READING THE HISTORY OF A TIBETAN MAHAKALA PAINTING: THE NYINGMA CHOD MANDALA OF LEGS LDAN NAGPO AGHORA IN THE ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

A Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree Master of Arts in the

Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

Sarah Aoife Richardson, B.A.

*****

The Ohio State University

2006

Master’s Examination Committee:

Dr. John C. Huntington

Dr. Susan Huntington

Approved by

Advisor

Graduate Program in History of Art
ABSTRACT

This thesis presents a detailed study of a large Tibetan painting in the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) that was collected in 1921 by an Irish fur trader named George Crofts. The painting represents a mandala, a Buddhist meditational diagram, centered on a fierce protector, or dharmapala, known as Mahakala or “Great Black Time” in Sanskrit. The more specific Tibetan form depicted, called Legs Idan Nagpo Aghora, or the “Excellent Black One who is Not Terrible,” is ironically named since the deity is himself very wrathful, as indicated by his bared fangs, bulging red eyes, and flaming hair. His surrounding mandala includes over 100 subsidiary figures, many of whom are indeed as terrifying in appearance as the central figure.

There are three primary parts to this study. First, I discuss how the painting came to be in the museum, including the roles played by George Crofts, the collector and Charles Trick Currelly, the museum’s director, and the historical, political, and economic factors that brought about the ROM Himalayan collection. Through this historical focus, it can be seen that the painting is in fact part of a fascinating museological story, revealing details of the formation of the museum’s Asian collections during the tumultuous early Republican era in China.

The second section explores the stylistic features of the painting to ascertain the date and provenance of its production. By examining both the earliest and latest features
of the painting, and their ultimate foreign sources, the painting is situated within the continuum of stylistic development in Tibetan art. This section also reveals how art itself, and this example specifically, stands at the intersection of political, social, and religious relationships, often revealing the complexities of these exchanges.

The third section analyzes the complex Tibetan Buddhist iconography represented in the painting. To ascertain the identity of the figures, I rely on textual sources, but I also emphasize the meaning and religious functionality of the painted vision. The discussion specifically shows how the painting visually represents key teachings of the Tibetan Chod ("Cutting") practices, aimed at severing all egoistic attachments. Indeed, the painting is an evocative and creative vision that helps practitioners in their meditations.

By engaging multiple levels of art historical analysis I demonstrate how several avenues of inquiry reveal valuable information about a particular work of art. By examining the painting both historically and comparatively, and exploring information that is both internal and external to the painting itself, I show how multiple moments of history are embedded in works of art. This history extends far beyond the moment of the painting's production, and continues through the five centuries since production: its movements and adventures.
Dedicated to Mom, Dad and Bill....
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people have helped and supported me through the research and writing of this thesis. I wish to thank my advisor, Dr. John Huntington, who introduced me to the wonderful study of Buddhist Art History. With his intellectual guidance and encouragement I have learned how to ask the right questions, and grown as both a scholar and a person. I am especially grateful for his unending kindness. My sincere gratitude also goes to Dr. Susan Huntington who has provided insightful advice and guidance both in her lecture classes and with the organization and editing of this thesis. As a teacher, and writer, she has made invaluable suggestions and taught me a great deal about communicating clearly. I am thankful also to both John and Susan for their support through my Master's degree in the Huntington Archive of Buddhist and Related Art, where I have had an opportunity to learn about the techniques and functions of a digital archive.

I am also very grateful to Dr. Deepali Dewan, the Associate Curator of South Asian Art at the Royal Ontario Museum. It was through her intellectual generosity and encouragement that I discovered an interest in studying Himalayan Art. She has continually allowed me access to work on the Himalayan materials at the Royal Ontario Museum, and has continued to be a supportive and encouraging advisor and friend.
I am also grateful to the larger community of colleagues and friends at the Royal Ontario Museum who have helped in various ways throughout my work and research. I thank Shirley Ellis and Janet Cowan in the Conservation department, who invited me to attend and participate in a workshop on thangka Conservation with specialist Ann Schaeftel at the ROM in April. In the Registration Department, Cindy Brouse allowed me to spend a week at Christmas pouring through the Crofts Files. Also in Registration, Susan Richardson, Nur Bahal, Barb Rice and Tricia Walker helped me find missing and forgotten facts once I was back in Ohio. Thanks also to Brian Boyle in ROM Images for the beautiful photographs of the Himalayan materials, and to Nicola Woods and Wanda Dobrowlanski for helping me use them. Also, in the Far Eastern Library Jack Howard and Kang Mei Wang always helped find me space and books to work on. Thanks also to Jeannie Parker, who has researched George Crofts, for her thoughtful advice, and to Prof. Dennis Duffy at the University of Toronto for sharing his interesting forthcoming article about Crofts with me.

I am grateful also to my colleagues and friends at the Ohio State University, especially Brid Arthur, and Dorothy Sutton, who came into the Master’s program with me and have been an unending source of laughter and advice. I also want to thank those who have come before me, but still return with wisdom, Ariana Maki and Rebecca Twist.

Lastly I thank my parents, who have supported me in my every dream and decision, and Bill, for his unending encouragement and love.
VITA

1979
Born, Toronto, Ontario.

1998 – 2003
B.A. Honors Anthropology and Humanistic Studies, McGill University, Montreal, Canada.

2003 -2004
Assistant in Gallery Development, Research Writer Royal Ontario Museum.

2004 – present
Graduate Assistant, Huntington Archive of Buddhist and Related Art, the Ohio State University.

PUBLICATIONS


“South Asia: 5,000 Years of Culture,” Educational Student Kit, Outreach Department, The Royal Ontario Museum, Winter 2004.

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: History of Art

Studies in Buddhist Art.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract........................................................................................................... ii

Dedication........................................................................................................ iii

Acknowledgments.......................................................................................... iv

Vita................................................................................................................... v

List of Figures................................................................................................. vii

Chapters:

1. Introduction.................................................................................................. 1
   1.1 Methodology.......................................................................................... 3

2. The History of the Tibetan Collection at the Royal Ontario Museum.......... 5
   2.1. The George Crofts Collection of Asian Art....................................... 6
   2.2 Where and How Crofts Bought the Materials................................. 13
   2.3 The History of Artistic Contact Between Tibet and China............... 25
   2.4 Conclusion: The History and Adventures of One Painting................. 30

3. The Stylistic Analysis of the Painting......................................................... 31
   3.1 The Difficulties and Possibilities of Dating Tibetan Art.................... 32
   3.2 The Traditional Tibetan Account of the Early Painting Schools....... 34
   3.3 Holdovers of the Early Indian Pala Style......................................... 35
   3.4. The Nepali Translation and Development of the Indian Pala Style..... 42
   3.5 The 14th century Shalu Murals: the Nepali Style of the Yuan Court... 43
   3.6 Chinese Stylistic Influences in the Painting....................................... 47
   3.7 The Gyantse Murals: The Southern Central Tibetan Style of the 15th Century................................................................. 50
   Conclusion: Dating the Tibetan on Stylistic Grounds............................... 56
4. The Mandala and its Meaning: The Iconography of Legs ldan Nagpo Aghora...59

4.1 Identifying the Central Figure: Legs ldan Nagpo Aghora in Texts....60
4.2 Legs ldan Aghora in Chod Practices..................................................69
4.3 Chod and the Nyingma Lineage..........................................................71
4.4 Understanding the Full Painted Mandala as Related to Chod
Practices........................................................................................................75
4.5 The Central Deity: Self Destruction Described.................................75
4.6 The Subsidiary Figures in the Painted Mandala of
Legs ldan Aghora........................................................................................78
4.7 Textual Descriptions of the Retinue of Legs ldan Aghora.................85
4.8 Conclusion: The Mandala of Aghora, Practices and Meaning..........88

5. Conclusion: The Painted Mandala of Legs ldan Nagpo Aghora.........92

Appendix A: Figures................................................................................97

Bibliography.............................................................................................136
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Painting of Legs Idan Nagpo Aghora <em>Mandala</em>&lt;br&gt;Overview of Painting&lt;br&gt;Central Southern Tibet, 15th century, Nyingma Lineage&lt;br&gt;Royal Ontario Museum (921.1.1)&lt;br&gt;Photo Courtesy of ROM Images</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Portrait of George Crofts&lt;br&gt;Archival photograph from 1925, Tianjin&lt;br&gt;Registration Files, Royal Ontario Museum&lt;br&gt;Photo Courtesy of ROM Registration Department</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>George Crofts and his Staff on the Front Steps of the Tianjin Office&lt;br&gt;Archival photograph from 1925, Tianjin&lt;br&gt;Registration Files, Royal Ontario Museum&lt;br&gt;Photo Courtesy of ROM Registration Far Eastern Department</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Tibetan Thangkas on Display in Crofts Tianjin Yard&lt;br&gt;Archival photograph from 1921, Tianjin&lt;br&gt;Registration Files, Royal Ontario Museum&lt;br&gt;Photo Courtesy of ROM Far Eastern Department</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Painting of Hayagriva&lt;br&gt;Overview of Painting&lt;br&gt;Central Southern Tibet, 15th century, Kagyu Lineage&lt;br&gt;Royal Ontario Museum (921.1.216)&lt;br&gt;Photo Courtesy of ROM Images</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Painting of Legs Idan Nagpo Aghora <em>Mandala</em> in Chinese Style Paste and Paper Mount&lt;br&gt;Overview of Painting in Mount&lt;br&gt;Central Southern Tibet, 15th century, Nyingma Lineage&lt;br&gt;Painting Mounted in China in 20th Century&lt;br&gt;Royal Ontario Museum (921.1.1)&lt;br&gt;Photo Courtesy of ROM Images</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
7. Photograph Showing Side View of Painting of Hayagriva with Paper Mount Buckling the Surface
   Thangka Conservation Workshop with Ann Schaftel,
   Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, April 3-7 2006.
   Photo Courtesy of Dr. Deepali Dewan .............................103

   Overview of Painting in Mount
   Tibet or China, 19th century
   Painting Mounted by Crofts in China c.1921
   Royal Ontario Museum (921.1.224)
   Photo Courtesy of ROM Images ...........................................103

9. Painting of the Temples of Lhasa Mounted by George Crofts in China
   Overview of Painting
   Eastern Tibet or Mongolia, 19th century
   Painting Mounted by Crofts in China c.1921
   Royal Ontario Museum (921.1.82)
   Photo Courtesy of ROM Images ............................................104

10. Painting of Sakyamuni Buddha
    Overview of Painting
    Newar style in China, Late Yuan or Early Ming 14th-15th century
    Royal Ontario Museum (921.1.129)
    Photo Courtesy of ROM Images ............................................104

11. Gold Painting of Kalachakra
    Overview of Painting in Mount
    One of Three Gold Tibetan Paintings in the 1921 Shipment from Crofts
    Eastern Tibet or China, 19th century
    Royal Ontario Museum (921.1.122)
    Photo Courtesy of ROM Images ............................................105

12. Buddha Seated in Red aureole
    *Ramapala*, Pala Manuscript
    Nalanda School, dated 1095
    Photo Courtesy of Prof. John Huntington ................................106

13. Painting of Cakrasamvara and Vajravarahi
    Khara Khot, Central Asia, before 1227
    The State Hermitage, Leningrad
    (Marilyn M. Rhie and Robert Thurman. *Wisdom and Compassion*,
    pl.92) .................................................................................106
14. Detail of Painting of Legs Idan Nagpo Aghora
   Detail: Lotus Petal Design Between Registers
   Royal Ontario Museum (921.1.1)
   Photo Courtesy of ROM Images ............................................107

15. Painting of Sadaksari Avalokitesvara
   Central Tibet, 11th–12th century
   U-ri school “derived from Central India”
   (Susan Huntington and John Huntington, Leaves from the Bodhi Tree,
   pl.110) ............................................................................107

16. Detail of Painting of Legs Idan Nagpo Aghora
   Detail: red aureoles pushed together.
   Royal Ontario Museum (921.1.1)
   Photo Courtesy of ROM Images ............................................108

17. Detail of Painting of Legs Idan Nagpo Aghora
   Detail: lineage monk against bolster.
   Royal Ontario Museum (921.1.1)
   Photo Courtesy of ROM Images ............................................108

18. Prajnaparamita Sitting Against Wide Bolster Pillow
   Nayapala, Pala manuscript
   Eastern India, dated 1054
   Photo Courtesy of Prof. John Huntington .........................108

19. Detail of Painting of Legs Idan Nagpo Aghora
   Detail: Mahasiddhas at top.
   Royal Ontario Museum (921.1.1)
   Photo Courtesy of ROM Images ............................................109

20. Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara Seated
    Ramapala, Pala Manuscript
    Nalanda School, dated 1095
    Photo Courtesy of Prof. John Huntington .........................109

21. Goddess with Stylized Scarves
    Nayapala, Pala Manuscript
    Eastern India, dated 1054
    Photo Courtesy of Prof. John Huntington .........................110

22. Detail of Painting of Legs Idan Nagpo Aghora
   Detail: Stylized Mountains.
   Royal Ontario Museum (921.1.1)
   Photo Courtesy of ROM Images ............................................110
23. Sculpture of Uma-Mahesvara  
   India, Pala Period, 11th century  
   Huntington Archive of Buddhist and Related Art  
   Scan # 013491, Detail Scan # 013492

24. Tara in Mountain Landscape  
   Manuscript  
   Nepal, 12th c.-13th c.  
   Photo Courtesy of Prof. John Huntington

25. Painting of Green Tara in Khadiravani Paradise  
   Central Tibet, c.12th century  
   (Rhie and Thurman, *Wisdom and Compassion*, pl.24)

26. Kessu (Slit-weave Textile) of Tara in Khadiravani Paradise  
   Khara Khoto, Central Asia, before 1227  
   (Rhie and Thurman, *Wisdom and Compassion*, pl.23)

27. Wrathful Figure Surrounded by Flames  
   Pala Manuscript  
   Eastern India, c.12th c.  
   Photo Courtesy of Prof. John Huntington

28. Vajrapani Surrounded by Flame Aura  
   Mgon khang, Shalu  
   South Central Tibet, c.14th c.  
   (Roberto Vitali, *Early Temples of Central Tibet*, pl.48)

29. Vaisravana with Flying Robes  
   Serkhang, Shalu  
   South Central Tibet, c.14th c.  
   (Roberto Vitali, *Early Temples of Central Tibet*, pl.49)

30. Detail of Painting of Legs Idan Nagpo Aghora  
   Detail: Aghora's Flying Robes.  
   Royal Ontario Museum (921.1.1)  
   Photo Courtesy of ROM Images

31. Detail of Stylized Mountains  
   Mgon khang, Shalu  
   South Central Tibet, c.14th c.  
   (Roberto Vitali, *Early Temples of Central Tibet*, pl.60)
32. Avalokitesvara with Clouds Behind
   Mgon khang, Shalu
   South Central Tibet, c.14th c.
   (Roberto Vitali, *Early Temples of Central Tibet*, pl.73) ............... 117

33. Detail of Painting of Legs Ldan Nagpo Aghora
   Detail: Clouds Surrounding Aghora
   Royal Ontario Museum (921.1.1)
   Photo Courtesy of ROM Images .............................................. 117

34. Detail of Mural Painting of the Eight Immortals Showing Active Robes
   Yongle Gong, China, Shanxi, 14th c.
   (Barnhart [et al.] *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*, Fig. 142) ............................................................... 118

35. Mural Painting of Buddha
   Wearing Lower Robes with Flowing Wave Pattern
   Qutansin, Qinghai Province, c.15th century .................................. 118

36. Painting of Arhat Vanavasin
   Central Tibet, 14th c.
   (Marilyn Rhie and Robert Thurman, *Wisdom and Compassion*, pl.13) ........................................................................ 119

37. Mural Painting Detail of Warriors Wearing Tang Costumes
   Princess Changles tomb, dated 643
   Liquan, Shaanxi Province, China,
   (Barnhart [et al.] *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*, Fig. 62) ........................................................................ 120

38. Detail of Painting of Legs Ldan Nagpo Aghora
   Detail: Guardian Kings in Tang Warrior Costumes
   Royal Ontario Museum (921.1.1)
   Photo Courtesy of ROM Images .............................................. 120

39. Painting of Amitabha La Ying
   Showing Clouds
   Khara Khoto, before 1227
   Image Courtesy of Prof. John Huntington .................................... 121

40. Arhat Painting,
   China, Yuan Dynasty, 13-14th c.
   Image Courtesy of Prof. John Huntington .................................... 121

xiv
41. Painting of Four Guardian Kings
   Showing Clouds
   Bao Ning Si, Ming dynasty, China, 15th century
   Image Courtesy of Prof. John Huntington.................................122

42. Mural Painting of Nartakavara Vajrapani
   Gyantse Kumbum, Central South Tibet, 15th century
   (Franco Ricca and Erberto Lo Bue, The Great Stupa
   of Gyantse, pl. 39)................................................................122

43. Mural Painting of Vajravidarana
   Gyantse Kumbum, Central South Tibet, 15th century
   (Franco Ricca and Erberto Lo Bue, The Great Stupa
   of Gyantse, pl. 40)................................................................123

44. Detail of Painting of Legs Idan Nagpo Aghora
   Detail: Multicolored Scarf
   Royal Ontario Museum (921.1.1)
   Photo Courtesy of ROM Images...............................................123

45. Mural Painting of Vairocana
   Gyantse Kumbum, Central South Tibet, 15th century
   (Franco Ricca and Erberto Lo Bue, The Great Stupa
   of Gyantse, pl.14)...............................................................124

46. Mural Painting of Teacher from Vaishravana Mandala
   Gyantse Kumbum, Central South Tibet, 15th century
   (Franco Ricca and Erberto Lo Bue, The Great Stupa
   of Gyantse, pl. 76)...............................................................124

47. Mural Painting of Directional Guardian in Clouds
   Gyantse Kumbum, Central South Tibet, 15th century
   (Franco Ricca and Erberto Lo Bue, The Great Stupa
   of Gyantse, pl.57)................................................................125

48. Mural Painting of Buddha Sakyamuni Appearing in Clouds
   Gyantse Kumbum, Central South Tibet, 15th century
   (Franco Ricca and Erberto Lo Bue, The Great Stupa
   of Gyantse, pl.95)................................................................125
49. Detail of Painting of Legs Idan Nagpo Aghora
   Detail: Aghora Face
   Royal Ontario Museum (921.1.1)
   Photo Courtesy of ROM Images ........................................ 126

50. Mural Painting Face Detail of Vajrahumkara
    Gyantse Kumbum, Central South Tibet, 15th century
    (Franco Ricca and Erberto Lo Bue, The Great Stupa of Gyantse, pl.41) ........................................ 126

51. Detail of Painting of Legs Idan Nagpo Aghora
    Detail: Sadaksari Avalokitesvara in Headdress
    Royal Ontario Museum (921.1.1)
    Photo Courtesy of ROM Images ........................................ 127

52. Key to Figures in Legs Idan Nagpo Aghora Painting.
    Based on Royal Ontario Museum (921.1.1)
    Photo Courtesy of ROM Images ........................................ 128

53. Sculpture of "Legden Mahakala"
    Western Tibet, Nyingma Lineage, 16th century
    Himalayanart.org website, item 65208 ................................ 129

54. Detail of Painting of Legs Idan Nagpo Aghora
    Detail: Gandi
    Royal Ontario Museum (921.1.1)
    Photo Courtesy of ROM Images ........................................ 129

55. Painting of "Mahakala (Protector)- Danda (Stick)"
    Tibet, 19th century, Nyingma Lineage
    Himalayanart.org website, item 235 ................................ 130

56. Painting of "Mahakala (Protector)- Danda (Stick)"
    Tibet, 17th century, Nyingma Lineage
    Himalayanart.org website, item 66 ................................ 131

57. Painting of Machig Labdron
    Eastern Tibet, 19th century
    Shelley and Donald Rubin Collection
    (Dina Bangdel and John Huntington, The Circle of Bliss, pl.33) .... 132

58. Detail of Aghora Figure with Inscription from Machig Labdron Painting
    Eastern Tibet, 19th century
    Shelley and Donald Rubin Collection
    (Dina Bangdel and John Huntington, The Circle of Bliss, pl.33) .... 132
59. Detail of Painting of Legs ldan Nagpo Aghora
   Detail: Charnel Animals Devouring Corpses
   Royal Ontario Museum (921.1.1)
   Photo Courtesy of ROM Images ........................................ 133

60. Illustration of Gandi for Legs ldan forms
   Robert Beer, The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs,
   detail from pl. 127) .......................................................... 133

61. Detail of Painting of Legs ldan Nagpo Aghora
   Detail: Panjaranatha Mahakala Trampling Corpse
   Royal Ontario Museum (921.1.1)
   Photo Courtesy of ROM Images ........................................ 133

62. Painting of Mahakala Panjarnata
   Central Tibet, Sakya Lineage, 12th century
   (Rob Linrothe and Jeff Watt, Demonic Divine, Fig. 2.2) .......... 134

63. Detail of Warrior-type With Checkered Flag from Lower Left Corner of Painting
   Mahakala Panjarnata
   Central Tibet, Sakya Lineage, 12th century
   (Rob Linrothe and Jeff Watt, Demonic Divine, Fig. 2.2) .......... 134

64. Mandala of Mahakala on Design of Six-Pointed Throwing Star
   Plate 15) ........................................................................ 135

65. Illustration of Throwing Star Design for Mahakala Mandalas
   Illustration by John Huntington, April 2006
   Courtesy of Prof. John Huntington ..................................... 135
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

OVERVIEW

The Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, Canada, has an interesting, though little known, collection of Tibetan art. This collection includes over 100 Tibetan thang kas, distinctive Himalayan paintings mounted in textile borders that were made to be rolled up for storage and transportation.

This thesis presents a detailed study of one large Tibetan painting in the collection of the Royal Ontario Museum (Fig. 1). The painting itself is nearly six feet tall and was collected by the museum in 1921. At this point it had already been removed from its Tibetan textile surround and glued to a paper backing. The painting represents a mandala, a Buddhist meditational diagram, centered on a fierce protector, or dharmapaśa, known as Mahakala or “Great Black Time” in Sanskrit. His more specific Tibetan name is Legs ldan Nagpo Aghora (henceforth Aghora), and he is an important figure in the Nyingma lineage practices of Chod, which are aimed at severing egoistic attachment. The central figure is surrounded by over 100 subsidiary figures. Together, the figures depicted in the painting represent a complex diagram of a specific visualization practice.

The focus of the study is three-fold: I first discuss how the painting came to be in the museum; second I explore its date and provenance based on stylistic features; and
third I analyze the complex Tibetan Buddhist iconography it represents. This thesis aims to engage the various levels of art historical analysis and demonstrate how multiple avenues of inquiry can reveal valuable information about a particular work of art. By examining the painting both historically and comparatively, including information that is both internal and external to the painting itself, we will see how multiple moments of history are embedded in works of art.

This thesis is first and foremost a concentration on the minute details of the Legden Aghora painting. It is an exercise in prying apart the possible layers of interpretation and meaning that lie, sometimes hidden, in ancient works of art. The mission thus may at first appear too simple, yet the task is actually enormous. There are so many details, so many stories and truths, embodied in the painting. A physical document of its time, this art object has now outlived its makers by hundreds of years, yet contains thousands of clues to its own history. This history extends far beyond the moment of the painting’s production, and continues through the five centuries since production: its movements and adventures.

To unravel some of the histories within the painting, I will approach the painting in several ways. The first section focuses on the museum’s records and how the painting was collected. The painting is in fact one part of the fascinating museological story of the formation of the museum’s Asian collections and the socio-political history of the era in which they were collected. This section includes a discussion of the possible and probable movements of the painting from the time and place of its production to its accession into the Royal Ontario Museum’s collection. The second section focuses on a stylistic analysis of the painting’s details, which reveal the history of foreign influences in
Tibet and their integration into distinctive styles at particular historic moments. This section demonstrates how art stands at the intersection of political, social and religious relationships, revealing the complexities of these exchanges. By studying the details closely we can discover the approximate date of this Tibetan painting’s production. The last section seeks to explain the iconography of the mandala and the Buddhist practices it was made to support. In the conclusion, I weave the various strands of the discussion into a greater whole, uncovering some of the kernels of history embodied in this painting, and discerning the many ways that we can learn from such a careful study.

METHODOLOGY

For the historical study of the movement of the painting, primary sources from the Royal Ontario Museum’s registration files provide extensive information. The preserved personal correspondence between the original collector, George Crofts, an Irish fur trader working in China, and the museum’s director, Charles Trick Currelly, reveal details of how the painting was collected and eventually acquired by the museum in 1921. These letters also provide insight into how the painting was valued by the European collector and the Canadian museum that collected it. Original object lists provided by the collector, also preserved in the museum’s files, provide information about how the painting was treated in China, and what the collector already understood about its history and provenance. An analytical reading of these primary sources provides an understanding of how this large, early Tibetan painting came from Tibet, to China, and then to Canada, where it has remained unstudied until this time.
The stylistic analysis of the painting that follows in Chapter 2 utilizes comparative materials of known, relatively securely dated art from India, Nepal, Tibet, and China to assess the date and provenance of the painting. The painting displays a fascinating synthesis of stylistic influences that combined in Tibetan paintings to form a unique style in the late 15th century. The regional attribution of the painting based on stylistic grounds emerges through comparisons with other Tibetan paintings, both *thangkas* and dated wall paintings from Tibet. This examination reveals that the painting can be attributed to the 15th century, and was originally produced in the Central Southern Tibetan region.

Lastly, the complex iconography of the full *mandala* is assessed through identifying Tibetan textual sources for the iconography. Comparisons with other related Tibetan paintings provide a further analysis of how the iconography was treated uniquely in this painting. The relationship between the textual tradition as a determinant of Tibetan iconographic representations and the equally important role of artistic creative interpretations is also discussed. In this painting both textual conservatism and imaginative ingenuity are at work. The understanding of the complex esoteric iconography of the painting informs an understanding of the distinctive Buddhist practices and concepts it was made to support. Through understanding the religious function of practices aimed at cutting away all attachments to the self, the distinctive functionality of Tibetan Buddhist art may be understood.
The vast majority of Himalayan art objects in the Royal Ontario Museum were collected by George Crofts (1872-1926), a trader whose portrait and correspondence survive in the files of the museum (Fig. 2). An Irish fur-trader who lived and worked in Tianjin from 1896 to 1926, Crofts had a side business exporting Chinese art and antiquities to Europe and North America (Fig. 3). Crofts sent antiquities to the museum at reduced prices, forming the basis for the very rich Asian collections at the Royal Ontario museum today. In his eight-year partnership with the museum, from 1918 to his sudden death in 1926, the museum accumulated approximately 5000 rare and valuable Asian art objects purchased by George Crofts. The Himalayan materials, including both paintings and sculptures, formed only a small, and possibly accidental subset of this extensive collection.

---

1 Crofts was one of two important original major collectors for the Royal Ontario Museum’s Chinese collection. He acquired about 5000 objects between 1918 and 1926. The other major collector of Chinese materials was Bishop White, who is more famously remembered in relation to the ROM Asian collections today, and who collected approximately 8000 objects for the museum between 1916 and 1951. This information comes from correspondence with Registrars Susan Richardson, Nur Bahal, and Tricia Walker, Registration Department, Royal Ontario Museum, April 2006.
There were very special circumstances that made the collection of the Himalayan materials possible for the Royal Ontario Museum in 1921. A friendship of mutual respect and interest grew between the Museum's director Charles Trick Currelly and the trader George Crofts. The story of this contact and professional friendship, which permitted the collection of such rare and valuable Asian pieces, warrants telling. At a time when Currelly, and probably very few people in Toronto, had an interest in Tibetan art per se, it was the eye of George Crofts and his broad interests, encouraged by the special trade relationship that had developed between him and the museum, that led to the formation of this interesting collection in Toronto.

The George Crofts Collection of Asian Art: A Special Friendship Produces a World Class Collection

Before making contact with the Royal Ontario Museum in 1918, George Crofts was already exporting Asian antiquities to art dealers and museums in Europe and North America. This side business had likely emerged as a by-product of his interest in art, his business abilities, and of course his circumstances. Crofts had already been in China for 20 years, and had witnessed a time of violent turmoil and abrupt change. As the Qing empire crumbled, China experienced a period of political disarray and Chinese antiquities became suddenly available to a foreign market. This time of violent disruption sent former elites into poverty, forcing many people, even the former emperor and his family, to part with some of their treasures.

It is clear from Crofts' letters that the antiquities trade was always a side-venture to his larger and much more lucrative family fur business. It is precisely because it was a side venture, and not his "bread and butter," that Crofts was able ultimately to help the
museum by providing amazing and rare objects without charging the museum their actual trade value. The professional friendship that developed between Crofts and the museum’s director Currelly is a vital part of the story of the creation of the Crofts’ collection.

Crofts and Currelly met almost by chance in 1918, an event that Currelly would later refer to as “one of the two most important things that have happened to me and the museum.”2 The story of their first meeting, as recounted by Currelly in his autobiography, reads like a comedy of errors. Crofts had come Toronto for his fur business, and just happened to see a promotional postcard for the new Toronto museum at the cigar counter of his posh hotel, the Royal York. The postcard featured a sculpture of a Chinese ceramic “Lohan” figure, which had been bought by a museum patron, Mrs. Hastings, from a British dealer S.M. Frank several years earlier. Crofts recognized it as a piece that he himself had bought in China and sold to that British auction house, and decided to drop in at the new museum to see what else they had in the collection, and meet the director.

But when Crofts arrived, Charles Currelly was in a meeting and mistook him for a New York art dealer. Telling him that he had neither money nor time to meet with him, Currelly showed Crofts to the door. As Crofts was leaving, he remarked to Currelly on a hanging Chinese textile on display, recognizing it aloud as a ceremonial piece from the throne of the Jehol palace. This comment triggered Currelly to recognize his mistake. As Currelly writes:

I was tired, and he had gone down the steps and away before the remark sank in. I was hurrying back to my visitor when it struck me: That man is not from New York... That’s the Great Unknown from China who sent to London most of the Chinese things that had come to Europe.³

The British dealers had kept the identity of their Chinese source a secret, likely to protect their middleman profits. Yet this comment reveals that Crofts was already an important and prolific collector, and that he occupied some fame and stature in Currelly’s mind at least. Indeed, he was influential in several other museum collections, and some Crofts objects ended up in the British museum and the University of Pennsylvania museum.⁴ Yet it is likely that the “Great Unknown” was responsible for parts of many more collections than these, but since his dealings had been through the auction houses for so long, records of connections to him are often lost.

Once Currelly was certain he had dismissed the “Great Unknown”, he tracked Crofts to his hotel and apologized. The two men shared tea and Currelly explained his ambitious plan for a world-class science and humanities museum in Toronto. The museum had opened only four years earlier in 1914, but had since been suffering under the lack of funds that resulted from the war years. At this meeting Crofts showed Currelly photographs of his latest Chinese acquisitions, Chinese tomb ceramics that had become available because of a railroad project that had uncovered ancient tomb sites. Currelly, amazed at the quality of the archaeological pieces, inquired about their prices. Perhaps Crofts was impressed with Currelly’s vision, for he immediately offered several choice

⁴ Jeannie Parker, Former Far Eastern Department Technician and Crofts Researcher, Conversation about George Crofts, Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, April 5 2006.
pieces to Currelly at a fraction of their potential price. Currelly quotes Crofts as saying: “I have a strong feeling that you would be worth helping here in Toronto, and I should like very much to help you.”

From this time on, Crofts acquired objects for the museum at discount prices. The prices were so low, in fact, that at times Currelly would beg him to increase the rate of interest on purchases he had forwarded to the ROM. It is possible that Crofts’ relationship with his British dealers had gone sour at this time too, and this may be one more reason that he was so willing and able to help the museum in this way. However, he had a genuine desire to help the new museum, and this sentiment was often repeated in the correspondence between the men. Regarding one sculpture sale that would give him little profit Crofts writes to Currelly “my share of profit will seemingly be the pleasure of seeing the No.1 sculpture as the frontispiece to your book on the museum collection” and in 1921 writes “The museum is my hobby just now and I think the collection will continue to be enriched with rare, if not valuable specimens.”

In return for this generosity in business, Currelly offered early on to name the new collection after Crofts. This was a rare practice for a group of objects that were not donations, but actual purchases. Eventually, Currelly also garnered Crofts an honorary Doctoral degree from the University of Toronto. In his letter to the President of the University, with which the Royal Ontario Museum of Archaeology was then affiliated,

5 Currelly, 243.
6 Dennis Duffy, “Triangulating the ROM” (Forthcoming in Journal of Canadian Studies, Toronto: 2005), 12.
7 George Crofts, Letters to Charles Currelly. (Crofts Correspondence Files 1918-1926. Registration Department, Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto) Letter dated 26th May 1918.
8 Crofts, Letter dated 3rd November 1921.
Currelly wrote that Crofts deserved this honorary degree as “probably the greatest expert in matters of Chinese art.” In the same letter, Currelly states:

...very few universities have had such tremendous gifts as Mr. Crofts has poured into this country. When one thinks of it, it is really a marvelous thing that in one of the greatest arts Toronto is the most important place in the world, and probably always will be.

This comment shows the very high regard that Currelly had both for Crofts and for the marvelous collection he had helped the museum to build. It also reveals that Currelly held Asian art in the very highest esteem. The friendship and respect was mutual, as evident in Crofts’ response:

I need hardly state the honour is a tremendous surprise and totally unexpected, therefore, while hesitating in accepting I cannot but appreciate the offer and realise that my work on behalf of the museum is being crowned by an honour equally worthwhile. I feel that I am solely indebted to you for this recognition, especially as you have always been the incentive and producer through your great enthusiasm, consequently the co-worker with myself and deserving of similar honours. (sic)

Their professional friendship was a mutually valuable and productive one for both men. Crofts continued to send the “best” materials to Currelly, often with little or no profit, until his sudden and untimely death in 1926.

The hundreds of long letters between Crofts and Currelly that survive in the museum’s registration files hold many stories. They tell the story of Crofts-- the Irishman witnessing the turmoil of China as outsider, businessman, and compassionate observer. There is the story of the young museum, and its ambitious director struggling to raise a

---

9 Charles Currelly, Copy of Letter from Currelly to the President of the University of Toronto. (Crofts Correspondence Files 1918-1926. Registration Department, Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto) March 6, 1922.
10 ibid.
11 Crofts, Letter dated 3rd May 1922.
mere $4,000 a year to send to Crofts in China for crates upon crates of rarities. The letters are colorful and long, and though both men betray their era by writing in a formal, sometimes third person language, the letters are nevertheless emotive and revealing. The correspondence files also hold a wealth of fascinating information, attesting to the unique period of the collection and some ways that Crofts acquired his objects. The letters also tell of how the objects were treated in China before the half-year shipping process to reach Canada.

George Crofts collected over 100 Tibetan thangkas paintings, which arrived together at the museum in one particular shipment of 1921 (Figure 4). The large early painting of Legden Aghora came rolled up in a crate with another large early painting of the fierce protector Hayagriva (Fig. 5). This painting is of an equally early date and had also been mounted on a paper backing, though it is of the Kagyu teaching lineage and thus not from an original set with the painting of Aghora. This equally important painting warrants a fuller analysis in another forum, and yet it is relevant here since these two paintings were considered together by Crofts in several letters to Currelly. In a letter dated December 29th, 1921 Crofts wrote excitedly about some pieces he was sending:

Have secured a small stone figure of the sleeping Buddha which will outdo Rodin’s statue of “the thinker” possibly it was from a picture of this particular Buddha that he obtained his inspiration. Also have two large fine Tibetan pictures on painted cloth which are probably finer than anything in the collection. And three small pre-Tang wooden Kwan Yins from a grave. These are gems to my mind and I shall send them forward without charge. Too unique to be presented by a patron\(^{12}\) (my italics)

In this excerpt the enthusiasm and connoisseurship that informed Crofts decisions are clearly evident. Crofts openly expresses his own feelings and tastes, and how these must

\(^{12}\) Crofts, letter dated December 29\(^{th}\) 1921.
have affected his purchases. He considers the two large paintings of Aghora and Hayagriva to be of unprecedented quality in the entire collection, which included many Chinese paintings by this point. Though Crofts does not explain his reasons, this evaluation of the importance of these paintings in the collection would be supported today by most Himalayan Art scholars, for these two paintings are undoubtedly among the earliest and best surviving Himalayan works in the collection. This letter also demonstrates that by 1921 Crofts felt strongly that rare and special pieces be presented to the museum as donations from him, rather than purchases. Crofts was personally involved and invested in producing the collection by this point.

While Crofts knew little about the two large Tibetan paintings he had purchased, he found them, quite rightly, to be exceptional. This letter began a prolonged conversation about the Tibetan paintings that entered sporadically into the long letters between Crofts and Currelly over the next several years. This was not unique, for in the long, bi-monthly letters the two men often exceeded ten typed pages in discussing particular details and sentiments regarding the collected works.

The shipment took a long time to reach the museum. When it arrived, Currelly’s responses reveal that the Tibetan paintings were quite new, strange, and exotic to him:

The paintings have grown on me very much particularly the Thibetan [ones], about which I was not nearly as enthusiastic at first. When we unrolled them in the office, I could see only interest in them; I saw no particular beauty. The interest I realized, of course, to be very great, but I saw very little of charm or attractiveness. Now that we are able to get them up and look at them properly, it is easy to see what a tremendous charm they have and what a great asset they are to the Collection. I can easily imagine a Thibetan gallery being one of the very attractive parts of the whole museum. (sic)  

Unfortunately a Tibetan gallery never came to fruition for Currelly. However, this letter reveals his initial surprise at the Tibetan paintings, and his later recognition of their importance.

Crofts went even further in the discussion in a response letter to Currelly about the Tibetan paintings:

Your remarks rather surprise me and actually confirm the feeling I had when in Toronto and discussing with your goodself, the Thibetan Paintings. I could feel that you were not responsive in regard to this particular study because my feelings were quite the contrary, and I believe the Thibetan collection, to be of far greater value than anything in the Pictorial line, which we have in the Collection. These remarks apply to the large and important Thibetan paintings, not the usual run, but the large and uncommon ones which must attract immense attention, if the work is studied from an Art point of view for design, coloring and perfection of work, in a crude or bold manner. Personally I am always anxious to secure out-of-the-way Thibetan Paintings, as I feel that they will become something of great importance in the future... These things one must live with to appreciate and the more they are studied, especially the Thibetan Paintings, the more they will grow on one, because of the compressed mass which appears in each particular painting. (sic) 14

In this letter, the last major discussion of the Tibetan paintings in the preserved correspondence, Crofts suggests the great art historical interest of these large paintings (Figs. 1 and 5), and indicates that he found Tibetan art in particular to be worthy of study and collection.

Where and How Crofts Bought the Materials:

Crofts was not explicit in his written record about where he had purchased these Tibetan pieces. However, some of the methods by which the materials were collected, valued and treated by Crofts are revealed in the letters and object lists that he sent to the

14 Crofts, letter dated 19th February 1923.
museum. Crofts was based in Tianjin, an important seaport just southeast of Beijing. He depended mostly on middlemen in his employ to bring him antiques and art objects they had found. Crofts was always involved in the final choice of purchases, and he seems to have had an acute eye for fine and rare objects.

Crofts is occasionally explicit in regards to the collection processes of particular objects, explaining where he had encountered them and how they became available, while in other instances he is perhaps purposely elusive. At the time, Crofts had to be particularly aware of the political factors influencing his business. In the case of the early Chinese ceramics, which were Currelly’s primary collecting interest, Crofts explained some economic and political factors affecting their availability:

In previous years the floods in the interior have opened many graves and exposed the contents, again the Railway cutting has occasionally passed into a grave and permitted the contents to be taken and sold. At present the districts are being more or less controlled so that the graves are being, to a greater extent than ever before, preserved. The graves are below the surface of the earth ... more often than not the contents are more or less broken, or with the floods so damaged as to be useless. You will therefore recognize that if the museums in Canada are keenly interested in these early potteries they should commence collecting now, or otherwise a year or two from now will be too late.15

To our modern sensibilities, this may sound as though Crofts was callous in his frankness about selling off grave goods. However, we must understand Crofts as a product of his time and place, as well as the context of the larger systemic problems in China at the time that had nothing to do with this one man.

In fact, the letters also show that Crofts often demonstrated a clear respect for the cultural properties and history of China. In one instance, the large Ming tomb, still a

---

15 Crofts, letter dated 28th July 1918.
centerpiece of the Royal Ontario Museum’s display on Chinese architecture, was purchased because it was about to be demolished.16 Another story, recounted in a letter from Currelly to a Professor Forbes from Harvard, Currelly recounts the story of Crofts’ encounter with a sculpture from the Longmen caves. A broken head from the ancient Buddhist cave site of Longmen was brought to Crofts for sale. He recognized it immediately, and thought it was so appalling that this important historic piece had made its way onto the art market that he bought it and returned it to the government at his own cost. However, the exact same head was then brought to him a year later, once again for sale.17 The story, though recounted nostalgically by Currelly in a 1936 letter, reveals how the systemic economic and political disintegration of China in these years directly affected the sale of antiquities.

Unfortunately, the amount that Crofts knew, or at least preserved in writing, about the specific purchase and provenance of the Himalayan material is very small. Yet there are still many clues regarding the objects that allow us to discern the pattern of their movements. It seems likely then that these items had been brought to Crofts by some of his middlemen. Crofts was at least locally well known as a dealer, to whom entrepreneurial traders would bring goods for sale. Some of these men were in his employ as well, and searched for goods throughout the provinces. The letters imply that they often went as far south as Hunan in search of antiquities, but direct contact with Tibet is never mentioned.

16 Crofts, letter dated 16th November 1920.
17 Currelly, Letter from Currelly to Edward Forbes, December 23rd 1936.
Yet the letters also demonstrate that in the years of 1921 and 1922 political and social turmoil curbed much of Crofts' access to trading in other parts of China. In a 1922 letter he regrets: “I understand that my Chinese have not been able to obtain anything during my absence owing to the troubles, and that it has been practically impossible for them to visit Honan or stay in this district.”\(^\text{18}\) Though this shows that the middlemen had often traveled into the provinces, in these years their movements had been directly affected and curbed by the political unrest.

There is no mention anywhere in Crofts' letters of direct contact with Tibet. This is one of several reasons that I do not believe that the paintings were brought from Tibet directly in these years. The evidence, both in Crofts letters and internal to the condition of the paintings themselves, suggest instead that the Tibetan paintings were purchased as a group in Central China, in the area of Tianjin and Beijing (formerly Tientsin and Peking), around 1920-21. Indeed, the evidence further suggests that at this point the paintings had already been in China for quite a long time.

This suggestion is supported by the condition and mountings of the two large paintings. The paintings of Aghora and Hayagriva have both been removed from their original Tibetan textile style mounts and glued to large panels of paper with cylindrical dowels at either end (Fig. 6). They have been mounted, quite well, in the style of a Chinese hanging scroll. This is now an unfortunate reality since the paper panels and paste are drying out and buckling, becoming a major conservation issue for the current museum (Fig. 7).

\(^{18}\) Crofts, letter dated 11\(^{\text{th}}\) July 1922.
We can discern for sure that this mounting was not the work of Crofts or his business by his notes in the original object lists that he sent to the museum. The collection lists provided by Crofts make a point of stating “mounted by us” in cases where this is true. In the *thangka* shipment of 1921 there is a large group of paintings, all removed from their Tibetan textile mounts and adhered to paper covered with a pale blue textile border (Fig. 8). A typical entry from a painting of this group carefully explains:

Painting in miniature in gold and colours. Fine work. Colours new looking because picture has been removed from old frame. The latter too damaged for shipping. Lama cloth. Unusual and good. Mandala.¹⁹

These notes repeatedly make it clear that the paintings of this similarly mounted set were removed from their cloth borders and mounted in this way on the instructions of Crofts. Similarly, some of the large paintings, like one showing the temples of Lhasa (Fig. 9), are also described in the notes:

Thibet home of the Lama showing the Living Buddha out riding. Unusual and fine. Mounted by us.²⁰

Here again we see that in the cases where Crofts was responsible for the mounting of the painting, he noted this in his lists. Furthermore, the second painting clearly demonstrates that when he did instruct a paper mounting, even a large one, he did not choose to have the painting mounted in the manner of a Chinese scroll with wide top and bottom panels and dowels like both the Aghora and Hayagrīva paintings (Fig. 6). Instead, the paintings Crofts had mounted were completed with only a small inch wide paper border on all

sides, which better suited his European sensibilities and resembled the matting of a framed picture.

The entries Crofts wrote about the Aghora and Hayagriva painting make it clear that the Chinese mountings of these paintings predated his purchase of them. For the Aghora painting Crofts noted only: “Ming Tibetan Picture- 5/9’ x 5/3’- Wonderfully Fine. Repaired,” and for the Hayagriva painting a similarly short entry of: “Ming Thibetan Picture- 6/6’ x 5’- Antique Border Silk. Wonderfully fine. Repaired.” The “repairs” he mentions here may have been simply a consolidation in places of the mounted fabrics already adhered to the paper. A close inspection of the paintings appears that they were not tampered with nor in-painted in any way.

In the brief entries of the shipping lists Crofts provided, he also explains his feelings on the group of Tibetan paintings as a whole: “We consider very valuable from an artistic point of view and also in a monetary sense, because unusual and uncommon. All in brilliant colors and of the Ming dynasty.” The fact that he considers the group as a whole, having been numbered together by him, to be “unusual and uncommon” is, I believe, a further indication that this was a group he had encountered for sale in China itself. The collection, which includes both paintings from central Tibet and some painted in the Tibetan style in China, would not have been uncommon for a trader with usual contact with Tibet. However such a large grouping in central China was an uncommon occurrence. This evidence supports the conclusion that the paintings were sold to Crofts

---

21 Crofts, Object Lists vol. VII, 519.
23 Crofts, Object Lists vol VII, 519.
through another middleman. It also seems most probable that they had already been owned, or at least mounted, by someone who was concerned for their easy display, and/or sale.

Yet there is further evidence that the group of 1921 Tibetan paintings was sold to Crofts in the area of Tianjin as a group, and, furthermore, that this was a very odd group. In another note in the files Crofts says “We consider the Thibetan pictures generally under these numbers of great interest and may not be repeated.”24 Here we see yet again that Crofts felt that he had come across something that would be, at least for him, a rare opportunity. This confirms the inference that he had come across these suddenly as a group and that he did not often encounter this sort of thing.

So where could such a diverse and strange painting group have come from at this time? The collection of paintings is odd in that it includes painting of many various dates and from all different lineages of Tibetan Buddhism. This makes it unlikely that this large group formed a part of a monastic collection, which would adhere mostly to the lineage of the particular monastery or temple. Furthermore, within the collection, there are obviously some paintings that once belonged to larger sets, though the sets have not survived intact in the Crofts group. Sets of paintings would normally have been donated or gifted as set, and so the fact that the grouping of over 100 paintings held only pieces from sets implies that they might have been selected from an even larger grouping still. Where in Central China, would there possibly have been such a large and diverse collection, which included paintings from sets, some of a very fine quality, and others

less so. And who might have collected them and owned them before Crofts was able to acquire them?

There is one fascinating and tantalizing possibility here, which further research may be able to support. I offer this here as a musing, yet one that I now consider to be a very real possibility. I believe that these paintings could have, at one time, been connected, in some way, to the imperial Chinese court. Though the current evidence here adds up only to probabilities, I feel that the probabilities are quite high.

The first tantalizing piece of evidence is that we know that in Beijing, not far from Tianjin, goods from the imperial collection were being sold off at this particular historical juncture. The Manchu Qing dynasty had been deposed in 1911, yet the child emperor Pu Yi, his family, and more than 600 eunuchs and countless other servants had continued since that time to live in the palace of the Forbidden City. During the early years of the Republic of China, from 1911-1930, the deposed imperial family and powers had a strange and ambiguous relationship to the numerous treasures formerly owned by their court. The court subsisted on a governmental annual stipend from the new Republic, but this was considerably less than they had formerly had under their control. Pu Yi later wrote that in those years, because the stipend was delivered irregularly and they were always short of funds, treasures were often sold. In her account of the dissemination of the Imperial collections during these years, Jeannette Shambaugh Elliot writes:

The imperial household’s practice was to sell to a small and exclusive set of dealers, at a price far higher than would be reported in the accounts and far below the market value of the articles sold. When a four foot high solid gold pagoda was

26 Elliot, 61.
to be sold, Pu Yi asked a eunuch how it was to be priced. By weight, was the reply.27

The former emperor Pu Yi, at the suggestion of his British tutor Reginald Johnston, ordered an inventory of his former imperial collections. Johnston recalled that this often involved looking at objects still in “a sealed receptacle from a long forgotten tribute bearer or a viceroy,” and further that many objects had “disappeared.”28

Another interesting story reveals the fate of some of the imperial Buddhist collections:

In June 1923, Pu Yi announced that he would inspect the Palace of Eternal Happiness... where Emperor Qianlong’s favorite treasures had been stored. The eunuchs, frightened of having their depredations revealed, set fire to the palace... This collection had originally included more than two thousand gold Buddhist images, many Buddhist paintings, gold altar ornaments, porcelains...29

Probably a reference to this same historical fire, Crofts wrote to Currelly about the known backdoor antiques sales at the Palace Museum in Beijing:

It is quite untrue that the Imperial Museum was destroyed by fire during June of this year. The report no doubt arose from the fact that three of the Imperial Palaces were burned during that time but they contained but few treasures and were merely the living rooms of the Court people. Of course the newspapers stated that valuable treasures were destroyed but this is more or less nonsense but the report does help to cover various losses which have been incurred by the eunuchs in stealing goods from the palaces.30

In this remark we see that Crofts had some knowledge that stealing of court treasures was occurring. In another interesting and revealing letter from a British Major to Crofts, which Crofts had copied to Currelly and scrawled across the top “Private for what it is worth--

27 Elliot, 61.
28 Elliot, 61.
29 Elliot 61-62.
G.C.,” Major Fitz Hugh approaches Crofts about some “curio-buying” related to the former court goods. He writes:

As you doubtless know, during the recent negotiations for the Emperor’s wedding a number of Manchus gained access to the Palace and have brought out considerable quantities of bronzes, jades, ko-ssu etc., which have probably not seen the light of day since the revolution in 1911. These they wish to sell- but to save their faces are naturally more desirous of selling them to Foreigners, who will take them out of the country, than of putting them up to public sale and some of them, relatives of the Emperor, have therefore approached me on the subject... but the price asked being quite beyond my pocket I was wondering whether we might do a joint deal in them if such a proposition interests you.31

Crofts responds to the inquiry rather brusquely, perhaps put-off by the conspiratorial and colonial tone of the Major, that he doubts anything much will come of this. Crofts replies that he is sure the court types will have “inflated ideas” about the values, insisting that “I would not be interested at paying ridiculous prices to the Chinese merely because the articles came from the Palace, and may not have any great value.”32 Yet once again this excerpt reveals that such things were coming on to the market at the time and that this was, for Crofts, a fairly normal situation, and possibly even that he had already had contact with the Imperial collections before.

There are several reasons that the collection of over 100 thangkas could well have at some point had a certain association with the court or a court supported temple like Yongheghong. As stated earlier, the paintings represent all the teaching lineages, diverse geographical areas, and periods spanning from the 14th-20th centuries. The paintings vary from those made in Central and South Tibet to those made in China in the Tibetan style. The royal family would have received gifts from all the teaching lineages, and from

31 Crofts file, Copy of letter from Major Fitz Hugh dated 11th December 1922.
32 Crofts, Copy of Letter from Crofts to major Fitz Hugh dated 15th December 1922.
people in numerous areas. Furthermore, the Qing emperors had a real religious interest in Tibetan Buddhism, and maintained contact with the Tibetan religious schools and leaders.

That this collection could represent a part of a much larger, broader collection, is made furthermore likely by the quality of some of the paintings and the inclusion of some paintings which once formed parts larger sets. This makes sense that if the court eunuchs, servants, or even some formerly powerful families or religious teachers, were selling off some paintings from a larger collection they might select an odd grouping such as this.

There are several key pieces and groupings of paintings in the Royal Ontario Museum’s Himalayan collection that suggest these former associations, apart from the two large early ones that had been mounted in a purposely Chinese manner. One is a rare and early painting of Uddiyana Buddha which, though now very damaged, was once very fine (Fig. 10). It is stylistically consistent with the Yuan dynasty painting styles that incorporated elements of Nepalese figure types and combined these with Chinese landscape elements, and could possibly date from the 14th century.

Another interesting grouping of three gold paintings demonstrate a very fine quality but were likely once part of a larger set (Fig. 11). These represent the wrathful protectors Kalachakra, Mahottama Heruka, and Simhamukha Heruka, not a logical iconographic group as a triad but more likely three from a larger set. These paintings are of an amazing quality and as paintings on a gold ground represent overt displays of prominent wealth. Only a very wealthy donor or patron could have commissioned them, and the emperor, his relations, or an imperially related temple, would have been a
suitable place for donating such a lavish gift. The fact that only three occur in the
collection implies that even the museum’s large collection of paintings came from an
even larger group still.

The available evidence therefore suggests that the collection of Tibetan paintings
sent by George Crofts to Toronto in 1921 had already been in China for some time, and
that it was acquired by Crofts as a group. Evidence deduced from the Crofts
correspondence, from the condition of the paintings themselves, and from the structure of
the group as a whole strengthens this claim. Though answering specifically when and
how the Tibetan paintings came to China is currently impossible with the known
information, I have suggested that the group may have been formed in some relationship
to the disintegrating but formerly centralizing imperial power of Manchu China. For
more exact knowledge about the movement of the Aghora painting, which was produced
in 15th century Tibet, only the discovery of a fortuitous inscription, or some other record
of it written Chinese records, could lead to more exact information.

But how and when did this painting come from Tibet to China?

This is a difficult question to answer with the present information. There were
many moments and movements of goods, and particularly religious works of art, between
Tibet and China recorded since the 7th century. Tibet and Central China had a long and
particularly complex religious and political relationship particularly since the Yuan
dynasty (1260-1368). I will look briefly at the history of this relationship and in particular
its bearing on the arts. The many possible points of artistic exchange, created both the

---

33 These three gold paintings have long Tibetan inscriptions on their reverse sides
that, once translated, may reveal more about their provenance.
movement of goods suggested above, as well as the transmission of artistic styles between the regions, which is important for the analysis of the painting’s style to follow.

The History of Artistic Contact Between Tibet and China:

The Himalayan paintings in the museum’s collection include both paintings that were made in China in the Tibetan style and paintings that were made in Tibet and Mongolia and later imported to China. The distinctions between these two, Tibetan and “Tibeto-Chinese” works, is usually made on stylistic grounds, but may also include materials (such as the use of silk for the painting surface in China) and techniques (such as the use of embroidery in China). The Tibeto-Chinese works, which were made in China yet produced for Tibetan religious contexts, were a direct result of the longstanding religious relationship between Tibet and China. To understand these works and their appropriate context, we must explore a brief history of the relationship, particularly with regard to the religious and political context, between Tibet and Central China, and how these in turn influenced both the production and the movement of works of art.

Tibetan religious practices and sects had been active in China since before the Mongol Yuan dynasty (1280-1368), when the Yuan rulers adopted Tibetan Buddhism as their religion. During the Ming and Qing dynasties this close relationship between Tibet and Central China continued. The Buddhist art of China was influenced by the unique style and iconography of Tibetan art, and likewise Tibetan art was influenced by increased contact with China. These interactions also resulted in the production in China of distinctively Tibetan, or Tibeto-Chinese style paintings and sculptures.
During the Yuan dynasty Prince Godan, later Kublai Khan, took an interest in Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism. He called an important religious leader, the Sakya Pandita Kunga Gyaltsen (1182-1251) to his court. Under Sakya Pandita, Prince Godan converted to Buddhism. The Pandita was also able to negotiate terms with the Mongol leader to ensure that Tibet was not attacked. The Sakya sect was designated as the representatives of the Mongols in Tibet, and the Mongols were given authority over appointments in Tibet. The ruler Kublai Khan also developed a close relationship with the Tibetan Buddhist hierarch Phagspa, a Sakya Lama who ultimately became the Khan’s “Imperial Preceptor.” Phagspa wielded great power and was put in charge of all religious matters for the Yuan dynasty, including Tibet. Phagspa and Kublai Khan together patronized much Buddhist art and temple building. Their relationship was the first example of the lama-patron (mchod-yon) relationship that would continue between the later Manchus (the Qing dynasty) and various Tibetan teachers.

Under Phagspa and during the Yuan dynasty the Nepalo-Tibetan influence in Chinese Buddhist art expanded greatly as a result of the influence of the Nepalese artist Arniko (1245-1306). When Phagspa was charged with the construction of a golden stupa in Tibet in 1260, he brought a group of artists from Nepal. Despite his young age, the artist Arniko impressed Phagspa with his talent and was brought to the court to meet Kublai, who tested him by having him repair a badly damaged sculpture. When he did so with expert ease, the Khan placed him in charge of the imperial workshops for the Yuan court.

Amiko stocked his workshop with other Nepali artists and has been credited for creating the emphatically Nepalo-Tibetan style evident in the art of the Yuan court. While we do not know of anything directly attributed to Amiko, there are several surviving monuments and sites from the 14th century that attest to his influence. These include the Indo-Nepalese style sculptures at Feilaifeng near Hangzhou, and the Juyong guan gate near Beijing. One painting in the Royal Ontario Museum Collection also exemplifies this synthesis of Indo-Nepalo-Tibetan styles combined with Chinese styles, and is a representative piece of a Tibeto-Chinese religious piece possibly produced during the Yuan dynasty (Fig. 10). This painting shows the synthesis of Nepalo-Tibetan figural style, with a Nepalese style crown, set against a thoroughly Chinese style painted landscape.

During the Ming period, and especially under the Ming emperor Chengzu, who reigned under the title Yongle, the interest in the Nepalo-Tibetan artistic styles was revived. The emperor Yongle (r.1403-1424), who built the famous "Forbidden City" palace in Beijing, invited both Nepali and Tibetan artists to come to work in his imperial workshop. Many authors have written about the Ming emperor's political interest in supporting Tibetan Buddhism. While it was true that garnering the support of the Tibetan Buddhist clergy helped to control the Mongol and Tibetan peoples, several emperors also felt deep personal devotion, practicing Vajrayana Tibetan Buddhism. In the cases of the emperors Yongle and Xuande particularly, their devotion to Tibetan Buddhism was evident in both their own Buddhist practices and rites as well as their patronage of Tibetan Buddhist texts, monuments, temples, and the arts.
For instance, in 1403 the Yongle emperor invited the fifth Karmapa to come to China to perform the funeral rites for his parents at Mount Wutai. The fifth Karmapa accepted this invitation and stayed for over a year as the emperor's personal spiritual advisor. The emperor also took Tantric initiations from the Karmapa. Further, Yongle bestowed upon the Karmapa a title equivalent to that of the Yuan Imperial preceptor, reviving the lama-patron (mchod-yon) relationship established by Kublai Khan.

The Ming Yongle emperor also invited the great Tibetan teacher Tsong Khapa (1357-1419) to come to China several times. Although Tsong Khapa always declined for reasons of health and age, he twice sent other teachers accompanied by lavish gifts. These convoys of gifts from Tsong Khapa would certainly have included Tibetan sculptures and paintings. This would have been yet another of the moments when numerous fine Tibetan goods were gifted to the Chinese emperors. Such exchanges with Tibet provided an important direct source for the distinctive Tibetan style incorporated into the Chinese court's Tibeto-Chinese style that developed further under Yongle. The Ming rulers Yongle and Xuande, who ruled during the early 15th century, both took a great interest in patronizing distinctively Tibetan style art.

During the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) Tibetan Buddhism was also the state religion of the Manchu rulers. While again much has been made of the politically expedient reasons for this, there is again ample proof that Tibetan Buddhism was a devoutly held belief system for particular Qing emperors. The emperor Qienlong (1736-1796) was a serious disciple of Tibetan Buddhism as well as a prolific patron of the arts.

---

36 Ibid.
During his time, finely cast bronzes and Tibetan style paintings were produced in China, in a style that represents yet a further development of an integrated Tibeto-Chinese style. Trade, particularly of religious art, would have continued throughout the Qing between Tibet and the imperial powers of China.

Qienlong was also a prolific patron of Tibetan style paintings, sculptures, and Buddhist monuments, related to his Buddhist piety. Qienlong's close friend and advisor, the Mongolian lama Rolpe Dorje, served as the artistic consultant and resident iconographer for Qienlong's major Buddhist artistic endeavors. Rolpe Dorje was responsible for printing two Buddhist pantheons, and was also charged with taking an inventory and identifying all the Buddhist art in the imperial collection. Rolpe Dorje was also given Qienlong's princely palace that he converted into the Yongeghong Geluk Buddhist temple. For this task Qienlong and Rolpe Dorje brought a group of Tibetan monks, and a group of Tibetan and Nepali artists, to Beijing. These artists necessarily incorporated their own stylistic idioms into the imperial art they produced.

The long history of religious contact between Tibet and China has been given here as a framework towards understanding both how Tibetan art works might have come to China at various moments during the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties. The relationship between the two countries had been largely positive and mutually beneficial, although the relationship would change suddenly and violently in 1959. Regardless of one's current vantage point, the history of relations between Tibet

and China has clearly been one of constant exchange, particularly in the arenas of religion and art.

**Conclusion: The History and Adventures of One Painting**

The painting of Mahakala Aghora was produced in Central Tibet in the 15th century, which will be proved in the following section. This section has addressed as far as possible the known and unknown history of the painting since its creation and up until its collection by the Royal Ontario Museum. In this task, it has been expedient and necessary to consider the painting in the context of its collection, as a part of a larger group that was collected by George Crofts, likely in the environs of Tianjin, around 1921. I have suggested that the paintings in this group may have in fact had some relation to the imperial court and family. I am not suggesting here that the tie was necessarily concrete or direct, or even necessarily that Crofts knew explicitly about their origin. The connection may in fact have been through Yongheghong, the Tibetan Buddhist temple built and associated with the Qing emperors. Still, as an otherwise assembled and extremely diverse group of Tibetan and Tibetan style paintings that seem to have lived together in China for some time already, I propose this is a likely scenario to explain their sudden occurrence in the trans-Pacific crates of George Crofts in 1921. This has been a fascinating history so far, yet the history of the painting’s production has been so far neglected. In the next section, I will continue to engage the history of the painting, but this time in terms of the history of its production. For this task I will partake in a careful stylistic analysis of the component parts and details of the painting.
CHAPTER 3

STYLISTIC ANALYSIS OF THE PAINTING

The stylistic details of this large painting provide many clues to its date and regional origin. While specifically dated works are rare in Himalayan art, and could only be assured by finding an inscription, such as one identifying a specific donor or datable consecration, an approximate date can be arrived at from a careful analysis of the style employed to render specific details in the painting. This section explores the stylistic features of the Aghora painting (Fig. 1) to arrive at an estimate of its date.

The development of style in Tibetan painting follows a fairly well understood historical pattern of incorporating and assimilating foreign stylistic influences at specific times. By understanding the framework of temporal and historic development in style resulting from these influences, we can locate specific "clues" in paintings that allow us to date them. This section focuses on placing the Royal Ontario Museum's painting of Aghora appropriately into the developmental continuum of Tibetan art styles through comparative analysis with Indian, Nepali, Tibetan, and Chinese works of art. After examining the specific details, it will be clear that the painting is stylistically consistent with gTsang district, that is, South-Central Tibetan paintings of the 15th century.

Tibetan paintings reflect a synthesis of elements from other painting traditions, particularly those established in India, Nepal, and China. The changes in regional
influences on Himalayan painting reflect specific political, economic and social realities and the changing and shifting relationships between Tibet and its neighbors. The mandala of Aghora reflects all these influences. Yet to reduce Tibetan painting solely to a conjunction of foreign parts is to miss the greater unique whole that is visible in Tibetan art. Again, our painting is no exception, and after looking at the various borrowed elements in the painting and identifying their foreign sources, we turn to a discussion of how these were combined into a unique style that was distinctly and fundamentally Tibetan.

The Difficulties and Possibilities of Dating Tibetan Art:

There are some unique difficulties associated with accurately dating Tibetan art. In *Leaves from the Bodhi Tree* John and Susan Huntington discuss the major obstacles to a carefully understood development of style in Himalayan art. There is a marked lack of a strong comparative basis in the early art of neighboring regions, and furthermore the original context of most Tibetan art has been lost. Other issues stem from the approaches often taken to study Tibetan art, where focus is placed on the philological or religious aspects, and the complex iconographies that dominate. Steve Kossak repeats a similar opinion, stating that:

The artistic record is fragmentary not only for Tibetan works but also for the works that provided the most important influences: paintings of the Pala period of eastern India (eighth-twelfth century) and Nepalese painting of the thirteenth century. Of the paintings that have come down to us from those cultures, chiefly

---

1 Huntington, Susan and John C. Huntington. *Leaves From the Bodhi Tree: The Art of Pala India (8th to 12th Centuries) and its International Legacy*. (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1989) 281.
manuscript illuminations, some are dated by inscription but few can be assigned a specific provenance. Moreover, most postdate comparable Tibetan works.²

Despite these drawbacks, considerable work has occurred over the last two decades which more clearly and decisively assesses the painting styles of Tibetan art. These studies rely on a firmer assessment of the comparative materials from India, Nepal, central Asia, and China. So too the importance of mural paintings from Tibet on monuments of a known and inscribed date have become increasingly useful to scholars studying the development of style in Tibetan painting. A stylistic dating of Tibetan works, like the Aghora mandala, has therefore become increasingly possible.

This section identifies the specific painting style that dominated in South-Central Tibet in the 15th century. This style displays holdovers of the Indian Pala style, and later vestiges of this style as it became increasingly filtered through the Nepali sources from the 13th century on. Also, it incorporated elements of the Mongol Chinese Yuan dynasty style of the 13-14th century on, which had distinctively combined Nepali and Chinese stylistic elements in painting.

In this section we will first examine the stylistic elements of the painting that reflect the Pala Indian heritage, and then those that can be seen as specifically altered in the transmission through Nepal after the 12th century. We will then turn to those Chinese elements that entered the Tibetan painting idiom after the Yuan dynasty. The distinctive Tibetan style is also apparent in two Tibetan monuments with surviving mural paintings, the monasteries of Shalu and Gyantse. A comparison of the Aghora painting to these

---

demonstrates that it is consistent with the distinctive stylistic synthesis evident in South-Central Tibetan painting of the 15th century.

The Traditional Tibetan Account of the Early Tibetan Painting Schools

India and then Nepal are acknowledged in the Tibetan histories as the sources for the Tibetan painting schools from the 11th through 14th centuries. Specifically, the historian and Tibetan scholar Taranatha (born 1575) outlines the evolution of style in Tibetan painting. 3 Although his seventeenth century account incorporates some ahistorical materials, it has been “widely recognized that he had legitimate early sources at his disposal.” 4 Taranatha roughly delineates the schools of Tibetan painting, whose names refer to the foreign sources they adhered to. The development he outlines is corroborated in the material record of known and dated Tibetan paintings and monuments.

In Taranatha’s account, the earliest schools of painting were specifically derived from Indian prototypes. The dBus bris (U-ri) school was based on the style of what he calls Central India (Magadha), the Nub rnying bris (Nubnying-ri) school derived from what he calls Western Indian styles, and the Shar mthun ris (Shardun-ri) school was based on what he calls the styles of eastern Indian schools, likely those of the Gaur and Anga regions. Taranatha distinguished these earlier schools based in Indian conventions from the stylistic school of the “middle period” which is called the Tibetan Bal bris, based on the stylistic conventions of Nepal, though he writes that this Nepali style closely resembled the western school of Indian painting.

3 Huntington and Huntington, Leaves. 284-289.
4 Huntington and Huntington, Leaves. 285.
Though no examples of Tibetan painting have been convincingly linked with the Western Indian style of the Nubnying-ri, some early Tibetan paintings have been linked to both the Shardun-ri and U-ri stylistic conventions. There are traces of these conventions present in the ROM painting of Aghora, and we will now explore this in light of comparative Indian, Central Asian, and Tibetan materials.

**Holdovers of The Early Pala Indian Style**

The first major importation of Buddhism from India to Tibet, which was associated with Padmasambhava, took place in the 8th century. In the 11th century, there was another major Buddhist importation from India, this time associated with the Indian Pandit Atisa. Given these major waves of religious influence, it is not surprising that the early art of Tibet reflects a strongly Indian style. Not only was the Indian art considered authoritatively Buddhist to the Tibetans, but it also served as the model upon which the emerging Tibetan artistic development was based. There are no extant works associated with the 8th century wave of Buddhism brought by Padmasambhava. The earliest Tibetan paintings that have survived are attributable to the 11th and 12th centuries, and reflect Atisa's transmission of Buddhism in Tibet. Since Atisa came from what is now eastern India and Bangladesh, it is not surprising that the early Tibetan works are heavily dependent on the Indian style of the "Pala" and related dynasties. In particular, the Shardun-ri school is based on the eastern stylistic idioms of Gaur and Anga, and the
styles based on the centers at Magadha and Nalanda are understood by the Tibetans as the central U-ri school\(^5\).

Though no large Indian paintings survive from this time, evidence from several painted *potti* manuscripts from the 12th century provide evidence for the artistic conventions established during the Pala period of Indian art in painting. Similarly, paintings from the central Asian horde at Dunhuang reflect a synthesis of Indian Pala elements also evident in the earliest stylistically dated Tibetan paintings. The painting of Aghora, though later than these earliest examples, retains elements of the preferred Pala style that predominated in the earliest Tibetan paintings of the 12th-14th centuries. The mechanism of stylistic influence was at least in part related to the fact that Tibetan artists must have had access to works of art and manuscripts that Atisa brought with him to Tibet, for he is reputed to have brought 30 donkey loads of Buddhist ritual objects and paraphernalia.\(^6\)

These Pala Indian holdovers of the foundational early style are important for dating this 15th century painting, not because of an actual temporal proximity to the date of their 11th century entrance into the Tibetan painting idiom, but rather because gradually, these Indian stylistic elements were gradually codified, altered, and eventually replaced in the Tibetan idioms. Specifically, the numerous similarities to the early Indian style evident in this painting show that it was painted before several of these stylistic

---

\(^5\) The Tibetans considered the "Central" region of India, not in terms of modern geography, but instead as the center focused at Bodhgaya, the center of the Buddhist universe where Sakyamuni attained enlightenment under the Bodhi tree.

\(^6\) Huntington and Huntington, *Leaves*, 291.

36
elements disappeared from Tibetan painting in the 16th and 17th centuries, for these “early” styles had their last expression in the 15th century.

Key stylistic holdovers of the early Indian style in Tibetan painting are visible in the design of this mandala, that is, the meditational diagram for a visualization practice. This particular example contains over 93 subsidiary figures each depicted in individual red-arched aureoles laid along even, horizontal registers surrounding the central figure. This mandala type differs from the better known “bird’s eye view” architectural-space mandala type that dominates among later mandalas. This style developed directly out of Indian manuscript painting. Red arched aureoles survive in Pala Indian manuscript paintings, and were commonly placed behind figures. An example of a Pala Indian manuscript dated to the 13th century from the Nalanda area shows a Buddha seated in a plain red aureole (Fig. 12). The plain red aureoles were associated with the central Indian style exemplified by the Nalanda school and were incorporated into the U-ri school of Tibetan painting.

The composition of the mandala, laid out in registers, is a common design for early Tibetan paintings. Such a design is used in the Lhakang Soma at Alchi dating to the 12th century, as well as in the design of several paintings from Khara Khotó dating from before 1227 when the horde was sealed in a stupa. In one painting of Cakrasamvara and Vajravarahi recovered from the Khara Khotó group, the bright red aureoles of the subsidiary figures dominate and pattern the overall design of the painting (Fig. 13). This mandala design with figures laid out along horizontal registers at the top, sides, and bottom surrounding a large central figure likely existed in large cloth paintings in India as
well, though none of these has survived. However, the design is common among early Tibetan paintings and painted monuments.

That this design of figures laid out in horizontal registers around a large central figure is a *mandala* may not be readily apparent to those who are more familiar with the bird’s eye view designs that are based on a series of circles and squares. Indeed, can a *mandala*, which means “circle,” exist if the pattern followed is not in fact literally laid out in a circular design? The answer is yes, and there is one clear indication of the “mandalic” and even circular nature of the painting of Aghora amidst the horizontal layout. In the painting of Aghora each register of niches is separated by a lightly colored horizontal stripe with roughly rendered lotus designs: semicircles interspaced by black hatch marks. This is a symbolic depiction of the petals and stamen of a lotus flower (Fig. 14). This design serves as a visual reminder to the viewer that despite the horizontal appearance of the layout, this *mandala* is in fact read as the circular unfolding petals of a lotus flower. Though the explicitly round-shaped *mandala* is more common in later paintings, this small symbolic note assures us that the core conceptual meaning of a circularly unfolding *mandala* was present in this design even when the round shape was not explicit.

An early Tibetan painting showing Sadaksari Avalokitesvara in the center has been attributed to the *U-ri* school and has been dated to the 11th–12th century (Fig. 15).

Here the six subsidiary figures of the *mandala* are placed in two horizontal registers at

---

7 In the catalogue *Leaves from the Bodhi Tree* this Sadaksari Painting is attributed by John Huntington to the Shardun-ri school. However after subsequent research John Huntington now attributes this painting to the U-ri school based on the Nalanda/Magadha style of “central” India. Huntington and Huntington, *Leaves*, 324. Huntington, John. Art of Tibet Class Lectures, Spring 2005.
the top and bottom of the painting, and the simple red aureoles are spaced apart. The painting of Aghora has considerably more figures in the represented mandala, and the red aureoles are pushed together until they share a virtually indistinguishable line between them (Fig. 16). This may represent the more formulaic repetition of this much earlier design type that became, over the centuries, more regularized into a repetitive patterning device.

Other details also conclusively demonstrate the stylistic connection to the Indian-derived painting schools in Tibet. The treatment of the subsidiary figures, their postures and garments, also show a close adherence to the Pala-derived Indian style. In the top row, the lineage figures are shown frontally supported by wide, plain, arch-shaped bolster pillows behind them (Fig. 17). This device of a large broad bolster pillow is evident in Pala manuscript paintings of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas seated against large bolster pillows. In one example from a Prajnaparamita manuscript dated to 1054, also from the so called “central” region India,8 the figure of Prajnaparamita sits against a broad, patterned blue bolster (Fig. 18).

The two Indian Mahasiddhas at the top of the mandala (Fig. 19) are also depicted in a manner concurrent with the Pala types. We see them seated in royal ease with their slender limbs, legs and arms, bare. Their knees are bent and splayed sideways and each one keeps one knee raised slightly higher than the other. They look strikingly similar to depictions of Bodhisattvas from Pala manuscripts. A painted Avalokitesvara from the Nalanda school manuscript the Ramapala dated to 1095 shows the precedent for this

---

8 The “Central” region of India as conceived by the Tibetans at this time would now correspond, in modern geographic terms, to the westernmost part of eastern India.
figure type, dress and posture (Fig. 20). However, the sinuous curve at the waist exhibited by the Pala manuscript figure had been lost by the time of the Aghora painting.

Other minor stylistic elements that have their source in the early Indian styles, but which are increasingly translated and elaborated through contact with Nepal, include the scarves of the central figure and the subsidiary figures that billow upwards in stiff arches, almost as though they were starched straight upwards. These flying scarves loop behind the standing subsidiary figures and fishtail into two lobes at either side of their hips. This type of scarf movement is seen in Pala manuscript paintings (Fig. 21) and then throughout early Tibetan paintings of both the Shardun-ri and U-ri schools.

Another important element in the Aghora painting that can be traced to the early Indian sources and influences in Tibetan art is the depiction of the charnel ground mountain terrain. This narrow band, which can be easy to miss in an overview of the large painting, occurs right below the single lotus base of the central figure. In this depiction, the stiff corpses are draped over multi-colored, geometrically shaped forms, meant to represent mountains (Fig. 22). Many of these mountain forms have curled and pointed tips. This may seem to be a creative and abstract rendering of mountain forms, yet it was actually a conventionalized mountain type that emerged directly from Indian Pala art. Such stylized mountain prototypes are seen in both Pala period sculptures and manuscript paintings. In one sculpture of Uma-Mahesvara from 12th century eastern India we see the mountain forms rendered as vertically trapezoidal columns with pointed triangular tips, some of which curve inwards (Fig. 23). The landscape surrounding the divine couple is punctuated by caves, where mountain animals dwell. A similar stylization of mountain forms is evident in manuscript paintings. In one rendering, a
Similarly stylized rendition of mountains appears around a central figure of Tara (Fig. 24).

This convention for geometrically stylized mountains continued and developed in both Nepal and Tibet, and was a common convention in early Tibetan paintings. A 12th century painting of Green Tara shows the curl-tipped mountain forms surrounding the goddess in her Khadiravani mountain paradise (Fig. 25). The influence of this stylistic shorthand for mountains reaches as far north as Khara Khoto in Central Asia in a woven Kessu depicting Green Tara. Here, the landscape is once again filled with such stylized mountains (Fig. 26). In the Kessu however the mountains have developed into flatter geometric tipped columns, some perforated with holes near the tops. The design of lobed and tipped triangularly topped vertical bands of various colors represents a similarly imaginative development from the Indian prototype.

Thus we have seen that many remnants of the Pala Indian style resonate in the Royal Ontario Museum’s painting of Aghora. Pala Indian derived elements occur in both the overall design and layout of the painting, the particularities of figure types, ornaments and scarves, as well as in tiny landscape details. Yet this is only the beginning of the story, for the Pala Indian style in Buddhist art came to an abrupt end in India in the 12th century following the destructive Muslim incursions into northern India. The style, however, was preserved and altered in and through the small Kathmandu Valley of Nepal.
The Nepali Translation and Development of the Indian Pala Style

We will now look at the identifiably Nepali stylistic developments in this painting. This is a difficult task, though, considering the lack of a corpus of surviving Nepali paintings from the 13th century. We will begin, once again, by studying the historic textual sources and then discuss the available evidence for our analysis of the Nepali style.

Taranatha's traditional account of Tibetan painting explains that the middle period was dominated by stylistic sources from Nepal. Both art and political history of the 12th-13th centuries supports this claim. Just as Buddhism was in sudden decline in India due to the destructive Muslim incursions in the north, Nepal became the repository for the "classical Pala" style. In Taranatha's account, the style of the Nepali-derived Bal bris school was said to closely resemble the Shardun painting style of eastern India. As John Huntington has written, "It would appear that the Nepali's discovered a market for Pala-style paintings in Tibet."⁹ Though the Pala style persisted in Nepal, it did not remain unaltered, but was developed into an increasingly ornamental and recognizably Nepali style. While this style was based primarily in the Indian schools, it also departed in favor of elaborated additions based on the Nepali's "culturally based design sense."¹⁰

One prominent example of a Nepali stylistic development in the painting of Aghora is the vigorously stylized lobed flames that entirely surround the central figure. These flames are composed of linear red tendrils extending outwards in curves and waves, which together form geometrically regular petal-shaped lobes. These lobes give

the appearance of standardization, although close observation clarifies that the artist actually used a great degree of freedom within the form. No two lobes are actually composed exactly the same. While in the Indian Pala style, the flame aureoles were depicted as decorative, and geometrically regular curling tips (Fig. 27), this stylistic design of ornamental curlicues in petal-shaped lobes is an innovation that can be attributed to Nepal. However, curiously, our best example for the Nepali ornamentation of this type of lobed flame design comes from a South-Central Tibetan temple, the monasteries at Shalu, where Nepali and Nepali-trained artists were commissioned to paint some very fine Buddhist murals in the 14th century.

The 14th Century Shalu Murals: the “Nepali-Chinese” Style of the Yuan Court

The central Tibetan temple of Shalu Serkhang (Zhwalu gSerkhang) has wall paintings surviving to this day which exemplify and demonstrate the Tibetan preference for and assimilation of “the Newar style of the Yuan court.” Though it was built in the 11th century, the temple was renovated and largely repainted in two separate stages during the 14th century. Roberto Vitali argues successfully that the surviving paintings provide excellent examples of the “chief characteristics of the Nepali style born at the Yuan court” and that many Nepali artists, and Chinese artists trained in the Nepali style, worked on the murals. The 14th century Nepali-Yuan style evident at Shalu provides numerous points of stylistic comparison with our painting of Aghora.

---

12 Vitali, 112.
13 Vitali, 107.
As discussed earlier, the Mongol Yuan dynasty established a special relationship with Tibet as well as with the Nepali artistic tradition. Since the conversion of Kublai Khan, Yuan rulers had treated Tibetan Buddhism as their religion. The Yuan emperors, ethnic Mongols themselves, invited many foreign artists to play major roles in their imperial building projects in central China. This led to the innovations and artistic virtuosity of the young Nepali Arniko, an artist invited by Phagspa, the Tibetan advisor to Kublai, to the Yuan court. Arniko would eventually become the imperial master of the arts. Arniko who was a self-described master of painting, metal-casting, textiles and portraiture, and became the head artist of the Yuan court around 1280. He trained many other artists to work in the Nepali Style.\textsuperscript{14} He was thus able to establish a school of artists working in China, of many nationalities, who had been taught in the Nepali Pala-derived style of painting, decoration and metal-casting.

The Shalu murals from the 14\textsuperscript{th} century were not painted by Arniko himself, but by a group of Nepali, Tibetan, and Chinese artists who were consciously working in the Nepali style of the Yuan court.\textsuperscript{15} This is evident because, while the Shalu murals retain clearly and identifiably Nepali elements, particularly of the Nepali style that had evolved out of Indian Pala idioms, the Shalu murals also combine distinctly Chinese elements into the paintings. This marriage of Nepali and Chinese features is also apparent in the painting of Aghora.

In one wall painting showing the wrathful Vajrapani in the north wing of the early 14\textsuperscript{th} century mgonkhang, the typically Nepali stylization of flames (Fig. 28). Here, the

\textsuperscript{14} Vitali 104-105.  
\textsuperscript{15} Vitali, 106.
flame aura around the figure is arranged in triangular lobes, each composed of stylized and curling red tendrils extending outward in a repetitive geometric design. These curling tendrils demonstrate the Nepali ornamented stylization, reminiscent also of the foliated tails of typically Nepali makaras. We see these same distinctive flames, vine-like tendrils in lobe shapes, surrounding the central Aghora in our painting. In the Aghora painting the design has become even more repetitive, with less variation in the size and shapes of the curl-tipped lobes compared with the Shalu paintings. This is because the ROM painting is a slightly later translation of the style, which a century later had become a more standardized and repetitive design element.

However, the Chinese elements that began to enter Tibetan paintings during and after the Yuan dynasty are also evident in the Shalu murals. In a detail of the Guardian king Vaisravana from Shalu, we see the conjunction of Nepali and Chinese elements in the treatment of his robes. The sleeves of Vaisravana's robes swoop upwards, attenuated into rigid upward flowing curves, with stylized interior folds visible (Fig. 29). The interior lining of the robes are rendered in a light yellow color. Though the shapes of the attenuated flying sleeves and scarves at Aghora's shoulders differ, these are also stylized into curving shapes with geometrically delineated interior folds displayed by a lighter interior color (Fig. 30). Though the shapes differ, the resonance between these two visual concepts, both vividly unnatural stylizations of flying textiles swirling in activity, relate closely to one another. These are basically Chinese by the geometric stylization of the robes, but these Chinese elements are altered through the combination with the Nepali design taste, so influential during the Yuan, for the ornamental stylization of form through decorative movement.
In yet another detail from Shalu, the Pala stylization of the geometric mountain forms are depicted as they were preserved in Nepal. Beneath a group of monks, a cluster of multi-colored geometric blocks is shown. They are largely rectangular, with a depiction of their jutting three-dimensionality by a trapezoidal central space depicting their jutting forward and back into space (Fig. 31). They are rendered in red, white, blue, and yellow and have sweeping curled tips at the top. Though these differ in specific shape from the stylized mountains evident in the Aghora painting, the same idea of a geometrically abstracted formal device, multicolored and curl-tipped at the top, is used as a symbolic shorthand for representing a mountain landscape.

In another example from Shalu, a distinctive cloud form is seen in a section of later 14th century painting. This cloud form demonstrates the further evolution of a synthesis between Nepali and Chinese elements typical of the Yuan style. Multicolored opaque clouds swirl behind a depiction of Avalokitesvara (Fig. 32). Here, the colors of the painting are rendered in a more characteristically Chinese manner, with a greater admixture of white as compared with the vibrant Nepali coloration, usually in bright reds and blues. At Shalu the clouds are opaque and solid, rendered in stylized shapes with swirling interior lines and a horizontally long shape. Though these clouds differ slightly from those swirling around Mahakala Aghora, they bear a relation to these clouds in their opacity and solidity.

The clouds swirling around the Aghora figure are thicker, dense like an unbroken pattern (Fig. 33). This may, of course, be a reflection of the iconographic fact that Aghora’s clouds are meant to represent smoke clouds, not the puffy atmospheric clouds denoting the heavens as in a painting of the peaceful Bodhisattvas at Shalu. Furthermore,
the nearly "fungal" shapes of Aghora's clouds are delineated by interior double lines in dark blue, and the spaces within show shading in the transition between lighter whites and deeper opaque colors. The darker clouds at Shalu are also depicted with small light white lines around the exterior and denoting the interior shapes. The styles of clouds at Shalu show the important integration of the combination of Chinese elements in Yuan school paintings. Roberto Vitali observes that here the Chinese tendency towards "the predominance accorded to clouds as decorative motifs in classical Chinese painting has been fully accepted by the artists of the Nepali style of the Yuan court." Other examples of the Chinese stylistic influence in the depiction of the solid clouds surrounding Aghora will be located later in other Chinese examples.

The synthesis of Nepali and Chinese elements that typified the art of the Yuan dynasty is thus present in our painting of Aghora. However, in many of the details the painting appears more stiff and staid than in the Shalu murals. The aura of flame lobes shows less variance in size and shape, the folds of the robe represent a true play on the geometric properties of cloth more than any realistic movement of textile, and the wrathful face of the central figure appears mask-like. This slightly more stiff effect demonstrates that the painting of Aghora was produced about a century later than the Shalu murals, when the stylistic elements introduced during the Yuan dynasty in Tibet and China had become more firmly codified and standardized.

The murals at Gyantse, an elaborate temple near to Shalu in South-Central Tibet, dating approximately one hundred years later to the first half of the 15th century, provide a closer point for comparison to our painting. However, let us first examine a few more

\[16\] Vitali, 107.
Chinese comparisons, which will permit an understanding of the evolution of the robe and cloud types, the distinctly Chinese elements which were incorporated into the style of this Tibetan painting.

**Chinese Stylistic Influences in the Painting:**

Along with the Pala and Nepali features, elements of the painting can also be clearly identified with Chinese stylistic sources. These Chinese elements entered Tibetan painting during the Yuan and Ming dynasties, when religious and hence artistic contact between Tibet and China increased. These stylistic elements in the painting are important for a clear assessment of its date.

The Chinese style of robes and the treatment of the draperies have already been discussed in the Shalu paintings, where I proposed that artists trained at the Yuan court incorporated Chinese elements into the Nepali style taught by Arniko. A few examples clearly demonstrate their Chinese stylistic origin. In the 14th century wall murals from the Daoist temple Yongle Gong in Shanxi province, there are figures wearing robes whose sleeves are swept up in a turbid wind (Fig. 34). These show a more naturalistic depiction of long robes and sleeves made active by the elements around them. The interest in naturalistic and actively moving drapery has a Chinese origin and contrasts with the stylized and stiff depiction of scarves and draperies in Pala Indian sources. In comparison to the Yongle Gong murals, the robes of Aghora still fold in more geometric lines and show less freedom of movement. They exemplify the codification in Tibet of this originally Chinese interest in the activation of flying textiles and robes.
The lower robes on a seated Buddha from the Chinese Qutansi temple in Qinghai province, dated to the 15th century, further demonstrate this interest in the visual description of moving draperies. The fluid and moving robes, even on a seated Buddha, are shown in a geometric rendering closer to those of Aghora. The bottom hem of the Buddha's robes wave in a pattern of alternating arcs and bends rendered with stylized geometric precision (Fig. 35). These are similar to the regularized arcs at the bottom hem of Aghora's long vest-robe, which move in geometric waves over both of his knees.

The stylization of bending, arcing, and folding robes based on Chinese precedents became an important influence in Tibetan paintings, particularly after the 14th century. In a Tibetan painting of the Arhat Vanasavasin, an interest in the movement and folding of the multicolored robes, differentiating between the colors of their exterior and interior linings, is shown (Fig. 36). This Tibetan painting demonstrates how the eventual translation of the Chinese conventions into Tibetan painting became more geometrically standardized, less freely naturalistic or expressive. The draperies in the painting of the Arhat, as in that of Aghora, show the folding and movements of textiles almost for their own sake, no longer as reflections of atmospheric effects or depictions of naturalistically curving silks. In 15th century Tibetan painting, the textile treatments follow a more conventionalized form, lacking the freedom of movement of the Chinese prototypes.

Another importation from China that became prevalent in Tibetan painting was the depiction of the Guardian kings and warriors in the costumes of Chinese Tang warriors. A clear example of the dress of Tang warriors, wearing tunics made of vertical leather strips and pointed caps, comes from the 7th century wall paintings from Princess Changles Tomb (Fig. 37). This Chinese costume type became the preferred garments for
the four guardian kings in Tibet, who developed from an Indic prototype, where they were shown as corpulent, bare-chested Indian princes. The Tang warrior dress worn by the guardian kings and the warrior-like asuras in the Aghora painting are nevertheless rendered in a very different style. Though the Tang costume has been adopted, it has been rendered in the more frontal, stylized, brightly colored linear painting style of Indic derived early Tibetan paintings (Fig. 38).

The cloud forms have been discussed already as Chinese elements, but we will ascertain exactly how the use of clouds is a formal device borrowed from Chinese painting. Throughout Chinese paintings from an early date, clouds have a solid and substantial presence. In a Chinese style painting from Khara Khoti showing Amitabha welcoming the deceased to paradise, the Buddha and his attendant Bodhisattvas appear to be transported down to the ground in the lower left corner on vehicles made of solid cloud (Fig. 39). These clouds are incorporated as much more than decorative devices, but instead become opaque, substantial physical presences.

While there are many different types and motifs used for clouds in Chinese painting, one close comparison occurs in a 14th century Chinese painting of an arhat. The clouds here are solid and shown as multicolored, with predominantly horizontal shapes, smooth outlines and curling interior lines rendered with some interior shading (Fig. 40). A later example of Chinese clouds in a 15th century painting demonstrates the continuation of the multicolored effects of shading in clouds that occupy the habitual space of auras behind the figures of the four guardian kings (Fig. 41).

17 This style of dress for the “four guardian kings” continued in Nepal.
By tracing the influences in the style of the painting details of the Aghora painting, we become more aware of the complex religious, political, and social circumstances that affected Tibetan paintings. We begin to understand that Tibetan painting, in the 15th century, was a tradition at the crossroads, where the last vestiges of the early Indian style were still preserved, transmitted through Nepal, and more recent Chinese elements entered the idioms, at first in subtle ways.

The Gyantse Murals: the Southern Tibetan Style of the 15th Century

The closest comparison for the numerous stylistic elements of the Aghora painting are found in the surviving 15th century murals at Gyantse in South Central Tibet. The Great Stupa at Gyantse, known as the Kumbum, was built and decorated around the year 1440. It is a complex feat of construction and decoration, with seventy-five temples and chapels built along the eight stories of the structure. In these shrines and temples, numerous Tantric deities are arranged according to the levels of the tantras, providing a "view of the world as conceived in the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist culture of the 15th century, a visual summa of all the knowledge of the time, as well as a true pantheon of images."

These painted images, produced in the mid-15th century, exemplify the Central Tibetan style of the 15th century. This style had synthesized the foreign elements discussed thus far, and integrated them into a distinctly Tibetan style. Looking closely at some examples

---

18 There is some debate over the exact date of construction of the Gyantse Kumbum, with Tibetan textual sources giving the year 1427 as the date and many scholars preferring a slightly later date around 1440. For our purposes here this debate bears little importance. Either way, the monument was built and decorated in the mid 15th century. Ricca, Franco and Eberto Lo Bue. The Great Stupa of Gyantse: A Complete Tibetan Pantheon of the Fifteenth Century. (London: Serindia Publications, 1993) 27.

19 Ricca and Lo Bue, 32.
from Gyantse we find the closest comparison yet for specific stylistic elements in the Aghora painting from the Royal Ontario Museum.

At Gyantse the wrathful deities are depicted in the stylized flame auras like those used at Shalu. In contrast to the auras from Shalu though, these flame auras are even more standardized in their formal, geometric properties. The auras at Shalu demonstrate an exuberance of design and ornamentation but were often fit to other aspects of the painting, with the petal-lobes made of varying sizes and made to conform to various exterior shapes. At Gyantse, as visible in an example of a painting of Vajrapani, the petals and lobes of the aura are all the same size and the general shape of the aura retains a regularized arch shape (Fig. 42). The exact dimensions of the curled tendrils inside each petal vary slightly, as is also true in the painting of Aghora, where the primary tendrils curve in varying directions from petal to petal. Still, the overall effect is of petal lobes that match in size and shape and extend in a regular arch shape around the central figures. We see here that the convention of stylized ornamental flames depicted as petal-lobes, discussed earlier as a Nepali decorative convention, has become fully assimilated into the repertoire of Tibetan painting by the 15th century. Over the century, the shape and style of the aura became more standardized and appears as a common decorative device.

The treatment of drapery in the Gyantse paintings is also similar to the treatment in painting of Aghora, a resonance that supports their similar dates. Although no wrathful

---

20 In the book of Ricca and Lo Bue all the wrathful figures illustrated in plates are depicted in this type of stylized flame aura. Whether this is true for every wrathful figure in the monument remains to be seen, and would be dependent on a complete set of images from Gyantse. Likewise, no robed forms of Aghora, nor any wrathful figure emerging from smoke clouds, are illustrated. Once again it is possible that such images exist at Gyantse but were not illustrated in the book.
deities are illustrated from the Kumbum in full robes as is Aghora, many of the depicted deities wear scarves that behave in a similar way. In a painting of Vajravidarana, a scarf attenuated in a stiff arch behind the head of the deity reflects a holdover from Pala India that spread into Nepal and was then re-transmitted to Tibet (Fig. 43). The tips of the scarves loop under the deity’s arms and extend in two directions in wave-like curves. These blue curves are delineated with interior lines that have some shading towards the center. Although these scarves are much smaller and do not alternate in color like those in the Aghora painting (Fig. 44), we see a similar interest in a stylization of robe folds in the upright scarves.

Even images of peaceful Buddhas from Gyantse employ a similar treatment of folded draperies. A painting of Vairocana shows a similar aesthetic treatment of the long tips of his shawl-scarves (Fig. 45). These draperies, which fall before the folded legs of Vairocana, twist and turn, and are depicted with regularized linear folds and some shading in blue near the linear creases. As the scarf tips twist they alternate between two colors of fabric, probably meant to express an inner lining and an outer color on a two-colored fabric. In the painting of Aghora, the same linear folds and slight shading in the creases, as well as the same interest in the play on changing colors with each fold is seen. However, in the Aghora painting the artist has depicted a scarf with two longitudinal stripes of color on each side, and so the visual play of geometrical lines and curves of color is increased.

One figure depicted in full robes at Gyantse, though not a wrathful deity, is a teacher or king in a corner detail of the Mandala of Vaisravana (Fig. 46). The royal robes worn by this figure differ greatly from the more monastic Chinese robes that our Aghora
wears, although in the hanging sleeves there is a similar treatment of the robe interior. Once again, the folds of the robe are depicted in regularized geometric linear folds. At Gyantse, the interiors of the orange robes are shown in a dark blue with curving striations. These do not really replicate realistic folds of fabric, but instead represent one more example of the Chinese tendency towards linear ornamentation of drapery to give the impression of flowing movement. Inside the sleeves of Aghora’s dark robes, there is a lighter white interior lining on which the same sort of idealized linear folds occur.

Smoke cloud forms do not appear in any of the illustrated paintings of wrathful deities at Gyantse published in Ricca and Lo Bu-e’s book on Gyantse, yet Chinese style clouds in other parts of the Gyantse compositions provide excellent comparisons with the Aghora painting. The clouds in such paintings fully demonstrate the Chinese cloud types: solid, opaque, decorative and even substantially physical. One painting shows a wrathful deity flanked by two directional guardians, each of whom is seated in auras of blue clouds (Fig. 47). While once again these clouds differ iconographically from the smoke of the great fire from which Aghora emerges, the forms are similar in their horizontal shapes, their shaded interior lines and curves. In another detail, a Buddha appear to a devotee in an aura of opaque white and pink clouds (Fig. 48). The clouds are similarly substantial, a solid device transporting the Buddha above almost like a vehicle. Once again, two colors appear, a lighter white exterior and a colored and shaded interior of curving shapes. Though the smoke clouds of Aghora are inherently differently from these atmospheric clouds, we can trace a similar tendency towards opacity, solidity, and a two-toned rendering in both examples.
As a last point of analysis let us look closely at the facial features of Aghora in relation to the paintings at Gynatse. This is difficult since the wrathful faces at Gyanste differ quite considerably from one another. Some faces are more expressive, with more humanly furled brows and pupils turned toward the side, while others are more “mask-like” and static in their appearance. The face of Aghora is one such static, mask-like face, with solidly round red bulging eyes that glare straight ahead and a grimacing fanged mouth with flaming beard that is more ornamental than naturalistic (Fig. 49). Faces with similarly mask-like, stylized features occur in the Gyanste Kumbum paintings. The grimacing face of is one example of this mask-like facial type for a wrathful deity (Fig. 50).

The wall paintings at Gynatse, dating from the mid-15th century, demonstrate the same stylistic synthesis of elements found in the painting of Aghora from the Royal Ontario Museum. The Gyanste murals thus confirm the region of origin and date of creation for the ROM painting. Because the Aghora painting and the Gyanste murals share all the major indicators in forms and details, they are conclusively linked together as having been produced in approximately the same period and region.
Conclusion:

It is important for dating the painting of Aghora to look at both the earliest and latest attributable stylistic elements. Specific details of the painting demonstrate the adherence to the earliest Indian Pala-derived sources, in combination with distinctive components from Nepal and China. The development of style can be thus read here as a genealogy, a progressive line of artistic descent traced continuously from its many successive ancestors. The painting is both related to all of these sources, and distinct from them as well.

This approach has underscored that, in conjunction, these various elements of style occur at one specific point in the history of Tibetan painting, that is the 15th century South-Central Tibetan style as exemplified by the Gyantse mural paintings. Though a comparison with the royally patronized paintings of the Gyantse Kumbum is slightly unfair, since the painting of Aghora was likely made and offered at a lower level of patronage, the Gyantse murals are nevertheless the closest known stylistic match.

And what do the style and raw materials reveal about the patronage of the painting? The painting of Aghora is very large, measuring nearly six feet tall and five feet wide, and in these terms was a relatively expensive and important commission. However, compared with the wealth sometimes displayed in Himalayan paintings, this painting has no gold in the usual places of decoration on the robe designs and halos. Instead, the artists of the Aghora painting used yellow ochre paint where gold might be used on a more expensive commission. This is related to the needs and demands of the patron, and the religious function that the painting was made to serve. The next section, focusing on the iconography of the painting, indicates that it was commissioned by a monk or monastery.
as a didactic teaching tool to explain an esoteric ritual and meditation practice. The painting thus inherently lacks the intentional display of wealth and power that often underlie the more politically charged commissions and gifts, as in the larger Tibetan monuments like Gyantse.

The genealogy of the painting’s style has limited relevance though, after revealing the date of the painting. The identification of foreign influences is useful to understand the date, yet Tibetan art is always much more than a conjunction of foreign parts. Elements are borrowed, but these are combined into a unique whole that is identifiably different from the artistic traditions of its neighbors.

The painting is recognizably Tibetan in form and function. But what are these distinguishing elements that make the painting at once recognizable as a product of Tibetan devotion? We could point to the bright palette, dominated by red and punctuated by deeply contrasting dark blues and bright ochres, and the simplified geometric patterning of the design filled with exuberant detail. These characteristics of early Tibetan painting can be understood in relation to the unique form of Vajrayana Buddhism that evolved in Tibet, and its special relationship to society and art.

These elements are present in this 15th century Tibetan painting possibly as a product of the fundamental purpose behind Tibetan art. This Tibetan painting served a highly functional didactic purpose: a mandalic diagram made as a guideline for Buddhist visualization and meditation practices. To this end it is clear, diagrammatic, bright, and filled with details that emphasize the important aspects of the meditation: the wrath of the central figure, the fearfulness of his powerful retinue, and their presence in a charnel ground. As we see in the next section, the iconographic and even seemingly “decorative”
elements are in fact meant to underscore and support these visualizations, leading to deepened understandings of esoteric Buddhist practices.
CHAPTER 4

THE MANDALA AND IT'S MEANING: THE ICONOGRAPHY OF LEGS LDAN NAGPO AGHORA

Tibetan Buddhist art presents complex iconographic systems that hold the key to understanding the original context and Buddhist purposes behind the production of art. The visual images, symbols, and ultimately their “Buddhological” significance underscore and support Buddhist practices and teachings. In this section, I explore the iconography of the painting of Legs ldan Nagpo Aghora, discussing its purposes and meanings. This will be an exercise and example in how one may approach Tibetan art and iconography, and how to combine the various relevant tools of this analysis. In this analysis, the identification and comprehension of Tibetan religious textual sources, combined with careful observation of the painting, will be the necessary keys to understanding the painting.

In studying a complex iconographic representation like this mandala many questions arise. Who is being depicted? What practices are being illustrated? What were the Buddhist meanings behind these teachings, and what practices did the painting support?

In answering these questions, Tibetan textual sources are an invaluable resource. Tibetan Buddhism is a textual religion. In Tibet, meditations and practices, which
developed through the re-transmission of teachings written in texts, were in turn recorded and codified as new texts. Thus, most teachings and iconographies have some textual existence. To understand the identities of the many figures in the painting we must search the known, and, in this case the available, translated Tibetan texts, thereby gaining some clarity as to who is being represented and why. The Tibetan texts can describe the key iconographic aspects of the deity, his meditational purpose, and the extensive retinue that accompanies him.

To understand the iconography, it is fruitful to focus first on the identity of the central figure, and understand his role in Nyingma lineage practices. In light of this information, the full mandala can be explored, combining careful visual analysis with the available information from textual sources. It will be shown that the painting follows some conservative textual precedents, yet, at the same time, the artists and patrons employed their own creative visualizations to depict the full retinue of beings surrounding Aghora. Finally, the relationship between this painting of Aghora and its deviation from other surviving representations of the same figure will be discussed. These other paintings are mostly much later and much less complex, demonstrating why this early, and ultimately creative depiction is so fascinating and important.

Identifying Legs ldan Nagpo Aghora in Texts

To identify the central figure it is necessary both to examine the painting carefully and attempt to corroborate the visual details with textual sources. The first clue to the identity of the central figure is that he is a wrathful form, demonstrated through his bared fangs, bulging red eyes, and flaming hair. Furthermore, a small four-armed depiction of
Sadaksari Avalokitesvara in his headdress assures us that he is considered to be a wrathful emanation of the bodhisattva of compassion, Avalokitesvara (Fig. 51). Though this is almost enough to ascertain that the central figure is a form of Mahakala, the number of Mahakala-related figures surrounding him in the upper portions of the mandala, and the recurrence of numerous forms of his female counterpart Palden Lhamo, a wrathful female riding a wild ass in the retinue, confirm that the central deity is indeed a form of Mahakala, the popular dharmapala, or Buddhist protector, whose name translates roughly as “Great Black Time.” In Tibet, Mahakala is known as Nagpo, meaning “Black One.”

So what form of mGon po is this? In answering this question, the first useful source for Tibetan textually based iconography is Rene de Nebesky-Wojkowitz’s work Oracles and Demons of Tibet. In this book, the author categorizes the various wrathful deities and their many forms based on several Tibetan texts and informants from every lineage of Tibetan Buddhism. The condensed descriptions he offers are based primarily on the texts of Rin ’byung (or rhin lhan) and the Zur kha brgya rtsa. In his chapter titled “the Group of the mGon Po”, mGon Po being the Tibetan term for “Terrible Ones,” Nebesky-Wojkowitz enumerates 75 different forms of Mahakala. Among this group, at least 14 are described as wearing robes of black silk.

---

1 Rene de Nebesky-Wojkowitz, Oracles and Demons of Tibet: The Cult and Iconography of the Tibetan Protective Deities. (Delhi: Book Faith India, reprint 1996)
2 Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 38.
After carefully reading these entries, the description that fits most closely with our painting comes from a form identified as “mGon po an gho ra.” Nebesky-Wojkowitz describes this Mahakala as:

A one-faced, and two-handed, dark blue form of *mGon po*. He is dressed in a cloak of black silks with a golden girdle and is adorned with snakes and jewels. His attributes are a club of sandal-wood and a skull-cup, full of blood and intestines, which he holds towards the left side of his body. His boots are made of copper and he stands in the middle of a vehemently burning fire-cloud.  

In *Deities of Tibetan Buddhism* by Martin Wilson and Martin Brauen, the authors translate a meditation on the figure they call “Mahakala Anghora” from another *rhin lhan* text:

Out of emptiness before me, in a guardian circle and charnel ground, a dark blue triangle and an eight-petaled lotus, with a seat of a sun disk and black Rudra thrown down on his back. On this, from HUM comes a large club marked with HUM, from which light-rays spread, return and transform it into glorious Gnosis Mahakala Anghora, dark blue, with one face and two arms. His right hand holds a large sandalwood club and his left rests a blood-filled skull on his side. He has three-eyes, bared fangs and dark brown, upward streaming beard, eyebrows and locks, and is offering blood and entrails to his mouth. He wears a flowing cloak of black silk tied with a gold girdle, snake and jewel ornaments, a crown of dry skulls and a long necklace of the heads of demon clans, and copper boots on his feet. He abides amidst a blazing mass of fire.

Although our central figure does not raise the cup to his mouth, the other details of the description of the central figure are consistent with our painting.

---

4 Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 53.
5 Wilson and Brauen 351.
While both translations above take the 16th century Sakya lineage text *rhin lhan* as the primary source, the Nyingma school. Its Nyingma origins are clearly evidenced by the presence of Padmasambhava in the lineage at the top (#5, Figure 52). Padmasambhava (Tib. *Orgyen*) was the 8th century Indian teacher who successfully established Buddhism in Tibet during the first propagation, and who remained the important lineage master of the Nyingma lineage, or "school of the elders," in Tibet.

Is it a problem that the translated texts identifying our central figure here have come from Sakya and not Nyingma lineage sources?

There are several reasons that we can rely on these Sakya texts to identify a Nyingma iconography in this case. Though there exist discrepancies between the schools, particularly the Serma "New" tradition schools (including Sakya) and the "Old" Nyingma school, these differences occur primarily in terms of the foci of practices and the lineage of transmissions. The names and identities of deity forms are often shared between the sects, though the particular practice methodologies may not be. Secondly, we know that at least one author, Nebesky-Wojkowitz, incorporated into his iconographic designations the opinions of informants from all the Tibetan schools including the Gelug, Sakya, Kagyu, and Nyingma lineages.

Yet the most relevant and important reason for trusting a Sakya text for a Nyingma iconography is found through the central deity’s identification with Tibetan

---

6 The full name of the text is the *sadhanas Yi dam rgya msho 'I sgrub thabs rin chen 'byung gnas*, and was compiled in the 16th century by the Sakya author and historian Taranatha. Matsushita, 16, Nebesky, 598, Wilson and Brauen 231-233.

7 All the references to figures as (#x) to follow refer to their numeric placement on the painting key, figure 52, page X.

8 Nebesky-Wojkowitz, viii-ix.
Chod practices. The figure and meditations on Aghora are specifically associated with the Chod practices established by Machig Labdron in the 11th century, practices which inherently transcend the lineage designations. This point will be returned to shortly.

However, we can locate one relevant translation from a Nyingma text, provided by Jeff Watt from the himalayanart.org website. In this Nyingma textual description, the form of a particular sculpture of Mahakala in a robe is identified as “Legden Nagpo” (Fig. 53). Nagpo is the Tibetan name for Mahakala, translating as “Black One,” and “Legden” is an anglicized transliteration of Legs ldan, the term meaning “Excellent One” describing a sub-category of forms of Nagpo wearing dark monastic robes, a category into which Aghora falls. Though the more specific name of Aghora is not given here, the textual description provided on the website is still useful to shed some light on the nature and purpose of these forms of Nagpo and the phurpa-tipped gandi that he holds. While this sculpture has lost the attribute once held in his upraised arm, the textual description refers to him having once held a gandi, a club or stick.9

The figure is identified as an important Nyingma protector of the revealed treasure (terma) tradition texts (Fig. 53). In the translation provided from the Nyingma text 'dod 'jo bum bzang,10 “Legden Nagpo” is described:

... Legden Nagpo, Desire Free Son, with a body blue-black in color, one face, two hands, three eyes. The right [hand] holds a large sandalwood gandi marked with a jewel. From the upper [portion] of the gandi fire blazes and from the lower [portion] water flows. From inside the gandi a great army of asuras issue. The left [hand holds] at the side an iron [bowl] filled with various diseases. Wearing a thick upper cloak and tied with a gold belt, wearing boots, a crown of five dry skulls and

9 The website here does not clarify why it is assumed that this figure held the gandi.
10 A text by Terdag Lingpa Gyurme Dorje (1646-1714) and Minling Lochen Dharmashri (1654-1718).
having a necklace of fifty wet heads, adorned with snakes, three staring eyes, bared fangs and a curled tongue, black flowing eyebrows, moustache and hair, standing with the right leg bent and the left straight in the middle of a blazing mass of fire.¹¹

Again, this description fits our central figure, apart from the distinction of a held iron bowl whereas our figure clearly holds a skull cup. However, this text reveals the significance of the attribute held aloft as indeed a club (Skr. *gandi*) with flames at the top and water flowing from the bottom. In our example, the *gandi* is surmounted by a flaming triple-gem (*triratna*) and the lower end has snakes (*nagas*) depicted on the lower blades, which occur here as a symbol for water (Fig. 54). Furthermore, this description identifies the source for the strangely placed warrior figure in the flame aura (# a) as an *asura* emerging from the *gandi* as part of the “army” of the Aghora.

Yet what should be made of the different names provided here: the Legs Idan Nagpo designation instead of Amghora/Anghora or Aghora? It is notable that there is a recurrent inconsistency on the site in terms of naming the forms of Mahakala. Several entries are labeled simply “Danda Mahakala,” named for the Sanskrit term for the sandalwood stick that some forms of Legs Idan carries.¹² Two such entries, entry number 235 and entry number 66, both written in September 2000, identify Nyingma lineage protectors holding the same attributes as our central figure as “Danda Mahakala.” The figure in the first painting appears to have the same primary and secondary attributes as our figure (Fig. 55), and the second holds a slightly longer variation of the *phurpa*-tipped


stick (Fig. 56). Most likely, the inconsistencies in names on the website necessarily reflects the monumental task that they have undertaken in cataloguing and displaying thousands of Tibetan paintings over the last few years.

At the same time, the confusion on the Himalayan art website over the designations of “Danda Mahakala” and “Legs ldan Mahakala” reflect the confusing diversity of forms of Mahakala. Emi Matsushita explored the diversity of the forms of Mahakala in her Masters work on the iconography of Mahakala, and her work helps to clarify the confusion that emerges here. Based on the careful reading of Nebesky-Wojkowitz and Wilson and Brauen, Matsushita identifies the Legs ldan designation as a sub-class of Mahakala forms, into which many more specifically named forms, including Aghora, fall. Matsushita returns to the designations preferred by Nebesky-Wojkowitz, dividing the various types of Mahakalas first into the subclass of Legs ldan, which is then further subdivided into groups of forms differentiated by their key attributes and vehicles: Club Mahakala (mGon po beng), Knife Mahakala, Lion-seated Mahakala, and Traksad Mahakala. With in the subset group of club Mahakala (mGon po beng), the source for the Sanskritized “Danda Mahakala” referred to on the Rubin site, Matsushita differentiates five forms of Mahakala based on their secondary attributes or vehicles: one carrying an iron bowl, one carrying a skull cup, one holding the club by both hands, one with a spear, and lastly one form mounted on a tiger. Within this subset of Legs ldan, the Mahakala form with both a club and a skull cup is called mGon po Aghora, but this form necessarily falls under the rubric of the larger category Legs ldan.

---

14 Matsushita, Emi. 85-86.
In Matsushita’s explanation, the Legs ldan forms, who all wear black robes, represent one of the elaborated forms of Mahakala that occur only in Tibet. Matsushita discusses this distinctive enumeration of the Tibetan mGon po forms as a direct result both of the “different cultural expectations” of the region, and the result of the visions and teachings of particular high-ranking lamas.\textsuperscript{15} It is indeed interesting to consider that in Tibet the Legs ldan forms may have developed as depictions of particular high lamas who had visions of themselves as the mGon po protectors, since the figures are all shown wearing the monastic robes of a high-ranking lama. These may have emerged from one or more vision or teaching wherein a high lama had truly envisioned himself in this form.

The central figure of the mandala is thus a distinctly Tibetan form of Mahakala called ldan Nagpo Aghora. The Legs ldan denomination defines the figure as a particular sub-class of this extensively elaborated wrathful deity, an elaboration unique to Tibet.\textit{Legs ldan} means “the excellent one” and is applied to this sub-class of Mahakala forms who are depicted in robes, differentiated from the usually bare-chested forms of Mahakala like \textit{Panjarnata} (the Lord of the Tent) or the four armed \textit{Chaturbhurja}.

Then, within the Legs ldan sub-class “Aghora” refers to the specific form found here, holding a skullcup and phurpa-tipped club. Understanding the meaning of this term has been difficult due to the various transliterations used. I have preferred the spelling “Aghora” since it is this form that I found actually inscribed in Sanskrit in a painting, and further since this term has a traceable Sanskrit meaning. The spellings “Am gho ra”, used by Nebesky-Wojkowitz and “Anghora” used by Wilson and Brauen are impossible Sanskrit words and have no meaning in that language at least. The spelling Aghora refers

\textsuperscript{15} Matsushita, 3.
to the negation of an adjective, “ghora” meaning “awful; dreadful; horrid,”\textsuperscript{16} and thus could mean the one who is “not dreadful.” However, it is possible that since both Nebesky-Wojkowitz and Wilson and Brauen transliterate the name as “am gho ra” and “Anghora” respectively, it may actually derive from a lost Tibetan meaning and word.\textsuperscript{17}

Nonetheless, since I have located the name clearly written in Sanskrit as “Aghora,” it is more likely that the texts from which they translated had misspelled Tibetan names. These could easily arise from a faulty transliteration from the Sanskrit into Tibetan. Even though the Aghora Nagpo deity was a Tibetan development, Sanskrit was still an important sacred language in Tibet and it is likely that the name came from the Sanskrit source and meaning.

The identity of the central deity is therefore clear based on the three important textual descriptions of \textit{Legs ldan Mahakala Aghora} identified in Tibetan source texts. These are the \textit{rhin lhan} text translated by Wilson and Brauen, the \textit{rhin lhan} compiled with other texts translated by Rene de Nebesky-Wojkowitz, and lastly the ‘\textit{dod ’jo bum bzang} translated by Jeff Watt. These textual entries also describe the identities and significance of his large retinue, a point that will be returned to shortly. Yet a fuller understanding of the identity and meaning of the central figure and his \textit{mandala} depends on an understanding of the practices it was painted to support. The next section contextualizes the deity and his practices in the Nyingma lineage, particularly as related to the distinctive Tibetan practices of \textit{Chod}.


\textsuperscript{17} Brian Joseph, Discussion on the etymology of the term “Aghora,” 8 May 2006, Professor of Linguistics (Sanskrit) Ohio State University.
Legs ldan Aghora in Chod Practice

There is an important connection between Aghora and the practices of Chod. This was first revealed to me in a lineage painting of Machig Labdron, the foundress of Chod practices in Tibet, who lived in the 11th–12th century (Fig. 57). Aghora appears in a painted retinue of Machig, labeled with the Sanskrit inscription “Aghora” clearly written beneath him (Fig. 58). Though Aghora is only one of many subsidiary figures here, his occurrence in this painting set me upon one of the most fruitful research trajectories related to the iconography of the figure, his retinue, and the painted mandala surrounding him.

The name of Aghora was also found in an un-translated 19th century Chod text, the gcod chos 'byung by gcod smyon dharma seng ge, further confirming the connection to Chod practice. Though this source is currently un-translated, and thus beyond the research available to me at this time, both these pieces of evidence were enough to substantiate that there is a significant connection between Aghora and Chod practices.

In the lineage painting of Machig (Fig. 57), the foundress of Chod is shown as a white dakini surrounded by a large group, with Aghora in the front lines of her closest inner grouping as an important lineage protector. So who was Machig and what was this “Chod” practice that she established?

---

18 Thanks to John Huntington for finding this reference.
19 [http://www.toyo-bunko.or.jp/Database/tibetan_resources/gcod_chos_hbyung.html](http://www.toyo-bunko.or.jp/Database/tibetan_resources/gcod_chos_hbyung.html) Though I cannot read the full text at present, which remains only in the original Tibetan, the name of mGon po Aghora occurs clearly in it. The inclusion of “gcod” in the text’s name implies that it is a Chod (gcod) practise.
Machig Labdron was a famous female siddha and the disciple of Dampa Sangye in the 11\textsuperscript{th}-12\textsuperscript{th} century. She is famous for establishing the practices of Chod, meaning "cutting off" in Tibet. Chod is a special type of esoteric ritual and visualization practice through which "one severs all attachments to ego through the envisioned destruction and offering of one’s own body to deities and demonic sprits alike."\textsuperscript{20} The teachings of Chod are based on the Indian tradition of the perfection of wisdom (\textit{Prajnaparamita}) and the complete realization of emptiness.\textsuperscript{21} Yet these were expanded into specific and particular practices by Machig in Tibet, following the female principle and focusing on the transformative powers of the female \textit{dakini}.

Chod focuses on intentionally encountering fearful and difficult emotional states so as to "cut" through them and thus overcome attachments to them. The primary focus of the meditation involves offering one’s own physical body to the wrathful demons and \textit{dakinis}. This visualization practice represented the ultimate sacrifice of all attachment to self, to the body, and to life itself.\textsuperscript{22} As Jerome Edou explains, in Chod practice:

The yogi deliberately takes up residence in charnel fields, cremation grounds and other wild, fearful spots and invites to the banquet of his or her own physical remains the most ferocious demons, the most bloodthirsty spirits and the cruelest \textit{dakinis}, in order to "cultivate one’s incapacities," as Machig calls it.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{22} Some information here based on a phone interview with Susan Arthur, (Tibetan Buddhist practitioner residing in Palo Alto California) May 10, 2006.
\textsuperscript{23} Edou, 55.
Chod practices are thus focused on visualizing the destruction of the body in a charnel field, the transformation of ego attachments (body) into an offering, and lastly offering one's self and body to Buddhas, dakinis, and terrifying "demons."

These key aspects of Chod visualization practices are visually present in the painting of Aghora. Throughout the painting the viewer is visually reminded of charnel grounds and the physical death and dismemberment of the human body. Human body parts are scattered all around the central deity. Below the deity the stylized lobed mountains express that the deity is emerging in the environs of a charnel field. In the charnel field animals like jackals, tigers, and vultures devour corpses (Fig. 59). The central deity himself holds a skull-cup filled with red boiling amrita, the impurities transformed into an elixir, as another evocation of the transformative processes of the body offering. Numerous demons and dakinis throughout the mandala also hold skull-cups, intimating their invitation to the feast.

Chod and the Nyingma Lineage:

Chod practices have an interesting and sometimes ambiguous relationship to the monastic lineages of Tibetan Buddhism. Chod was never a monolithic tradition, and never really constituted its own "school." Rather many different interpretations of it existed and were incorporated into the different monastic lineages, though each was inherently focused on the same practices.²⁴ In one way, it was a fringe phenomenon, related to figures like Machig herself, who were peripheral to the monastic lineages.

²⁴ Edou, 7.
Nevertheless, Chod visualization practices became incorporated into the practices of each
lineage.

So what was the relationship between the Nyingma lineage and Chod practices?
Could this painting be a depiction of the Chod practices within the Nyingma lineage?
Wouldn’t we see a depiction of the Chod foundress Machig Labdron if the Aghora
painting were associated with Chod practice?

Chod practices were early on incorporated into Nyingma practice. Of the four
evolutionary streams of Tibetan Chod three were based in Indian texts,\(^25\) and one was
based in a Nyingma Tibetan revealed treasure text or *terma*. This primary text, the
“Elimination of Confusion” by Padmasambhava, was never openly revealed in India but
was instead one of the textual treasures hidden by Padmasambhava, and revealed later in
Tibet. Yeshe Tsogyel, the chief female adept, companion and the Tibetan wife of
Padmasambhava, was also specifically associated with the *terma* tradition in Nyingma.
Interestingly, she was also considered an emanation of Machig Labdron. As Jerome Edou
explains:

The Nyingma Chod tradition is primarily based on the Recovered Treasure texts
of Padmasambhava contained in the cycle *The Elimination of Confusion*. Machig
does not play any central role in this transmission, but the Nyingma tradition still
considers her to be an emanation of Guru Rinpoche’s consort Yeshe Tsogyel,
who, together with Guru Rinpoche, is considered to be the source of the
Recovered Treasure tradition.\(^26\)

\(^25\) These three Indian texts are by Aryadeva the Brahmin, Naropa, and Dampa Sangye and
ranged from the 6\(^{th}\) to 12\(^{th}\) centuries. Edou, 29.
\(^26\) Edou, Jerome. 93.
The depiction of Padmasambhava and Yeshe Tsogyel (#5, #6) in the lineage at the top of the painting thus represents the inclusion of the lineage master Machig by default, as she is an incarnation of Yeshe Tsogyel in the Nyingma tradition.

The *terma* of Padmasambhava were revealed by the Terton Dawa Gyaltsen, while other Nyingma Chod practices developed from the *terma* of Jigme Lingpa and Patrul Rinpoche.27 Though I am unable at this time to identify which exact textual source the Nyingma Aghora painting is associated with, it is enough for the current study to understand that there is a deep relationship between Chod practices and the Nyingma lineage, and that the painting at hand is likely related to these. This makes sense of the identification of Aghora as an important *terma* protector,28 the purposeful inclusion in the lineage of Yeshe Tsogyel, the inclusion of many wrathful “demons,” and the graphic charnel imagery found throughout the painting.

The relationship between the Nyingma *terma* tradition and Chod practices deserves further attention. There also appears to be some incorporation of Chod elements into Nyingma Dzogchen meditation practices, the distinctive Nyingma practices of the highest tantra meditations on emptiness.29 However, to fully understand these relationships, the Tibetan source texts need to be studied in greater detail than I am able to undertake at the current moment. More research in the texts themselves could reveal more about the historical development and meditation practices on Aghora.

---

27 Edou, 94.
28 Jeff Watt, Himalayanart.org website item 65208.
The connection between Aghora and Chod practices is interesting for our understanding of how this uniquely developed iconography fits into a uniquely Tibetan tradition. Just as the Legs ldan forms Mahakala were a Tibetan development, so too many authors feel that Chod practices developed along a unique trajectory in Tibet. Although Chod was an outgrowth of the Indian text, and there likely were practices related to visualizing “cutting” in India in the 6th-10th centuries, many authors feel that the Chod practices took on a distinct character in Tibet:

The Chod tradition fits into the universe of popular Tibetan demonology...combining into a single doctrine the ultimate teachings of Mahamudra, tantric visualization techniques, and the vast pantheon of primordial forces, local gods and demons that inhabit the imagination of the Tibetan people. This appears to be the main function of Chod: to serve as a link between the highest metaphysical vision and the popular religion.  

Another study, Tantric Practices in Nyingma, by Khetsun Sangpo Rinbochay, explains Chod as a uniquely Tibetan practice that purposefully incorporated some “Shamanistic” elements of the pre-Buddhist Bon tradition:

As a rule, Tibetans went to India to learn Buddhism, but Ma-jilap-dron was an exception in that many Indians came to Tibet to learn the female form of cutting attachment from her, and it became the only practice to spread from Tibet to India.”

The Nyingma lineage painting of Aghora is thus a visual depiction of some unique, esoteric Tibetan practices. It was likely commissioned and produced on behalf of Nyingma monks of the 15th century who were involved in the Chod practices that had been incorporated into the Nyingma tradition as revealed treasure texts.

30 Edou, 76-77.
Understanding the Full Painted Mandala as Related to Chod Practice:

The iconographic details of the full mandala may now be approached with an understanding of their methodological framework, specifically, the Chod practices of the Nyingma terma tradition. These practices are primarily focused on the visualization of the destruction of the physical self in an attempt to sever all ego and particularly the attachments to the body and to life. The visualizations utilized the wrathful aspect of the central figure, who was understood ultimately by monk practitioners as the wrathful self, for the visualization of the destruction of the corporeal body and its transformation inside the skull cup. The surrounding army of demons and terrifying beings are understood as visualized aspects of attachments and fears, personified as the wrathful beings from all corners of the universe, who are invited to participate in this complete destruction of self. I will now discuss the iconographic details of the painting and how they express this functionality.

The Central Deity: Self-Destruction Described

The central Aghora figure shows a riveting depiction of a deity whose wrathful character and attributes have been fully explored by the artist. He dominates the design both by his large scale and his powerful stance. He is depicted with great dynamism, with swirling robes and scarves, and surrounded by an aura of churning smoke clouds and graphic, stylized flames. This central figure is a visual testament to the intense meditative power and Tantric transformative functionality of the wrathful self in the practices of Tibetan Buddhism, and more specifically within a Chod methodological framework.
Legs ldan mGon po Aghora stands in the wide legged alidha posture with his right leg extended and his left leg bent, a warrior stance often associated with wrathful figures. He wears a flowing dark blue robe with a red border and yellow lining which whirls around him in active geometric folds, animated through the movement of his dance and the energy of the fiery atmosphere surrounding him. He holds his right arm aloft grasping a danda and his left hand holds a skullcup in front of his chest. His skin is dark blue and his orange flame hair stands on end. Above his crown of skulls a small figure of Sadaksari Avalokitesvara, his progenitor, emerges from his orange flame hair. A cloud of multicolored smoke, rendered in red, white, blue, green and yellow opaque colors, swirls around him.

Aghora’s ornaments are highly detailed and appropriate to his status as a wrathful Tantric figure. His crown of five dry skulls represents his ability to conquer the five aggregates and transform these negative outflows into positive enlightenment. The skulls are surmounted by Nepali-style lobes of a Vajrasattva crown, indicating his complete enlightenment. He also wears four long garlands, symbolic representations that he has conquered all attachments. The innermost garland of red lobed shapes represents a garland of hearts, the next is a garland of flaming triple-gems (triratna), a Buddhist symbol of the three jewels of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. The next garland represents the typical snake garland associated with Mahakala, and the outermost is made of severed human heads representing his complete detachment from egoistic cravings and his conquest of all obstacles on the Buddhist path. These last two garlands are normally

---

associated with forms of Mahakala, as with many wrathful figures, while the inner two
display the artistic elaboration undertaken by the artist here in the specific form and
visualization of the deity in this large format painting.

The clothing he wears is also elaborated and specific to the class of the Legs ldan forms. The Chinese style robes are decorated with patterns in gold, demonstrating that he is wearing fine Chinese brocade. The inner robe has a pattern of pearl-bordered roundels reminiscent of Sassanian designs, and his darker blue vest exhibits a flower-like geometric design in gold. The inner red robes are designed to look like the patchwork style robes of high lamas, which intentionally reference the patched robes of Sakyamuni and his followers. Aghora also wears a flying multicolored scarf, and dark Tibetan style felt boots that turn up at the toes. His inner belt is clasped by a kirttimukha form, from whose mouth blue ribbons flow, a more mundane visual reminder of the usual naga tails clasped in the mouth of the kirttimukha.

The held attributes of the figure demonstrate aspects of his meditative functionality. In the long claw-like fingers of his upraised right hand he holds a sandalwood club (or danda) with a phurpa-tip. This staff is one particular variation of the sandalwood club used by certain forms of Legs ldan Mahakala. Though this could be mistaken for an elongated phurpa, a ritual stake or dagger used to pin down malevolent sprits and define sacred space, its dimensions for this purpose are incorrect. Instead, this club is more appropriately described as a stick with a phurpa shaped tip at one end, from which water flows, and a flaming triple-gem (triratna) at the other. This description emerges from the textual descriptions, and signifies that Aghora harnesses the active powers of both fire and water. His great army is said to emerge from this club.
The club closely resembles an example drawn by Robert Beer of this type of a club used by some forms of Mahakala that has “three fortress gates upon its knurled and embellished gold shaft” and a “lotus-mounted flaming triple gem” at its top (Fig. 60).\(^{33}\)

The shaft of our example does not have these visible fortress gates, but are instead primarily golden, and patterned with designs and two double lotus forms in red and blue (Fig. 54). In his left hand Aghora holds a gold-rimmed skull-cup (*kapala*) in front of him filled with a red liquid substance, representing the transformation of the five aggregates (*klesas*), and ultimately the body and ego into *amrita*, the pure nectar of transformation. This visual element is a functional reminder of the graphic, meditative symbolism of the destruction of the body present in Chod practices.

**The Subsidiary Figures in the Painted Mandala of Legs Idan Aghora:**

The central figure of Aghora is surrounded by 100 subsidiary figures. These consist of 93 figures occupying the red arches of the composition, and four smaller attendant figures between figures in the lower registers. There are also three figures, two *dakinis*, and one *asura* warrior, in the flame and smoke aura surrounding the central figure. This *mandala* thus has over 100 discrete figures, with even more included in the numerous dual forms of deities with their female *prajna*. To understand the significance of the *mandala*, we must first understand how these figures function as part of discrete groupings. These groupings consist of the lineage, the source deities, the protectors, the directional guardians, and the army retinue of Aghora. I will first describe the figures and

\(^{33}\) Beer, 288, illustration 289.
their groupings and then relate these to the textual sources. The numbers and letters used in this section refer to the numbered painting key, Figure 52 on page X.

The top register of the *mandala* is occupied by a lineage of twelve figures. The lineage begins with the Blue Vajradhara (#1) who is placed beside two Indian siddhas (#2, 3). The only identifiable figures of the lineage are Padmasambhava, the 9th century Indian teacher who established Buddhism in Tibet, wearing his distinctive red hat and holding a trident and skull cup (#5) and his female partner Yeshe Tsogyel beside him wearing beige robes and a gold Vajrasattva crown (#6). The other teachers of the row (#4, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11) have very little differentiating them, except their gestures and the colors of their robes, except for the last in the row, who is once again shown wearing another style of robe with vest and a Vajrasattva crown of the Nepali type. This may be a representation of another female, or the differentiation of a type of Nyingma married householder monk.

The second register from the top shows an assemblage of both peaceful and wrathful benefactors, many in dual forms with their *prajna*, or energizing female partners. Many of these forms are related to Mahakala, and his progenitor Avalokitesvara. From the left these are: Manjusri (#13), Sadaksari Avalokitesvara (#14), Vajrapani (#15), Hevajra and Nairatmya in union (#16), Sahaja Cakrasamvara and Vajravarahi in union (#17), a two-armed Vajrabhairava and Vajravetali in union (#18), a White completion stage Cakrasamvara and Vajravarahi in union (#19), Hayagriva (#20), Visvavajrasattva (#21), Usnisasitatipatra (#22), Hayagriva and his Prajna in union (#23) and Dorje Phurba (#24). These represent both the active principles and progenitors of the *mandala*'s generation. The esoteric nature of this Tantric practice is demonstrated by the
numerous dual images present, representing the completion stage of the non-dual meditations.

The next register consists of only six figures split to either side of the central image (#25-30). Together with the two figures below on the next register (#31-32) these form a group of interspersed forms of Nagpo (Mahakala) and Palden Lhamo. This is interesting since Palden Lhamo and a form of Nagpo (Mahakala) are the main attendants listed in texts for Aghora. However, I do not believe these are the representations of the specific attendants here, but instead this grouping forms yet another aspect of the meditational protectors of the central figure. On the left is the four-armed Chaturbhurja Mahakala (#25), then a two-armed form of Palden Lhamo (#26), then a Panjara Mahakala (#27). The figure of Panjara Mahakala is the only subsidiary figure in the entire mandala shown standing on a corpse, which is squeezed into the tight horizontal space of the lotus register below (Fig. 61). To the right side this arrangement is reversed with a four-armed Palden Lhamo form on the interior (#28), a two-armed form of Mahakala on a tiger mount (mGon po stag zhon³⁴ or Mahakala Vyaghra Vahana) (#29) and another four-armed form of Palden Lhamo (30). The two figures in the next register below on the left side represent yet another two-armed form of Mahakala holding a conch shell and a Remati-like figure holding a thunderbolt. These can be distinguished from the following groupings and adhere together as a set of eight protectors for Aghora.

The next groups found below are directional guardians. These groups, consisting of only two figures per register along the sides of the large central figure, include the four-guardian kings (#34, 35, 36, 37). The four kings are the directional guardians of the

³⁴ Nebesky, 52.
four sides of Mount Meru, the sacred Buddhist environment of transformation. The four guardian kings are shown in the dress of Chinese Tang warriors, with leather pieced breastplates and caps. This style of dress, depicted in a different style in Chinese paintings dating from the Tang period (Fig. 37) long remained the preferred style of warrior dress for the guardian kings in Tibet.

The kings are followed by the group of eight Dikpala, important directional guardians in Tantric Buddhism (#33, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44). The Dikpala set of directional guardians on their appropriate vehicles begins with Indra (#33), who is clearly identified by his vehicle, a six-faced elephant, and the vajra attribute that he holds. As the conceptually “highest” figure, the lord of Trayasrimsa heaven atop Mount Meru, he is separated from the other Dikpala and placed above the four guardian kings who reside conceptually below him on the sides of the mountain. This positioning shows a careful adherence to the relative position between Indra in the heaven atop Mount Meru and the four guardian kings guarding its four sides below. After the guardian kings, the other seven Dikpala are also shown in order, Isvara on a bull (#38), Agni on a goat (#39), Yama on a bull (#40), Naritti on a corpse (#41), Varuna on a makara (#42), Vayu on an antelope(#43) and Kubera on a horse (#44).

The next group of eight figures presents a difficulty for exact identification, although the inclusion among them of the snake bodied and multi-headed Rahula (#51) likely identifies them as a group of eight planetary deities. Though this group does not conform to the more well-known iconography of the navagraha or nine planetary deities, which in Buddhism often consisted of a group of eight by the omission of Ketu, we can propose that this is an alternative iconography of a group of planetary deities. The
occurrence of planetary deities here is consistent both with the textual sources that
describe their presence in the retinue of Aghora, and their placement along the sides of
the central figure with other directional guardians.

In the groups discussed thus far, some intriguing checkered flags occur as
recurring attributes. These do not occur in a systematic manner, but rather are held aloft
by six of the Dikpala and three of the planetary deities. These are furthermore intriguing
since no two flags are the same, yet they are all square or triangular in shape and
decorated with geometric black and white checkered shapes. Interestingly, both the
warrior-like asura figures of the painting, one in the left side of the smoke aura (# a) and
in the bottom register (#67) also carry these checkered flags. This may have some special
relation to Mahakala, as they are found among subsidiary figures of another early
painting of Panjara (Panjarnata) Mahakala in the Rubin Museum (Fig. 62). In this early
painting, dated to the 12th century, a warrior-type figure in the lower left also holds a
checkered flag (Fig.63). Marilyn Rhie considers as an identification of his status as “one
of the four member’s of Mahakala’s ‘Outer Retinue.’”35 Interestingly, in this painting
checkered flags also occur on the offering table arranged by the monk in the lower right
corner. I propose that while their exact significance is unclear, they likely bear a specific
relationship to the worship of Mahakala.

The next distinguishable group in the Aghora mandala is a set of seven black
dakinis, each of whom hold skull cups and kartrika knives (#53-59). By their behavior,
their attributes, and their finely rendered bone ornaments, we can identify these as

35 Marilyn Rhie. “Mahakala: Some Tangkas and Sculptures from the Rubin Museum of
Art” in Rob Linrothe and Jeff Watt. Demonic Divine: Himalayan Art and Beyond. (New
dakinis, the female figures whose name translates as “sky-goer” and who form important beings in the transformation stages of Tantric rituals. Within Chod practice a key aspect of the visualization is to become a wrathful dakini and to visualize the consumption of the self and body by her heat. One dakini is shown in the act of drinking from a skull cup (#58), which distinguishes her from the other six. Her bone ornament girdle is also worn differently, gathered in an “X” shape across her chest, where the others wear only long sweeping bone garlands.

Seven may seem an odd number in our context for a grouping, yet in the clear differentiation of one figure we can interpret this grouping as the assemblage from a six-pointed mandala, wherein the drinking dakini (#58) occupies the central position. Mahakala is associated with several mandalas based on the design of a six-pointed throwing star. 36 An illustration of this basic design taken from another Mahakala mandala found in the set of Nor Mandalas displays this six-pointed design (Fig. 64). Though this mandala does not show dakinis in the seven positions, it depicts the throwing star atop an inverted triangle, the symbol for the female generative organ and hence inherently the dakini symbol. Thus, it is assured that such a six-pointed and seven-figured dakini mandala, associated with Mahakala and the throwing star design, exists (Fig. 65).

The lower three registers are occupied by the most creatively conceived grouping in the Aghora mandala. Amidst the long grouping from #60-91 only a few figures can be identified conclusively by name. These include Palden Lhamo (#63), and the “three victorious brothers” (#64, 65,66) beside her as the chief attendants to Aghora. There is a

lone warrior figure holding the checkered flag (#67), and a snake bodied female nagini (#79). Otherwise the registers are occupied by animal-headed and winged “demons.” The demons in one distinguishable group of eight have animal heads, human bodies, and thick serpent like tails (#60-62, 68-72). Each of these figures stands in the alidha warrior posture like that of the central figure. These are followed by four animal-headed protectors shown without wings or tails, who stand in assorted postures and appear as though they are running (#73-76). In this register there are also four animal headed protectors who sit atop animal vehicles (#77, 80-82). Interestingly, this group of human bodied beings on vehicles share the same animal heads as the vehicles atop which they sit. One figure, who is distinguishably different from these “demon” sets in this register, is a wrathful dark brown human-formed demon holding a notched stick (#78).

The bottom register shows a group of black female matrika-type dakinis on animal mounts (#83-90). Their animal mounts charge energetically forward. All have dark human-like bodies except the figure at the far left who has the face of a dark lion and rides a boar that is consuming a human corpse. Three of the following figures wear the same dark robes associated with the Legs ldan forms (#84,86, 88) and the other three do not. These may represent a Tibetan wrathful grouping of matrikas. The last figure of the group is red in color and stares out holding a skull cup and riding what appears to be a blue multi-jackal-headed animal vehicle.

In the bottom right, a form of Pita Jambhala, a wealth guardian, sits beside the offering tables (#91). Next to him the offerings of tripod vessels, hanging banners and butter-lamps (#j) are placed beside the monks (#92, 93). The two monks sit facing in towards the composition in reverence to the visualization above them. They are
distinguished from each other both in the color of their robes and the attributes they hold. The innermost monk holds a lotus (#92), and by his position is probably the more important of the two, the purohita or monk who is actually conducting the ceremony. The other monk, probably the jajman, the monk who is paying for the depicted offering (and/or painting), is shown beside him holding a golden incense burner. Their placement in the painting, in the lower right corner where patrons are usually depicted in Tibetan paintings, confirms that the painting was indeed commissioned by monks. This is not surprising given the highly esoteric nature of the meditation depicted.

Thus the basic formation of the groupings surrounding Aghora can be distinguished into five basic groupings from top to bottom. These include the teaching lineage at the top, the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and Fierce protectors who form the underlying source deities of the meditation, the directional guardians, and, lastly, the army or entourage of the central figure which includes dakinis, various animal-headed demons, asuras, nāginis, and warriors. I believe that this is a purposely loosely interpreted grouping in the lowermost sections of the painting, which is consistent with the various textual descriptions of the entourage of Legs ldan Aghora.

Textual Descriptions of the Retinue of Legs ldan Aghora

The textual descriptions provide loose descriptions of the retinue of Aghora. In the textual descriptions based on the rhin lhan, the main two attendants to Aghora are the “Excellent Black One” (Leg ldan mGon po), and Sri-devi (or Palden Lhamo) riding a wild ass. As we have already seen, the denomination of “Leg-ldan” as a descriptive is problematically general. However, some light can be shed on the situation by the
discussion of the tripartite form of the “three excellent brothers” whose Tibetan name is \textit{mGon-po legs-lidan mched-gsum}\textsuperscript{37} and which Matsushita simplifies to “Legs Idan appearing in three,”\textsuperscript{38} relating to their appearance as a group of three robed Nagpo figures.

There are three robed Nagpo occurring together, shown wearing robes and holding variants of the sandalwood clubs, directly below the central figure (#64-66). These are appropriately places as the depiction of the tripartite “attendant” referred to in the texts. Furthermore, next to them is a Palden Lhamo (#63). It is thus clear that this grouping of four figures directly below the central figure occupy the positions of the main attendants to Aghora. This also elucidates further the structural formation of the iconographic groupings, and the bottom three registers are revealed to be the “army” or “retinue” specifically accompanying Aghora while the groupings above are source deities and directional guardians.

But the various animal headed demons of the lower registers are still intriguing. Do these have specific associations? According to the \textit{rhin lhan}, Aghora’s more extensive retinue includes:

\begin{quote}
… on the right are dakinis of the Five Families, on the left the Four Great Kings, in the east the rṣi Kun-tu-ri-ka, and behind the yakṣa Manibhadra. Outside them are the eight tribes, each a thousand strong.\textsuperscript{39}
\end{quote}

We have already seen the four great kings above and the obvious black set of seven \textit{dakinis}. I cannot conclusively identify which figures are meant by Kunturika and

\textsuperscript{37} Wilson and Brauen, 351
\textsuperscript{38} Matsushita, 88.
\textsuperscript{39} Wilson and Brauen, 351.
Manibhadra, though one or other may be represented by the male figure in the lower register with the notched stick.

However, the lower registers can be understood primarily as a visual elaboration of the "eight tribes" of beings, for which there are several different available enumerations. Wilson and Brauen list several variant lists of the eight tribes in their glossary. The eight tribes that they specifically connect with the Aghora entry are: raksasas, matrikas (ma mo), planet demons (gza-bdud), red btsan demons, male jinn, smu demons (smu-bdud), female mara demons (bdud-mo), and yamas. This list appears comparable to the list provided by Nebesky-Wojkowitz although he uses only the Tibetan names. Other lists of the eight tribes also include the nagas and asuras.

I believe that the groupings at the bottom are thus a somewhat broad interpretation of all the imaginable classes of demons and "tribes" of beings. For good measure, the artists have even included a nagini and an asura to ensure that all the tribes are present, regardless of the specific enumeration of tribes in the relevant text. This may reflect also a slightly freer relationship between text and art than is often assumed for Tibetan art. The various animal-headed beings represent the various smu, jinn, btsan, mara and yama demons, liberally interpreted and applied. There may not have been specific textual descriptions for the qualities of each type available to the artist, nor even to the commissioning teacher, and possibly the choice was made to depict every imaginable type of conceivable terrifying being.

This does not negate the textual precedent for iconography here, yet it does problematize the relationship between Tibetan religious art and texts. While the retinue of

---

40 Wilson and Brauen, 502.
Aghora is textually determined, the specifics of the various types of beings were apparently only loosely defined. The artistic significance of a "btsan" demon may thus have been open to the imaginative response of the artists and commissioning teachers involved in the production of the painting. Furthermore, the intended effect of the lower registers seems to have been to show the widest possible array of beings. The beings in the lower registers were thus placed there to express that Aghora is accompanied by an enormous, exhaustive retinue of terrifying beings. These are the innumerable beings who represent all the human fears and attachments and who are invited to the "feast" in Chod visualization practices to aid in the complete annihilation of the self.

**Conclusion: The Mandala of Mahakala Aghora: Practices and Meaning**

The painting and its complex iconography are inherently embedded in the meanings and practices it was made to support. By discovering a connection with Chod practices, through the identification of the figure and then through his presence in Chod paintings and texts, we have found a broader platform for understanding the meditation practices that the painting explains visually. Together with the knowledge of the temporal circumstances of its production, ascertained in the last chapter through the analysis of stylistic details, we can locate a broader understanding of when and why the painting was made.

The clear depiction of two monks in the lower right corner, the normal position of patrons, makes it likely that it was one or both of these monks who commissioned the painting. Furthermore, with the background understanding of the esoteric Chod practices that were incorporated into the Nyingma lineage, we can determine that the painting was
likely produced and commissioned as an instructional tool for teaching the visualization meditations of Nyingma Chod. This painting was large enough and drawn clearly enough to demonstrate to a group of assembled monks the various necessary elements of the practice: the complete wrath of the self as Legs ldan Aghora, his position in the charnel fields amidst the dismembered bodies, the all-important and revered lineage of teachers responsible for transmitting the teachings, and the thousands of beings from all planes of existence who could participate in this complete destruction of self-hood.

But what is the relationship of text to practice and text to art in Tibetan Buddhism? These are complicated questions that warrant much fuller answers than are presently possible, yet I will offer here some of my thoughts. Research into Chod practices has shown that while Chod emerged from textual precedents like the Prajnaparamita, its real and unique importance in Tibet arose because of its particular and distinctive formulation of practices. The primary development of Chod was thus the practices themselves, and these were later codified in and through texts.

The "rational" way that the Nyingma lineage, the oldest in Tibet, incorporated new practices into their liturgical canon was to recognize these as "terma," the hidden treasures left by important teachers like Padmasambhava and revealed by later teachers. The practice methodologies of Chod, the distinctive practices formulated and taught by Machig Labdron, herself a woman and inherently outside the monastic sects, became one such incorporated tradition.

In a way, this painting also emerged from the practices of a teacher and lineage. In fact, both the art and the texts can be understood as following the evolution of the practices themselves. The often-assumed primacy of texts is thus called into question.
The Texts cannot and should not be seen as the one true and original source for both practices and art. Rather, it can be explored further that perhaps both art and text are both secondary and tangential to the practices themselves.

In examining the correspondence between the painting and the textual sources we have formulated an assumption of a direct and formative relationship from text to art. While the texts described the eight tribes of demons surrounding Aghora, the specifics of their actual, visual interpretation into painting was flexible and open. Though the retinue of beings was textually described, the artists found room for a creative visual interpretation of these creatures. We find here that both conservative textual precedents were married to artistic ingenuity, a fascinating and often overlooked example of the artistic license and freedom that is present even within a conservative, textually based artistic tradition.

So in relation to this early painting, despite the constant (and necessary) temptation to identify “source texts,” we cannot overlook that active and inventive creativity is present as well. This creativity was probably partially on the part of the artist(s) who painted the painting, as well as the teacher(s) who commissioned it. Insofar as the painting is a detailed, creative and visionary interpretation, the painting itself can be seen, at least partially, as its own text.

The painting of Aghora must also be seen as an important and highly elaborated early vision of Nyingma Chod practices. In comparison with other paintings of Aghora found on the Himalayan art website and published in books (Figs. 55, 56), this painting of Aghora is both a substantially elaborated and significantly earlier version. The other
paintings of Aghora found thus far mostly date from the 17th–18th century, and show the central figure with far fewer attendants surrounding him.

Understanding how and why the painting functions and was produced expands our conception of the unique place and character of art in Tibetan Buddhism. Visionary creativity existed and was discovered anew by particular monks, teachers, and artists who constantly sought new ways to give expression to the deep Buddhist meanings and the practices of their liberation.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

THE PAINTED MANDALA OF LEGS LDAN NAGPO AGHORA

The history of the painting of Legs ldan Nagpo Aghora offers a rich variety of topics for study. Not surprisingly, there is not a single linear narrative, but rather many narratives, woven together to reveal the history of its creation, its life after production, and its current status as part of the collection of the Royal Ontario Museum. Using evidence that is both internal and external to the painting, and with multiple approaches I locate it in the relevant moments of its history and its many lives and movements.

The important moments in the history of the painting includes its present location in the collection of the Royal Ontario Museum, and the story of how it was collected as gleaned through museum records. Fascinating details in the registration and collection files of the museum place the painting firmly into the larger Himalayan collection assembled by George Crofts, an Irish fur trader working in China in the early twentieth century. Evidence from the correspondence files of the collector, strengthened by the Chinese scroll-style mounting, support the claim that this painting was one from a larger and disparate group that had been in China for some time previous to 1921. The size and quality of the collected grouping further suggests that it had been owned and assembled
by a wealthy patron, and one that was somehow connected to the various lineages of Tibetan religious politics. Combined with the research into the political and economic circumstances of Central China around 1921, I suggest that these paintings may have formed a part of a larger art collection, potentially related to the former centralizing powers of the Chinese imperial courts and the late Qing dynasty.

Viewed as part of a larger and temporally specific collection, this painting is embedded in a complex history spanning many centuries, and one that is especially relevant considering its current position in a western museum. The means behind how and why museum collections are formed are often a neglected subject in the study of art. In contrast, this study shows that the objects in a museum collection in fact reflect a variety of specific events, conditions, biases and personalities. George Crofts bought specific things that were available to him, and objects that appealed to his European sensibilities. The collection of this painting, and the other Tibetan materials collected by Crofts, were results of specific historical moments and circumstances, influenced as much by the personalities involved as by the larger politico-economic realities of China in the early 20th century. The movements of art across the globe at particular moments in history thus reflect specific global and local forces.

Though I cannot ascertain the specific details regarding the movement of this painting from Tibet to China, we can still contextualize this movement as a reflection of larger trans-national political relationships. The history of the religious and political relations between Tibet and China provide many possible moments of exchange. Ongoing trade and gifts between leaders and teachers, particularly of religious art, occurred frequently from the 14th century on. The painting could have traveled to China
with a teacher or been gifted to a religious teacher in service of the imperial courts. The movement of the painting is part of a long history of religious and political contact between the two countries.

The painting may also be positioned in terms of the history of its production. Following the more traditional outlook of art history, I discuss the painting in terms of the time, place, and purpose of its production. By closely examining the stylistic choices in its various details, I determined that the painting was produced in South-Central Tibet in the early 15th century.

Understanding the evolution of style in Tibetan paintings is also inherently a process of understanding the ways that art reflects social, economic, and political realities. The style of this 15th century Central Tibetan painting combined elements borrowed from India, Nepal, and China. The occurrence of these elements reflects the larger history of the transmission of Buddhism to Tibet from India, the importance of Nepal after the demise of Buddhism in India, and the growth of religio-political relationships between the centers of China and Tibet. Even the seemingly decorative elements in the painting, like mountains, flames, and clouds became the indicators of these larger religious and political relationships.

To more fully understand the original context and history of the painting, it must also be understood as a religious work. The complex iconography of the painting reveals aspects of the religious meanings it expressed and meditational functions it served. The painting demonstrates how Tibetan art operates as a distinctive record, a type of textual record, of the Buddhist practices it supports. The painting, viewed in the context of the Nyingma lineage Chod practices, is an evocative visual exploration of meditations aimed
at overcoming attachments to life and the body. The wrath of the deity is the wrath of the self, and the fearful demon armies represent the ego-attachments and obstacles that must be conquered to attain this visualized physical destruction of the self. Understanding the symbolism here is key to understanding how the painting fits into the larger religious context of Tantric Buddhism. The charnel grounds, the skull-cup, the awesome and terrifying power of the envisioned deities, are all tools to allow practitioners to encounter their own fear and mortality. This fear, this attachment to self and life, is regarded as the single greatest attachment to be overcome.

Another history is present here: the history of the development and evolution of religious practices. The transformative practices of Machig Labdron, and her formulation of Chod in the 11th century, were important to all the religious lineages of Tibetan Buddhism. These practices were so important in Tibet that even the seemingly conservative, “closed” tradition of the Nyingma lineage incorporated them. The practices were considered “revealed treasures,” terma, and became part of the Nyingma evolution of praxis.

While the texts of Tibetan Buddhism are key to understanding the art, an assumed direct and simple relationship between text and art must be problematized. The complexity of this painted vision, unprecedented in other depictions of Legs ldan Nagpo Aghora, underscores that this was not a simple or straightforward relationship. The retinue of Aghora, made up of eight tribes of demons, is explained in the texts, yet still the translation of text into painting requires creative visualization. Here the artists and patrons likely worked together to find relevant representations of the necessary meanings. Furthermore, as a tool for teaching and aiding with visualizations, this painting can be
considered to be its own text. Both text and art, in the end, are related outgrowths of the practices, and exist insofar as they record and trace these developments.

The painting of Aghora embodies many stories and histories. In many ways, it is still part of a historic process, as I, a new western student in the history and art of Tibet, grapple to understand the many ways that this painting is an invaluable record of religious, political, and economic history. This painting, which was understood by its makers as a visual expression of terma, the hidden textual treasures revealed to later practitioners, still holds in its fibers a wealth of treasure for the modern audience. It can be understood, in fact, as an embodiment of history, giving some small insight into ways that art reveals and reflects the past. The weave of history is still alive in this painting. In bringing to light the stories of its multiple lives, we allow it to continue to live and evolve in meaning.
Figure 1. Painting of Legden Nagpo Aghora Mandala, Central Southern Tibet, 15th century, Nyingma Lineage Royal Ontario Museum (921.1.1)
Figure 2: Portrait of George Crofts, 1925.

Figure 3: George Crofts and his Staff on the Front Steps of the Tianjin Office, 1925.
Figure 4. Tibetan Thangkas on Display in Crofts Tianjin Yard Before shipment to the Royal Ontario Museum, 1921.
Figure 5: Painting of Hayagriva, Central Tibet, 15th c. Kagyua Lineage, the Royal Ontario Museum (921.1.216).
Figure 6. Legden Nagpo Aghora Mandala in Chinese Style Paper Scroll Mount
Royal Ontario Museum.
Figure 7. Photograph Showing Side View of Painting of Hayagriva with Paper Mount Buckling the Surface. Thangka Conservation Workshop with Ann Schaftel, Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, April 3-7 2006.

Figure 8. Mandala mounted on paper with blue cloth border, mounted by George Crofts and staff. Royal Ontario Museum. (921.1.224)
Figure 9. Painting of the Temples of Lhasa, Mounted by George Crofts in China. 1921. Royal Ontario Museum.

Figure 10. Painting of Sakyamuni Buddha, In Newar Style of Yuan court, 14th-15th c. Royal Ontario Museum (921.1.129).
Figure 11. A Gold Painting of Kalachakra, One of Three Gold Paintings in the 1921 Shipment from George Crofts, Royal Ontario Museum (921.1.129)
Figure 12. Buddha Seated in Red aureole, Pala Manuscript, Nalanda School, 11th c.

Figure 13. Painting of Cakrasamvara and Vajravarahi Khara Khoto, Central Asia, before 1227
Figure 14. Detail of Lotus Petal Design Between Registers, ROM Aghora Painting.

Figure 15. Painting of Sadaksari Avalokitesvara Central Tibet, 11th–12th century, U-ri school.
Figure 16. Detail of Red Aureoles, ROM Aghora Painting.

Figure 17. Detail of Teacher in Lineage against bolster, ROM Aghora Painting.

Figure 18. Prajnaparamita Sitting Against Wide Bolster Pala manuscript, c
Figure 19. Detail: Mahasiddhas at top, ROM Aghora Painting

Figure 20. Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara Seated, Pala Manuscript, dated 11th c.
Figure 21. Goddess with Stylized Scarves, \textit{Nayapala}, Pala Manuscript, dated 1054

Figure 22. Detail: Stylized Mountains, ROM Aghora Painting
Figure 23. Sculpture of Uma-Mahesvara, India, Pala Period, 11th century.

Figure 24. Tara in Mountain Landscape, Manuscript, Nepal, 12th
Figure 25. Painting of Green Tara in Khadiravani Paradise
Central Tibet, c.12th century
Figure 26. Kessu (Slit-weave Textile) of Tara in Khadiravani Paradise, Khara Khot, before 1227
Figure 27. Wrathful Figure Surrounded by Flames, Pala Manuscript, c.12th c

Figure 28. Vajrapani Surrounded by Flame Aura, Mgon khang, Shalu, South Central Tibet, c.14th c.
Figure 29. Vaisravana with Flying Robes, Shalu, South-Central Tibet, c. 14th c.

Figure 30. Aghora's Flying Robes, ROM Aghora Painting
Figure 31. Detail of Stylized Mountains, Shalu, South Central Tibet, c.14th c.
Figure 32. Avaloitesvara with Clouds behind, Shalu Serkhang, South Central Tibet, 14th c.

Figure 33. Detail of clouds, ROM Aghora Painting
Figure 34. Painting of the Eight Immortals with Active Robes, Yongle Gong, China 14th c.

Figure 35. Mural Painting of Buddha Wearing Lower Robes with Flowing Wave Pattern, Qutansi, c.15th century
36. Painting of Arhat Vanavasin, Central Tibet, 14th c.
Figure 37. Mural Painting Detail of Wearing Tang Costumes, Princess Changles tomb, dated 643, Liquan, China

Figure 38. Asura and Guardian King in Tang Warrior Costumes, ROM Aghora Painting.

120
Figure 39. Amitabha La Ying Painting, Kahara Khotok, pre-1227

Figure 40. Arhat Painting, Yuan dynasty, China. 13th-14th c.
Figure 41. Four Kings, Bao Ning Si Painting, Ming, 15th c.

Figure 42. Vajrapani, Gyantse Kumbum, South Central Tibet, 15th c.
Figure 43. Vajravidarana, Gyantse Kumbum, South Central Tibet, 15th c.

Figure 44. Detail of Scarf, ROM Aghora Painting
Figure 45. Vairocana, Gyantse Kumbum, 15th c.

Figure 46. Robed Teacher, Gyantse Kumbum, 15th c.
Figure 47. Directional Guardians in clouds, Gyantse Kumbum, 15th c.

Figure 48. Sakyamuni in clouds, Gyantse Kumbum, 15th c.
Figure 49. Detail of Aghora's Face, ROM
Aghora Painting

Figure 50. Face of Vajrahumkara,
Gyantse, 15th c.
Figure 51. Detail of Sadaksari Avalokitesvara in headdress. ROM Aghora Painting
Figure 52. Key to Figures for Legs Idan Nagpo Aghora Painting.
Figure 53. Rubin sculpture of “Legden Mahakala”, himalayanart.org website (rubin 65208)

Figure 54. Detail of Gandi, ROM Aghora Painting.
Figure 55. Painting of “Danda Mahakala”, himalayanart.org website. (rubin 235)
Figure 56. Painting of “Danda Mahakala”, himalayanart.org website (rubin 66)
Figure 57. Painting of Machig Labdron, Eastern Tibet, 19th century, Shelley and Donald Rubin Collection.

Figure 58. Detail of “Aghora” from Machig Labdron Painting.
Figure 59. Detail of charnel tiger devouring corpse.

Figure 60. Illustration of Legs Idan Gandi by Robert Beer

Figure 61. Panjara Mahakala detail, ROM Aghora Painting
Figure 62. Mahakala Panjarnata, 12th c

Figure 63. Detail of Warrior with checkered flag.
Figure 64. Mandala of Mahakala on Six-pointed Throwing Star Design.

Figure 65. Illustration of Throwing Star Design for Mahakala Mandalas by John C, Huntington.


Crofts, George. Letters to Charles Currelly. Crofts Correspondence Files 1918-1926. Registration Department, Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Canada.


Currelly, Charles. Letters to George Crofts. Crofts Correspondence Files 1918-1926. Registration Department, Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Canada.


Parker, Jeannie. Conversation about George Crofts, Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, April 5 2006.


Registrars, Royal Ontario Museum. E-mail correspondence with Registrar Susan Richardson referring to information provided by Registrars Nur Bahal and Tricia Walker, April 15, 2006.


