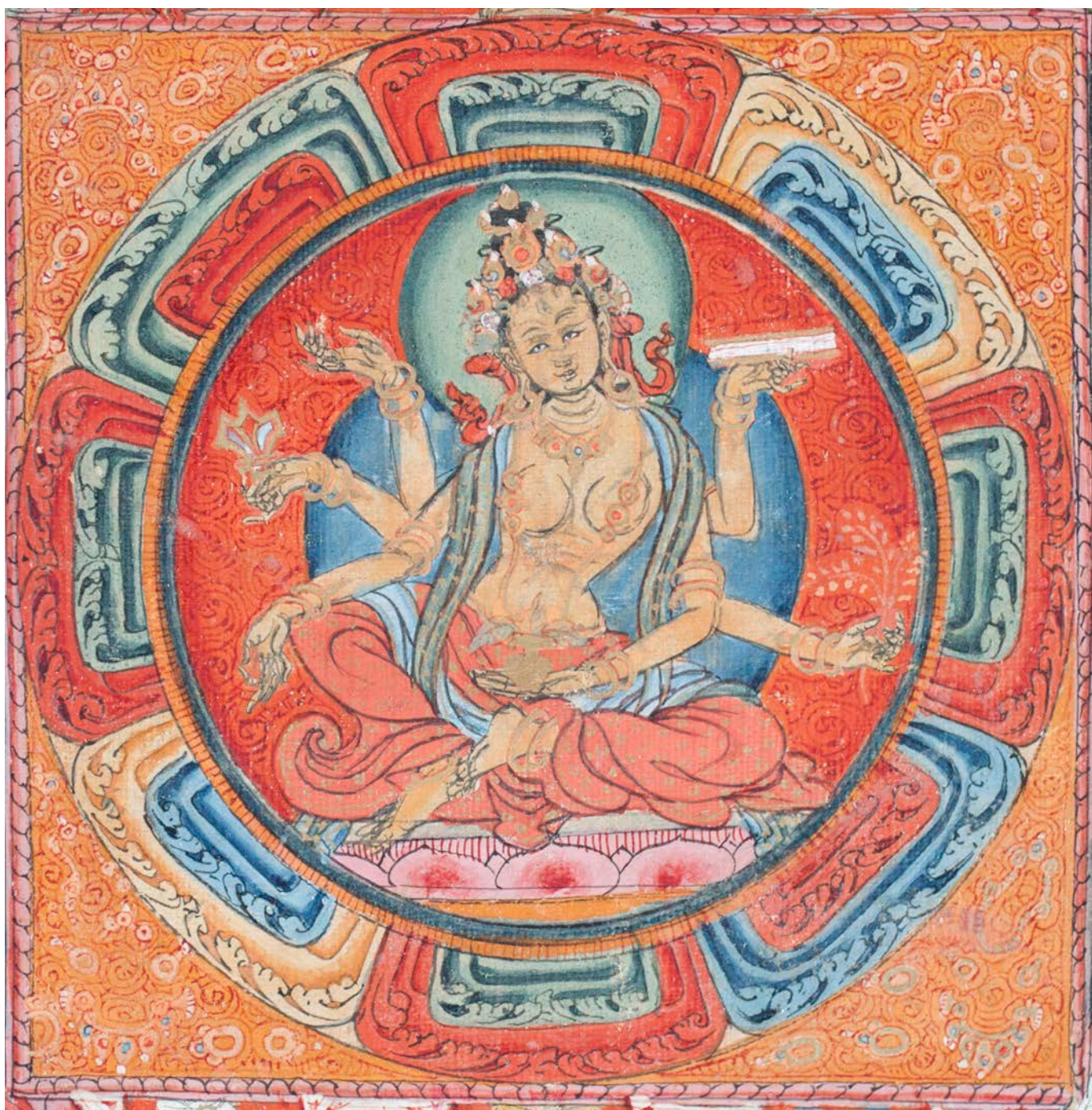


A Sakya Mandala of the Goddess Vasudhara
女神财源天母的萨迦曼陀罗



Navin Kumar Gallery

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1. STYLE

Our interpretation and emotive response to a work of art is invariably framed by its size. Large works can inspire a sense of grandeur and accomplishment, and as such are appropriate as reminders for historical events – such as an initiation ceremonies, meeting gifts, or funeral rites. In comparison, small and finely crafted works can evoke a nuanced and personal response, for example, the feeling of marvel arises from multi-faceted refractions and reflections of a rare and flawless gem.

A flawless, rare, and multi-faceted gem is an apt metaphor for this Sakya lineage Vasudhara Mandala. Vasudhara, the Goddess of Wealth and of exoteric nature, is an extremely rare subject in Tibetan painting. Vasudhara's serene gaze and golden, lyrical form is tightly encapsulated by the inner most circle, emphasizing her presence above all else. Just beyond the six-armed Vasudhara is a most masterful rendering of conformal Nepali scrollwork: a virtuoso that seamlessly embedded her crown, necklace, and earrings in the orange corners of the circumscribing square (Fig. 2a), providing a more condensed symbolic representation than found in Nepali versions (which include prominent treasure boxes as well). This iconographic distillation and composition is also found in the Vajravali Vasudhara Mandala in the Kimbell Art Museum² commissioned by Ngorchen Kunga Zangpo (Fig. 2b, Fig. 4). The dynamic postures and sublime expressions of the Mahasiddhas in the upper register hint at the stories associated with Indian tantrics, and give the painting a narrative quality that is explicitly found around the boundaries of several Nepalese Vasudhara mandalas (for example, the Mandala in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art¹, Fig. 10). Four verses – inscribed in gold along the bottom red border – praise Vasudhara for her radiant and wealth-bestowing nature.



2a



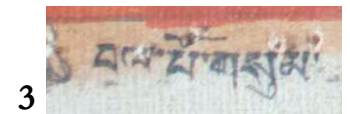
2b

Vasudhara's crown and jewelry embedded within the orange scrolling pattern of the first circumscribing square. (a) this work, (b) Kimbell mandala²

2. ASCRIBED TO A NEPALI ARTIST[S]

An inscription on the bottom left of the painting, reads *bal po gsum*. The phrase *bal po* translates to native of Nepal, and Ngorchen Kunga Zangpo used this phrase to describe the artists who came to Tibet to work in the Ngor monastery. The addition of the word *gsum*, translating to three, can be interpreted to mean that not only one, but three Nepali artists worked together to make this painting, and all the others in the set.

There is no further information about the artist, but it is clear that the painting is not – as has been suggested – removed from the wave of Nepali artists associated with the Sakya school till the mid-16th century.



3

Inscription on the bottom left reading *bal po gsum*



Inscription in the bottom border (Wylie): *na mo gu ra we / dgos 'dod kun 'byung bsam 'phel nor gyi lha / skye dgu'i re bkong dpal mo nor rgyun ma / khyod tshul bsgrubs las khyod thugs rab bgyes pa'i / phun tshogs gter la bdag don lhur len shog / mangallam*

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1 Vasudhara Mandala : 19 Deity Assembly
 Nepali Artist[s], Sakya Lineage
 circa 1463 - 1521, Tibet
 10 x 13 inches, Mineral Pigment on Cloth

3. A HIDDEN MOTIVE

As an exoteric deity, Vasudhara is rarely painted in Tibet, and one wonders what might have been the motive for commissioning this work. Nepalese paintings of Vasudhara were often commissioned by laypeople, and perhaps this painting was similarly commissioned by a non-monastic donor for worldly reasons. This conjecture is supported by a hidden and difficult to read inscription on the scroll of one of the Mahasiddhas (Fig. 4). The inscription references the donor with Sanskrit word, *dAnapati* (mostly used for non-monastic donors) and expresses the donor's hopes for wealth and prosperity in perpetuity.

4. LINEAGE IDENTIFICATION FROM INSCRIPTIONS

Typically, the transmission lineage in a mandala is determined by establishing a correspondence between iconography of figures in the painting and textually identified lineages of the Mandala assembly (in this case, the Vasudhara 19 Deity Assembly, see the Diagram in Fig. 8). The preferable case, however, is for the relevant transmission lineage to be directly inscribed in the painting. This painting has an inscription (Figure 4b) that reads, *sa chan yab sras*. Given the location of the inscription directly below a lama with the iconic features of Sachen Kunga Nyingpo, *sa chan* is a misspelling of *sa chen*, thereby clearly referring to Sachen Kunga Nyingpo. The phrase *yab sras* means father-son (spiritual) lineage, and identifies the lineage in the painting as the lineage of Sakya throneholders.

5. IDENTIFYING OTHER PAINTINGS IN THE SET

The last lama in this painting is Sakya Pandita (1182–1251). As the painting is stylistically not a 13th century work, the incomplete lineage implies that the painting belongs to a set. The register here begins with Vajradhara and Nairatmya, and contains the first Sakya heirarchs, indicating that the Vasudhara mandala is the first in the set.

The challenge is to propose reasonable candidates for subsequent works. Candidates must be of the same dimensions, have the same register structure, a similar style, and a plausible textual, pictorial, or iconographic association with Vasudhara.

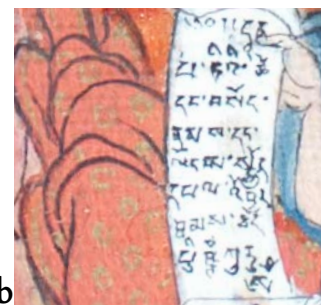
One of the only known paintings of Vasudhara comes from the Vajravali painting in the Kimbell Art Museum² (Figure 6, 1426–1456). The Kimbell painting is a four mandala composition, which after the first unidentified mandala, consists of Vasudhara (2), Bhagavati Mahavidya (3), and Ushnishavijaya (4). The placement of the nineteen deities of the Vasudhara assembly in the Kimbell painting deviates from the Nepalese composition based on the *Vasundharoddesa*, in which "the inner mandala...[is] placed against an ornate tribolate mountain"³ (Fig. 10 for Nepalese, and Fig. 9 for the Tibetan version). The present mandala exhibits the same composition as the Kimbell assembly,

If the current painting belongs to a set, the most likely candidates for a 2nd, and 3rd painting are Bhagavati Mahavidya and Ushnishavijaya respectively. There is one extant Bhagavati Mahavidya mandala (in the Fournier Collection⁴) with extremely similar style, the same number of figures in the registers, and the same size as the current Vasudhara mandala. Furthermore, the mandala's assembly matches the Bhagavati Mahavidhya in the Kimbell Vajravali. The register of the Bhagavati Mahavidhya mandala does not begin with deities, but instead with Mahasiddhas, signifying that it belongs to a set as well.

Two other mandalas with the same dimensions and register size are known: one of Karamukha Chakrasamvara⁵ and one of Vajrabhairava⁶, both of the Jucker collection. The hypothesis that either of these two mandalas is part of the set has a number of deficiencies, including the duplication of either Vajradhara or Nairatmya (in the



5a



5b

(a) An Mahasiddha reading an open scroll
(b) The barely legible text reads: *dAn pa ti'i tshe dang bsod nams dang long a bskyong dpal 'byor thams cad pa'i shTAM ku ru oHM*



6

An inscription below the red border is aligned with one of the lamas and reads *sa chan yab sras*. The lama has white robes – indicative of the early Sakya heirarchs – and has Sachen Kunga Nyingpo's characteristic age and balding head with white hair.



- 7 Four Mandalas of the Vajravali (14th of 14 in the set)
 Nepali Artist[s], Commissioned by Ngorchen Kunga Zangpo
 circa 1429–1456, Tibet, Ngor Monaster
 35 x 29 inches, Mineral Pigment on Cloth
 Kimbell Art Museum²

Chakrasamvara / Vajrabhairava mandalas respectively), the absence of Amitayus or Amitabha, lack of a clear textual/pictorial/iconographic association, and the presence of charnal grounds in the mandala periphery. Finally, though all mandalas have inscriptions across the bottom, the Chakrasamvara and Vajrabhairava inscriptions do not start with *na mo gu ra we* or end in *mangallam* unlike the Vasudhara and Mahavidya mandalas.

It is safe to conclude that the Fournier Mahavidhya mandala follows Vasudhara as the 2nd painting in the set, and that a 3rd mandala – no longer extant – of Ushnishavijaya may have been part of the series as well.

6. ESTIMATING THE PERIOD FROM THE LINEAGE

Herein, we estimate the period for the set based on knowledge of the transmission lineage (the Sakya heirarchs) and a projection of the number of lamas. The Fournier Mahavidya mandala contains fourteen heirarchs following Sakya Pandita, meaning that the last lama is the 20th Sakya Trizin, Gyagar Sherab Gyaltzen (*rgya gar ba shes rab rgyal mtshan*, lineage holder from 1463–1472). The earliest possible period for the set is during the life of the 20th Sakya Trizin starting 1463, corresponds to the presence of only two mandalas in the set.

To obtain a reasonable upper bound, some hypothesis needs to be advanced regarding the register structure of a possible third mandala of Ushnishavijaya. One of the only extant mandala of Ushnishavijaya⁶ is a Ngor mandala from a similar period (1500–1550). Its register consists of alternating Amitayus and Amitabha figures, with only a solitary lama at the top center of the painting. Leaving only one lama for depiction in the Ushnishavijaya mandala is no doubt the result of intentional planning for that set's registers, and indicates that there was a compositional preference for the Ushnishavijaya mandalas of that period to have a register solely comprising of alternating Amitayus/Amitabha figures. It is reasonable to conclude that the unknown Ushnishavijaya mandala of this set would likely be one or zero lamas – and conservatively at most two. Interestingly, the registers of the Vasudhara and Mahavidhya mandalas end with Amitayus and Amitabha respectively, alluding to a natural continuation of this alternating pattern in the register of the 3rd mandala. Logically, if there were more than two lamas in the 3rd painting's register, two of them could have replaced the Amitayus/Amitabha in the Vasudhara/Mahavidhya paintings to maintain the desired register structure of the Ushnishavijaya mandala. Thus, I conclude that there would have been at most two lamas in the register, and the latest date for the set at the end of the tenure of the 22nd Sakya Trizin in 1533.

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8 Bhagavati Mahavidya Mandala : 58 Deity Assembly
 Nepali Artist[s], Sakya Lineage
 circa 1463 – 1521, Tibet,
 10 x 13 inches, Mineral Pigment on Cloth
 Collection of Lionel Fournier⁴



9 Enumeration of the Vasudhara Mandala 19 Deity Assembly based on characterization in Circle of Bliss³.

Inner Sanctum

1 Vasudhara	Gold
2 Avalokiteshvara	Red
3 Vajrapani	Green
4 Ratnasambhava	Yellow
5 Jambhala	Blue
6 Nagaraja Varuna	White
7 Ila Devi	Yellow

Outer Glorious Realm

8 Chivkundali	SE	Red
9 Kelimalini	NE	Green
10 Sukhendra	NW	Yellow
11 Chalendra	SW	White
12 Manibhadra?	S	Red
13 Purnabhadra	E	Blue
14 Dhanada	N	Red
15 Vaishravana	W	Yellow
16 Gupta Devi	SE	Green
17 Sagupta Devi	NE	Red
18 Sarasvati Devi	NW	Yellow
19 Chandrakanta	SE	White



10 Vasudhara Mandala : 19 Deity Assembly
 Nepal, dated 1495
 Mineral pigments on cotton cloth, 110.5 x 84 cm
 Los Angeles County Museum of Art
 From the Nasli and Alice Heeramanek Collection, Museum Associates
 Purchase (M.77.19.7)¹