

24. HEVAJRA

Mercury gilt copper alloy
Tibeto-Chinese
Ming, ca. mid-15th century
Height: 17.2 cm (6.77 in.)

This delicately rendered yet expressive figure of the skull-cup-bearing (Skt. *Kapaladhara*) Hevajra (Tib. *Kye'I rdo rje*; Chin. *Huanxi Jingang*) depicts the wrathful deity in his sixteen-armed form and with eight heads as he embraces his consort Nairatmya, "Without Self", the embodiment of Wisdom.¹

Hevajra, the tantric manifestation of Akshobhya and one of the most important initiation deities (Yidam), has four legs; two are energetically shown in a dancing pose (*ardha paryanka*), while the other two are in the lunging warrior (*alidha*) posture.² He tramples two prostrate Maras or "Deaths" under his feet, supported by an oval single-lotus base. The contents of the skull-cups held in each of Hevajra's sixteen hands symbolize the Yidam's universal dominion. The fan of Hevajra's arms forms a perfect arc around the deeply engaged couple as they lunge to the right. Both deities are naked save for their crowns, human bone jewelry and aprons. Their embrace signifies the bliss of enlightenment and the termination of all duality.

Kapaladhara Hevajra is described in an eighth century eastern India treatise and beautifully interpreted in this finely cast image: "[...] Black am I and terrible..., but my inner nature is tranquil, and holding Nairatmya in loving embrace, I am possessed of tranquil bliss".³

So far, only four marked Yongle gilt metal icons of this deity with his consort are recorded.⁴ In recent years, a small group of further, slightly later images with the same iconography has surfaced.⁵ The sculpture under review belongs to this group and is cast in a style that closely follows early Ming imperial prototypes.

NOTES:

1. See Chandra 2002, p.1410; Schumann 2001, pp.212 and Huntington 2003, pp.454.

2. Schumann, op. cit., p.213 and Huntington, op. cit., p.454.

3. See Linrothe 1999, pp.268 for a full discussion of the iconography of Hevajra.

4. See von Schroeder 2001, pp.1258, plate 347, nos.347 C-E; cat. Sotheby's Hong Kong, Visions of Enlightenment. The Speelman Collection of Important Early Ming Buddhist Bronzes, October 7, 2006, lot 814.

5. For an example see cat. Sotheby's London, Important Chinese Art, May 11, 2016, lot 65.



