

Article

“On Golden Tablets”: The Cleveland Museum of Art’s Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Manuscript as a Self-Referential Icon

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Abstract: This article examines the paintings on the five surviving illuminated palm-leaf folios and the interiors of the two wooden covers of the Cleveland Museum of Art’s almost complete Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines, or the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*, from the early twelfth century (CMA, Acc. No. 1938.301). Earlier scholarship on the CMA manuscript has overlooked the importance of the first folio, which depicts centrally a female personification of the *Prajñāpāramitā* text itself. Focusing on the details of the image and comparing it to the other instances of the figure in the manuscript, I argue that the golden image of *Prajñāpāramitā* on folio 1v serves as the core self-referential icon of the manuscript, alluding to not only the content of the text itself, but also to the very manuscript the image resides in. This essay shows the ways in which South Asian palm-leaf manuscripts can be understood from the purview of materiality, already well established in the scholarship of western European medieval parchment manuscripts.

Keywords: *Prajñāpāramitā*; icon; materiality; *pothi*; manuscripts; palm leaf; Nepal

1. Introduction

The manuscript of the *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines*, or the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*, of the Cleveland Museum of Art (CMA, Acc. No. 1938.301) has received only sporadic and incomplete scholarly attention, and previous publications have not noted the importance of the first folio and its painted illuminations (Figure 1).¹ The page is damaged and discolored, and evidently has been considered unshowable in the galleries. It was therefore not photographed and was mixed in with the unilluminated pages of text, which were stored separately from the painted pages and without identifying accession or cataloguing numbers until recently. The page has been repaired, with a rewritten line of text at the lower left and backed with Nepalese yellow paper of the type used between the 1500s and 1800s.² In a Mellon Collections Seminar on global medieval manuscripts that was offered as part of the joint program in art history at the CMA and Case Western Reserve University, the manuscript was analyzed in full, and the importance of the paintings on the first folio has come to light.

¹ The CMA’s manuscript’s images, excluding the first folio, are dealt with by Kim (2015) and Pal (1978, 1985), but little else has been done extensively on the manuscript’s text or images. The manuscript was purchased from the Heeramanek Galleries in 1938 and is briefly featured in the *Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* (March, Hollis 1939; October, Marcus 1967); two texts by Lee (1942, 1964); and *The Handbook of the Cleveland Museum of Art* (The Cleveland Museum of Art 1958, 1966, 1969, 1978). The manuscript also makes appearances in (Kramrisch 1964, p. 79; Hickmann et al. 1975; Meahl 2004). It was exhibited at the Detroit Institute of Arts in 1942.

² A handwritten invocation and three syllables, possibly for consecration, have been written directly behind the painted image of *Prajñāpāramitā*.



Figure 1. Prajñāpāramitā flanked by two female figures, fol. 1v. *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines: Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*, 1119. India and Nepal. Gum tempera and ink on palm leaf. 5.4 × 54.3 cm. Cleveland Museum of Art, purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund, 1938.301.

On the center of the verso of the first leaf is a seated image of Prajñāpāramitā (Figure 2) in the form of a young four-armed goddess. Prajñāpāramitā is both the personification of the manuscript itself as well as its teachings. She sits on a lotus pedestal with multicolored petals and is framed by a mandorla edged with jewels that complement the blue halo behind her head. She wears a bejeweled crown, large hooped earrings, and striped ribbons—now barely visible—flutter from her crown down around her arms. Prajñāpāramitā holds in her upper left hand the light-colored palm-leaf manuscript of the *Prajñāpāramitā* itself, which evokes the relationship between her light-skinned image, her attribute, and the material on which they are placed: light-colored palm leaf. Prajñāpāramitā is herself both form and content in her role as a visual manifestation of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*, but this painting also suggests that she is further linked to the actual container of her image. A survey of the other paintings in this manuscript as well as an analysis of the wood and palm-leaf substrates shows that the makers of this manuscript intentionally composed this already self-reflexive iconography to serve as a self-referential icon, playing off the philosophical nature of the text itself.



Figure 2. Prajñāpāramitā, detail of fol. 1v. *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines: Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*, 1119. Nepal. Gum tempera and ink on palm leaf. 4.3 × 5.3 cm. Cleveland Museum of Art, purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund, 1938.301.

In this manuscript, the Sanskrit text is written in the formal *scriptura continua*, known as *rañjanā*, which was current in northeastern India during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, on 188 narrow rectangular palm-leaf folios held together between two wooden covers. The quality of the calligraphy is extremely fine; the scribe, probably associated with the Vikramaśīla Monastery in northeastern India, had a steady and consistent hand. The folio numbers have been noted on the verso of every folio in *nepālākṣara*, suggesting that the manuscript was paginated in Nepal or at least by a Nepalese person.

The colophon on the recto of folio 188 gives a date of 1119 CE,³ and it provides information about the patron. The work was commissioned by a Nepalese Mahāyāna Buddhist monk (*nepāladeśīyabhikṣu*) named Āryaśrīmitra while he was in northeast India at the renowned monastic university Vikramaśīla.⁴ Āryaśrīmitra dedicated the religious merit, or *punya*, that he accumulated from commissioning this costly manuscript to his teacher, preceptor, parents, and a multitude of beings on their paths to enlightenment. Based on art historical evidence, it has been proposed that the manuscript's five surviving illustrated pages and two painted interior covers were probably the work of a Nepalese painter, while the text is the product of a northeastern Indian scribe (Pal 1978, p. 32; Pal 1985, pp. 38–39; Kim 2015, p. 59).⁵ The manuscript was therefore likely penned in India at Vikramaśīla and was then brought to Nepal by Āryaśrīmitra to be illuminated (Kim 2015, p. 59). It was also later corrected, repaired, and paginated there. The CMA's *Prajñāpāramitā* is a testament to the cross-cultural interactions and diverse networks of Buddhist patronage in India and Nepal in the twelfth century (Kim 2015, p. 58; Pal 1978, p. 32; Pal 1985, pp. 38–39).

2. The Manuscript and Its Background

Previous publications of the CMA manuscript have excluded the first folio, only dealing with the other four illuminated pages and painted covers. This article brings together all the manuscript's paintings for the first time. The paintings found on the five illuminated palm-leaf folios of the CMA's *Prajñāpāramitā* are placed at the beginning, middle, and end of the manuscript (Figure 3).⁶ Although,

³ According to the unpublished analysis of Shin'ichirō Hori, the colophon on folio 188r states that the manuscript was made in the year 239 of the Newar Samvat in the month of Āśvina on "the eighth of the light fortnight," which corresponds to Sunday, September 14, 1119 CE. Shin'ichirō Hori 2017. (International Institute for Buddhist Studies, Tokyo.) Personal communication. The curator in charge of the manuscript in Cleveland, Sonya Rhie Mace, confirmed the reading of the date as 239, instead of 237, by comparison with other examples of the numeral as written throughout the same manuscript. Kim (2015, pp. 57–86) incorrectly dates the CMA's manuscript to 1114 CE. Furthermore, Phyllis Granoff identified an excerpt from Haribhadra's final remarks to his commentary on the *Ratnaguṇasamīcaya-gāthā* at the bottom of folio 187v. The *Ratnaguṇasamīcaya* is a verse rendering in Prakrit of the core teachings of the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*. Some manuscripts of the *sūtra* include the full *Ratnaguṇasamīcaya*. In addition to his commentary on the *Ratnaguṇasamīcaya*, Haribhadra (c. 800) wrote an erudite commentary on the *Aṣṭasāhasrika Prajñāpāramitā* itself. Granoff 2019. (Yale University, New Haven, CT.) Personal communication.

⁴ Shin'ichirō Hori transliterated and translated the colophon:
 deyadharmo yaṃ pravaramahāyānāyāyinaḥ śrīmannepāladeśīyabhikṣuāryaśrīmitrasya
 yad=atra puṇya=ta; ○ d=bhavatv=ācāryopādhyāyamātāpitṛpūrvavāṅgamaṇ=kṛtvā
 sakalasattvarāśer=anuttarajñānaphalāvāptaya iti || ○ [siddham] samvat* ā la ṇa
 aśvanīśuklāṣṭamyām | śrīvikramaśīlamahāvihāre ||
 "This is a religious donation of Āryaśrīmitra, an eminent follower of the Mahāyāna, a monk coming from Nepal. What here is the merit, may that be for the gain of the fruit of supreme wisdom by the whole multitude of beings, having placed first the teacher, preceptor, mother, and father. In the year 239 [Newar Era], on the 8th [tithi] in the bright fortnight of Āśvina, at the great monastery of Vikramaśīla." Shin'ichirō Hori 2017. (International Institute for Buddhist Studies, Tokyo.) Personal communication.

⁵ Information from a record in the CMA's curatorial file. For an art historical analysis of another illuminated Nepalese *Prajñāpāramitā* manuscript that discusses style as well as the original ritual contexts of northern Indian and Nepalese manuscripts, see (Melzer and Allinger 2010).

⁶ Based on the measurements for the other leaves, folio 1v (Figure 1) appears to have been trimmed. In the manuscript's current condition, the picture planes on folio 90r (Figures 5 and 8) that house the central *Prajñāpāramitā* and two flanking white attendants are painted larger than those on folios 1v and 89v (Figures 1 and 4). The paintings on 1v and 89v seem unfinished. The white wash of kaolinite used as an undercoat or a preparatory coat is still visible around the paintings on 1v and 89v. If the width of the kaolinite undercoat of the *Prajñāpāramitā* on folio 1v is measured, the width would be 6.2 cm and would have been commensurate with the red *Prajñāpāramitā* on folio 90r. Based on a comparison with the finished paintings at the end of the manuscript, a curtain above and a border under the lotus pedestal would have been intended. Although we cannot know why these paintings were left unfinished, this does suggest that the paintings were completed beginning with the covers and then the bottom or end of the *pothi*. Indeed, the gold borders and details such as the jewelry and the gold settings for the jewels in the haloes are filled in on folios 186v and 187r (Figures 6 and 7). The gold detailing is possibly just a yellow pigment with traces of gold, as it does not have a noticeable metallic quality. Folio 90r has none of this gold color at all, and the border lines have only been drawn in. The jewelry has likewise not been filled in with gold. Folio 89v has even less of the painting finished (for example, it lacks the bolsters), and the preparatory ground layer remains visible. This is also the case for folio 1v. On folio 186v, there has also been some minor retouching to Avalokiteśvara and Mañjuśrī, probably when the manuscript was refurbished in the sixteenth(?) century or so. Sonya Rhie Mace 2020. (Cleveland Museum of Art.) Personal communication.

as a rule, it is almost impossible to assert any consistency among painted *Prajñāpāramitā* manuscripts, many such works from the eleventh and twelfth centuries format miniatures this way. For example, the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, now held in the Detroit Institute of Arts (ca. 1160, Acc. No. 27.586), retains the beginning-middle-end placements for the miniatures; however, the images in the Detroit manuscript are narrative scenes, in contrast to the iconic figures of the CMA's version (Kim 2008). Another *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* (British Library, Or. 6902) that was the product of the Vikramaśīla monastery dates to about 1156 CE and also organizes six illustrated panels at the beginning, middle, and end of the volume (Kim 2015). The illustrated folio numbers in the CMA's manuscript are 1v, 89v, 90r, 186v, and 187r (Figures 1 and 4–7). Four of these leaves are organized in pairs, with the exception of folio 1v. Because the manuscript is arranged in the traditional *pothi* format (Kim 2015, p. 81, n. 7), the paired illustrated folios would have been visible at the same time. This is typical of *pothi* manuscripts (Weissenborn 2012, p. 279).

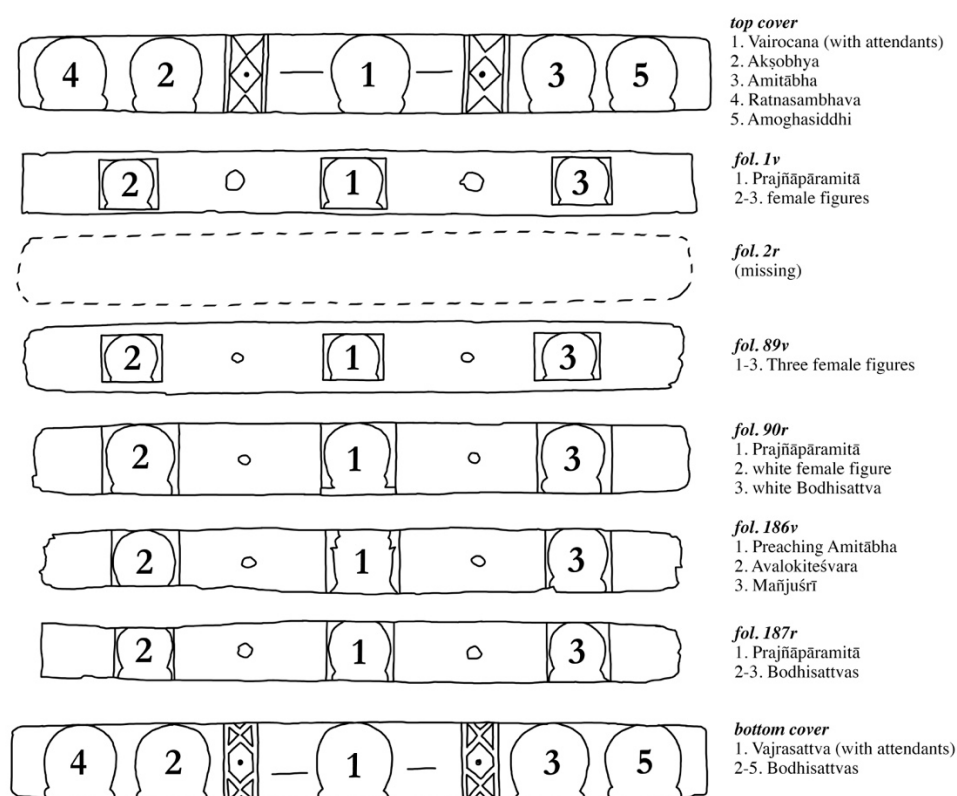


Figure 3. Chart shows the layout and iconography of the painted boards and palm leaves. Created by Benjamin Levy (Department of Art History and Art, Case Western Reserve University) for the author.



Figure 4. Three female figures, fol. 89v. *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines: Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*, 1119. India and Nepal. Gum tempera and ink on palm leaf. 5.9 × 55.9 cm. Cleveland Museum of Art, purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund, 1938.301.2.

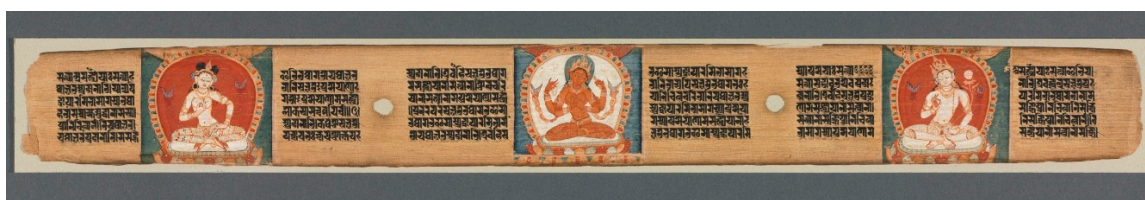


Figure 5. Prajñāpāramitā flanked by a white female figure (left) and white bodhisattva (right), fol. 90r. *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines: Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*, 1119. India and Nepal. Gum tempera and ink on palm leaf. 6.1 × 55.8 cm. Cleveland Museum of Art, purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund, 1938.301.3.



Figure 6. Preaching Amitābha with Avalokiteśvara (left) and Mañjuśrī (right), fol. 186v. *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines: Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*, 1119. India and Nepal. Gum tempera and ink on palm leaf. 5.5 × 54.6 cm. Cleveland Museum of Art, purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund, 1938.301.4.

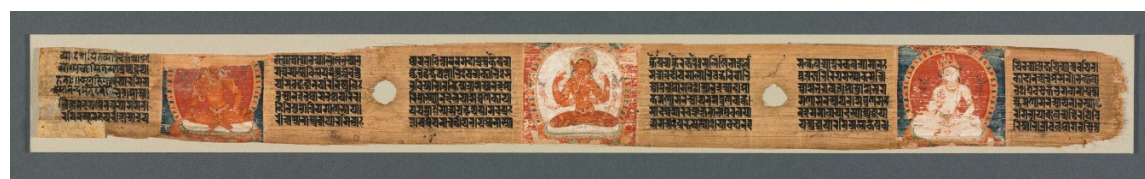


Figure 7. Prajñāpāramitā flanked by two bodhisattvas, fol. 187r. *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines: Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*, 1119. India and Nepal. Gum tempera and ink on palm leaf. 5.3 × 54.3 cm. Cleveland Museum of Art, purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund, 1938.301.5.

Folio 1v likely had a facing illustrated page (folio 2r), but that palm leaf is now unfortunately lost.⁷ Folio 2 would have included the last eight verses of the opening hymn, the *Prajñāpāramitā-stotra* of Rāhula, that begins on folio 1v up to verse 13.⁸ Also, folio 2 would have included the beginning of the proper text of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, since folio 3r has a section that is already well into the text. In other words, there is a gap in the text that proves a page is absent, and it was most likely illustrated.⁹

Each of the palm-leaf images depicts an individual transcendent being seated on a lotus pedestal and with a halo and mandorla. Some are female, some are male bodhisattvas, three are four-armed images of Prajñāpāramitā, and one is the Buddha Amitābha. They are often personifications or manifestations of abstract concepts, written texts, or specific beings that were worshipped and/or venerated in Buddhist contexts, including both temples and manuscripts. An example of this

⁷ Kim has noted that the timeworn state of folio 1 (it is supported on the backside with Nepalese yellow paper) implies that the second folio may have also been damaged and therefore lost during its time in Nepal (Kim 2015, pp. 60 and 82, n. 16).

⁸ The original verses of the hymn in Sanskrit and in a German translation can be found in (Eimer 1988).

⁹ I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer who suggested that it should be possible to guess whether folio 2 was illustrated by looking at the amount of text missing between folios 1 and 3. Phyllis Granoff kindly identified the amount of missing text based on standard published texts of the hymn and the *sūtra*, and Sonya Rhie Mace made a rough count of *akṣaras*. Folio 1v with the three paintings has approximately 430 *akṣaras*; folio 3r with text only has 775 *akṣaras*, and folio 3v with text only has around 904 *akṣaras*. The number of *akṣaras* of missing text that would have fallen on folio 2, both recto and verso, would have been approximately 1140. Although these are rough estimates, it seems unlikely that folio 2 would have had text only on both the recto and verso. Sonya Rhie Mace 2020. (Cleveland Museum of Art.) Personal communication.

concept is found with the widespread artistic renderings and veneration of certain beings that functioned as personifications of specific *sūtras*. For example, Prajñāpāramitā is representative of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* and its teachings. Likewise, the five protective beings—Mahapratisarā, Mahāsahasrapramardanī, Mahamāyūrī, Mahāsītavatī, and Mahāmantrānusāriṇī—are figurations of the five sections of the popular apotropaic texts (*dhāraṇī*) known collectively as the *Pañcarakṣā*.¹⁰ Like the *Prajñāpāramitā*, the *Pañcarakṣā* often depicted the goddesses inside illustrated manuscripts of the texts they personify. As with western medieval personifications of the allegorical virtues and vices as women, the figures are depicted as female because the names of the foundational texts they represent are gendered female in Sanskrit. In conjunction with this gendered language, Prajñāpāramitā is herself described in the text as a mother figure to all the Buddhas and bodhisattvas.¹¹

On folio 1v, the central figure is a crowned Prajñāpāramitā flanked by two pale-colored female figures separated from her by two columns of black text (Figures 1 and 2). Prajñāpāramitā is shown frontally and hieratically; her body does not lean to either side. She also appears in the center of the page on folios 90r and 187r (Figures 8 and 9), likewise crowned and wearing a diaphanous veil, but there she is red, and in both cases, she is shown swaying her body toward the left. On 90r, which is at the center of the manuscript, the four-armed figure makes the teaching *mudrā* with two hands, her second right hand holds a rosary, and her second left hand holds a palm leaf from the *pothi*. Folio 187r is far more damaged than 90r, but the red Prajñāpāramitā is evidently again holding a rosary, a palm leaf, and giving the teaching *mudrā*. Although these figures have self-referential elements that play on the materiality of the *pothi*, since they both are the personifications of the *Prajñāpāramitā* text and hold a palm leaf representing it, I would argue that their skin tone detracts from establishing them as the main self-referential icons of the text.



Figure 8. Prajñāpāramitā, detail of fol. 90r. *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines: Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*, 1119. Nepal. Gum tempera and ink on palm leaf. 6.1 × 6.4 cm. Cleveland Museum of Art, purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund, 1938.301.3.

¹⁰ For more on the *Pañcarakṣā*, see (Kim 2010; Allinger and Melzer 2010).

¹¹ For example, in chapter 12 (Conze 1975, p. 31) the text reads: “Just so also the Buddhas in the world-systems in the ten directions /Bring to mind this perfection of wisdom as their mother.” Chapter 12 and the rest of the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*’s prose is filled with several examples mother imagery.



Figure 9. Prajñāpāramitā, detail of fol. 187r. *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*, 1119. Nepal. Gum tempera and ink on palm leaf. 5.25 × 5.8 cm. Cleveland Museum of Art, purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund, 1938.301.5.

The red color of these two images of Prajñāpāramitā connects them with the image of the red Amitābha on 186v (Figures 6 and 10), who sits iconically in the center, under what appears to be a tree. A pair of *hamsas* perch on either side of his elaborate golden throne, which further confirms the identification of this Buddha as Amitābha. Flanking him on the left is a white Avalokiteśvara, and a red Mañjuśrī is seated on the right. Amitābha is often paired with Prajñāpāramitā in Indian illuminated manuscripts, as he is here.¹² For example, in a Nepalese manuscript from 1148 CE shared between the Asiatic Society in Kolkata (G.4203) and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst in Berlin (I 5410 and I 5411), a reddish-orange teaching Buddha figure on folio 1v is paired with a similarly red meditating Prajñāpāramitā on folio 2r (Melzer and Allinger 2010, pp. 7–10).¹³ The red Amitābha on folio 186v in the CMA manuscript is hieratic and static, suggesting that at least the last Prajñāpāramitā is meant to be subsidiary to him and representative of his wisdom specifically. Indeed, the red Prajñāpāramitā figures take on more subsidiary forms, as indicated by their swaying torsos. This means that the first golden Prajñāpāramitā is indicated as the main image not only by her self-referential qualities, but also by her hieratic posture. Amitābha is then the second main image of the text, appearing as he does at the end of the manuscript. Perhaps the duplication of the red Prajñāpāramitā figure on folios 90r and 187r could reference the manuscript's own desire to be recopied and repeatedly recited, to be discussed below. Viewed as a group, the image of the golden Prajñāpāramitā on the first folio seems to stand out as the most prominent, more so than the swaying red version in the central pair of illuminated folios.

On the first folio, which is the only instance of Prajñāpāramitā appearing as gold and not red in the manuscript, her skin tone imitates that of the actual palm leaf she is depicted on and for which she is the visual shorthand. Palm leaf was not only considered to have a golden color, but its yellowish hue was enhanced during the manuscript production process by the application of turmeric paste and burnishing. She also holds a palm-leaf manuscript in her hand, which again, functions as a self-referential image. Further, she gives the two-handed *dharmacakra mudrā* to indicate teaching. This hand gesture alludes to the text (and her) as the teachings of the Buddha. In illuminated *sūtras* in

¹² See, e.g., the Detroit manuscript (Acc. No. 27.586) and Kim (2008). In the article, Kim notes that this iconographical pairing is common, but the reason for it is unclear. She notes that in the hymn dedicated to Prajñāpāramitā, she is described as “boundless,” which may connect to Amitābha because his name means boundless light (p. 84). See also the chapter by Weissenborn (2012) for more examples of South Asian illuminated manuscripts containing figural images of both Amitābha and Prajñāpāramitā (e.g., number 6 [G.4713 from the Asiatic Society], number 17 [the Detroit manuscript], and others in her list).

¹³ In the Berlin/Kolkata image of Prajñāpāramitā, she holds her palm-leaf attribute, and interestingly, in the image of the Buddha, behind him and above his head is a five-leaved fan palm (Melzer and Allinger 2010, p. 7).

which there is an illustration depicting the life of Śākyamuni, Prajñāpāramitā giving the *dharmacakra mudrā* is often paired with the Buddha's first sermon (Kim 2013, pp. 10, 55–56, 99).¹⁴



Figure 10. Preaching Amitābha, detail of fol. 186v. *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines: Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*, 1119. Nepal. Gum tempera and ink on palm leaf. 5.5 × 6.25 cm. Cleveland Museum of Art, purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund, 1938.301.4.

3. The Wooden Covers: A Vertical Axis of Wisdom

Because of the organization of illustrated folios into paired groups, it is also possible to conceive of the wooden covers as forming their own pair of images. Furthermore, it is instructional to think of them as serving as frontispieces to the text in addition to being integral parts of the manuscript as a whole. On each of the folios and boards, the space is structured into three separated and vertically organized registers that feature one or more seated figures. On the painted palm leaves, there are only three figures per leaf, making for a total of fifteen figures across the five remaining folios, plus three presumed to have been on folio 2r. The covers have seven additional figures, each. Therefore, there were thirty-two figures depicted in the manuscript if one includes the covers.

The first painting of the CMA *Prajñāpāramitā* is therefore on the verso of the top wooden cover (Figure 11), and thus is incorporated into the text by functioning like a frontispiece. While it cannot be confirmed whether the boards of *pothi* were always painted contemporaneously with the illuminations on the palm leaves, Pratapaditya Pal has argued that in the CMA manuscript, the cover paintings seem to have been produced by the same hand as the palm-leaf illuminations (Pal 1978, p. 34). Indeed, the textile patterns, quality of line, and style of the halos, and even the white tips on the multicolored lotus pedestals, suggest that the paintings on the covers were made at the same time and place as the paintings on the palm leaves. The board depicts the Five Tathāgatas (*pañcājina* or *pañcatathāgata*), often described by scholars as the Five Cosmic or Transcendent Buddhas. There are two attendant bodhisattvas on either side of the central Buddha. Moving from the center out along the book cover, the five Tathāgata figures are Vairocana (with attendants), Akṣobhya, Amitābha, Ratnasambhava, and Amoghasiddhi. Each is distinguished in the CMA *Prajñāpāramitā* by his skin color and a different *mudrā*. The centermost Buddha is Vairocana (Figure 12), who has white skin, is associated with the

¹⁴ For example, the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* (A.15, dated to NS 191, or 1071 CE) now in the Asiatic Society in Kolkata, India, opens the first folio with an image of the Buddha preaching the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* that is linked to an image of Prajñāpāramitā at the end of the first chapter.

center, and in this instance, holds his hands in the *vajra mudrā*.¹⁵ This *mudrā*, which is more esoteric than the teaching (*dharmacakra*) *mudrā* usually given by Vairocana, signifies the union of wisdom with skillful, compassionate action that leads to enlightenment and signals that this manuscript was created in an environment in which tantric rituals were conducted. While the central images on the palm leaves are Mahāyāna, the two covers promote an esoteric element, suggesting that Vajrayāna was current among the users of this manuscript.¹⁶

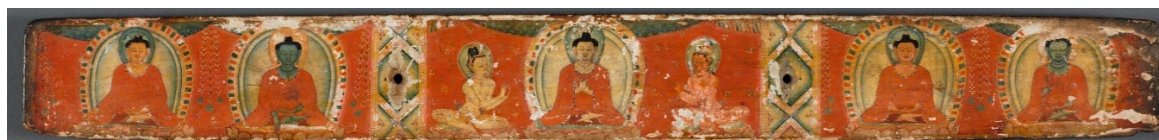


Figure 11. From left to right, Ratnasambhava, Akṣobhya, Vairocana (with attendants), Amitābha, and Amoghasiddhi—The Five Tathāgata of tantric Buddhism, top cover. *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines: Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*, 1119. Nepal. Gum tempera on wood. Overall: 6.5 × 57 × 1.5 cm. Cleveland Museum of Art, purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund, 1938.301.1.



Figure 12. Vairocana, detail of top cover. *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines: Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*, 1119. Nepal. Gum tempera on wood. H: 6.5 cm. Cleveland Museum of Art, purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund, 1938.301.1.

Vairocana as the central figure on the top cover relates to the first image of Prajñāpāramitā on the opening palm-leaf folio and to the miniature of Vajrasattva on the back cover. The back cover (Figure 13) features Vajrasattva in the center, flanked by attendants and four Bodhisattvas, and it visually echoes the top cover.¹⁷ Vajrasattva (Figure 14), like Prajñāpāramitā, has been regarded as a personification of Buddhist ideals. He is often meant to be envisioned during meditative practices (Linrothe 2014). The crowned Vajrasattva is depicted in the CMA work with a white skin tone and two arms and is the only figure to be surrounded by a ring of flames, which underscores his tantric, semi-wrathful aspect. His right hand holds a *vajra*, which is indicative of a thunderbolt and the male aspect. His left hand holds a *vajra*-handled bell, which is indicative of *prajñā*, or wisdom, the female

¹⁵ For a similar example of Vairocana holding his extended left index finger in his right hand, see (Huntington and Bangdel 2003, pp. 108–9).

¹⁶ Another example of a manuscript that has Vajrayāna imagery as well as illuminations showing Prajñāpāramitā is a mid-twelfth-century *pothi* from Bihar in Boston at the Museum of Fine Arts (20.589); see (Weissenborn 2012).

¹⁷ The leftmost has a solar disk (*cakra*) on his lotus flower, while the rightmost has a crescent moon. The bodhisattva on the inner left has a blue lotus (*utpala*), while the one on the inner right has what appears to be flaming triple jewels on a white lotus. Their identity remains uncertain. It is interesting to note, however, that the leftmost bodhisattva is iconographically identical to the bodhisattva on the right of folio 90r (Figure 5).

aspect. These attributes relate directly to the *vajra mudrā* of Vairocana on the top cover. Thus, Vairocana and Vajrasattva are linked not only by their placements as the central figures on the top and bottom covers, respectively, but by their mudra, attributes, and white skin tones.



Figure 13. Four bodhisattvas and two attendants flanking Vajrasattva, bottom cover. *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines: Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*, 1119. Nepal. Gum tempera on wood. Overall: 6.5 × 57 × 1.5 cm. Cleveland Museum of Art, purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund, 1938.301.7.



Figure 14. Vajrasattva, detail of bottom cover. *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines: Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*, 1119. Nepal. Gum tempera on wood. H: 6.5 cm. Cleveland Museum of Art, purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund, 1938.301.7.

In turn, these images on the two wooden covers forge a parenthetical relationship to the interior paintings of *Prajñāpāramitā* found on the centers of folios 1v, 90r, and 187r. Together, these miniatures, in combination with Vairocana and Vajrasattva on the interiors of the *patli*, create a vertical axis through the manuscript, perpetually linking compassion and wisdom, key elements of Buddhism. This is reinforced by other central figures such as the preaching Amitābha on folio 186v. The overall format further reaffirms the spatial relationships of all the images to each other throughout the *pothi*. When closed, folios would be pressed against each other by the pressure exerted by the bounded boards. For example, Amitābha and *Prajñāpāramitā* (on 186v and 187r, respectively) would be physically touching—connecting his preaching *mudrā* to her matching teaching gesture, as well as their corresponding red skin tones. Further, the images along this central vertical axis would all be in a line that forever connects compassion, wisdom, teaching, and *Prajñāpāramitā* to the contents of the manuscript.

4. Materiality as Methodology

Through defining a materials-based approach to the study and investigation of the images found in the CMA's *Prajñāpāramitā* from the twelfth century, this study will show how self-referentiality

underpins not only the worship of this sacred text, but also the understanding of the text and images as vehicles to ascertain higher truths on the path leading to enlightenment. Examining the materials and creation methods for these works will provide a new context to consider the meanings of the palm leaves themselves. The images painted on the interiors of the CMA's *Prajñāpāramitā*'s wooden covers establish some of the first self-referential qualities at play in the manuscript as a whole. However, it is ultimately the representations of the female personification of wisdom, *Prajñāpāramitā*, especially on the first illustrated palm-leaf folio, that function as the core self-reflexive icons of the text.

The scholarship on the medieval illustrated *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras* from South Asia has largely been conducted by Jinah Kim, Eva Allinger, and Gudrun Melzer, among others (Melzer and Allinger 2010, 2012). Kim's 2013 book on the subject is particularly noteworthy for this present study. Kim's employment of the term and methodology of "materiality" is centered on what she calls the "objecthood," or three-dimensional aspect, of *pothi* as physical books (Kim 2013, pp. 1–19). She emphasizes, for example, how the *Prajñāpāramitā* as a book, "is in itself a relic and a sacred text, and at the same time, it encases a true relic of the Buddha, his teachings written in beautiful letters. In other words, a book can be a relic and a reliquary simultaneously" (Kim 2013, p. 41). Kim addresses in her monograph the actual materials that comprise the manuscripts (Kim 2013, pp. 2–5, 113, 253–45), but she does not discuss at length the implications of such materials, nor how the making processes for the manuscripts can amplify current understandings of the images as symbolic of the Buddha's teachings. Importantly, she does highlight how the images serve non-decorative roles, and that they "do not exist entirely superfluous to the text, nor do they defy the context of a book" (Kim 2013, p. 45). Her contributions of relevance for the present study of the CMA *Prajñāpāramitā* are, therefore, her discussions centered around the manuscripts' important roles and status in the book cult and her elucidation of the semiotic qualities inherent in the *Prajñāpāramitā*'s text/image relationship.

While Kim does not address the CMA's manuscript specifically until a later article (2015), she does provide a helpful categorical framework in her book for thinking about specific illustrated texts in relation to one another. Although my study focuses solely on the CMA's *Prajñāpāramitā*, it is significant that the *pothi* fits well into Kim's "Group C" category, which is characterized by manuscripts that symbolize the text (Kim 2013, p. 57). She explains:

The images serve as indexical signs of the text and provide a visual index for a site map for each book. Through the presence of these images, a book becomes an icon of the text that could help open up the text in one's mind even when the book is closed. This scheme seems to have become popular from the beginning of the twelfth century, and Nepalese *Pañcarakṣā* manuscripts follow it most closely. This iconographic trend in its simplistic form subsequently became the most popular method of illustrating a Buddhist manuscript in Nepal. This group would comprise a large number of manuscripts from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. (Kim 2013, p. 57)

The CMA work, which dates to the twelfth century and is connected to Nepal by its monastic patron and painting style, specifically uses iconic images of *Prajñāpāramitā* to explicate the nature of the text she represents. "Icon" has a dual meaning. It may refer to the semiotic terminology of signs or have a more religious connotation, which relates to an image that represents and invokes an abstract concept or a specific entity or figure.

Although manuscripts from western Europe from the same time as the CMA *Prajñāpāramitā* are vastly different from South Asian works, both in medium and content, it is beneficial to put scholarly approaches to the various objects in dialogue. In the study of western medieval Christian and Jewish manuscripts, there has been a significant interest in and study of the meaning behind illuminations appearing on parchment, or highly-processed animal skin. This research primarily foregrounds the experience of the medieval viewer and is intimately tied to reception theory. Authors such as Sarah Kay have underscored the elision between the parchment and the viewer's own skin (Kay 2017, p. 3), while still others have investigated the impact of the material on, for example, the beholder's understanding

of carnal sin or the passions of St. Bartholomew and Christ.¹⁸ More recently, Elina Gertsman's forthcoming book addresses the materiality of parchment as it relates to lacunae, voids, and the concept of nothingness, which presents a compelling model for analyzing the images in the South Asian *Prajñāpāramitā* because the text is mainly concerned with emptiness.¹⁹ Although there tends to be more information regarding the specific functions of manuscripts and how they were to be viewed in Europe, the lack of such knowledge for South Asian manuscripts should not dissuade material-based approaches to *pothi* despite the fact that colophons are often the only surviving evidence for the original viewership. Whereas the question of an object's materiality is now well integrated into the study of western parchment codices, it has not yet found a firm hold in the study of South and Southeast Asian palm-leaf *pothi*. While scholars like Kim have made great strides in the field and have begun to provide a framework for understanding manuscripts like the *Prajñāpāramitā* from their roles as physical objects (their "objecthood") and as "receptacles of the sacred" (Kim 2013, p. 2), materiality as a methodology has thus far not been integrated into the wider scholarly discourse. Analyzing the CMA manuscript under this methodological purview presents some of the ways that Indian and Nepalese *pothi* can be put into dialogue with the current "material turn" of global medieval art history.

5. The Materiality of a *Pothi* Manuscript

The horizontal manuscript format, or *pothi*, is a standard for pre-modern South Asian manuscripts and is used for the CMA *Prajñāpāramitā*. The CMA *Prajñāpāramitā* is made chiefly from plant-based products, including the palm-leaf folios, the wooden top and bottom covers, as well as the lamp black ink used for the Sanskrit text and the gum tempera pigments for the manuscript's twenty-nine paintings. Whereas western codices are usually opened from right to left, palm-leaf or paper *pothi* are opened with a vertical movement, revealing two folios at one time, one positioned over the other (see for example the arrangement of the folios in Figure 3). The materials of a Buddhist manuscript and their structure work together to impart additional interpretations of the paintings and texts found within. Palm-leaf manuscripts were illuminated from as early as the tenth century (Van Dyke 2009, p. 83).²⁰ Further, the preparation of palm leaves for manuscripts has not drastically changed from the pre-modern period to now (Kumar et al. 2009, p. 2). There are three kinds of palm leaves that are typically used for writing and illustrating: *Borassus flabellifer* Linn (palmyra palm), *Corypha umbraculifera* Linn (talipot, or fan palm), and *Corypha taliera* Roxb (Kumar et al. 2009, p. 2). The *Prajñāpāramitā* is made from the talipot palm,²¹ which can be characterized by its soft, light-colored, and flexible leaves that were also used in the production of fans, mats, baskets, and roofing in South Asia (Kumar et al. 2009, p. 2). Talipot palms grow best in wet climates, especially in coastal areas. They naturally grow in Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Malaysia, and South India (Agrawal 1984, p. 25; Van Dyke 2009, p. 85). This indicates that the CMA's manuscript was a part of a larger network of production and regional trade of palm leaves, although *pothi* were made in land-locked northeast India, and talipot palm was likely cultivated there in Bihar as well.

Importantly, the talipot palm leaves may also be distinguished by their light yellowish color, which in eastern India was enhanced by the application of yellow turmeric paste during the making process.²² Palm leaves' color was seen as analogous to gold—an aspect which further attests to

¹⁸ E.g., for St. Bartholomew: Mittman and Sciacca (2017); and for a summary of the material-focused reception of the side wound of Christ: Areford (2012). Other essays in the *Playing in the Pre-Modern World* volume (Tracy 2017) will likewise be relevant. For other western-focused "skin" and materiality studies, see: (Kay 2011; Holsinger 2009, 2010; Gertsman 2018). The discussion of carnal sin and the materiality of parchment comes up frequently in Biernoff (2012). For specifically art historical approaches to the subject, also see the works of, e.g., Sherry C.M. Lindquist, Martha Easton, and Michael Camille, among many others.

¹⁹ See also (Gertsman 2018).

²⁰ One of the earliest surviving illustrated manuscripts from south Asia dates to ca. 983 CE (Kim 2013, p. 45).

²¹ According to Shin'ichirō Hori 2017. (International Institute for Buddhist Studies, Tokyo.) Personal communication.

²² This is accounted for specifically in Orissa. Turmeric (*Curcuma longa*) paste may have functioned not only aesthetically, but also as an insect repellent (Agrawal 1984, pp. 27, 29, and 276–77; Van Dyke 2009, p. 86).

the value placed on the sacred *sūtras* copied within.²³ Indeed, in chapter 30 of the *Prajñāpāramitā* itself, the palm-leaf substrate is likened to golden tablets (*suvarṇapaṭṭeṣu*), which are said to be written on with melted vidurya (*vaidūryeṇa*), a dark semiprecious gem with inherent movement when viewed from different angles and may refer to either powdered brown-gold tiger's eye or blue-green beryl (Conze 1975, pp. 288–89). The text is also described as being placed in a box made from four gems (Conze 1975, pp. 288–89).²⁴ The sumptuousness of this description serves to highlight the auspiciousness of and effectiveness of the teachings of the Buddha found in the *Prajñāpāramitā* while also elevating the substrates of palm leaf and lamp black ink.

Palm leaves were cut and then boiled and cured before being used as a substrate.²⁵ Boiling the leaves made them softer, and they would be left to dry in the sun before being pressed, polished, and trimmed again (Kumar et al. 2009, p. 3). The palm leaves were also hot-ironed around the edges to prevent fraying and to keep the fibers tight. A hot metal prong was used to burn one to two holes into the palm leaves so that they could be used as binding holes for the *pothi* format. Folios were then bound together by cords that typically passed through one set of the holes in the leaves and then wound tightly around a wooden peg inserted through the other set of holes. The peg was provided with a wide base that set into a depression detectable around one of the binding holes in the top cover. The wooden covers were then rubbed with insecticide oils (Kumar et al. 2009, p. 3; Agrawal 1984, pp. 34 and 275–77). Many of the wooden covers do not survive, nor do the cords. Once the manuscript was fully dried and the leaves flat, the *pothi* could be written on and painted. A ground of white kaolinite pigment was used to prepare the palm leaf to receive the painting. The book would be stored in a cloth to further protect it (Agrawal 1984, p. 34; Van Dyke 2009, p. 87). More cords and decorated ribbons would also have been wrapped around the boards to keep the sheets securely packed together. The ribbon would be tightly bound around the entirety of the object, “exerting an even pressure on the manuscript” (Agrawal 1984, p. 59). On the inside cover of the wooden boards are two different renderings of these brightly-colored and patterned binding ribbons (Figure 15). Lastly, the manuscript would then be stored in a box or cabinet until needed. Overall, a finished palm-leaf manuscript was a relatively light object that made for easy transport (Van Dyke 2009, p. 85), as evidenced by the CMA's own *pothi*, which traveled from northeastern India to Nepal during its lifetime.

²³ In Kim (2013, p. 8 and n. 12), she notes the use of palm leaves as amulets or as “medicines of miraculous healing power” (p. 8). In Thailand, palm leaves (*bai-larn*) were made from a leaf from the Lopburi region known as the “golden leaf.” Thai *pothi* makers also gilded or colored the edges of the manuscripts with gold powder, vermillion, and lacquer as opposed to ironing the pages' edges (Agrawal 1984, pp. 28 and 31).

²⁴ Chapter 30 describes the shrine (*kūṭāgāra*) created by the bodhisattva Dharmodgata, which includes “a pointed tower, made of the seven precious substances, adorned with red sandalwood, and encircled by an ornament of pearls. Gems were placed into the four corners of the pointed tower, and performed the functions of lamps. Four incense jars made of silver were suspended on its four sides, and pure black aloe wood was burning in them, as a token of worship for the perfection of wisdom. And in the middle of that pointed tower a couch made of seven precious things was put up, and on it a box made of four large gems. Into that the perfection of wisdom was placed, written with melted vidurya on golden tablets. And that pointed tower was adorned with brightly coloured garlands which hung down in strips [...] They saw thousands of Gods, with Śakra, Chief of Gods, scattering over that pointed tower heavenly Mandarva flowers, heavenly sandalwood powder, heavenly gold dust, and heavenly silver dust, and they heard the music of heavenly instruments” (emphasis added). The italicized in the original Sanskrit is: *yatra prajñāpāramitā prakṣiptā suvarṇapaṭṭeṣu likhitā vilīnena vaidūryeṇa*. (Conze 1975, pp. 288–89). Melzer and Allinger also discuss the luxury of the *Prajñāpāramitā* (Melzer and Allinger 2010, pp. 15–16).

²⁵ For several regional differences in palm-leaf manuscript production, see (Agrawal 1984, pp. 27–31; Van Dyke 2009, p. 86). Kim (2013, pp. 253–54) also discusses the *pothi* making process briefly.

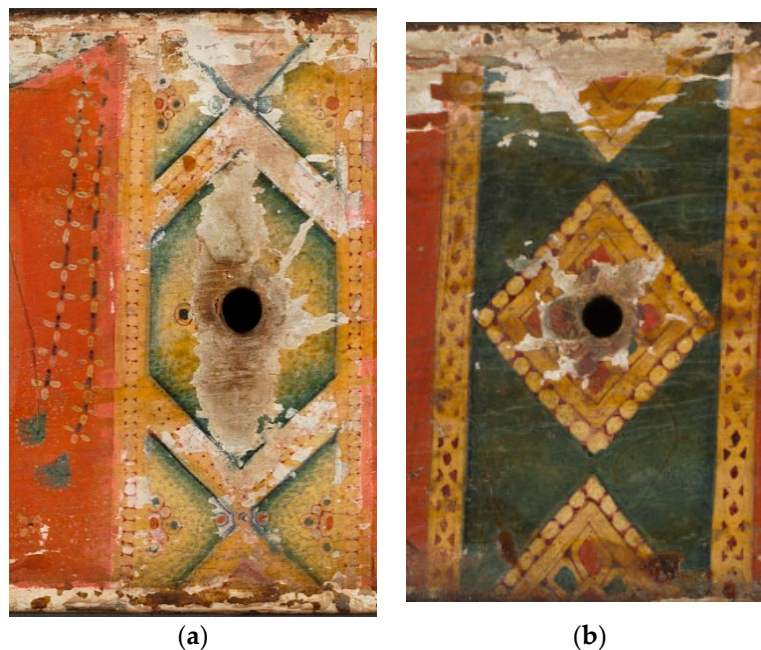


Figure 15. Examples on the top cover (a) and bottom cover (b) of the binding ribbons painted on the interior sides of both wooden covers. *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines: Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*, 1119. Nepal. Gum tempera on wood. H: 6.5 cm. Cleveland Museum of Art, purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund, 1938.301.1 (a) and 1938.301.7 (b).

Wood was used for the covers, and when it was used as a cover for palm-leaf manuscripts, it was often painted. Some wooden covers, specifically from Burma, made during the later pre-modern period were even inlaid with luxurious materials like ivory or mother-of-pearl (Agrawal 1984, pp. 34 and 55–56). The purpose of these wooden covers was both functional and protective, as well as decorative. The top of the upper wooden cover of the CMA *Prajñāpāramitā* (Figure 16) bears the signs of centuries of use as a site of veneration. Spices such as turmeric and saffron, as well as vermillion powder, fingerprint-sized pieces of paper, and possibly sandalwood paste were used to adorn the object. Flowers would also have been laid overtop in the manuscript's original altar setting. Other surviving covers, such as the much later *Kāraṇḍavyūha-sūtra* dated to 1641 CE now in the Cambridge University Library (Add. 1330), similarly attest to this practice of adoration and adorning over time (Kim 2013, pp. 62–63). Still other surviving *patli*, like the *Pañcarakṣā* in the National Archives in Kathmandu dated to around 1177 CE (Acc. No. 5.83.), have either been cleaned or were never embellished.²⁶ Occasionally, even the first folios of a manuscript bear similar signs of interaction (Kim 2013, p. 41). Folio 1v of the CMA *pothi* does not have a colorful collage of powders and pastes, but it is darkened and smudged to such a degree as to suggest that the first folios in such manuscripts were not only more prone to damage, but may have been more likely to be viewed. This suggests that the first painted folio with the main iconic image of *Prajñāpāramitā* was left open for longer periods of time than the rest of the manuscript.

²⁶ For more on this manuscript, see (Kim 2015, p. 59).



Figure 16. Top of the top wooden cover. *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines: Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*, 1119. India and Nepal. Paper and pigments on wood. Overall: 6.5 × 57 × 1.5 cm. Cleveland Museum of Art, purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund, 1938.301.

Kim has demonstrated that the strata of marks and accretions found on the covers of Buddhist manuscripts reveal how the codices could be “a temple in microcosm, [. . .] layered with the memories of many generations of users” (Kim 2013, p. 8). Indeed, the consecration of the book with illuminations and in rituals was understood to imbue it with a sacred status on par with the bone relics of the Śākyamuni Buddha. The teachings of the Buddha contained in texts such as the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* could attain their own status as relics (Kim 2013, p. 39). Thus, the top panel of the CMA *Prajñāpāramitā* has accrued such signs of use over the course of its life. Although the text was typically not recited from the manuscript itself or even necessarily opened after its creation—with exceptions—the cover was a site for the ritual veneration of the teachings of the Buddha, now in the form of a Dharma relic. It can be summarized that in the *pothi* format, the wooden boards of the *Prajñāpāramitā* have three main functions. The first is to protect the fragile contents. Secondly, the topmost panel is a site of veneration for the text. Thirdly, the interior sides of the two boards function as illustrative frontispieces or bookends to the text.

6. The Luxury of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*

The paintings found on the interior of the boards (Figures 11 and 13) establish the first self-referential details in the CMA’s *Prajñāpāramitā*. The background of both wooden covers is a bright vermillion red, and it is divided into three sections by two vertical bands painted around the holes meant for the cords to pass through. These bands resemble the binding ribbons that would have held the book together. The colorfully painted binding ribbons with argyle patterns (Figure 15) depicted on the boards immediately encourage the perception of the *pothi* as aware of itself as a material object. Indeed, the *Prajñāpāramitā* may be described as “self-aware” for several reasons—namely, an entire section of the text is dedicated to beseeching the reader/viewer to repeatedly copy and worship the physical manuscript. In the prose version of the text, which is structured as a dialogue between Śakra and “the Lord,” chapter three reads,

Greater would be the merit of someone who would truly believe in this perfection of wisdom; who would, trustingly, confiding in it, resolutely intent on it, serene in his faith, his thoughts raised to enlightenment, in earnest intent, hear it, learn it, bear it in mind, *recite and study it, spread, demonstrate, explain, expound and repeat it, illuminate it in detail to others, uncover its meaning, investigate it with his mind; who, using his wisdom to the fullest extent, would thoroughly examine it; who would copy it, and preserve and store away the copy*—so that the good dharma might last long, so that the guide of the Buddhas might not be annihilated, so that the good dharma might not disappear [. . .] It would be greater than the merit of one who would completely fill the entire Jambudvīpa [the Indian subcontinent] with such Stupas [of the Buddha’s relics]. (emphasis added). (Conze 1975, pp. 107–08)

This excerpt reveals the way the text simultaneously appeals to both the sensorial and the cerebral. The text goes on to say that the manuscript should be worshipped with flowers, incense, and other

unguent,²⁷ as well as what the immediate benefits of recopying the work are. The advocacy on the part of the manuscript to see itself reproduced is not only found in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*, but it is one of the most thorough examples (Kim 2013, p. 36). As Kim has noted, South Asian books are “simultaneously content (text) and form (object) and thus embod[y] the classic tension between idea and material” (Kim 2013, p. 5). In the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*, this aspect is made manifest in not only the text’s assertion that it shall be worshiped and lavishly recopied, but in the actual miniatures and materials serving to perform that task. The inclusion of sumptuous illuminations and carefully chosen palm leaves and wooden covers attests to the ability of a beautiful *Prajñāpāramitā* to accrue more *punya* for the patron.

However, this sumptuousness and the personal desire to amass religious merit may seem somewhat opposed to the actual text of the manuscript. The *Prajñāpāramitā* itself does not have a continuous narrative, but it expounds on the core Buddhist concepts of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) and enlightenment (*nirvāṇa*). Kim has highlighted that the contents of the *Prajñāpāramitā*—namely, the prose expounding on *śūnyatā*—are paradoxically juxtaposed with the rich materials and vibrant illuminations of the book itself and its status in the book cult (Kim 2008, p. 86). The manuscript does at once promote detachment (as in chapter 21) but later describes itself in physical, material terms: “the best receptacle, the storehouse of the supreme Dharma, /The treasury of happiness and ease.”²⁸ While the luxurious materials used in *pothi* may seem at first at odds with a text about *śūnyatā*, in actuality, such materials serve to honor the manuscript and emphasize the importance of the True Dharma. The use of palm leaves that evoke gold, the ink that suggests melted gems, and the paintings of Buddhist figures in jewel tones adjectivally show the splendor and effectiveness of the teachings of the *Prajñāpāramitā* and act as signifiers of success, auspiciousness, and abundance. They are the physical manifestation of a person’s goal to accrue *punya* and to achieve enlightenment.

Returning to the representations of the diamond-patterned binding ribbons, these imitations of textiles imbue the manuscript with even more luxury and indicate the work’s expectation that it will be bound and thus protected. Binding ribbons were not only wrapped around the manuscript to keep the leaves tight and secure, but pearl-studded ribbons were also drawn on the interior of the covers. Furthermore, whenever the *pothi* is open or the binding cords are gone, as they are now, the painted ribbons’ presence (which signify the absence of the actual ribbons) is indicated by their imitation on the front and back covers. This relates well to the content of the manuscript, which so often emphasizes the duality of form and emptiness, presence and absence. Further, the inclusion of the pearl-studded ribbons also showcases the effectiveness of the Buddha’s teachings as the True Dharma through such allusions to luxury.

7. Prajñāpāramitā as a Self-Referential Icon

The now much-darkened verso of the first folio’s depiction of *Prajñāpāramitā* is the most ostentatious and conscientious self-referential icon in the CMA’s manuscript. The text on this folio is not actually the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*, but is instead the first twelve and part of the thirteenth verses of a Sanskrit hymn dedicated to the personification herself. On folio 1v, three figures are shown—the centermost of which is a crowned *Prajñāpāramitā*. This means that beside a text invoking the *Prajñāpāramitā*, in a manuscript that she herself represents, there is also an anthropomorphized representation of her. The self-referential nature of the text does not stop there, however. *Prajñāpāramitā* is shown with golden colored skin and has four arms, two of which are held at her chest and give the teaching *mudrā*, or the *dharmacakra mudrā*. Her upper left hand holds a palm-leaf manuscript—the *Prajñāpāramitā* itself.

²⁷ This is from chapter 32 of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* and is reproduced in Kim (2013, pp. 1, 37).

²⁸ (Conze 1975, chp. 11 (p. 49) and chp. 28 (p. 61)).

This iconography of Prajñāpāramitā holding a manuscript was not new nor was it rare in the twelfth century. What separates the CMA's manuscript and others like it from stone sculptures of the goddess is that the iconography of the Prajñāpāramitā holding a palm-leaf folio actually appears *on* palm leaf. This links Prajñāpāramitā to not only the teachings she represents, but to the materials she is depicted on. Furthermore, her golden color evokes the ideal color of the palm leaves themselves.

Prajñāpāramitā is found three times in the manuscript's twenty-nine extant paintings, and Kim has argued that the centermost representation of her is the most significant, operating as a great central icon for the entire text (Kim 2015, p. 60). She writes that the images on "the first folio of the middle section (fol. 89v), are in niches leading to the main image on the central panel of folio 90r, which is Prajñāpāramitā, the celebrated, rightful center of this book-shrine space, who is represented on a raised platform under an elaborate canopy" (Kim 2015, p. 60). I believe there is room, however, to argue that because the layout of the illuminations in the *Prajñāpāramitā* implies balance due to the beginning-middle-end format, there is no need to consider the first and last sets of illuminations as peripheral spaces. Indeed, the semiotic relationship of the golden color, palm-leaf material, text, and image on folio 1v asserts that this first image of Prajñāpāramitā is the most significant icon in the manuscript. This assessment is further reinforced by her hieratic form in comparison to the swaying poses of the figure on folios 90r and 187r.

Early studies of South Asian manuscripts were concerned with the disparities between the textual content of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* and the iconographies they contained. Modern scholarship is still primarily focused on issues of style, with some notable exceptions. The question of viewership still remains largely unanswered. As museums and libraries make their collections increasingly accessible digitally, illustrated twelfth-century *pothi* like the CMA's *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* become available to use as evidence suggesting that there is still the possibility of reconstructing certain modes of viewing that are specifically informed by the materials used in the production of the manuscripts. These complex manuscripts were designed with intention, and as the images of Prajñāpāramitā show, with an intellectual understanding of the relationship between form and content. By incorporating the methodology of materiality as it has been applied to contemporaneous medieval manuscripts from western Europe, I hope to have demonstrated the ways in which palm-leaf manuscripts like the CMA's *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* can be reconsidered and analyzed on their own terms.

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