Design Memo

To: Dr. Karen Kuralt
From: Tenzing Briggs TB
Date: 9 May 2023
Subject: Graduate Project — Tibetan Iconography Logo Design

The documents described in this memo are "Katog Choling Logo Design 1," "Katog Choling Logo Design 2," and "Katog Choling Logo Design 3," with Design 3 being the final version and Designs 1 and 2 being earlier drafts. I also describe the research behind their rationale.

Introduction and Purpose

The designs in this document are alternate logos and graphics for the religious nonprofit Katog Choling. I originally approached this project from an academic standpoint; although I grew up Tibetan Buddhist, I am not *ethnically* Tibetan, and I wanted to research what kinds of Tibetan symbols would best capture Tibetan Buddhist culture for a non-Tibetan Buddhist audience. Additionally, the purpose of these designs is to represent Tibetan Buddhism in a way which uses symbols reflecting both its history and rituals. I felt formal research on the topic would help, as one thing I've found personally is that the valued symbols of Tibetan Buddhists vary greatly across the US (who are primarily ethnically non-Tibetan), due to their being many local Buddhist cultures across the country.

Description of the Users/Readers

The audiences for this design are both new and experienced Tibetan Buddhist practitioners. Because these designs are intended for use by the Tibetan Buddhist nonprofit Katog Choling, their practitioners are one audience; however, the secondary audiences, of potential new Tibetan Buddhist practitioners and of those learning about the religion, are also important. In other words, the designs here navigate the potential divide between experienced Tibetan Buddhists and people only now learning of the religion. The former audience will likely bring with them their expectations and experiences of Tibetan culture, while the latter will likely have different expectations of what a brand (religious or otherwise) looks like.

These are also audiences I know intimately, first because I myself grew up as a Tibetan Buddhist practitioner and second because I've often described my religious practices or symbols for others who know little about the religion. Thus, part of my research into the audience meant reaching outside my own personal experience, by conducting formal research into the history of Tibetan Buddhism from an academic point of view.

Description of the Employer/Client

The client Katog Choling expects any new designs to align with their brand colors. I do know this client personally, having spent my high school years at Katog Choling's retreat center Katog Ri'throd. The primary aspects I believe that Katog Choling expects is that the new designs create an alternate look that's based on their current logo and illustrations on their website and that also brings in Tibetan symbols not currently represented on the website.

Description of the Context and Design Constraints

As designs for Katog Choling, there are primarily color constraints, as per their official brand colors of Million Red (hex number b6342d), Citrus Orange (hex number f88624), and Shining Sea (hex number 6eb5dd). There is also the contextual constraint of navigating Tibetan culture, both as a culture affected by the political tensions with and within China and as a culture that's developing in the US due to China's oppression of Tibetan Buddhism.

Academic Research

My research confirmed my experience with the complicated nature of Tibetan iconography, which later informed my design evolution and rationale. Stephen Laumakis, in his introductory book on the history of Buddhism *An Introduction to Buddhist Philosophy*, writes that it can be difficult to make assumptions of Tibetan Buddhist history and its symbols due to limited texts. He writes:

> "it is important to keep in mind that there also are good reasons for being cautious about one's claims about Tibetan Buddhism because of limited reliable texts as well as ongoing scholarly debates and disagreements about both its development and its relationship to [other forms of Buddhism]" (230).

Laumakis also writes about how Tibetan Buddhism is unique from its neighbors of Indian/Tantric Buddhisma and Chinese/Chan Buddhism; Tibetan Buddhism historically developed as a synthesis of these two denominations. He talks about a specific debate in eight-century Tibet, between an Indian monk and a Chinese monk, saying that it is "helpful to think of the subsequent history of Tibetan Buddhism as the unfolding of the basic tension [between Tantric and Chan Buddhist foci] expressed in this debate" (243). In particular, Laumakis identifies how this "tension" is something somewhat unique to Tibetan Buddhism, as a reflection of its unique historical development—a developing synthesis between Indian Tantric Buddhism and Chinese Chan Buddhism (240-241). More specifically, he writes that "Tibetan Buddhism is best thought of as the union of these two forms of 'high' and 'low' Buddhism," (241) with 'low' Buddhism being heavily ritual-based (drawing upon Chan Buddhism's focus on experiences) and with 'high' Buddhism being more associated with theory or theology (drawing upon Indian Buddhism's focus on the history of the Buddha).

I then turned to sources on Buddhist and Tibetan iconography to find symbols that would somehow unite ritual and history. I first researched what distinct symbolic deities were most seen in Tibetan Buddhism, finding that the deities Tara and Manjushri were most distinct and prominent—Tara depicts the *pratyalidha stance* (one leg forward, as if in the act of getting up), reflecting her active nature (see Figure 1), while Maitreya always features a crown (see Figure 2). However, I found that depictions of deities often follow very specific rules, such as the "Thirty-Two Marks a Great Man" (see Figure 3), which limits simplification. Thus, I switched to research of more simple symbols, discovering two more relevant sets of symbols—the eight auspicious symbols and the crossed vajras symbol. First, both of these symbol sets draw upon Indian history—each of the eight auspicious symbols generally has Indian folklore stories and spiritual values or ideas associated with them, and the vajra is originally an Indian symbol, representing a thunderbolt. Second, both of these draw upon ritual practice — the eight auspicious symbols are common in temples due to often being portrayed on Tibetan *tankas* (a kind of Tibetan tapestry art), and the vajra and crossed vajras are also physical ornaments used in everyday ritual practice.

I also researched the relevance of Tibetan Buddhist history to its religious practice in the US today, to confirm my experiences and the careful choice of iconography. Firstly, Tibetan Buddhism can accurately be described as in crisis or, at least, changing here in the US, in response to the political situation with China. In his chapter on contemporary Buddhism, Laumakis describes how the Dalai Lama is "the *de facto* spokesman for Tibetan Buddhism" (248) but also also describes how he represents history "as the leader of a country that is currently occupied by Chinese military forces" (248).

Thus I then turned to the Dalai Lama's memoirs for an answer on how I should consider my own Tibetan Buddhist practice and how it relates to the religion in the US, within this context of carefully navigating design based on it. Several of his chapters approach the subject of communist China, with him describing his relations with Mao Zedong when he was a young man. For example, he writes about how Mao "seemed to be genuinely friendly and affectionate" (118) but that the Dalai Lama was "thoroughly startled" (118) when Mao said things to him such as " 'I understand you very well. But of course, *religion is poison*…Tibet and Mongolia have both been poisoned by it' " (117). He then writes in an appendix on this ideological or religious divide, how "it would be better if disunity among the followers of different religions could come to an end" (237) and that "the followers of each religion should know something of other religions" (237).

Thus, reading both Laumakis' and the Dalai Lama's writings, I was assured that there is, in fact, a need to navigate Tibetan Buddhist iconography carefully, especially given its recent history: namely, the context of Tibetan Buddhist practice having only recently moved to the US, a country with little Tibetan ethnicity or cultural history, in response to its religious crisis. In short, my research confirmed the need to carefully present Tibetan iconography for US audiences, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist. Moreover, my sources on Tibetan Buddhist iconography showed that the eight auspicious symbols and the crossed vajras were both sets of symbols valued almost universally across all denominations of Buddhism.

Design Evolution and Rationale

In my first design, I focused on recreating some of the eight auspicious symbols and the crossed vajras, as I believed these two sets of symbols would together capture Tibetan Buddhism in a distinct, stylized way. I based these designs off of a few images from my sources (see Figures 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8). Of the eight auspicious symbols, I first recreated the conch and the eternal knot on my own in Adobe Illustrator; for the crossed vajras, I used one of Katog Choling's logos (see Figure 9) as it seemed to have elements both of a simplified crossed vajra (see Figure 6) and a complex crossed vajra (see Figure 7). I recreated the crossed vajras symbol in Adobe Illustrator by tracing their logo. To make my logo design distinct, I changed the colors of the new crossed vajras, and I replaced the Tibetan syllable in the center, normally the *om* syllable, with a *hung* syllable, in BabelStone Tibetan font, using their Citrus Orange color for the inner circle.

In my second design, I added more color into the design; I included in the crossed vajras symbol an outline in Million Red.

For my final design, I swapped the conch symbol out for a lotus symbol, another of the eight auspicious symbols, because, compared to and alongside the eternal knot, the conch seemed less sleek and bold. I recreated the lotus in Adobe Illustrator by tracing one of Katog Choling's website illustrations, simplifying it somewhat by removing some inner sections.

In terms of rationale, then, I focused on creating graphics which would both capture Tibetan Buddhist values (for a Buddhist or Tibetan audience) and be visually distinct and simple (for a non-Buddhist or US audience), choosing the crossed vajras and the eight auspicious symbols. To this end, I confirmed through research the *meaningfulness* of such rationale, looking at Tibetan Buddhism's history, both going as far back to its first development and as recent to the Dalai Lama's exile. To an extent, then, my rationale was also informed by my own experience—I had had an inkling of such a need before starting such research, simply from my own experience growing up as a non-ethnic Tibetan Buddhist practitioner here in the US.

Design Assessment

Primarily, in working on this project, I learned that my experiences with Buddhism were potentially not just an issue of not being Tibetan, but also a historical issue of Tibetan Buddhism itself. Growing up, I often felt the tension of focus on ritual or practice versus focus on theory or history. I learned this tension existed in Tibetan Buddhism even outside the US—even as the potential cultural divide, exasperated by the religious crisis in China, makes it all the more relevant to navigate carefully. Given more time, I would have considered adding more alternative symbols, such as the Precious Jewel and its variation the Three Jewels (see Figure 10). I might have also attempted a more complex logo based on a mandala (see Figure 11), and I would also have considered adding ornate decorative symbols, such as silk ribbons seen in complex depictions of Tibetan iconography (see Figures 5 and 9).

In terms of programs I became more familiar with, I gained more experience with Adobe Illustrator's vector graphic design tools.

Sources

Laumakis, Stephen J. *An Introduction to Buddhist Philosophy*. Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Dalai Lama [Tenzin Gyatso]. *My Land and My People*. McGraw-Hill Book Company Inc., 1962.

Beer, Robert. *The Handbook of Tibetan Buddhist Symbols.* Shambala Publications, 2003.

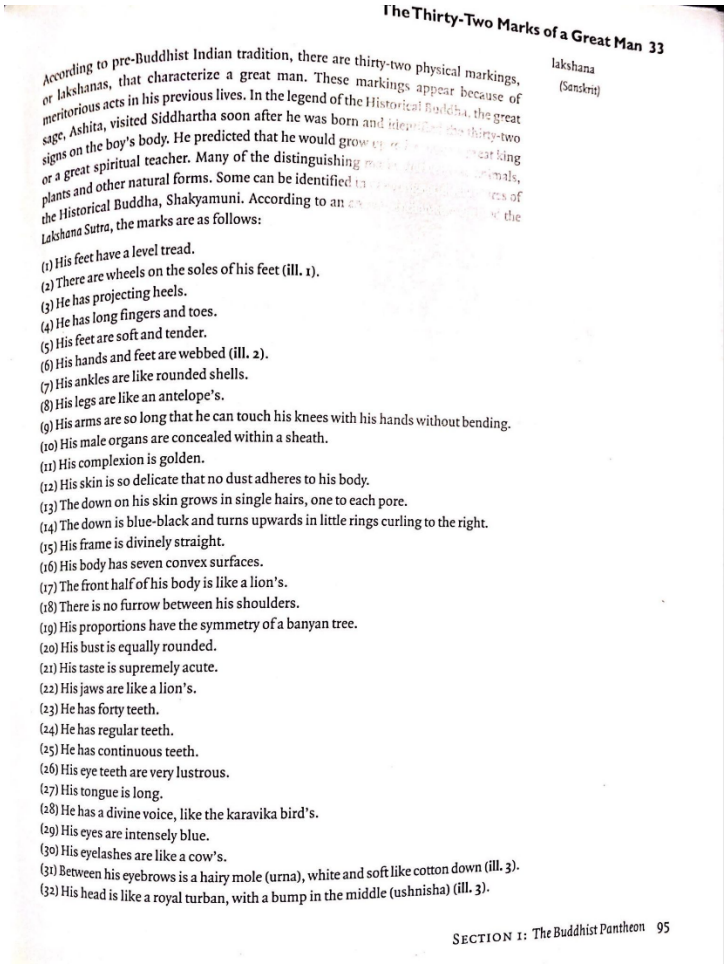
McArthur, Meher. *Reading Buddhist Art: An Illustrated Guide to Buddhist Signs and Symbols*. Thames & Hudson, 2002.

Lhadrepa, Konchog, & Charlotte Davis. *The Art of Awakening: A User's Guide to Tibetan Buddhist Art and Practice*. Snow Lion Publications, 2017.

Appendix — Figures

Figure 1: Simplified Depiction of Tara (McArthur 46)

Figure 2: Simplified Depiction of Maitreya (McArthur 32)



The Thirty-Two Marks of a Great Man 33

lakshana
(Sanskrit)

According to pre-Buddhist Indian tradition, there are thirty-two physical markings, or lakshanas, that characterize a great man. These markings appear because of meritorious acts in his previous lives. In the legend of the Historical Buddha, the great sage, Ashita, visited Siddhartha soon after he was born and identified the thirty-two signs on the boy's body. He predicted that he would grow up to be either a great king or a great spiritual teacher. Many of the distinguishing marks of Buddhas, plants and other natural forms. Some can be identified in animals, the Historical Buddha, Shakyamuni. According to an ancient sources of *Lakshana Sutra*, the marks are as follows: the

(1) His feet have a level tread.
(2) There are wheels on the soles of his feet (**ill. 1**).
(3) He has projecting heels.
(4) He has long fingers and toes.
(5) His feet are soft and tender.
(6) His hands and feet are webbed (**ill. 2**).
(7) His ankles are like rounded shells.
(8) His legs are like an antelope's.
(9) His arms are so long that he can touch his knees with his hands without bending.
(10) His male organs are concealed within a sheath.
(11) His complexion is golden.
(12) His skin is so delicate that no dust adheres to his body.
(13) The down on his skin grows in single hairs, one to each pore.
(14) The down is blue-black and turns upwards in little rings curling to the right.
(15) His frame is divinely straight.
(16) His body has seven convex surfaces.
(17) The front half of his body is like a lion's.
(18) There is no furrow between his shoulders.
(19) His proportions have the symmetry of a banyan tree.
(20) His bust is equally rounded.
(21) His taste is supremely acute.
(22) His jaws are like a lion's.
(23) He has forty teeth.
(24) He has regular teeth.
(25) He has continuous teeth.
(26) His eye teeth are very lustrous.
(27) His tongue is long.
(28) He has a divine voice, like the karavika bird's.
(29) His eyes are intensely blue.
(30) His eyelashes are like a cow's.
(31) Between his eyebrows is a hairy mole (urna), white and soft like cotton down (**ill. 3**).
(32) His head is like a royal turban, with a bump in the middle (ushnisha) (**ill. 3**).

Figure 3: The "32 Marks of a Great Man" (McArthur 95)

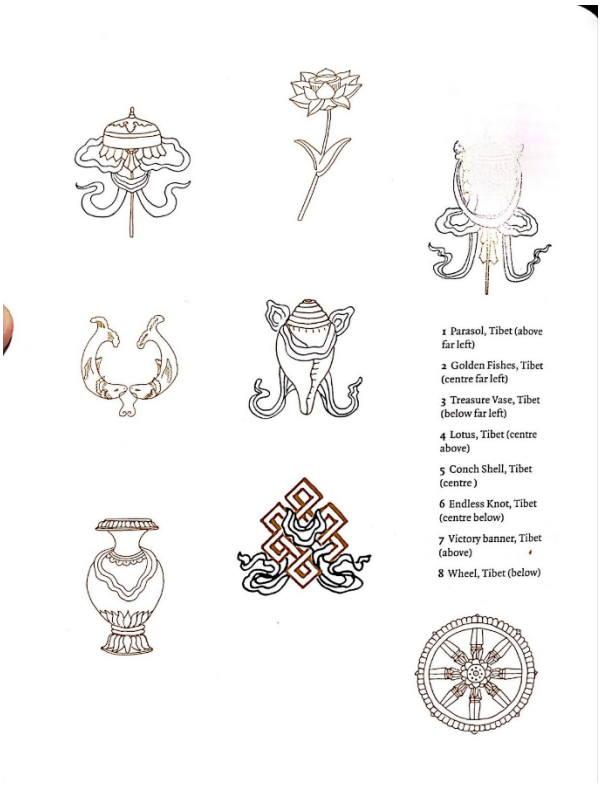


Figure 4: Simplified Depictions of Eight Auspicious Symbols (McArthur 118)

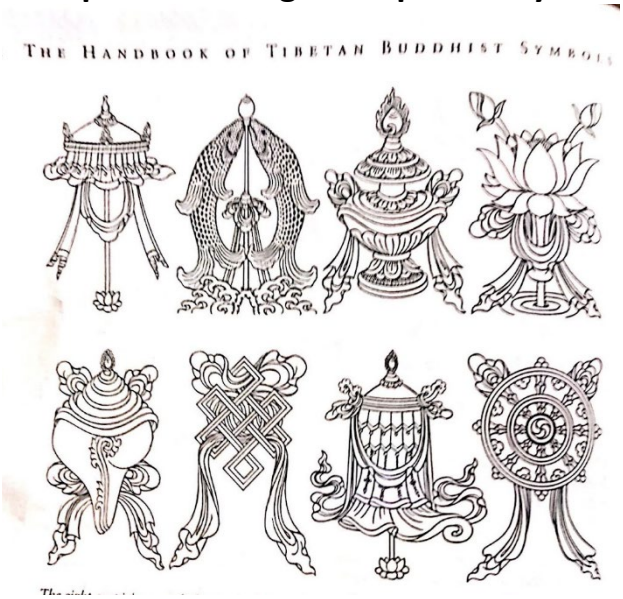


Figure 5: Complex Depictions of Eight Auspicious Symbols (Beer 2)

Figure 6: Simplified Depiction of Vajra and Crossed Vajras (McArthur 138)

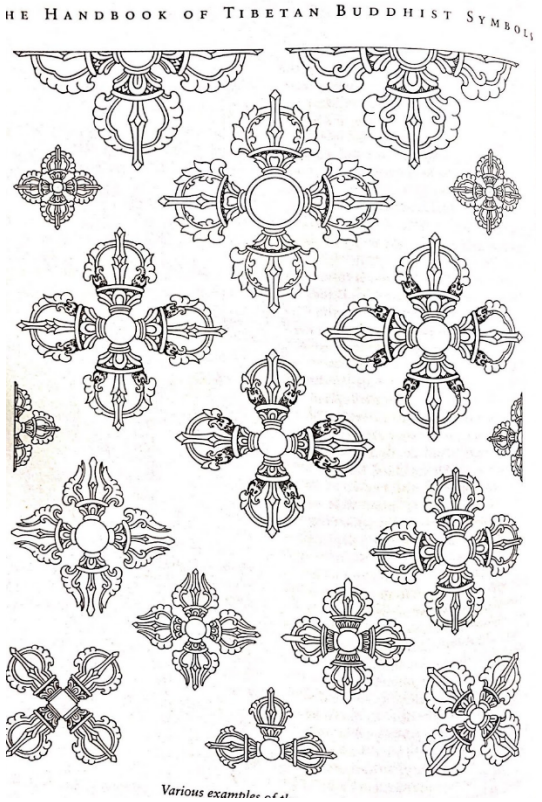


Figure 7: Complex Depictions of Crossed Vajras (Beer 96)

Figure 8: Complex Depiction of Vajra (Beer 91)

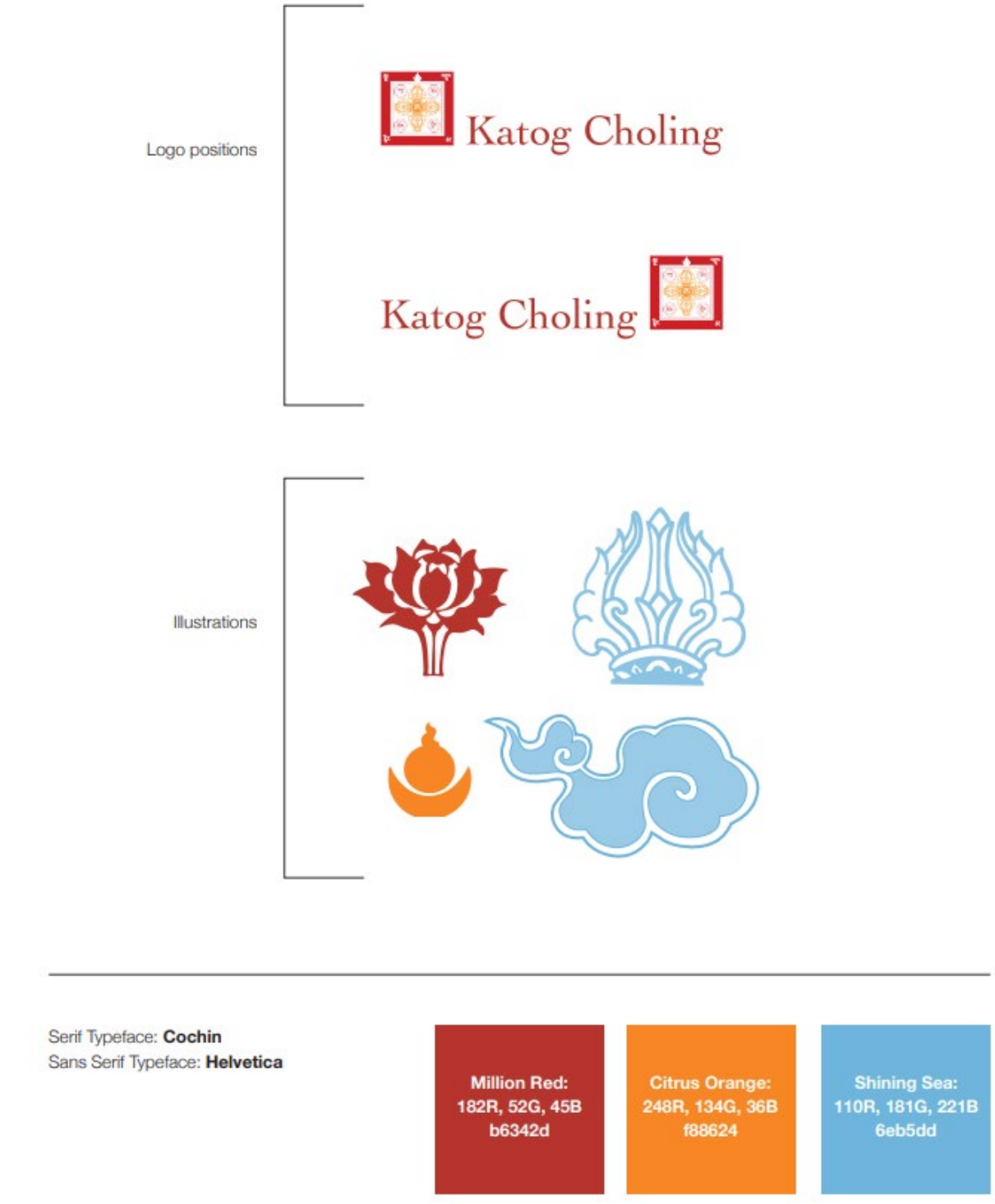
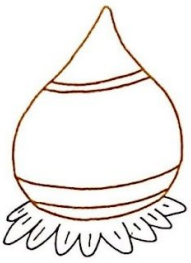


Figure 9: Katog Choling Illustration Sheet



1 Precious jewel, Tibet (above)

2 Three Precious Jewels, appliqué, Tibet, 20th century (below)

3 Kshitigharbha holding a precious jewel, wood with polychrome with inlaid rock crystal eyes, Japan, 13th century (right)

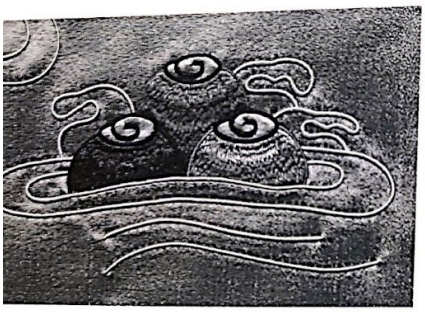


Figure 10: Simplified Depiction of Precious Jewel and Complex Depiction of Three Jewels (McArthur 126)

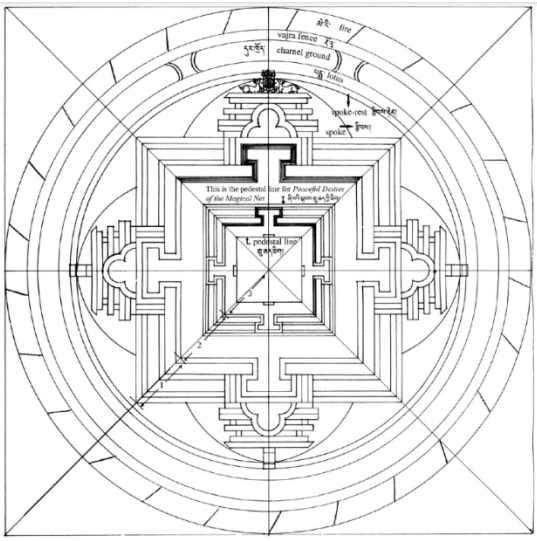


Figure 11: Mandala with Different Symbolic Parts Shown (Lhadrepa 329)