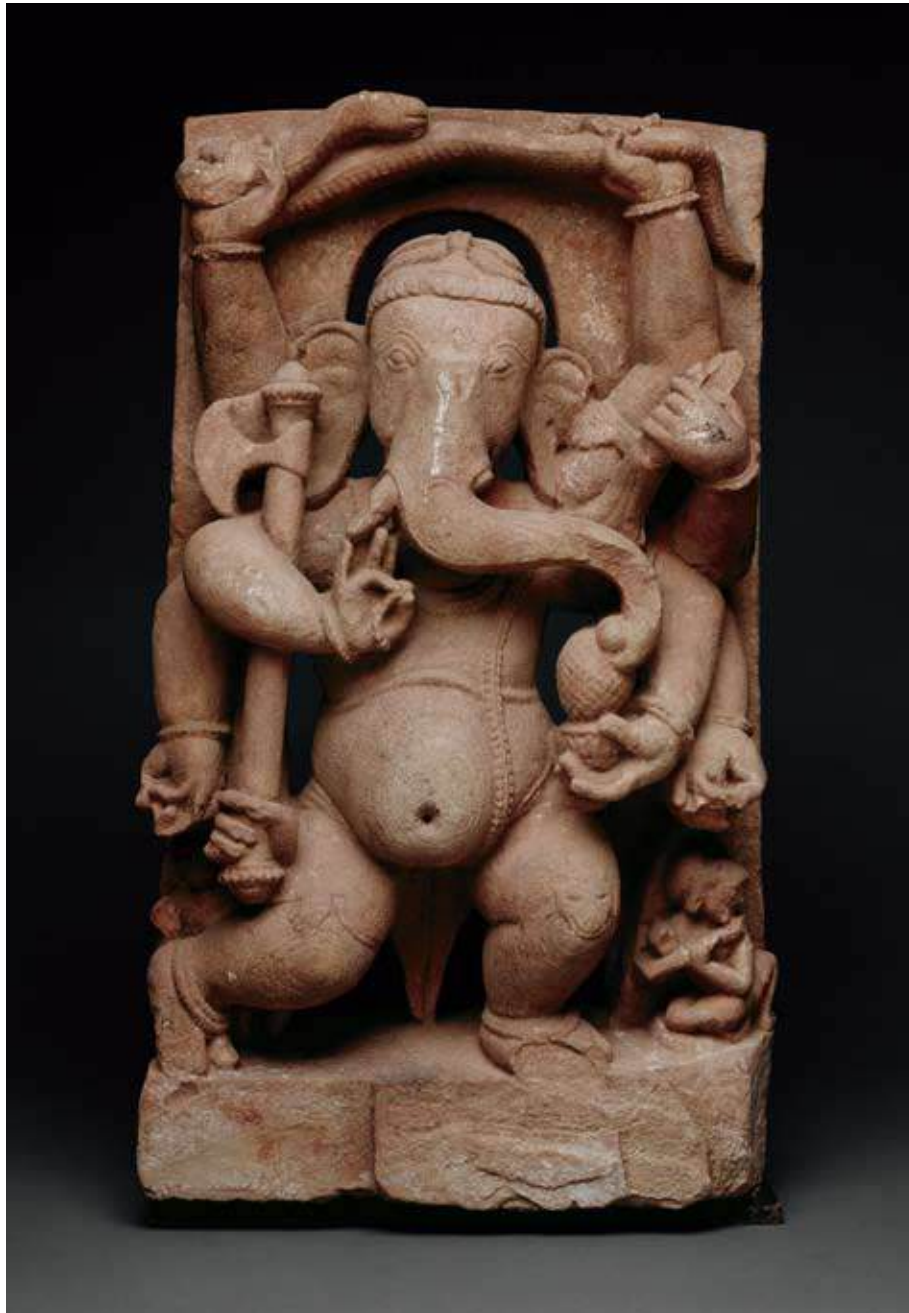


Dancing Ganesha

10th century
India, Uttar Pradesh



THE
ART INSTITUTE
OF
CHICAGO

Poster Packet

Department of Museum Education

Division of Student and Teacher Programs

The Elizabeth Stone Robson Teacher Resource Center

India, Uttar Pradesh

Dancing Ganesha, 10th century

Sandstone; 23 5/8 in. x 12 3/4 in. x 6 in. (60.1 x 32.4 x 15.3 cm)

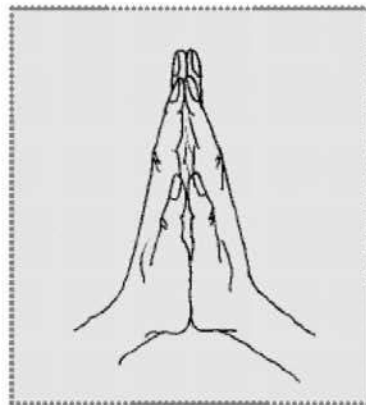
The James and Marilyn Alsdorf Loan Collection, 77.1999

This dancing, elephant-headed creature is Ganesha, **Hinduism's** Lord of Beginnings and Remover of Obstacles. Before beginning a school year, taking a trip, or starting a new business, Hindus pray to Ganesha for assistance, and he is prayed to at the start of all Hindu worship. Most temples have a separate area of worship dedicated to this elephant-headed god, and devotees first visit his image before proceeding to the principle deity's shrine. Sculptures of Ganesha are often washed with water and adorned with

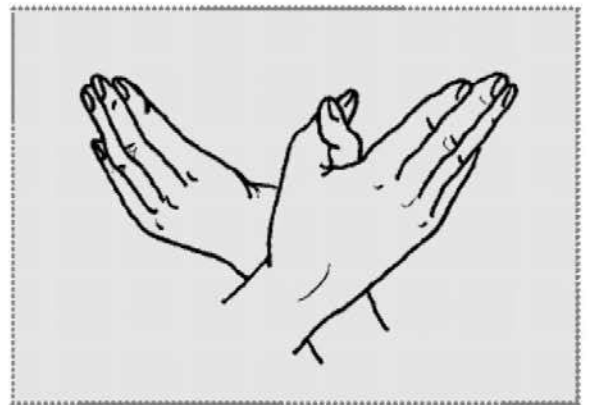
flowers. Like most Hindu gods and goddesses (figure 3), Ganesha has multiple limbs, which indicate his supernatural power and cosmic nature. In some of his many hands, the god holds an attribute, an object closely associated with his personality or history. Other hands form *mudras*, symbolic hand gestures (figure 1). With his oversized elephant head and rotund stomach, Ganesha always amuses. He is most comic when he dances, as shown in this image.



beautiful



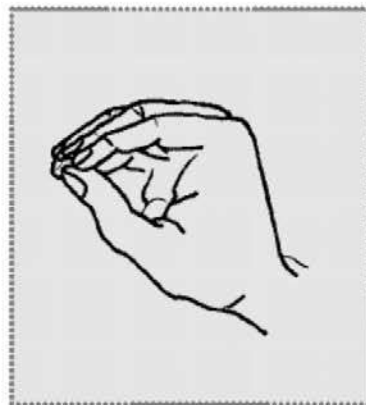
salutation/greeting



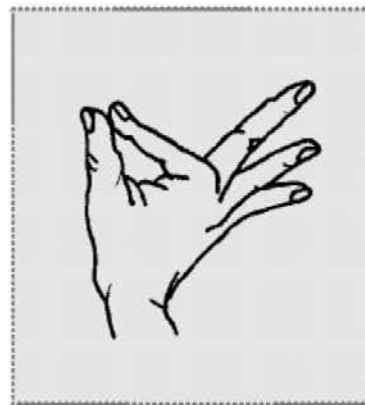
birds



speak



eating



painting

Figure 1
Examples of Various Mudras

Ganesha's Attributes

The most important of Ganesha's attributes is his large elephant head. In one version of his myth, the goddess Parvati, lonely because her husband, the god Shiva, had been away for some years, created a human son Ganesha from the dirt left behind in her bath. As the years passed, the boy grew into a man who did not know his father but was devoted to the needs of his mother. One spring morning, Parvati asked Ganesha to stand guard at the entrance to her bath. A stranger approached and tried to enter, but Ganesha blocked his way. Angered, the stranger attacked Ganesha and ripped off his head and tossed it away. When Parvati came out of the bath, she found her son without his head and her husband (the stranger), who had returned from his long journey. She was filled with sorrow and anger at the sight. Shiva realized the grief he caused and promised to replace the head with that of the first creature he could find. His attendants, *ganas* (GUN-ahs), found an elephant sleeping by the river, and Shiva took this creature's head and placed it on the neck of Parvati's son, thus restoring him to life. Thereafter, Shiva called the young man Ganesha, lord of the *ganas*.

The god may be depicted with 2 to 16 arms. Here he is shown with eight, each holding one of his standard attributes. In one of his left hands, he holds a giant radish, which he is partial to eating. Radishes symbolize abundance, and Ganesha encourages his devotees to grow more radishes than they need—perhaps so that they will make offerings of the excess to him. Ganesha is also very fond of sweets, and he is often shown holding a bowl of fruits or sweetmeats (candied or crystallized fruits). One evening after eating a very large bowl of sweets, Ganesha was riding on his rat, his means of conveyance, when a snake crossed their path. The rat bolted in fright, throwing Ganesha to the ground. When the elephant-headed god fell down, his belly burst open, and all the sweets rolled out. Patiently, Ganesha picked up all the sweets and placed them back into his stomach and then used the snake as a belt to hold them all in. The moon, who saw the incident from up in the sky, laughed at Ganesha, who then snapped off his tusk and hurled it in anger. In this image, Ganesha is shown holding the snake high over his head with one right and one left hand. He is also missing one of his tusks.

Ganesha is most often shown with one broken tusk, and when represented in this aspect, he is called *Ekadanta* (eck-uh-DHAN-tuh)—He of the Single Tusk. Another story tells of Ganesha breaking his tusk off in order to use it as a writing tool. A *sage* wanted to write down the famous Hindu epic the *Mahabharata* (mah-hah-BAR-ah-tuh) and asked the god Brahma to suggest a suitable scribe to write down his words. Brahma suggested Ganesha for the job, who used his tusk to complete the task.

In the crook of one of his right elbows, Ganesha grasps a large axe. This powerful weapon cuts through obstacles and frightens off demons and the malicious thoughts of those who wish to harm his devotees. With his middle right hand, Ganesha has formed a *mudra* gesture of power and, when associated with dance, assurance. Faintly in the center of his forehead, a third eye appears. Like all spiritual beings, Ganesha has three eyes, two for seeing the external world and one for spiritual sight. With this eye, Ganesha sees beyond the appearances of the physical world. Also present is Ganesha's rat, which rests on his left knee. The rat was once a wicked demon upon whom Ganesha stomped his large, heavy foot, turning him into a lowly rat. With his kind heart, the elephant-headed god took pity on the rat and made him his tiny transport. Although utterly different in size and nature, the two work well as a team. As the remover of all obstacles, Ganesha clears obstacles from his path, while the rat can wriggle into places where Ganesha would never fit—another means of avoiding obstacles and achieving goals.

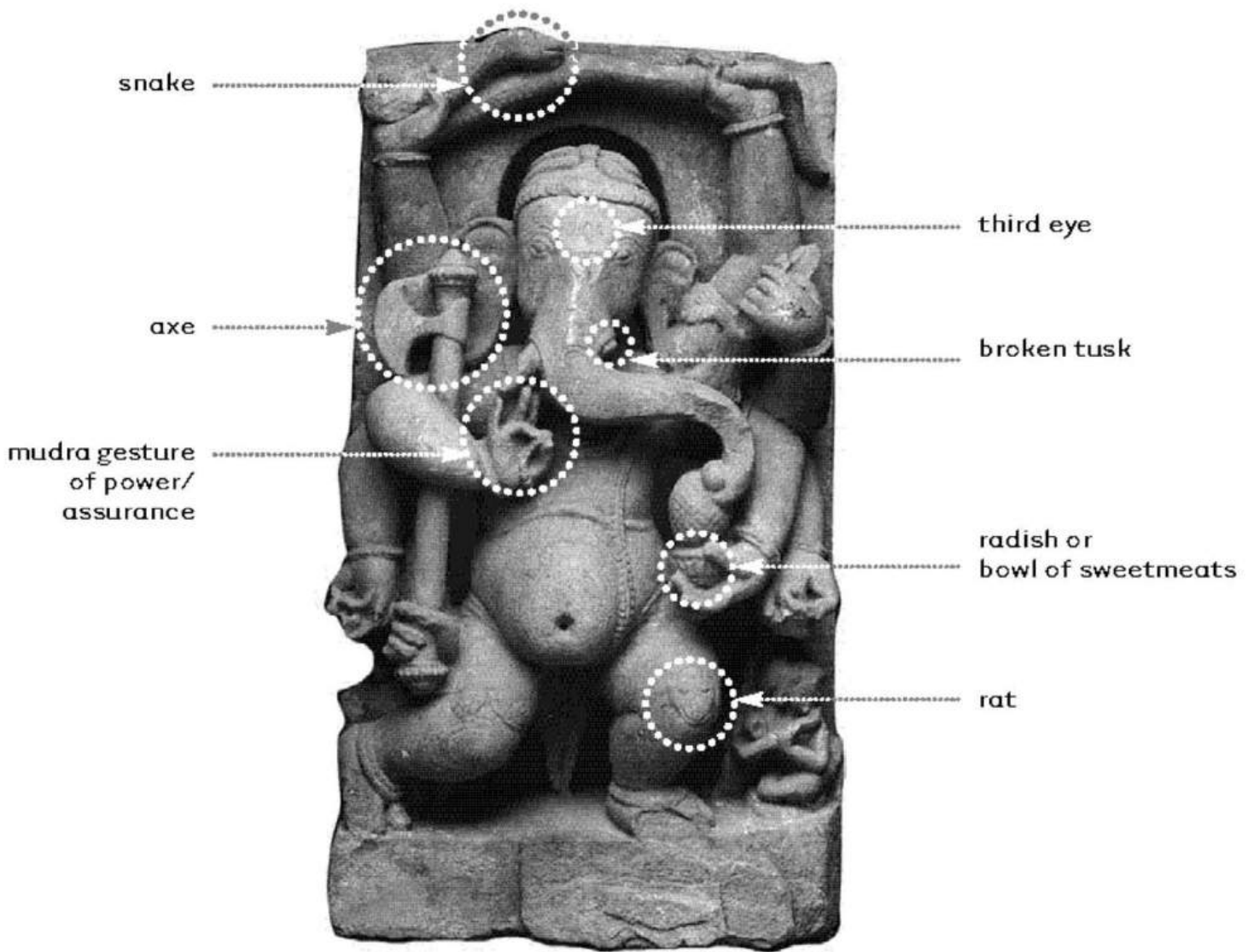


Figure 2
Attributes of Dancing Ganesha

Cosmic Dancing

One of Ganesha's roles is to entertain his parents, which he does by dancing. Shiva, Ganesha, and all the dwarfish ganas love to dance because the act of dancing is spiritually significant in Hinduism. It is related to the perpetual cycle of creation and destruction, called *samsara*, that defines the universe and from which humans seek to escape. Yet, when Ganesha dances for his parents, he is in a comic aspect. One can imagine his oversized ears, his long trunk, and swelled stomach bouncing gently as the god moves his arms and legs. But even though Ganesha's form appears bulky, his movements seem to have buoyancy. He is often shown stepping to the right or left with one foot and thrusting the opposite hip outward, creating a strong sense of action. In this image, his dancing seems to be less sure, with his right leg dragging behind the left. Perhaps this slightly clumsy dance was meant to especially delight his parents.

Elephants and Indian Culture

Besides being a comic figure, a protector, and a god of wisdom, Ganesha holds special significance among the Hindu deities because elephants have a popular place in Indian culture. From the earliest civilization in the Indus Valley, elephants were commonly represented and always had **auspicious** associations. The elephant brigade was important in the Indian army as the cavalry, and kings often fought from elephants' backs. The animal was also used as a battering ram. They are famous for their remarkable memory and intelligence and associated with clouds, probably due to their large, round gray shape and the way they spray water from their trunks. As clouds, they symbolize rainfall, fertility of crops, and prosperity. Scholars believe that Ganesha may have originated as a deity in a much older elephant cult and was assimilated by Hinduism when it emerged. He appears in the **Buddhist** and **Jain** faiths as well, although he always ranks below their gods. Because his image appears in many different religions, Ganesha's birthday is celebrated in modern India as a holiday for national unity.

Shiva and Parvati: Ganesha's Parents

Shiva (SHIH-vah) is Ganesha's father, God of Destruction and Regeneration. His dance sets the rhythm of life and death that orders the universe. Shiva's destruction is not negative, but a positive, nourishing, and constructive destruction that builds and transforms life and energy for the welfare of the world and the beings that inhabit it. He destroys in order to renew and regenerate. Shiva, Brahma, and Vishnu form the Trinity of Hindu gods. Shiva was originally a mountain god and is the most powerful and popular Hindu god. Shiva is depicted young and white with a blue neck, or all dark blue. Between his brow is a third eye—the eye of wisdom, the opening of which destroys our false selves and our myriad illusions. He has four arms and is shown seated or dancing. Shiva chose Parvati, whom he is very close to (they are often depicted together), as his consort and wife. Shiva treats Parvati as his equal and shares his seat with her. She is literally his better half and occupies half of his body. Shiva lives with his family and seems to dote on his two children, Ganesha and Skanda.

Parvati (PAHR-vah-tee) is Ganesha's mother. She got her name because she is the daughter of the mountains (parvatha) and also because she occupies one half (parva) of the universe while the other half is occupied by Shiva. Parvati is the Mother Goddess. She is believed to be the power of consciousness, the giver of knowledge (especially the arts), and the protector. Parvati is often portrayed or described as having a charming personality and is adored by married women who wish for a happy married life. Parvati is often depicted seated by Shiva or in the company of her children, Ganesha and Skanda. She is sometime seated on a pedestal, or shown as a lion or tiger with four hands and a cheerful face. The family of Shiva and Parvati, and their sons Ganesha and Skanda, is considered an ideal example of family unity and love.

NAME	FUNCTION	APPEARANCE	VEHICLE	RELATION TO OTHER GODS AND GODDESSES
Brahma (BRAH-mah)	The source, the seed, and the creator of all beings in this world; great spiritual teacher; part of the Trinity of Hindu gods (though not widely worshipped)	Shown with four old, bearded faces looking in four directions; meditative, with eyes half-closed; has four arms	Swan, representing decision-making abilities	Chose Saraswathi as his consort
Shiva (SHIH-vah)	The destroyer; destroys in order to renew and regenerate; originally a mountaingod; part of the Trinity of Hindu gods; the most powerful and popular Hindu god	Shown white with a blue neck, or all dark blue; has third eye between brows; young or middle aged; has four arms; shown seated or dancing; may be worshipped as a phallic symbol, an aesthetic, or teacher	Bull	Chose Parvathi as his consort, whom he is very close to (they are often depicted together); father of Skanda and Ganesha
Vishnu (VISH-noo)	Preserver of the universe and the embodiment of love, truth, and mercy; originally connected with the sun; part of the	Dark blue; depicted with four arms, usually standing or in a resting posture; wears a necklace and garland of flowers	Garuda, the bird or Ananta, the cosmic serpent	Lakshmi is his consort
Saraswathi (sar-uh-SVAT-ee)	Goddess of learning and light	Depicted as a beautiful and graceful goddess in white clothes, seated on a lotus; has four hands	Swan or peacock	Consort of Brahma
Parvati (PAHR-va-tee)	Mother goddess	Shown seated by Shiva or in the company of her children; sometimes shown seated on a pedestal, or as a lion or tiger with four hands and a cheerful facer	(No vehicle)	Consort of Shiva; mother of Skanda and Ganesha
Lakshmi (LUCK-shmee)	Goddess of wealth and provider of all materials comforts	Shown seated on a lotus flower with four hands; sometimes shown showering gold coins upon her devotees	Owl	Consort of Vishnu
Ganesha (guh-NESH-ah)	Lord of obstacles and impediments; one of the most popular Hindu gods	Elephant-headed; has one tusk, four arms, and is usually seated or standing; has third eye; loves sweets; hyperactive	Rat	Son of Shiva and Parvathi; younger brother of Skanda
Skanda (SKAHN-duh)	Named commander in chief of Shiva's armies	Shown with six heads and 12 arms or with one head and two arms; beautiful; intelligent; shown seated on his knees or a pedestal, or riding his vehicle	Peacock	Son of Shiva and Parvathi; older brother of Ganesha

Figure 3
Selected Hindu Gods and Goddesses

Stories about Ganesha

There are many stories that explain important events from Ganesha's life. Here are just a few.

How Ganesha Got His Elephant Head

I.

The great god Shiva was away from home for some time when his wife Parvati became very lonely. While taking a bath, Parvati washed the dirt from her body and used it to form a baby boy. As the years passed, the boy grew into a young man who did not know his father, but loved his mother so much that he wanted to help her in every way. One spring morning, Parvati asked her son to stand guard at the entrance to her bath. A stranger approached and tried to enter, but the young man blocked his way. In a fit of anger, the stranger attacked Parvati's son and ripped off his head. Hearing the commotion, Parvati quickly stepped out of her bath and opened the door. There she found her son without a head and her husband Shiva (the "stranger") who had returned from his long journey. Although glad to see her husband, Parvati was filled with sorrow at the sight of her son. Realizing the grief he had caused, Shiva promised he would replace the head with that of the first creature he could find. Shiva's attendants, called ganas, found an elephant sleeping by the side of the river. They brought the elephant's head to Shiva who placed it on the neck of Parvati's son, thus restoring him to life. From then on, Shiva called the young man Ganesha, lord of his ganas.

II.

When her son was born, Parvati was so filled with joy she called the gods together to celebrate. All the gods gazed adoringly at the beautiful baby boy, except for Sani (SAH-nee), who stared down at the ground. Sani did not want to look at the baby because of a curse—anyone who crossed his sight would turn to dust. The proud mother Parvati pleaded with Sani, finally convincing him to look at the boy. As Sani raised his eyes to catch a quick glimpse, the poor baby's head disappeared into a fine dust. Parvati became very upset. To calm her, the god Vishnu, preserver of life, mounted his bird and flew in search of a head to replace the lost one. On the banks of a river, he found an elephant who was actually a heavenly being. Vishnu took the head of that elephant, attached it to the body of the boy, and named him Ganesha.

How the Rat Became Ganesha's Vehicle

Once there was a wicked demon who terrorized the land. The people of the earth cried out to Ganesha to save them from this terrible monster. When Ganesha asked him to stop bullying the people, the demon simply laughed, because he did not believe Ganesha could stop him. So Ganesha lifted his foot and stomped on the monster, turning him into a lowly rat. With his kind heart, Ganesha took pity on the rat and could not abandon him. Instead, Ganesha decided to keep the rat and make it his vehicle. As the Hindu god responsible for removing obstacles, Ganesha tramples everything in his path. His rat, however, creeps through small cracks and narrow spaces where Ganesha would never fit. And so, each animal reaches his goal by overcoming obstacles in a different way.

How Ganesha Broke His Tusk

One evening, after eating a very large bowl of sweets, Ganesha was riding on his vehicle the rat, when a snake crossed his path. The rat bolted away in fright, throwing Ganesha onto the ground. When he fell, the impact caused his stuffed stomach to burst open and all the sweets rolled out onto the ground. Patiently, Ganesha picked up the sweets and put them back into his belly, using the snake as a rope to hold them all in. The Moon, who had seen this unfortunate accident, burst out laughing. Ganesha became embarrassed, so he snapped off his tusk in anger and hurled it at the Moon to teach it a lesson for laughing at another's bad luck.

Classroom Applications

1. Ganesha's Attributes

Ganesha is surrounded by many attributes that tell his stories and describe his personality. Discuss the meaning of the word “attribute,” an inherent characteristic or an object closely associated with or belonging to a specific person or thing. Have students identify Ganesha's attributes and have them analyze what these attribute tells us about Ganesha. As they identify the attributes provide them with information about Ganesha from the object description.

Which parts of the figure are human? Which parts are animal-like? Why does Ganesha have the head of an elephant? We associate certain characteristics with specific animals, such as the sly fox, brave lion, and slow turtle. What characteristics do we associate with elephants? Ask students to imagine they have the head of an elephant. What are some things that you could do as an elephant that you cannot do as a human?

Many of the objects Ganesha holds have symbolic meaning. They either relate to an event in Ganesha's life or represent a particular characteristic of Ganesha's personality. What does his large belly and the large radish he holds tell you about Ganesha? How does the tusk and snake relate to the story of his belly bursting open? What does the axe, Ganesha's many arms, and the mudra of his middle right hand tell you about his personality? Why does Ganesha dance?

Have students think about the objects or attributes that represent themselves. Instruct them to gather images of these objects from magazines and catalogues to create a self-portrait collage. Have students place a picture of themselves amid a collage of their symbolic objects.

2. Animal-Head Masks

Have students create masks of various animal heads. Instruct them to select an animal that portrays certain characteristics (fear, honor, etc.) or a friend. Provide students with poster-board, scissors, glue, six-inch tongue depressors, and decorative materials (construction paper, paint, brushes, markers, beads, dried beans, feathers, glitter, buttons, etc.). From poster-board, cut the shape of

the selected animal head as well as the eyes and mouth. Decorate using provided materials. To finish, glue tongue depressor to the back so the mask can be held by hand. Ask students to describe their masks, pointing out the animal characteristics they depict.

Additional Related Activity:

Arrange the class into small groups of three to four students. Instruct each group to write a short story or short play that includes all the animals represented in their group. Then have groups act out their stories, using their masks and other related props.

3. Creature for a Day

Encourage students to choose an animal they like. What qualities do they admire in this animal? Have them paint, draw, or sculpt an imaginary figure that combines both human and animal features. Imagine what a normal day would be like for their fantastical creature and have them write a journal entry in the voice of this creature. Where would the creature live? What would it eat? How would it walk or move about? What could it do that you cannot do? What are a typical day's activities? Have students share their pictures and journal entries with the class.

4. Body Talk

Much of our communication comes from body language—gestures, postures, and facial features. Ask students what Ganesha is communicating to us through his body language. Assign students different emotions, such as excitement, sadness, pride, fear, and joy. Have students act out these emotions without sound in front of the class and have the other students identify the emotion.

Multiple limbs or heads of Hindu gods represent supernatural powers. How many arms does Ganesha have? Ganesha is known as the bringer of luck. Before beginning a new school year or taking a test, Hindu schoolchildren call upon Ganesha for help. To what or whom do you turn to bring luck?

5. Remover of Obstacles

In Hindu tradition, Ganesha is the remover of obstacles, the bestower of success, and the god of beginnings. Read a variety of stories about Ganesha to determine which skills he uses to overcome challenges. Ask each student to think about an obstacle they currently face or have faced in the past. Instruct them to write a story in which they overcame that obstacle on their own or with the help of a friend. Have students illustrate an episode of the story that represents their challenge and then another that demonstrates their success at tackling that challenge. Bind the illustrations and stories together in the form of a book. Allow students to read their stories with the class if they so choose.

6. The Hindu Gods

Hindus honor many gods, including Ganesha. Learn about Hinduism and other Hindu gods, such as Shiva (the Creator and Destroyer) and Vishnu (the Preserver) (figure 3 and Bibliography). Have students create a drawing of a Hindu god and share what they have learned with the class.

7. Geography Jeopardy

This statue of Ganesha is from Uttar Pradesh. Locate the continent of Asia, the country of India, and the region of Uttar Pradesh (north-central India) on a world map. Describe the location and topography of this country and region. Create a table listing India and the countries located nearby. On the table, include the following categories about each country: capital, largest city, major languages spoken, major religions, currency, climate, size. Assign one of these countries to each student or group of students and have them research their assigned country. Have students share the information they learn and fill out the table of countries as a class.

Ask students to imagine that they are traveling through one of these countries. Based on the research they have gathered, consider what the land looks like. Is it hot, cold, dry, or rainy? What kind of plants and animals are there? What kind of people live there? What do they eat? What kind of adventures might one have? Have the students write a journal entry describing their journey, including their expectations and reactions to their travels. Have them

illustrate one episode of their adventures. Compile the illustrations and stories in a book about the region.

8. Dancing Gods

Dance is an important part of Hindu culture performed at many celebratory occasions, such as weddings, births, harvests, and religious processions. Classical Indian dance is drawn from Hindu myths and legends about various gods. Hindus believe dancers bring luck because they carry these gods' blessings. One of Ganesha's roles is to entertain his father, Shiva, and his mother, Parvati, which he does by dancing. What did the artist include in the sculpture that demonstrates Ganesha's rhythm? Find a selection of music that matches the sculpture. Have students move or dance to the music as they think Ganesha would.

Ask the students to imagine a dancing character. Will the character be human? animal? god or goddess? What kind of dance will he or she do? Have students make dancing puppets. Provide the following materials (enough for each student): poster-board, hole punch, brass fasteners, pencils, glue, tape, scissors, thin wooden dowels or sticks about 8 inch long, tongue depressors about 6 inches long; and markers, glitter, confetti, and scraps of cloth (for decorating).

Instruct students to draw their characters' heads and bodies on poster-board, then draw the moving parts (arms, legs, tails, etc.) separately. Cut out all the parts and color and decorate. Glue the head to the body of the puppet. Arrange the movable parts, overlapping where they connect. Punch holes in the center of the overlapping areas, and attach brass fasteners. Tape tongue depressors vertically to the lower part of the back of the puppets' bodies; students hold the puppet by the tongue depressor. Tape the tops of the sticks to the back of the moveable parts (which can be moved with the other hand). When finished, make the puppets dance to selected music!

Glossary

auspicious (adj)

Of or pertaining to good fortune or good luck

Buddha (n)

Historical figure who lived in India in the sixth century B.C., who discovered during his lifetime a means to escape the endless cycle of death and rebirth that, according to his teachings, is determined by an individual's karma. Through meditation, the Buddha attained a state of being known as nirvana, signifying the merging of the inner spirit with the void from which all reality is believed to emerge. Literally means "the **enlightened** one."

Buddhism (n)

Religion born of Buddha's teachings.

Buddhist (n)

Follower of Buddhism

enlightenment (n)

Attainment of perfect knowledge and integration with the universe, as believed in **Buddhism**; the spiritual goal of Buddhism; literally, "to become extinguished"

Hindu (n)

Follower of Hinduism; of or characteristic of Hinduism

Hinduism (n)

Range of related religious practices and beliefs that have their origins in India and exist today in many areas of south Asia. Hinduism's three major deities are Brahma, the creator; Shiva, the destroyer; and Vishnu, the preserver of universal order. The supreme goddess is Devi or Parvati (consort of Shiva). (See figure 3.)

Jainism (n)

Faith founded in India in the sixth century B.C. by the spiritual leader Mahavira, as a reaction against the caste system (hereditary social class system) and the elaborate spiritual beliefs of Hinduism. Jainism emphasizes the renunciation of the material world and advocates nonviolent, humanitarian behavior.

Jain (n)

Follower of Jainism

sage (n)

Person distinguished for his or her wisdom

symbol (n)

Object, person, animal, or motif that stands for, represents, or alludes to an idea, person, culture, nation, etc.

India, Uttar Pradesh, *Dancing Ganesha*, Dancing Ganesha
Produced by the Department of Museum Education

The majority of the text is excerpted from the *Faces, Places, and Inner Spaces* teacher manual.

Department of Museum Education. Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 2003

Text additions by Maria Marable-Bunch, Assistant Director,
Teacher Programs

Editor: Sarah Boyd

©2003 The Art Institute of Chicago

