

## Educator Guide

### FEATURED WORK OF ART



#### [Ganesha](#)

Unidentified artist

India, 1st half of 11th century

**Schist**

Gift of J. Gilman d'Arcy Paul, 1967, acc. no. 25.49

#### HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE

This resource includes factual information, cultural context, glossary of terms, as well as prompts and discussion questions related to *Ganesha*, 25.49.

This resource is recommended for Middle School audiences and Social Studies subjects. Students will learn about the historical and religious context of this object to be able to relate and compare it to other historical cultures as well as their own culture and identity. These suggestions were informed by the Maryland State Department of Education 2024 standards.

## BACKGROUND CONTEXT

### Facts about the Work of Art

- The elephant-headed Ganesha is best known as a god of new beginnings and remover of obstacles. He is the son of Shiva and Parvati, a divine couple. Shiva is the destroyer and creator of the universe, while Parvati is the goddess of fertility, love, and devotion, and mother of Ganesha.
- The Walters' Ganesha is thought to have been a sculpture for a Buddhist temple or a **cave shrine**.
- Ganesha is a deity in both Hindu and Buddhist **pantheons**.
- According to Hindu belief, Shiva was away when Ganesha was born so the two do not recognize each other when they first meet. At that time Ganesha is guarding his mother's chamber from intruders and will not let Shiva enter. In his anger at being denied entry Shiva severs Ganesha's head. When Parvati discovers her lifeless son, she is so overcome by grief that Shiva instructs his followers to replace the head immediately. They do so with a head from an elephant. When Shiva breathes life into the boy's new body, Parvati is so overjoyed to have Ganesha back that she embraces his elephant/human form as the same she created. This miraculous new beginning showcases Ganesha's most important role in the pantheon of Hindu gods as the god of new undertakings.
- According to ancient Hindu texts, the universe is periodically destroyed and recreated when Shiva dances. Here Ganesha dances in imitation of his father upon a lotus flower.
- Each of Ganesha's hands holds items with symbolic meanings. A Hindu scholar who examined the Walters' Ganesha suggests the following meanings. The drum represents the rhythm of dance, and Ganesha's dancing imitates Shiva's. Shiva is also represented with a battle axe that he is often portrayed with, and the snake, which represents Shiva's power over fearsome creatures. A radish represents a healthy diet, and a bowl of **sweetmeats** represents the inner sweetness of self-realization. Lastly, prayer beads represent constant attentiveness. The missing right hand was said to be in the **abhaya mudra** or have-no-fear position. The trunk which loops toward the **sweetmeats** symbolizes Ganesha's power and gentleness.
- On either side of his legs are two smaller figures of seated musicians who play percussion instruments (a small double drum and a large single drum). Below Ganesha's lotus flower pedestal lays his "vehicle" or mount (**vahana**), a mouse. The tiny mouse must carry the largest beast of the jungle, suggesting that the impossible is possible. On bended knee to the right of the mouse is a very small worshipper.

## Cultural Context

- Hinduism and Buddhism, along with imagery of Ganesha in religious objects and artworks, spread from the Indian subcontinent across Asia, to as far away as Indonesia and Japan.
- This artwork was created during the **Pala Dynasty** (750–1124 CE). After a period of expansion, Pala rulers ushered in a time of dynastic stability, widespread peace, great prosperity, and rich patronage of the arts.
- The Palas were followers of **Mahayana Buddhism**, which is one of the two main branches of Buddhism, along with **Theravada Buddhism**. We can see the effects of the spread of Mahayana Buddhism in contemporary expressions of faith today; for example, Zen Buddhism in Japan is derived from Mahayana Buddhism.
- The period is noted as Bengal's "Golden Era" in which the arts reached a pinnacle of technical execution and great beauty. Ganesha is an important figure in both Buddhism and Hinduism, just one of several shared components of the two religions.

## GLOSSARY

**Abhaya Mudra:** A hand gesture that represents the ideas of peace, friendship, fearlessness, and reassurance.

**Cave Shrine:** A temple created under or within rocks or natural caves for the purpose of ritual and meditation.

**Deity:** A god or goddess.

**Pala Dynasty:** The ruling dynasty in Bihar and Bengal, India, from the 8th to the 12th century.

**Pantheon:** The set of deities belonging to a specific religion.

**Schist:** A metamorphic rock made up of layers of different minerals.

**Sweetmeats:** Any type of sweet treat, made with sugar or honey and can include fruits, nuts, or any other sweetened food.

**Vahana:** A Hindu term for the creature that acts as a mount or vehicle to a deity.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[National Geographic Mapmaker](#)

## PROMPTS AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



1. Focus on the central figure in this artwork. Identify 3 things you notice about this figure.
2. Next focus on the area surrounding the central figure. Identify 3 things you notice about the figure's surroundings.
3. Knowing that the central figure is the deity Ganesha, discuss what you think this artwork may have been used for. Where do you think this object may have originally been kept? Support your idea by explaining why you chose that location/place.
4. Identify how many cultures across Asia have Hindu practices. What does this tell us about the movement of religion across geographic space? Make conjectures about some ways that religion can spread from one country to the next.
5. Ganesha is surrounded by symbols that represent important elements of Hinduism. Choose 3 symbols that represent important parts of your life, such as your culture, beliefs, or loved ones. Create artwork inspired by these 3 symbols.