



c. 750

Sandstone

Height: 50 inches (127 cm)

Indian

Purchased with the New Members Fund,  
1971, 1971-154-1

### LET'S LOOK

What is the first thing you notice about this statue?

How many arms do you see on Ganesha? What is he holding?

Is Ganesha standing still? Find three bends that make an "S" shape in Ganesha's body. How is he moving?

### LET'S LOOK AGAIN

Who is providing the music for Ganesha's dancing?

What is Ganesha wearing that makes musical sounds? Look for another small figure in a similar pose as Ganesha.

Do you think Ganesha's body is that of a young child or an older person? Why?

Look at the decoration on the base underneath Ganesha. What could this design represent?

Why do you think Ganesha has an elephant's head and a human body?

## DANCING GANESHA

This is a sculpture of Ganesha (Guh-NESH-uh), a beloved Hindu god who is believed to bring good fortune and success in all daily activities. In India, people who visit temples often pray to Ganesha before they worship the main temple god or goddess. Ganesha is easy to recognize because he has an elephant's head, a round belly, several arms, and is often depicted as having something sweet to eat. Although he is often shown sitting or standing, here he is dancing, which shows his joyful side. In some parts of India he has an adult's body, in other parts, a child's body.

This image of him was carved from sandstone over a thousand years ago and was probably placed in the south exterior wall of a temple, which still exists in the city of Gwalior in north-central India. Some parts of the sculpture surrounding the figure of *Dancing Ganesha* were broken a long time ago when it fell off of the temple. Have you noticed that both his tusks are missing? Ganesha is believed to have broken one of them off and thrown it at the moon because the moon laughed at his potbelly! In another story, his broken tusk is thought to be the pen used to help write the *Mahabharata*. This ancient Indian poem, about a war between cousins, describes every aspect of Hindu life and thought.

Why does Ganesha have more than two arms? Hindu gods are often represented with multiple arms as a sign of their supernatural powers. Here, two of Ganesha's arms accent the "S" curves of his dancing body: his upper-right arm extends out from his shoulder as the hand points to his swaying trunk, echoing its graceful bend; his lower-left arm leads our eyes down to the hip that juts out to the right. The hand of his lower-right arm holds a large battle-ax to protect his worshippers from trouble and to cut away bad thoughts. In his upper-left hand Ganesha grasps a cone-shaped object that

has been interpreted in several different ways: it might be his broken tusk, or a daikon (large white radish)—a great treat for elephants! Like his father, Shiva, he wears a snake around his large belly.

Have you noticed that Ganesha holds a round sweet cake (called a *modaka*) in the end of his trunk? Because he is dancing, his crown has shifted slightly to one side. On his feet are ankle bells, also worn by dancers and elephants in India. He dances on top of a flat pedestal decorated with petals of a lotus flower, a type of water lily. The lotus symbolizes the purity and divine energy of life because, although rooted in the mud of ponds and rivers, its flower rises up out of the water and opens, completely clean, each morning. Every aspect of Ganesha's round, rhythmically swaying figure is full of such contrasts: he is both heavy and graceful, mischievous and serious, and he seems to embody deep wisdom as well as the joy of a young child.

## ABOUT THE GOD GANESHA

Ganesha is a Hindu god who loves to dance. His name means "Lord of the Ganas" (GAH-nahz)—small, mischievous dwarfs with round bellies who serve Ganesha and his famous father, Shiva (SHE-vah or SHIH-vah). Shiva is one of the three great male gods of Hinduism (HIN-doo-ism). Today, Ganesha is worshipped widely by people of different faiths throughout India, Southeast Asia, and around the world. Also called the Lord of Beginnings and the Lord of Obstacles, Ganesha can create challenges, but even more, he can remove them or help people overcome them. People pray to Ganesha to bring them good luck, especially when starting something—such as a journey, a business, a marriage, or a new year—or when facing something difficult, like taking an exam or performing a dance.

Ganesha is also known both as the Lord of the Harvest and the Lord of Learning and the Arts. His large elephant's head symbolizes strength and wisdom. Indian rulers used elephants to win wars, build palaces, and show off their wealth in royal ceremonies. Ancient Indian poets compared elephants spraying water from their trunks to rumbling rain clouds. People today value elephants for their cooperative nature. In the wild they live in family groups headed by females and help one another when calves are born or when a group member is in danger. They also work hard for people to remove trees and do other construction work.

There are many stories about why Ganesha has an elephant's head. One explains how Ganesha's mother, the goddess Parvati (PARH-vah-tee), created him to keep her company while her husband,

Shiva, was away from home. She formed Ganesha using clay from the riverbank or, some stories say, a skin softener made of tumeric (a yellow spice) that she scraped off her body. Parvati used her goddess powers to bring her son to life and was so delighted with him that she kept him always by her side. One day before her bath, she asked Ganesha to guard the doorway. When Shiva arrived home unexpectedly, he heard his wife in her bath and found a young stranger who would not let him in. Shiva became so angry that he cut off Ganesha's head in a fit of rage! When Parvati heard all the commotion, she ran out to find that her son was dead. She explained to Shiva who Ganesha was, and Shiva promised that he would bring the boy back to life with the head of the next creature that came along—which happened to be an elephant! Parvati was happy and Shiva rewarded Ganesha by making him the leader of his army of ganas. Images of Ganesha have been placed above doorways ever since.

## THE FESTIVAL OF GANESHA CHATURTHI

There is a special festival in India dedicated to Ganesha during August and September called *Ganesha Chaturthi* (chah-TOUR-tee). Over one hundred years ago when the country was still under British colonial rule, an Indian freedom fighter promoted the festival to unite the Indian people through pride in their own culture. Today, millions of people celebrate for as many as ten days at home and in the streets.

Families buy brightly painted clay sculptures of Ganesha for temporary shrines, which they create in the kitchen or living room. The sculptures are bathed with sacred oils and rubbed with vermilion (a red powder, called *kumkum* in India), then dressed and presented with rice, fruits, flowers, and lamps that provide sacred light. After these rituals, Ganesha is believed to inhabit the statues, and he is treated as an honored guest and worshipped each morning and evening.

Communities in India also create public shrines with statues of Ganesha—some as tall as thirty feet—made of unfired clay by local sculptors. They may include his parents, or even feature Elvis and Madonna! The statues are paraded with music to public spaces where pujas (worship ceremonies) are held for crowds of devotees. On the last day of the festival, all the statues of Ganesha are brought to the sea (or nearby body of water), stripped of their flowers, and carried into the waves, where they dissolve and return to nature.

## CONNECT AND COMPARE

We can see a small musician playing a tabla (pair of hand drums) in the lower-left part of the sculpture. Listen to some Indian music. What instruments are played? Make a drawing or painting of Ganesha that includes them.

Collect and compare images of Ganesha from museums, libraries, and the Web—both old and new. List the things that Ganesha holds in his hands and what they symbolize. Notice his different postures. Are members of Ganesha's family also shown?

## RELATED ART PROJECTS

Ganesha's head and trunk represent "Om," the cosmic sound from which the world was created. Om is a sacred syllable used as a mantra (a silent or spoken prayer) in Hinduism and Buddhism. Written in Sanskrit (SAN-skrit), "Om" looks like an elephant's head and trunk (see right). Practice writing it, then make a stamp of it by carving styrofoam or a potato, to decorate a story or picture about Ganesha.



Model a small clay figure of Ganesha. Use sculpture wire, craft sticks, or toothpicks as an armature (a framework to support the clay). Will your figure be sitting or dancing? What will Ganesha hold in his many hands? Where will he live?

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