

EDUCATOR GUIDE

Adaptable for grades K-6

Animals in Himalayan Art



**RUBIN
MUSEUM
OF ART**

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Animals are everywhere in Himalayan art and are an accessible entry point for close looking and discussion with younger students. This guide focuses on works of art from the Hindu tradition. The objects, questions, and activities featured explore the role of animals in Hindu art from the Himalayas, including animal vehicles (*vahanas*) that many Hindu gods and goddesses ride.

Corresponds with New York State Learning Standards:

Arts Standards

- » Standard 1: Creating, Performing, and Participating in the Arts
- » Standard 2: Knowing and Using Arts Materials and Resources
- » Standard 3: Responding to and Analyzing Works of Art
- » Standard 4: Understanding the Cultural Dimensions and Contributions of the Arts

Social Studies Standards

- » Standard 2: World History
- » Standard 3: Geography

How to use this guide

- » Read through the guide before coming to the Rubin Museum of Art.
- » Use this guide as a starting point to help plan your visit and learn more about the museum's collection.
- » This guide provides contextual information and stories about each object, followed by questions to ask and activities to do to help you discuss and explore the work of art with your student.
- » At the end of the guide you can find resources for learning and follow-up activities to do at the museum or in your classroom.

Lesson Outline

- » Introduce the Rubin Museum of Art and basic questions to guide your visit.
- » Watch the introductory video located in the spiral staircase lobby of the museum and use it to orient students to the various climates and habitats that animals would inhabit in the Himalayas.
- » Look at four works of art and discuss using the object information and questions provided.
- » Follow up with the suggested activities in the galleries or your classroom.
- » Wrap up and reflect on your experiences.

Guiding Questions

- » What are some characteristics of each animal found in the works of art?
- » What are the strengths of each animal represented in the works of art?
- » For the works that feature a person riding an animal, how are the riders like or unlike their animal companions (referencing the strengths and characteristics discussed)? What might the meaning be behind the similarities or differences between the riders and animals?

Key Terms

Deity - A god, goddess, or divine character.

Deva - A god or divinity in the Hindu tradition.

Hinduism - Popular religion with roots reaching back into prehistoric India. Hinduism is a polytheistic religion that recognizes gods and goddesses can take many different forms.

Obstacle - Something that blocks or hinders progress.

Prophecy - Prediction of a future event, often divinely inspired.

Temples - Buildings or places dedicated to the service or worship of a deity or deities.

Transformation - Change in form, appearance, nature, or character.

Vahana - Sanskrit word for the animal vehicles or mounts that Hindu gods and goddesses ride.



Ganesha

India; 11th century
Sandstone
Rubin Museum of Art
C2004.14.4 (HAR 65346)

Ground Floor, Café

The elephant-headed god Ganesha, the adopted son of Parvati and Shiva, is one of the most commonly recognized and beloved figures in the Hindu tradition. Ganesha is typically seen riding his animal mount (*vahana*), the rat. The rat is not depicted in this statue but can be found in other Ganesha statues in the galleries.

Ganesha is the patron of arts and sciences and the deva of intellect and wisdom. Among Hindus and Buddhists he is associated with clearing obstacles at the start of any new endeavor. Ganesha has many forms; here he is eight-armed and dancing. To Ganesha's right is a drummer, raising his right arm to strike the stretched skin of one of his drums. Behind him another musician plays a smaller, two-sided drum. This large, sandstone statue is nearly 1,000 years old and has remained intact except for a broken arm.

In Hindu temples Ganesha is often found at doorways, ready to remove obstacles before visitors proceed inside. You may find money, flowers, candies, and other small gifts left on and around this statue, as this approachable deity is a favorite among Hindus and non-Hindus alike.

STORY

The following is just one of many stories told about Ganesha. This tale has been passed down orally and in writing for hundreds of years. Storytellers add their own interpretations and embellishments, resulting in an endless number of versions of the same story. There are many stories of how Ganesha received his elephant head, for example. One version relates that Ganesha was created by the goddess Parvati because she was lonely:

Parvati's husband, Shiva, was often away, and so Parvati created a little boy out of dirt to keep her company. One day Parvati took a bath and asked the young Ganesha to guard the bathroom door. At that moment Shiva returned home, demanding to see his wife. When he saw the young boy blocking his way, he angrily drew his sword and chopped off the child's head. Parvati's anger at the gruesome deed caused Shiva to go out and seek the first creature he could find and place its head on Ganesha's body to restore him to life. The first creature that crossed Shiva's path was an elephant, and so that is how Ganesha received his distinctive head. Now with the strength of an elephant, Ganesha can remove any obstacle or problem that stands in the way.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

- » What do you see going on here? Gather general observations about this sculpture.
- » What kind of animal head does Ganesha have? What are some qualities of an elephant? How does that relate to Ganesha's role as the remover of obstacles?
- » What is an obstacle? What are examples of mental and physical obstacles?
- » How many arms does Ganesha have? Why do you think he has so many? Can you see that some are missing? This piece is almost 1,000 years old, how do you think some of the arms might have been lost? What would you do with so many arms?
- » Sometimes there are objects left on and around Ganesha (coins, dollar bills, flowers, candies, etc.) Why do you think people leave these?

ACTIVITIES TO DO

- » Tell the story of how Ganesha got his elephant head.
- » Ask students to stand in Ganesha's body position. What do you think he is doing? What does it feel like to stand this way? How do the musicians below Ganesha relate to how he is moving?
- » Sketch a detail of Ganesha.



Ganesha

Nepal; 17th century
Copper alloy
Rubin Museum of Art
C2004.22.2 (HAR 65369)

3rd Floor, From the Land of the Gods: Art of the Kathmandu Valley

This small work may be difficult to gather a group around, but it is useful for a comparison to the Ganesha on the ground floor.

This metal Ganesha has many interesting details. Look beneath his left leg to find the rat that serves as his animal companion and vehicle (*vahana*). Can you imagine an elephant riding a rat? It is common to see opposites in combination in Hinduism in an effort to create balance.

Unlike the Ganesha on the ground floor, which would have stood outside a temple's entrance, this metal statue would have existed in a more intimate environment, probably inside a shrine alongside statues of other deities for devotion. Notice the forehead and nose are smooth and worn down. The continued rubbing by devotees caused the sculpture to wear down, generating the polished look.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

- » What do you notice about this sculpture? Gather general observations about this piece.
- » What are the similarities to the large, stone Ganesha on the ground floor? What are the differences?
- » What animal is Ganesha riding?
- » What is unusual about an elephant-headed boy riding a rat? What are the benefits of having these opposite animals together? How could the rat help Ganesha be more balanced?

Transition: Let's go look at a larger sculpture of the rat that Ganesha rides.



Mooshika

Nepal; 17th century
Copper alloy
Rubin Museum of Art
C2006.26.1 (HAR 65688)

3rd Floor, From the Land of the Gods: Art of the Kathmandu Valley

This sculpture of Mooshika, Ganesha's rat, is a fragment from a large sculpture of Ganesha. As a wealth deity and the destroyer of obstacles, Ganesha requires a mount that can support him and Mooshika is perfect for the job: he gnaws through any obstacles and his name means "Little Hoarder," so he has riches to share, like the fruit in his hand here.

STORY

The following is just one of many stories told about Ganesha and how he got his mount, the rat Mooshika. This tale has been passed down orally and in writing for hundreds of years. Storytellers add their own interpretations and embellishments, resulting in an endless number of versions of the same story.

Once there was huge banquet and a musician who was in a big hurry ran into a great sage, making him very angry. The sage put a curse on the musician that turned him into a rat named Mooshika.

Mooshika went to live at an important school for warriors and, like most rats, started to cause trouble. He chewed holes in rice sacks, played in the garbage can, and ate the warriors' food.

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The students tried to catch him, but he always got away. Frustrated, they told the head of the school, who decided that they would ask Ganesha for help. Ganesha agreed readily and soon captured Mooshika with his lasso. “I will make you my steed,” Ganesha declared.

The rat couldn’t believe his good luck, “I will serve you faithfully,” he promised. Soon, however, Mooshika began to think he was more powerful than his master and decided to kidnap him. Ganesha knew exactly what the rat was thinking, but decided to play along. The rat took off running as fast as he could with Ganesha on his back, but suddenly Ganesha was too heavy. The rat collapsed and all his pride and arrogance came whooshing out of his mouth. “It’s not a good idea to kidnap gods,” said Ganesha. Mooshika was humbled, “I will serve you faithfully for all time,” he promised, and this time he did.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

- » What is depicted in this sculpture?
- » Where else did we see a rat depicted in a work of art? How is this rat different?
- » What are some qualities that rats have? What are some things that rats do? How is that different from an elephant?
- » Which animal would you choose as your vehicle? How would that help you be more balanced?

ACTIVITIES TO DO

- » Tell the story of how Ganesha got his *vahana*, the rat Mooshika.
- » Imitate the gesture of this sculpture. Discuss how it feels to stand in this position and how it would feel to carry an elephant on your back.
- » Sketch your own hybrid animal or animal vehicle.

Transition: Let’s go look at another work of art from the Hindu tradition that shows powerful animals.



Durga

Nepal; 14th century
Gilt copper alloy
Rubin Museum of Art
C2005.16.11 (HAR 65433)

*3rd Floor, From the Land of the Gods:
Art of the Kathmandu Valley*

This sculpture depicts the Hindu goddess Durga slaying the buffalo demon Mahisha, one of the most famous stories about her. Flanked by two slain demons, Durga is shown grasping the head of the demon emerging from a decapitated buffalo with her lower-left hand. The deity's fearsome, all-powerful form is balanced by her calm facial expression. Durga's right leg, raised above the ground and extended in an active lunging pose, is supported by her animal companion (*vahana*), the lion, who bends to her weight. Her raised hand would have originally held the spear used to slay Mahisha.

The back of the sculpture shows that a highly skilled artist paid careful attention to all sides, even though it was unlikely that anyone was meant to see the back. In its original context this sculpture was most likely placed against a wall inside of a shrine.

This statue was cast using the lost-wax technique and then covered with a thin layer of gold. This sculpture is a highlight of the Rubin Museum of Art's collection because of its delicate details, expressive gesture, and almost perfect condition, even after 700 years.

STORY

The following is just one of many stories told about Durga. This tale has been passed down orally and in writing for hundreds of years. Storytellers add their own interpretations and embellishments, resulting in an endless number of versions of the same story.

In one version of this Hindu story, a shape-shifting demon named Mahisha conquered the world. Mahisha was impossible to defeat because a prophecy said no man or beast could defeat Mahisha during the day or night. The greatest of the Hindu gods—Shiva, Vishnu, and Brahma—were furious.

Parvati, the wife of Shiva, offered to battle Mahisha. The Hindu gods were grateful for her courage and each gave her a weapon and their power. Parvati transformed into the warrior goddess Durga, with eighteen arms and a great lion as her vehicle.

Mahisha sent two servants to subdue her. Durga tied ropes around their necks and threw weapons into their chests, defeating them easily. Realizing the danger he was in, Mahisha transformed into a buffalo and hid among a herd of other buffaloes. However, his disguise did not fool Durga. She chased him on her lion and tackled him to the ground. They fought furiously for a long time, and finally, in the evening when the sun had just set, she cut off his buffalo head and pierced his heart with her spear. Durga defeated Mahisha and saved the world.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

- » Walk around the piece to see all sides. What do you notice about the sculpture?
- » What is Durga holding in her hands? What is missing from her hands?
- » What are some of the different animals that you notice in this work of art?
- » Durga is riding a lion. What are some qualities of a lion? What are some qualities we know about Durga from the story? Why do you think Durga rides a lion?

ACTIVITIES TO DO

- » Tell the story of Durga's transformation and defeat of Mahisha.
- » Stand like Durga. What does it feel like to take this warrior's pose? What would the opposite position look and feel like?
- » Sketch a detail of Durga or her lion. Find the lions on the ground floor near the elevators and compare them to Durga's lion. How are they similar or different?

Conclusion and Synthesis Questions

- » What are some of the different animals you noticed at the Rubin Museum of Art?
- » How are these animals similar to or different from animals you see everyday?
- » If you had an animal head like Ganesha, what would it be? What power would that give you?
- » What animal would represent you? What animal would be opposite of you and thus be a good companion for you?

Activities to do at the museum

All grade levels:

Vahana sketches

Bring paper and pencils to the museum. Each student chooses an animal for their *vahana* or vehicle. Students sketch themselves riding that animal. Students discuss with a partner why they chose that animal and what characteristics they have to make them stronger.

Grades pre-k through 3:

Animal charades

Each student picks an animal from a work they have observed. One at a time, students silently act out the animal while the class guesses which animal they have selected. This can lead to a discussion of other animals in the works of art.

Grades 3 and higher:

Independent exploration

Select a specific area in a gallery. Give students 10–15 minutes with paper and a pencil to find and sketch a selection of animals.

Follow-up Activities for Your Classroom

Grade 1 and higher:

Vahana sculptures

Each student chooses an animal for their *vahana* or vehicle. After sketching the animal students create a small sculpture of the animal using air-dry clay or Model Magic. Students share with each other why they chose that animal and what characteristics the animal has to help them and complement their personality.

Hybrid animal sculptures

Have students create a sketch and sculpture of an animal that combines features of two different animals. Students discuss why they chose those two animals and what powers their hybrid animal has related to their features.

Grade 3 and higher:

Himalayan Habitats

Students choose an animal featured in Himalayan art. Students research the habitat of the Himalayas where the animal lives and the role this animal plays in Hindu stories. To share their findings students can create posters highlighting different animals, including the role they play in Hinduism.

Resources

Visit the Rubin Museum of Art's education website for resources, including downloadable maps, gallery activities, multimedia resources, web links, and a bibliography for educators at rmanyc.org/education.