

EDUCATOR GUIDE

Adaptable for any age level

Note that some stories are not necessarily appropriate for all ages

Storytelling in the Himalayan Region



**RUBIN
MUSEUM
OF ART**

150 West 17th Street, NYC 10011
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Telling stories is a great way to engage a student of any age with a work of art. Students can make the connections between what is happening in a painting or sculpture and the action of a story, learning not just about the object itself but also about the traditions and beliefs of the people who made it.

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

English Language Arts Standards

- » Standard 1: Students will read, write, listen, and speak for information and understanding.
- » Standard 2: Students will read, write, listen, and speak for literary response and expression.
- » Standard 3: Students will read, write, listen, and speak for critical analysis and evaluation.
- » Standard 4: Students will read, write, listen, and speak for social interaction.

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

- » Overview and introduction to the Rubin Museum of Art, the location and geography of the Himalayan region, and basic questions to guide your tour.
- » Look at the four works of art, tell the stories that are associated with them, and discuss using the object information and questions below.
- » Follow up with the suggested activities in the galleries or your classroom.
- » Wrap up and reflect on your experiences.

Guiding Questions

- » What is the importance of storytelling to a community?
- » In what ways do people tell stories?
- » What do these stories explain?
- » What connections do you notice between the stories and the works of art?

Key Terms

Bodhisattva - An awakened being who postpones their own enlightenment to help others achieve enlightenment.

Buddha - A title given to beings who have attained enlightenment in the Buddhist tradition. The term “the Buddha” usually refers to the historical Buddha Shakyamuni, Siddhartha Gautama, who lived from approximately 563–483 BCE.

Buddhism - A religion and a philosophy that is based on the teachings of the historical Buddha Shakyamuni. The Buddhist tradition focuses on the attainment of enlightenment and release from an endless cycle of death and rebirth.

Compassion - Feeling sympathetic towards another and having a strong desire to alleviate their suffering or hardship.

Deity - A god, goddess, or divine character.

Deva - A god or divinity in the Hindu tradition.

Enlightenment - A spiritual awakening. In the Buddhist tradition enlightenment is the moment when a complete understanding of the nature of reality and attainment of perfect wisdom and compassion is reached.

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.

Idealized - Showing something in an unrealistically perfect form. Idealized works of art show images of people and places using common conventions that have symbolic value, as opposed to representing them how they look in reality.

Meditation - Continued or extended thought; reflection; contemplation.

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). 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.



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. The following is 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

- » What do you see going on here? Gather general observations about this sculpture.
- » What moment in the story is this? How can you tell?
- » 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?
- » What is a prophecy? What was the prophecy in this story? How did Durga work around this prophecy and defeat the demon Mahisha?

ACTIVITIES TO DO

- » Tell the story of Durga's creation and defeat of Mahisha.
- » Walk around the piece to see all sides. What do you notice?
- » 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 sketch Durga at another moment in the story.



Buddha Shakyamuni

Nepal; 13th century
Gilt copper alloy with inlay
Rubin Museum of Art
C2006.24.1 (HAR 65687)

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

This sculpture depicts the Buddha at the moment of his enlightenment. He is seated in meditation posture (*vajrasana*); one hand rests in his lap and the other is performing a gesture that calls the earth to witness his great accomplishment. This idealized statue follows common conventions in depicting the Buddha's characteristics: a monk's robe, short hair, bare feet, and extended earlobes. His wisdom is suggested by a bump on the top of his head (*ushnisha*) and by a coil of hair between his eyebrows (*urna*).

Cast in the Khasa Malla kingdom of the western Himalayas using a lost-wax technique, this sculpture is a superb example of Newar Nepalese artistry without elaborate embellishments. He wears earrings inlaid with turquoise—an adornment not usually seen in depictions of the Buddha, yet commonly found in Khasa Malla sculptures representing him.

STORY

The following is just one of many stories told about the Buddha. 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. This is one version of the story of the Buddha Shakyamuni's awakening:

The Buddha was not always known as such. He was born as Prince Siddhartha Gautama hundreds of years ago in India. A fortune teller told his father, a great warrior king, that his son would grow up to be either a warrior king or a religious leader. The king wanted his son to follow in his footsteps and become a warrior king so he kept Siddhartha locked inside the palace and gave him everything he wanted, shielding him from the pains of life: age, poverty, sickness, and death. Prince Siddhartha lived a rich and easy life until he was 29, when he became curious about what was beyond the palace walls.

One night he snuck out of the palace and saw things that made him upset and confused. He saw a man who was hungry, a woman who was sick, a very old man, and a dead woman in a funeral procession. He did not know any of these things happened to people!

Prince Siddhartha could not return to his life of luxury while he knew that others suffered. He gave up his fancy clothes for simple monk's robes. He removed the princely gold earrings he wore, leaving his earlobes stretched. He cut off his long hair so it curled tight against his head.

Siddhartha wandered for a long time, searching for teachers to help him understand how the world worked so he could learn how to help people escape their suffering. He found some good teachers, but none could help him. Discouraged, he sat beneath a bodhi tree. He crossed his legs, closed his eyes, and thought very deeply. After a long while he understood! It was as if a light had turned on inside of his mind. Siddhartha had become spiritually awakened and now understood the true nature of the world.

Siddhartha touched the earth to ask it to witness his amazing accomplishment. His brain grew with his newfound knowledge, and a bump called an *ushnisha* emerged on top of his head to contain it. At that moment Siddhartha had become a buddha, a word which literally means a "person who has woken up."

The Buddha spent the rest of his life traveling and teaching others what he discovered about the world. He learned how to help those who were suffering and shared this knowledge with anyone who wanted to learn.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

- » What do you see going on here? Gather general observations about this sculpture.
- » What details of this statue do you recognize from the story? Why are his ears so long?
- » How did the artist capture a particular moment in the story? What do you see that makes you say that?

ACTIVITIES TO DO

- » Tell the story of the Buddha's awakening.
- » Walk around the piece to see all sides. What do you notice?
- » Sit in the Buddha's position. How does this feel?
- » Sketch a detail of the Buddha.
- » Download and print the common symbols worksheet to explore the symbols of the Buddha.

Transition: *Let's look at another work of art and hear another story from the Buddhist tradition and see what is similar and different about it.*



Thousand-Armed All-Seeing Lord Sahasrabhujalokeshvara Avalokiteshvara

Tibet; 18th century

Pigments on cloth Rubin Museum of Art

F1996.31.12 (HAR 525)

Second Floor, Gateway to Himalayan Art

This painting and sketch depicts Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. He is the most revered bodhisattva in Tibetan Buddhism.

A bodhisattva is someone who has achieved awakening but chooses to remain in this

world to help others achieve enlightenment. Like Avalokiteshvara they are often depicted wearing crowns and jewelry. Avalokiteshvara has 1,000 arms, each with an eye in the palm, and 11 heads. The topmost head is the head of the Buddha.

This painting comes from the Tantric tradition in Tibetan Buddhism. Tantric Buddhist methods are used to achieve enlightenment in a single lifetime. The techniques—yogas and ritual practices—were transmitted through texts (tantras). Its transmission and techniques are closely guarded. Followers work closely with a teacher who also inspires deep compassion for the suffering that attachment brings and a desire to help others. A notable feature of tantric art is the multiplication of arms, heads, legs, eyes, and implements to deal with impediments to enlightenment. Adding more body parts is perhaps best understood by the principle that more is more. More arms mean more capacity for providing aid; more attributes mean more powers.

STORY

The following is just one of many stories told about Avalokiteshvara. 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.

Avalokiteshvara made a promise to the Buddha that he would help every person in the world and if he ever gave up, his body would explode into a thousand pieces.

Avalokiteshvara was determined to meet his goal, but for one moment he became discouraged and thought, “I can’t help everyone.” When this thought crossed his mind his promise was broken and he exploded.

The Buddha was moved by Avalokiteshvara’s compassion, so he put him back together. But instead of one head and two arms he gave him eleven heads and a thousand arms. Now he could help many more people at once.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

- » What do you see going on here? Gather general observations about this painting.
- » How is this piece similar to or different from the sculpture of the Buddha on the third floor?
- » Why would it be important for Avalokiteshvara to have so many heads and arms? Have you ever felt like you could use some extra arms or heads? What would you do?
- » What details in the story and the painting tell us that Avalokiteshvara is compassionate? What is something compassionate that you’ve done recently?
- » How does knowing the story help us understand the painting better?

ACTIVITIES TO DO

- » Tell the story of how Avalokiteshvara got eleven heads and a thousand arms.
 - » Create a sketch and write a short paragraph about Avalokiteshvara doing something compassionate.
 - » Find another image of Avalokiteshvara in the galleries and compare and contrast with the painting. Then use a magnifying glass to look more closely at all the tiny details in this painting. What more can we learn about Avalokiteshvara from these details? Why are details important for storytelling?
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Questions to Ask After Viewing

- » What similarities did you notice between the stories and the works of art?
- » The stories we heard today existed before the works of art we looked at were made. Since the stories came first, how do you think that explains differences between works of art that depict the same story?
- » *For older students:* The stories of Ganesha and Durga are from the Hindu tradition and the stories of the Buddha and Avalokiteshvara are from the Buddhist tradition. How are the stories similar and different?

Activities to Do at the Museum

For students in Grades 3 and higher:

Create a narrative drawing

Select a specific area in a gallery. Give students 10–15 minutes with paper and a pencil to find and sketch an object that they think illustrates a part in a story on one half of their paper. On the other half students imagine and sketch what happens next in the story.

Free-choice gallery exploration

Students explore a gallery in pairs and find another example of an object featured in one of the stories and compare and contrast. Students discuss: How is this object similar to or different from the object we looked at as a group? Does it show the same moment in the story or a different one? How can you tell?

Follow-Up Activities for Your Classroom

For student in Grades 3 and higher:

Illustrating Buddhist and Hindu stories

Students work in small groups or as a whole class to create illustrations for an age-appropriate Buddhist or Hindu story. Students can create a book or exhibition to share their finished work. They can also discuss how this story is similar to or different from a story from their own traditions.

Theatrical storytelling

Students work in small groups to adapt an age-appropriate Buddhist or Hindu story into a play and act it out for each other. They can also discuss how this story is similar to or different from a story from their own traditions.

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.