Lesson Plan: Postage Stamp Contest
Provided by the Art Institute of Chicago Department of Museum Education

Suggested Grade Level: 4–8
Estimated Time: 2 hours

Introduction
The stories invoked by the symbolism of a statue of Vishnu incorporate elements of India's cultural history and values. Whenever the Hindu god Vishnu has been needed to solve a problem or restore order, he has appeared as an avatar in animal or human form. The 10 avatars of Vishnu originated in myths of creators, saviors, heroes, and historical figures. In this activity students write a story about a problem on earth. They imagine themselves as one of Vishnu's avatars or create another avatar for Vishnu who can solve the problem.

Lesson Objectives
- Analyze a work of art
- Gain an understanding of the concept of myth through stories relating to a Hindu god
- Create a compelling short story with character development and a plot that includes a conflict and a resolution

Key Terms
- myth
- Hindu
- Vishnu
- avatar
- dharma
- attribute
- conch shell
- chakra
- mudra
- plot
- character
- conflict
- resolution
Instructional Materials

• Description of the statue *Stories of the Avatars of Vishnu* from *Telling Images: Stories in Art* exhibition catalogue (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 1997). (Available in the Museum Shop)

• Dashavatar dance video clips showing the 10 avatars of Vishnu represented in a classic Hindu dance form

• Pencils
• Paper

Procedures

Discussion

• Have students examine the statue of Vishnu. Ask:
  
o What do you see? Encourage students to describe the object in detail.
  
o Is this a human or a god? What makes you think so?
  
o Why does this being have more than two arms? Explain that multiple limbs on Hindu deities indicate that they have supernatural powers.

• Followers distinguish Hindu gods by their attributes. Define this term and ask students to locate Vishnu's attributes in this representation (conch shell, chakra, mudras). Explain their significance.

• Hindus believe Vishnu is the preserver of the universe. Vishnu carries out his godly duties by descending to earth at various times in the form of one of 10 avatars or incarnations. In these forms, he works to protect humans and dharma (the order of the universe).

• Explain Vishnu's function in the Indian pantheon and help students visualize Vishnu's avatars by showing them the Dashavatar dance video clip.

• Have students read *Stories of Vishnu's Avatars*. Ask:
  
o What is your favorite story or avatar? Why?
  
o What problems or global issues on earth need solving or improving today?
  
o Which avatars of Vishnu do you think could help with these problems or issues?

Activity

• Define the basic elements of a short story, including character, plot, conflict, and resolution.

• Have students imagine a problem or global issue on earth that requires the aid of one of Vishnu's avatars (or an avatar of their making). Ask students to write a
two- to three-page version of the story. Encourage them to consider the following as they develop their account:

- Which features of the avatar are ideal for solving the problem?
- What events will lead to the crisis? How will the crisis be solved? What will be the result of its resolution?

**Evaluation**

Base students' achievements on their class discussions and written assignments. Have students illustrate a scene from their story. Encourage them to incorporate recognizable attributes into their avatar, including those they have been introduced to or others they imagine.

**Glossary**

**attribute (n)**
object or characteristic closely associated with or belonging to a specific person or thing; in art, often used to identify representations of known individuals, such as gods or saints

**avatar (n)**
incarnation or appearance of a god, who may assume many forms

**chakra (n)**
a powerful weapon that symbolizes dharma; its circular shape suggests that the circles of existence are assured by proper behavior

**conch shell (n)**
horn-shaped sea shell that produces a loud, resonant sound when blown

**dharma (n)**
rules of religious and social conduct that are one's duty to follow. Dharma is determined by religion (Hinduism, Buddhism, or Jainism) and birth (see caste); often capitalized

**Hindu/Hinduism (n/n or adj)**
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); a follower of Hinduism; of or characteristic of Hinduism
mudra \((n)\)

one of numerous symbolic hand gestures that indicate concepts, such as reassurance or meditation, of Hinduism and Buddhism

Vishnu \((n)\)

"the preserver;" supreme Hindu god; one of the three major Hindu gods, who include Brahma and Shiva. Vishnu has 10 avatars, or incarnations, savior gods who come to earth to save humanity from evil at different intervals during the cycles of existence.

Illinois Learning Standards

Fine Arts: 27

English Language Arts: 1–3