This dancing, elephant-headed creature is Ganesha, Hinduism’s Lord of Beginnings and Remover of Obstacles. Before beginning a school year, taking a trip, or starting a new business, Hindus pray to Ganesha for assistance, and he is prayed to at the start of all Hindu worship. Most temples have a separate area of worship dedicated to this elephant-headed god, and devotees first visit his image before proceeding to the principle deity’s shrine. Sculptures of Ganesha are often washed with water and adorned with flowers. Like most Hindu gods and goddesses (figure 42), Ganesha has multiple limbs, which indicate his supernatural power and cosmic nature. In some of his many hands, the god holds an attribute, an object closely associated with his personality or history. Other hands form mudras, symbolic hand gestures (figure 39). With his oversized elephant head and rotund stomach, Ganesha always amuses. He is most comic when he dances, as shown in the Art Institute image.
The most important of Ganesha’s attributes is his large elephant head. In one version of his myth, the goddess Parvati, lonely because her husband, the god Shiva, had been away for some years, created a human son Ganesha from the dirt left behind in her bath. As the years passed, the boy grew into a man who did not know his father but was devoted to the needs of his mother. One spring morning, Parvati asked Ganesha to stand guard at the entrance to her bath. A stranger approached and tried to enter, but Ganesha blocked his way. Angered, the stranger attacked Ganesha and ripped off his head and tossed it away. When Parvati came out of the bath, she found her son without his head and her husband (the stranger), who had returned from his long journey. She was filled with sorrow and anger at the sight. Shiva realized the grief he caused and promised to replace the head with that of the first creature he could find. His attendants, ganas (GUN-ahs), found an elephant sleeping by the river, and Shiva took this creature’s head and placed it on the neck of Parvati’s son, thus restoring him to life. Thereafter, Shiva called the young man Ganesha, lord of the ganas.

The god may be depicted with 2 to 16 arms. Here he is shown with eight, each holding one of his standard attributes. In one of his left hands, he holds a giant radish, which he is partial to eating. Radishes symbolize abundance, and Ganesha encourages his devotees to grow more radishes than they need—perhaps so that they will make offerings of the excess to him. Ganesha is also very fond of sweets, and he is often shown holding a bowl of fruits or sweetmeats (candied or crystallized fruits). One evening after eating a very large bowl of sweets, Ganesha was riding on his rat, his vehicle or means of conveyance, when a snake crossed their path. The rat bolted in fright, throwing Ganesha to the ground. When the elephant-headed god fell down, his belly burst open, and all the sweets rolled out. Patiently, Ganesha picked up all the sweets and placed them back into his stomach and then used the snake as a belt to hold them all in. The moon, who saw the incident from up in the sky, laughed at Ganesha, who then snapped off his tusk and hurled it in anger. In this image, Ganesha is shown holding the snake high over his head with one right and one left hand. He is also missing one of his tusks.
Ganesha is most often shown with one broken tusk, and when represented in this aspect, he is called *Ekadanta* (ek-uh-DAHN-tuh)—He of the Single Tusk. Another story tells of Ganesha breaking his tusk off in order to use it as a writing tool. A sage wanted to write down the famous Hindu epic the *Mahabharata* (mah-hah-BAR-ah-tuh) and asked the god Brahma to suggest a suitable scribe to write down his words. Brahma suggested Ganesha for the job, who used his tusk to complete the task.

In the crook of one of his right elbows, Ganesha grasps a large axe. This powerful weapon cuts through obstacles and frightens off demons and the malicious thoughts of those who wish to harm his devotees. With his middle right hand, Ganesha has formed a mudra gesture of power and, when associated with dance, assurance. Faintly in the center of his forehead, a third eye appears. Like all spiritual beings, Ganesha has three eyes, two for seeing the external world and one for spiritual sight. With this eye, Ganesha sees beyond the appearances of the physical world. Also present is Ganesha's rat, which rests on his left knee. The rat was once a wicked demon upon whom Ganesha stomped his large, heavy foot, turning him into a lowly rat. With his kind heart, the elephant-headed god took pity on the rat and made him his tiny transport. Although utterly different in size and nature, the two work well as a team. As the remover of all obstacles, Ganesha clears obstacles from his path, while the rat can wriggle into places where Ganesha would never fit—another means of avoiding obstacles and achieving goals.

---

**FIGURE 40**
Attributes of Dancing Ganesha

---

- snake
- third eye
- axe
- broken tusk
- mudra gesture of power/assurance
- radish or bowl of sweetmeats
- rat
COSMIC DANCING

One of Ganesha's roles is to entertain his parents, which he does by dancing. Shiva, Ganesha, and all the dwarfish ganas love to dance because the act of dancing is spiritually significant in Hinduism. It is related to the perpetual cycle of creation and destruction, called samsara (sahm-SAR-ah), that defines the universe and from which humans seek to escape. Yet, when Ganesha dances for his parents, he is in a comic aspect. One can imagine his oversized ears, his long trunk, and swelled stomach bouncing gently as the god moves his arms and legs. But even though Ganesha's form appears bulky, his movements seem to have buoyancy. He is often shown stepping to the right or left with one foot and thrusting the opposite hip outward, creating a strong sense of action. In this image, his dancing seems to be less sure, with his right leg dragging behind the left. Perhaps this slightly clumsy dance was meant to especially delight his parents.

ELEPHANTS AND INDIAN CULTURE

Besides being a comic figure, a protector, and a god of wisdom, Ganesha holds special significance among the Hindu deities because elephants have a popular place in Indian culture. From the earliest civilization in the Indus Valley, elephants were commonly represented and always had auspicious associations. The elephant brigade was important in the Indian army as the cavalry, and kings often fought from elephants' backs. The animal was also used as a battering ram. They are famous for their remarkable memory and intelligence and associated with clouds, probably due to their large, round gray shape and the way they spray water from their trunks. As clouds, they symbolize rainfall, fertility of crops, and prosperity. Scholars believe that Ganesha may have originated as a deity in a much older elephant cult and was assimilated by Hinduism when it emerged. He appears in the Buddhist and Jain faiths as well, although he always ranks below their gods. Because his image appears in many different religions, Ganesha's birthday is celebrated in modern India as a holiday for national unity.

Shiva

Shiva, Ganesha's father, is the god of destruction and regeneration, and his dance sets the rhythm of life and death that orders the universe. In the sculpture Shiva Nataraja (figure 41), the ring of fire represents the cyclical nature of existence—destruction and creation, death and rebirth. To the beat of the drum in Shiva's right hand, the universe is created, while the flame in his left hand sparks the fiery ring of destruction that surrounds him. Shiva's other hands assume mudras—the raised hand means "fear not," while the other, pointing down toward his raised foot, signals release from ignorance. Shiva's other foot, planted on the back of a demon-dwarf, stamps out ignorance, which hinders the path to enlightenment.

FIGURE 41
India, Tamil Nadu, Thanjavur.
Shiva Nataraja, Chola dynasty, 10th/11th century.
Bronze; h: 22 1/4 in. (56.4 cm)
Kate S. Buckingham Endowment, 1965.1130
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME</th>
<th>FUNCTION</th>
<th>APPEARANCE</th>
<th>VEHICLE</th>
<th>RELATION TO OTHER GODS AND GODDESSES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brahma</td>
<td>The source, the seed, and the creator of all beings in this world; great spiritual teacher; part of the Trinity of Hindu gods (though not widely worshipped)</td>
<td>Shown with four old, bearded faces looking in four directions; meditative, with eyes half-closed; has four arms</td>
<td>Swan, representing decision-making abilities</td>
<td>Chose Saraswathi as his consort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(BRAHM-mah)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shiva</td>
<td>The destroyer; destroys in order to renew and regenerate; originally a mountain god; part of the Trinity of Hindu gods; the most powerful and popular Hindu god</td>
<td>Shown white with a blue neck, or all dark blue; has third eye between brows; young or middle aged; has four arms; shown seated or dancing; may be worshipped as a phallic symbol, an aesthetic, or teacher</td>
<td>Bull</td>
<td>Chose Parvathi as his consort, whom he is very close to (they are often depicted together); father of Skanda and Ganesha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(SHIH-vah)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vishnu</td>
<td>Preserver of the universe and the embodiment of love, truth, and mercy; originally connected with the sun; part of the</td>
<td>Dark blue; depicted with four arms, usually standing or in a resting posture; wears a necklace and garland of flowers</td>
<td>Garuda, the bird or Ananta, the cosmic serpent</td>
<td>Lakshmi is his consort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(VISH-noo)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saraswathi</td>
<td>Goddess of learning and light</td>
<td>Depicted as a beautiful and graceful goddess in white clothes, seated on a lotus; has four hands</td>
<td>Swan or peacock</td>
<td>Consort of Brahma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(sar-uh-SVAT-ee)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parvati</td>
<td>Mother goddess</td>
<td>Shown seated by Shiva or in the company of her children; sometimes shown seated on a pedestal, or as a lion or tiger with four hands and a cheerful facer</td>
<td>(No vehicle)</td>
<td>Consort of Shiva; mother of Skanda and Ganesha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(PAHR-vah-tee)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakshmi</td>
<td>Goddess of wealth and provider of all materials comforts</td>
<td>Shown seated on a lotus flower with four hands; sometimes shown showering gold coins upon her devotees</td>
<td>Owl</td>
<td>Consort of Vishnu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(LUCK-shmee)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ganesha</td>
<td>Lord of obstacles and impediments; one of the most popular Hindu gods</td>
<td>Elephant-headed; has one tusk, four arms, and is usually seated or standing; has third eye; loves sweets; hyperactive</td>
<td>Rat</td>
<td>Son of Shiva and Parvathi; younger brother of Skanda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(guh-NEsh-ah)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skanda</td>
<td>Named commander in chief of Shiva's armies</td>
<td>Shown with six heads and 12 arms or with one head and two arms; beautiful, intelligent; shown seated on his knees or a pedestal, or riding his vehicle</td>
<td>Peacock</td>
<td>Son of Shiva and Parvathi; older brother of Ganesha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(SKAHN-duh)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 42**
Selected Hindu gods and goddesses. Brahma is the supreme being. All gods and goddesses are aspects of Brahma. (See [http://hinduwebsites.com/hinduism/pantheon.htm](http://hinduwebsites.com/hinduism/pantheon.htm) for more information.)
Classroom Applications
Transparency 11

India, Uttar Pradesh. Dancing Ganesha, 10th century

1. Ganesha's Attributes
Ganesha is surrounded by many attributes that tell his stories and describe his personality. Discuss the meaning of the word “attribute,” an inherent characteristic or an object closely associated with or belonging to a specific person or thing. Have students identify Ganesha's attributes and have them analyze what these attributes tell us about Ganesha. As they identify the attributes provide them with information about Ganesha from the object description.

Which parts of the figure are human? Which parts are animal-like? Why does Ganesha have the head of an elephant? We associate certain characteristics with specific animals, such as the sly fox, brave lion, and slow turtle. What characteristics do we associate with elephants? Ask students to imagine they have the head of an elephant. What are some things that you could do as an elephant that you cannot do as a human?

Many of the objects Ganesha holds have symbolic meaning. They either relate to an event in Ganesha’s life or represent a particular characteristic of Ganesha’s personality. What does his large belly and the large radish he holds tell you about Ganesha? How does the tusk and snake relate to the story of his belly bursting open? What does the axe, Ganesha’s many arms, and the mudra of his middle right hand tell you about his personality? Why does Ganesha dance?

Have students think about the objects or attributes that represent themselves. Instruct them to gather images of these objects from magazines and catalogues to create a self-portrait collage. Have students place a picture of themselves amid a collage of their symbolic objects.

State Learning Standards: 2A, 25A, 26B

2. Creature for a Day
Encourage students to choose an animal they like. What qualities do they admire in this animal? Have them paint, draw, or sculpt an imaginary figure that combines both human and animal features. Imagine what a normal day would be like for their fantastical creature and have them write a journal entry in the voice of this creature. Where would the creature live? What would it eat? How would it walk or move about? What could it do that you cannot do? What are a typical day’s activities? Have students share their pictures and journal entries with the class.

State Learning Standards: 3B, 26B
3. Body Talk
Much of our communication comes from body language—gestures, postures, and facial features. Ask students what Ganesha is communicating to us through his body language. Ganesha likes to dance. What did the artist include in the sculpture that shows his rhythm? Find a selection of music that matches the sculpture. Have students dance to the music as Ganesha would.

Assign different emotions to the students, such as excitement, sadness, pride, fear, and joy. Have them act out these emotions without sound in front of the class and have the other students identify the emotion.

State Learning Standards: 25A, 25B

4. Remover of Obstacles
In Hindu tradition, Ganesha is the remover of obstacles, the bestower of success, and the god of beginnings. Read a variety of stories about Ganesha to determine which skills he uses to overcome challenges. (See Student Bibliography.) Ask each student to think about an obstacle they currently face or have faced in the past. Instruct them to write a story in which they overcame that obstacle on their own or with the help of a friend. Have students illustrate an episode of the story that represents their challenge and then another that demonstrates their success at tackling that challenge. Bind the illustrations and stories together in the form of a book. Allow students to read their stories with the class if they so choose.

State Learning Standards: 2A, 3B, 25A, 26B

5. The Hindu Gods
Hindus honor many gods, including Ganesha. Learn about Hinduism and other Hindu gods, such as Shiva and Vishnu (figure 42). Have students create a drawing of a Hindu god and share what they have learned with the class.

State Learning Standards: 5A, 17B, 18A, 26B

6. Geography Jeopardy
This statue of Ganesha is from Uttar Pradesh. Locate the continent of Asia, the country of India, and the region of Uttar Pradesh (north-central India) on a world map. Describe the location and topography of this country and region. Create a table listing India and the countries located nearby. On the table, include the following categories about each country: capital, largest city, major languages spoken, major religions, currency, climate, size. Assign one of these countries to each student or group of students and have them research their assigned country. Have students share the information they learn and fill out the table of countries as a class. (See Student Bibliography.)

Ask students to imagine that they are traveling through one of these countries. Based on the research they have gathered, consider what the land looks like. Is it hot, cold, dry, or rainy? What kind of plants and animals are there? What kind of people live there? What do they eat? What kind of adventures might one have? Have the students write a journal entry describing their journey, including their expectations and reactions to their travels. Have them illustrate one episode of their adventures. Compile the illustrations and stories in a book about the region.

State Learning Standards: 3B, 17B, 26B