



c. 1760

Opaque watercolor on paper

7 15/16 x 11 5/8 inches (20.2 x 29.5 cm)

Indian

Purchased with the Edgar Viguers Seeler
Fund, 1976, 1976-15-1

LET'S LOOK

Look closely at this painting.
How many animals do you see?

What kind of animals are they?
What colors are they?

What colors are used in this
painting? Are they natural
looking? Why do you think
the artist chose to show
certain colors for the different
animals in the composite?

There are two human-like figures
in this painting. One represents
good, and the other, evil.
How does the artist make these
characteristics evident?

How does an elephant made of
different animals affect the story
being told? Would this story look
different had the artist chose to
depict a more common elephant?

DIVINE RIDER ON A COMPOSITE ELEPHANT PRECEDED BY A DEMON

In this lively little painting, the artist has portrayed India's most beloved animal, the elephant, in a highly imaginative way. The creature seems to be made up of the entire natural and supernatural animal kingdom. Mounted by a divine rider, this elephant charges across the page chasing a similarly composed, evil-looking figure. Such interactions between the forces of good and evil are a common motif in Hindu literature and art.

The rider atop the elephant is a deity who carries an anuska, or elephant goad, an instrument used to drive and direct the animal. The rider can be identified as a divine being by his crown, which is tipped with three lotus blossoms. The lotus flower has long been associated with divinity in Hindu and Buddhist art. The Asian lotus grows in still pools and swamps, and sends up a shoot that blossoms above the murky water, an apt metaphor for divine life blossoming above the ordinary earth. The nimbus, or circle of light, visible around the rider's face is another mark of his heavenly nature.

Within the contours of the elephant figure, real and mythical animals engage in chaotic tumble. Several lion-like beasts seem to be nibbling on other animals. Green, sharp-toothed dragons chew and gnaw at each other. Two stags lock horns on the elephant's flank. Tiny rabbits make up the beast's feet. If we can overcome the sensation that they may be crushed by the weight of the creature, we can enjoy the artist's humor as these swift little animals guide the gait of the lumbering beast.

ELEPHANTS IN INDIAN ART

Elephants have been prominently featured in Indian art from the earliest times. On seals excavated from Indus Valley civilization sites, elephant imagery is common and seems already to have an

auspicious meaning. There are murals showing elephants frolicking in pools of water on the rock-cut monasteries of Ajanta, around 475 CE. Elephants often appear lined up in rows at the base of temple walls, as if supporting the structure. They adorn entrances to domestic buildings, and are carved in the legs and backs of chairs and thrones of kings.

The animal's shape, temperament, and strength have all contributed to its symbolic interpretations. There are many different names for the elephant in the ancient Sanskrit language. Among them is the word *naga*, which means both mountain and snake, a good description of the huge body and amazing trunk of the creature. The elephant is associated with clouds, probably due to its round, gray shape and the way elephants spray water from their trunks like raindrops. As clouds, they are symbolic of heaven, rainfall, the fertility of crops, and prosperity in general. They are also symbols for the four cardinal directions.

INDIAN MINIATURE PAINTING

The depiction of elephants in Indian art was given new impetus when Muslim Mughal rulers conquered northern India in the mid-1500s. The greatest ruler was Akbar, who ruled all of northern and central India from 1556–1605.

Though illiterate, Akbar was a great patron of literature and the arts. He brought from Persia two master painters who introduced native Hindu court painters to the Persian miniature painting tradition. Akbar had at one time more than 1,000 painters at his court at Agra, and amassed a library of 24,000 volumes.

In addition to supporting the arts of philosophy, painting, and poetry, Akbar was a fearsome and successful general, and had a great love for elephants. One hundred and one elephants were set aside for his personal use, and an enormous entourage was employed for the stabling, feeding, and exercising of the beasts. Akbar was a great connoisseur and rider of elephants. Because his influence on Indian painting was so strong, elephants became increasingly popular in Mughal-style miniature painting.

STYLE AND TECHNIQUE

The style and technique of this painting is descended from early Mughal tradition. Akbar's influence spread to outlying Rajput courts which were under his dominion. Rajput rulers began to commission

small paintings bound in volumes for meditation and aesthetic pleasure. They employed local Hindu or Muslim artists, facilitating the development of local styles. This painting was made in a court in Kota, Rajasthan, around 1760; long after Akbar's reign but while India was still under Mughal rule. The meaning of this composite beast is unclear. Persian miniature paintings dating several centuries earlier contain images of composite beasts, and composite elephants were a known subject in Mughal painting. Perhaps this anonymous artist was simply creating a complex and humorous image to delight his patron.

AN ANIMATED SCENE

Some scholars have suggested that these images demonstrate the dominion of the heavenly world over the natural world and, by inference, the dominion of a local ruler over his land and people. If this painting takes its inspiration from an earlier Mughal example, the rider may represent the glorious Mughal dynasty whose reign triumphed over the often warring native Indian Rajput kingdoms and brought peace to northern India for more than two hundred years. Whatever the intention, this artist has created an animated scene, which captivates both the eye and the mind of the viewer.

LET'S COMPARE

Probably the most famous depiction of an elephant in Indian art is the elephant-headed god Ganesha. Universally popular as the god of auspiciousness and good fortune, images of Ganesha are found throughout Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain art. Ganesha's composite form incorporates the head of an elephant, the body of a boy, usually four arms, and a large belly. He can be thought of as the union of heaven, represented by his divine body born of the god, and earth, represented by his elephant head.

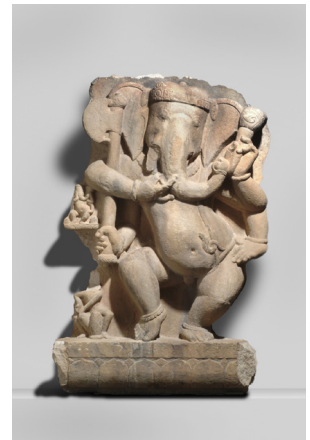


*Divine Rider on a Composite
Elephant Preceded by a Demon*
c. 1760

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Indian

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Fund, 1976, 1976-15-1



Dancing Ganesha
c. 750

Sandstone

Height: 50 inches (127 cm)

Indian

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

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

ELEMENTARY: CREATE A WALL-SIZE GROUP COLLAGE

In each painting of a composite elephant in Indian art, the animals, humans, or beasts that fill the form are unique creations and combinations. Using an opaque projector, cast the elephant image onto a large, wall-size piece of paper, and trace its outline. If no projector is available, the art teacher could draw a nearly life-size outline of an elephant. Let each student create his or her own creature to place within the elephant form. Let the students arrange the creatures on the paper, deciding about overlapping areas, superimposed creatures, etc.

MIDDLE SCHOOL: COMPOSITE FACES

Show the students the composite elephant. If available, also show a composite face by Giuseppe Arcimboldo. Bring in flowers, leaves, fruits, and vegetables that have all sorts of interesting shapes, and discuss how the students can design an animal using botanical forms. Make lists of plant forms that could be the different parts of the animal. Then, have the students sketch each flower, leaf, fruit, and vegetable. The final product can be a drawing, painting, a collage made from the sketches, or a work in clay.

HIGH SCHOOL: DESIGN A COMPOSITE FIGURE FROM AN IMAGINARY ANCIENT CULTURE

Creatures composed of a variety of animal and human parts are found in the art of many ancient cultures. The Greeks had the winged horse, Pegasus. The Egyptians had Anubis, the jackal-headed god of the dead, and the Sphinx. Have the students look through books on ancient cultures for other beasts and to read about their symbolic meanings. Then, have each student design a composite beast to be deity of an imaginary ancient culture. The final piece may be two- or three-dimensional, and should include a paragraph about the imaginary composite deity and what its role was for the ancient society.