

Activity: Asian Narrative Match

Please note: These activities were originally designed for use in the Museum galleries. As written here, they reflect adaptations for classroom use.

Classroom resources related to India are available to local teachers for free loan.

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Recommended grade level: 5 – 12

Use images of the following sculptures. (These may be downloaded from this website.)

- **Dancing Ganesha**
Possibly Madhya Pradesh, mid 10th to 11th century
Sandstone; 85.2.1
 - **Varaha**
Possibly northeastern Rajasthan, southern Haryana, or Uttar Pradesh, Mathura region,
Late 11th century
Phyllite; 82.5.1
 - **Krishna/Saint Sambandar**
Tamil Nadu, Kaveri delta region, late 12th or early 13th century
Bronze; 97.8
 - **Buddha Calling the Earth to Witness**
Possibly Burma, 13th century
yellow pyrophyllite; 97.14.1
- or
- **The Offering of the Four Bowls to Buddha**
Gandhara Region, 2nd century CE
Schist; 90.35

Materials:

- Synopses of stories related to these sculptures
- Optional: Catalogue of the exhibition, *Fashioning the Divine*, available for purchase from the Ackland Art Museum (\$15)

Time needed: 30 – 45 minutes









Objectives:

- Make connections between written and visual “texts.”
- Recognize choices that artists make.

Instructions:

1. Divide the students into 4 groups. Tell them that each group will receive a short story that is represented in one of the works of art on view. Talk about how a story might be translated into a sculpture. (Will you see the entire story? How would the artist decide which scene to show us?)
2. After letting one person in each group read the story aloud to the group, they will look for clues that will help them find the work of art.
3. Students will walk around the room, looking at all the images, until they can identify their work of art. They will place the story face down next to the image. Make sure that the reproductions are spread out so students have room to cluster around each one.
4. As a large group, discuss how each group identified the sculpture and ask one member of the group to TELL (not read) the story. If no one is willing to tell the story, the teacher may help out. Students should mention specific areas of the sculpture that are mentioned in the story.

Learning style(s) addressed:

logical 123	kinesthetic 	musical 	spatial 	linguistic 	interpersonal 	intrapersonal 	naturalistic 	existential 
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How Ganesha Got his Head

When Shiva (Hindu deity of destruction) was away, his wife Parvati created a son from clay in her garden. She named him Ganesha (gun-ESH-uh). One day she told Ganesha to guard the doorway while she took a bath. That day, Shiva returned from his long journey and was anxious to see his wife. Not being acquainted with Ganesha, Shiva drew his sword and cut off the boy's head when he was denied entry to the bath. When Parvati learned what had happened, she demanded that Shiva find a head for Ganesha. Shiva gladly took the head of an elephant who offered it to him. With the head, Ganesha gained the strength and wisdom that an elephant possesses. Ganesha is a deity who removes obstacles and provides good beginnings for new activities.

Ganesha has 4 or 6 hands and usually holds an ax, a rope, and some sweets. He extends one hand in blessing.

His 'vehicle' is a rat.

He has a broken tusk.

Varaha (Vishnu in his Boar Incarnation)

(incarnation = bodily form of a supernatural being)

When the earth was submerged by a great flood, it was captured by demons. Vishnu (the Hindu deity who preserves the world) took the form of a wild boar. (A boar has several advantages: a keen sense of smell, strong tusks, and he is a fierce fighter.) He dashed across heaven and dove into the waters, where he tracked down the earth with his powerful sense of smell. After 1000 years wrestling the serpent demon who held the earth prisoner, Vishnu killed the demon. He then rose to the water's surface, bringing with him the earth, which he lifted from the depths with his tusks.

Vishnu's four hands hold:

- a conch shell indicating spread of the divine sound "Om"
- a discus, a weapon, symbol of the wheel of time
- a mace, indicating power
- a lotus, symbol of life and purity

Vishnu often wears the King's tiara on his head, indicating power. The earth takes the form of Mother Earth in this sculpture.

Krishna/Saint Sambandar

Thousands of years ago, the people in a small village in India would nap in the afternoon because it was too hot to work outside. One boy in the village, Krishna, just loved butter, and while everyone slept he crept up to their butter pots and ate until he had his fill. One day he got caught. His mother, Yashoda, was so angry with him that she tied him to the post in front of their house where they usually tied cattle. The villagers looked with amazement at Krishna,

for as soon as Yashoda tightened the rope, it loosened, and an unusual golden light glowed around Krishna's head. When she heard her neighbors' gasps of amazement, Yashoda looked up and saw the halo of light around Krishna's head. Realizing that Krishna was blessed and should be honored, everyone in the village set aside a portion of butter just for him. This made him dance for joy.

Krishna is known for his bravery in destroying evil powers. As a child, he is usually shown as a fat baby or a playful, mischievous boy. Sometimes he holds a butter bowl in one hand and a flute in the other. He loves to dance.

Recent scholarship suggests that this figure might also be the child saint Sambandar, best known for a mystical experience that occurred when he was three years old. While his father performed his religious duties at a local Shiva temple, Sambandar waited outside. His father returned to find his son holding a golden cup with drops of milk dribbling down his chin. When asked where he got the milk, Sambandar pointed to an image of Parvati, Shiva's consort. To commemorate this event, artists in southern India typically based images of Sambandar on those of the dancing Krishna.

Only the position of the right hand identified one from the other: Krishna's right hand extends, palm up, in a gesture of protection; Sambandar typically points toward the deity (Parvati.)

The Buddha

Born a prince, Siddhartha Gautama was protected behind palace walls and not allowed to leave. As he grew, he began to wonder about the world outside, and set out with his horse to nearby towns. He saw four things he had never seen before: an old man leaning on a stick; a sick man in pain; a human corpse being carried to a funeral; and a very poor holy man. Realizing that every human suffers, he decided to look for the reasons why people suffer so that he could help end suffering. He shaved his head, gave up all signs of wealth (jewelry and fancy clothes), left his family and home, and went to seek the answer. After many years of searching, he sat beneath a bodhi tree (a kind of fig tree) and meditated until he finally understood the reasons. At that point he became known as the Buddha (which means *enlightened* or *awake*).

The Buddha is often shown

- Seated in a calm pose of meditation with downcast eyes and a peaceful smile
- With long earlobes to indicate the heavy jewelry he wore in his youth
- With a bump on the top of his head to indicate his extra knowledge, and sometimes a flame to indicate spiritual energy
- With the tight curls that grew back after he shaved off his long hair