



# muse for the Arts

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DEVYANI JAYAKAR

## *Endorsed by religion*

Hinduism persuasively endorses the use of imagery in religion and worship. The *Vishnu Samhita*, an ancient ritual text, says that an idol or an image is a kind of device for harnessing the eye and the mind on god. "Without a form, how can god be meditated upon? When there is nothing for the mind to attach itself to, where will it fix itself? Therefore, the

wise will meditate on some form, remembering, however, that the form is a superimposition, and not a reality". Throughout history, the didactic of religion has been a heady opiate - demanding unswerving allegiance, and the willing suspension of disbelief.

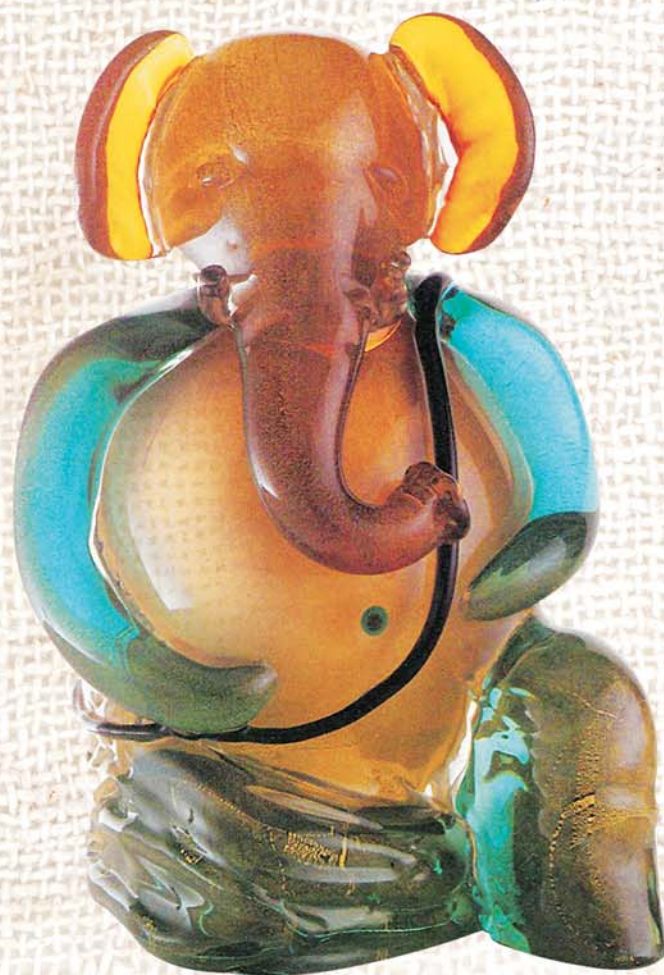
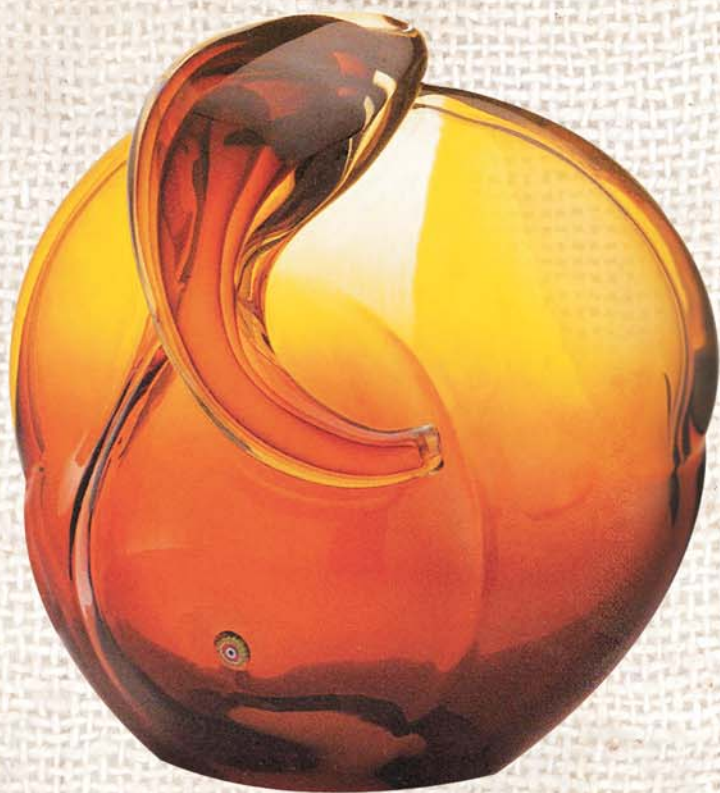
Symbolism plays a great role in the religion and art of India. The Indian mind is completely comfortable with its expression of images, knowing and accepting that everything is illusory anyway. At the same time, images are to Indians,

what numbers are to mathematician. They are a means to comprehending eternal truths.

In the midst of all this abundance of imagery, is the strange looking elephant-headed god with a child's body, instantly recognisable as Ganesha to those with even a nodding acquaintance with Indian mythology. Acceptance of his form as the divine force, stills the rational mind and its doubts, forcing one to look beyond outward appearances.

As Dr. Devdutt Patnaik says, this adored god possesses neither

*Murano Ganeshas  
created by Anjolie  
Ela Menon and  
Gayatri Ruia*





Courtesy: Sangita Kathiawada

Krishna's lyrical appeal, nor Shiva's monastic ascetism, nor even Durga's primaeval power. This is not a transcendental, distant, high god. This is the god of the common man, sympathetic to mundane aspirations of power, pleasure and prosperity in the material world.

It is against this diverse backdrop, that a formidable body of Ganesha-based art has developed over the centuries, ranging from sculpture, to paintings and even literature.

### *Sculpture and painting*

Paul Martin-Dubost, in his scholarly work *Ganesa*, notes that the earliest representations of Ganesha were before Christ, probably made of perishable materials, such as butter and other foodstuff. These were followed by terracottas, fashioned by hand. The earliest stone sculpture dates back to the 2nd century AD, while the first sculpture in round from Karnataka has been traced to the 5th

*Jamini Roy's  
Ganesha with Shiva  
and Parvati*

century. A representation in bronze has been dated to the 9th century. Subsequent to this, Ganesha sculptures have been made in sandstone, serpentine, ivory, granite, wood, semiprecious stones, silver, crystal, *panchadhatu* (an alloy of five metals) and *ashtadhatu* (an alloy of eight) Ganeshas have been depicted sitting, standing, dancing, writing, playing musical instruments and flanked by consorts or other deities. Ganesha has had multiple hands, heads, and various creatures as carriers.

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From rock sanctuaries to temples, from Kashmir to Sri Lanka, and Gujarat to Orissa, Ganesha imagery has been all pervasive. Soft stone Ganeshas from the 9th to the 11th centuries have minute details in the ornamentation of the idol, and in a Bhubaneswar temple, even the veins in the ears of the stone Ganesha are visible. Ganesha appears on the outer wall friezes of the world famous





heritage site, Khajuraho. The Jains, too, incorporated Ganesha in their pantheon and occasionally placed him alongside Mahavir. In the resplendent *thangka* paintings of Nepal, Ganesha appears alongside the Buddha. Ganesha carvings exist on the walls of Jain temples in Rajasthan, including those at Mount Abu, Ranakpur and Palitana. Buddhist monasteries in Ladakh and the high chamber of the Maharajah of Travancore depict Ganesha on their frescoes. In Greece, Janus, the mythological god after whom the month of January was named, has the head of an elephant. Sometimes, he is depicted as a two-headed deity.

The various schools of miniature painting, such as the Nurpur, Chamba, Mewar, Bilaspur and most of all Kangra, have all depicted Ganesha. Even the ancient Indian playing card game of *ganjifa* occasionally had the image of Ganesha on the cards. In Afghanistan, Tibet, China, Japan

*Left: Badri Narayan's Ganesha painting  
Right: One more Murano Ganesha from Anjolie Ela Menon and Gayatri Ruia*

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and Sri Lanka as well as parts of South East Asia - Cambodia, Sumatra and Java, Polynesia, and Mongolia - Ganesha appears like a leitmotif.

### **Literature and theatre**

Ganesha finds mention in the venerated *Rigveda*. Appropriately, the scribe of the *Mahabharata*, arguably the largest epic the world has ever known, is the subject matter of much literature himself, and is invoked in much the same manner as the Muses of Greek mythology. The oldest literary references to Ganesha are by hymn composers, poets, playwrights and even mathematicians. The 8th century Tamil poetess, Auvaiyar, composed *Vinayaka Ahaval*, a 72-verse devotional poem where she described Ganesha's divinity. From the 12th century to the present day, however, it is in the Marathi language that the strongest evidence of lyrical fervour is to be found. The 13th century poet saint Dnyaneshwar opens his *Dyaneshwari*, the colossal





interpretation of the *Bhagavad-Gita* with an ardent laudatory 23 verse invocation to Ganesha. The poet of Wai, Dhundikavi, wrote the *Chintamani* in Marathi, describing the epic of Ganesha and his marriage to the goddess Sharada. King Sarfoji, ruler of Thanjavur from 1798 to 1832, great scholar and founder of the Saraswati Mahal Library, composed the *Ganeshalilanavanataka*, a five-act play in Marathi based on some of Ganesha's exploits.

The 19th century poet Gopal Mairala of Vadodara composed *Ganeshavijaya* in Sanskrit, a six-act play based on Ganesha. The Peshwa of Pune, Balaji Bajirao, composed a magnificent poem in Sanskrit, entitled *Ganeshkutakamrta*, set in different metres. Even today, Ganesha is the subject of the *Dashavtar* tradition of theatre in Maharashtra.

So, for almost 2000 years, writers, playwrights, poets and philosophers have spared no words in composing panegyrics to the elephant headed god, even casting him as their protagonist.

Above & Opposite:  
Gopal Adivrekar's  
series of Ganesha  
paintings

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### Contemporary work

Several contemporary artists have executed an entire Ganesha series. Gopal Adivrekar has been fascinated by the form of Ganesha since childhood. He says that it is possible to see this form even in everyday life, such as a coconut, areca nuts, vegetables, the roots of the mandara tree, an apple, or a kitchen vessel.

For Udayraj Gadnis, painting is tapasya, or a meditative process. He is neither the doer nor the creator, nor the source of these paintings - only the medium. In his 40 Ganesha paintings, he seeks to invoke the divine and fill space with an aura of sacredness. Moreover, his paintings are painted in the most auspicious months of the year, at a set *mahurat*, to enhance maximum spiritual vibrations, which invoke Ganesha. This will sound familiar to those who are acquainted with the time-honoured way of setting gems in *navgraha* jewellery. This takes a whole year to make, simply because each of the nine gemstones is set at a





predetermined auspicious time in the year based on planetary positions, in order to enhance its beneficial properties.

Unsung artists have shown considerable creativity in illustrating Ganeshas using only the *Devnagari* letter Aum (which indicates the entire cosmos) for strokes. Calligraphists, too, have created Ganeshas entirely by inscribing his names in various styles and configurations. M.F.Husain, Badri Narayan, Subhash Awchat, Jamini Roy and Anjolie Ela Menon have all lent their creativity to styling Ganeshas.

Saryu Doshi, ex Director, NGMA, says, "Many artists have different and beautiful interpretations of Ganeshas, to meet the demand of the market."

Ganeshas appear to be both figuratively as well as literally omnipresent. The Ganeshas industry churns out calendars, postcards, bags, T-shirts, jewellery and miniatures, all for a Ganeshas hungry public. International porcelain and crystal brands such as Lladro and Daum,

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have already released Ganeshas figurines in their signature style for the Indian market. Even a predominantly Islamic country like Indonesia has the Ganeshas image adorning 20,000 its rupiah currency notes!

### *Western media*

There are several references to Ganeshas in the media as well. In *Monkeybone*, Jumbo the elephant god is loosely based on Ganeshas. In *The Simpsons*, Apu is a devoted follower of Ganeshas. Ganeshas appeared in the *Mighty Max* episode 'Good Golly Ms. Kali', under the control of Naga. The film *Garden State* begins with an invocation to Ganeshas, and the Ganeshas mantra is sung several times during a traumatic event. The video game *Postal 2*, features a grocery store named 'Lucky Ganesh', which is not at all unfamiliar in the Indian context. In Neil Gaiman's novel *American Gods*, Ganeshas appears as a character who provides assistance. And in the game *Dreamblade*, the Thunder Sultan figure



An exclusive, limited edition,  
porcelain Ganesha from Lladro



greatly resembles Ganesha, though  
with two trunks and only two arms.

### *Source of the inspiration*

Is it the personal religious conviction of the artist which inspires work on Ganesha? Or is it simply the lure of lucre which dictates this choice? As everybody knows, Ganesha is big business. Or is there something about the form of Ganesha itself, which lends itself to artistic interpretation? "Probably true," says Niloufer Kapadia of The Fourth Floor Art Gallery where minimalistic interpretations of Ganesha, almost western in their sensibility, abound. The truth probably lies somewhere in between mantras and money. However, Ganesha solely as "art for art's sake" seems to be non-existent. Museum collections of contemporary art do not reflect the all pervasive presence of Ganesha in the public eye, and archeological relics have significance, only in so far as they are representative of certain periods in history. Ganesha has always been associated with some degree of religious conviction, either in the mind of the artist or that of the buyer. As in other parts of the world, much of artistic content has been dictated by religion.

Maybe the Italian glass master Antonio Da Ros of Gino Cenedese Glass Works, Venice, who executed the Murano Ganeshas designed by Anjolie Ela Menon, (conceptualised by Gayatri Ruia) sums it up best. 'There is spirituality in art, and art in prayer'.

