

GANESHA – The Lord of Beginnings and Remover of Obstacles

The son of Shiva and Parvati, Ganesha (or Ganesh) has an elephant head with a curved trunk and big ears atop the pot-bellied body of a four-armed man. He is the lord of success and the destroyer of evils and obstacles, worshiped as the god of education, wisdom, and wealth. Worshippers also regard him as the destroyer of vanity, selfishness, and pride, the personification of the material universe in all its manifestations.

An elephant's trunk has the strength to uproot a tree as well as the finesse to pick up a needle. Ganesh's trunk symbolizes that the wise person has both immense strength and fine discrimination. Ganesh has large ears--the wise person hears all.

He has four hands. In one hand he holds a lotus, the symbol of enlightenment. In another hand, he holds a hatchet, representing the old karma, the accumulated good and bad of past deeds that get cut when enlightenment comes.

Ganesh's third hand holds a bowl of laddus (Indian sweet-meats), the rewards of a wise life. Ganesh is never shown eating the laddus, as the wise never partake of the rewards of their deeds. The fourth hand is shown blessing the people; the wise person wishes the best for everyone.

In Hinduism, many deities have an animal that acts as the vahana or vehicle to carry the god or goddess wherever they wish to go. Ganesh's vahana is a mouse. Though it seems odd to put a deity with the head of an elephant on the back of the mouse, the mouse underscores Ganesh's connection with knowledge and the removal of obstacles. An elephant is not impeded by obstacles because of its enormous size. It simply pushes through barriers and keeps walking forward effortlessly. A mouse can slide through even the smallest of cracks and reach places an elephant cannot. When caught by strong ropes, an elephant will be trapped if it cannot yank itself free. A mouse, however, will slowly gnaw its way through the binding and escape. As such, elephants are associated with the effortless and unrelenting pursuit of enlightenment. The mouse represents the hard work that is needed to cut through the many things that tie a person to ignorance and keep them from reaching wisdom and enlightenment.

THE STORY OF GANESH

The most common story of Ganesh's birth is depicted in the Hindu scripture Shiva Purana. In this epic, the goddess Parvati creates a boy from the dirt she has washed off her body. She assigns him the task of guarding the entrance to her bathroom. When her husband Shiva returns, he is surprised to find the strange boy denying him access. In a rage, Shiva decapitates him.

Parvati breaks down in grief. To soothe her, Shiva sends out his warriors to fetch the head of any sleeping being who is found facing the north. They return with the severed head of an elephant, which is attached to the boy's body. Shiva revives the boy, making him the leader of his troops. Shiva also ordains that people will worship Ganesha and invoke his name before undertaking any venture.

CREATING GANESH FOR YOGA GARDEN

In April of 2018, at the end of Yoga Garden's first season, my sister asked me to transform a corner of the garden that had not yet been designed, except for the semi-circular bench facing the wall. Although I knew nothing about the deity, Ganesh's image (in the form of a mosaic) came to mind immediately, and I spent the next twelve months bringing him to life.

In research, I learned why he was the perfect deity for Yoga Garden. As the remover of obstacles, it seemed appropriate that he would dance on this wall to show everyone who looked upon him what lay on the other side. Indeed, if one were to see through this particular wall and the obstacles that lay just beyond, one could experience the beauty of the sunrise on the Sea of Cortez surrounded by the desert mountains of the East Cape in the very early morning when the night sky still sings its magical song.

Using a combination of mirror, glass, and ceramic tiles, and natural objects like stones and shells, I spent many months experimenting with how to create Ganesh. It was like putting together a big jigsaw puzzle, trying lots of pieces in different spots before finding the right one. For example, I picked up all the shells on the Oregon Coast, thinking to use them to create the beach beneath Ganesh's feet. But once I'd finished Ganesh's head and started to work on his ears, he took on a mind of his own, refusing any attempt to create his ears with pre-formed tiles. When I laid a piece of shell on his ear, I knew it was right...after all, what does one do with a seashell, but hold it up to one's ear to hear the ocean?

The blade of Ganesh's hatchet is formed of sea glass, symbolizing (for me) the care one must use when wielding such a weapon to cut through obstacles, which could shatter like glass and become more dangerous than before. The rocks and stones representing the East Cape came from our local beach here in Los Barriles. The crown chakra is the bottom of a rose' wine bottle backed by a mirror.

In addition to including the traditional symbols associated with Ganesh (the bowl of laddus, the lotus flower—which I found for fifty cents in my local thrift store—the hatchet, and the mouse), I included some very personal items in the mosaic. The large crystal in his forehead was found in Peru when Jackie and I spent nine days in the Andes hiking the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu in 2003. Ganesh wears a bracelet containing a charm that says "Joy" (my daughter's middle name) next to a square green charm that she made in copper craft at summer camp when she was 10. The role of music in my life is depicted in the night sky. His pearl necklace was found on a trip to Shanghai years ago.

Ganesh's mouse, the seven chakras, and my signature piece were created with the help of my best friend and potter, Arlene (Red Mud Ceramics), who helped me make the clay forms, then glazed and fired them for our mosaic. My favorite is the heart chakra, backed by a mirror that reflects both the garden and the face of the viewer as the world sees it.

Ganesh is my second mosaic. My first mosaic, the Earth Chakra stepping stone in Yoga Garden, was created in a workshop to learn the art. It may seem crazy that I'd go from a simple stepping stone to such a large and detailed piece, but Ganesh was an inspiration to me every step of the way. I learned so much about the art, the deity himself, and my own ability to overcome obstacles in the year it took to bring him to life. I hope that everyone who gazes upon him sees enlightenment, joy, and a way forward.

Namaste.

Shirley Horn April, 2019