

Makara

More than 100 years old.
Carved in wood on the
Malay Peninsula.



Makara palanquin ornament | Pattani, Malay Peninsula,
18th-19th centuries, Wood, Zinc and brass

Background information

The Makara, said to be the vehicle of the Hindu river goddess, Ganga, is a mythical sea creature used as a protective symbol. It is a water spirit and a powerful fertility symbol that may have had its roots in early animist traditions.

This Makara comes from Malaysia, and was used in ceremonial processions. An artist combined parts from different real animals, including the trunk of an elephant, horns of a goat, scales of a fish, and mouth of a crocodile, to make this Makara. Makaras and other earlier Hindu deity figures were often used as decorative elements on large processional vehicles (*kereta berhias* in Malay), which were large enough to carry people. The head would have been attached to a temporary "body" of wood, bamboo, rattan, and cloth. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, these palanquins were sometimes used to carry the sons of village notables to their circumcision ceremony. Such processions were popular and widely practised until fairly recently. In the present day, this tradition has largely been abandoned; it is frowned upon by Islamic purists and viewed as unnecessary by many others.

Fishermen and sailors on the coast of the northeastern Malay Peninsula, particularly in the states of Terengganu, Kelantan, and Pattani, have long thought of the Makara as a protective symbol, and they often had Makara motifs and imagery on their boats and homes. Despite its origins in Hinduism, the Makara remained a strong symbol in the area long after the people had embraced Islam.

Makara

Proposed Activities

STUDENTS WILL LEARN ABOUT

- Symbolism of the Makara
- Mythical creatures in Southeast Asia

GLOSSARY

Processional vehicle refers to an object made to be carried, pulled, or pushed in a ceremonial parade or festival.

REFERENCES

Welch, P B. *Chinese Art: A Guide to Motifs and Visual Imagery*. North Clarendon, 2008.



LOOKING ACTIVITIES

1. Name the parts of real animals you see that make up the Makara.
2. What sort of strengths do these animals give the Makara?
3. If you could touch the object, what would it feel like? What material is the Makara made of?
4. This Makara was originally found at the front of some sort of vehicle. Imagine what that might have looked like.



MAKING ACTIVITIES

1. Imagine the food the Makara might eat. Create a special menu and draw the food here.
2. Create a super-creature that represents you.
 - What animals would you use to make your creature?
 - Why did you choose these animals?
3. Create a collage of your mythical creatures using scrap materials.



CROSS-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

English

Describe and write a story about your mythical creature.

History

1. Are mythical creatures living or non-living things? Why?
2. What type of food do you imagine these creatures might eat?
3. With all these animals combined, how do you think they would survive? (mammals, reptiles, amphibian, arthropods)

Social Studies

Why are Hindu and Buddhist symbols like the Makara used in Southeast Asia and China? How did these practices spread, and why were they adapted?

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