

Representation of the Elephant in Bengal Arts and Crafts

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ABSTRACT

Living in harmony with nature is an integral part of Indian culture, which has been reflected abundantly in the arts and crafts of every Indian province. Representation of animals in arts and crafts reflects its association with human life, symbolises human values, demonstrates the practices as well as creates a bonding that constitutes the ecosystem. Portraying various animal figures including the elephant is traced to the origin of Indian art by the pre-historic Hominid settlements in the 3rd millennium BCE (e.g. Indus Valley). These art and craft traditions have withstood the ravages of time and continue to flourish to date in every region of India with the assimilation of new materials to express new ideas.

Bengal is known all over the world for its expertise in art and craft; its skill in architectural splendours to its excellent work on woodwork, terracotta, paintings, pith work, metal work, paper-pulps, clay-work, pottery and textile which are unparalleled. Most of these are products of the cottage industry in West Bengal. The elephant, which is native to the sub-Himalayan region covering the area of Bengal-Bihar-Assam—the three Indian States, is the most important aspect of wildlife along with the tiger and rhinoceros which are associated with the inhabitants of this region. The elephant is thus represented abundantly in the arts and crafts of Bengal to symbolise power and strength. The paper highlights the representation of the elephant in various indigenous arts and crafts of Bengal, which are unique to this region.

Keywords: *Elephant, traditional arts and crafts, West Bengal, ecosystem, symbol*

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