Object Summary

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Gold-Draped and Gem-Inset Carved Ivory Elephant Figurine Carrying a Howdah-Framed Stupa

19th century

India (Tamil Nadu)

British India/Princely States

Ivory, gold, gemstones

Overall: 5 7/8 x 3 1/4 x 5 7/8 in. (14.9 x 8.3 x 14.9cm)

This elephant figurine is carved from ivory and adorned with gold regalia inset with jewels. On its back, the elephant carries a howdah, the seat that would carry a royal rider. A large central jewel rests on its forehead and a golden bell dangles from its neck. Elephants were held in high regard in India. In Hinduism, the elephant-headed god Lord Ganesh was regarded as the "remover of obstacles." Elephants in South Asia were rarely killed for ivory or food, due to the predominance of Hinduism, which discourages the consumption of meat. The demand for ivory was met by "tipping," cutting off the solid end of a tusk from an elephant without hurting the animal.