



APPROACHING THE VALUES OF THE MAJAPAHIT KINGDOM: A STUDY OF GANESHA STATUES IN TROWULAN MUSEUM

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Abstract

Penelitian ini membahas kecenderungan interpretasi artefak Majapahit yang masih dipahami sebagai simbol dengan makna tetap tanpa mempertimbangkan proses pembentukan nilai melalui pengalaman sosial. Fokus penelitian diarahkan pada patung Ganesha di Museum Trowulan sebagai artefak budaya yang berada dalam konteks historis tertentu. Pendekatan yang digunakan adalah kualitatif interpretatif dengan analisis literatur dan simbolik yang berlandaskan teori nilai dari John Dewey. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa patung Ganesha tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai representasi religius, tetapi juga sebagai medium yang mengorganisasi nilai pengetahuan, otoritas, dan keteraturan sosial dalam masyarakat Majapahit. Atribut simboliknya mencerminkan kebutuhan praktis, bukan sekadar makna doktrinal yang tetap. Analisis komparatif menunjukkan bahwa perbedaan antara representasi India dan Majapahit merupakan hasil adaptasi kontekstual. Perubahan fungsi patung dalam konteks museum menunjukkan adanya pergeseran nilai dari praktik ritual menuju fungsi edukatif dan kultural. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa nilai terbentuk melalui interaksi, penggunaan, dan perubahan konteks. Penelitian ini berkontribusi dalam kajian budaya dan pendidikan dengan menempatkan artefak sebagai bagian aktif dalam pembentukan nilai.

Kata kunci: artefak, Ganesha, Majapahit, museum, nilai

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Abstract. This study addresses the tendency to interpret Majapahit artifacts through fixed symbolic meanings without examining how value is constructed through social experience. The research focuses on the Ganesha statue in Trowulan Museum as a cultural artifact situated within a specific historical context. A qualitative interpretive design is employed, using literature-based analysis and symbolic examination guided by the framework of John Dewey's theory of value. The findings indicate that the Ganesha statue functions not only as a religious representation but as a medium through which values related to knowledge, authority, and social order are organized. Its symbolic attributes are shown to reflect practical concerns within Majapahit society rather than fixed doctrinal meanings. Comparative analysis reveals that differences between Indian and Majapahit representations result from contextual adaptation rather than variation in form alone. The study also demonstrates that the relocation of the statue into a museum context produces a shift in valuation, where its function changes from ritual practice to educational and cultural interpretation. These findings support the view that value emerges through interaction, use, and changing conditions. The study contributes to cultural and educational research by positioning artifacts as active participants in value formation rather than passive carriers of meaning.

Keywords: artifact, Ganesha, Majapahit, valuation, museum

Introduction

Interpretations of Majapahit artifacts often remain confined to descriptive symbolic readings. Meaning is frequently treated as a fixed religious attribute rather than as a product of social and historical processes. This tendency is evident in studies of the Trowulan area, which largely emphasize preservation and cultural tourism while giving limited attention to how meaning is constructed (Fatihah & Riyanto, 2025; Segara, 2025).

Trowulan Museum functions as a repository of material evidence related to Majapahit society. Its collections reflect not only religious practices but also broader social and political arrangements. Architectural and spatial studies indicate that the site has been continuously reframed as both an educational space and a cultural reference point (Krisnanto, 2024; Puspita & Arfianti, 2025). Despite this, specific artifacts such as the Ganesha statue are still commonly approached through descriptive accounts rather than analytical interpretation.

Ganesha is widely associated with knowledge, learning, and the removal of obstacles. Such interpretations are frequently reinforced in studies of Hindu religious education and visual representation (Arini, 2023; Putrayasa et al., 2020). However, these meanings are often presented as stable and universal. Limited attention is given to how symbolic attributes function differently across contexts. Evidence from intercultural studies suggests that the interpretation of Ganesha is subject to variation depending on social and communicative settings (Raditya, 2014).

This condition reveals a conceptual limitation. Meaning cannot be reduced to an inherent quality of the object. Value must be understood as emerging from interaction between individuals, communities, and their environment. This perspective aligns with the framework proposed by John Dewey, who situates value within lived experience rather than abstract principles (Dewey, 1939; Dar, 2021).

Within this framework, value is not treated as stable. It develops through processes of evaluation, adjustment, and response to changing conditions. Experience, reflection, and action operate together in shaping how meaning is formed and revised (Hildebrand, 2022; Hassen, 2023). As a result, cultural objects are positioned as active elements within social practice rather than passive carriers of symbolic meaning.

In the Majapahit context, Ganesha appears within a symbolic structure that relates to knowledge organization and authority. The values represented are linked to broader concerns regarding social order and ethical formation (Pasopati et al., 2025; Ibrahim et al., 2023). The placement of Ganesha statues in strategic locations suggests a functional role that extends beyond ritual expression.

Majapahit society operated within a complex network of governance and exchange. Such conditions required forms of symbolic representation capable of supporting intellectual and political stability. Within this setting, Ganesha can be interpreted as a medium through which values were organized and expressed. Meaning is therefore not fixed, but shaped through continuous interaction between social needs and cultural responses (Saputro et al., 2025; Suka & Gara, 2021).

Method

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive design aimed at examining how cultural meaning is constructed through symbolic representation. The focus is placed on the Ganesha statue as a cultural artifact situated within a specific historical and social context. Rather than treating the object as a static symbol, the analysis is directed toward understanding how value emerges through interaction between representation and experience.

Data are derived from scholarly sources that address Ganesha iconography, Majapahit cultural history, and philosophical interpretations of value. Sources are selected based on relevance to symbolic analysis and theoretical discussion. Priority is given to peer-reviewed articles, academic books, and studies that engage directly with cultural interpretation and value formation (Putrayasa et al., 2020; Arini, 2023).

The analytical procedure follows an interpretive approach grounded in the valuation framework developed by John Dewey. Within this perspective, value is not assumed to reside in the object itself but is understood as emerging from practical engagement and contextual conditions (Dewey, 1939; Hildebrand, 2022). This framework guides the identification of how symbolic elements are connected to social functions and collective needs.

Analysis is conducted through three stages. The first stage involves the identification of key symbolic attributes associated with the Ganesha statue, including visual elements and their commonly assigned meanings. The second stage examines how these attributes are

interpreted within Majapahit society by relating them to historical and cultural conditions (Fatihah & Riyanto, 2025; Segara, 2025). The third stage evaluates how these meanings shift when the object is relocated into a museum context, where its function changes from ritual use to educational and cultural representation (Isawwa et al., 2025; Puspita & Arfianti, 2025).

Interpretation is carried out through comparative reading across sources in order to identify patterns, variations, and tensions in meaning construction. The process does not aim to establish a single definitive interpretation. Instead, emphasis is placed on tracing how meanings are produced, negotiated, and transformed across contexts. This approach allows the analysis to remain sensitive to historical specificity while maintaining theoretical consistency.

Results and Discussion

Result

Trowulan Museum is located in an area identified as the former center of Majapahit authority in East Java. The site contains a range of archaeological remains associated with religious practice, governance, and everyday activities. Its position within a historically dense landscape allows material evidence to be examined in relation to broader patterns of social organization (Fatihah & Riyanto, 2025; Segara, 2025).

The collection consists of statues, inscriptions, ceramics, and architectural fragments. Each category reflects a different aspect of Majapahit life. Statues relate primarily to religious and symbolic systems, while inscriptions document administrative and ritual practices. Ceramics and domestic objects provide indications of daily activities and economic exchange. Artefacts from other Hindu-Buddhist contexts are also preserved, enabling comparison across regions and traditions (Krisnanto, 2024; Isawwa et al., 2025).

The Ganesha statue is positioned as one of the central objects within the collection. The figure is represented in a seated posture with four arms. Each hand holds a distinct attribute, including an aksamala, an axe, a broken tusk, and a bowl. These elements are consistently documented in studies of Ganesha iconography, suggesting a stable visual configuration across different representations (Putrayasa et al., 2020; Arini, 2023).

The surface of the statue shows detailed carving, particularly on the crown, ornaments, and body proportions. The use of volcanic stone reflects material practices commonly associated with Majapahit sculpture. Stylistic features indicate a combination of established Hindu iconography and local adaptation, visible in the treatment of facial expression and decorative elements.



Figure 1–2. Ganesha statue and Trimurti representations in Trowulan Museum

Other statues within the collection include representations of Vishnu, Brahma, and Shiva. These figures correspond to preservation, creation, and transformation within Hindu cosmology. Their presence indicates that the Ganesha statue forms part of a broader symbolic system structured around interconnected divine roles.

Additional figures include Durga and Mahakala. These statues are associated with protection, control, and the maintenance of order within sacred space. Visual elements such as posture, gesture, and facial expression emphasize strength and authority. Their placement within the collection suggests a complementary function to other deities represented in the museum (Krisnanto, 2024; Puspita & Arfianti, 2025).



Figure 3–4. Durga and Mahakala statues in Trowulan Museum

The museum also preserves inscriptions and yupa stones written in Old Javanese and Sanskrit. These materials record administrative decisions, territorial grants, and religious activities. Their content provides direct evidence of governance structures and institutional practices within Majapahit society. Linguistic variation in these inscriptions reflects interaction between local traditions and external cultural influences (Fatihah & Riyanto, 2025; Pasopati et al., 2025).



Figure 5–6. Yupa stones and Majapahit pottery and ceramics in Trowulan Museum

The ceramic collection consists of both locally produced and imported materials. Local pottery includes domestic and ritual objects such as vessels, storage containers, and lamps. Imported ceramics originate from regional trade networks, including China and Southeast Asia. Differences in material composition, decorative technique, and form indicate interaction between local production systems and external influences.

The presence of imported ceramics suggests sustained participation in regional trade networks. At the same time, locally produced pottery reflects continuity in daily practices and technological adaptation. These materials provide evidence of economic exchange and cultural interaction within Majapahit society (Puspita & Arfianti, 2025; Krisnanto, 2024).

Taken together, the distribution of artefacts within the museum indicates that material culture in Majapahit was organized across interconnected domains. Religious symbolism, administrative structures, and economic activity are reflected within the same collection. Recurrent visual patterns across different objects suggest the presence of a structured symbolic system that operated across multiple aspects of social life.

Discussion

The Ganesha Statue as a Cultural Artifact

The Ganesha statue in Trowulan Museum presents a composed seated figure with four arms holding distinct attributes. These elements include an aksamala, an axe, a broken tusk, and a bowl. Although such features are recognizable within broader Ganesha iconography, their specific configuration in the Majapahit context indicates a selective emphasis rather than a direct replication (Putrayasa et al., 2020; Arini, 2023).

The elephant form carries associations with strength, endurance, and authority. These qualities extend beyond religious symbolism and relate to expectations of order and control within social life. The placement of Ganesha statues in temples, gateways, and administrative

spaces suggests that their function operated across ritual and institutional domains. The figure therefore cannot be reduced to a purely devotional object, as it also participates in structuring collective perception and behavior (Saputro et al., 2025; Suka & Gara, 2021).

Each attribute contributes to a relational symbolic system rather than functioning as an isolated sign. The aksamala is commonly associated with repetition and continuity. This element can be linked to disciplined practice and sustained engagement over time. The axe introduces a different register, often connected to intervention, decision, and control. Its presence suggests the necessity of action in situations that require resolution rather than contemplation.

The broken tusk introduces a dimension of disruption within this configuration. It is frequently associated with sacrifice and transformation. Its inclusion indicates that the process of acquiring knowledge or maintaining order is not without cost. The bowl, positioned alongside these elements, is often associated with completion or accumulation. When read together, these attributes form a sequence that moves from ongoing practice, through intervention and disruption, toward a form of consolidation.

A distinction becomes apparent when this configuration is compared with more common representations in Indian contexts. Attributes such as the ankusha or pasha are more frequently emphasized in those traditions. The selection of different elements in the Majapahit version suggests a shift in symbolic priorities. This variation indicates that the meaning of Ganesha was not transferred as a fixed system, but adjusted in response to local conditions.

The configuration observed in the Trowulan statue suggests that symbolic elements were arranged in relation to specific cultural needs. The figure operates as a medium through which values related to knowledge, control, and continuity are visually structured. Its significance therefore lies not only in what it represents, but in how it organizes a set of relationships that reflect the conditions of Majapahit society.

Dewey's Theory of Value and Its Application

The interpretation of the Ganesha statue requires a framework that does not treat value as fixed or inherent. The perspective developed by John Dewey provides such a basis. Within this view, value is not located in the object itself but emerges through interaction between individuals, practices, and situational demands (Dewey, 1939; Dar, 2021).

This position shifts attention from symbolic meaning as a static attribute toward valuation as an active process. Objects become meaningful as they are used, interpreted, and integrated into lived experience. Philosophical discussions on Dewey consistently emphasize this relational and experiential character of value formation (Hildebrand, 2022; Hassen, 2023).

When applied to the Ganesha statue, this framework redirects analysis away from essentialist interpretation. The statue is not approached as a container of predetermined meaning. Instead, it is examined as part of a process through which Majapahit society responded to concrete conditions. Studies on Dewey's pragmatism highlight that valuation develops through problem-solving activities and adaptive responses rather than abstract belief systems (Kaszynska, 2021; Holdo, 2023).

Within this context, the attributes associated with Ganesha can be understood as functional selections rather than symbolic residues. The emphasis on knowledge, control, and continuity corresponds to conditions that required organized governance and intellectual discipline. Historical and cultural studies of Majapahit indicate that social organization relied on structured systems of authority and knowledge transmission (Nurlaela et al., 2024; Saputro et al., 2025).

The statue therefore operates within a field of practical concerns. Its presence in temples, gateways, and administrative spaces suggests that it contributed to the stabilization of social expectations. Research on Javanese ethical and cultural formation indicates that symbolic systems often function as mediators of collective values rather than mere representations (Pasopati et al., 2025; Ibrahim et al., 2023).

Dewey's concept of valuation also clarifies how meaning is sustained through repeated interaction. Ritual practices, spatial placement, and collective engagement allow values to be reinforced over time. In this sense, the statue does not simply represent knowledge or authority. It participates in the ongoing production of those values through practice and experience. This perspective becomes more evident when considering the transition of the statue into a museum context. Removed from its original setting, the object no longer functions within ritual practice. Its value is reconfigured through educational, historical, and cultural interpretation. Studies on museum development in Trowulan indicate that artefacts are increasingly positioned as sources of knowledge and public learning rather than ritual objects (Isawwa et al., 2025; Puspita & Arfianti, 2025).

Dewey describes this process as revaluation, where meaning shifts in response to changing conditions. The Ganesha statue illustrates this transformation clearly. What previously operated within a religious and political framework is now situated within a system of heritage and education. The object retains significance, but its function is reorganized according to new forms of engagement. This shift does not indicate a loss of meaning. Instead, it reflects the adaptive nature of value as described in Dewey's philosophy. Cultural objects remain relevant because they can be reinterpreted in relation to new contexts. Research on cultural communication and symbolic interpretation supports this view by showing that

meaning is continuously reconstructed across different social settings (Raditya, 2014; Pasopati et al., 2022).

Through this lens, the Ganesha statue can be understood as part of an ongoing process rather than a fixed cultural relic. Its value emerges through interaction, is stabilized through practice, and is reshaped through changing conditions. The application of Dewey's framework therefore allows the analysis to move beyond symbolic description toward an understanding of how value is actively produced within historical experience.

Comparative Analysis and Dewey's Valuation Perspective



Figure 7-8. Ganesha statue in Majapahit (left) and India (right)

Differences between Majapahit and Indian representations of Ganesha extend beyond visual variation. The distinction lies in how symbolic elements are selected and organized in response to specific conditions. Both traditions retain Ganesha as a figure associated with wisdom and obstacle removal, yet the configuration of attributes reflects different priorities.

In Indian contexts, attributes such as the *ankusha* and *pasha* are frequently emphasized. These elements are commonly linked to spiritual control and guidance. The presence of *modaka* reinforces an orientation toward reward and spiritual fulfillment. This arrangement suggests a symbolic system closely tied to devotional practice.

The Majapahit configuration shows a different pattern. Attributes such as the *aksamala*, axe, broken tusk, and bowl are arranged in a sequence that relates to process and function. This arrangement introduces continuity, intervention, disruption, and consolidation as interconnected elements. The structure indicates that symbolic emphasis is directed toward practical concerns rather than purely metaphysical ones.

This difference can be examined through the perspective of John Dewey. Value is understood as emerging from interaction between communities and their conditions rather than from fixed symbolic meaning (Dewey, 1939; Kaszynska, 2021). The Majapahit configuration

can therefore be interpreted as a response to specific social demands, including governance, knowledge organization, and stability (Nurlaela et al., 2024; Saputro et al., 2025).

Table 1. Comparison of Ganesha Attributes in Indian and Majapahit Contexts

Aspect	Indian Ganesha Representation	Majapahit Ganesha (Trowulan)	Interpretation in Dewey's Perspective
Number of Hands	Typically four or more	Four hands	Functional complexity reflects different social uses of the figure
Dominant Attributes	Ankusha, pasha, modaka	Aksamala, axe, tusk, bowl	Attribute selection responds to contextual needs rather than fixed tradition
Symbolic Orientation	Devotional and metaphysical emphasis	Functional and socio-political emphasis	Value emerges from practical engagement within specific conditions
Knowledge Representation	Spiritual wisdom and guidance	Disciplined learning and continuity	Knowledge is shaped through experience and repeated practice
Obstacle Removal	Spiritual purification	Decision-making and control	Value linked to problem-solving and situational response
Cultural Function	Ritual and devotional practice	Integrated into governance and social order	Value operates within institutional and social structures
Context of Use	Religious worship	Ritual, administrative, and symbolic spaces	Meaning varies according to environment and use

The comparison indicates that symbolic meaning is not transferred as a fixed system across contexts. Instead, elements are reorganized according to different historical conditions.

Research on cultural interpretation supports the view that symbols are continuously reshaped through interaction and adaptation (Raditya, 2014; Pasopati et al., 2022).

The Majapahit configuration demonstrates that shared religious figures can carry different functional roles. While Indian representations maintain a stronger devotional orientation, the Majapahit version integrates symbolic meaning with social and political structures. This shift reflects a process in which value is constructed through use rather than inherited as a stable property.

From a Deweyan perspective, this difference is not a deviation but a transformation. Value emerges from how objects are engaged within particular environments. The Ganesha statue therefore operates as part of an adaptive system in which symbolic elements are selected, arranged, and interpreted in response to changing conditions.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the meaning of the Ganesha statue in the Trowulan Museum cannot be reduced to fixed symbolic interpretation. The analysis shows that its attributes, spatial placement, and historical usage are better understood as part of a process through which value is constructed within specific social conditions. The statue operates not only as a religious image but as a cultural medium that organizes relationships between knowledge, authority, and continuity in Majapahit society.

The application of the framework developed by John Dewey shifts the analysis from symbolic description toward valuation as an active and contextual process. Value is shown to emerge through interaction, practice, and response to situational demands rather than from inherent meaning embedded in the object. This perspective clarifies how the configuration of Ganesha's attributes reflects functional priorities related to governance, intellectual discipline, and social order.

Comparative analysis further indicates that shared religious figures do not produce uniform meanings across contexts. The Majapahit representation demonstrates a selective reconfiguration of symbolic elements in response to local conditions. This finding supports the view that cultural symbols are continuously reshaped through processes of adaptation and reinterpretation.

The transformation of the statue from a ritual object into a museum artefact provides a clear example of revaluation. Its function shifts from participation in religious practice toward roles associated with education, historical interpretation, and cultural identity. This transition confirms that value is not stable but reorganized as contexts change.

The study contributes to cultural and educational research by repositioning artefacts as active participants in value formation rather than passive carriers of meaning. It also extends

the application of Dewey's theory by demonstrating how valuation operates within historical material culture. Future research may expand this approach by examining other artefacts within the Majapahit corpus or by exploring how similar processes of revaluation occur in different cultural settings.

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