

FROM FORMLESS TO FORM

Design Exploratory Seminar

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IIT Bombay

About the element: Elephant

The Asian Elephant:

The Asian elephant is one among the three species of the elephant which are found in the Indian subcontinent, Srilanka, and South-east Asian countries. The elephant, as an animal is always a wonder for humans because of their huge size and its unique body parts like trunk and tusks, unlike other animals.

Elephants are well known for their intelligence and they are most featured in religious and cultural realm because of their grace and nobility. The elephant was always a part of Indian culture and traditions. Elephants are also well known for its nature and interaction with humans after their domestication.

Elephants are humungous animals that are potential for causing huge damage if they want to because of their gigantic physical appearance. However, being destructive is not their real nature. This is why elephants are also seen as a symbol of power. And because of their gentle nature, they are more admirable. A vehicle for kings and gods, the magnificent Asian elephant are also considered sacred and spiritual.

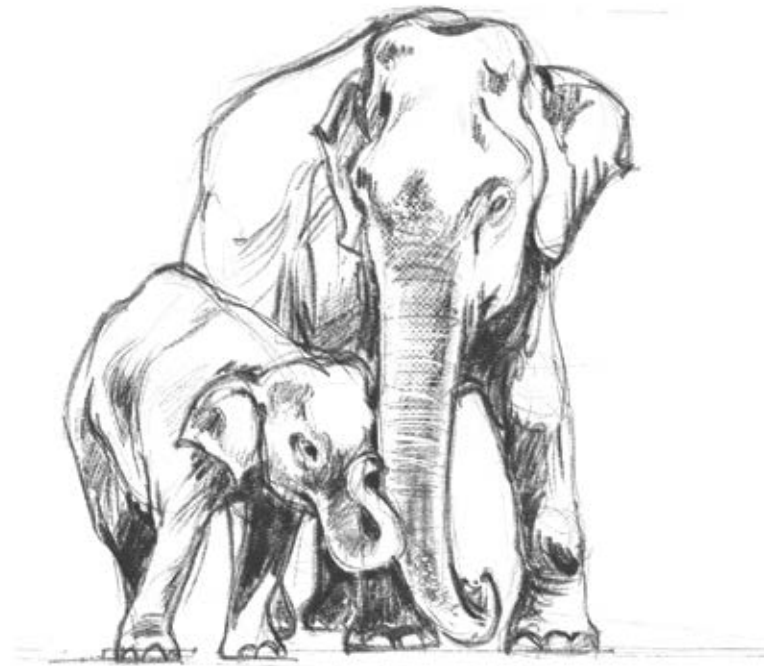


Image source: Author

Elephants in history, religion, and culture:

The earliest record of domestication of the elephant dates back to Harappa civilization. Even from prehistoric cave paintings and further civilizations depicted elephants in their art and literature. The elephant always had a great role in mythology and culture throughout time and place.

In Hindu mythology, the deity Ganesha has the elephant head, a corpulent body and a serpent tied around his stomach. He has four hands; one upper hand has a noose, and the other holds an ax or an elephant god, symbols of his ability to remove obstacles. Ganesha is the god of obstacles, elephant-headed Ganesha can make everything easy to do, especially learning, so he is the god of knowledge. All the classical Indian dances, folk dances, and folk dramas begin with Ganesha's portrayal. Folk dancers enter the dancing arena wearing elephant masks and dance Ganesha's qualities and attributes.



Idol of Lord Ganesha during a procession in Ganesh Chaturthi Festival in Mumbai, India.
Image source: Kajal Gaur, Via www.neuronerdz.com



Temple elephants gathered for the 'Thrikkur Pooram' festival, Kerala.
Image Source: Warren Smart via www.flickr.com

Hindu processions and religious celebrations often feature elephants. Some temples in India have sacred elephants that bless worshippers by touching with their trunk. Devotees consider elephant as sacred and good fortune as it represents Lord Ganesha. Mainly in the south Indian state of Kerala Temple elephants are trained and used in temple activities. Mostly during the time of festivals Elephants are displayed in processions with decorative caparisons.

In Japan, the deity Kangiten is considered the Japanese Buddhist form of Ganesha as he also has an elephant's head and the human body. Kangiten is a deity symbolizing conjugal affection and is worshipped by couples for children. Kangiten is also portrayed sometimes as a pair of embracing humans with an elephant head.

According to Hindu mythology, Airavata, a white elephant considered as the king of elephants belonged to the Lord Indra. According to the myth, Airavata used to carry Indra and it has the ability to fly. It is considered to have five trunks and numerous tusks. There are several stories about Airavata some of which mention Airavata relating to water and sky as is believed that Airavata is capable of creating rain clouds. The Airavateshvara temple in Thanjavur district, Tamil Nadu constructed in 12th century AD was named after the white elephant Airavata.



Lord Indra and Sachi Riding the Divine Elephant Airavata. A Rajasthani watercolour painting
Image source: www.lacma.org



Buddhist imagery of the divine white elephant with a lotus. A cave painting from Ajanta Caves, India
Image Source: Suzie Nimmo, The White Elephant, and The Buddha.

In Buddhist iconography, the elephant is associated with the mother of Gautama Buddha. She had a vivid dream that foretold Buddha's birth, in which a white elephant was prominently featured. Thus the white elephant is considered sacred and spiritual. It is also seen as the earthly manifestation of buddhas embodied quality. In Buddhism elephant symbolizes mental strength with the representation of grey elephant and white elephant as uncontrolled and obedient mental states respectively.

White elephants are also considered sacred in Thailand and Burma, and as a symbol of good luck and royalty. In Myanmar at the end of the rainy season in October, dozens of men wearing colorful elephant masks dance during a festival in Kyaukse, Mandalay.



the Elephant Dance Festival in Kyaukse, Mandalay Division.
(Photo: Zarni Mann / The Irrawaddy)

Chinese Culture & Elephants: In Chinese culture, the elephant is believed to be a symbol of good luck and happiness. In Chinese traditional architecture Feng Shui, elephants symbolize good luck, wisdom, protection, and fertility, depending on the position they're depicted in. An elephant with its trunk raised up is considered as good fortune, while fertility is symbolized when the trunk is down. They position two elephants at an entrance to symbolize protection.



Statue of Erawan (Thai form of Airavata) at Sanam Luang, Bangkok.
Image source: Nathantwarne via pixabay.com



Rock cut Elephant sculpture at Airavateswara Temple, Tamil Nadu
Image source: Karty Jazz / wikipedia.org

Elephant symbolism

The choice of elephant head for Ganesha is an interesting Hindu symbolism. The elephant is the symbol of material abundance. Indra, king of devas, rides an elephant symbolizing royal power. Elephants flank Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity. The elephant symbolizes power, royalty, majesty, and wisdom. Elephants resemble large grey rain clouds when they use their graceful trunks to spray water over their gigantic bodies to keep cool, so they symbolize rain.

Elephant also have symbolic references to

- Strength
- Wisdom
- Loyalty
- Prosperity
- Fertility
- Sensitivity
- Tranquility
- Intelligence
- Peace
- Reliability
- Determination
- Calmness
- Stability
- Patience
- Perceptivity

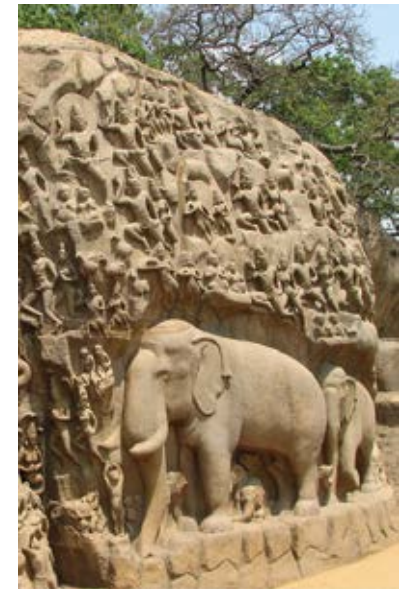
the Elephant Dance Festival in Kyaukse, Mandalay Division.
(Photo: Zarni Mann / The Irrawaddy)

Elephants in art and literature:

Representing the elephant in art was a major aspect of bringing out the characteristics of the elephant into the paintings or art. Even from ancient sculptures in India and other southeast Asian countries elephant was depicted as a symbol of religion, spirituality, or royalty. Indian paintings such as Mughal miniatures showed elephants as a royal emblem or element especially ones ridden for battle.



Elephant sculpture at Ellora caves, India
Image source: Tristan Savatier/ loupote.com



A stone relief sculpture from Descent of the Ganges, Mahabalipuram, Tamil Nadu
Image source: McKay Savage Via flick.com

In the great Hindu mythology literature Mahabharata, the elephant-headed Lord Ganesha was the one who scribed the saga listening to Vyasa's narrations. As the stories say that no human was capable of scribing that tremendously huge volume of literature like Mahabharata, so Ganesha was asked to do so.



Lord Ganesha and Vyasa from a 17th century Rajasthani Painting.
Image source: mfa.org

One major elephant character in western literature which was inspired by an Asian elephant was 'Hathi' from The Jungle Book by Rudyard Kipling. Hathi was characterized as a bull elephant who was the leader of the elephants who represents order, dignity, and obedience to the law of the jungle. Hathi is famed for his patience and wisdom.

In popular literature, there are different phrases and expressions that mention the elephant. The expression "elephant in the room" tells of an obvious truth that nobody wants to discuss. The story of the blind men and an elephant was written to show how reality may be viewed from differing perspectives.

Elephant form study

Three categories of sign:

Primarily, the emphasis was to understand the difference between Icon, Index and Symbol- three categories of sign: Signs can take several forms. They can be numbers, words, photographs, paintings and road signs etc. Although signs can be many things, however, they may be classified as one of several types:

Icon

An icon is meant to be a direct emulation of the object or concept. Icons have a physical resemblance to what's being represented.
Take a picture of a dog and the resulting image will look like that dog. It definitely resembles anything it's portraying.

Index

An index is a sign indicating evidence of the idea or entity being represented. An index does not imitate the represented object or definition. Rather, it represents something that indicates the entity or idea.
Smoke, for instance, is an index of fire. A footprint is an index of a foot.

Symbol

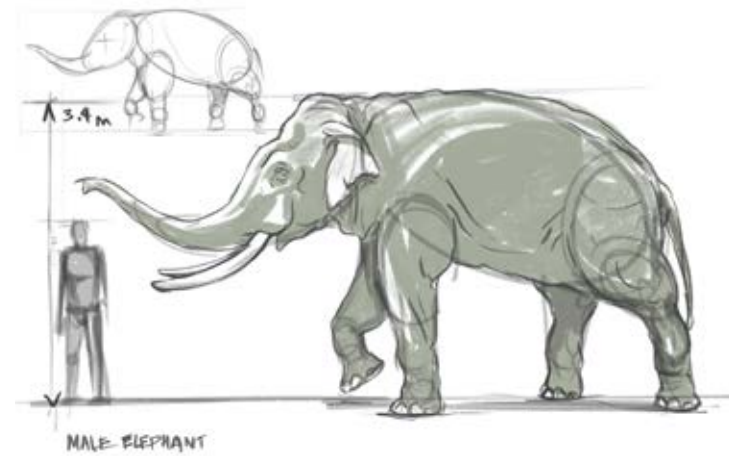
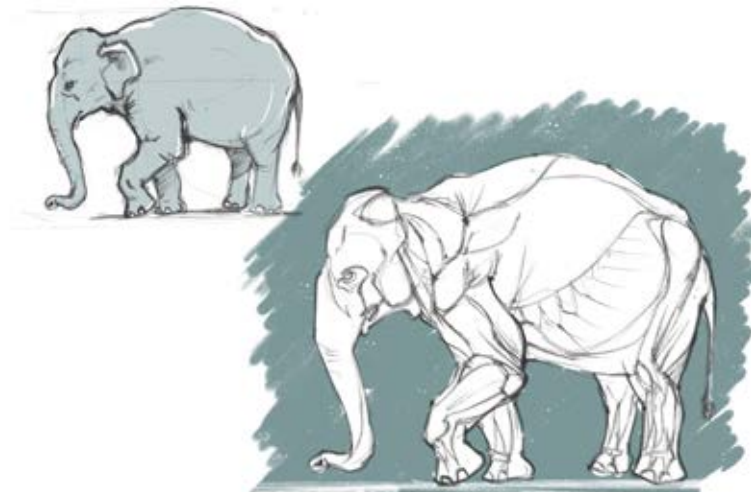
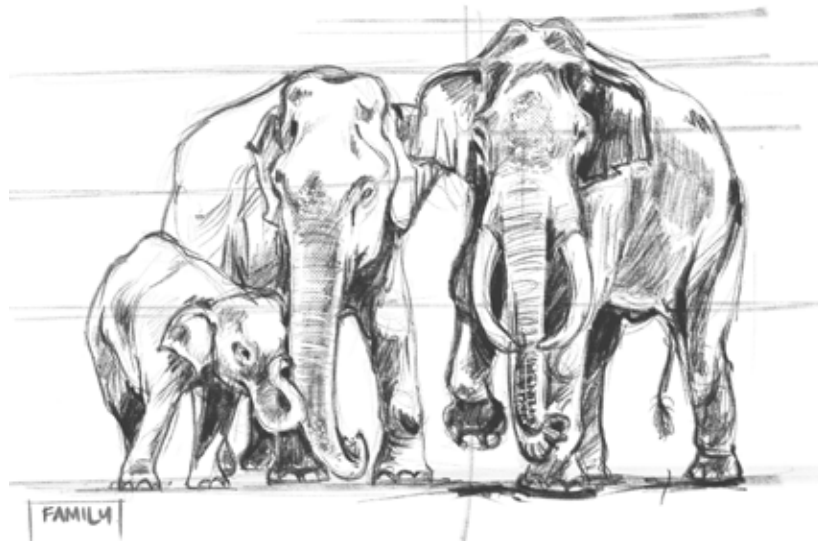
Symbols are at the opposite end from icons. There is a abstract connection between a symbol and what it represents. The connection has to be grasped and is usually associated with the belief that it represents over time.
Traffic lights are symbols. Flags are symbols. What's being communicated, must be learned.



Image source: vanseodesign.com

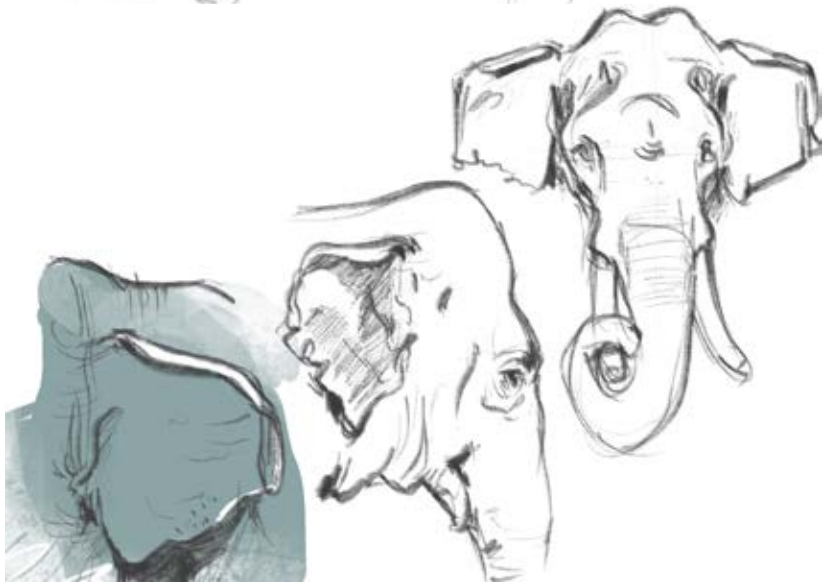
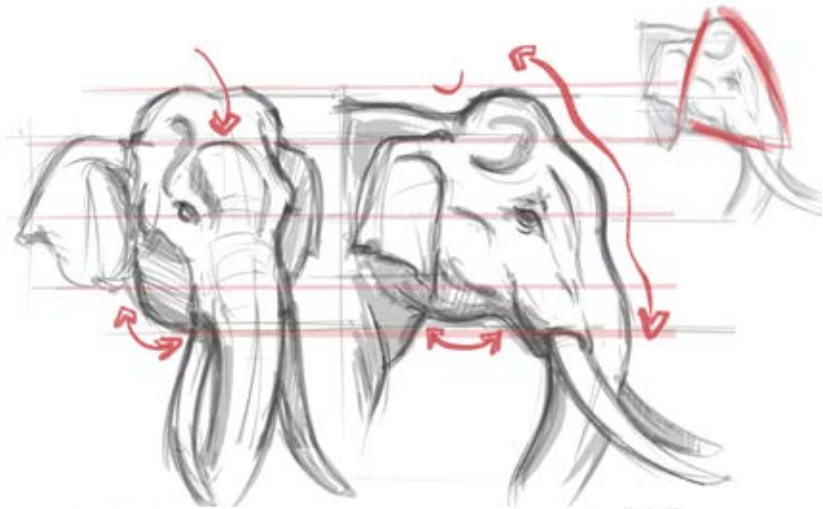
Explorations

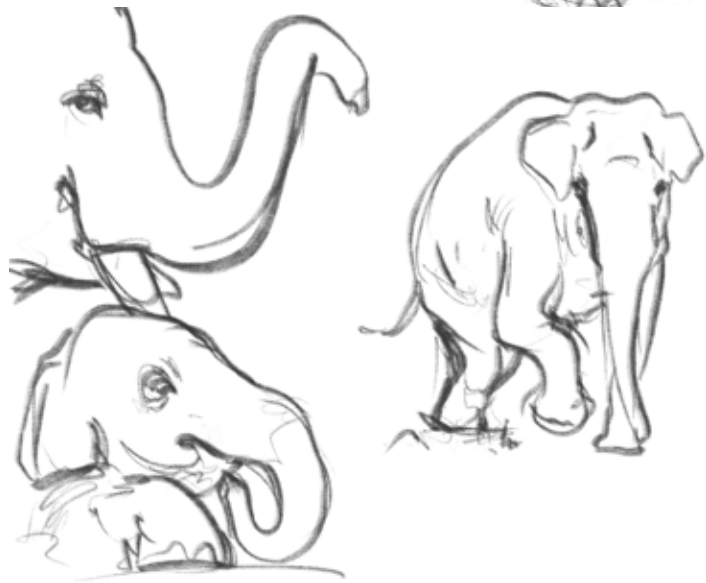
The initial process was to study the physical form of the elephant as a whole and then its features and body parts. This helped in understanding the characteristics and details of an elephant and its essence and personalities.





TUSK & TRUNK

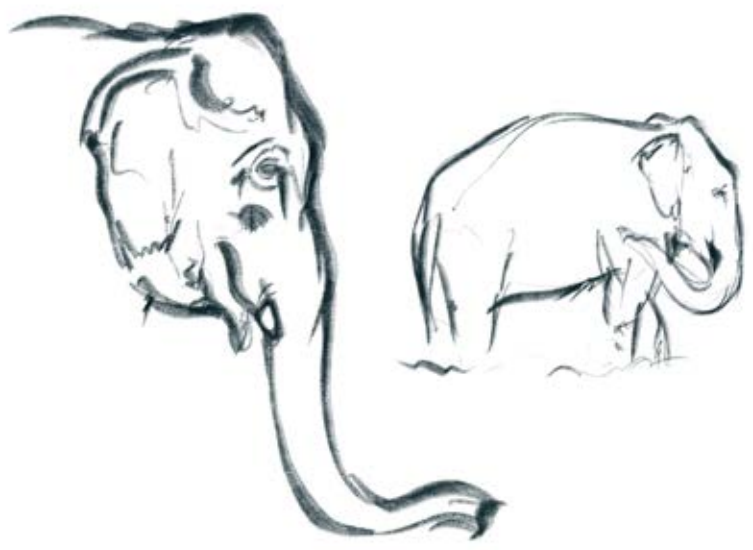
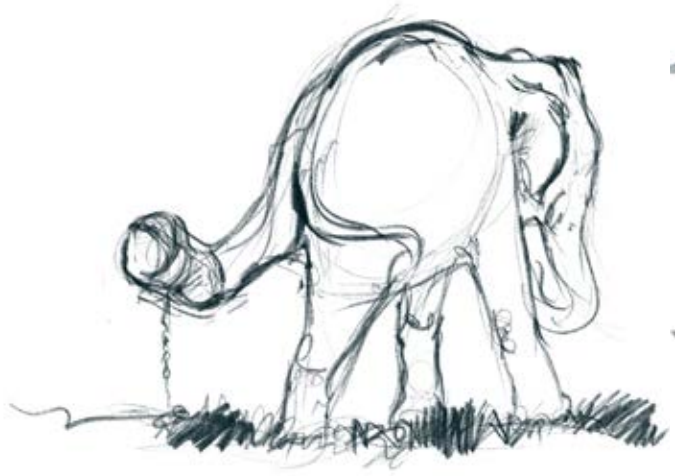




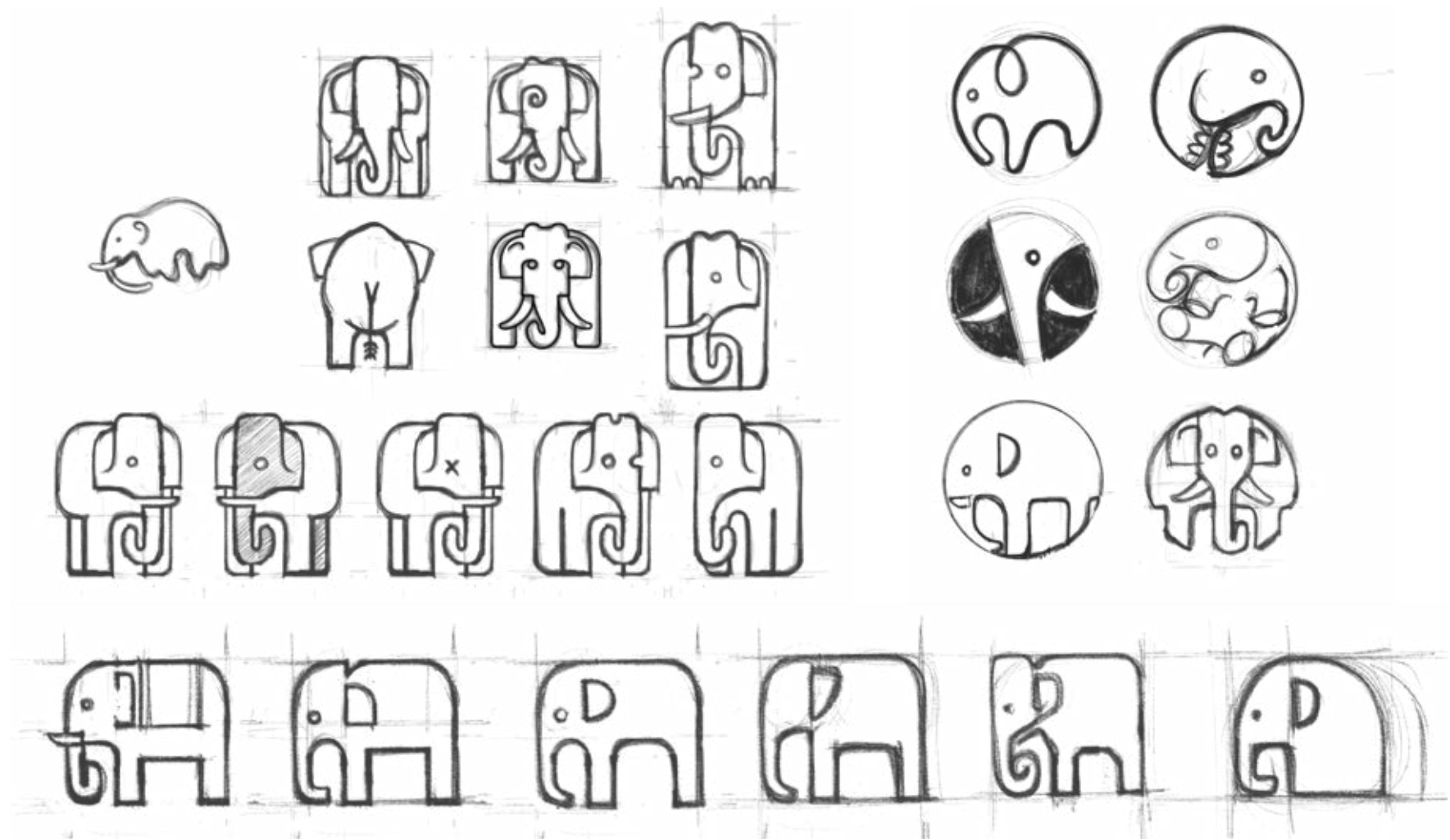
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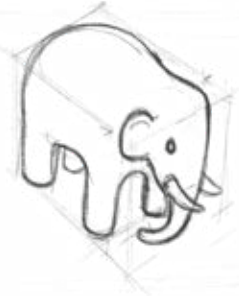
Live sketches



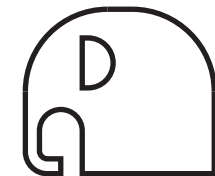
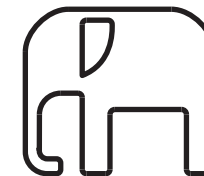
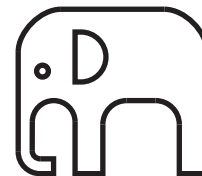
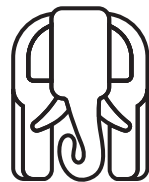
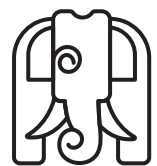
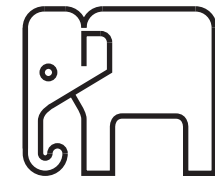
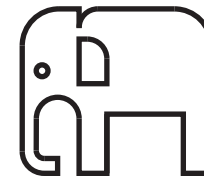
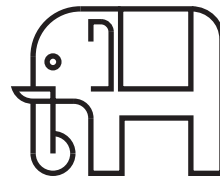
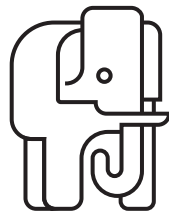
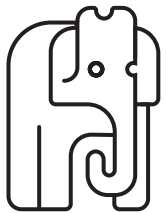
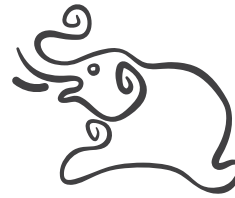
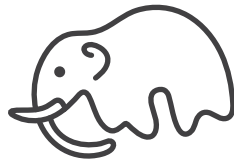
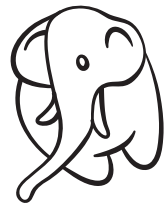
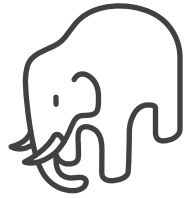
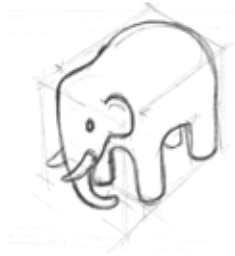


The next step was sketching and developing icons which represents the whole form of an elephant.

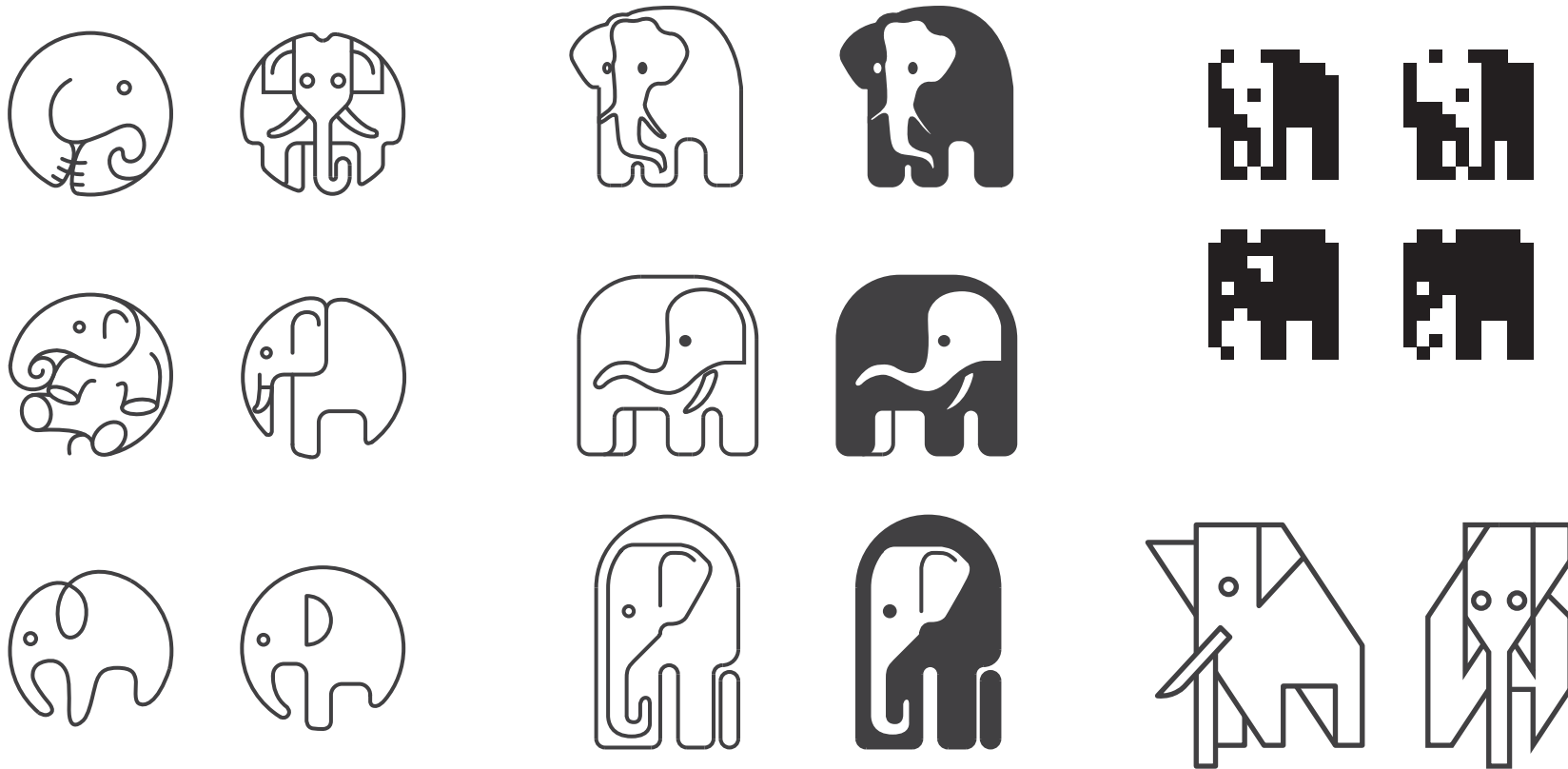




Works on the digital vector versions of icons:



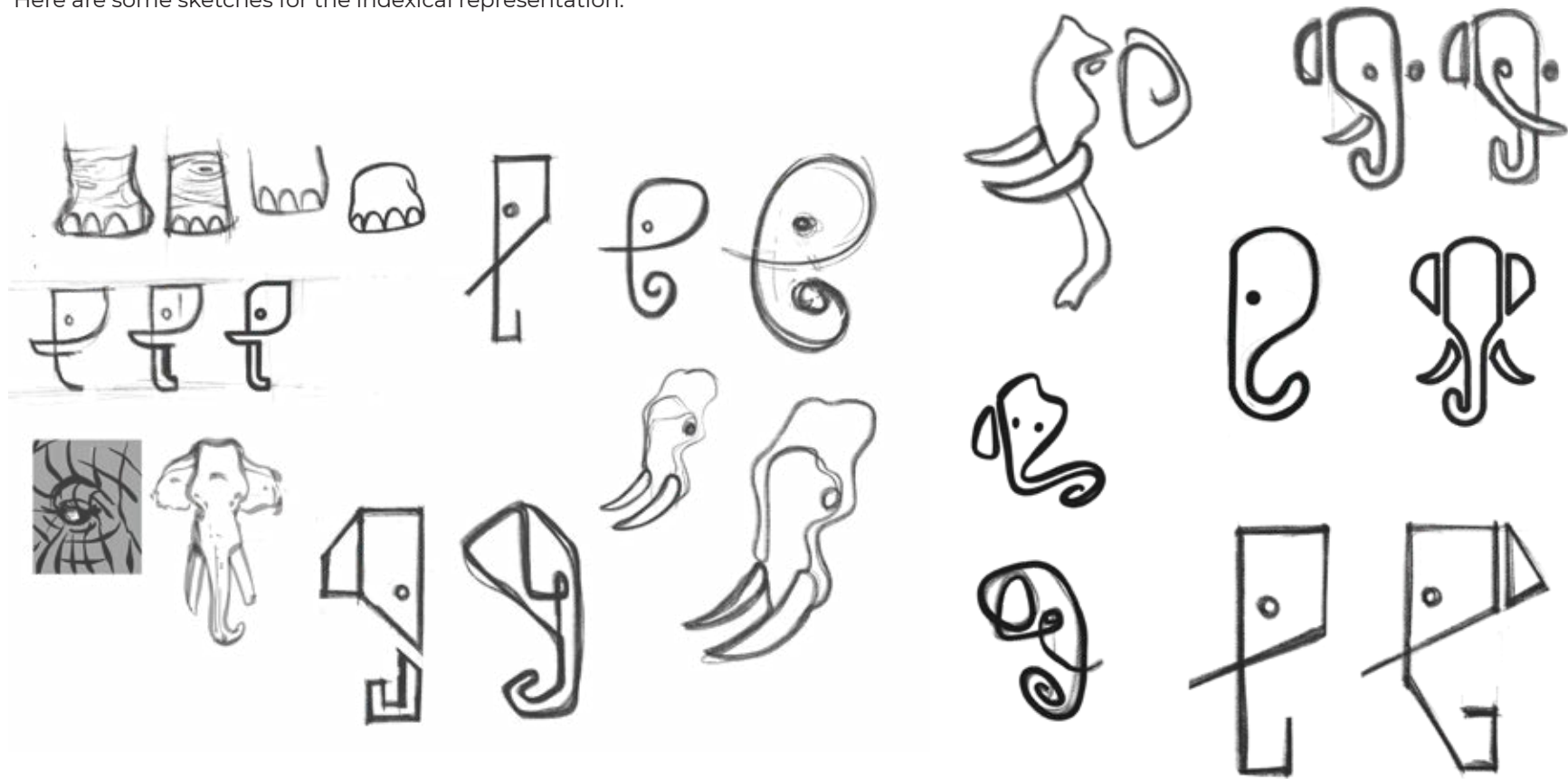
Works on the digital vector versions of icons:



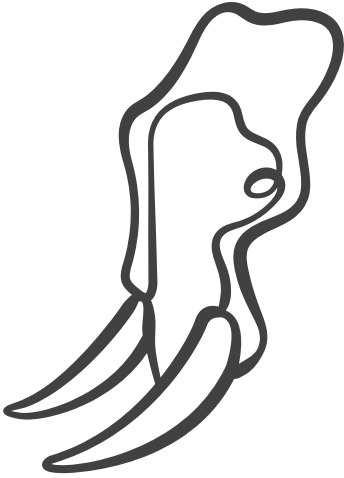
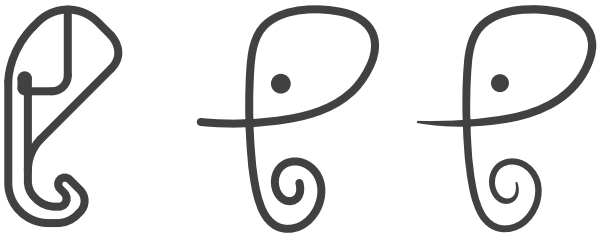
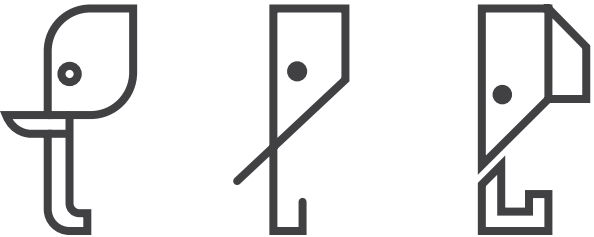
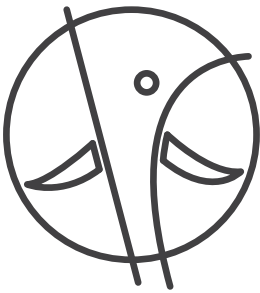
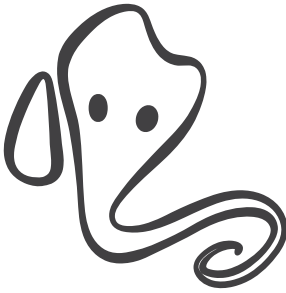
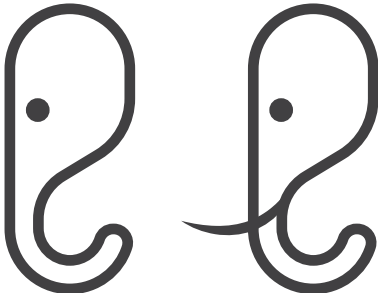
Developing Index for the element.

Here rather than depicting the whole form of the elephant, some parts or specific characteristics are used to develop the index.

Here are some sketches for the indexical representation.



Digital vector versions of Indexical representation



For representing as a symbol 3 other elements were selected to compliment the elephant. Among those 2 elements were abstracts formless elements which were 'power' and 'wisdom'. The third element was one with characteristic form which was 'Armoured vehicle'.

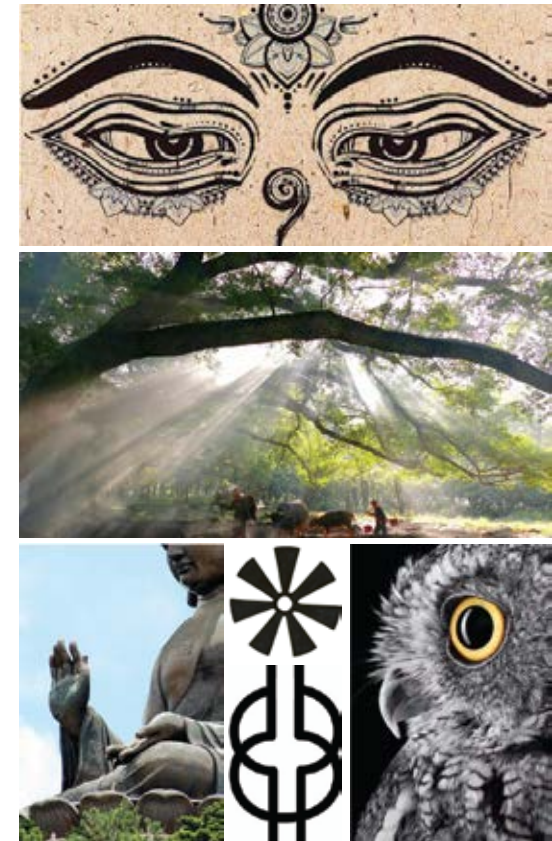
Moodboards were created for the elements wisdom, power and armoured vehicle. explorations were done with each elements for their respective symbolic representations.



Moodboard for the element 'Armoured vehicle'

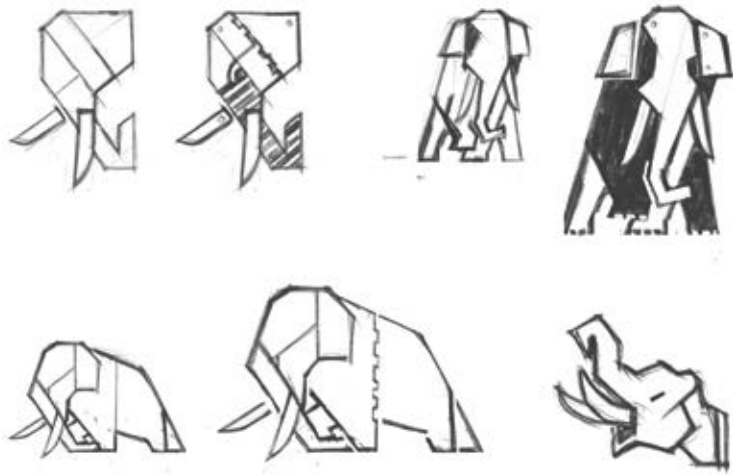
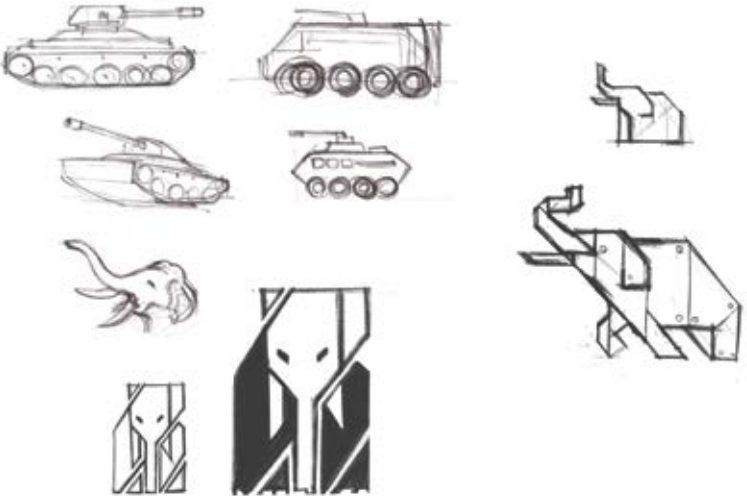
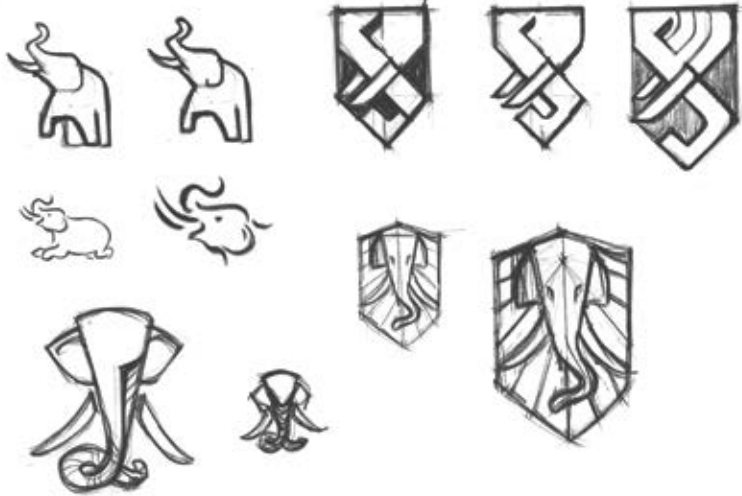


Power



Wisdom

Developing symbols for the elements power, wisdom and armoured vehicle in compliment to the elephant.



Conclusion

Communicating an element can be done in numerous ways which can be verbal, imagery, etc. Pictorial representation of any element has its own power to grasp the attention and importance. This can be seen from even the prehistoric era of cave art. Icons, indexes, and symbols are one of the effective ways of communicating an element which has been adopted in many people and culture around the globe. This Design exploratory project- 'From Formless to Form' gave me an overall idea of how to represent an element in these three different ways.

The project helped me to develop and learn a new process in understanding the essence of the element taken (Elephant) and representing the same through icons. This project also helped me to gain a brief idea of cultural and historic ways of visual representations. This was also a learning of how the form of an element can be minimized for communication and also how to abstract its characteristics and details.