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## The Airline, The Painter, The Ashtray, And The Elephant

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We dubbed our first year at Happy Ali the Year of the Elephant after we ran stories on the rehabilitation of [Kavaan](#), the world's loneliest elephant from a zoo in Pakistan; the Englishman playing the piano while elephants sang along in a rescue centre in northern Thailand; and even had Sara, a 23-year-old elephant, also from Thailand, join us during one of our [Zoom meetings](#). This has not dimmed our enthusiasm for all things pachydermal and we are therefore delighted now to bring to you the tale of Indian Airlines, a world-famous artist and a valuable, limited edition ashtray.

In the days when flying was fun Indian Airlines had a reputation for unsurpassed luxury in its First Class cabins. VIP flyers were treated to caviar, champagne, superb meals washed down by vintage wines, all served by hostesses dressed in the latest designer gear. And then, a fine post-prandial Havana cigar was enjoyed — just imagine a passenger lighting up on today's airlines!

So, in 1967 Indian airline executives staying at an upscale New York hotel spotted the wildly eccentric figure of Salvador Dalí — who once turned up to deliver a lecture at the Sorbonne in a Rolls Royce filled with cauliflowers. Dalí was a sculptor, writer, artist, and at the time the world's most famous surrealist painter.

In the ensuing conversation, they asked Dalí to create a work of art as a gift for their most valued VIPs. Dalí accordingly designed a white porcelain ashtray: a shell surrounded by a snake and supported by the heads of an elephant and a swan.

There was a very special feature to the ashtray. In Dalí's own words, "The reflection of an elephant's head looks like a swan and the reflection of a swan appears to be an elephant. This is what I have done for the ashtray. The swan up-side-down becomes an elephant's head and the elephant inverted — a swan."

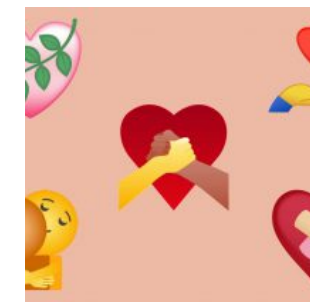
This was a theme Dalí obsessed over and it is in one of his most famous paintings, entitled *Swans Reflecting Elephants* (1937), as can be seen in the headline image for this story.

The commissioned piece of artwork was then manufactured in a limited edition of 800 pieces by renowned French porcelain maker Teisonniere-Limoges and handed personally to Indian Airlines' most valued passengers.

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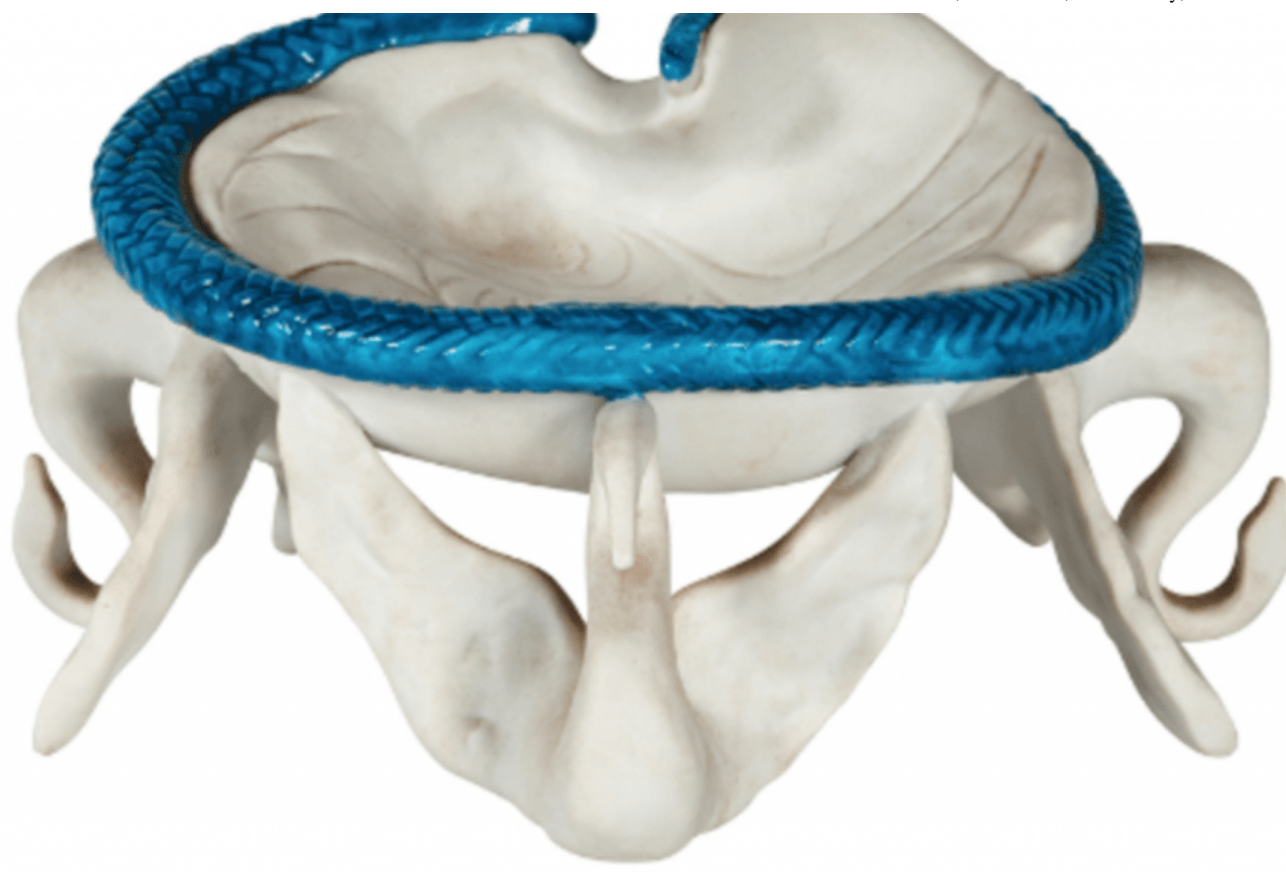
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The ashtray Dalí sculpted for Air India's VIP passengers depicts elephants and swans, depending on how you view it. Via eBay

All very interesting, I hear you all saying but what, exactly, does this have to do with elephants?

Dalí had long been fascinated by elephants. He first used a stylized elephant in his snappily-titled work, *Dream Caused by the Flight of a Bee around a Pomegranate a Second Before Awakening* and subsequently depicted elephants in a great many of his paintings such as *The Temptation of St Anthony*, *The Elephant and the Monkey*, *Celestial Elephant* and many more.

Accordingly, when Indian Airlines asked Dalí what the cost would be for the design of his ashtray his reply was, of course, "I want an elephant."

The Indian Airlines executives laughed at this piece of witticism from the renowned eccentric—except that it wasn't a joke: Dalí was deadly serious.

"I wish to keep him in my olive grove and watch the patterns of shadows the moonlight makes through the twigs on his back," said the artist.

Uttara Parikh, Deputy Commercial Director of Indian Airlines then had to buy a two-year-old elephant from Bangalore Zoo and had it flown on Indian Airlines to Spain. Whether in First Class or not is not recorded.



Salvador Dalí with Jot Singh of Air India. Image via [www.air-india-first-flight-covers.com/](http://www.air-india-first-flight-covers.com/)

It was then sent by truck to the town of Cadaques and thence to Dalí's home accompanied by its own personal mahout.

The mayor of Cadaques was so delighted that he declared a three-day holiday and at the subsequent procession through the town a special cocktail was served consisting of Spanish wine and Indian tea. An Indian astrologer was specially flown in from Bombay and lashings of Dalí's favourite French pink champagne were distributed to the locals who had probably never seen an elephant—or drunk pink champagne—in their lives.

Dalí planned to ride his elephant, aptly named Surus, across the Alps but that scheme—thankfully—fell through. Hannibal had tried it before and it didn't work. Surus, by the way, was the name of Hannibal's war elephant.

As for the ashtrays, one of the most famous recipients was King Juan Carlos of Spain but most of the rest seem to have vanished or are maybe lying around today in the attics of virulent non-smokers.

Dalí died in 1989. And the elephant? It ended up in Barcelona Zoo eternally grateful, one suspects that he hadn't been made to cross the Alps with Dalí on his back.