

Design Resource

Animal Depiction in Indian Art throughout History

The representation of cattle and its evolution over time

by

Yash Vardhan Singh and Prof. Ravi Poovaiah
IDC, IIT Bombay

Source:

<https://dsource.in/resource/animal-depiction-indian-art-throughout-history>



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Introduction

This report examines the depiction of cattle in Indian art over various periods, from the Indus Valley civilization to the colonial era. The portrayal of cattle in Indian art is an important aspect of the country's cultural heritage, as cows have been a symbol of wealth, fertility, and agricultural abundance in Indian society for centuries. The report delves into the different styles and techniques used to represent cattle in art during different time periods, such as the stylized and geometric depictions in the Indus Valley civilization and the more realistic and detailed representations in Mughal art. It also discusses the religious and social significance of cattle in Indian society and how this is reflected in their portrayal in art. Finally, the report examines how the depiction of cattle changed during the colonial era, as Western influences began to shape Indian art. Overall, this report provides a comprehensive overview of the representation of cattle in Indian art and its evolution over time, offering valuable insights into the cultural and historical significance of these depictions.

Animals have been depicted in art for various reasons throughout history. One of the main reasons is for symbolic or religious purposes. In many cultures, animals hold special significance and are believed to have spiritual or mystical powers. By depicting these animals in art, artists were able to communicate important ideas and beliefs to the viewers. Another reason for the depiction of animals in art is for decorative or aesthetic purposes. The beauty and grace of animals have inspired many artists to create works of art that capture their unique qualities. Animals have also been used in art to evoke emotion and create a sense of realism.

In addition, animals have often been used as symbols of power, strength, and nobility. Depictions of animals such as lions, eagles, and horses have been used to represent royalty, leadership, and bravery. Finally, animals have also been depicted in art for educational and scientific purposes. Natural history illustrations, for example, depict animals in a realistic and detailed way to help people understand their anatomy and behavior. Overall, the depiction of animals in art serves a multitude of purposes and has been an important part of human artistic expression for thousands of years.

Cattle have played a significant role in Indian art for centuries, reflecting their importance in the country's religious, social, and economic contexts. The portrayal of cattle in Indian art has evolved over time, with different styles and techniques used to represent these animals.

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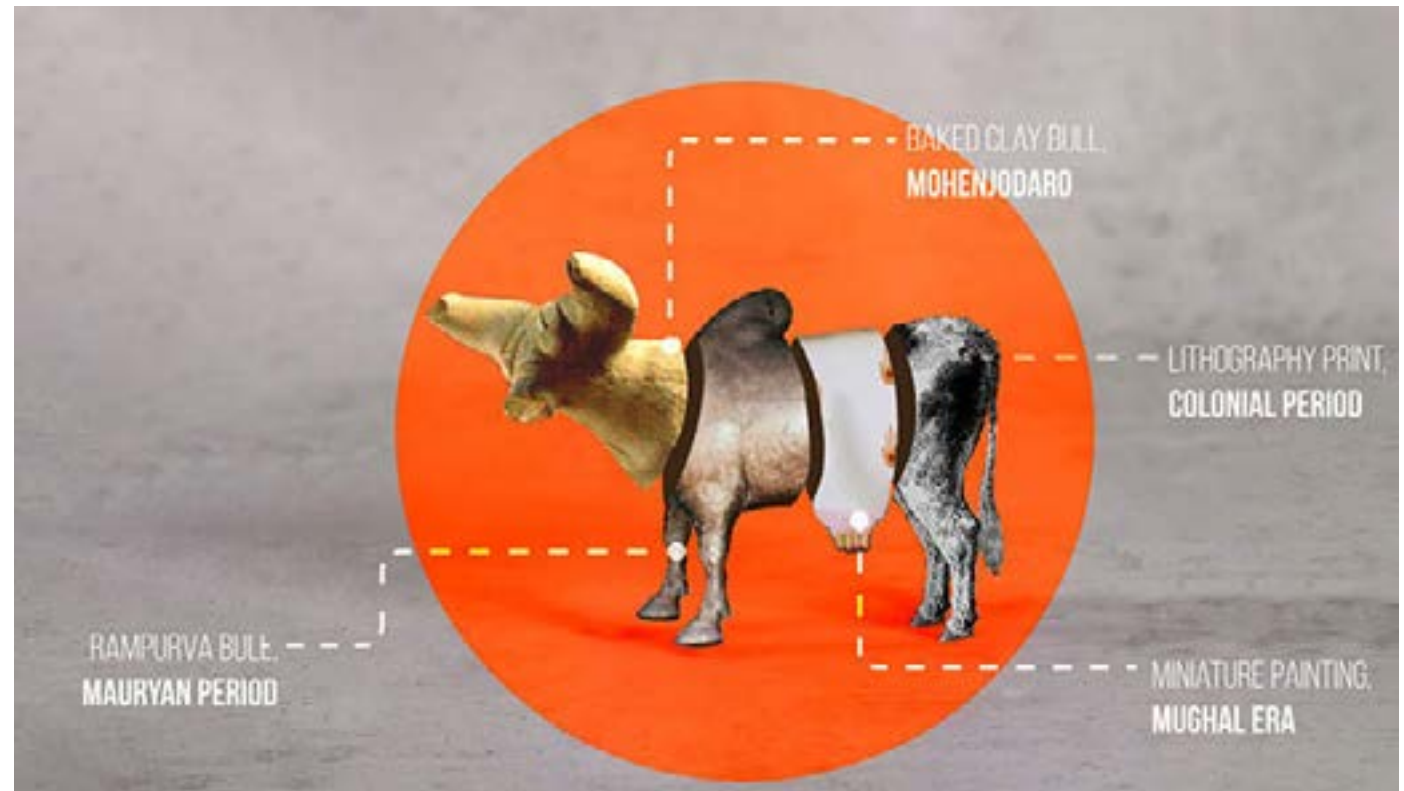
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Cattle have been an important part of Indian society and culture for thousands of years and their depiction can be seen in various forms of Indian art throughout history. From the Indus Valley Civilization to the modern era, cows and bulls have been portrayed in paintings, sculptures and other art forms throughout time.

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Why Studying These Depictions?

Studying the depiction of animals in art can provide us with valuable insights into the world at that time. It can tell us about the social, cultural, and religious beliefs of the people who created the art. For example, the prevalence of animal depictions in ancient Indian art can help us understand the importance of animals in the daily life and religious practices of people during that era. Furthermore, the style and techniques used in the depiction of animals can give us clues about the artistic techniques, cultural influences, and technological advancements of that period. Therefore, studying animal depictions in art can help us understand and appreciate the history and cultural heritage of a society.

How to go about it?

Choosing the animal

Studying all animal depictions in Indian art would have been a daunting task as it would involve analyzing a vast and diverse body of artwork spanning over several millennia. India has a rich and varied artistic tradition that encompasses different art forms, styles, and techniques across various regions and time periods. The depiction of animals in Indian art is widespread, and different animals hold specific meanings and associations across different contexts. For example, elephants represent power and royalty, tigers symbolize strength and ferocity, and peacocks signify beauty and grace. Focusing on specific animal depictions, such as cows and bulls, allows for a deeper exploration of the cultural, religious, and social contexts that shape the portrayal of these animals in Indian art. It provides a more meaningful and nuanced understanding of the cultural and artistic significance of these depictions. Cattle have been an important part of Indian life for centuries, serving as a source of milk, meat, and labor. Their importance in agriculture and rural life has also made them a symbol of prosperity and abundance. Dividing the timeline into periods was important as it allowed for a more focused analysis of the artwork produced during each era. This approach helps to identify the unique artistic styles, themes, and techniques that emerged during different periods of Indian history. Breaking this long timeline into short chunks not only helps in curating the data but also helps in understanding and categorizing these artefacts easily.

Overall, dividing the timeline into periods is essential when studying cattle depiction in Indian art as it allows for a structured and comprehensive analysis of the artwork produced during each era. This approach provides valuable insights into the cultural and artistic heritage of India and its continued significance in Indian society.

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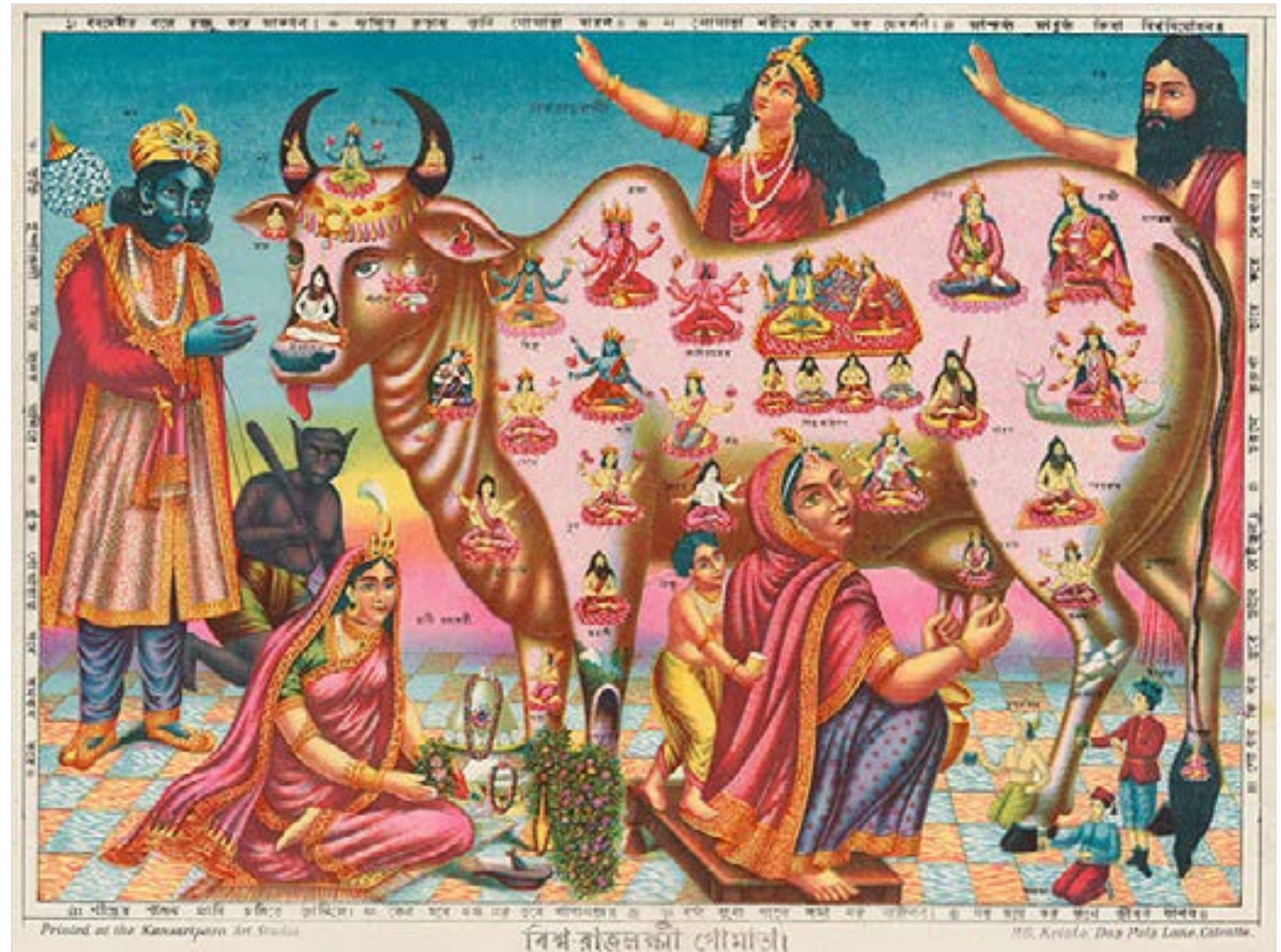
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Vishva Rajalakshmi Gomata India ca. 1890
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Art Periods

Indian art history can be broadly divided into several eras based on the different art periods that emerged during different times. Here are some of the significant art periods and eras in Indian art history:

- **Indus Valley Civilization (2500 BCE – 1700 BCE):**

This era is known for its exceptional pottery and sculpture artefacts discovered from the Indus Valley sites. The artefacts reflect a sophisticated culture that flourished during this time.

- **Maurya Empire (321 BCE – 185 BCE):**

During this era, the art style was predominantly focused on Buddhist and Jain art. The Mauryan period is known for the creation of rock-cut architecture, such as the famous Sanchi Stupa.

- **Gupta Empire (320 CE – 550 CE):**

The Gupta period is considered the “Golden Age” of Indian art, where art and literature flourished. The art of this period is known for its intricate details, graceful curves, and naturalistic forms.

- **Mughal Empire (16th century – 18th century):**

During this period, India witnessed the emergence of several Islamic dynasties. This era witnessed the creation of Indo-Islamic architecture, such as the Qutub Minar, the Taj Mahal, and the Red Fort.

- **Colonial India (1757 – 1947):**

This era witnessed the arrival of the British in India. The British influence can be seen in the architecture, painting, and sculpture of the time.

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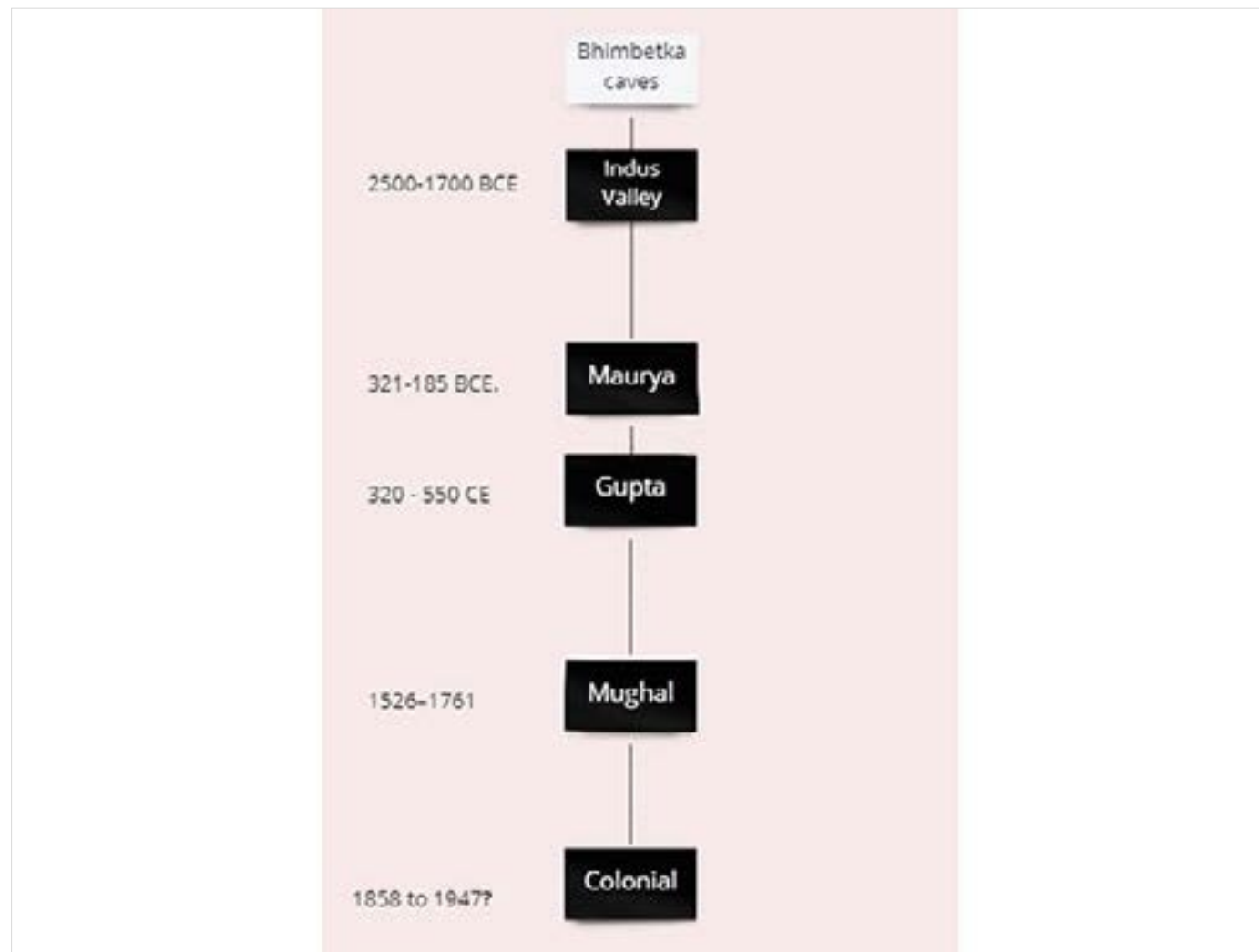
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Bhimbetka Caves



Indus Valley



Mauryan Era



Gupta Era



Mughal Era



Colonial Era

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Bhimbetka Caves

The Bhimbetka cave paintings, often regarded as the oldest evidence of art in South Asia, are Prehistoric paintings discovered on the Bhimbetka rock shelters in the Raisen area of present-day Madhya Pradesh. Bhimbetka has about 750 rock shelters, many of which feature murals showing animal and human figures in green, red, white, brown, and black. The oldest of them depict scenes from the life of Upper Palaeolithic and Mesolithic hunter-gatherers - a time when many animals had yet to be tamed, people were nomadic, and collective civilizations did not yet exist. The caves were inhabited by humans from at least the Upper Paleolithic period (around 30,000 years ago) to the medieval period, and the rock art found in the caves provides a glimpse into the lives of the people who lived there. One of the common themes in the rock art of Bhimbetka is the depiction of cattle. These cattle are depicted in various poses, such as standing, grazing, and being milked. The depictions also show the different types of cattle, including humped and humpless breeds, and the use of various tools and equipment associated with cattle, such as ropes and milking vessels.



People hunting bovine.
(Image source)



Animals painted on the rock shelters, Upper Paleolithic period, Bhimbetka, India.
(Image source)

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Indus Valley

The Indus Valley Civilization, also known as the Indus Civilization, was a Bronze Age civilization in the northern areas of South Asia that lasted from 3300 BCE to 1300 BCE, and from 2600 BCE to 1900 BCE in its full form. It was one of three early civilizations of the Near East and South Asia, along with ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, and the most extensive of the three.

Excavations of Indus towns have revealed a great deal of evidence of creative activity. A variety of different specimens of the culture's art were discovered, including seals, ceramics, gold jewellery, and figures in terracotta, bronze, and steatite. Such finds are important because they provide insights into the minds, lives, and religious beliefs of their creators and their surroundings.

Animal remains in Indus Valley

The sheer volume and variety of animal, reptile and bird remains found at three sites is staggering, and on the stratigraphic analysis of the area in which they are found allows for a clearer discernment of how patterns of use and consumption may have changed over the course of Indus epochs.

As others have noted of ancient animal remains in South Asia, cattle “constitute the highest percentage among faunal remains at the primary sites and during all phases of the Harappan occupation. It was a major component of the diet. Cattle were kept for primary products like meat and milk”. They were followed in importance by sheep and goats.

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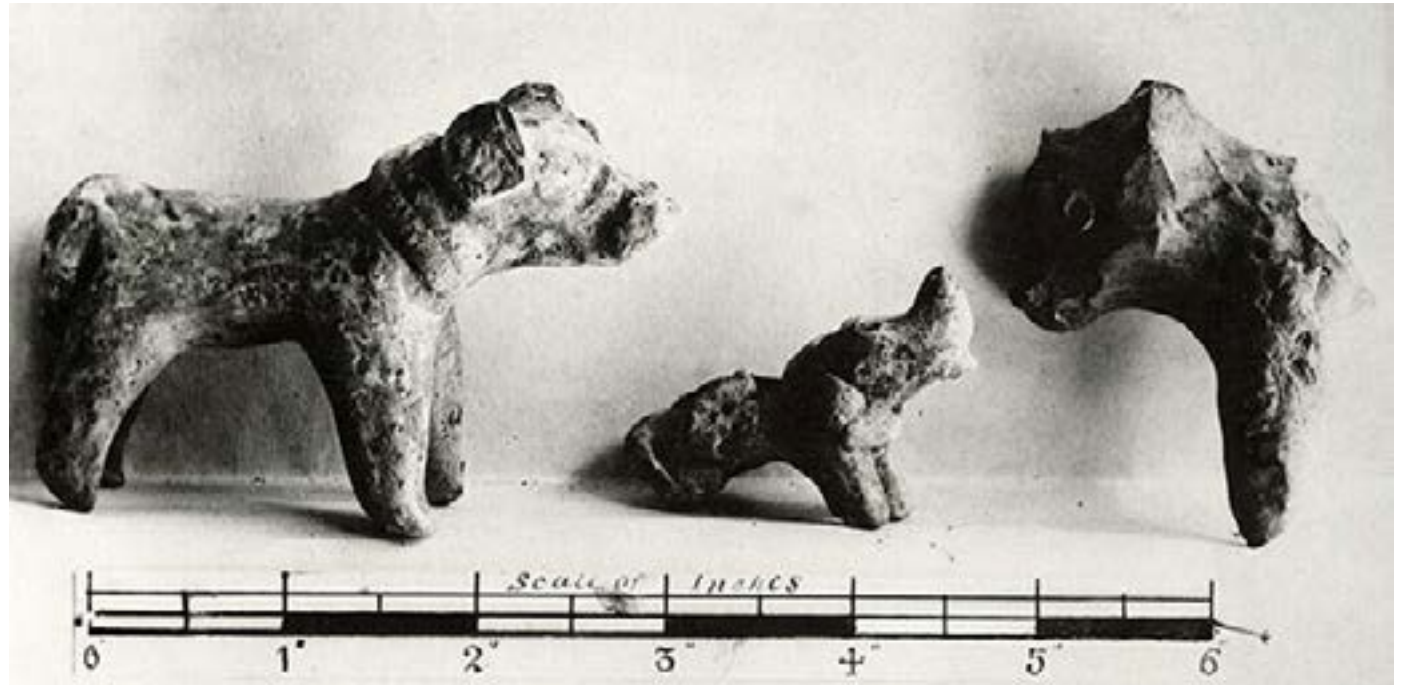
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Cattle depiction in Terracotta figurines

Over three-quarters of the animal figures are cattle, usually humped bulls and buffaloes. These figurines are generally believed to be zebu cattle, which are depicted in earlier portrayals with painted geometric designs, large abdomens, and splayed legs and augmented with individually attached, and occasionally painted eyes during the Mature Harappan Period. Apart from them dogs, rabbits, pigs, elephants, felines, deer, monkeys, rhinoceroses, elephants, turtles, and birds are also depicted. Birds are pictured in cages in some cases; dogs, lambs, and monkeys wear collars; and cattle, particularly from later eras, are depicted pulling carts with wheels – all of which imply the practise of animal husbandry in Indus culture.



The terracotta figurine on the left is an animal with a double collar ornamentation. The broken projections on the head could be where the ears were or possibly horns. It is not clear if this is a dog or a bull without a hump. The figurine in the center is a one horned rhinoceros and the broken figurine on the right appears to be of a bull with broken leg and horns missing.

- Jonathan Mark Kenoyer, 2023.

(Image source)

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What these figurines could have meant?

Researchers think that these animal sculptures were created for ceremonial usage, as children's toys, or as amulets. A variety of discoveries, including elephant sculptures from Harappa with red and white stripes painted across their faces, support this theory. It has been claimed that such styles of painting may represent a culture of adorning domesticated elephants for ceremonial purposes, as well as the usage of clay figurines for ritual sacrifices rather than actual animals.



Baked clay bull Mohenjodaro C. 2500 B.C.E
([Image source](#))

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An endearing form with plumpish build, elongated figure and innocent face this typical animal is one of the two best known styles of bulls that the Indus artisan innovated. This terracotta bull figurine is entirely handmade with cream slip on it. Probably a knife might have been used in shaping the parts of the body and its minute details. It appears to be wearing a garland or plaited rope around its neck.

During excavation, a large number of small clay figures of cattle were found, as were fragments of small clay carts. Even more common were biconical clay pieces or tokens, with a total of 23,000 recovered. Much like with the human figurines excavated along with them since the 1920s, the terracotta animal figurines from this period provide us with a sense of the relationship between humans and animals during the Indus Valley Civilisation, as well as the broader symbolic and functional position of animals within Indus ideology.



Clay model of cattle pulling a wheeled cart. From the Chanhu Daro, ca. 2250 B.C.

(Photograph courtesy of the University Museum)

(Image source)

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The Harappan Gallery houses a limited collection of objects categorised as toys. One figure from Kalibangan in particular has an animal with a moving head that is foxed to the body by a thread. Additional toys include small depictions of carts and possibly ploughs, demonstrating the importance of trade and even agriculture in the town. Because their full-size equivalents are generally lost from the archaeological record, the survival of these ceramic toys is crucial in providing us with insight into such activities.



National Museum, New Delhi - Harappan Artefacts

(Image source)

Apart from the human figures, excavations have uncovered a plethora of clay animal depictions. These animals include a bull, a buffalo, an elephant, a dog, a deer, a monkey, and birds. None of these representations are very naturalistic or artistic and should again appear to be symbolic in nature.

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Indus Valley Stamp Seals

The symbolic and formal imagery on the seals are typical of Indus Valley iconography and consist of bovine figures such as bulls, water buffalo, Indian gaur or wild ox and zebu; other animals such as elephants, rhinoceroses, tigers; fantastical creatures such as unicorns (sometimes interpreted to be bovine animals in strict profile) and plants, although less common; and human and human-like figures. Seals frequently included images of individuals appearing to be engaged in religious activities, complemented with themes such as the holy fig, containers, and agricultural equipment. The geometric forms and realistic figurations are nearly usually accompanied with inscriptions of four to seven characters in the as-yet undeciphered Indus script, making the Indus Valley stamp seals the most prevalent group of artefacts to show it.



Front and back of seal with two-horned bull and inscription, Indus Valley Civilization, c. 2000 B.C.E., steatite (Cleveland Museum of Art)

(Image source)

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Animal-Human hybrids?

Historically, archaeologists thought the Harappans used cattle primarily as draught animals and as a source of food. (Other major foods grown via cultivation were wheat, barley, peas and beans, and cotton.) It was also clear that animals had a role in Harappan philosophy, since several of the seal-tablets discovered at sites such as Harappa and Mohenjo Daro depict cow-women and maybe a bull-man.



Seal portraying a “cow-woman” attacking a horned or feathered tiger. Found in the excavations at Mohenjo daro carried about by Mackay in the 1930s. (Drawing by Jano Bell)

(Image source)



Seal portraying a seated man with bull's horns; from Mohenjo daro, ca. 200-1900 B.C. To either side of this figure are animals of the grasslands: a rhinoceros, buffalo, elephant, and tiger. (Drawing by Jano Bell)

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The Unicorn Seals

The Harappan seal-tablets represent a variety of animals, but the most prevalent are eight. Four of these are grassland wild animals: rhinoceros, elephant, buffalo, and tiger. They are in the minority in the seal-tablets sample. The other four animals are domesticated: goat, zebu, shorthorn bullock, and unicorn bull. The latter, actually a profile of an animal akin to the well-known bullocks from Gujarat, is depicted with great frequency, occurring as almost 90 percent of the corpus from any given site. At the back of each seal is a perforated knob or boss that would allow it to be suspended on a string and worn.

Frequency of animal devices on Indus seals

Unicorn with standard	1,159
Short-horned bull	95
Elephant	55
Zebu (humped bull)	54
Rhinoceros	39
Goat-antelope	36
Bull-antelope	26
Tiger	16
Buffalo	14
Hare facing a bush	10
Bull-like unicorn but with two horns	5
Horned tiger	5
Hare	5
Two short-horned bulls, face to face	2
Horned elephant	1
Two rhinoceroses	1
Two goats flanking a tree	1

Note: From Mahadevan (1977: 793).

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A photograph of bullocks from Gujarat.



Seal portraying a "unicorn bull". (Photograph courtesy of James Blair, National Geographic Society)

(Image source)

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Harappan Seals

Thousands of seals have been found so far from excavations at many different Indus Valley Civilization sites. It is thought they played an important role as the mode for transactions, highlighting a vibrant local and long distance trading network.



(Image source)

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Unrecognizable Artefacts

Although many animal figurines have identifiable traits (e. g., the applied “hide” and horn typical of a rhinoceros figurine), some figurines are not readily identifiable. Animal figurines that are badly broken are sometimes particularly difficult to identify, but even the more complete figurines are not necessarily recognizable. Perhaps the makers of Indus figurines created abstractions, possibly by emphasizing particular features (as is common in caricatures), that were and are not recognizable to others.

Many archaeological sites have been destroyed or looted, making it difficult to reconstruct a complete picture of the Indus Valley civilization. As a result, our understanding of their society and culture remains incomplete, and many questions about their way of life, beliefs, and practices remain unanswered.



Unidentified animal figurine from Harappa.

(Image source)

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Difference between Indus Valley and Bhimbetka art

The Indus Valley Civilization and Bhimbetka both provide valuable insights into ancient Indian art and culture. However, there are several differences between the animal depictions in art in these two regions.

- **Time period:**

The Indus Valley Civilization existed between 2600 BCE and 1900 BCE, while Bhimbetka is believed to have been inhabited by humans for over 30,000 years. Therefore, the animal depictions in art in Bhimbetka are much older than those in the Indus Valley.

- **Style:**

The style of animal depictions in the Indus Valley Civilization is highly stylized, with animals being portrayed in a naturalistic yet simplified manner. In contrast, the animal depictions in Bhimbetka are more realistic and detailed, with a greater emphasis on the texture and anatomical features of the animals.

- **Purpose:**

The animal depictions in the Indus Valley Civilization were primarily found on pottery and seals, and were likely used for religious or ritualistic purposes. In contrast, the animal depictions in Bhimbetka were found in rock shelters and were likely created as part of everyday life, as well as for spiritual and artistic expression.

- **Diversity:**

The animal depictions in the Indus Valley Civilization primarily feature domesticated animals such as bulls, cows, and goats, while the animal depictions in Bhimbetka are much more diverse and include a wide range of wild animals such as tigers, rhinoceroses, and elephants.

Overall, while both the Indus Valley Civilization and Bhimbetka offer important insights into ancient Indian art, the animal depictions in each region differ in terms of style, purpose, diversity, and time period.

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Mauryan Era

The Mauryan Empire existed from approximately 322 BCE to 185 BCE and was known for its political and cultural achievements. The art of the Mauryan Empire was influenced by Buddhist and Jain teachings, which emphasized non-violence and compassion towards all living beings. As a result, the animal depictions in Mauryan art were largely symbolic and but naturalistic. For example, the famous Lion Capital of Ashoka, which is now the emblem of modern India, features four lions standing back to back, each with a different expression. This depiction of the lion symbolises strength, power, and the benevolent rule of the Mauryan Empire.

Some of the most notable examples of Mauryan art include:

- **Pillars:**

The Ashoka Pillars are one of the most recognizable Mauryan artefacts. They are tall columns made of polished sandstone and feature elaborate carvings depicting animals, plants, and various other motifs.

- **Stupas:**

Stupas are Buddhist structures that are used to enshrine relics or commemorate important events. The Great Stupa at Sanchi is one of the most famous Mauryan stupas. It features intricate carvings and sculptures that depict scenes from the life of Buddha.

- **Stone sculptures:**

The Mauryan era is also known for its stone sculptures, which are noted for their realism and attention to detail. Some of the most famous examples include the Yakshi figures at the Sanchi Stupa and the Didarganj Yakshi.

- **Coins:**

The Mauryan dynasty was one of the first Indian dynasties to issue coins as a means of exchange. Made of silver, copper, and gold, these coins often featured images of animals, plants, and other symbols that were important to the Mauryan culture. The coins were also inscribed with various legends in Brahmi script, which provide important historical and linguistic information.

Overall, Mauryan art and artefacts are known for their intricate detailing, realistic depiction of human and animal forms, and their unique blend of indigenous and Hellenistic influences.

The Lion Capital

The Lion Capital discovered more than a hundred years ago at Sarnath, near Varanasi, is generally referred to as Sarnath Lion Capital. This is one of the finest examples of sculpture from the Mauryan period.

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The pillar capitals are divided into three parts: the lotiform bell at the bottom; the abacus, and the animal sculpture on top. The lotiform bell-shaped bases of the capitals—named for their resemblance to an inverted lotus—are composed of long petal-like units enclosing a second row of smaller, more angular petals. The abacus is a band that goes around a capital and is decorated with floral and animal motifs in relief: flamed palmettes with multiple calyxes, rosettes and honeysuckles interspersed with figures of the lion, bull, horse and elephant. The animal sculptures, noted for their neat, restrained style and precise anatomical detail, are located at the top of the Ashokan capitals.



Capital of inscribed Ashoka Pillar at Sarnath. (A. S. photo)
(Image source)

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These animals are believed to have symbolic significance and represent various aspects of Ashoka's reign and beliefs. The bull, for example, is a symbol of strength and power and may represent the might of the Maurya Empire. The lion, on the other hand, is a symbol of royalty and courage and may represent Ashoka's authority as a king. The elephant, with its association with wisdom and longevity, may symbolize Ashoka's commitment to promoting social welfare and justice. Finally, the horse, with its association with speed and agility, may symbolize Ashoka's commitment to maintaining an efficient and well-organized administration.



Ashokan lion capital from the Deer Park at Sarnath.

(Image source)

The Dharma Chakra

The Dharma Chakra (also spelt Dhamma Chakra) is a symbol that represents the teachings of Buddha, and it is often used in various forms of Buddhist art and architecture. In addition to the Indian national emblem, the Dharma Chakra is also commonly used in statues and other artwork across various countries in Asia.

In addition to the Lion Capital, there are many examples of statues and artwork that feature the Dharma Chakra and various animals in Buddhist traditions. For instance, the Great Stupa of Sanchi in India features a depiction of the Dharma Chakra, as well as various animals such as lions and elephants. Similarly, the Borobudur temple in Indonesia also features carvings of animals such as elephants and lions, as well as depictions of the Dharma Chakra.

One of the notable features of Mauryan art is the depiction of animals alongside the dhamma chakra or the wheel of law, which is a symbol associated with Buddhism and Jainism. These animals include lions, elephants, bulls, horses, and deer, which are often depicted in pairs or groups around the dhamma chakra. These animal depictions were often highly stylized and ornate, with intricate details and symbolic meanings.

The inclusion of animal depictions alongside the dhamma chakra highlights the importance of nature and the environment in ancient Indian culture and religion. It also suggests a deep reverence for animals and their symbolic

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and spiritual significance in Mauryan society.



Preaching Buddha, Gandhāra Ca. 200 A.D. Washington, Freer Gallery.

(Image source)



Buddha from Ahichchatra. Second cent. A.D. Calcutta, Museum.

Rampurva Bull

Rashtrapati Bhawan holds another one of its pillars, the beautiful Rampurva Bull, the Ashokan Pillar's sandstone capital from the third century B.C. It receives its name from the place where it was discovered, Rampurva in Bihar. The Rampurva Bull stands on a pedestal between the Rashtrapati Bhawan's central pillars at the Forecourt entrance.

The Rampurva Bull is known for its carefully sculpted figure, which depicts soft skin, sensitive nose, attentive ears, and muscular legs. It is a mixture of Indian and Persian elements.

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Rampurva Bull, Rashtrapati Bhavan.
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The Ashokan pillars at this location are thought to commemorate Buddha's renunciation. Ashoka installed two pillars (a lion and another bull) here to commemorate this event in Buddha's life. Some locals believe the lion-headed pillar represented Lord Buddha, while the bull-headed pillar represented his charioteer companion Chandak, whom he had asked to return to the palace with his discarded royal garments.



Ashokan pillar capital with bull, Maurya dynasty, India, ca. 3rd century B.C.
(Image source)

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The Stupas

The Sanchi Stupa Buddhist complex in the town of Sanchi (State of Madhya Pradesh, India). The Great Stupa is one of the oldest stone structures in India and was originally commissioned by the emperor Ashoka in the 3rd century BCE. Top Right: Carved decoration of the Northern gateway (torana) to the Great Stupa of Sanchi. Bottom: Close up of one of the panels of the southern torana of the Great Stupa showing King Ashoka visiting Ramagrama to take relics of the Buddha from the Nagas.

All the elements are covered with relief sculptures depicting the events of the Buddha's life, Jataka stories (about the Buddha's previous lives), scenes of early Buddhism, and auspicious symbols.



(Image source)

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(Image source)



(Image source - right)



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Cattle were also depicted in more utilitarian contexts, such as in scenes of farmers ploughing fields or using bull-ox carts to transport goods. These depictions were more focused on the practical aspects of cattle, rather than their symbolic or aesthetic qualities.

In conclusion, while cattle were not given the same level of artistic attention as elephants and horses in Mauryan art, they played a vital role in the Mauryan economy and society, and their depiction in art reflected their practical and utilitarian role in daily life.

Post Mauryan Influence

Apollodotus I was a Greek king who ruled in the northwestern Indian subcontinent during the 2nd century BCE. The Mauryan Empire was a powerful Indian empire that existed during the 3rd century BCE.

The exact significance of the animals depicted on the coins is unclear. The sacred elephant may be the symbol of the city of Taxila, or possibly the symbol of the white elephant that reputedly entered the womb of the mother of the Buddha, Queen Maya, in a dream, which would make it a symbol of Buddhism, one of the main religions of the Indo-Greek territories.

Similarly, the sacred bull on the reverse may be a symbol of a city (Pushkhalavati), or a depiction of Shiva, making it a symbol of Hinduism, the other major religion at that time.



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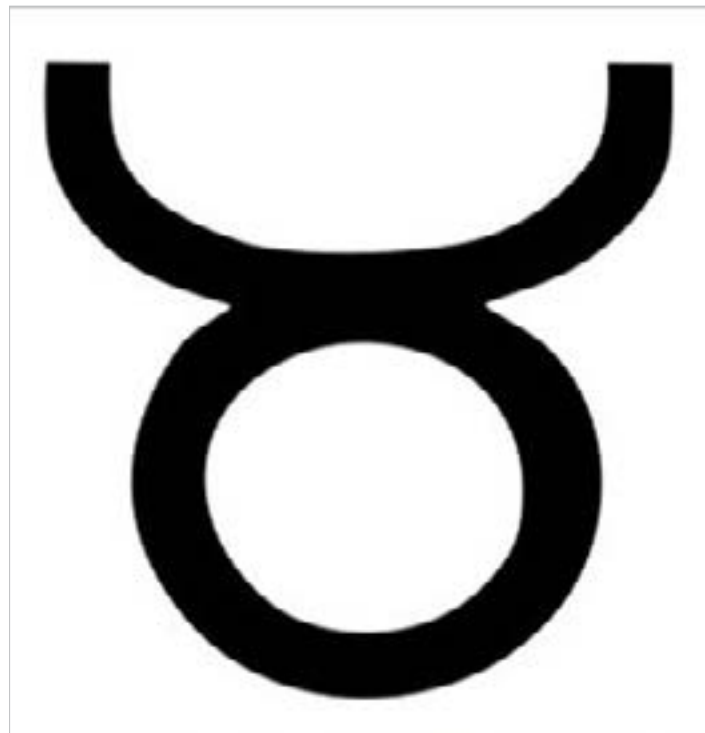
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Nandipada

The Nandipada (“foot of Nandi”) is an ancient Indian symbol, also called a taurine symbol, representing a bull’s hoof or the mark left by the foot of a bull in the ground. The Nandipada and the zebu bull are generally associated with Nandi, Shiva’s humped bull in Hinduism.[1] The Nandipada symbol also happens to be similar to the Brahmi letter “ma”.

The Nandipada appears on numerous ancient Indian coins, such as coins from Taxila dating to the 2nd century BCE. The symbol also appears on the zebu bull on the reverse if often shown with a Nandipada taurine mark on its hump on the less worn coins, which reinforces the role of the animal as a symbol, religious or geographic, rather than just the depiction of an animal for decorative purposes. The same association was made later on coins of Zeionises or Vima Kadphises.



(Image source)

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Indian coin of Apollodotus I, with a nandipada taurine symbol on the hump of the zebu bull.
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Gupta Era

Art, being an important part of religion and society, flourished from time to time under the patronage of the rulers in India. It reached up to its golden time in Gupta period as well as in Chola period.

Art captured an important position in the religion as well as in society. Along with the rock-cut architecture, temple architecture, sculpture, dance, music and drama; painting captured a significant hold in all these arts. But up to 10th Century AD most of the art was done in the rock-cut temples and temple architecture. To promote religion and show dedication of rulers, they made many temples in their empire and regions.

The paintings in the Ajanta Caves depict a range of subjects, including scenes from the life of Buddha, Jataka tales, and various deities. They also depict scenes from everyday life, such as hunting, dancing, and farming. The themes are often intertwined with religious teachings and provide a window into the socio-cultural milieu of the time.

Depiction of Animals for aesthetic purposes

While the animals depicted in the Ajanta paintings often have significant symbolic or religious meanings, they are also frequently used for aesthetic purposes. The depiction of animals in the paintings is an essential aspect of the overall art style, and they are often portrayed in intricate detail with a focus on their physical form and movement.

The artists who created the Ajanta paintings were skilled in portraying the natural world, and the animals they depicted were often rendered with a high degree of realism. The use of color, shading, and texture helped to create a sense of depth and three-dimensionality, and the animals were often depicted in dynamic poses, capturing their natural movements and expressions.

The paintings are made in fresco technique here many animals are depicted at required places. Bull is not depicted as the part of the composition but as decoration or design.

No other design or anything had been made in the painting along with these two bulls as to put full attention on the act. The spectator should enjoy the movement and rhythm in the painting as well as the balance and harmony in the motion.

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Capital of column 5, corridor side - Bull fight scene.

(Image source)

(Image source - right)



Capital of column 5, corridor side - Bull fight scene

During this period, animal depictions in art were often created for both aesthetic and narrative purposes.

One of the significant sources of animal depictions during the Gupta period was the Jataka tales, which are a collection of stories about the previous lives of the Buddha. These tales often feature animals as the main characters and provide rich material for artistic and literary expression.

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Reclining Bulls Cave 17 Ajanta Caves.

(Image source)

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Kshaya vridhhi, ('loss-and-gain'), Foreshortening A ceiling painting, Cave 1

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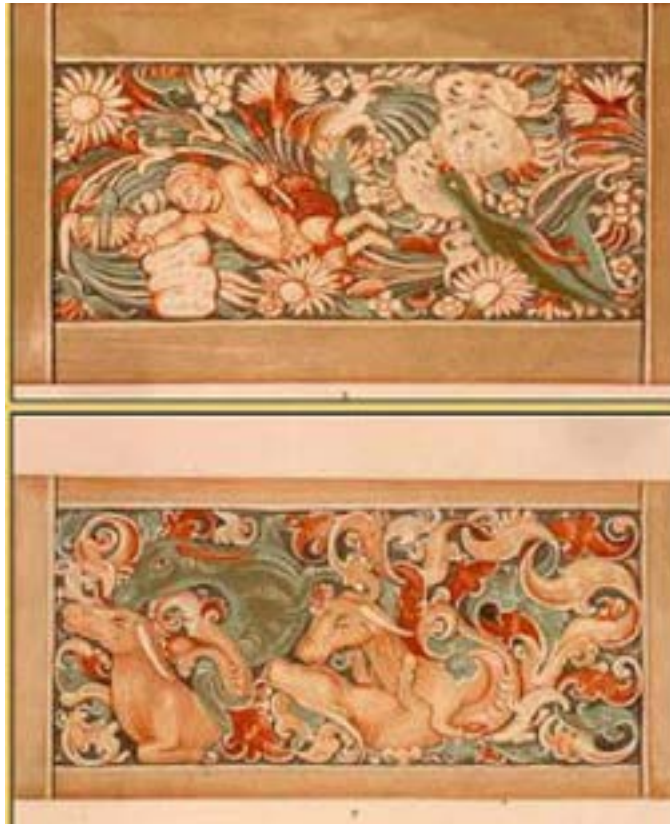
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Animal depictions in Gupta art were also highly stylized and ornate, with a strong emphasis on symmetry, balance, and proportion. For example, the depiction of peacocks, elephants, and lions in Gupta art was often characterized by their elaborate details and intricate patterns, which added to their aesthetic appeal.



The leaping bulls.

(Image source)

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Flora and fauna in Bagh caves.

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Kshaya vriddhi, ('loss-and-gain'), Foreshortening A ceiling painting, Cave 1

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Nandivisala declining to drag the cart.

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According to the Jatak stories, this is the story of Nandivishala. Gautam Buddha took a birth of a bull named Nandivishala who was a reared bull of a Brahmin. See Nandivisala Jataka Jataka Pali No.28.

Different ideologies in Gupta and Mauryan Art

Religion and politics were both essential aspects of ancient Indian society, and the art of the Gupta and Mauryan periods reflected these differing emphases.

Gupta Art: Gupta art is characterized by its elegance, refinement, and attention to detail. Gupta art often depicted religious themes and mythological stories, reflecting the dominant role of Hinduism and Buddhism in this period. Hindu and Buddhist deities were often depicted in sculpture and painting, with intricate details, lifelike poses, and expressive features. The Ajanta caves in Maharashtra, India, are famous for their murals depicting scenes from the life of the Buddha, and Hindu gods and goddesses, such as Vishnu, Shiva, and Devi, were often depicted in stone and bronze sculptures.

Mauryan Art: Mauryan art, on the other hand, was primarily focused on political and ethical messages. The Mauryan period was marked by the reign of Emperor Ashoka, who converted to Buddhism and promoted it as the state religion. Ashoka's edicts, which were inscribed on pillars and rocks across his empire, promoted ethical and moral principles, such as nonviolence, respect for elders, and religious tolerance. Mauryan art, therefore, reflected these political and ethical messages, with a focus on monumental architecture and sculpture. The Sarnath Lion Capital, which features four lions sitting back to back on a circular abacus, is a famous example of Mauryan art. The lions represent the power and authority of the Mauryan empire, while the inscriptions on the capital promote ethical and moral values.

In summary, Gupta art often depicted religious themes and mythological stories, reflecting the dominant role of Hinduism and Buddhism in this period, while Mauryan art focused more on political and ethical messages, reflecting the reign of Emperor Ashoka and his promotion of Buddhism as the state religion. Both styles of art, however, shared a common interest in creating monumental architecture and sculpture that showcased the skill and artistry of ancient Indian craftsmen.

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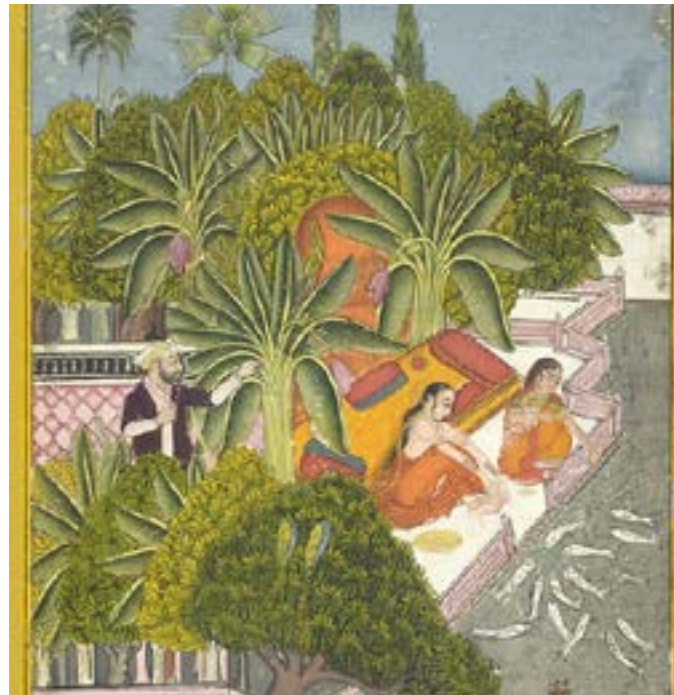
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Mughal Era

Mughal paintings emerged during the Mughal Empire (1526-1858 CE) and were heavily influenced by Persian and European art, as well as Indian art forms. These paintings covered a diverse range of subjects, including historical events, court life, hunting scenes, and portraits of emperors and their families. Mughal paintings were characterized by a more realistic and three-dimensional style, with a greater emphasis on shading, perspective, and depth. The color palette of Mughal paintings was richer and more diverse than Gupta paintings, featuring shades of blues, greens, and gold.

Unlike Gupta paintings, which were primarily focused on religious themes, Mughal paintings explored a variety of subjects and were known for their intricate details and vivid colors.



Royal Women Feeding Fish Rajasthan, Bundi, c. 1740
Opaque watercolor, Everett and Ann McNear Collection,



European Banquet Scene Mughal, c. 1600 Opaque watercolor Lucy Maud Buckingham Collection, 1919.891

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Depiction of everyday life

Mughal paintings often depict scenes from courtly life, such as hunting parties, feasts, and royal processions. They also feature portraits of Mughal emperors, their wives, and other courtiers. In contrast, earlier Indian paintings tended to focus on religious and mythological themes.

The painted world of the Mughals and Rajputs preserves for us extraordinary vivid images of daily encounters, some pleasant and others less so, between humans and animals. The Europeans' love for cats and dogs is graphically and empathetically portrayed in a meticulously observed, tinted drawing of a banquet scene by an unknown Mughal artist. In contrast to this picture, which is enlivened by a social conviviality and festive spirit, is a more colorful but doleful image from the Rajput state of Bundi in which we, along with a princely voyeur behind the banana trees, can spy on a lady biding her time with her maid and a school of fish eager for their daily rations.



Prince and Princess Hunting Blackbuck - Art Institute of Chicago

(Image source)

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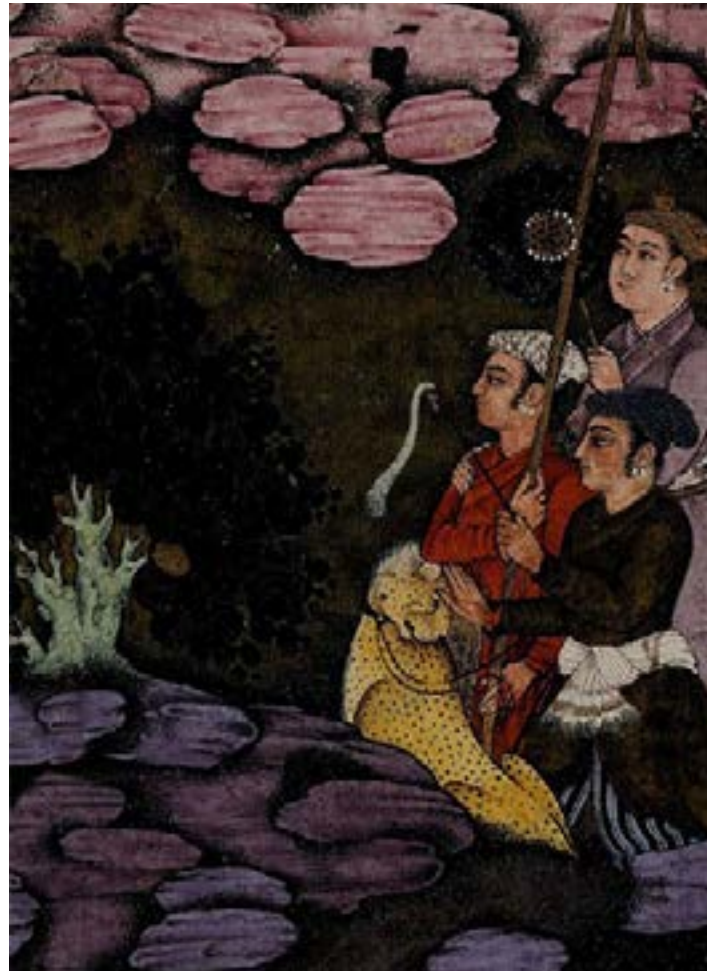
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Significance of Hunting

In Islamic miniature paintings, hunting scenes are often depicted with great attention to detail and artistic skill. These paintings are not only a representation of the hunt itself but also a symbol of the spiritual search for the divine. The animals, the landscapes, and the human figures all carry symbolic meanings that allude to the spiritual significance of the hunt.



Mughal, c. 1585 (central image); Rajasthan, Mate seventeenth/early eighteenth century (border) Opaque watercolor cm Lucy Maud Buckingham Collection
([Image source](#))

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In a splendid portrait of the Mughal prince Azam Shah, painted in the third quarter of the seventeenth century, the artist chose to represent him as a keen falconer. Sometimes an unexpected bonus during a hunt was a visit to a holy man who lived in the forest. One Shah Jahani picture in the collection, probably painted in Kashmir, portrays such a visit. These pictures were particularly popular with the Mughals, as the earthly hunt in Islamic cultures is a metaphor for the search for the divine.

While cattle depictions were not the primary focus in Mughal hunting paintings, they were occasionally included in the composition. Mughal hunting paintings were a popular genre of art during the 16th to 19th centuries and typically depicted royal hunts, with the emperor or nobles pursuing game on horseback with the help of falcons or other birds of prey.

Cattle depictions in these paintings were often secondary to the primary subjects of the hunt, which were usually wild animals such as tigers, deer, and boars. However, domesticated animals such as cows and buffaloes were sometimes included in the background or foreground of the composition, as they were commonly found in the rural landscape of Mughal India.

The depiction of cattle in Mughal hunting paintings was often used to enhance the realism and naturalism of the composition, providing a sense of context and scale. Cattle were also sometimes included as part of the narrative of the painting, such as in scenes where the hunting party was crossing a river or passing through a village.



(Image source)

(Image source - right)

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Varying Proportions for different animals

Animals were, of course, the principal mode of transportation for the rich and powerful. The elephant and the horse were the two favorites, as we see in two beautiful pictures. The earlier of the two, from the Padshahnama, an album prepared for Shah Jahan to record his imperial rule, is a detailed and acutely observed rendering of an imperial procession that conveys all the pomp and pageantry of such occasions. While the caparisoned elephant reveals the traditional confidence of Indian artists in representing the pachyderm, the more naturalistic depiction of the horse in Indian art is a contribution of the Mughals. In the Indian way of thinking, however, the horse bearing royalty was not just another animal to be observed and drawn accurately. It could not match the elephant for size in life, but in art its form could be manipulated to convey the majesty of the ruler. So in a magnificent Mewar picture, the horse's splendidly embellished form reiterates the importance of his royal, and, indeed, divinized rider.



Maharana Bhim Singh Attributed to Ghasi lactive 1820/36) Rajasthan, Mewar, Udaipur Royal Atelier, Everett and Ann McNear Collection
(Image source)

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In some Mughal-era paintings, yogis from different sects, including Nath, Ramanandi, and Sannyasi, are depicted alongside cattle. These paintings typically showcase the yogis in a meditative or contemplative state, often surrounded by natural elements such as trees and animals. The depiction of yogis and cattle together in Mughal-era paintings also reflects the complex social and cultural milieu of the time. These paintings showcase the interaction and overlap between different religious traditions, and the ways in which spiritual practices were influenced by the natural world.



Bifolio from the Gulsham Album.
(Image source)

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Cattle depictions were a common feature on the borders of Mughal miniature paintings. These borders were typically decorated with intricate designs and patterns, often featuring a variety of animals, birds, and plants.

The cattle depicted in the borders of Mughal miniature paintings were often stylized and abstract, with elongated bodies and curved horns. They were typically depicted in profile, facing to the left or right, and were often accompanied by other animals such as deer, birds, or monkeys.



Humayan Seated in a Landscape with a Plane Tree, Admiring a Turban Ornament: Page from the Late Shah Jahan Album (Image source)

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Mughal emperors and nobles were passionate about the natural world and often commissioned artists to document the flora and fauna they encountered. The resulting paintings are highly detailed and realistic, capturing the intricate patterns and colors of plants, birds, animals, and insects.

One of the most famous Mughal painters, Mansur, was renowned for his detailed studies of plants and animals, which he created for Emperor Jahangir's botanical album. His paintings documented the flora and fauna of the Indian subcontinent with such precision and accuracy that they are still used as scientific illustrations today.

Ustad Mansur

Ustad Mansur was a famous Mughal painter who lived during the reigns of Jahangir and Shah Jahan in the 17th century. He was known for his exceptional talent in painting animals, birds, and flowers, and his work was highly prized by the Mughal emperors and other members of the court.

The significance of Ustad Mansur's paintings lies in their exceptional beauty and detail, as well as their importance in documenting the flora and fauna of India during the Mughal period. Mansur's paintings were highly realistic and captured the unique qualities of each animal, bird, or flower he depicted. His paintings also provide valuable insights into the Mughal court's fascination with nature and their efforts to understand and classify the natural world around them. His paintings were not just artistic masterpieces but also served as important records of the biodiversity of the Mughal era. The accuracy of his paintings helped naturalists and scientists in identifying and classifying the flora and fauna of the time.

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A painting depicting the dodo ascribed to Ustad Mansur dated to the period 1628-33. This is one of the few coloured images of the dodo made from a living specimen.
(Image source)

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Many of Ustad Mansur's paintings feature rare and exotic species, which were not known to Europeans at the time. For example, his painting of a dodo, which is now extinct, is one of the earliest depictions of the bird in the world.



(Image source)

(Image source - right)



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Rajput School of Paintings

Rajput paintings of the Mughal era were a distinct artistic style that emerged in the royal courts of the Rajputana region (present-day Rajasthan) during the 16th and 17th centuries. These paintings were influenced by the Mughal art style, but also incorporated local Rajput elements and iconography.

Rajput paintings of this era often depicted scenes from Hindu mythology and epics, such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata, as well as portraits of Rajput rulers and nobles. The paintings were typically characterized by their vibrant colors, intricate details, and the use of gold and silver to embellish the artwork.

Overall, the Rajput paintings of the Mughal era represent a unique fusion of local traditions and Mughal influences, and are an important part of India's rich artistic and cultural heritage.



Siva and Parvati. Pahari. Ascribed to Mola Ram of Gahrwal (D. 1833). Author's Collection
(Image source)

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Siva and Parvati

Early nineteenth century. Rajput, Pakari, attributed to Mola Ram. A moonlit night in the hills, Siva watching over Parvati sleeping. Siva's trisul, drum, gourd and banner on the right, the bull Nandi on the left; a lotus lake and low wooded hills in the distance. The clear night effect is very well suggested; the figure of the Great God is drawn with much tenderness. The trees are somewhat artificial, the figure of Parvati a little stiff, the fingers unnaturally pointed; these may be regarded as late features in a work otherwise well designed, and fascinating by its romantic, but not sentimental, tenderness.

Krishna and Cows

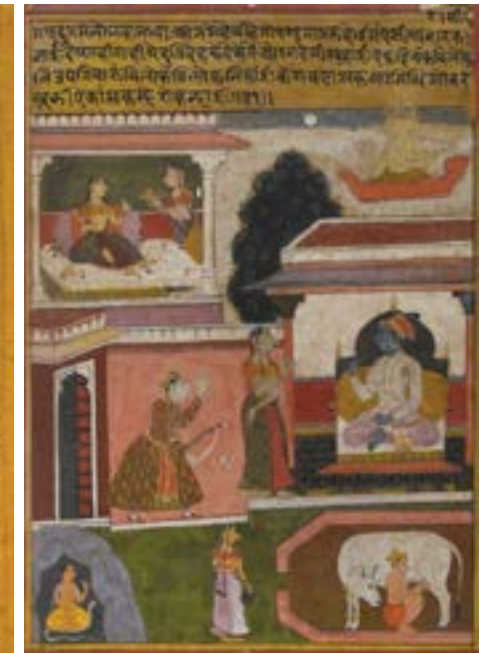
The geographical relevance of Krishna's association with cattle in paintings is rooted in the mythology and traditions of the region of Vrindavan, located in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. According to Hindu mythology, Vrindavan is the place where Krishna spent much of his childhood as a cowherd. The region is known for its lush pastures, where cows and other animals graze, and it is believed that Krishna spent his days herding cattle and playing with his friends in the fields.



(Image source)



(Image source - right)



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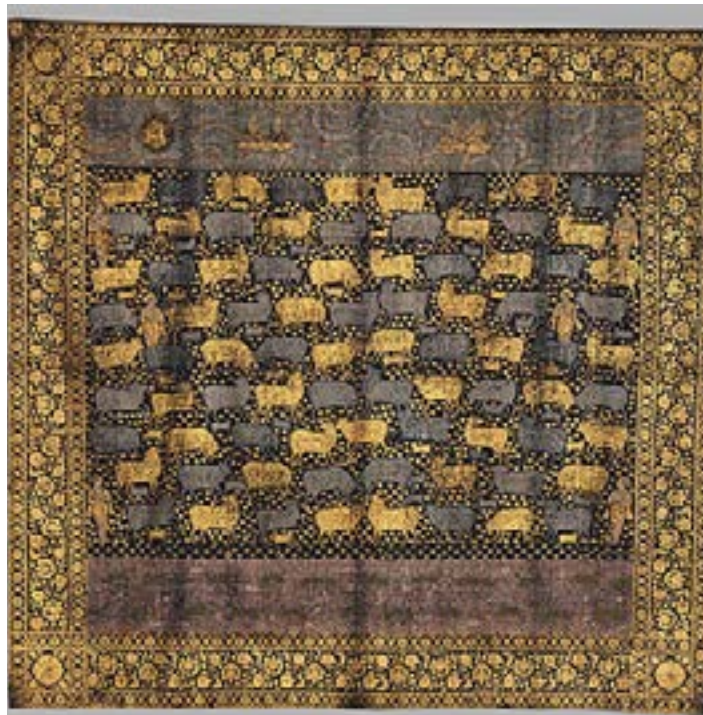
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Large painted cloths (Pichhwais) were made to hang behind the main image in a temple. This textile was produced for the Festival of Cows (Gopashtami), which occurs in late autumn to celebrate Krishna's elevation from a herder of calves to a cowherd. Note the range of cows and frolicking calves that populate the flower-strewn field. The indigo ground and extensive use of gold and silver are typical of Pichhwais that was made for a community of Sri Nathji (Shrinathji is a form of Krishna, manifested as a seven-year-old child) devotees who moved to the Deccan during this period.

At these pilgrimage centers, large painted cloths (Pichhwais) were hung behind the primary stone images of Shri Nathji in accordance with the festival calendar (2003.177). This textile was produced for the Festival of Cows (Gopashtami) which takes place in the late autumn to celebrate Krishna's elevation from a herder of calves to a cowherd. Note the range of cows and frolicking calves that populate the flower-strewn field. The indigo ground and extensive use of gold and silver are typical of Pichhwais which were made for a community of Shri Nathji devotees who moved to the Deccan during this period. Emphasized is the idea of natural abundance central to the Shri Nathji tradition: the word shri actually carries the meaning of prosperity.



Pichhwai for the Festival of Cows India, Deccan, Aurangabad late 18th century
(Image source)

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Pahari School Paintings

Pahari painting (literally meaning a painting from the mountainous regions: Pahar means a mountain in Hindi) is an umbrella term used for a form of Indian painting, done mostly in miniature forms, originating from Himalayan hill kingdoms of North India, during 17th-19th century Pahari painting grew out of the Mughal painting, though this was patronized mostly by the Rajput kings who ruled many parts of the region, and gave birth to a new idiom in Indian painting.



India, Pahari Hills, Bilaspur school, 18th century - Krishna
Summoning the Cows - 1989.339 - Cleveland Museum of Art.

(Image source)



India, Pahari Hills, Bilaspur school, 18th century - Krishna Vasudeva Carrying Krishna over the en:Yamuna River.
Created: mid-18th century.

At the moment depicted in this painting, she has succeeded in beheading the buffalo demon and shooting arrows into his true form that climbs from its neck. Artists in the foothills of the western Himalayas, where this work was made, depicted Durga's mount as a tiger—lions and tigers had synonymous meaning throughout India as emblems of shakti, or divine creative energy.

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India, Pahari Hills, Nurpur school, early 18th Century - Durga Slaying Mahisha - 1960.51 - Cleveland Museum of Art.tif

(Image source)



India, Pahari, Sirmur, 19th century - Durga Slaying Mahisha - 1955.667 - Cleveland Museum of Art.tif

Shiva and Nandi

In Pahari paintings, Nandi and Shiva are often depicted together as they are considered inseparable in Hindu mythology. Nandi is the divine vehicle and gatekeeper of Lord Shiva, while Shiva is the Hindu god of destruction and one of the three main deities in the Hindu pantheon.

The depictions of Nandi and Shiva in Pahari paintings are often used to convey the message of devotion and surrender to a higher power. These paintings also showcase the beauty and intricacy of Indian miniature painting, as well as the rich cultural and religious heritage of the Pahari region.

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School of Pahari, Shiva and Parvati on Panther Skin

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India, Himachal Pradesh, Chamba



Master of the court of Mandi - The Goddess Kali Standing upon a Mountaintop - 2018.98 - Cleveland Museum of Art

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Ragmala Paintings

The Ragmala paintings are a set of Indian miniature paintings that depict various musical modes (ragas) of Indian classical music, along with accompanying poetry. These paintings often feature depictions of Hindu gods and goddesses, as well as scenes from mythology and literature.

A narrative genre that is wholly Indian and that was extremely popular with patrons of Indian painting from the seventeenth century onward is known as Ragamala, literally, "garland of melody." Ragamala paintings illustrate six basic musical modes known as Raga and thirty or more derivatives designated as Ragini. A Raga is a male while Ragini is a female. Poets composed short verses, often included above the pictures, about these modes. These verses provide a word picture of a romantic situation or a devotional sentiment that was given visual expressions by the artist. Often animals are included in these paintings as companions of the personified Raga or Ragini, as an empathetic audience, or as symbols, visual metaphors, or allegories. The three examples selected here are representations of the Raginis known as Kakubha, Todi, and Bangal.



Lord Shiva - Bhairava Raga. Pahari, Nurpur, c. 1690. Opaque pigments heightened with gold on paper, Shiva holding an alms bowl and a trident seated on the bull Nandi, within black rules and red borders, inscription in black Takri script to the upper left corner 8 1/4 in. (21 cm.) square.

(Image source)

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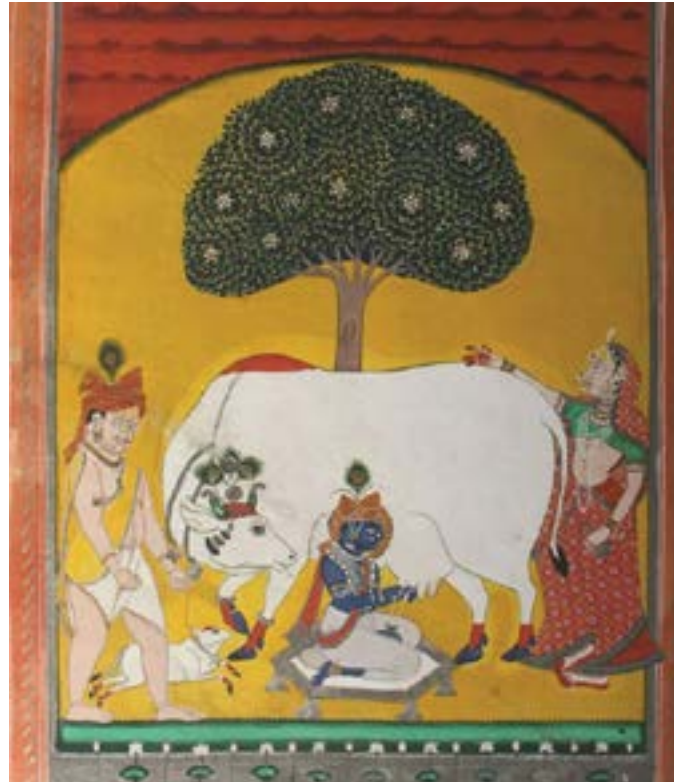
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Ragamala paintings representing the essence or mood of musical composition were another popular genre that often also had devotional significance. In a work that gives pictorial form to the music of the Vasant Ragini, a central dancing nobleman plays the role of Krishna in celebration of the coming of spring (1999.148). He holds a vina (stringed instrument) over his shoulder and lifts up a pot out of which a flowering plant emerges. His skirt of peacock feathers makes his association with Krishna clear, while the surrounding female musicians recall Krishna's Raslila dance with the Gopis (cowherdresses).



Krishna Milking Cow.

(Image source)

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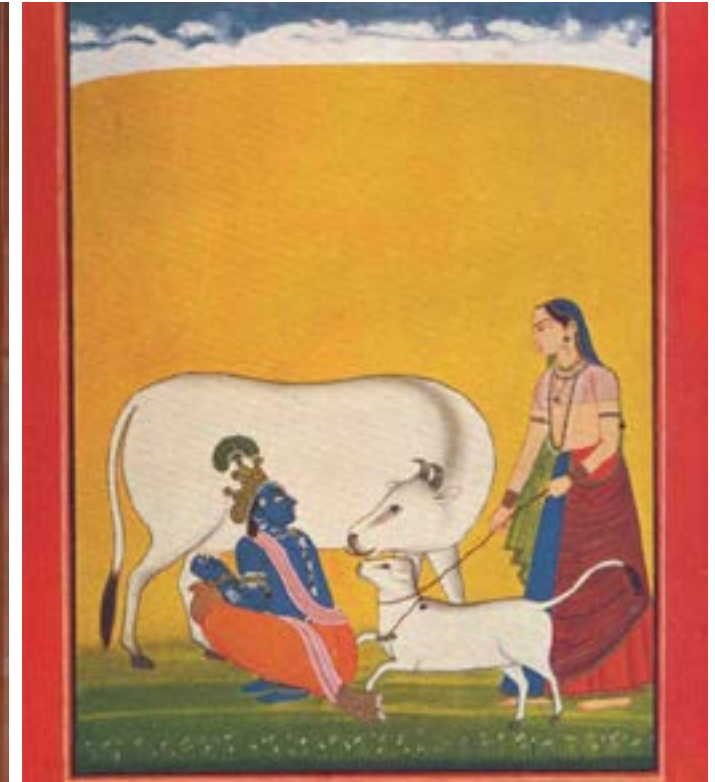


Illustration Krishna and a gopi from the Bhagavad Purana, Basohli, c. 1750.

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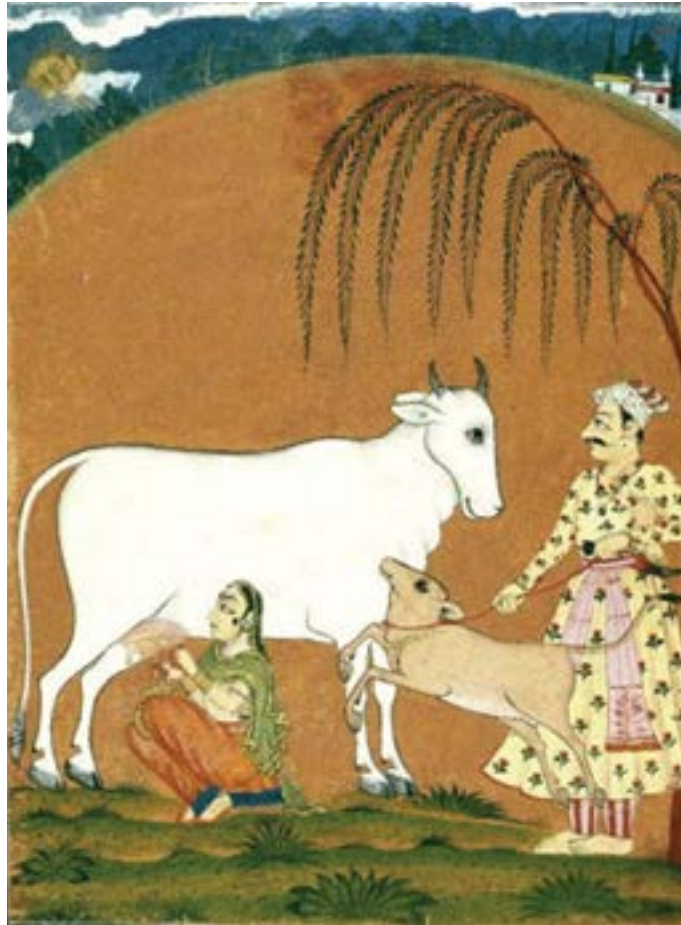
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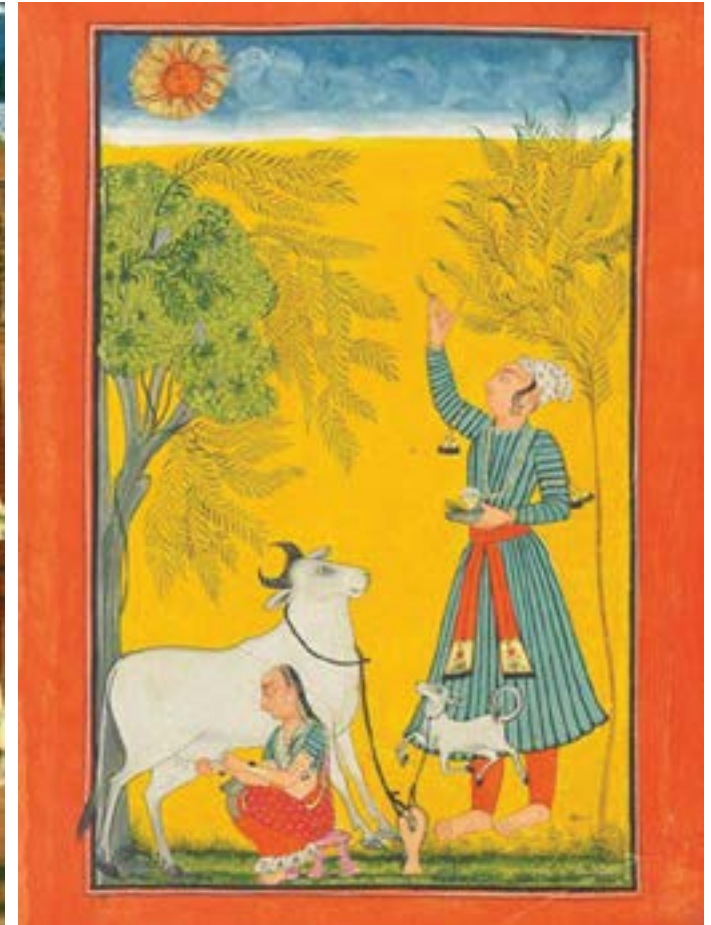
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Brooklyn Museum - Bhaskara Ragaputra Page from a Dispersed Ragamala Series.

(Image source)

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Colonial Era

Colonial-era paintings in India emerged during the British Raj (1858- 1947 CE) and were heavily influenced by European art styles, such as Realism and Impressionism. These paintings often depicted landscapes, portraits, and scenes from daily life in India, but with a more Western perspective. The artists of the colonial era were interested in capturing the unique aspects of Indian culture and landscape, but often did so through the lens of colonialism and Orientalism, resulting in a romanticized view of India that was appealing to Western audiences. The subjects in these paintings were varied and often depicted the day to day life of the nobility, street scenes, river banks, people going to the temples, people whom the British met in the marketplace and in the cities and villages and so on, apart from natural landscapes.

Depiction for current events

The illustrations in newspapers and other publications were an important means of raising awareness about the impact of famine in colonial India. These illustrations were often included in newspapers, pamphlets, and other forms of media, and they were intended to convey the severity of the crisis to a wider audience.

The purpose of these illustrations was to generate public sympathy and support for relief efforts. By depicting scenes of suffering and deprivation, the illustrations aimed to elicit an emotional response from readers and to encourage them to take action to help those affected by the famine. In addition to their immediate impact on public opinion, these illustrations also played an important role in shaping historical memory of the famines in colonial India. They helped to document the scale and severity of the crisis, and they served as a reminder of the human cost of British colonial policies.

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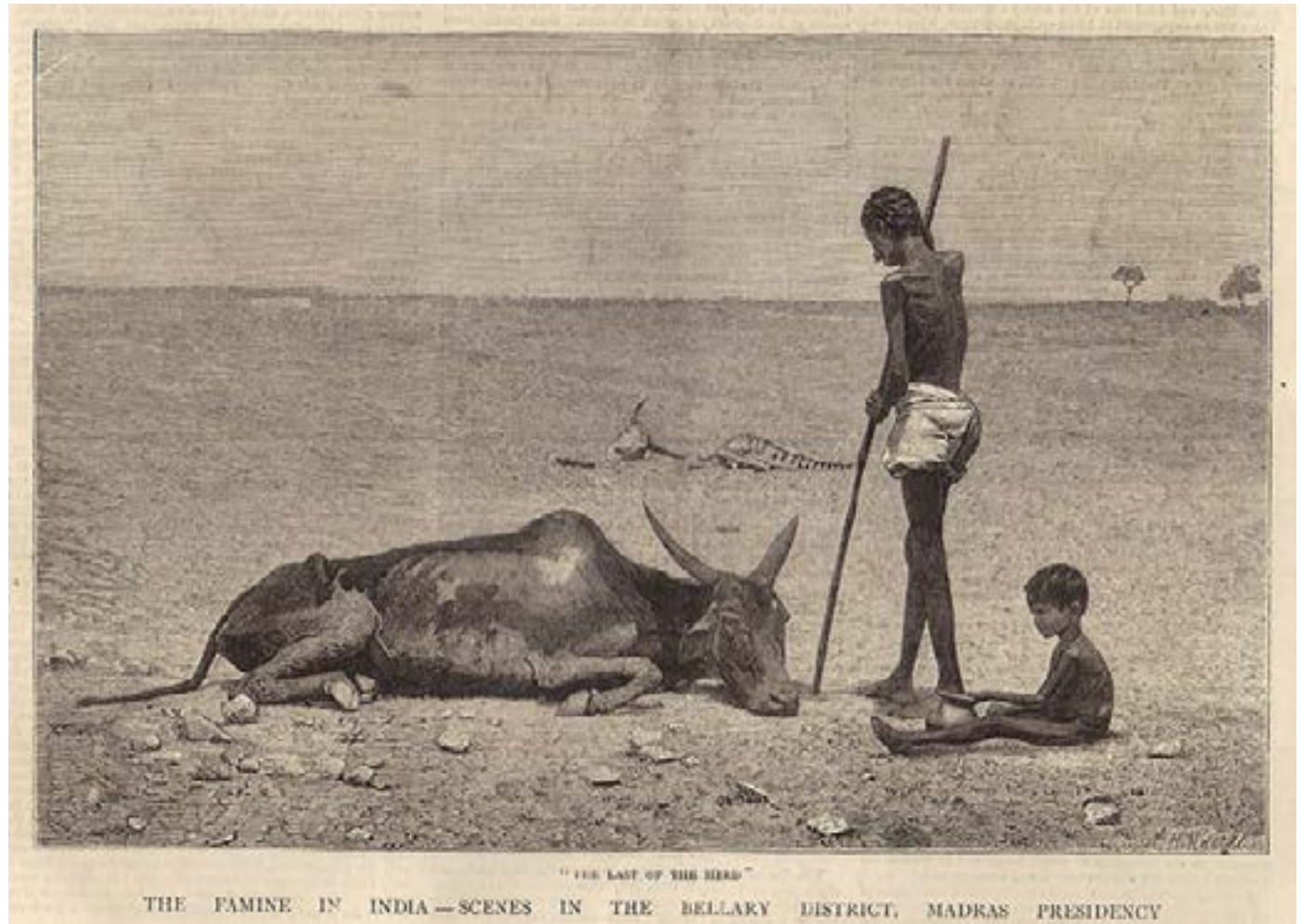
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Engraving from personal copy of *The Graphic*, 6 October 1877, entitled “The last of the herd,” about the plight of animals as well as humans in the Bellary district of the Madras Presidency, British India during the Great Famine of 1876–78.

(Image source)

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Cattle in Rural India

The depiction of cattle in rural contexts in colonial India can be seen in various forms of media, including paintings, photographs, and literature. Cattle played a significant role in rural life in colonial India, and their depiction in art and literature provides insight into the social, cultural, and economic significance of these animals.

In many paintings and photographs from colonial India, cattle are depicted as an integral part of rural life. They are often shown grazing in fields or being used for ploughing, transportation, or milk production. These depictions highlight the close relationship between humans and animals in rural India and the importance of cattle to the rural economy.

In literature, cattle are often depicted in pastoral scenes or as a symbol of traditional rural life. The poetry of Rabindranath Tagore, for example, frequently references cattle as a symbol of rural life and the natural world. In his poem "The Gardener", Tagore describes a cow grazing in a field, capturing the peaceful and harmonious relationship between humans, animals, and nature in rural India.



"Indian villager with bullock," pen and ink on paper, by the Anglo-Indian artist George Chinnery. Dated between 1808 and 1822. Courtesy of the British Library, London.

([Image source](#))

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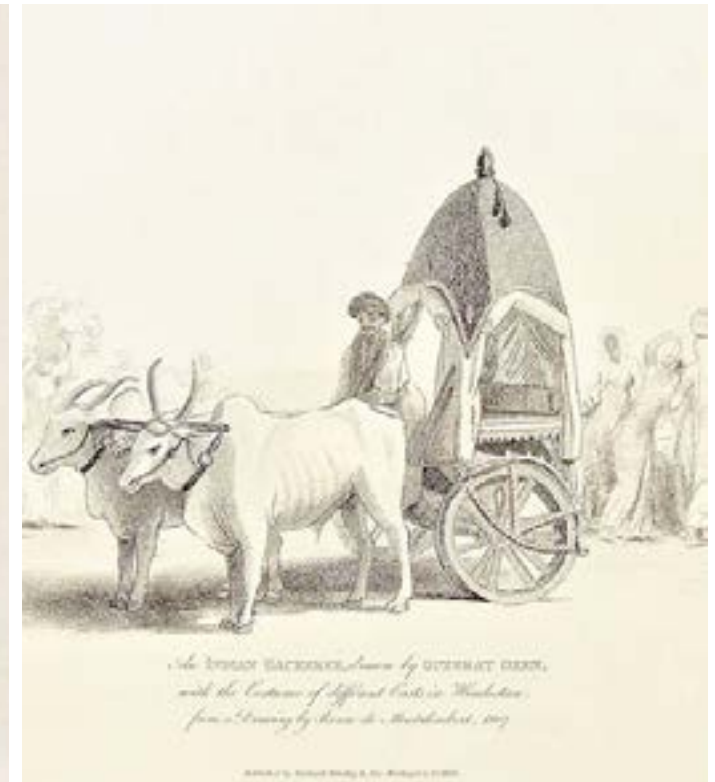
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“Engraving by Poisson” Published in 1782 after a painting by Pierre Sonnerat (1748-1814), showing men using oxen to press oil from some sort of plant product.

(Image source)

(Image source - right)



“An Indian Hackaree Drawn by Guzerat Oxen” An Indian Hackaree, drawn by Guzerat Oxen, with the Costume of different Casts in Hindostan, from a Drawing by Baron De Montalembert, 1807.

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“The Sacred Calf in the Bazaar at Agra” Helen Hyde, American (1868-1919) The Sacred Calf in the Bazaar at Agra, color woodcut, 1910. Mason and Mason
(Image source)

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Symbol of Hinduism

The iconography of this print emerges in conjunction with the popularization of lithographic images of the Hindu gods; it has no real historical precedent. According to Pinney, such images seem to be related to the growing importance of cow protection groups who were attempting to “rouse Hindu feelings against Christians and Muhammadans on account of the killing of cows”. The cow comes to embody Hindu cosmology; technically 84 gods are shown within the cow’s body, though in this example only 33 appear. This imagery played an important role in the emergence of Hindu nationalism that targeted meat-eating lower casts along with non-Hindu religious and colonial communities. Variations on this iconography were issued by most of the major presses.



Vishva Rajalakshmi Gomata India ca. 1890
(Image source)

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Depiction by famous painters of the period

Analyzing paintings of famous painters of the colonial era that depict cattle in India is important because they provide valuable insight into the cultural and social significance of cattle in India during that time period. These paintings can help us understand the attitudes and beliefs of colonial artists towards Indian culture, as well as the role of cattle in Indian society at that time.

Abanindranath's painting of a bull highlights the story-telling aspect of the artist's imagination. Abanindranath's place as a master storyteller of Bengali children's literature is well established. He endows his animals with almost human feelings and emotions. The solitary animal in the image is homesick for his distant mountain home. It has reference to the mythological account of the bull being the vehicle of Shiva whose abode is Mount Kailash. The palette indicates that the painting may have been done between 1915 and 1920. The inscription mentions, signed 'Abanindra' in Devanagari script at bottom right corner of the painting with a brush.



Dreaming of Kailash by Abanindranath Tagore National Gallery Of Modern Art, New Delhi
(Image source)

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Towards the close of the 19th Century, Abanindranath Tagore challenged the British academic system of art education and the physicality of the oil medium. As the 20th century dawned, Abanindranath sought to subvert the academic realist art practices of the time and project new aesthetics in visual language. This led him to found a new art school popularly known as Bengal School. He was greatly inspired by the Mughal miniature traditions and the Japanese wash technique.

'Journey's End', one of the masterpieces of Abanindranath, is expressive of Abanindranath's visual language. It shows a camel that has collapsed under its heavy load carried over long distances. The image shows Abanindranath's precise yet delicate lines, intensity of the emotive content, a combination of glowing colours and a misty appearance. These qualities make 'Journey's End', an unforgettable image.



Journey's End by Abanindranath Tagore circa 1913 National Gallery Of Modern Art, New Delhi
([Image source](#))

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Haripura posters by Nandalal capture moments of everyday Indian village life and culture. This poster is one of many examples of acute observation of his surroundings in which he has depicted a farmer engaged in the act of 'ploughing the field'. The illustration has been articulated with an earthen colour palette and swift strokes executed the contours in a calligraphic manner that both the styles and subject matter exude the charm and playfulness often found in folk art. This aptly links the figure with the artist's personal sensibilities. The inscription mentions, signed 'Nanda' in Bengali at the left margin of the poster. It also bears the artist's personal seal in red below the signature.



"Tiller of the soil" by Nandalal Bose 1938
(Image source)

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This is a modern painting created by Nandalal Bose. In this poster, he has depicted a cow with her calf, and a woman milking a cow. This has been executed in vibrant earthy colors and spontaneous, energetic contouring lines that aptly link the figure with the artist's sensibilities. It is created by using tempera on paper. It is signed 'Nanda' in Bengali in the bottom-right corner of the frame. It is exhibited in the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi.



“Milking of Cow” by Nandalal Bose.
(Image source)

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Conclusion

The depiction of cattle in Indian art has evolved through the centuries, with different periods and styles emphasizing varying aspects of their importance. Here are some general comparisons between the depiction of cattle in the Indus Valley, Mauryan, Gupta, Mughal, and colonial eras:

• Indus Valley Civilization:

The Indus Valley Civilization, which existed from around 2600 BCE to 1900 BCE, did not leave behind written records, but their art and artefacts provide clues about their way of life. Cattle are depicted in many Indus Valley seals, often in a naturalistic style. They were likely kept for their milk, meat, and labor. Hence, it is unclear whether these depictions had any symbolic or cultural significance.

• Mauryan Empire:

The Mauryan Empire (322-185 BCE) was a time of political and social change in India, and this was reflected in the art of the time. Cattle were depicted on the famous Pillars of Ashoka, which were erected throughout the empire. These pillars feature bull capitals, which were sculpted in the round and symbolized power and authority.

• Gupta:

The Gupta period, which spanned from around 320 CE to 550 CE, saw cattle depicted in a more decorative and stylized manner. They were often shown as part of religious or mythological scenes, such as Krishna playing the flute for a herd of cows.

• Mughal:

During the Mughal period (1526-1857), cattle were depicted in a more realistic manner, often as part of courtly scenes or in hunting scenes. Some of the most famous Mughal paintings featuring cattle were created by artists such as Ustad Mansur and Abul Hasan.

• Colonial:

In the colonial period, which lasted from the 16th century until India's independence in 1947, cattle were often depicted in a more romanticized and nostalgic manner. They were shown as symbols of India's rural past and traditional way of life, rather than as working animals. Cattle are depicted in many colonial paintings, often in a realistic style, reflecting the changing economic and social landscape of India.

Overall, the depiction of cattle in Indian art has varied widely depending on the time period and artistic style. While some eras emphasized the utilitarian role of cattle, others portrayed them as symbols of religious or cultural significance, or simply as part of everyday life.

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