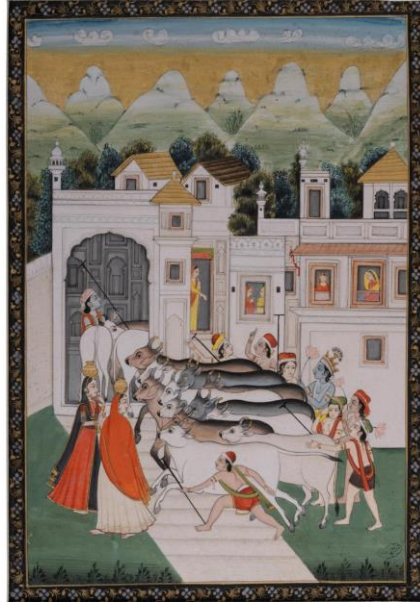




The Hour of Cowdust, Handmade Paper with Original Colour and Real Gold, Kangra, c.a. 1825-1850.

In the mid-18th century, Northern India experienced invasions by Nadir Shah and subsequently by Ahmad Shah Abdali. During this tumultuous time, the Kangra School of Painting emerged in Haripur-Guler, patronised by Raja Govardhan Chand (1744 to 1773) and was renowned for his appreciation of the arts.¹

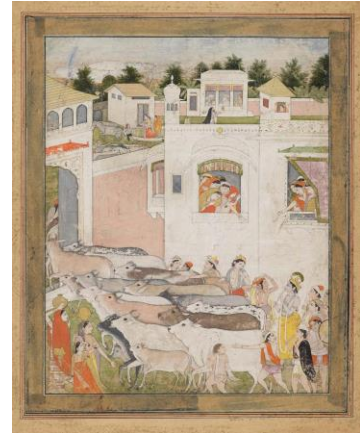
In the Kangra school of miniature painting tradition, the portrayal of Kṛṣṇa and his life is a central subject for artists. Kṛṣṇa's life, from childhood to his later years, serves as a perennial inspiration for poets and artists alike, representing the ideal of human character and endeavour.² In this artwork, we see a depiction of Kṛṣṇa and his deep love for cows, reflecting his alternate name, Gopāla, which means "the protector of the cows."³ This painting beautifully captures his Kṛṣṇa-līlā, the divine pastimes of Kṛṣṇa.

¹Dr. M. S. Randhawa, *Kangra Paintings on Love* (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, originally published 1962; reprint 1994).

²Priyatosh Banerjee, *The Life of Kṛṣṇa in Indian Art* (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, Government of India, 1994).

³Kṛṣṇa's Mercy. 2018. *Three Reasons Kṛṣṇa Is Known as Gopala*. January 28, 2018. Accessed August 1, 2025.

This painting reflects a common theme in various Indian painting traditions, most effectively shown in the Kangra school. A similar work, created between 1810 and 1815, is in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and was made using the same technique. (an image has been attached)⁴



This exquisite miniature painting is titled "The Hour of Cowdust." It captures a deeply evocative moment at dusk when cowherds guide their cattle back to the village. This time of day is often

celebrated in poetry for its romantic and optimistic qualities, emblematic of reunions—husbands with their wives and cows with their calves.⁵ In this enchanting scene, women lean gracefully out of intricately carved windows, their expressions filled with warmth and anticipation as they welcome the returning men. The phrase "Hour of cowdust" poetically encapsulates the moment when the golden glow of the setting sun dances in the dust kicked up by the cows' hooves, a phenomenon that the artist skillfully captures, reflecting the joy and contentment intrinsic to this hour.⁶

The composition features elegant pillared arches, ornate balconies, and slender, ethereal minarets that frame the setting. This marble architectural setting resembles the Rajasthani art tradition, while the slopes of the roof give an idea of the Punjab Hills, as the hilly region is surrounded by cold and snow, for which this kind of sloping roof is needed to be constructed. In the foreground, a serene procession of cows, adorned in alternating tones of alabaster, muted grey and dusky brown, gracefully makes its way toward a grand central gateway. The cows, with their gentle and discerning eyes, embody a sense of calm as they wend their way peacefully through the ornate gates, entering an unearthly yet beautifully rendered village. Behind this tranquil movement, women stand atop steps and balconies, gesticulating and observing with a keen sense of community.

⁴The Family of Nainsukh, *The Hour of Cowdust*, c. 1810–1815, opaque watercolor and gold on paper, 38 × 31.9 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, accession no. 22.683.

⁵Joan Cummins, *Indian Painting: From Cave Temples to the Colonial Period* (Boston: MFA Publications, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 2006).

⁶*Ibid.*

Kṛiṣṇa, depicted on the right side of the painting, distinguished by his radiant crown adorned with a vibrant crest of peacock feathers and his striking light-blue complexion, holding a blooming pink coloured lotus, adorned and wearing the pītāmbara dhoti. Surrounding him, the group of herdmen are being rendered, wearing the turban of red and green colour, holding a stick to march the cows to their place and positioned in different movements.

In the distance, rolling hills of pale green lie beneath a golden sky, imparting a soothing depth typical of the hilly miniatures from the Pahari art tradition. There is appearance of Chinese-like clouds, giving an inspiration from the Mughal art tradition. There is a depiction of lush green shrubs and trees as well.

The overall composition is masterfully balanced; cows lead the viewer's gaze horizontally across the scene while the vertical lines of architecture and figures draw it upward, creating a harmonious flow. The figures in the painting possess refined, porcelain-like faces—smoothly modelled with sharp chins, long, narrow eyes, and noses elegantly aligned with their foreheads. Their flat hair

surfaces add to the stylised beauty of the figures, enhancing the painting's overall aesthetic, a typical stylistic feature of Kangra art.