
PORTRAITS OF BIRDS AND ANIMALS UNDER JAHANGIR

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Emperor Jahangir's vivid and accurate descriptions of several birds and animals undoubtedly present him as a keen observer of nature and indicate his desire for realistic expression. Not satisfied with textual description, he ordered his painters to draw likenesses.¹ Jahangir considered pictorial representation a source of amazement and pleasure, and recognized the importance of the documentation of rarities to be passed on to later generations. Consequently, numerous studies of birds and animals characterized by realism were made at his instance by his painters. It was thus that with Jahangir a new era in the portrayal of flora and fauna emerged and developed. His reign (1605–27) is celebrated for the production of masterpieces, especially portraits, executed for the first time at the Mughal ateliers.

Even before Jahangir, the long tradition of manuscript painting, illustrating fables and legends, both in Persia and at the Mughal court, provided artists an opportunity to become acquainted with animal character and behaviour. The scope of bird and animal figures increased with their accommodation in margin paintings, where birds and animals are represented amidst landscapes in hunting scenes, and are painted in various tones of gold pigment. A change is seen later in the margin illumination at Jahangir's studio when coloured figures of animals become frequent.

Numerous folios of the albums of Jahangir and Shah Jahan decorated with broad margin painting depict exquisitely detailed bird and animal drawings.

From our point of view, the *Baburnama* and *Ajāib al Makhlūqat* illustrated towards the close of the sixteenth century are significant since these represent a rich variety of flora and fauna of India.² These may be accepted as setting trends in the course of the development of independent studies of birds and animals at Jahangir's studio. These pictures of birds and animals are examples of vivid and minutely detailed realistic art. The famous painter *Ustad Mansur*, "*Nadir ul 'Asr*" (Unique of the Age), of Jahangir's studio had an early stint at Akbar's court, and his artistic contributions are available in the *Baburnama* manuscript.³

A large number of pictures of birds and animals, mostly ascribed to Abu'l Hasan, Govardhan, Inayat, Mansur, Murad, and Pidarath of Jahangir's studio have survived.⁴ These were drawn at the emperor's command which suggests that there was an emphasis on the delineation of portraits taken from life. An intimate, careful observation of the subject was the basis of their characteristic and lifelike pictures. In 1619, Jahangir ordered Mansur to draw the likeness of a falcon brought from Persia. He writes:

What can I write of the beauty and colour of this falcon? There were many beautiful

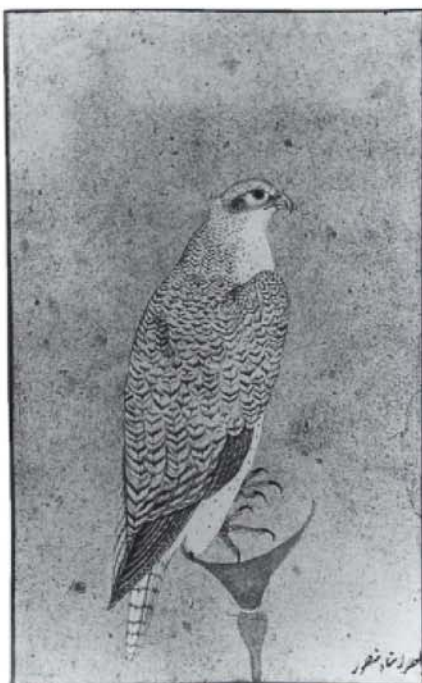
black markings on each wing, and back, and sides. As it was something out of common, I ordered *Ustad Mansur*, who has the title of *Nadir ul 'Asr* to paint and preserve its likeness.³

Coomaraswamy mentions a miniature, "Falcon", ascribed to Mansur in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, which could be the most probable likeness of the bird referred to by Jahangir.⁶ It represents the bird on its perch, in rigid profile and centrally positioned in the composition (figure 1). The well-defined form of the bird and the remarkable precision of inner details, including the ferocity in the eye and the sharpness of the preying beak, testify to the artist's keen perception. The plain background in contrast to the slow careful work on the figure, as in other bird and animal studies, not only throws the figure in relief to the fore, but would be suitably functional in any objective picture of nature.

Jahangir gives a graphic account of the *saj* (dipper) executed by Mansur:

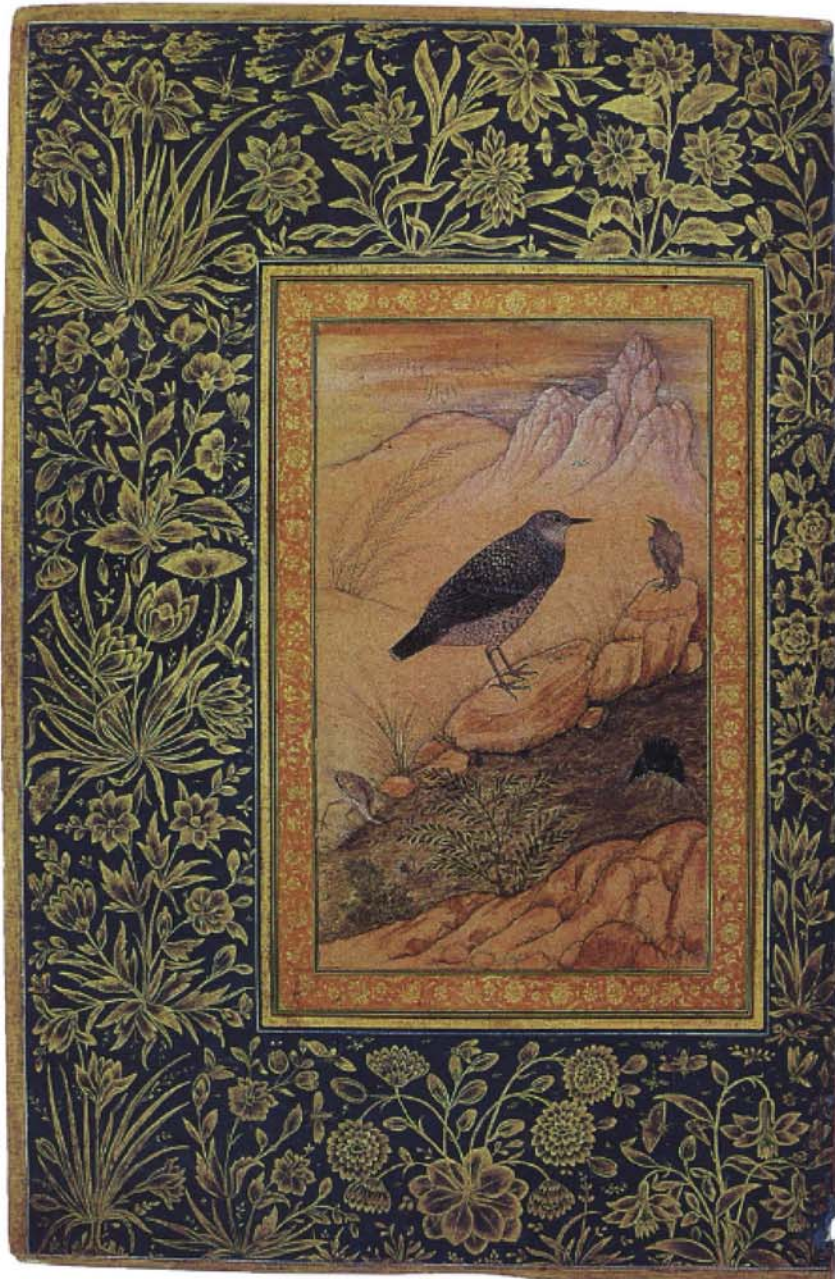
In this stream [Sukh Nag] I saw a bird like a *saj*. A *saj* is of a black colour and has white spots, while this bird is of the same colour as a *bulbul* with white spots, and it dives and remains for a long time underneath, and then comes up from a different place. I ordered them to catch and bring two or three of these birds, that I may ascertain whether they were waterfowl and were web-footed, or had open feet like land birds. They caught two and brought them. One died immediately, and the other lived for a day. Its feet were not webbed like a duck's. I ordered *Nadir ul 'Asr Ustad Mansur* to draw its likeness.⁷

Jahangir's note suggests that the painters



1
Falcon on perch by
Nadir ul 'Asr Ustad Mansur. Circa 1619.
22.5 x 14.8 cm.
Goloubeh Collection,
Museum of Fine Arts,
Boston, No. 14.683.
Francis Bartlett
Donation of 1912 and
Picture Fund.

accompanied the royal entourage and were engaged in portraying rarities of nature. Mansur's work can be identified with the picture of this bird preserved in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (figure 2). It depicts the *saj* in a hilly landscape, with a fast flowing stream in the foreground. The main figure of the bird is shown in the middle of the composition, and drawn in still pose with minute details. The juxtapositioning of another bird, smaller in size and apparently viewed from a distance, and the receding contours of the hills painted in blurred colour, suggest scale perspective, besides giving relief to the central figure. The stream divides the picture plane diagonally corresponding with the axis of the main figure, and, by cutting across the frame in a direction opposing the



2
Dipper (*Cinclus cinclus*), by Nadir ul
'Asr Ustad Mansur
Naqqash. Circa 1620.
The Metropolitan
Museum of Art,
New York.
No. 55.121.10.16r.

slant of the vertical hill contours, it creates a balance and rhythm which is further accentuated by a judicious use of tonal variations of pigments.

The date given on the portrait of the red bustard (*jarz bor*) corresponds with the earliest notice of this bird in Jahangir's memoirs appearing in the account of the year 1619 (figure 3).⁸ The present miniature, an isolated study of the bird, while it retains the usual stiffness, has a powerfully executed background as if it was done boldly and spontaneously in quick horizontal brush strokes in a single pigment with varied tones. The skyline produces a chiaroscuro effect and distancing which is enchanting. It reflects Mansur's great confidence in his brush and depth of vision. Other works of Mansur, close to it, are the pictures of the "Himalayan cheer pheasant" (Victoria and Albert Museum, London), "Blue bull" (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), and "Goldfinch" (National Museum, New Delhi).

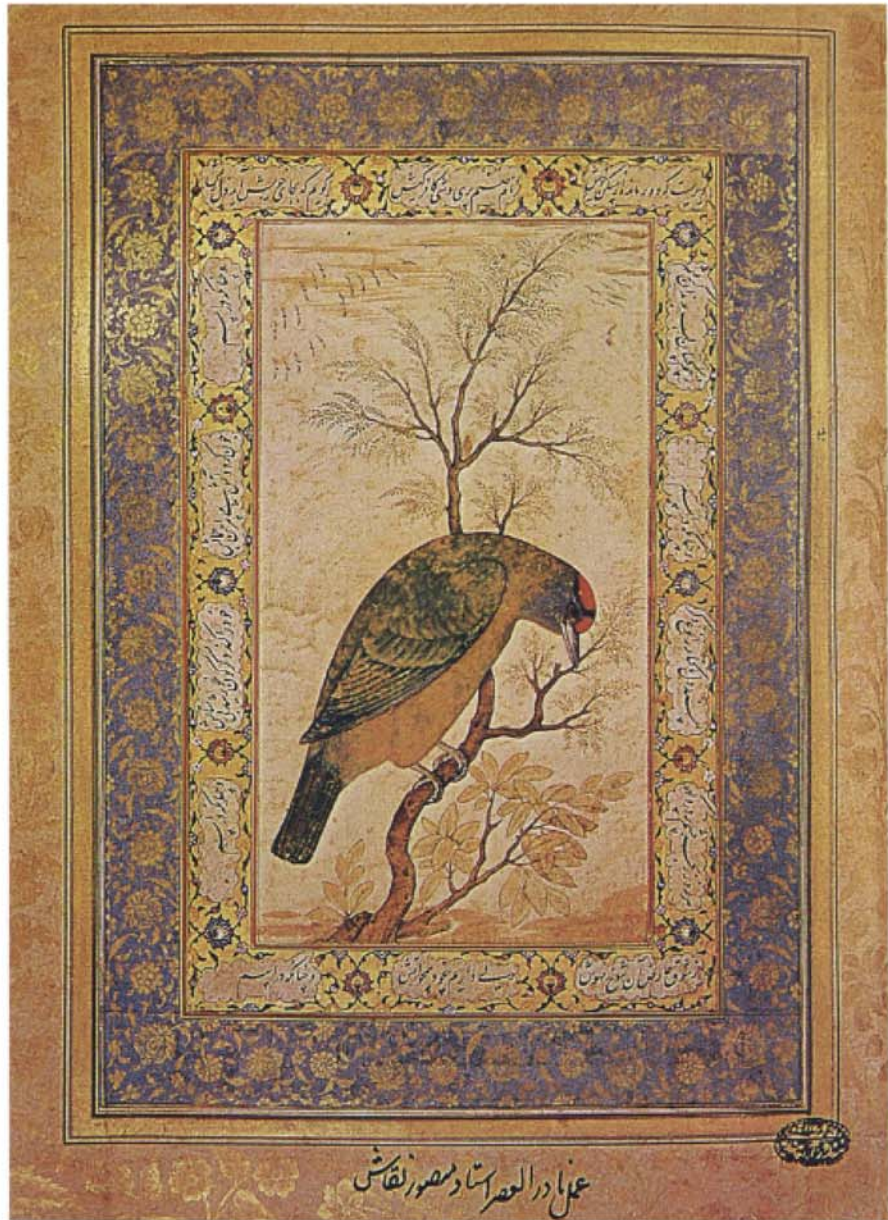
The painter's clarity of vision and spontaneity of expression are notable in the study of the Himalayan blue-throated barbet (circa 1615–20). In it the bird perched on the branch, relatively larger in proportion, dominates the composition (figure 4). Mansur's ingenious compositional technique can be seen here in the way he subordinates the background to the principal subject. A stiff pose of the neck and the firm and bold curve of the back betray some rigidity in the drawing, but it is greatly relieved by the anatomical correctness of the pose, that is, the bird's searching look below, which also lends it a remarkable realistic quality and a sense of lyricism. The pictures of the "Turkeycock" (Victoria and Albert Museum, London) and

"Vultures" (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) are in rigid profile with high precision of details, but lacking in lyrical quality.

In 1623, Abu'l Hasan, who had the lofty title *Nadir uz Zaman* (Wonder of the Age), drew a picture of the spotted fork-tail at the command of Jahangir, hunted by his men at Jangespur (as stated in the inscription on the miniature). The slightly stiff drawing of the bird in rigid profile dominates the whole composition (figure 5). Abu'l Hasan, a contemporary of Mansur, puts masterly touches to this picture, highlighting liveliness, humour, and agility of expression. The soft, soothing quality of the pigment, the chiaroscuro emerging through the clouds, and the heavy modelling and shading of the foreground rock formation and the clustering



3
Red bustard, by *Nadir ul 'Asr* Ustad Mansur (inscribed in Jahangir's hand). Circa 1619. 38 x 25.2 cm. Courtesy Indian Museum, Calcutta. No. R.31.



4
 Himalayan blue-throated barbet, by Nadir ul Asr Ustad Mansur. Circa 1615–20. Wantage Album, Victoria and Albert Museum, London. No. 137-1921.I.M. Courtesy V&A Picture Library.



5
 Forktail (*Enicurus scouleri*), by Nadir uz Zaman Abu'l Hasan. Circa 1610–15. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. No. 55.123.10.15r.

birds in the sky are employed by him to create an illusion of distance and elevation in the picture.

In 1616, a high-ranking noble, Muqarrab Khan, presented Jahangir with a small elephant that was brought from Abyssinia. The emperor took notice of its distinct features.⁹ The picture of a young elephant published in the Ehrenfeld catalogue, could possibly be taken as the likeness of the animal presented to Jahangir.¹⁰ This miniature is attributed to Govardhan, a famous painter at Jahangir's court. The subtle shading and textured surfaces revealed in the delineation of the creature's hide, wrinkles, and roll of flesh – all carefully depicted – established the artist's skill.

In another instance, in 1623, while Jahangir was in *pargana* Rahimabad, he ordered his painters to draw the likeness of a tiger shot by him. He writes:

Driving the elephant forward, the tiger's flank came into view, and with one wound from my gun he fell and gave up his life. Of all the tigers I have shot from the time I was a prince until now I never saw a tiger like this for size and majesty and the symmetry of its limbs. I ordered the artists to take its portrait according to its real form and body.¹¹

However, no picture of this animal executed at Jahangir's atelier seems to have survived.

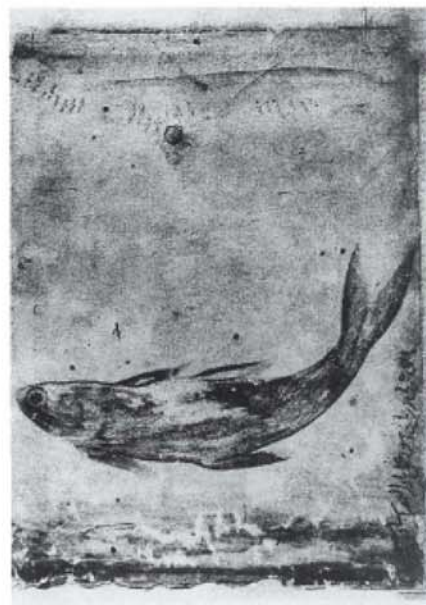
Obviously, pictures of animals were made immediately after these were gifted to Jahangir or spotted by him in nature. We may refer to the picture of a zebra drawn by Mansur (preserved in the Victoria and Albert Museum). This masterpiece carries the emperor's autograph. Mansur must have executed it at the instance of the emperor immediately after the animal was presented at

6

Chameleon, by *Ustad Mansur*. Circa 1610–20. 11.0 x 13.7 cm. The Royal Collection © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.



his court, since the date on the miniature is 1621 (corresponding to the date recorded in his memoirs).¹² This statement is corroborated by the fact that it was included among the gifts sent to Shah Abbas of Persia.¹³ Mansur's precise vision and eye for detail is observable here in the representation of the animal; the isolated figure dominates the composition, and a subdued background with a slightly shaded



7

Salt-water fish, by *Nadir ul 'Asr Ustad Mansur* (inscribed in Jahangir's hand). Circa 1621–25. Red Fort Museum, Delhi. No. 40.688. Photograph copyright ASI, Delhi Circle.

tone around throws up the animal figure in relief. The linear movement, curves, shades, and the brushwork on the black stripes of the animal give the figure a somewhat three-dimensional effect and muscle articulation to capture its natural form. The authenticity of the particular shade used in the background is demonstrated amply not because of its concordance with the exposure of the figure, but also in order to create a serene harmony in the whole picture without causing any damage to the relief effect. Thus, an estimate of Mansur as a “draughtsman whose pictures are invariably drawn and tinted rather than conceived and executed more coloristically”,¹⁴ appears to be an anomalous judgement.

In the portrait of the chameleon (circa 1610–20), we notice Mansur's abiding concern for detail; so much so that he did not miss capturing in colour even the rough granulated texture of the reptile's skin (figure 6). Here also, his typical conscious enlargement of the figure in proportion to the space and branches of the tree is clear. It was the Mughal painter's special way of according dignity to the subject of his painting. This apart, the naturalistic treatment of the tree's structure, with even the minutest knots and bulges, and the leaves displaying mid-ribs with parallel venation, is thoroughly maintained. The composition, in order to give an idea of the natural cycle, does not leave out even the hovering insects – food for the chameleon.

The picture of the salt-water fish (circa 1621–25) is undoubtedly an outstanding work for its spontaneity, hardly surpassed by any other contemporary artist (figure 7). The fish is shown in a state of rhythmic movement, as if it has dived down and is about to move up again. Certainly, it has been executed with quick

strokes of the brush made with absolute confidence and maturity. The superb handling of space, that is, the smooth blending of water mass with sky, has acquired a depth which perhaps Mansur has not achieved elsewhere.

The miniature showing a groom leading a blackbuck, one of the few animal pictures ascribed to Manohar – a prolific painter at Jahangir’s court – is described by Havell as one of the finest genre pictures of the Mughal school: “It is a magnificent study of animal life, and the coaxing attitude and expression of the keeper, as if trying to overcome the hesitation of his well-trained pet, is perfect in characterization and technique” (figure 8).¹⁵ Another composition by this artist is equally important as it establishes him as a clever painter of the horse (figure 9). Heath opines that although this painting is much damaged, the drawing bears evidence of a skilled artist; it is more carefully studied, and shows greater knowledge of the horse than is usual.¹⁶ The picture of the Himalayan wild goat (markhor) ascribed to ‘Inayat, drawn on similar lines, is a rare portrait of this uncommon animal with the details of physiognomy depicted in a subtle manner.

The lively picture of Indian gazelles, blackbucks, etc. filled with action, and expressive of their mood and character, executed by Murad, is treated on par with Mansur’s drawing of animals.¹⁷ The action imparted to the animal figures, seen in the present example, is rather rare in the Mughal school. The naturalism observed here is more in tune with the tradition of Jahangir’s atelier.

The pictures of a man leading a bear by Govardhan (figure 10) and keeper with a lion, by Pidarath (figure 11) are set amidst a background of wide landscape.¹⁸ These are



8
Keeper leading a blackbuck, by Manohar. Circa 1615–25. Wantage Album, Victoria and Albert Museum, London. No. 134-1921.I.M. Courtesy V&A Picture Library.

examples of characteristic studies of animal behaviour in captivity. The landscape background bears affinity with another Pidarath study of a long-haired mountain sheep, set against a sunset (figure 12).¹⁹

Our foregoing discussion shows that specific portraits of birds and animals are drawn in rigid profile (a trend largely accepted in medieval Indian painting), generally single



9
The saddle-horse of Dara Shukoh, by Manohar. Circa 1630. 26.0 x 36.1 cm. Johnson Album, India Office Library, London. V. 3, No. 1. By permission of the British Library.

10
 Man leading a bear, by
 Govardhan. Circa
 1630–40. The
 Metropolitan Museum
 of Art, New York.
 No. 55.121.10.10r.



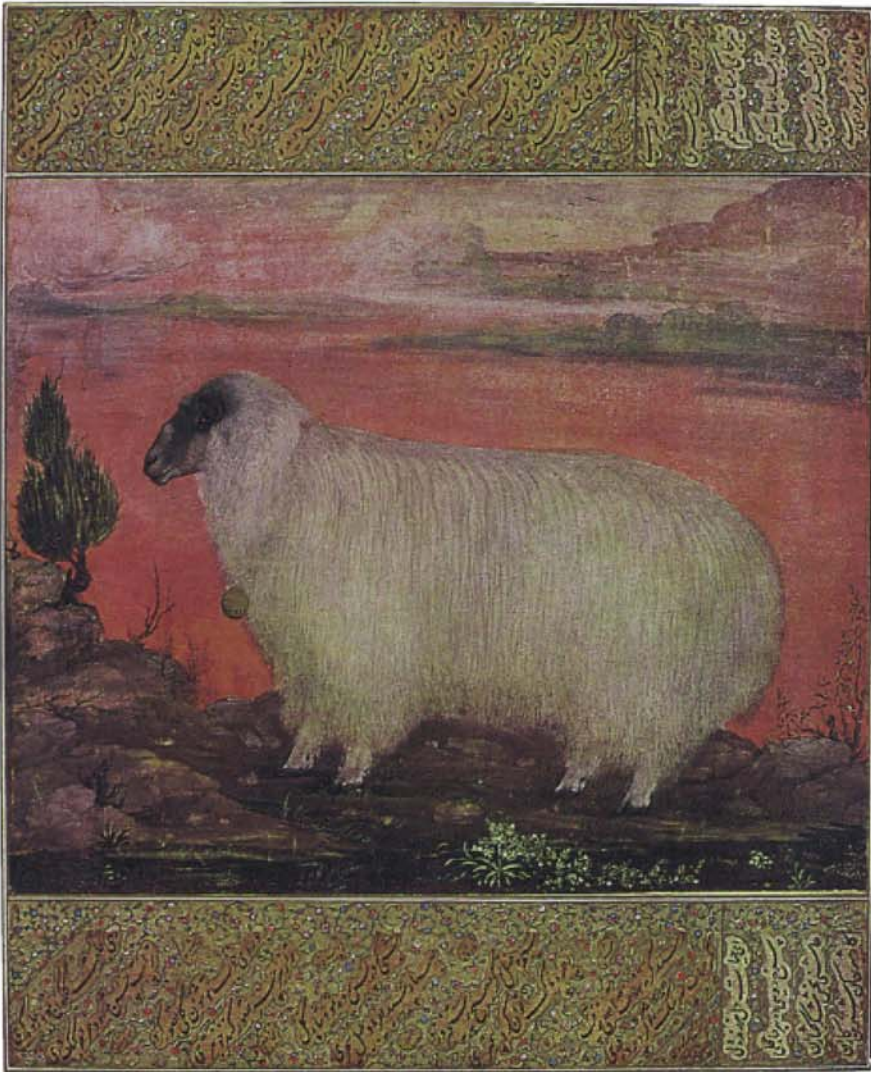
11
 Keeper leading a lion,
 by Pidarath. Circa
 1630–40. The
 Metropolitan Museum
 of Art, New York.
 No. 55.121.10.11v.



in composition, dominating the whole picture plane. These show simpler composition, accommodating the central theme more spaciouly, probably to allow maximum detail. This effect is further enhanced in the picture where we occasionally meet with a subdued background executed in harmonious colours, or in the blending of one pigment. The painting of birds and animals in isolation is another quality of these works. In the landscape, sprigs of blossoming plants in the foreground appear to have become a common characteristic of early seventeenth-century Mughal pictures. Their forms, though naturalistic in effect, appear fanciful in their arrangement which imparts a lyrical touch to the picture. As a result, nature tends to give place to stylization.

It is important to note that these paintings show minimum (slow) action in animal figures, suited to nature studies. While there are Mughal drawings filled with spirited movement and violent action, the best studies from our point of view are the drawings finished as portraits of single animals or pairs. It is not violent action but technical finesse and refined workmanship in a more restrained manner that make the picture valuable. The Mughal portraits are an outcome of slow careful work imbued with realism achieved within the framework of the traditional manner of draughtsmanship. The Mughal painter never accepted the Persian mode of depicting birds and animals which is purely linear and descriptive in character, but instead always aimed at portraying the animal as an "individual" with emphasis on physiognomy.

Salim Ali writes of a Mughal picture of the Himalayan cheer pheasant: "Though the picture may appear somewhat stiff and



12
Mountain sheep, by
Pīdarāth. Circa 1630–
40. 16.5 x 20.7 cm.
Royal Album, Chester
Beatty Library,
Dublin. MS. 7, No. 1.
Reproduced by kind
permission of the
Trustees of the Chester
Beatty Library,
Dublin.

'wooden' if judged from the modern Gronvoldian standard, it leaves little doubt as regards the identity of the species."²⁰ Of a drawing, "Siberian crane" (early seventeenth century), Havell says that as an ornithological study it rivals the work of the best Japanese masters. He adds that "the delicate feathers of the white plumage and microscopic details of the bird's anatomy are drawn with infinite patience and scientific exactitude".²¹ Kuhnelt and Goetz hold that the miniature "Two magpies" (early seventeenth century) reminds one of "the Dutch specialist painters of the 17th century, who portrayed subjects from the animal kingdom with equal knowledge, but their paintings are seldom so full of feelings as this one from India".²²

It is important to note that the realism seen in the Jahangiri painters' work is confined to the artists' visual experience. However, this element of art is apparent in Mughal painters' work from the very beginning. One can observe a shift from strict conventions of Persian art in the depiction of the animal figures represented in the miniatures of the *Anwar-i Suhaili* (circa 1570, School of Oriental and African Studies, London). These appear at once more natural and more self-possessed than the remote and exquisite animals of the Persian school, and are shown more deeply engaged by their action.²³ According to Eletr, with the general emergence of Indian ideals, the Persian traditions and ways were weakened.²⁴ This facilitated a more naturalistic rendering of birds and animals. An Indian element, that is, sympathy with the animal world, further gave rise to emotions and feelings in their representation. But in no way is the animal world the subject of "adoration" in their art as it is in the sculpture

and painting of ancient India. Mughal painters clearly aimed at the portrayal of physical reality where spiritual and emotional matters hardly had a place. This aspect of Mughal aesthetics obviously lends their creations a quality of earthly charm and pleasure. Grousset has rightly remarked that Mughal studies of wildlife are frank material, intended to give earthly pleasure.²⁵ The Mughal artists' material approach finds expression in an emphasis on objectivity in the presentation of nature. While this best suited studies of specimens intended to depict maximum possible detail, it constrained the creativity of the artist. As a result, only a few works of great masters are found imbued with warmth of feeling and wealth of emotions. At any rate, the emperor's combined interest in realistic-cum-ornithological portrait studies does not find a parallel in the art of Persia and pre-Mughal India.

It is notable that though the European impact on Mughal painting, in general, is obvious, and it is rather more explicit during Jahangir's time, pictures of birds and animals also did not remain unaffected. Of course, the treatment of space in these pictures often exhibits European methods and techniques. Otherwise, the European influence is relevant in the drawings of birds and animals only in the context of deep shading and heavy modelling occasionally employed to highlight the contours and various parts of the body. In short, the quality of lively naturalism achieved by the Jahangiri painters was accentuated through the influence of the European technique of painting.

The trend of independent studies of birds and animals continued during Shah Jahan's time, the best known representatives of which

are in the Dara Shukoh Album in the India Office Library, London.

Apart from the quality of details and dexterous rendering of colours, the characteristic lively effect of the subject makes the pictures pointedly commendable. The masterpieces executed by Mansur, Manohar, Govardhan, and Abu'l Hasan are the most inventive creations of the Mughal atelier. Of course, Mansur – the most creative amongst them – is known to have made many sensitive and minutely detailed pictures of birds and animals which testify to his psychological acumen. His works are the best evidence of the attempt to explore the natural world, and present an attractive series of bird and animal pictures which mark the zenith of skilled draughtsmanship and the finest expression in the contemporary art of India and Persia.

Unfortunately, a large number of drawings of birds and animals are lost. Those that have survived invite close scrutiny since we find identical or near identical versions of certain works of Abu'l Hasan, Mansur, and others, which give rise to the question whether some of these are mere copies. Most of the replicas are without actual ascriptions, but they have been attributed to master-painters such as Mansur, Basawan, Miskin, Govardhan, Manohar, Abu'l Hasan, etc. by modern art historians. However, the authenticity of such attributions is doubtful.²⁶ It seems likely that sometimes attributions have been made to leading painters to stress the importance or quality of a miniature. Of the various unasccribed bird and animal drawings, the bulk has been attributed to Mansur, simply because he is known to have been a master of this genre. The ascriptions in Persian recorded on some of the versions, too, appear to be forged.

NOTES

1. Jahangir, *Tuzuk-i Jahangiri or Jahangirnama*, tr. A. Rogers, ed. H. Beveridge, Vol. 1 (London 1904–14), p. 215.
2. For their reproductions, see Hamid Sulciman, *Miniatures of the Baburnama* (Tashkent 1970), pls. 55–75; S.J. Tyulayev, *Miniatures of Babur Namah* (Moscow 1960), pls. 37–63; M.S. Randhawa, *Paintings of the Baburnama* (New Delhi 1983), pls. on pp. 125–31; T.W. Arnold and J.V.S. Wilkinson, *The Library of A. Chester Beatty: A Catalogue of the Indian Miniatures* (London 1936), Vol. 1, pp. 26–27, Vol. 2, pls. 50–52.
3. See Som Prakash Verma, *Mughal Painters and Their Work, A Biographical Survey and Comprehensive Catalogue* (New Delhi 1994), p. 262.
4. Of course, at present our purpose is not to describe all the known pictures of birds and animals of Jahangir's studio; the aim is to bring out the approach of the royal patron and his painters, and to highlight the most distinctive pictures.
5. *Tuzuk*, op. cit., Vol. 2, p. 108.
6. A.K. Coomaraswamy, *Catalogue of the Indian Collections in the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Pt. VI (Mughal Painting)*, (Boston 1930), p. 51, pl. 41.
7. *Tuzuk*, op. cit., Vol. 2, p. 157.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 112.
9. *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 215.
10. Daniel J. Ehnborn, *Indian Miniatures, The Ehrenfeld Collection* (New York 1985), pl. 22 and text.
11. *Tuzuk*, op. cit., Vol. 2, p. 284.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 201 (account of the sixteenth regnal year, i.e. 1621).
13. *Ibid.*
14. S.C. Welch, *Imperial Mughal Painting* (London 1978), p. 93, pl. 27.
15. E.B. Havell, *A Handbook of Indian Art* (London 1929), p. 207, pl. 75.
16. L. Heath, *Examples of Indian Art at the British Empire Exhibition (1924)*, (London 1925), pl. 2 and text.
17. Ernst Kühnel, *Indische Miniaturen* (Berlin, no date), p. 166, pl. 7.

18. S.C. Welch, A. Schimmel, M.L. Swietochowski, and W.M. Thackston, *The Emperors' Album, Images of Mughal India* (New York 1987), nos. 76-77, pls. on pages 238-39.
19. Arnold and Wilkinson, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 28, Vol. 3, pl. 53.
20. Salim Ali, "The Mughal Emperors of India as Naturalists and Sportsmen", *The Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society*, Vol. 32, Pt. 2 (Bombay 1927), p. 53.
21. E.B. Havell, *Indian Sculpture and Painting* (London 1908), p. 214, pl. 61.
22. E. Kuhnelt and H. Goetz, *Indian Book Painting* (London 1926), pp. 6, 56, pl. 10.
23. Douglas Barrett and Basil Gray, *Painting of India* (Lausanne 1963), p. 81.
24. M. Raid Eletr, "Birds and Animals in Mughal Painting", *Bulletin of College of Arts*, Vol. 1 (Baghdad 1959), p. 16.
25. R. Grousset, *Civilization of the East*, Vol. 2 (New York 1931), p. 374.
26. Som Prakash Verma, "Some Problems of the Mughal School of Art: Ascriptions, Duplicate Versions and Modern Attributions", in Ahsan Jan Qaisar and Som Prakash Verma, eds., *Art and Culture, Endeavours in Interpretation* (New Delhi 1996), pp. 49-66, pls. 1-15.