

Wonders of Nature

Ustad Mansur at the Mughal Court

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CHAPTER V

Wonder of the Age: Studies of Animals and Birds



DURING THE LATER PART OF JAHANGIR'S REIGN, MANSUR was actively associated with drawings of animals and birds. Though Jahangir's interest in nature and wildlife dates from his princely days, a lengthy and leisurely visit to Kabul in 1606 seems to have further aroused his curiosity about rare and unusual animals, birds and flowers, as revealed by entries in his memoirs. This apparently resulted in a desire to have these specimens recorded in paintings to be mounted in albums. Interestingly, the Gulshan Album does not contain wildlife studies by Mansur, with the exception of the study of flowering stems discussed in the following chapter. There are quite a few bird and animal studies by other artists in the Gulshan Album and similar albums from this period, for example the *Rosy Pastors* in the "Berlin Album" and paintings of ducks, pigeons, chicken, blackbucks and elephants bearing the names of Aqa Reza, 'Ali Quli, Farrukh Chela and Manohar in the Gulshan Album, but there is no similarity of style and treatment between these images and those from Mansur's brush. It appears that Mansur came to the forefront in this genre only later.

In this chapter we discuss Mansur's studies of individual animals and birds, common as well as rare, preserved in various albums of Jahangir's period. These realistic representations of species that attracted the emperor's attention are followed by a few paintings of birds that are unidentifiable, though no less life-like and animated.

ANIMALS

The few surviving album pages with animal paintings ascribed to Ustad Mansur represent a motley group. It is interesting to note that there are no studies of carnivores such as the lion, tiger or leopard, wolf or bear, nor any of elephant or rhinoceros. Instead the chameleon and a saltwater fish are represented along with two antelopes, Blackbuck and Nilgai, and a delightful composition of squirrels in a tree, painted by Mansur with another of Jahangir's favourites, Abu'l Hasan.

A Tame Blackbuck *Antelope cervicapra* (figure V.1)

Ascribed to Mansur in a librarian's note on the reverse of the folio that has several seal marks from Shah Jahan's reign.

Album folio, c. 1605–10, in the Maharaja Sawai Man Singh II Museum, Jaipur.

The Blackbuck is the only representative of the genus *Antelope* in India. It is a singularly attractive animal with its striking colour, beautiful spiralled horns and graceful movement.² A large herd of Blackbuck moving across the scrubby habitat they frequent presents an unforgettable sight. Babur devotes a full paragraph in his memoirs to this animal, its capture and use in luring others to be trapped.³ Following this practice, Akbar and Jahangir employed tamed Blackbucks to capture wild ones.

Amongst numerous references to the hunting of antelopes with decoy bucks Jahangir writes about a particular buck named Mansraj or Hansraj in whose memory he erected a *minar* at a spot in Jahangirpur near Lahore where he had captured it. Within a month after its capture it became "without equal in fights with tame antelopes and in hunting wild ones". He entrusted the celebrated calligrapher Mulla Husayn Kashmiri, "the chief of the elegant writers of the day" to carve this epitaph on a stone of that *minar*: "In this enchanting place an antelope came into the world-holding (*jahan-giri*) net of the God-knowing ruler Nur-ud Din Jahangir Padshah. In the space of one month, having overcome his desert fierceness, he became the head of the special antelope."⁴

This image of a tame Blackbuck, a young male with dark blackish brown coat and long spiralling horns, though not identified by any inscription as a particular animal from the imperial menagerie, is a remarkable specimen, fit to attract the attention of a painter of Mansur's eminence. It is represented in perfectly accurate detail, except for the eye and its white patch which are drawn rather unnaturally circular. The authenticity of the picture is established from the dated notes of presentation (*arz-alida*) and seals of Abdul Haq, son of Qasim Shirazi in 1037 Hijra (1628), another partly legible note dated in the first year of Shah Jahan's reign (1627), and notes of the second regnal year, 18th regnal year (seal of Inayat Khan), 24th regnal year (seal of Ahmad Shahidi) and 30th



Burchell's Zebra *Equus quagga burchelli* (figure V.7)²⁸

Inscribed in Jahangir's hand along the right border: *Samrabi-yi Mir Ja'far avestah budand sanoh 1030 wa sahib-i inra Nadir ul-Ast Ustad Mansur khatidab sanoh 16* (A mule which the Ramis [Turks] in company of Mir Ja'far had brought from the Habsh country [Abyssinia] in the year 1030 [1621] and Nadir ul-Ast Ustad Mansur has drawn it in [the regnal] year 16).

Folio from the Minto Album, no. 1, in the V&A Museum, London.

An Abyssinian Zebra or Burchell's Zebra was among the gifts presented to Jahangir at the commencement of his sixteenth regnal year in March 1621. The zebra was brought by Mir Ja'far who served as governor of Surat and Cambay where he also carried on trade as a merchant. Seeing a zebra for the first time, Jahangir was sceptical about its authenticity and noted in the *Tuzuk*: "At this time I saw a wild ass [*gar-bhar*], exceedingly strange in appearance, exactly like a lion [tiger]. From the tip of the nose to the end of the tail, and from the point of the ear to the top of the hoof, black markings, large or small, suitable to their position were seen on it. Round the eyes there was an exceedingly fine black line. One might say that the painter of fate, with a strange brush, had left it on the page of the world. As it was strange, some people imagined that it had been coloured. After minute enquiry into the truth, it became known that the Lord of the World was the Creator thereof. As it was a rarity, it was included among the royal gifts sent to my begetter Shah Abbas."²⁹ He

V.7 Burchell's Zebra, inscribed by Jahangir as drawn by Nadir ul-Ast Ustad Mansur in 1621. Folio: 26.7 x 38.9 cm. Minto Album, © Victoria and Albert Museum, London, T M 23.1925.





V.8 Burchell's Zebra, artist unknown, after 1621. 13.8 x 19.7 cm. Private collection, New York.

V.9 Burchell's Zebra, artist unknown, after 1621. Opaque watercolour and gold on paper; 18.9 x 27 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Francis B. Bartlett Donation of 1912 and Picture Fund, 14.659.



instructed Mansur to prepare an image of this strange animal for his record, as revealed by his autograph on the picture.

The image, true to Mansur's mature style, is an exact likeness—devoid of any poop or landscape detail. The animal is shown tied to a stake and standing almost frozen as if to help the artist to capture every detail of its physiognomy and the pattern of its stripes that make it so different and attractive.

Two other images of the zebra drawn in the same period, but not necessarily by the Ustad, are in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (figure V.9)¹⁸ and in a private collection in New York (figure V.8).¹⁷ These animals must have reached the Mughal court after the one portrayed by Mansur was dispatched by Jahangir to Persia as a present to the Shah. Another picture of a zebra mounted in an album of mainly birds, animals and flowers in the Maharaja Sawai Man

V.10 Grey's Zebra, artist unknown, Aurangzeb Album, c. early 1670s. Maharaja Samat Man Singh II Museum, Jaipur, no. A G 936.

V.11 Squirrels in a Chinar Tree, by Nadir ul-Az, Nadir uz-Zaman, circa 1610. Image: 36.2 x 22.5 cm; page: 47 x 32.2 cm. © The British Library Board, Johnson Album 1, f. 30.



Singh II Museum, Jaipur, shows a different species that appears from contemporary accounts to have arrived at the Mughal court in 1671 as a present to Emperor Aurangzeb (figure V.10).²⁸

Squirrels in a Chinar Tree (figure V.11)²⁹

Inscribed on reverse: *'amal-e Nadir ul-Az* [Mansur] *Nadir uz-Zaman* [Abu'l Hasan].

Painting c. 1610 (with inscriptions added later), mounted on an 18th-century album page in the British Library, London.

This is one of the finest and best known natural history paintings executed in Jahangir's *zawarkhana*. It shows a magnificent Chinar tree *Platanus orientalis* drawn with utmost care following classical Persian prototypes, which fills the entire upper area of the picture. It is set in a rocky landscape with birds, animals and a single human figure. A large family of squirrels frolics among its branches. The squirrels are Eurasian Red Squirrels *Sciurus vulgaris*. They are common in Europe and Northern and Central Asia. In the lower right foreground are two female and a single male Ladakh Urial *Ovis orientalis sibiricus*, with a pair of Koklass Pheasant *Pucrasia macrolophus* in the corner and a pair of Chukar *Alectoris chukar* on the rocky outcrop above. At lower left are a Demoiselle Crane *Grus virgo* in the corner, with a Red-Warbled Lagwing *Vandellia indicus* close by and a pair of Hoopoes *Upupa epus* in flight above. In the top corners are Eurasian Collared Doves *Streptopelia decaocto* in flight. The painting has several other birds and is a wonderful composite – one would not encounter so many species in a single scene as depicted here.