



Newsletter Archives

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Birds and Animals in Indian Art - The Mughal Artist as a Naturalist

Article of the Month – June 2000

Jahangir the fourth Mughal emperor (r. 1605-27), was a lover of beauty, be it that of an artifact created by human hands or that observed in nature, the work of god. His memoirs, commonly known as Tuzuk-I-Jahangiri or, Jahangirnama, are as much an album of his aesthetic experiences as a chronicle of his reign. With his keen sensibility, these experiences were a permanent source of joy for him. Nature and beauty were preserved through the brush of his artists.

Jahangir was also a naturalist of the first order, with a strong curiosity for facts. He maintained a rich menagerie and an aviary, manned by expert officials and a team of workers under his personal supervision. Regular records were kept of each individual specimen, as also such information as he desired to acquire. His investigations have been found to be of immense scientific value. The historian Henry Beveridge opined that Jahangir would be a happier man had he been the head of a museum of natural history.

The Zebra (*Equus grevyi*) was first brought into India at Jahangir's court in 1621. Jahangir's keen eye observed the intriguing correspondence between the pattern of stripes of the zebra and the tiger. The former, we are informed, "is striped exactly like the black and yellow tiger, except that this is black and white. Since some doubted that the black stripes had been painted onto its body, an inquiry was instantly ordered. After inquiry into the truth, it became certain that they (the lines) were by the creator of the World".



Jahangir's most valuable contribution to the knowledge of zoology was a portrait of the Mauritian bird, the dodo (*Raphus cucullatus*). An important link in the evolution of ducks, this flightless, primitive bird had become extinct by the end of the seventeenth century, "thanks to the active gastronomic interest taken in it by visiting European soldiers". Modern scholars wishing to know its features had to depend for long on a not very accurate drawing by the Flemish artist Ronald Savery, made at Amsterdam between 1626 and 1628, while the Mughal painting (attributed to the great Mughal artist Mansur) lay in oblivion. Dr. A. Ivanov of St Petersburg (Leningrad) discovered it in the collection of the Institute of Oriental studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences. His paper created a sensation at the XII International Ornithological Congress at Helsinki in 1958; for this painting was found to be the most correct representation of the dodo. It was correctly made from a live specimen which seems to have been presented to Jahangir by a foreign visitor. Professor Erwin Stresemann

has dated this miniature to the last years of the emperor's life when ill-health had stopped his pen, and thus deprived the world of an eyewitness account of an exceedingly curious bird by one of the most interesting figures in Indian history and a naturalist par excellence.

Accuracy achieved by well-defined outlines and the rendering of maximum detail are the chief characteristics of Mughal studies of nature. Attention is paid to the use of pigments that reflect the actual color of the subject. One cannot fail to admire the minute observation of the artists in which other characteristic physical features of the various birds and animals - hairs, ears, eyes, tail, fur or plumage- are so realistically depicted as to enable one to identify the species at first glance. The artists paint them after careful study, as their creations are not merely a copy of the external appearance of the animals but objective illustrations of their mood. That there is a typical conscious enlargement of the figure in proportion to the space is clear. It is the Mughal painter's special way of according dignity to the subject of his painting.



Indian art also includes depictions of animals which are made up of human figures or other elements from throughout nature - called Composite Animals. These images invert the normal Indian approach to interpreting form. These composites, made up of disparate elements (animal, human, demon, and so on) are found in India from the early Mughal period onward, giving rise to the Mughal label. The painters of the Mughal composites are able to invent composite animals which may startle us at first, but on close inspection seem so entirely

natural. This sheer naturalness of many of these paintings is even more striking than the individual elements. The playfulness inherent in these paintings may mask some deep intent, but at the same time this playfulness is enough to keep our interest and inspire our admiration.

Mughal art also broke new ground in the use and representation of the floral motif in painting. While flowers were a common motif and an integral part of design in Indian art from very early times, it was only with the emergence of the Mughal school that they became subjects of paintings, rather than embellishments, and here too, only from the start of the seventeenth century.

The first Mughal emperor Babur expresses his love for nature in the following words:

*"My heart, like the bud of the red, red rose,
Lies fold within fold aflame;
Would the breath of even a myriad Springs
Blow my heart's bud to a rose? "*

His fascination for flowers, especially the rose (gul in Persian) was so deep that he named his daughters Gul-chihra Begum, Gul-izar Begum, Gul-badan Begum, and Gul-rang Begum.

Babur's description of the panoramic view of blossoms during spring in Sindh once again testifies to his being a connoisseur of flowers: " In some places sheets of yellow flowers bloomed in plots; in others sheets of red flowers in plots; in some red and yellow bloomed together. We sat on a mound near the camp to enjoy the sight. There were flowers on all sides of the mound, yellow here, red there, as if arranged regularly to form a sextuple. On two sides there were fewer flowers but as far as the eye reached, flowers were in bloom. In spring near Parashawar the fields of flowers are very beautiful indeed" (account of the year AD 1519).

Mughal flower paintings are typically meticulously drawn twigs with leaves, buds, and flowers, in a variety of arrangement, flawless in depiction and fully conforming to the rules of naturalistic study without losing its essential aesthetic appeal. The background is mostly treated plain except for a slight suggestion of aerial perspective with the help of a fine strip across the top, without defining the horizontal line. Total focus is laid on the main subject which suggests the artist's inclination to project it in all its genuine objective form. In such paintings, in order to enliven the surroundings and capture a certain rhythm of movement, as well as to manage the compositional aspects, the Mughal school prefers to depict birds, butterflies, and other insects hovering over the blossoms. This is done to achieve a greater impact of naturalistic environment through a kind of relational placement of the main object and other minor living things (flying) in nature; also, he introduces through the hovering objects a sort of freedom of movement in the space around a still-life exposure of the main object. Besides, in the selection of the hovering objects, there is an attempt not only to suggest the skyline, but also to intensify the naturalistic impact of the flower study through the addition of ecological harmony that exists in nature. The pale background does help in brightening up in relief the flowering plant as a whole, and also enhances with ease vertical movement without having to concentrate much on spacing the sky as one might expect



otherwise. One may note that the clustering of the leaves is composed with a deliberate purpose and design: at the base it is denser, suggestive of the plant being rooted in the soil; while in its upward growth the leaves have generally a light openness balanced by a bud, and then there is a full focus on the flowers showing different folds of petals concerting with various stages of blossoming.

The Mughal artist tends towards a naturalistic rendering of flora and fauna. 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 aim at the portrayal of physical reality where spiritual and emotional matters hardly had a place, in other words a scientific approach. 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. The Mughal artist's approach finds expression in an emphasis of objectivity in the presentation of nature. This best suits studies of specimens intended to depict maximum possible detail.

This article by Nitin Goel.

We hope you have enjoyed reading the article. Any comments you may have will be greatly appreciated. Please send your feedback to feedback@exoticindia.com.

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