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## The tulip (ca. 1621): A study by Mansur

Som Prakash Verma

Mansur (fl. 1595–fl. 1627) was a celebrated painter at the courts of the Mughal emperors Akbar (1556–1605) and Jahangir (1605–1627) and is particularly known for his studies of animals, birds and flowers. His study of the tulip almost certainly belongs to the collection of his studies of the flowers of the Kashmir valley, which he undertook while accompanying Jahangir on his visit to Kashmir in 1621. Jahangir wrote in his memoirs: “The flowers which are seen in the district of Kashmir exceed all count. The flowers that *Nadiru'l 'Asr Ustad* Mansur ‘Naqqash’ had drawn pictures of exceed more than a hundred” (Jahangir 1978, p. 145).

The miniature itself bears the following inscription: “*Amal-i banda-i dargah Nadiru'l 'Asr Mansur Naqqash Jahangir Shahi*” (“Work of the Slave of the Court, *Nadiru'l 'Asr*, Mansur *Naqqash* (servant) of King Jahangir”). (The letters *dal* and *ra* in the word *Nadiru'l 'Asr* seem to have been lost as a result of the re-touching of the painting at a later stage.) Unluckily, it is not dated. *Nadiru'l 'Asr* [“Unique of the age”] was the title given by Jahangir to Mansur (Jahangir 1978, p. 20).

The painting measures 38.2 cm × 25 cm, with an illuminated margin that is 1.6 cm wide; vertical panels on both sides contain verses in *nasta'liq* (the mode of writing Persian with rounded letters), each 1.7 cm wide. The dimensions of the inner picture are 21.6 cm × 9.7 cm. The painting was received by the Aligarh Muslim University as part of the Habibganj Collection given by Mr. Obaidur Rahman Khan Sherwani in December 1960. The entire history of the miniature is not known, except that it had been acquired by the donor's father, Mr. Habibur Rahman Khan

Sherwani, a minister in the Nizam's government at Hyderabad. It is in a fair state of preservation. There are small worm holes, mainly on the margin, but the main picture is undamaged. The colours maintain their freshness.

The illuminated margin is damaged at the left-hand corner, the paper having been re-joined through pasting. The miniature bears a seal of the Habibganj Library on the top of the folio and the accession number 60-1-*ba*-3 on the right-hand margin in black ink. The paper is light buff, the ground being visible in vertical panels and broad margin where the flower plant motifs are executed directly on the paper in gold pigment (Fig. 1).

Mansur's study of the plant—its stem, leaves, bud, and flowers in three stages, with the stamens shown in the fully opened flower—is very detailed and lifelike. Examining it under a microscope, one sees the accurate details of the pollen grains at the ends of the stamens (six in number) and the details of venation (in a few leaves) proceeding towards the margin of the leaf blade in a more or less parallel direction (convergent type), a characteristic of lanceolate leaves of the plants of the lily family (Liliaceae). It is obvious that the artist was painting from life and not copying some other picture or painting from memory.

It should, therefore, be possible to identify the variety of the tulip that he had pictured. R. Skelton reports its identification by Dr. W. T. Stearn of The Natural History Museum as *Tulipa montana* (Skelton 1972, p. 151, no. 25). But *T. montana* has pale lemon yellow segments (Bailey 1966, p. 220) and not red ones as in Mansur's painting. A variety of the same species, *Tulipa chrysantha*, grows on the higher

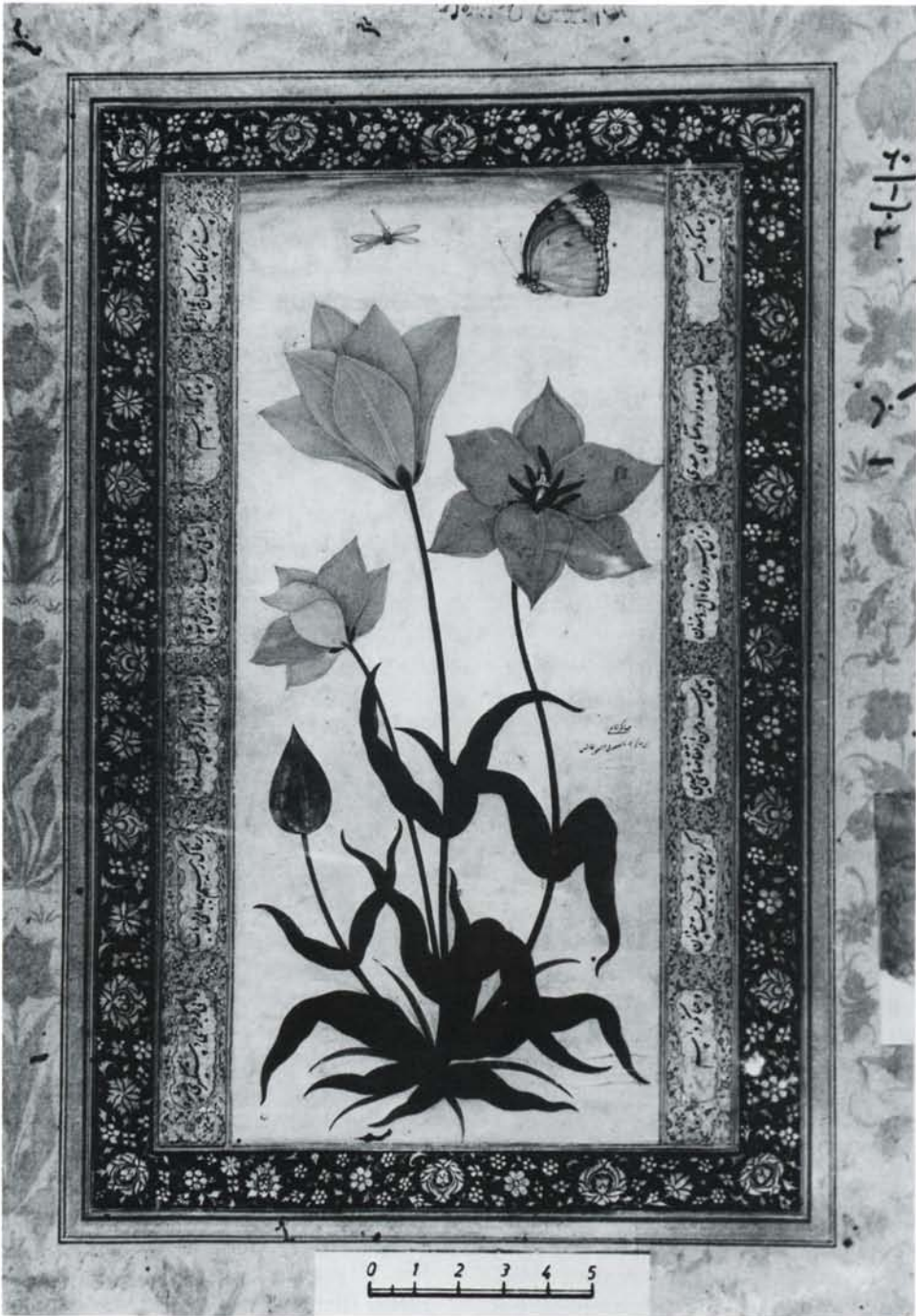


Figure 1. The tulip, ca. 1621, by Mansur 'Naqqash.' Courtesy of Habibganj Collection (no. 60-1-ba-3), Maulana Azad Library, Aligarh Muslim University.

slopes of the Himalayas, but its perianth too is reported to be "yellow within, without suffused with red" (Hooker 1954, p. 355; Polunin & Stainton 1984, p. 429; see also plate 124 [no. 1454] in Polunin & Stainton).

It would seem that the species closest to what Mansur was portraying (Fig. 2) is *Tulipa clusiana*. The following description is from Bailey (1966, p. 220; 1947, p. 3402):

T. Clusiana, DC. Lady Tulip. Tunic brown and leathery, woolly within near apex: lvs. 2-5, somewhat glaucous, sometimes red on edges, sharply folded, the lower 8-10 in. long,  $\frac{3}{8}$  in. wide: st. glabrous, to 1 ft. high: bud solitary, green, erect: fls. at first campanulate, later almost a flat star; segms. 1½-2 in. long,  $\frac{3}{8}$  in. wide, acute, white within with basal carmine blotch, backs of outer segms. red with white margin; stamens less than half as long as segms., purple: midseason.

According to Bailey (1947, p. 3402) the variety is found in "Portugal through the Mediterranean region to Greece and Persia." It is not apparently reported from the Himalayas, but "a close ally of it with similar leaves and habit" is *Tulipa stellata* (Bailey 1947, p. 3402; cf. Bailey 1966, p. 220). This variety is, indeed, found in "Western Himalaya, Kumaon westwards" (Hooker 1954, p. 355; Polunin & Stainton 1984, p. 429), but its descriptions show points which, unlike *Tulipa clusiana*, do not suit Mansur's tulip: Its segments are not acute but "obtuse or subacute," and the flowers are "always without the distinct purple eye" (Hooker 1954, p. 355; Bailey 1947, p. 3402). We may then suppose that Mansur has indeed drawn *Tulipa clusiana* and that, like its close relative *Tulipa stellata*, it was present in Kashmir at the time of his painting (and perhaps still is present there).

The butterfly and the insect (a dragonfly?) shown hovering above the tulip flowers are in keeping with Mansur's striving for a naturalistic flavour. In his early work "The portrait of a 'vina-player'" (ca. 1600), birds are similarly depicted hovering over flower plants (Welch 1963, plate 18). In his study of the

iris, executed between 1621 and 1625, a bird hovers over the blossom (Godard 1937, p. 274, fig. 113). In yet another instance, Mansur's study of a plant of the pea family composed with floricans (*Sypheotis bengalensis*) shows butterflies and an insect hovering around the plant (Alvi & Rahman 1968, plate 24). This stylistic device does not seem to have become common in Mughal painting until late in Jahangir's reign (1605-1627). However, a painting ascribed to Muhammad Nadir (of Samarqand), a contemporary of Mansur, shows a yellow narcissus with a butterfly above it (Khandalavala & Moti Chandra 1965, plate E).

The device had also developed in Europe, and Skelton (1972, p. 151) would compare Mansur's portrayal of the tulip with the margaton lily from Pierre Vallet's *Le Jardin du roy très Chrestien Henry IV* of 1608, in which a butterfly also is shown poised above the flowers. A 17th-century Mughal copy of the margaton lily published by Skelton (1972, plate 41), however, omits the butterfly from the composition. Clearly, even if Mansur's device of putting birds and insects above or beside flowers was not original, it says much for his naturalistic instincts that unlike other Mughal artists he hastened to adopt it. One must remember that he was a master at the portrayal of animals and birds, on which his reputation mainly rests.

In Mansur's study of the tulip exhibited here, the butterfly also balances the whole composition, being a counterpart of the isolated green of the miniature, for it is set on the high margin, which is a characteristic of the Mughal school. The dragonfly fills part of the smaller gap on the opposite side. The background in composition represents a vertical plane only, but the sky appears in a barely visible top margin, just enough to suggest an aerial perspective.

Mansur displayed his usual mastery of colour in this painting. The butterfly with bluish green wings balances the single bud (dull green



Figure 2. Details of the tulip. Courtesy of Habibganj Collection (no. 60-1-ba-3), Maulana Azad Library, Aligarh Muslim University.

in the painting, while the bud of *Tulipa clusiana* is described as “green”). The bright red blossom is well-balanced by the subdued pigment used in colouring the leaves. Mansur added rhythm to the composition by projecting the flowers in three different stages of development.

The margin painting (*hashyia*) also deserves notice. The margin was an integral part of

Mughal album pictures. The outer margin depicts flower plants, thematically in association with the central picture, but these are essentially decorative in character, being executed in gold pigment. The inner margin comprising stylised floral motif, though highly ornamented, appears subdued enough to highlight the central picture. The artist who painted this margin is not known. It could be Mansur,



Figure 3. Specimen of calligraphy: Verses calligraphed by Mir 'Ali (on the reverse of Mansur's tulip). Courtesy of Habibganj Collection (no. 60-1-ba-3), Maulana Azad Library, Aligarh Muslim University.

since he had illuminated certain folios, e.g., the illuminated frontispiece ('*unwan*) in *Khamsa* by Amir Khusrau, Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore (acquisition no. W. 624 [unpubl.]), and the illuminated *shamsa* (heading/panel) around the central seal of the emperor Jahangir, in *Diwan* by Anwari (location not known), which was reproduced in *Islamic art of India* (a catalogue of the exhibits put on sale during 24 April–10 May 1980, London, p. 36, no. 62, frontispiece [in colour]). The verses (in the vertical panels), which are well-calligraphed, bear no relation to the theme of the main painting. Their inclusion merely conformed to a formal convention of that era whereby album painting used to be accompanied by well-calligraphed verses.

On the reverse side of the miniature are verses calligraphed in *nasta'liq*, signed by "Mir 'Ali" (Fig. 3). It is noteworthy that the verses in the centre of the folio and in the inner margin are in a different handwriting from that seen in vertical panels on the folio painted by Mansur. N. C. Mehta (1926, pp. 80–82) mistakenly attributed the verses on the folio that contained the painting by Mansur to Mir 'Ali.

It had been a practice at the Mughal atelier to paint the miniatures on the reverse side of folios that contained verses on one side. Such folios lodged in royal albums were of different origins, and paintings were later made on their blank sides. A miniature by 'Abdu's Samad has on its reverse verses calligraphed by Mir 'Ali (Beach 1978, p. 164, no. 16d; see also pp. 156–161, nos. 16a, 16b).

The calligraphy on the reverse side of Mansur's painting of the tulip is probably much older than Mansur's painting. It is difficult to identify Mir 'Ali, owing to more than one calligraphist bearing that name. Khwaja Hasan Nisari Bukhari in his *Muzakkarat-i Ahabab* (1969, p. 295) noticed one scribe (*katib*), Mir 'Ali of Herat. He is also mentioned by Abu'l Fazl as an "illustrious" scribe and the father

of Maulana Baqir, who was a noted scribe at Akbar's court (1977, pp. 108–109). The date of his death is given by Qazi Ahmad as 966 A.H. (Hijri era)/1558 A.D. (Christian era) (1959, pp. 126–131). Signed works of Mir 'Ali, Mulla Mir 'Ali and 'Ali are found in royal albums from the Mughal school, a few of which have been published (Kühnel & Goetz 1926, plates 21–23, 26, 28–30; Atil 1978, pp. 106–110, no. 60).

Mansur's study of the tulip has been described and reproduced by N. C. Mehta (1924, plate facing p. 118; 1926, pp. 80–82, plate in colour between pp. 80–81); E. C. Dickinson (1951, p. 46, plate on p. 43); Shanti Swarup (1968, p. 148, plate C; 1983, pp. 51–52, fig. 67); R. Skelton (1972, p. 151, fig. 90a); and A. K. Das (1978, p. 199, plate 66). It has also been described, without reproduction, by Das (1974, p. 34) and S. P. Verma (1982, p. 10, plates 1–3). In addition, the artwork of the tulip was featured in the Festival of India, India Exhibition (Painting), at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, in 1985–1986.

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