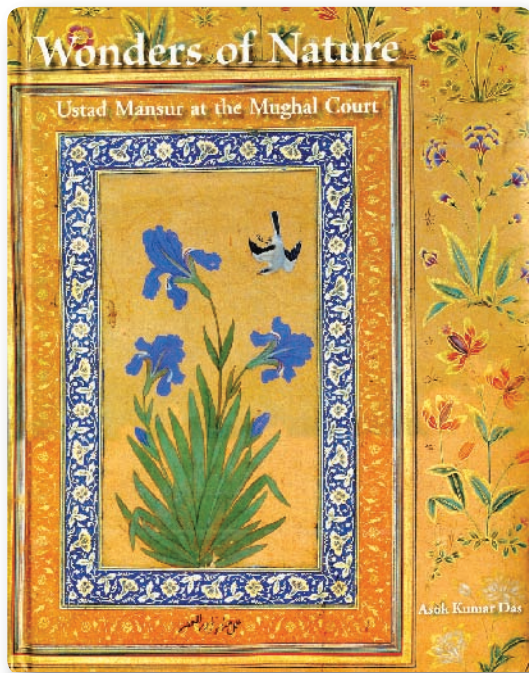


Book Review by Priyaleen Singh

WONDERS OF NATURE

USTAD MANSUR AT THE MUGHAL COURT



Wonders of Nature:
Ustad Mansur at the Mughal Court
 Author: Asok Kumar Das
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The Mughals as great lovers of nature is a fact well chronicled in history. That this resulted in the great tradition of *char bagh* garden design from the sixteenth century onwards has also been written about and researched extensively. The Mughals were great patrons of art and this love of nature was reflected in the painting traditions of the period too. The fascination for native and exotic flora and fauna resulted in several albums and folios being commissioned by the imperial court. And amongst the many artists patronized by the Mughal court, the name of Ustad Mansur stands out as one of the most prolific and proficient in the art of recording nature. This publication, aptly titled *Wonders of Nature*, is the first of its kind devoted exclusively to the artist Mansur, and captures his engagement with the natural world through his paintings.

Spread over seven chapters, the book spans the entire range of Mansur's work to include his early phase as assistant to some of the leading masters in the painting ateliers in the court of Akbar and the later phase in the court of Jehangir where he graduated from his early rank of designer or *naqqash*, as an illuminator, to earn fame as a specialist in natural history subjects.

The first chapter is more in the form of an introduction to the Mughal emperors, their fascination for new discoveries of flora and fauna, and the desire to capture the rarities of nature observed in their travels and hunting expeditions. It also introduces us to the personality of Emperor Jehangir in particular, who in "combining the eye of a naturalist with that of a scientist and an art connoisseur" was largely responsible in fostering the talent of Mansur. The great popularity enjoyed by the Baburnama at Akbar's court gave Mansur the first opportunity to display his prowess at illustrating manuscripts. His folios in the various copies of the Baburnama and Akbarnama also demonstrate his handling of human subjects with remarkable maturity. Chapters two and three of the book dwell on the Early Natural History paintings and portraits drawn by Mansur. The eye for capturing the intricacies of foliage is apparent in this phase of Mansur's career as well, as evidenced in the sensitive portrayal of the *vina* player in a garden landscape setting, a painting now in the British museum collection.

The next chapter describes the illumination work by Mansur *naqqash*. The folios attributed to Mansur dazzle the eye with the intricate decorations of the text panels and the delicate rendering in the borders and margins of



mation outside of the frame. The author links the paintings with contemporaneous events through anecdotes and other descriptions, offering insights into life in the Mughal court, travels of the Mughal emperors, work in the painting ateliers and natural history.

With little known about the personal life of Mansur, it is for the reader to speculate on his personality through the sensitivity with which he managed to capture the essence and beauty of nature and the sheer aesthetic delight he provided through the magic of his brush. The book is truly a feast for the eyes and worth having in ones library to simply appreciate the joy of nature and bring a certain warmth and beauty in our lives. Browsing through the book will perhaps help arouse an aesthete and a connection with nature, helping some of us to become better designers in a world alienated from the beauties of nature and fast imbibing the crass culture of commercial enterprise and mass production of design. The book also brings to the fore that the craft of the human hand can never be matched by the acquired skill on the computer machine.

the books in the Mughal *kitabkhana*. Chapters five and six—comprising the largest section of the book—dwell on the studies of animals, birds and flowers, in which Mansur excelled. The realism and scientific enquiry is visible in all the works of Mansur and can truly be appreciated in the portrayal of the zebra and the common turkey, the subject of folios now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. The illustrations clearly display that the imagery of nature was not imitated from existing illustrations but was drawn from closely observing the subjects. But the finest and best known natural history painting executed by Mansur in Jehangirs *taswirkhana* is the ‘Squirrels in a Chinar tree’ now in the British Library, where the treatment, textures and colours of the tree are mesmerizing.

The book also puts together some of the finest flower paintings drawn by Mansur which include the Red tulip, Iris plant and the Narcissus, all of which reveal the impact of European illustrations of herbal folios on his work. The last chapter is a brief essay on the legacy of Mansur displayed in the continuing interest shown by artists in drawing nature subjects right up to the early nineteenth century.

The format of the book makes for extremely interesting reading because while the main narrative is woven around the more famous and selective works of Mansur, it is interspersed with details pertaining to the specific subject in the painting frame and related infor-

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