



A Study of a Pair of Sunbirds

Calcutta, India, c. 1800

Watercolour on unidentified English paper

38.5cm high, 24cm wide

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This artfully rendered composition depicts two sunbirds perched on a branch. The darker bird appears to be a male Purple Sunbird, *Cinnyris asiaticus*, displaying his breeding plumage. At less than 10cm long, *Cinnyris asiaticus* is one of the smaller members of the sunbird family. The male has deep charcoal eyes and a curved grey-black beak. The neck is greyish black leading to a deeper blue-black, with hints of lapis overtones. The head, back and wings are an exquisite deep inky blue, which creates a dazzling metallic shimmer as the bird catches the light. During the non-breeding season, males revert to their eclipse plumage which is more akin to the females, although clusters of vivid blue feathers remain. The females tend to be olive-brown with yellow underparts.

The bird at the top of the branch may be a female purple sunbird, or another member of the nectariniidae (sunbird) family. The head and back are a combination of moss and olive tones, with paler greens around the edges of the feathers. A darker strip reaches from the crown along the upper back and the throat is a pale yellow. The wings, lower back and tail feathers are an exquisitely rich forest green. There is a softness to the feathers, creating a sumptuous, velvety quality to the wings.

There are fifteen species of sunbirds in India which inhabit deciduous and dry forests, scrubland and gardens. These vocal birds congregate in garrulous groups, where they are known to fend off much larger birds. Despite eating some insects and berries, sunbirds primarily feed on nectar. Their curved beaks enabled them to extract nectar with expert precision and they are invaluable pollinators for certain plant species.

In the present study it is the bird's plumage that so captivates the viewer. The employment of precision shading is exceptional, with paler tones used to demarcate the edges of the feathers and deep hues providing body. Both studies exhibit a wonderfully harmonious relationship between rich colours, depth and texture. Not only are the sunbirds exquisitely beautiful, but their glistening plumage also has a highly tactile quality, truly bringing these spirited little birds to life.

For additional ornithological studies made for Lord Valentia, see Sotheby's Sven Gahlin Collection Lot 36 a drawing of a bustard, and Lot 37 a watercolour of a crow-pheasant, both made for Lord Valentia; Sotheby's, London, 31 May 2011, The Stuart Cary Welch Collection, Part Two, lot 115; see also Welch 1976, no.26; Welch 1978-I, nos.18a-c.and Leach 1995, no.7.96, pp.760-2. For two bird studies donated by Viscount Valentia to Lord Wellesley, see British Library in London (Wellesley Collection, NHD 29, vol. iv, f.21,27)

Literature

Bikram Grewal et al. 2016. Birds of India - A Pictorial Field Guide. Om Books International.