

AMIR MOHTASHEMI



A Study of a Bronzed Drongo, *Dicrurus aeneus*

Calcutta, India, c. 1800

Watercolour on J Whatman paper

46.5cm high, 28cm wide

Provenance: Collector's seal on verso in Persian: 'The Right Honourable Lord Bahadur Viscount Valentia, 1217 (1802-3)'.

Stock no.: A5492

Perching upon a branch with an alert, intelligent expression, a member of the Drongo family takes a moment to rest. The bird is predominately black with faint dapples of inky blues upon the head, cheek and neck. An arrestingly fiery amber shade, the bird's eye is extremely striking against the darker plumage. The bill curves downwards toward a sharp tip, ideally suited to grasping insects during rapid flight. The wing feathers are black fading to a magnificent coppery shimmer across the primaries.

These tones continue down the long tail feathers, which gather together and form a straight tip. The Ashy Drongo often appears with a metallic gloss to their feathers and forked tail. Some, however, are more bronzed with a less forked tail, that may appear square-ended. The females bear a less iridescent plumage than the males and the juveniles are duller than the adults, with less forked tails. Given their characteristics and the variety within the species, it is most likely the present bird is indeed *Dicrurus aeneus*.

As a family, Drongos are renowned for their aptitude and cunning. Utilising their accomplished skills in mimicry, they reproduce the alarm calls of other species, which are capable of frightening them off and thus causing them to abandon their food. Several drongo species have been witnessed using a variety of different alarm calls in this manner.

Of the 27 species of Drongo in the world, nine are found in India. They frequent the lower Himalayas and the Western and Eastern Ghat mountain ranges. Occupying broadleaf evergreen and deciduous forest, they may be found individually or in small groups. Predominantly insectivorous, they conduct aerial

sallies under the forest canopy, searching for insects before returning to a favoured perch. Drongos have also been known to join other species to create larger foraging flocks.

Breeding from February to July, bronzed drongos lay up to four pinkish-brown eggs. Nests are constructed from a variety of materials including bamboo leaves, bark and grasses. After a period of thirteen days the chicks are born and fed by both parents. At 24 centimetres, they are one of the smaller members of the Dicruridae family, but despite this they will aggressively defend their broods by attacking much larger birds.

During his travels in the early nineteenth century, Viscount Valentia would have encountered some of the most accomplished artists in India at the time. With extremely fine detailing, rich and diverse pigments and a great likeness to the subject, the present work bears testament to this. Such accurate morphological characteristics imply the artist was working directly from nature. One can only imagine the wonder experienced by Lord Valentia as he laid his eyes upon these birds for the first time, and his sheer excitement upon returning home with an exceptionally accomplished and diverse collection of ornithological paintings.

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

Hazlitt, Gooden & Fox, 1991. Indian Painting for British Patrons, 1770-1860.

Stuart Carey Welch, 1976. Indian Drawings and Painted Sketches.

Linda Leach, 1995. Mughal and Other Indian Paintings from the Chester Beatty Library, London, vol. ii.