



**A Study of an Ashy Drongo, *Dicrurus leucophaeus***

Calcutta, India, c. 1800

Watercolour on Fleur de Lys watermark paper

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

47cm high, 27cm wide

Stock no.: A5498

With jet-black lustrous plumage, an elegant and deeply forked tail and piercing garnet-red eyes, the Ashy Drongo emanates a monarchical resplendence.

A member of the Dicruridae family, populations occur across South and Southeast Asia.

Preferring open forest in mountainous regions such as the Himalayas, they conduct aerial sallies, capturing insects in mid-flight. The birds are also known to eat blossoms such as those of the eucalyptus tree and also, occasionally, smaller birds and lizards. They have also been observed riding on the backs of sheep and buffalo, whilst feeding upon insects. Whistler (p. 158) describes the Ashy Drongo as "a magnificent flier, turning and twisting with extreme speed and skill, and it has the pugnacity of the family, hunting larger birds from the vicinity of its nest with great courage." Both sexes collaborate in nest building, with the males producing materials and the females overseeing the construction. A clutch of four to six eggs is laid in a loose cup nest made of roots, lichens and spiders webs. The birds emit a pleasant, chattery and sometimes nasal call and have been known to mimic other birds.

Ashy drongos can exhibit plumage in varying shades of grey with the presence of white patches around the eye of some birds. However, with very dark feathers, *Longicaudatus*, a subspecies in India bears more likeness to the Black Drongo, although it has a longer tail and brighter red eye.

The present bird has predominately black feathers with a wisp of grey supercilium above the eye. The chest feathers are also a paler greyish-black, with hints of brown tones on the primaries. Despite its charcoal black appearance, the plumage also reveals a subtle iridescence, and, on close observation the feathers appear to shimmer with exquisite deep blue-green tones.

The work itself may be regarded as a celebration of fine detail, as seen in the delicate whiskers around the bird's beak and glimmer of light reflecting upon the iris. Dense clusters of feathers on the forehead are also rendered with extremely refined brushstrokes. Overall there is a symbiosis between the confidence of this majestic bird and that of the hand of the artist, who has succeeded in their animated presentation of this elegant species.

Bhujjanganah written in pencil on recto and below this 'Fork tailed shrike'.

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

Hugh Whistler, 1949. Popular Handbook of Indian Birds. Edition 4. Gurney and Jackson, London, pp. 158–59.

Craig, Robson, 2005. Birds of Southeast Asia. Princeton University Press. Ashy Drongo, p. 176.