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Miniature of a Fat-Tailed Sheep in a Meadow

Northern India, probably Uttar Pradesh, Late 17th to mid 18th century

Gouache heightened with gold on paper

Painting: 12.5cm high, 8.9cm wide

Leaf: 37.8cm high, 25.7cm wide

Stock no.: A5873

Provenance: Acquired from the estate of Robert Ellsworth, New York, 1993.

The fourth Mughal emperor, Jahangir (r. 1605-1627), commissioned portraits of interesting and unusual animals by court artists, most notably Mansur. His successors, as well as wealthy North Indian patrons, continued this tradition. This miniature portrait depicts a fat-tailed sheep, framed by dark blue, red, and light blue borders and mounted on a dark blue sheet decorated with gold flecks. The sheep, probably a Balkhi, stands on a flowery hillock. The sheep has a black face, a tan and white coat, black forelegs, and black-and-white hindlegs. It is tethered to a peg in the ground with a red leash, attached to a gold collar. Behind the sheep, small birds are silhouetted against a sunset. Gold outlines produce the effect of sunrays breaking through the fluffy clouds. Though great care has been taken to capture the textured woollen coat of the sheep and the gradient between black and tan markings, the perspective is somewhat distorted, with sheep's hindlegs misaligned with the body.

The regal red collar with gold ornamentation suggests that this sheep was kept in the Mughal royal menagerie. Several examples of similarly tethered animals exist. A portrait by the famed Mansur of a zebra presented to Jahangir for Nowruz is in the Victoria & Albert Museum, London (accession no. [IM.23-1925](#)). The zebra, facing right, is tethered with a red bridle to a small peg in the ground. A miniature dated c. 1625-1650, in the Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (no. [W.899](#)), depicts a ram wearing a red collar with gold bells. The hair on his back and above his hooves has been dyed red with

henna. A very similar study of a ram, dating to c. 1585, which may provide the terminus ante quem for this composition, is in the Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio (accession no. [2013.298](#)) and dated to c. 1585. Three portraits of fat-tailed sheep, one black and two grey, wearing decorative gold collars are in an incomplete album of portraits, animals, and birds in the British Royal Collection (accession no. [RCIN 1005069](#), plates 34, 73, 74). Furthermore, several other studies of fat-tailed sheep are known, which are so similar as to suggest a common source material. An 18th-century version is in the British Museum, London (accession no. [1920.0917.0.99](#)) and a late 17th-century version is in the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya Museum, Mumbai (accession no. 15.276).