A floral fantasy of animals and birds (Waq-waq) (cat.55)

Mughal, or perhaps Deccan, early 17th century
Opaque watercolor and gold on paper
Miniatrure: 7¾ x 5 in (20 x 12.6 cm)

Provenance:
Acquired from Khajanchi, Bikaner, December 1967

Exhibited:
A Flower From Every Meadow, Asia House Gallery, New York; The Center for Asian Art and Culture, Avery Brundage Collection, San Francisco; The Albright-Knox Gallery of Art, Buffalo, New York, 1973

Published:
India 1966, A Pictorial Diary, Calcutta, 1966, back cover
Welch, A Flower From Every Meadow, no.60, frontispiece
The Connoisseur, May 1973, p.48

This exquisite fantasy of flora and fauna is an enigmatic masterpiece whose origins lie partly in the lore of the Waq-waq, partly in the legend of the talking tree visited by Iskandar (Alexander) at the edge of the world, and partly in the decorative tradition of zoomorphic illumination, all combined in a highly imaginative design and heightened by the refined hand of a master artist.
The Waq-waq (also wak-wak, Wakwak) was an exotic mythical island and a tree on the island, whose fruit had the appearance of humans. Both were popular features of numerous Arabic and Persian texts, including the Thousand and One Nights. The exact origin of Waq-waq is uncertain, but a story in the Qur’an which certainly fed into the Waq-waq myth comes in Sura 37, verses 60–64, where mention is made of the tree of Zakum, whose fruit consists of the heads of demons, and Al-Jahiz (781-869), the great Abbasid intellectual and man of letters, mentions that the people of Waq-waq were the product of a cross between plants and animals. The tree with human fruit appeared in Arabic literature as early as the 10th century in al-Maqdisi’s Kitab al-Bad’ wa’l-Tarikh, in which he describes the tree as growing in India. The myth is likely, however, to be of greater antiquity, since a Chinese author Tu Huan, writing in the late 8th century, mentions in his T’ung-tien a Middle Eastern tale of similar content. Many locations around the Indian Ocean and Pacific Rim, from Madagascar and the islands of east Africa to Japan, have been suggested for the island of Waq-waq by a multitude of Arab and western authors over the centuries.

Illustrations of the Waq-waq tree appeared in Arabic manuscripts as early as the late 12th century (e.g. Kitab Ghara’ib al-funun wa-mulah al-‘uyun, (The Book of Curiosities of the Sciences and Marvels for the Eyes), Bodleian Library, Oxford, Ms. Arab c. 90, see fig.1 above) and thereafter appeared quite frequently in the Arabic and Persian contexts in such popular cosmographical texts as Al-Qazwini’s Aja’ib al-Makhlukat (“Wonders of Creation”, see, for example, a manuscript in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, illustrated in Coomaraswamy 1929, pl.XIII). At the same time there was a growth in popularity of the Shahnama of Firdausi in the Persian world, and this text included an episode in the legend of Iskandar (Alexander the Great) in which he travelled to farthest edge of the world where he discovered a talking tree with male and female parts that prophesied his death. The compositions employed by artists to illustrate this scene often conflate the iconography of the Alexander tale and the Waq-waq legend, and as early as the Great Mongol Shahnama of circa 1340 we see a tree with human and animals heads emerging from the leaves (see fig.2 above), and this iconographic tradition continues through later centuries and in all countries where the Shahnama was a popular text. At the same time, the Tree of Zakum from the Qur’an finds its way into the illustrated copies of the Mir’ajnama, where its demon- and animal-headed branches clearly anticipate some of the iconography on the present work (see fig.3 above).
During the 14th and early 15th centuries we also see the development of a style of zoomorphic illumination in which scrolling vegetal stems produce heads of humans, angels, animals, birds and dragons, which sprout directly from the flowers and leaves. These designs are found among the sketchbook albums in the Topkapi Saray Library (H.2152, H.2153, H.2154, H.2160) and in the Diez Album in Berlin, and may have been inherited from similar designs on earlier metalwork, stonework and other media (see Baer 1965, Walker 1997, fig.69, p.74). This design motif was applied to the illumination of manuscript pages, mainly in the decorated borders, but in some cases the central panels too. Early examples can be seen in the margins of a Persian Shahnama manuscript made during the second quarter of the 15th century (Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon, M.66A, see Lentz and Lowry 1989, cat.44, p.128, see also fig.4 below) and in a group of poetic anthologies of Turkman origin from the mid-15th century (e.g. British Library, Or.8193, dated 1431, see Akimushkin and Ivanov 1979, pl.X, p.42). The motif of zoomorphic illumination continued throughout the Timurid and Safavid periods, appearing not just on the margins of illuminated pages, but potentially on any flat surface depicted within miniatures themselves, such as carpets, tent canopies and throne-backs, and also spread to textiles, carpets and bookbinding. A splendid example of this theme is a page decorated in gold on blue ground in an album made for Amir Ghayb Beg in 1564-5 (Topkapi Saray Library, Istanbul, H.2161, f.45a, see Roxburgh 2005, fig.128, pp.180, 234, see also fig.5 below).

4. Zoomorphic borders in a Shahnama, Iran, circa 1425-50. Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon, M.66A  
5. Zoomorphic illumination, Iran, 1564-5. Topkapi Saray Library, Istanbul, H.2161, f.45

These iconographic traditions – the Tree of Zakkum, the Waq-waq, the Talking Tree of Alexander and zoomorphic illumination - run in parallel throughout the late and post-medieval worlds in Persia, Turkey and India, and by the late 16th century in Mughal India and the Deccan we see border designs and full pages of zoomorphic illumination in some of the most important manuscripts and albums of the period. In the Mughal context there are several examples of zoomorphic borders from the early 17th century, executed predominantly
in gold. These include the borders of Jahangir’s dictionary, the *Farhang-i Jahangiri*, dated 1607-8 (see fig. 6 below for the example in the Catherine and Ralph Benkaim Collection) and two single page illuminations, probably both part of a dispersed album, but now mounted separately in different manuscripts of Persian poetry of the late 16th and early 17th century (Museum of Islamic Art, Doha, Ms. 301; Sotheby’s 2000, lot 54; see figs. 7 and 8 below).

6. Details of zoomorphic borders in the *Farhang-i Jahangiri*, 1607-8. Catherine and Ralph Benkaim Collection (see vol. 1, cat. 54)

7. Details of zoomorphic illumination, Mughal, early 17th century. Museum of Islamic Art, Doha, M. 301

8. Details of zoomorphic illumination, Mughal, early 17th century. Formerly Sotheby’s, London, 12.10.2000, lot 54

In addition, several pages in the so-called Gulshan Album, assembled and decorated between 1608 and 1618 for Emperor Jahangir, have related borders of scrolling vegetal and zoomorphic designs (Walker 1997, fig. 71, p. 76; Tehran 2005, Gulshan section pp. 143, 42, 43, 62, 159 and frontispiece), and one in particular is so close to the design of the present painting that they must surely be linked in concept and perhaps even artist (see fig. 9 below, see also Hajek 1960). Not only does this particular Gulshan border contain all the individual zoomorphic
elements found in the present work (lions, tigers, cheetahs, deer, dragons, sheep/goats, bovines, simurghs), but it also has very similar leafy vegetation with broken stems, and the curving stalks of the scrolling plants are positioned at very similar angles to ours. Where ours has an elephant’s head emerging from leaves at the base of the design, the Gulshan border has just the leaves, which, however, are again very similar in design to ours.


The borders of the Gulshan album were executed by some of the leading artists of the royal atelier, including Aqa Reza, Abu’l Hasan, Daulat, Bakhchand, Govardhan and, pertinently, Mansur. The latter, who, according to the latest research, executed the borders of at least three pages plus the fully illuminated endpaper of the album (Beach 2011, pp.246-248, figs.4-7) was the greatest painter of animals and birds in the royal atelier and found particular fame in that context, as well as through his work as an illuminator. The present work combines the art of the illuminator and natural history artist in a dramatic and virtuoso display of exquisite quality, and it is quite possible that it is the work of Mansur himself. Interestingly, another version of the present design exists in the form of a drawing (Indische Museum, Berlin, I.5216, see Kroger and Heiden 2004, no.174, p.220, see also fig.10 below). Although based around a single stem rather than two and with the elephant head at the base facing right rather than left, it is so close in the details (even the parrot-flower is the same, and the elephants ear has a notch in exactly the same place) that one work must surely be based on the other, or both planned as part of a series of zoomorphic designs.

It is interesting to note a strong connection to the Deccan in the iconography of the Waq-waq, the trees of Zakkum and Alexander and zoomorphic illumination. An early and flamboyant example is the design of the borders of the Divan of Sultan Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah of Golconda, of circa 1590-1600 (Salar Jang

Museum, Hyderabad, see Seyller 2011B, fig.17, p.78, also fig.11 below). These feature extravagant gold leaves from which sprout the heads of a variety of polychrome beasts, including lion, deer, dragon and simurgh, and the exact form of these heads is very similar to those of the present work. Perhaps the best-known example, and one that borrows a good deal of detail from the present work, is in the Islamische Museum, Berlin (I.4594.f.26, see Zebrowski 1983, pl.XIX, p.163, and also fig.12 below). It depicts a leafy tree that sprouts fully formed human figures (very much in the tradition of the early Arab illustrations), as well as the heads of animals, birds and mythical beasts. The falling fruit has clearly sprouted, for four smaller saplings with animals heads grow on the ground at the base of the tree, which are particularly close to our work.

When the present work was exhibited in the ground-breaking 1973 exhibition *A Flower from Every Meadow* at the Asia Society in New York and other venues, S.C. Welch suggested a Mughal origin in the early 17th century, probably made for Jahangir (Welch 1973, pp.101-102 and color frontispiece), which would accord with the attribution of the present author. In a personal communication, Robert Skelton attributed the work to Golconda in early 17th century, and to the same artist as painted both the Berlin Waq-waq tree (fig.12 above) and a composite tiger in the Dorn Album (National Library of Russia, St. Petersburg, Ms.489, f.49a.). Howard Hodgkin has also suggested a Deccani origin.
11. Details of zoomorphic borders in the *Divan* of Sultan Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah of Golconda, circa 1590-1600. Salar Jang Museum