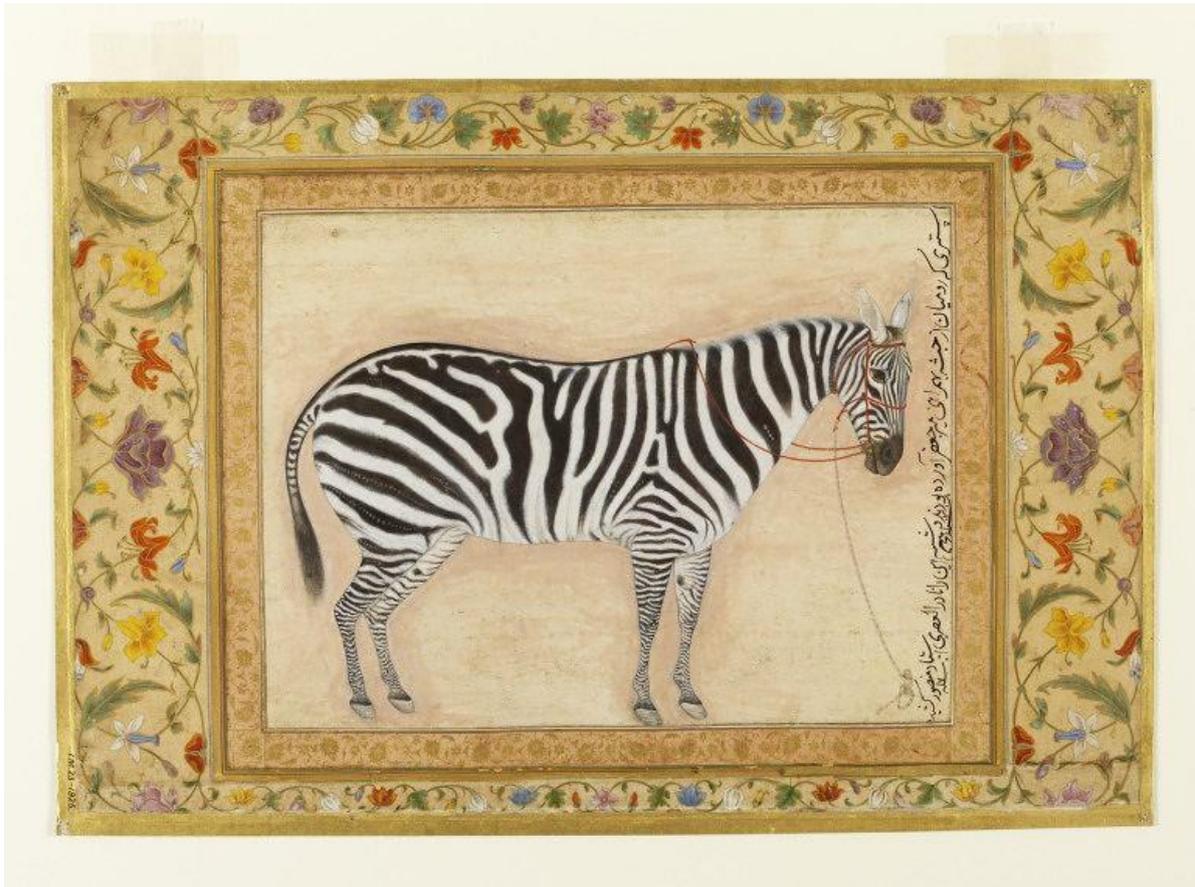


Mansur, *Zebra*, 1621



Digital image courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London (IM.23-1925)

Key facts:

- Date: 1621
- Size: Height: 18.3cm unmounted, Width: 24cm; page H: 26.9cm W: 38.7cm
- Source: Mughal court. This was originally painted for the emperor Jahangir (r. 1605-27), then mounted in an album for his son and successor, Shah Jahan
- Medium: Opaque watercolour and gold on paper
- Location: Victoria and Albert Museum, London (IM.23-1925)

1. ART HISTORICAL TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Subject matter: The *Zebra* was presented to the fourth Mughal emperor, Jahangir, in 1621. The Persian inscription next to the muzzle of the animal, written by the emperor himself in his characteristically spidery hand, gives the circumstances of its arrival at court. It translates: A mule [*astari*] the Turks [*rumiyan*] in the company of Mir Ja'far brought from Ethiopia [*Habasha*]. Its likeness was drawn by Nadir'ul-'asri [Wonder of the Age], the great Mansur. Year 1030, [regnal] year

16'. The date is given according to the Islamic calendar and falls between 1621 and 1622. However, Jahangir's memoirs record the arrival of this fascinating animal at court in March 1621. He notes that it was carefully examined to make sure that it was not, as some thought, a horse on which someone had painted stripes.

Composition: The painting is in effect a 'portrait' of an unfamiliar animal, done in the same way as Jahangir's artists painted portraits of people. These were usually painted against a plain background, sometimes with the addition of small details to indicate the ground on which the person stood. Here, the only indication of physical space is the peg hammered into the earth, used to tether the zebra.

Colour, space and depth: The undyed paper has areas of light pinkish wash. Areas of slightly darker tone cover Mansur's corrections to his original drawing. Some earlier outlines can still be seen next to the animal's hooves. The floral borders in opaque watercolour and gold are later additions of the reign of Shah Jahan, indicating that the painting was assembled into one of his albums. The album was broken up at some unknown date, and the pages scattered in collections across the world. Some of the flowers suggest three dimensions, a convention of Mughal painting that began to be introduced after the court artists saw Western botanical engravings. These were brought to the court by Jesuit missionaries. The Mughal border flowers lack the botanical accuracy of the printed originals.

2. CULTURAL, SOCIAL, TECHNOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL FACTORS

Jahangir inherited his father's extensive library, and his painters. The number of artists in the workshops was reduced significantly for reasons that are not entirely clear, though many must have been elderly by 1605 and probably retired.

Jahangir also inherited an immensely wealthy empire administered very effectively. He had little taste for military exploits and left these to his son, Khurram, the future Shah Jahan. He therefore had time and the means to indulge his taste in the arts. His memoirs make it clear that he commissioned new buildings, though few of these structures survive today, and travelled extensively with artists, calligraphers and craft workers in his encampment. Their work arguably surpassed even what was produced under Akbar.

Jahangir's annotation to this painting, and a remark in his memoirs, record the high level of recognition given to Mansur by the emperor. He was given the title Nadir'ul-'asri, or Wonder of the Age'.

Mansur's earliest known paintings date from about the 1590s when he was one of the royal artists in Akbar's reign (1556-1605). These include paintings of birds and animals that illustrate the *Baburnama* (literally 'Book of Babur'). The memoirs of the first Mughal emperor, Babur, were originally written in Eastern Turkish but Akbar ordered them to be translated into Persian, the cultural and administrative language of the empire.

Very fine animal studies by Mansur are also in the V&A *Akbarnama*, done between about 1590 and 1595. They include the left side of a double-page composition depicting Akbar hunting (Museum number IS.2:56-1896). He also produced designs for objects, and added illuminated headings to at least one other manuscript of the reign.

Mansur continued in royal service after Akbar's death, and became one of Jahangir's leading artists. Despite his obvious importance, details of his life, not least the dates of his birth and death, are unknown.

3. DEVELOPMENTS IN MATERIALS, TECHNIQUES AND PROCESSES

Mansur painted over his preliminary outline using very fine brushstrokes. He would have used a brush made from squirrel hairs.

In the reign of Shah Jahan, the painting was mounted onto a sheet of paper for inclusion in a royal album of paintings and calligraphies, and floral borders were added.

Each folio had a painting on one side, dating to the reign of either Jahangir or Shah Jahan. A panel of calligraphy was pasted on the reverse. The calligraphy was by one of the eminent practitioners of the past or present from Iran or Hindustan, and each page had floral borders of the kind surrounding the paintings, added by Shah Jahan's artists.

The reverse of the *Zebra* has a panel of Persian verses calligraphed by Mir Ali, who was probably a 16th century Iranian expert, though several calligraphers bore this name.

Jahangir's artists added the beautiful illumination of flowers on a gold ground, and the minute studies of animals. Their work is not signed.

The vertical format of Shah Jahan's albums meant that the orientation of Mansur's painting changed, with the zebra's head at the bottom of the page.

4. WAYS IT HAS BEEN USED AND INTERPRETED BY PAST AND PRESENT SOCIETIES

Mansur's *Zebra* must have been intended as an illustration for a royal copy of the emperor's memoirs, the *Jahangirnama*, or 'Book of Jahangir'. The emperor recorded significant events in his

own life and that of the court, interspersed with his reflections and observations. Some of his descriptions of nature are done with almost scientific precision. In 1618, during an absence of 5 years from Agra, the capital of the empire, he recorded in the memoirs that they were being copied and illustrated so that he could send them to favoured individuals. Two contemporary copies of Mansur's *Zebra* are known, but no illustrated volume of the *Jahangirnama* has survived. It is possible none was ever completed. The text, without illustrations, was copied many times. Soon after Mansur's painting was finished, Jahangir sent the *Zebra* to Shah Abbas of Iran as a present. There was a frequent exchange of unusual items between the two rulers.

Major bird and animal studies by Mansur done for Jahangir include a North American turkey sent from Goa and given by a high-ranking Mughal noble; various falcons and vultures; a blackbuck; and a chameleon. Mansur probably painted a very fine depiction of the dodo, which was last reliably sighted in the 1660s and then became extinct. Other bird studies include a Siberian crane, which is not indigenous to the Indian subcontinent and, like the dodo and the zebra, must have been presented to the emperor.

The *Zebra* is one of Mansur's most famous paintings, and was bought at auction by the V&A in 1925. However, the species of its subject was recorded only in 2012. The Indian scholar and naturalist Divyabhanusinh identified it as Burchell's Zebra, *Equus quagga burchelli* (Asok Kumar Das, *Wonders of Nature. Ustad Mansur at the Mughal Court*, 86).

FURTHER READING AND LINKS

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- For more information on the reign and identity of Jahangir: Roshna Kapadia, *Bichitr, Jahangir Preferring a Sufi Shaikh to Kings*, in Smarthistory, August 9, 2015, accessed May 14, 2017, <https://smarthistory.org/bichitr-jahangir-preferring-a-sufi-shaikh-to-kings/>