

Global India

For thousands of years, they came to India, fabled land of silk and spices: merchants and mariners, pilgrims and politicians, from far and wide. Those from Mesopotamian, African, Roman, and Arabic cultures voyaged via the Persian Gulf and Red Sea. From China and Southeast Asia, they sailed through the Bay of Bengal and the South Seas. From Central Asia and China, they trekked overland across great and dangerous distances. They came in search of spices, jewels, textiles, and religious philosophy that would change their lives and fortunes. In coming, they would change history.

Europeans were relative latecomers. Marco Polo, a Venetian, wrote in the 13th century of traveling to India and China, but it was the Portuguese who first settled permanently in India, arriving on India's western shores in the early 16th century. Their monopoly on European trade ended a century later when Dutch and English ships entered the Indian Ocean, angling for a foothold. The French followed in the late 17th century, but by then Britain had largely won out, ruling much of India through "presidencies" in Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras that established taxation and a British legal system.

Throughout this period of colonial jockeying, Europeans competed for favor within the imperial Indian courts, which still controlled the majority of trade, particularly the powerful Mughal court in Delhi. There, art became diplomacy, as works from one culture began to circulate within the other. Mughal princes collected prints by Albrecht Dürer, Rembrandt collected Indian paintings. Eventually, Europeans in India would commission local artists to represent the natural world. The paintings in this gallery explore the complex motivations and ambitions on both sides as commerce and culture became interwoven.

Lady Impey's Menagerie

These fantastic images of birds are among the world's finest natural-history paintings. As some of the earliest depictions of Indian species, with remarkable clarity of detail, they helped generations of ornithologists identify Indian birds and habitats. They were painted for Lady Mary Impey (1749–1818), an Englishwoman who lived in Calcutta from 1777 to 1783, by three artists—Sheikh Zain al-Din, Bhavani Das, and Ram Das—from the nearby city of Patna. Her husband, Sir Elijah Impey (1732–1809), was the chief justice of Calcutta when the British began exercising direct rule over large parts of India, a time of rising scholarly interest in Indian culture despite political tensions. In 1784, several pioneers of Indian studies founded the Asiatic Society of Bengal. Sir Impey himself collected hundreds of Indian paintings made at nearby courts.



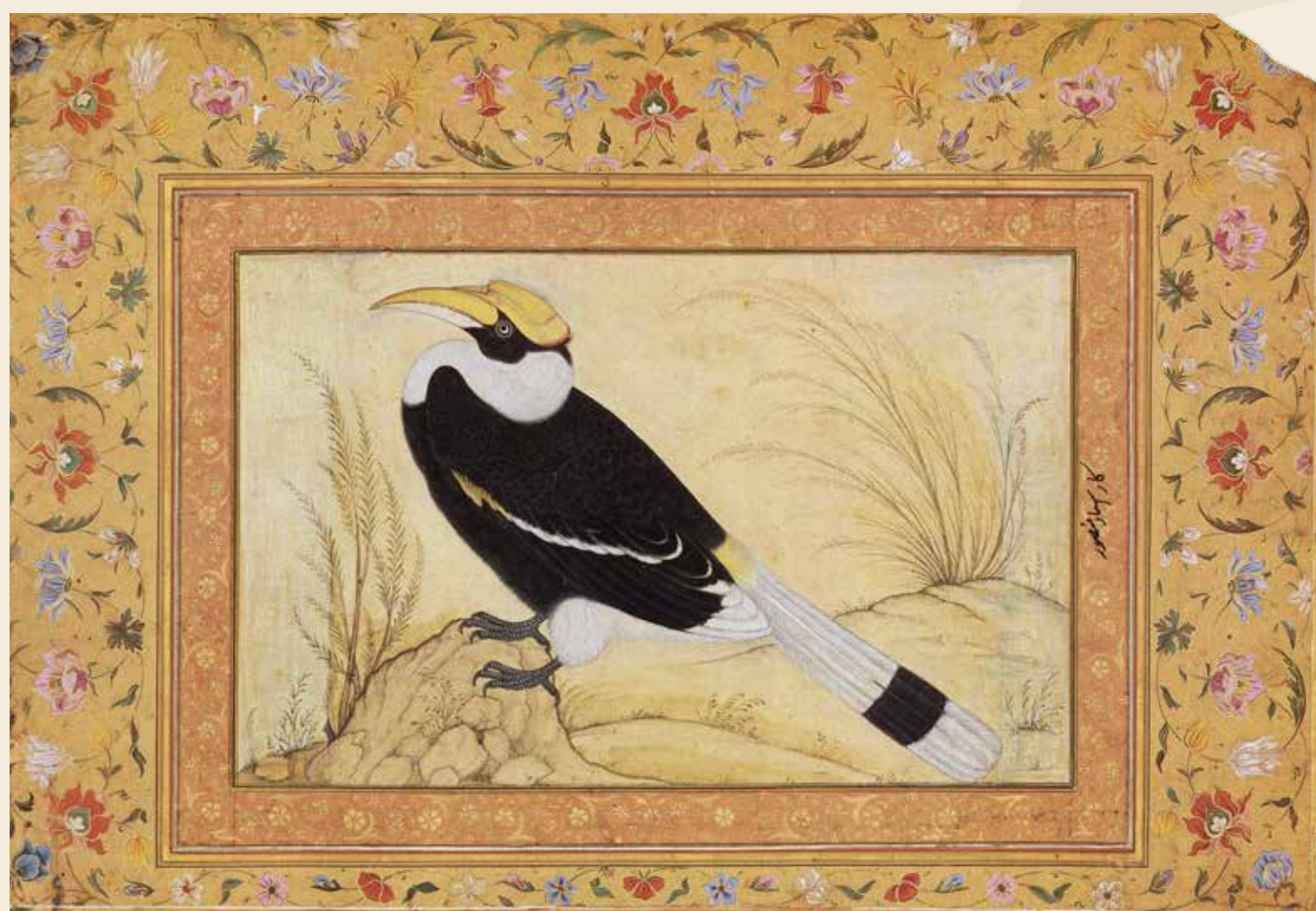
Attributed to Sheikh Zain al-Din, Calcutta, India. *Lady Impey Supervising her Household*, ca. 1780, watercolor on paper, private UK collection

While in Calcutta, Lady Impey created her own menagerie, filling it with birds, fish, wild animals, and plants. She commissioned Indian artists to paint the animals on imported European paper, and they created at least 200 images of birds and 100 images of plants, fish, reptiles, and other beasts. In the bottom left-hand corner of each work, an inscription identifies the artist, species, and Lady Impey as the collector.

The painting technique—building forms through layers of burnished opaque colors—suggests the artists were well-versed in Mughal painterly traditions, likely learned while serving as artists in nearby courts. The birds are depicted in their natural habitat, alive with movement and song, unlike their stiff counterparts in European natural-history painting at the time. The artists represented each delicate talon and soft feather in exquisite detail, foreshadowing what would become the preferred style of James Audubon and other naturalist/bird artists decades later and half a world away.

Princely Indian Patrons of Nature

Nature blooms throughout India's artistic and intellectual cultures. Knowledge of plants and animals was intrinsic to Indic science and the indigenous Ayurveda school of medicine while also informing artistic connoisseurs like Babur, founder of the Mughal dynasty, who reigned from 1526–30, and Jahangir, his successor, who reigned from 1605–27. In their memoirs, both wrote lengthy descriptions of natural phenomena and observations of flora and fauna, and Jahangir commissioned painters to make careful studies of plants and animals. Jahangir's descriptions of birds were particularly accurate, showcasing his ornithological talents. But they were hardly alone: representations of the natural world inspired many imperial painting traditions, patronized by princes throughout India.



Ustad Mansur, Indian, Great Hornbill, ca. 1615–20, from *The Kevorkian Album*, opaque colors and gold on paper, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Nature serves as a poetic device in many South Asian literary and painterly traditions, setting the mood and acting as a metaphor for divine love. The lush depictions of landscape and animal life in a painting of the god Krishna underscore the enchanting beauty of the god himself. In another painting, lightning bolts pierce the night sky, echoing the passion of two lovers embracing on a balcony.

Within the pantheon of Indic deities, there always has been an intimate relationship between the divine and the natural world. Many gods and goddesses adopt animalistic forms or are carried by animals, concepts respected under Muslim rulers as revealed by a Mughal-patronized manuscript depicting scenes from the Ramayana, the great Hindu epic.

The materials used in these paintings are themselves natural, consisting of vegetable and mineral pigments. They were applied in opaque layers over an underdrawing, which was often burnished by rubbing a smooth stone over the back of the painting. The artist then applied delicate patterns and details with the thinnest of brushes, usually embellishing his creations with gold and tin highlights.

Natural History in India

By the 16th century, Indian spices, fruits, and plants had become a European obsession. Travelers to India wrote treatises on indigenous flora, providing precise descriptions of appearance, taste, smell, and function. Their primary motivation was money—the plants were enormously valuable as commodities. But there was also great interest in their medicinal value: as many as one in four European sailors perished from disease during the long voyage between India and Europe, and many more became ill in the new climate.

The acute need for medicine and the desire to commodify Indian plants resulted in botanical studies such as the *Hortus Malabaricus*, a 12-volume tome featuring 791 engravings. The study was assembled by the Dutch commander Hendrik van Reede, who lived on the Malabar Coast (modern-day Kerala) in the late 17th century, but required the collaboration of Indian doctors, botanists, European translators, and Indian and Dutch artists, as evidenced by the multilingual inscriptions identifying each illustration by its indigenous name. The *Hortus* became indispensable to successive European botanists, including Carl Linnaeus (1707–78), who consulted the *Hortus* while creating his groundbreaking system of biological classification.

Botany became an elevated science and a booming business in India and Europe. Naturalists in both places were hired to create private botanical and medicinal gardens. At the same time, European colonials sent Indic plants to Europe, where they became central attractions in official gardens such as the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew in London, established in 1759. These gardens were tourist destinations, but also important sources of knowledge for colonial powers still learning about their occupied territories.