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Notes on identifying Mansur's Tulip

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Abstract

S. P. Verma's 1993 *Huntia* article on Mansur's tulip painting prompted identifications from W. T. Stearn and Syamali Dasgupta.

Ustad Mansur's early 17th-century painting of a tulip in the Maulana Azad Library, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, India, has been widely reproduced in books on Mughal art, but its identification is still a matter of controversy (Fig. 1).

Nanalal C. Mehta (1924) referred to it as "Red lilies" and later only as "Red Blossoms" (1926). Wilfrid Blunt (1950), with the assistance of William T. Stearn, labelled it "Tulip (perhaps *Tulipa lanata*)."¹ Professor W. T. Stearn subsequently identified the tulip as *Tulipa montana* (Skelton 1972). Som Prakash Verma (1993) questioned Stearn's identification, determining the plant to be *Tulipa clusiana* DC.

The publication of Verma's article provoked two letters from botanists, including Professor Stearn himself. In February 1994 Professor Stearn wrote:

The author's mistakes are (1) to consider it represents a native Kashmir species and (2) to identify it with the totally different *Tulipa clusiana*, with which I am familiar. In the 1950 original edition of *The Art of Botanical Illustration*, it is labelled "Tulip (perhaps *Tulipa lanata*)"! Now I am positive that Mansur portrayed accurately *Tulipa lanata* (and not badly *T. clusiana*), having learned that *T. lanata* has not only been planted around and on mosques in Kashmir but also occurs wild near Kabul in Afghanistan, whence Babur invaded northern India.

Subsequently Stearn published the following comment in footnote 10, page 185, in the revised *The art of botanical illustration* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 1994):

Several authors have commented on this miniature painting of a red tulip found in Kashmir, among them Som Prakash Verma in *Huntia* 9: 81-87 (1993) who erroneously supposes it to be *Tulipa clusiana*. It matches *T. lanata*, a Central Asian species introduced into Kashmir apparently by the Mughals and planted on mosques probably in the sixteenth century.

Dr. Syamali Dasgupta, who recently retired from the Central National Herbarium, Indian Botanic Garden, Calcutta, responded to the

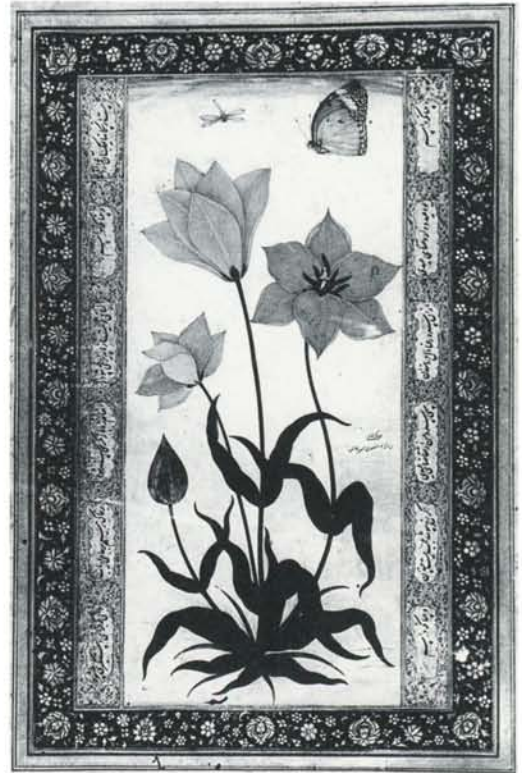


Figure 1. The tulip, ca. 1621, by Mansur 'Naqqash.' Courtesy of Habibganj Collection (no. 60-1-ba-3), Maulana Azad Library, Aligarh Muslim University.

Verma article in April 1994 with another determination based on the following characteristics:

Plants are about 20 cm long. Leaves crowded at the base of aerial stem are 3–6 cm long and 0.6–1.2 cm wide, lanceolate, sessile, acute, with thick, undulated margin. Flowers are solitary, apical on the aerial stem and deep red in colour. Segments are elliptic, acuminate with prominent midrib and blackish blot at the base. Anthers are c. 1 cm long and linear, and ovary is c. 1 cm long and oblong with prominent stigma. These are the characteristic features of *Tulipa lehmanniana* Merckl. ex Bunge. *Tulipa montana* Lindl. var. *chrysantha* Boiss. is its synonym. Distribution of the plants extends from Iran to the former Soviet Union and through Afghanistan to Pakistan in mountain ranges up to 2000 m altitude. It differs from *Tulipa clusiana* DC. where perianths are of variable colour from white with pink shade to complete yellow with red shade outside and veins are diverging.

Whether you decide on Verma's *clusiana*, Stearn's *lanata*, or Dasgupta's *lehmanniana*, the painting is a beautiful one and the only extant example of Mansur's botanical work.

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