

AMIR M O H T A S H E M I



A Study of a Red-Tailed Shrike (*Lanius phoenicuroides*)

Made for the European market

China. c. 1820–1860

Watercolour and bodycolour heightened with gum arabic

31 cm high, 31 cm wide

Stock No.: A5293

With a keenly poised eye, sharp beak and projecting breast, this astute bird appears moments away from swooping upon its unsuspecting prey. Above the white underside, rufous feathers descend from the crown to the tip of the tail, contrasting against a velvety black eyestripe and primaries. A dash of yellow marks the formidable point of the beak. The bird perches on a giant thorny species of clumping bamboo (*Bambusa arundinacea*), which is native to China, India and Pakistan.

The red-tailed or Turkestan shrike occupies shrubby and open countryside in Central Asia. Frequently shrewd hunters, they are known to impale their prey, such as insects, on the thorny spines of bushes. These caches attract the females, as do snail shells and colourful objects acquired by the males to adorn their territory.

This highly accomplished study of both flora and fauna adheres to the classical Chinese tradition of bird and branch paintings typified by finely balanced compositions and detailed observation. Chinese artists also illustrated plants with browning foliage and pale green undersides to the leaves, as instructed in traditional painterly texts. The astoundingly minute brushstrokes delineating the patterns on individual tail feathers and highly subtle tonal gradations around the bird's cheek attest to the mature conviction of a truly experienced hand.

This work would likely have formed part of an album of scientific studies for a western patron, keen to discover the natural wonders of distant lands.

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