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A Study of a Eurasian Coot, *Fulica atra*

Calcutta, India, c.1800

Watercolour on unidentified English paper

47.5cm high, 28.5cm wide

Provenance: It is highly likely that this work was commissioned by George Annesley, 2nd Earl of Mountnorris and Viscount Valentia (1769-1844) during his visit to Calcutta in 1803.

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By far the most striking feature of the Eurasian coot are the bird's extraordinary feet. The palmate skin on the toes distributes their bodyweight, enabling them to walk on aquatic plants. On land, the lobes fold back as the birds raise their feet, allowing them to walk on mud and grass. Their generously proportioned feet also assist them in travelling across the water's surface, as they vigorously flap their wings before taking flight. Despite their placid looking appearance, coots are known to engage in vicious territorial disputes. Again, their feet are deployed as males charge one another, then turn to strike out with their powerful feet. Coots are also intelligent birds: thwarting the practice of brood parasitism, parents are able to distinguish when another coot has laid an egg in their nest.

The Eurasian Coot is found in Europe, Asia, New Zealand and Australia. They are the most aquatic member of the rail family, which includes moorhens, crakes and gallinules. During migration coots are able to fly remarkable distances, although these long journeys often occur at night where there is less risk from predators.

The present study is an extremely well observed and accurate representation of this intriguing bird. The feathers are predominantly black with grey tinges on the underside of the belly and chest. The bill is white with a murmur of pink and the distinctive frontal shield is typically white. The feet are pale green with a touch of yellow and have been painted with a great deal of care and attention, as the

incredible reptile like textures of the skin demonstrate.

Beside the bird appears a detailed study of the beak and shield. The open bill reveals a long narrow tongue and a series of small, sharp teeth. This unusual and insightful feature reminds us that as well as being wonderful artworks, these paintings were also of great scientific interest. At the time these studies were commissioned, there was a great fervour to discover the mysteries of the natural world; to observe, to record and to preserve.

Written in pencil below the bird: 'Fulica Atra and below this 'Common Coot.'

For additional ornithological studies made for Lord Valentia, see Sotheby's Sven Gahlin Collection Lot 36 a drawing of a bustard, and Lot 37 a watercolour of a crow-pheasant, both made for Lord Valentia; Sotheby's, London, 31 May 2011, The Stuart Cary Welch Collection, Part Two, lot 115; see also Welch 1976, no.26; Welch 1978-I, nos.18a-c.and Leach 1995, no.7.96, pp.760-2. For two bird studies donated by Viscount Valentia to Lord Wellesley, see British Library in London (Wellesley Collection, NHD 29, vol.iv, f.21,27)

Literature

Bikram Grewal et al. 2016. Birds of India - A Pictorial Field Guide. Om Books International.