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TWO MINIATURES. “KALA WITH SABER DRAWN” AND “KALA IN UNIFORM”

INDIA, DELHI; 1815-1816

LEAFS: 37.9 × 24.9 AND 39.7 × 25.4 CM

Two groups of Company paintings in particular have become famous: the c. 300 botanical and zoological studies that were commissioned by Lady Mary Impey in around 1780 (see 38/2008), and the c. 100 paintings of native troops and villagers that were commissioned by the brothers James and William Fraser in around 1815.

One portrait shows William Fraser’s servant Kala in trousers and turban as he looked when he killed a tiger with a thrust of his saber on a hunt in 1810. On the second he is wearing the uniform that was used by the irregular cavalry regiment Skinner’s Horse, which was headed by James Skinner, with Fraser as his second in command.

The Fraser paintings were made by various Indian artists. Several of them are signed by Ghulam Ali Khan, while others were undoubtedly made by members of his family. A number of unsigned paintings stand out because of their high technical quality. They include these two of Kala that can probably be attributed to the same unknown artist.

The best Company paintings are characterized by a technical
perfection that imbues them with a super-realistic element. Kala’s facial expression is moreover curiously distant or introversive, a phenomenon that emphasizes the miniatures’ almost surreal character. The juxtaposition of Kala in trousers and turban and in uniform underlines the exciting but slightly eccentric meeting of cultures.

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