This painting by the Mughal court artists La’l and Sanwala depicts the Mughal emperor Akbar (r.1556–1605) hunting for black buck using his trained cheetahs. It is an illustration to the Akbarnama (Book of Akbar), commissioned by Akbar as the official chronicle of his reign. Here, Akbar restrains the horse he would have chosen to ride in order to be able to follow the hunt swiftly. The cheetah has been released from the empty bullock cart in the foreground and now brings down a fully grown male blackbuck. A second cheetah is still blindfolded and held by its keeper in the upper right of the composition. Eight females are included in the painting, with two other cheetahs identified by the naturalist Divyabhanusinh as 'sub-adult males' from their barely black appearance. He notes that it was accepted that cheetahs were trained to hunt only black-coloured buck, in other words, only the largest males in a herd were taken.

The Akbarnama was written in Persian by Akbar’s court historian and biographer, Abu’l Fazl, between 1590 and 1596, and the V&A’s partial copy of the manuscript is thought to have been illustrated between about 1592 and 1595. This is thought to be the earliest illustrated version of the text, and drew upon the expertise of some of the best royal artists of the time. Many of these are listed by Abu’l Fazl in the third volume of the text, the A’ìn-i Akbari, and some of these names appear in the V&A illustrations, written in red ink beneath the pictures, showing that this was a royal copy made for Akbar himself. After his death, the manuscript remained in the library of his son Jahangir, from whom it was inherited by Shah Jahan.

The V&A purchased the manuscript in 1896 from Frances Clarke, the widow of Major General John Clarke, who bought it in India while serving as Commissioner of Oudh between 1858 and 1862.

Descriptive line
Painting, Akbarnama, Akbar hunts with trained cheetahs, outline by La’l, painting by Sanwala, opaque watercolour and gold on paper, Mughal, ca. 1590-95

Physical description
Painting, in opaque watercolour and gold on paper, Akbar hunting black buck with trained cheetahs. IS.2:95-1896 is on the other side of this folio.

Dimensions
Height: 38.1 cm folio, Width: 22.4 cm folio

Museum number
IS.2:92-1896

Object history note
The Akbarnama was commissioned by the emperor Akbar as the official chronicle of his reign. It was written by his court historian and biographer Abu’l Fazl between 1590 and 1596 and is thought to have been illustrated between c. 1592 and 1594 by at least forty-nine different artists from Akbar’s studio. After Akbar’s death in 1605, the manuscript remained in the library of his son, Jahangir (r. 1605-27) and later Shah Jahan (r. 1628-58). The Victoria and Albert Museum purchased it in 1896 from the widow of Major General Clarke, an official who had been the Commissioner in Oudh province between 1858 and 1862.

Historical significance: It is thought to be the first illustrated copy of the Akbarnama. It drew upon the expertise of some of the best royal painters of the time, many of whom receive special mention by Abu’l Fazl in the A’ìn-i-Akbari. The inscriptions in red ink on the bottom of the paintings name the artists.

URL
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O9759/akbar-painting-lal/