

# Transformation of Natural Elements in Persian Art Part Two: the Faunae

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## ABSTRACT

This paper is the second of a two-part study on the transformation of different elements of flora and fauna in Persian art.

Using components of nature as motifs is not unusual among different cultures; however, in Persian culture it is widespread and uniquely representational. Unlike Western art that was presentational up until modern time, Persian art, even before the advent of Islam, has been representational. Accordingly, through alteration, deformation, and simplification of components of nature, abstract designs have been created. In the Pre-Islamic era, however, fauna designs were less representational than flora designs.

During the course of this paper, fauna in diverse art forms is discussed in order to demonstrate the creative breadth of abstract designs. Examples from ancient to present times are examined to support this conclusion.

Keywords: abstraction, presentation/representation, Persian art, fauna

## ペルシャ美術における自然物表現に関する研究 第2部：動物表現について

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### 要旨

本論文はペルシャ美術における 動植物表現 に関する2部から成る研究の第2部である。

様々な文化において、自然物をモチーフとして取り入れることは決して稀ではない。ペルシャ文化においては、自然をモチーフとする表現は多く、それらは独特な表象性をもっている。描写的な表現を追及し続けてきた西洋美術とは異なり、ペルシャ美術はイスラム前も後も常に表象的であり続けた。その結果、自然物を修正、変形、そして単純化することを通して、抽象化されたデザインを創り出した。しかし、イスラム前の時代には、動物デザインは植物デザインほどには表象的ではなかった。

様々な芸術表現に見られる動物デザインが、抽象的デザインの創造へと発展していく過程を検証することで本研究は進められる。古代から現代までの例を挙げながら結論へと導いていく。

キーワード：抽象化、描写性/表象性、ペルシャ美術、動物

Like plants and flowers, animals have been extremely important to Persians since ancient times. The Persians are responsible for domesticating many animals for the first time, such as goats (8000 BC) and horses (4500 BC). Animal symbolism has always been significant particularly in ancient Iran. For instance, the nightingale symbolizes a lover.

Persia exemplifies one of the most unique civilizations of all time and, as such, could be regarded as one of the most diverse. In the course of history, Macedonians, Arabs, Mongolians, Turkmen, and many others, having invaded Persia, ended up being absorbed by the conquered. By fusing different cultures, Persian artists and artisans created a completely new one. Also Iran's strategic and geographical position made it a melting pot where the impact of other civilizations amalgamated into a distinctive culture.

Archaeological exploration, which has been carried out for the last one hundred years, has provided answers to the majority of questions about Persian art. The point is that Persian art, irrespective of historic era, represents superiority in essence and originality. For instance, excavations carried out along the Zagros Mountain have unearthed masterpieces of one of the most ancient civilizations of Iran, namely the Luristan civilization (2900-1250 B.C.). These artifacts include metalwork appliances (Figure 1) and pottery (Figure 2) depicting fauna designs.



Figure 1. Metalwork, Lorestan (Okayama Orient Museum Publication 34)

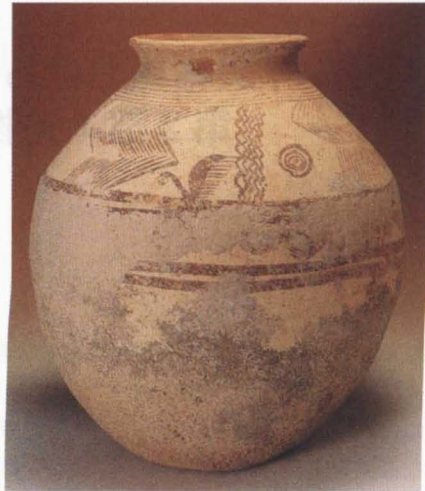


Figure 2. Ceramic, Lorestan (Okayama Orient Museum Publication 24)

Basically, both literary and visual depiction of fauna can be divided into two categories: symbolic, and mythological.

## Symbolic Depiction

Among illustrated books in Iran, *Kalile va Demne* is one of two produced repeatedly throughout greater Iran. Each scene is illustrated in minute detail and with few colors. Most of these handwritten volumes are supplemented with images of animals, plants and illustrations appropriate to each story (Figure 3). The other book is *The Shahnameh*, in which all scenes are executed exquisitely to complement the epic (Figure 4).



Figure 3. (O'Kane 108)



Figure 4. (Welch 51)

## Kalile va Demne

*Kalile va Demne* is the title of an anthology of animal fables that derives from a lost Sanskrit text of Indian origin to be found in the *Pancatantra* (*Five Books*). The author is unknown. A physician of Khusrau I of Sasanid (531-79), Burzuye translated it into Middle Persian. *Kalile va Demne*, names of the two jackals as the central characters, was translated into Arabic by ibn al-Muqaffa in the 9th century and later translated into Modern Persian, Greek, Hebrew, Turkish, Spanish and other Western European languages. Most of *Kalile va Demne* did not survive in its original form.

The earliest surviving manuscripts of the anthology date from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and the widespread popularity of this work is clearly confirmed by references to it in other Persian literary works, including the *Shahnameh* of Firdawsi. *Kalile va Demne* has not evolved as a preset body of stories. Translators and editors have added to it, or subtracted from it, as they felt fit. Subsequently, the five Indian tales were transformed into a much larger and more cross-cultural collection. Researchers have attempted to trace the intricate history and origins of

the *Kalile va Demne* through both literary and art historical investigation.

All animals in the book somehow symbolize personalities in society. Although they sometimes change characters, just as actors play different roles at different times. For instance, the lion portrays the powerful; however, it could be a positive or a negative power. Most noteworthy of all are the main protagonists in the book. Although they are both jackals, they portray different roles. Indeed, *kalile* means 'horribly howling' and *demne* means 'victor' in Sanskrit.

Illustrations very often play a complementary role to the text. The practice of illustrating the tales of the *Kalile va Demne* is based on the well-established traditions of illustration and illumination known in Persian manuscripts (Figure 5).



Figure 5. (Gray 35)

## The Bolbol

The *bolbol* is a songbird often mentioned in Persian poetry. It is thought of as being a nightingale, and in many European languages including Spanish and French it is written bulbul. Persians believe the *bolbol* sings at dawn and only for the *gol*, which is the rose. Persian poets consider *bolbol* a species without a female, so that males direct their sexual desires toward roses. So came into being the mystical concept of the rose and nightingale or the "*gol o bolbol*." It is also a famous style of painting. Although *gol-o-bolbol* paintings are not quite abstract, they are beautifully stylized (Figure 6).

The nightingale and rose theme was a traditional one in both painting and poetry well before the Safavid period. The origins of this theme may be traced to the beginnings of Persian manuscript illustration in the 14th century, where it first appears as a discrete motif. Persian painters represented the *bolbol* as a metaphor for a lover to generate emblematic compositions when creating these paintings. Classical



Figure 6.

Persian poetry often mentions nightingale, i.e., *bolbol* metaphorically, to signify a lover, such as in the following poem by Hafez:

The patient nightingale on a branch atop the tree  
For the well being of the rose made its plea.  
Praise your goodness O rose, and your beauty,  
Let not your pride make the nightingale flee.  
I complain not of being apart from thee,  
In hope of union, I'll be apart for eternity.  
Others delight in pleasure and luxury,  
Pain of separation is what delights me.  
For nymphs and Paradise, some find the rosary,  
Beloved is my nymph, and tavern my garden's entry.  
Drink wine to the music of the harp, be worry free  
From him who forbids you joy for God's mercy.  
Hafiz, separation is not a tragedy,  
Union in separation, and light in the darkness you see. (172)

## Mythological Depiction

Fauna motifs were used in Persian art and handicrafts much more than flora in Pre-Islamic time. The most widely used motifs of this era are the mythological representation of animals. They are often composed of combinations of animal parts. The motifs were applied in all sorts of design forms such as architecture (Figure 7), carpets (Figure 8), dishware (Figures 9a&b), and jewelry (Figure 10). Architectural ornaments, however, are most significant. Since the beginning of the Median Empire

and thereafter, architecture developed noticeably and grew in splendor. Continuing the historical process, architecture in the Islamic era, graced by the Sassanid style, was brilliant. At the same time, Persian artists created tile work and arched decorations superb in colorful designs of various structures.



Figure 7. Stairway of Apadana Palace at Persepolis



Figure 8.



Figure 9a. 1200 B.C.  
(Smithsonian Publication No. 4535)



Figure 9b. (Porada 164)



Figure 10. (Okayama Orient Museum Publication 59)

## Fravahar

Pre-Islamic motifs often represent images incorporating human and animal parts to illustrate different deities (Figure 11). One of the most recognizable images is the Zoroastrian deity, Fravahar, or guardian soul, literally "forward pulling force." Each of its parts signifies a thought or a philosophy. Its wing, suggesting the ascent of the soul or upward progress, consists of three major segments, representing Good Thoughts, Good Words, and Good Deeds. The ring, no beginning and no end, in the center, symbolizes the eternity of the universe or the eternal nature of the soul. The figure inside is that of an old man, representing wisdom. One of the hands points upwards, indicating that there is only one direction we should choose. The other hand holds a smaller ring signifying promise; that is to say, a Zoroastrian promise is like a ring that cannot be broken. The feathered tail below is also in three parts. It represents the opposite of the wings: Bad Thoughts, Bad Words, and Bad Deeds. It is at the bottom because such choices weigh us down and impede our ascent (Figure 12).



Figure 11 (Porada 141)



Figure 12.

## The Lion

The lion, among all faunae, is the most widely used for symbolism both in Persian literature and visual art. The Persian lion, known as *persica*, was once widespread across Iran in ancient times. Although it is now extinct in Iran, the last *persica* was sighted in Dasht-e-Arjang near Shiraz around 1914; around 300 now exist in India. The lion is so adored in Iran that for centuries it was used on the national flags (Figure 13).



Figure 13.

## The Simorgh

The *simorgh* (Figure 14) is a mythical flying creature also known as *angha*. *Simorgh* is the modern Persian name, derived from the Avestan bird *saena*, which was originally a falcon. The Avesta, the Zoroastrian holy book, says that the *simorgh* showers rain from watery clouds, bringing prosperity to farmers. The *simorgh* has an evil bird counterpart in the *kamak*, which acts in a manner exactly opposite to that of the *simorgh*. The *kamak* spreads his wings over the whole world so that the rain falls on his wings, thereby bringing drought, famine, and death. The *simorgh* is the original mythological bird, which later appeared in other cultures as the phoenix, and much like the phoenix is associated with resurrection. In Pahlavi (i.e., Old Persian language) stories, the *simorgh* makes a nest in the forest at the time of resurrection when the earth becomes flat and its waters stand still.

The figure can be found in all periods of Greater Iranian art and literature, and is evident also in the iconography of medieval Armenia, Byzantium and other regions that fell within the sphere of Iranian cultural influence. The *simorgh* is also present in folktales, mystical literature and post-Sassanid epics like Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* (*Book of Kings*), in which the *simorgh* is the savior, tutor and guardian of Zal, the son of Saam. According to this epic, Zal was born an albino. When Saam saw his albino son, he assumed that the child was the spawn of a devil, and abandoned the



infant on the mountain Alborz. The *simorgh* retrieved the child and raised him as her own (Figure 15).



Figure 14. Ceramic, Kashan 14th C. (Okayama Orient Museum Publication 128)



Figure 15. (Welch 50)

The mythical bird has also been mentioned in classical and modern Persian literature, especially in Sufi mysticism. One Sufi literary work from 1177 is *Mantiq al-Tayr* (*Conference of the Birds*). It is a book of poems of roughly 4,500 lines. According to Attar, the *simorgh* lives in an unreachable nest behind Ghaf Mountain. All the birds of the world guided by the hoopoe, set forth in search of their king, the *simorgh*. Much like a Sufi master leading his apprentices to enlightenment, the hoopoe takes them through many tests through which they try to free themselves of what is valuable to them. When they reach finally their destination, only thirty birds remain. The book employs an intelligent use of word play; "si morph" in modern Persian means "thirty birds" (Figure 16). Here follows an excerpt from *Conference of the Birds*:

'How could I seek the Simorgh out when I  
Remember paradise?' And in reply  
The hoopoe said: 'These thoughts have made you stray  
Further and further from the proper Way;  
You think your monarch's palace of more worth  
Than Him who fashioned it and all the earth.  
The home we seek is in eternity;

The Truth we seek is like a shoreless sea,  
Of which your paradise is but a drop.  
This ocean can be yours; why should you stop  
Beguiled by dreams of evanescent dew?  
The secrets of the sun are yours, but you  
Content yourself with motes trapped in its beams.  
Turn to what truly lives, reject what seems --  
Which matters more, the body or the soul?  
Be whole: desire and journey to the Whole. (115)

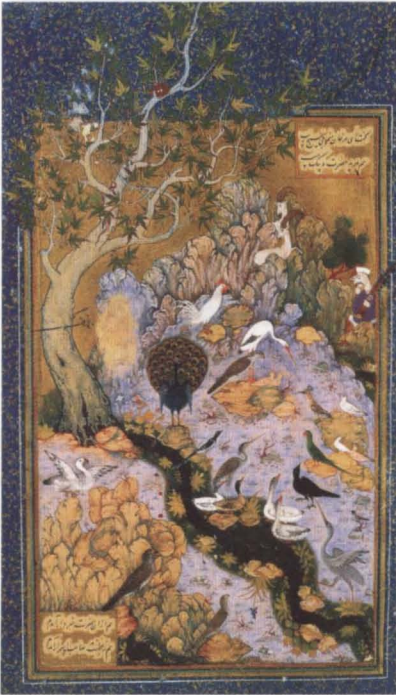


Figure 16. (Sims 250)



Figure 17. (Porada 210)

The *simorgh* is depicted as a winged creature in the shape of a gigantic bird, a kind of peacock with the head of a dog and the claws of a lion (Figure 17). The *simorgh* is intrinsically caring and decidedly female with teeth in thirty colors.

## Conclusion

According to Porada

The great revival of an appreciation of Iranian art in our own time is due to the influence of modern art. Modern art has educated us to

esteem varied 'patternizations' of natural forms and to analyze with interest the creation of new forms, suggestive of life, from what are actually quite abstract elements. The expression of this art, however, often intense and powerful, belongs to a world of thought into which we may rarely if ever penetrate. (231)

One of the most important and influential figures in modern art is undoubtedly Pablo Picasso. An interesting conclusion can be made by comparing one of his pottery pieces (Figure 18) with a piece of Persian pottery (Figure 19). What Picasso discovered in order to create abstract art, namely simplification and stylization of the animal, was already done in 3500 B.C.



Figure 18. Ceramic, *The Picasso Pavilion*. The Hakone Open-Air Museum 62)

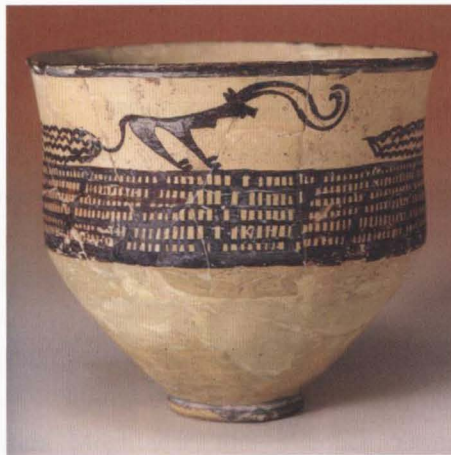


Figure 19. Ceramic, Tepe (Okayama Orient Museum Publication 1)

Fauna in Persian art has been transformed steadily throughout years of evolution. And this evolution has always been aiming at transforming natural elements into representations of pure abstract forms. Natural elements are stylized and applied on architectural components in order to convey certain messages or endorse principles. Deliberation of simplified patterns, as a unique art form, is functional as well. Furthermore, manuscript illustrations depicting symbolic and mythological stories create sheer abstraction through compiling flat surfaces rather than using perspective.

These works of art demonstrate a gradual application of alteration, deformation, and simplification of the natural elements in order to create an ornamental vocabulary for abstract designs and, ultimately, offer themselves as models for modern abstract art forms.

### List of illustrations

Photographs, unless otherwise indicated, are by the author.

Figure 1. Metalwork, Lorestan 2500 B.C.

Figure 2. Ceramics, Lorestan 2500 B.C

Figure 3. *Kalile va Demne*, Persian manuscript illumination

Figure 4. . *Shahnama* of Firdawsi, Persian manuscript illumination

Figure 5. Persian manuscript illumination

Figure 6. *gol-o-bolbol* painting, Sadr Shayesteh, 1927

Figure 7. Stairway of Apadana Palace at Persepolis, Achaemenid Ceremonial Capital, 5th-4th Century BC.

Figure 8. Carpet Examples

Figure 9a. Gold Bowl 1200 B.C.

Figure 9b. Gold Challis 5th Century B.C.

Figure 10. Gold Earring, Partian

Figure 11. Zoroastrian deity, Persepolis, Achaemenid

Figure 12. Faravahar, Modern Jewelry

Figure 13. Persian Flags

Figure 14. Ceramic, Kashan 14th Century

Figure 15. Shahnama of Firdawsi, Persian manuscript illumination

Figure 16. *Conference of the Birds*, Persian manuscript illumination

Figure 17. Simorgh, 7<sup>th</sup> Century

Figure 18. Pablo Picasso, Ceramic, 1959

Figure 19. Ceramic, Tepe 3500 B.C.

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