

Persian Allegory of *Chinoiserie* Motifs-Dragon and Phoenix or *Simurgh*

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Abstract

This research briefly investigates the significance of two *Chinoiserie* motifs, dragons and phoenixes that are frequently applied by the Persian artists from 13th century to 15th century when Chinese influence on Persian manuscripts was apparent in Persian illustrated manuscript. In Persian manuscript painting, mythical elements are of great significance. Many manuscript paintings convey a sense of the failure of evil and vicious mythical creatures like dragons and demons, before angelic forces, present in form of heroes with supernatural powers. Demons were considered destructive and a continuous danger to mankind, animals plants and crops. They were known as *khrafstra* and they included rodent, frogs, lizards, tortoise, spiders and insects such as well as wasps, ants and beetles. Cats were also regarded destructive as they belonged to the same harmful family of tigers and lions. Extraordinary monsters were also amongst these creatures that were challenged by human heroes. They frequently appeared in the form of serpents or dragons (*azhi*). The most significant of these was the giant with three heads who ate humans and was known as *Azhi Dahaka* (modern Persian *azhdaha*). Similar three-headed man-devouring monster appeared as *Zahhak* in Firdowsi's *Shahnameh*. The subject of dragon attacking heroes is deeply entrenched in Persian epic literature. Another mythical character Phoenix, a symbolic holy firebird, which can be seen not only in Chinese and Persian paintings but equally present in Arabian, Greeks, Roman, Phoenician, Indian and Egyptian mythologies. Numerous legendary birds are known in the Mazdean mythology; however, most renowned bird is *Saena*, known to us the *Simurgh* of the Persians. *Simurgh* known from the Middle Persian language as *Sinmurw*, is also recognized in Avesta 'the bird *Saena*', with mythical powers in the creation of world. Described in Avesta, in the centre of the *Vourukasha* (heavenly sea in Zoroastrian mythology) mother of all trees grew which was the source of all plants. This tree is identified as the *Saena Tree*, a tree of all remedies or tree of all seeds and it produced the seeds of all plants. This first tree was having the nest of the legendary bird, *Seana* (*Senmurv* in Pahlavi, *Simurgh* in Persian). These motifs such as dragons, phoenixes are modified into Persian narrative according to the demand of pure Persian subject matter, style and iconography provided by Persian epic and romantic literature.

Keywords: Phoenix, Dragon, *Chinoiserie*, evil and vicious mythical creatures.

1. Introduction

Chinoiserie motifs in Persian paintings such as dragons, phoenixes (*Simurgh*), peonies, trees with knotted trunks, dead branches, stylized rocks, scalloped patterns and whirls of moving water with surf and long-winding clouds, were also used in Sung and Yuan paintings and then emerged during fourteenth century in blue-and-white porcelains and textile. *Chinoiserie* motifs came from Chinese culture through their arts though they equally exist in Persian culture too and Persian artists with high consciousness modified, developed and transformed these motifs according to pure Persian moods and identity which already existed in their literature. It is pertinent to know that *Chinoiserie* motifs are present in Persian manuscript paintings though drawn on Chinese prototype but the representation describes different

allegory and meanings than that of Chinese. In this paper focus of study is significance of dragon and phoenix (*Simurgh*) in Persian manuscript illustrations and their identity as Pure Persian motifs that is defined in Persian literature. This paper is extracted from my unpublished MPhil thesis titled "Persian Allegory of *Chinoiserie* Motifs" which is submitted to Higher Education Commission, Pakistan.

In Persian manuscript painting, mythical elements are of great significance and these symbols. Many manuscript paintings convey a sense of the failure of evil and vicious mythical creatures like dragons and demons, before angelic forces, present in form of heroes with supernatural powers. This conveys spiritual message as well as evokes a deep sense of cultural identity which is connected with historical past of ancient Persia. Demons were considered destructive and a continuous danger to mankind, animals plants and crops. They were known as

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khrafstra and they included rodent, frogs, lizards, tortoise, spiders and insects such as well as wasps, ants and beetles. Cats were also regarded destructive as they belonged to the same harmful family of tigers and lions. Extraordinary monsters were also amongst these creatures that were challenged by human heroes. They frequently appeared in the form of serpents or dragons (*azhi*). The most significant of these was the giant with three heads who ate humans and was known as *Azhi Dahaka* (modern Persian *azhdaha*). Similar three-headed man-devouring monster appeared as Zahhak in Firdowsi's *Shahnameh*. The subject of dragon attacking heroes is deeply entrenched in Persian epic literature. *Azhi Dahaka* (dragon) is described as a three mouthed, six eyed and three headed monster in the Avesta, having thousand senses. A threatening monster for the world, with the most powerful brutal Drug, which Angra Mainyu created to destroy the good principles of the material world (*Yasht* 9, 14).

Another mythical character Phoenix, a symbolic holy firebird, which can be seen not only in Chinese and Persian paintings but equally present in Arabian, Greeks, Roman, Phoenician, Indian and Egyptian mythologies. Numerous legendary birds are known in the Mazdean mythology. Raven, is one of them and is known as messenger of the sun to Mithra. Bird Varegan, Vareghna (sometimes translated 'raven') is the swiftest like an arrow. However, most renowned bird is Saena, known to us the *Simurgh* of the Persians. His wide open wings are like thick clouds, and filled of water crowning the highest mountains. Amongst the extraordinary creatures revealed in Zoroastrian texts, the renowned bird Saena (Pahlavi *Senmurv*), a golden falcon, enjoys a particular distinction. Who while Sitting on top of the Tree of All Seeds, by pounding her wings scatter the seeds. Rain and wind then carried away seeds and distributed over the earth. *Simurgh* known from the Middle Persian language as *Sinmurw*, is also recognized in Avesta 'the bird Saena', with mythical powers in the creation of world. Described in Avesta (*Yasht* 12, 17), in the centre of the Vourukasha (heavenly sea in Zoroastrian mythology) mother of all trees grew which was the source of all plants. This tree is identified as the Saena Tree, a tree of all remedies or tree of all seeds and it produced the seeds of all plants. This first tree was having the nest of the legendary bird, Seana (*Senmurv* in Pahlavi, *Simurgh* in Persian).

It is perceived that from the Mongol conquest Persian illustrated manuscripts have perceptible Chinese influence and many motifs derivative from Chinese arts were adapted by the Persian artists into their arts. Sheila R. Canby, in her book, *Persian Painting* published in 1993, highlighted Chinese influence in Persian manuscripts while documenting the history of Persian paintings from 1300 to 1900 and also mentioned wall paintings before 1300 as a sequence of painting. Canby's other book; *Shah Abbas: the Remaking of Iran* published in 2009, describes

the turning point in Iran's history with the succession of Shah Abbas and brings astonishing variety of resources including gifts of Chinese porcelains, to Iran's shrines during the reign of Shah Abbas in Safavid dynasty 1501-1722. These are constant well-liked topics and there is plentiful literature available on them and many references from such literatures have been used for the interest of the reader. Execution of Chinese motifs and the meanings of their presence in Persian miniatures is a debatable topic. Aesthetical presence of *Chinoiserie* motifs in Persian paintings is different from the spiritual message that in actual these miniatures convey. Syed Hossein Nasr's *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, published by Suhail Academy in 1997 partly describes the spirit of Persian paintings and the message that is given by these illustrations represent sacred art. Louise Herbert's *The Mythology of All Races*, published by Marshall Jones in 1917 and Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis's *Persian Mythology*, published by the British Museum Press in 1993 are some other books that draw attention towards the ancient Persia, its religion and myths that were in the basis of the creation of magnificent art of books.

Chinoiserie motifs (dragon, phoenixes etc) created strong impact on Persian manuscripts, these motifs are painted on Chinese prototypes but representation of these motifs was according to Persian mythology and culture. For the authentication of the statement it is essential to pursue Literature that was the chief outlet for Persian artistic expression. From epic of Firdowsi to romantic poetry of Nizami, the element of mysticism is predominant in all Persian literary works. The allegorical *masnavi*, *Mantiq-al Tayr* by Faridud Din Attar or Sa'di's *Gulistan* or *Bostan* all are the works rich with metaphoric appreciations. Symbolical expression helps us to understand the spirit behind this magnificent art that speaks more about Meta physical world rather physical.

Allegorical expression of literature caused the development of Persian miniature in a physical space that speaks about the spirituality through melodious richness of artistic and poetic expressions, and gives it the meanings that is beyond visual description. Due to the metamorphic interpretation of Persian manuscript illustrations the inspirational designs and motifs derivative from other cultures portray neither direct meaning nor they speak the interpretation of foreign cultures. So is the case of *Chinoiserie* motifs in these illustrations. As an integral part of the pictorial space these motifs are only drawn from Chinese models and they narrate pure Persian allegory. These motifs such as dragons, phoenixes are modified according to the demand of pure Persian subject matter, style and iconography provided by Persian epic and romantic literature.

Persian Allegory of Chinoiserie Motifs (Dragon and Phoenix or Simurgh)

The nature of Persian manuscript painting before and after Islam has been monotheistic and the focus of

attention of the artist has been centred on God. In Persian paintings a lyrical fusion of native and foreign influences can be recognized and appreciated. The space of these miniatures addresses a space of exemplary world portraying heroes with supernatural powers fighting with mythical creatures. Flowers, trees, nature and matters related to the spiritual world, which is beyond material world though also exist in there.

In Persian poetry metaphorical literature made this possible for the artist to go beyond the narrative and let the movement of the brush create hidden atmosphere which is more spiritual than physical. Use of gold, silver, and dark turquoise blue are not only the creation of artistic minds but also belong to the spiritual world where two dimensionality converts to three dimensional and intention behind the creation of each painting is to interpret and explain the world around. Existence of physical and metaphysical, rich decoration of native and foreign decorative motifs all suggest the innovation of the mind of artists. Two diverse domains of reality, the spiritual world and physical world present dualistic view of existence. This will be unfair to read Persian illustrations only as physical space that is creation of man's impulses and imaginations though the presence of non-physical space and spiritual messages through a physical space are the real essence of these illustrations. Persian literature provides the experience of inspirational dimension that leads beyond physical space of the physical world. It involves a space that recreates peace and harmony of nature and places man in the world of spirituality and thereby causing to mitigate the stresses of earthly life.

Though a Persian manuscript illustration has an apparent quality of worldliness yet it is traditional and sacred due to element of spirituality. The delicacy of Persian artistic taste is evident in all manuscript illustrations. All the way through history of Persia we see practice of such an art that is spiritual in its identity either Islamic or pre-Islamic. Mainly it was religion that adopted forms and symbols even from diverse ancient religions and later transformed them according to the spirit of new religion.

In Persian manuscript illustrations Persian artists only appreciated well known elements of ancient Iranian culture perhaps at a subconscious level and infused them with meanings of Zoroastrian concepts to express ancient Zoroastrian philosophy. It is essential to know the meanings of such symbols within the tradition of that culture. Throughout Persian history an intimate relation between art and spirituality existed in Persia which is evidently derived from religion. Like Islam, Zoroastrians did not have religious idols but an art form of sculpture carved on large pieces of stones abundantly existed in Zoroastrian Persia. Islam banned figural arts, but many murals on the walls of the palaces of Muslim Caliphs provided ample evidence of such art form. Zoroastrian, Manichaean and Islamic ideologies all had a great impact on the subject matter, techniques and form of Persian

miniatures and shows a strong continuity of subject based on literature from pre-Islamic and Islamic period.

Illustrated Versions of *Shahnameh* and other Persian classic literary works contain symbols and themes from Zoroastrianism and Iranian mythology. Arabic and Persian literature and even everyday language are filled up with expressions which identify light with joy of the soul and true reflection of the mind while even epic tales narrated to children are often based on the primal symbolism of light as truth and felicity, a symbolism which is so powerfully asserted by Zoroastrianism.

In Persian manuscript illustration conventional and holy are inseparable but are not identical. Conventional addresses to all the expressions of traditional civilizations, communication and history. Religion though sacred is reserved for traditional manifestations that directly connect with spiritual principle of faith and belief. All through the long centuries of Islamic history, Persian art has been the major focus where principles of sanctified art in relation to spirituality are demonstrated in many spheres of arts. Persian art represents a culmination of regional ancient arts including Islamic art. Highly artistic nature of Persians and their love for beauty, refinement and delicacy facilitated them to create a greatest school that is highly associated with the arts of ancient civilizations of Achaemenians, Parthian; Sasanids. Persian art also absorbed the richness, variety and depth of expressions of Islamic art.

It is factual that religion can approve certain structures, ideas and imaginative symbols of a preceding religion but in that case the forms and symbols are entirely altered by the character of new exposure which provides a new existence to them restricted by its own world of meanings.^[1] Persians through their artistic talent created such an art that is highly aesthetical revealing natural beauties of this world as well as inspirational nature of spiritual world. In Persian manuscript painting, mythical elements are of great significance and these symbols and mythical themes evoked the work of the artist. Many manuscript paintings convey a sense of the failure of evil and vicious mythical creatures like dragons and demons, before angelic forces, present in form of heroes with supernatural powers. This conveys spiritual message as well as evokes a deep sense of cultural identity which is connected with historical past of ancient Persia.

Chinoiserie motifs derivative from China represent symbolic meanings in Persian manuscripts. These motifs specifically serve their mythological value and are also important elements of pictorial space, either as a design or filler, in relation to human forms in landscape. Before Mongols, Islamic plant depiction in arabesque and geometry was due to Islamic view of world whereas the influence of Sasanian art of pre-Islamic Persia was also of immense significance. Dragons, peony, and chrysanthemum were combined with elements drawn from European traditions, and interest in pictorial space has been developed through the use of devices such as

perspective and the repoussoir figure. These pictorial devices were probably introduced by European traders travelling in the course of Mongol domains, and are present in illustrated manuscripts, especially in copies of the Persian national epic, the *Shahnameh* (Book of Kings), by the poet Firdausi (d.1020) which became particularly important in Mongol period. Collectively, all the art of the Mongol period is manifested by the blending of many assorted elements into an extremely sophisticatedly and colourful whole.^[2]

Persian mythology played a fundamental role in literature, philosophy, art and other domains. Through myths natural phenomena were explained and in a society with evolution and transformation of cultures, myths were either lost or faded away and lost their original meanings and changed into new ones. Goddesses were transformed into heroes but remained in literature as mythical character in the history of nations. Same is happening in the art and literature of Persia where literature is the key to Persian manuscript painting and many examples of such influences from Zoroastrianism in these illustrations are also found.

Symbolism in Persian paintings is though not only restricted to *Chinoiserie* motifs yet the metaphoric description of the literature and its narration through illustrations also corresponds to spirituality and involve native and Chinese symbols to convey Sufi messages. From thirteenth century onwards Persian artists borrowed, adapted and integrated foreign motifs more specifically from China and transformed them into Persian traditional applications.

Chinoiserie motifs were not only adopted by the artists working under Ilkhanids but later followed by Timurid artists as well. "In Islamic art, the arabesque's popularity lasted until the 14th century, when it began to be displaced by Chinese-inspired designs incorporating chrysanthemum, peony, and lotus flowers and cloud bands, but even these new designs retain some of the arabesque's geometric underpinning. Although some of these *Chinoiserie* designs were circulated through direct knowledge of works of art, paper patterns were increasingly used in the Timurid period to create designs which could then be applied to textiles, manuscripts, leatherwork, metalwork, ceramics, wall paintings and even carved stones. The wide circulation of these designs in the 15th century created a Timurid 'international style' which was appreciated from Central Asia and India to Egypt and the Balkans."^[3]

Dragon

Conception of struggle between light and darkness has been highlighted recurrently in Iranian mythology. This caused the commencement and further expansion of myths dating back to ancient times and found amongst all Indo-European people. Next to the mythical narratives of creation in which the gods of sky or storm kill hideous giants and there exist other myths of storm and fire as

well. In the previous a dragon is killed by a divine being which was hidden in the cloud, and whose waters are poured over the earth now.^[4] Frequently, these myths describe the story of resistance against power of darkness to gain the light and blessings in the form of rain. These myths have strong tendency towards symbolism which can be clearly observed in Iranian conceptions which is resulted in moral ideas with the cosmic struggle, which leads towards dualism.

Demons were considered destructive and a continuous danger to mankind, animals plants and crops. They were known as *khrafstra* and they included rodent, frogs, lizards, tortoise, spiders and insects such as well as wasps, ants and beetles. Cats were also regarded destructive as they belonged to the same harmful family of tigers and lions. Extraordinary monsters were also amongst these creatures that were challenged by human heroes. They frequently appeared in the form of serpents or dragons (*azhi*). The most significant of these was the giant with three heads who ate humans and was known as *Azhi Dahaka* (modern Persian *azhdaha*). Similar three-headed man-devouring monster appeared as Zahhak in Firdowsi's *Shahnameh*.^[5]

Zahhak the serpent-shouldered ruler falls into a trap of devil. Firdaws in his *Shahnameh* first describes Zahhak as a true hero, a brave man, whose innocence later leads him to the arms of devil who bounds him in a trap and brings him into sever allegiance of his father's murder. That evil act bring change in his appearance and as a result two black snakes grow out of his shoulders when he embraced any visitors and removing those serpents was not possible for him.

Shahnameh also depicts heroes' fights with *divs* and other vicious creatures. By confronting *divs*, dragons, wolves and monsters in different disguises, the heroes of the *Shahnameh* have to prove their courage and physical strength as well as their utmost loyalty to the king of kings. On the other hand there are many stories about heroes being helped or saved by kind and loving mythical beings. Among them are *Simurgh*, the celebrated bird, and Rostam's horse *Rakhsh*.^[6] This popular Chinese motif, dragons, notably seen in Persian paintings, is symbol of power, strength and good luck in China but in Persian manuscripts it is evil. Emperor of China uses Dragon as a symbol of majestic power but in Europe it is considered evil, however in Persian art the character of dragon is antagonistic and often seen fighting or been killed by mythical heroes. (Plate.1)



Source: Gray, *Persian Painting*, 28.

Plate.1 Battle of Iskander with Dragon, *Shahnama* (Demotte) of Firdausi, Tabriz, 1330-1336.

An outstanding example of this phenomena, fight between evil and angelic forces, can be seen in manuscript illustration of Demotte *Shahnama*, 'Battle of Iskander with Dragon,' Tabriz, 1330-1336. The pictorial space is well organized in a harmonic manner, representing figures in landscape. Iskander Sultan, forcefully holding a sword and facing dragon with a gesture of courage and audacity, and his army man looking at the vicious creature with hatred. Presence of this Chinese motif, dragon clearly shows depiction of Zoroastrian belief however it is drawn from Chinese models that appeared on the ceramics of Song dynasty.

A number of Blue-white porcelains initiated in the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127) were decorated with dragon motif. In Chinese mythology dragons are usually measured to be fortunate. They were considered the controllers of the weather and in due course came to symbolize majestic power.^[7] Blue and white porcelain became gradually more in style, during the Yuan and Ming dynasties (1271-1644). Since 14th century, export of blue-white porcelain to the world markets was started by many manufacturers. Chinese celadon and blue and white porcelain were brought for sale in the Persian market for about 1400 onwards.^[8] Yuan and early Ming blue and white porcelain was so in style that Chinese were exporting copies till 1500 and *Chinoiserie* motifs decoration of porcelain ware became the major source of inspiration in Persian paintings.

Dragon motif has been painted in varied compositions sometimes embosses dragon in ceramics and sometimes silhouette in the entire composition. Space of the ceramic objects was designed in such a manner that varied motifs like clouds, trees etc were combined to generate a natural atmosphere in which this mythical creature exists. (Plate.2) In many Persian manuscripts dragon is seen painted with cloud bands as flying in the skies or sometimes twisting his body around the trunk of the tree, in the same manner as drawn in Blue and White porcelains.

For the period of Yuan dynasty painters captured their own feelings and ideas through images and the most popular medium of expression was ink and brush. Chinese paintings were characterized by simplicity and stylization for the approbation of nature and to give inspirational sophistication to the subject matter represented. During Ming scholarly painting and ink and wash painting continued to prevail. During late Ming scholarly painting was practiced in two styles, first style was of copying ancient themes and subjects and the second style of painting was artists' own innovative imagery through ingenious means. Innovative imagery was frequently depicted on blue and white porcelains of Ming dynasty. A serving dish of Ming dynasty, 1403-24, shows innovative depiction of a three clawed dragon among water waves. And the rim of the plate is decorated with an inner circle of continuous lotus pattern and out circle with geometrical pattern that adds a variety in the decoration of single plate. (Plate.3)



Source: Canby, *Shah Abbas: The Remaking of Iran*, 137.

Plate.2 Blue and white porcelain with dragon motif, Yuan Dynasty, c.1330-50.



Source: Canby, *Shah Abbas: The Remaking of Iran*, 150.

Plate.3 Three clawed dragon among waves on serving dish of Ming dynasty, 1403-24.

Most common types of Ming pottery are plates; bowls, cups, and vases, though, frequent design characteristics on blue and white porcelain ware comprised of floral motifs, mythical creatures such as dragons, scenes from stories, and various Chinese characters. Ming pottery is known for its boldness of structure and style and many of the subjects portrayed had symbolic meanings. Mongols' Chinese inspirational applications in Persian illuminations and illustrations, and commonly used *Chinoiserie* motifs, landscape and vegetation rudiments are reliably derivatives from import of blue and white porcelain.

The subject of dragon attacking heroes is deeply entrenched in Persian epic literature. *Azhi Dahaka* is described as a three mouthed, six eyed and three headed monster in the Avesta, having thousand senses. A threatening monster for the world, with the most powerful brutal Drug, which Angra Mainyu created to destroy the good principles of the material world (*Yasht*

9, 14).^[9] Same phenomena of fight between good and evil is seen in 'Alexander fights a Dragon', an illustration of Firdawsi's book of Kings, which was copied in Tabriz, by Abu Said in 1317-35, represents the evil nature of the vicious creature and is killed by the heroes. The whole image conveys a strong sense of Chinese influence. Body of the horse is cut with the picture frame creates a sense of continuity that came through Chinese inspiration and later adopted by Persian artists. Body of the dragon is rendered with decorative textural pattern to give a clear identity to the creature and to segregate it from the landscape in pictorial space. (Plate.4)

In many scenes of Persian paintings dragon is not only a mythical creature representing evil force and being killed by heroes. Though, it is also used as a decorative design in the pictorial composition in form of borders and sometimes as a focal image addressing some native allegory. Design like character of dragon in Persian paintings can be admired and enjoyed with beautiful vibrant colours and the twisted curve bodies creating a sense of movement in the whole pictorial space and presenting aggressive drama of fight and death as seen in Bahram Gur's combat with Dragon, *Shahnama*, Shiraz, 1370. (Plate.5)

Bahram Gur with thin moustaches and fringed beard is holding bow and arrow aiming at dragon to kill. Landscape is comparatively simple in rendering with high horizon and hills behind are outlined with spongy rocks. A stylized approach has been applied to depict figure in landscape. Colours of subjects are vibrant blues and red and the cervical movement of the dragon's body is designed in arabesque curls twisting around. Artist's focal attention in pictorial space is the subject rather than surrounding. For this reason landscape details are somehow neglected and these are merely the patterns that are filling the pictorial space.



Source: Barry, *Figurative Art in Medieval Islam and the Riddle of Bihzad of Heart 1465-1535*, 103.

Plate.4 Alexander fights a Dragon, illustration of Firdawsi's book of Kings, copied in Tabriz, Abu Said 1317-35.



Source: Gray, *Persian Painting*, 63.

Plate.5 Bahram Gur's Combat with the Dragon, "*Shah-nama*," Shiraz, 1370.

Figures of the kings and nobles in such scenes are also drawn with powerful gestures of courage and strength, to slay the mythical animal. In the painting 'Ali slaying the Dragon, from *Khawwar-Nama* by Ibn Husam, Shiraz, 1480, the mythical animal is depicted in a Chinese manner, but with an Iranian meaning which is the opposite of the Chinese. (Plate.6) In Islamic history, from the time of Muhammad (P.B.U.H), stories were narrated about Ali and he was portrayed as an ultimate hero or saint. Many tales from the time of Muhammad (P.B.U.H) have been illustrated in Persian manuscripts, such as Ibn Husam's *Khawwar-Nama*, d.875/1470, which was illustrated about 884/1480. In these miniatures Ali is shown holding a *Du'l Faqar* and slaying the dragon. This manuscript illustration follows almost same pictorial format like Bahram Gur's combat with dragon. Main subject is in the centre of pictorial space but the additions of figures in background shows development in composition. Chinese influence is also evident in the rendering of cloud motif. Rock formation behind is outlined with spongy rocks. Body of the dragon is twisted between Arabesque curls whereas landscape details are neglected and native plant motifs are used as fillers. Sword in the hand of Ali has a distinct status in the whole composition not only due to colour and form but also as a symbol of power.



Source: Papadopoulos, *Islam and Muslim Art*, 148.

Plate.6 Ali Slaying the Dragon, *Khawwar-Nama* by Ibn Husam, Shiraz, 1480.

Phoenix (*Simurgh*)

Another mythical character Phoenix, a symbolic holy firebird, which can be seen not only in Chinese and Persian paintings but equally present in Arabian, Greeks, Roman, Phoenician, Indian and Egyptian mythologies. Numerous legendary birds are known in the Mazdean mythology. Raven, is one of them and is known as messenger of the sun to Mithra. Bird Varegan, Varghna (sometimes translated 'raven') is the swiftest like an arrow. However, most renowned bird is Saena, known to us the *Simurgh* of the Persians. His wide open wings are like thick clouds, and filled of water crowning the highest mountains.^[10] *Simurgh*, a mythological creature, the 'king of birds' who lives at the top of Alburz Mountains and raises Rustam's father Zal, features throughout the *Shahnameh* has the friend and protector of Rustam and his family. Zal's *Simurgh* also called upon for help during Rustam's fight with Isfandiyar, in the famous encounter between the two equals. Badly injured Rustam for the first time doubts whether he can resist Isfandiyar's power, and he asks his father for help. Zal, sets alight the feather *Simurgh* had given him, shocked by the troubled physical condition of both Rustam and Rukhs, instantaneously the dark sky turns darker and *Simurgh* appears. Firdowsi describes how *Simurgh* first praises Isfandiyar's divine ancestry and heroic status and cannot understand why Rustam has confronted him. Nonetheless, she sees to Rustam, pulling arrows out of his body and rubbing *Simurgh's* feathers over the wounds.^[11] Amongst the extraordinary creatures revealed in Zoroastrian texts, the renowned bird Saena (Pahlavi *Senmurv*), a golden falcon, enjoys a particular distinction. Who while Sitting on top of the Tree of All Seeds, by pounding her wings scatter the seeds. Rain and wind then carried away seeds and distributed over the earth. *Simurgh* known from the Middle Persian language as *Sinmurw*, is also recognized in Avesta 'the bird Saena', with mythical powers in the creation of world. Described in Avesta (*Yasht* 12, 17), in the centre of the Vourukasha (heavenly sea in Zoroastrian mythology) mother of all trees grew which was the source of all plants. This tree is identified as the Saena Tree, a tree of all remedies or tree of all seeds and it produced the seeds of all plants. This first tree was having the nest of the legendary bird, Seana (*Senmurv* in Pahlavi, *Simurgh* in Persian). Another important plant 'mighty Gaokerena' was growing nearby which contained healing properties and could resurrect bodies of dead and make them immortal if eaten.^[12]

According to later legends *Simurgh* suckles young ones, and although her identification with the later *Simurgh* is probably not certain, in Firdowsi's *Shahnameh* fascinatingly a similar legendary bird with supernatural powers has seen who plays an important role in the story of Zal and his son Rustam.^[13] Many other stories also described the supernatural powers of this mythological bird. *Simurgh* depicted in ancient illustrations as a huge winged peacock like creature, sometimes with the head

of a dog or a human and the claws of a lion, or with three vicious claws. Dog and the peacock both are connected with the rainy period which may be one reason for the incorporated appearance of the *Simurgh*. In Iranian mythology the *Simurgh* is portrayed as a gigantic winged creature with lion like claws and strong enough to carry weight of an elephant or whale.

Simurgh frequently appeared in Zoroastrian Hymns and *Yashts*, contributing to the creation of world and spreading seeds of healing medicinal plants. It also attributed in Attar's *Mantiq al-Tayr* and other Sufi literature where *Simurgh* is a male and it is a mystic symbol of the divinity or a metaphor of God in mystic writings. Phoenix or *Simurgh* is described as a mythical bird with colourful tail of gold and scarlet having a 500 to 1000 years life-cycle. Phoenix can reborn from his ashes that entail him as an immortal bird. A variety of Chinese blue and white porcelain evolve the image of this mythical bird, in painterly and sculpted manner with floral patterns to create a composition more natural in style and design. Phoenix is not only present in Chinese and Persian paintings but equally present in a number of cultural mythologies such as Arabian, Greeks, and Roman, Phoenician, Indian and Egyptian. (Plate.7)

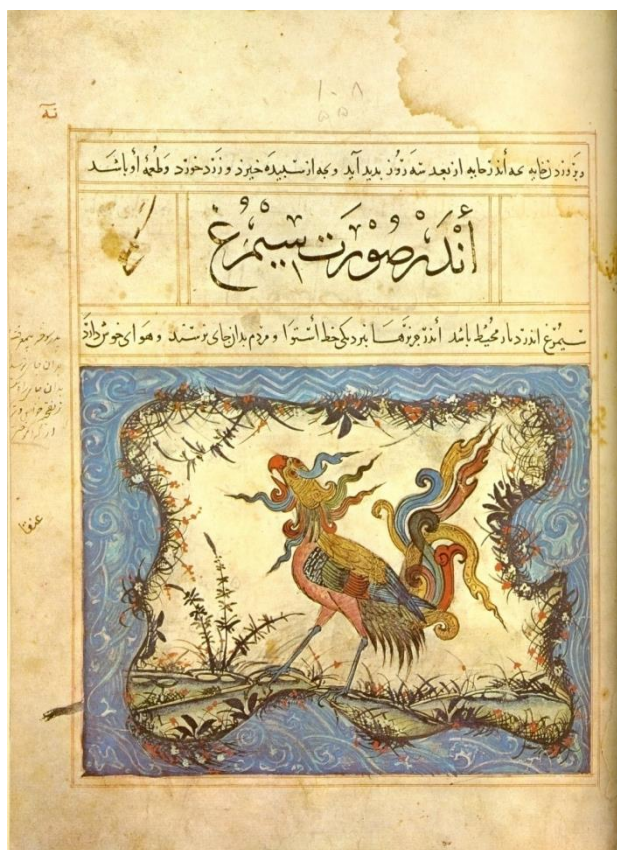


Source: Canby, *Shah Abbas: The Remaking of Iran*, 139.

Plate.7 Two flying Phoenixes surrounded by cloud motif, and encircled with a variety of flowers, large serving dish of Yuan dynasty, c. 1330-50.

In Persia mythology raven or Varegan is a magical bird with mysterious powers. Saena or *Simurgh* is also recorded with many mysterious powers. Homa or Huma, a legendary bird who never lands on earth and like Phoenix consumes itself in fire and rises from its ashes. There are many stories of *Simurgh's* magical powers in *Shahnameh*. *Simurgh* who brought up Zal gave him one of his feathers to keep him under the shadow of its

blessings.^[14] A story that confirms the powers of *Simurgh*, when Rudabah was giving birth to his child Rustam, and Zal healed the wound of Rudabah by rubbing it with feather of *Simurgh*. Another story also proves the powers of *Simurgh's* feather, when Rustam was wounded by Isfandiyar to death; and he was cured in the same way. Phoenix in Persian mythology, *Simurgh*, appears in many Persian heroic legends. The Chinese contact on diverse features of Persian painting, is largely apparent in court manuscripts as *Manafay al Hayawan*, of Ibn Bakhtishu, Maragha, 1294 or 1299. Stylized design like form of *Simurgh* is frequently painted with vibrant colours framed with a border Of Zigzags and Spirals in the manuscript illustration 'Simurgh' *Manafay al Hayawan*, Maragheh, 129-99 (Plate.8) This painting from the most primitive existing Mongol manuscript shows the significant influence of Far Eastern art on the improvement of the Mongol style. It was not only the representation of subject *Simurgh* which was inspired from Chinese paintings but other convention such as trees, flowers, water and cloud were equally applied with that inspiration.^[15]



Source: Grube, *Land marks of The World's Art: The World of Islam*, 60.

Plate.8 *Simurgh*, *Manafay al Hayawan*, Maragheh, 1294-99.

Another Persian Manuscript of *Shahnama* Firdausi shows *Simurgh*, Who rose up and well-regarded Zal, Father of Rustam. According to the myth Zal, who was born white hair and his birth was kept hidden from king Sam of

Sistan. A nurse disclosed the birth of his son and the king orders to expose the child. *Simurgh* not only raised Zal but then brought him back from Mount Elburz to the King, who received his son blissfully and named him as his successor. (Plate.9) In many illustrations *Simurgh* is also depicted as a decorative element of environment to add exuberance in the Manuscripts. Landscape in Persian miniatures with Chinese vegetation rudiments and emblematic format of pictorial space to describe perspective are regular features. The character of mythical bird in many paintings is represented confirmatory, whereas in some, the character is entirely opposite in description and narration. Firdowsi in *Shahnameh* describes the fight of Isfandiyar with a huge hideous bird, also called *Simurgh*. Though, it was obviously not the same protective guardian of Zal. Isfandiyar finally defeats her by cutting the body of vicious bird into pieces with his sword.^[16] *Simurgh* also appears in many other stories of Rustam and Isfandiyar.



Source: Papadopoulos, *Islam and Muslim Art*, 40.

Plate.9 *Simurgh* carrying Zal to his nest in the Elburz Mountain, Tabriz, c.1370.

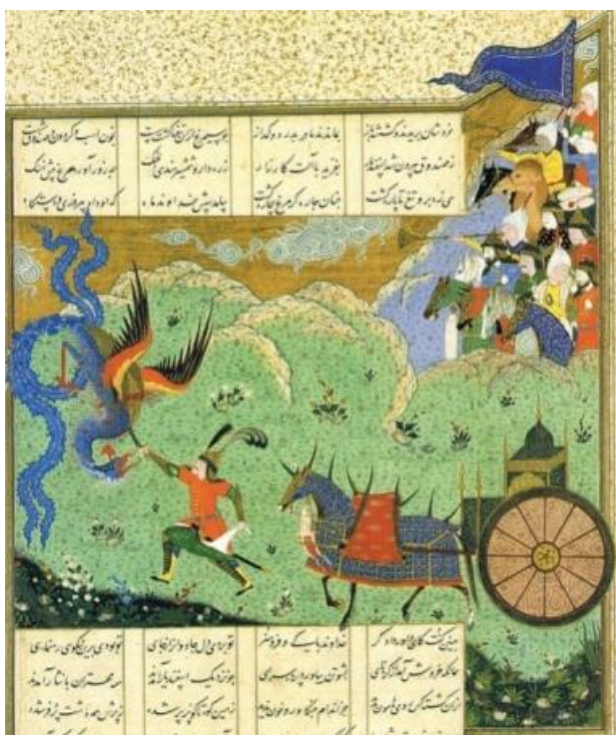
Manuscript illustrations from two *Shahnamahs*, one was illustrated incirca 1330 and the other *Shahnama* Firdawsī, Tabriz, 1515-1535, depicting 'Combat between Isfandiyar and *Simurgh*' address an evident development in Persian miniature. Compositional developments are also evolving change in colour palette. In the illustration from *Shahnama* c.1330 *Simurgh* is illustrated in fiery palette that compliment the character of the vicious

creature, whereas the illustration produced in Tabriz in 1515-1535 is entirely opposite in mood with prominent light blues and greens. Perhaps the intention of the artist is to focus the subject in a more naturalistic landscape with forceful gestures of fight rather than symbolic interpretation of colour. (Plate.10-11)



Source: Simurgh in Persian Paintings, Images,
<http://7junipers.com/log/isfandiyar-struggles-with-the-Simurgh/>
 (accessed March 19, 2013).

Plate.10 Combat between Isfandiyar and *Simurgh*, from Firdawsi's Book of Kings, circa 1330.



Source: Simurgh in Persian Paintings, Images,
<http://www.davidmus.dk/en/collections/islamic/materials/miniatures/art/32-1988> (accessed March 19, 2013).

Plate.11 Isfandiyar combat with *Simurgh*, *Shahnama* Firdawsi, Tabriz, 1515-1535.

Incontrovertibly, the domination of relationships between birds and men in Iran is primordial. In later literature Birds' participation as transmitters of exposure directs towards the recognition of the *Simurgh* with absolute Wisdom.^[17] The notion of mythical bird's dates back to Indo-European times and Indo-Iranian, and frequently those birds are manifestation of clouds, thunderbolt, fire and sun etc.^[18]

Art of a traditional civilization gives further details through the language of symbolism. The metaphysical and spiritual truth that Persian miniatures debate, make one investigate that inspiration behind this great art is limited or sources are several. Persian paintings are rich with symbolic, metaphysical, moral and spiritual significance. In Persian literature, specifically in *sufi* mysticism, *Simurgh* is mentioned as a metaphor for God. In 12th century, Faridud Din Attar wrote *Mantiq-al Tayr*, an allegorical piece of writing describing about a group of birds who were in search of *Simurgh* (their true king). The debates and discussions of birds with *Simurgh* reflect the relation of the master with his disciples as per Sufi order. They describe some of the most thoughtful and delicate descriptions of the problems and questions, which deal with those who truly commence with the voyage on the path of spiritual realization.^[19] To sum up, the birds, on reaching the dwelling of the *Simurgh*, were confronted with a provocative and insightful change in themselves.

The total number of the birds was thirty which expression in Persian is called *si-murgh*, translated in English to thirty birds, i.e., *si* thirty and *murgh* birds. On seeing the *Simurgh* each of the birds took the big bird for a mirror where each one of them found their own reflection considering being the *Simurgh* himself. In a state of dilemma and perplex situation each of the birds posed a question to the *Simurgh*, whom they thought to be their leader or the king, as to what was the actual state of affairs. *Simurgh*, the king of the birds, answered that he was the true reflection of each one of them and everybody can see his own image, his inner-self (both body and soul) in himself. *Simurgh* further explained that whatever the total number of the birds there are who come across to see me and look into the mirror, he will find himself to be exactly the same number as they are in total. He further explained that since you were thirty in number you appeared to be thirty. Had you been forty or fifty you would appear to be the same number in the mirror. The *Simurgh* continued to clarify that he himself was a multitude of numbers, essential and eternal in nature. He therefore advised the birds to engulf themselves to be in that so that they may become a symbol of unity and oneness in themselves.

In the larger context of story Attar tells the reader moral lessons regarding the idea of God. In this manuscript *Simurgh* is not an epic description from Persian mythology but a metaphor to address mysticism. (Plate.12) "Attar himself states,

I have recited for you the language of the birds,

One by one.
 Understand it then, O uninformed one!
 Among the lovers, those birds become free,
 Who escape from the cage, before the moment of death.
 They all possess another account and description,
 For birds possess another tongue.
 Before the Simurgh that person can make the elixir,
 Who knows the language of all the birds.”^[20]



Source: Lewis, *The World of Islam: Faith, People, Culture*, 137.

Plate.12 *Simurgh and thirty birds, Mantiq-al Tayr*, by Faridud Din Attar, Early 15th century.

Spirit of *Simurgh* in Persian manuscript illustrations corresponds to diverse descriptions. From physical to spiritual, from evil to angelic, and this diversification of character add a variety of depictions in Persian illustrated manuscripts. Though drawn from Chinese models it derives its evocative power from association with the winged symbol of Ahura-Mazda, the divine protector of the ancient Achaemenid kings of Iran.^[21]

Birds in Persia were not only an integral part of manuscript illustration, though also used as decorative motif for embellishment of costumes. A fashion adopted by the Il-khanid rulers of Persia was a cloth panel on the front of the caftan ornamental gold-embroidered work was actually popular from the early seventh/fourteenth century which is seen in these paintings. Other decorative motifs like dragon and phoenixes and cranes usually represented in landscape and sometimes details of the costumes represent these motifs on them in form of

embroidery. On the costumes worn by figures in the painting '*Kay Khusrau and Kay Kaus*', *Shahnam* of Firdausi, 899/1493-4, cranes and phoenixes are depicted as embroidery patterns with gold. (plate.13)



Source: Canby, *The Golden Age of Persian Art*, 9.

Plate.13 *Kay Khusrau and Kay Kaus*, *Shahnama* of Firdausi, 899/1493-4.

Persian miniatures represent diverse modes of consciousness; it is not only courtly art with romantic and epic themes but also tales of moral and spiritual significance drawn from various mystic literary works. Many motifs are of spiritual value and the significance of *Chinoiserie* motifs is purely Persian.

Conclusion

Chinoiserie motifs such as dragons and phoenixes are frequently applied by the Persian artists from 13th century to 15th century when Chinese influence on Persian manuscripts was apparent in Persian illustrated manuscript. *Chinoiserie* motifs (dragon, phoenixes etc) created strong impact on Persian manuscripts, these motifs are painted on Chinese prototypes but representation of these motifs was according to Persian mythology and culture. The subject of dragon attacking heroes is deeply entrenched in Persian epic literature. Another mythical character Phoenix, a symbolic holy firebird, which can be seen not only in Chinese and Persian paintings but equally present in Arabian, Greeks, Roman, Phoenician, Indian and Egyptian mythologies. For the authentication of the statement it is essential to pursue Literature that was the chief outlet for Persian artistic expression. Painted on Chinese prototypes these motifs have their pure Persian identity that can be traced through literature. From epic of Firdowsi to romantic poetry of Nizami, the element of mysticism is predominant in all Persian literary works. The allegorical *masnavi*, *Mantiq-al Tayr* by Faridud Din Attar or Sa'di's *Gulistan* or *Bostan* all are the works rich with metaphoric appreciations.

Symbolical expression helps us to understand the spirit behind this magnificent art that speaks more about Meta physical world rather physical. Allegorical expression of literature caused the development of Persian miniature in a physical space that speaks about the spirituality through melodious richness of artistic and poetic expressions, and gives it the meanings that is beyond visual description. Due to the metamorphic interpretation of Persian manuscript illustrations the inspirational designs and motifs derivative from other cultures portray neither direct meaning nor they speak the interpretation of foreign cultures. So is the case of *Chinoiserie* motifs in these illustrations. As an integral part of the pictorial space these motifs are only drawn from Chinese models and they narrate pure Persian allegory.

These motifs such as dragons, phoenixes are modified according to the demand of pure Persian subject matter, style and iconography provided by Persian epic and romantic literature.

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