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GOL O BOLBOL

GOL O BOLBOL, rose and nightingale, a popular literary and decorative theme.

I. IN PERSIAN LITERATURE

Individually, both the rose (*gol*; qv.) and the nightingale (*bolbol*; q.v.) are important motifs in Persian literature, and in the imagery of Persian poetry in particular. Alone, the rose served as a literary metaphor for perfection and beauty, and might figure the beloved (either worldly or spiritual), the prince, or the Prophet Moḥammad; the sweet-singing nightingale might represent the lover, or the poet (see BOLBOL ii; GOL iv; Meisami, pp. 66-67, 286-96). Together, rose and nightingale are the types of beloved and lover *par excellence*; the rose is beautiful, proud, and often cruel (roses do, after all, have thorns), while the nightingale sings endlessly of his longing and devotion. In panegyric, the poet-nightingale sang the praises of the prince-rose; in mystical poetry, the nightingale's yearning for the rose served as a metaphor for the soul's yearning for union with God (Schimmel, 1994, pp. 163-89). The use of this theme as a metaphor for spiritual and earthly love by Persian poets in epic and romance, lyrical and mystical works for nearly one thousand years attests to its deep significance in Persian culture. The theme of the rose in Persian mystical poetry has been the subject of detailed investigation since the

beginnings of Orientalist studies in Europe in the late 18th century, and poets such as Goethe (q.v.) and Rilke have been inspired by their Persian counterparts.

II. AS A DECORATIVE THEME IN PERSIAN ART

The theme of rose and nightingale, *gol o bolbol*—a sub-theme of flower and bird painting, *gol o botta* or *gol o morḡ*—was the principal theme of the decorative repertory of the Safavid (1501-1722) and Qajar (1785-1925) eras. *Gol o bolbol* designs were used to beautify all manner of objects, from prosaic ceramics and woodwork to the most precious regalia and manuscripts. The literary theme enjoyed great popularity due to its universal appeal and the range of both earthly and divine meanings which it conveyed; as a decorative tradition, the continued vitality of the *gol o bolbol* design may be attributed to its stylistic and formal versatility.

Origins and evolution of the bird and flower theme in pre-Safavid Persia (ca.710-1501). The bird and flower 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 the rose first appears as a discrete motif and a landscape element utilized in the illustration of epic and lyrical texts during the reign of the Il-khanids (1256-1353). Persian painters drew upon literary images of the rose as a metaphor for love and beauty to create symbolic compositions in the margins accompanying narrative scenes or lyrical landscapes evoking visions of springtime and young love (Cowen, pp. 41-43, 56-58, 67-70; Lentz and Lowry, p,117). Such landscapes also suggested the pleasures of the gardens of paradise as described in the Qurʾān, with its streams and beautiful houris (Blair and Bloom, pp. 16-17).

At that time, the rose was not known as a theme in the decorative arts, which featured stylized vegetal designs or arabesques, geometric designs, and calligraphy (see DECORATION). Floral elements were limited to either conventionalized or composite types. Manuscript illustration refl;ects the infl;uence of Chinese brush painting and landscape painting traditions and motifs, including naturalistically rendered rose or peony bushes. This is not the case with the decorative arts, although the ornamental vocabulary is reinvigorated by Chinoiserie motifs (dragons, lotuses, qui'lins, cloud-bands).

The association of flowers with earthly and divine love continued in the 15th

century in a group of large detached silk flower and bird paintings, attributed variously to Eastern Persia or Central Asia. These paintings derive from Chinese bird-and-flower painting, which enjoyed popularity from the mid-Sung period (960-1279) onwards and served to symbolize scholarly virtues, political events, or individual scholars (Barnhart, pp. 195-223; Bickford, pp. 293-315). This theme subsequently became a favored design for Chinese textiles, porcelains, tinted paper with gilt ornamental designs, and lacquerwork, examples of which were sent as diplomatic gifts or commercial exports to Persia during the Ming period. A number of these silk paintings faithfully follow their Chinese models; in others, the compositional elements are modified to correspond to the Persian association of flowers with love, wine, and spring (PLATE I). These paintings document the gradual adaptation of foreign prototypes and the interest in a new genre of painting distinct from text illustration; they ultimately provided the models for an authentically Persian interpretation of the theme of the rose and the nightingale.

The evolution of the bird and flower theme in the Safavid period (1501-1722). In the 16th century, bird and flower imagery continued to feature in manuscript illustration, in the form of flowering rose trees accompanied by clearly identifiable nightingales singing in their branches. Illustrations to Ferdowsi's (q.v.) *Šāh-nāma* evoke in visual terms his verses describing the nightingales and roses of Mazandaran (Welch, pp. 98-99; *Šāh-nāma*, ed. Khaleghi, II, p. 4). Alternatively, roses and other flowers are found in court portraits as attributes symbolizing courtly elegance, refinement, and idealized beauty. While we see a gradual evolution in the illuminated designs and bindings of this period from the Chinoiserie style to a greater naturalism in the interpretation of the rose and nightingale theme, the design repertoire of the decorative arts continued to be characterized by Chinoiserie motifs and increasingly complex arabesque designs. The bird and flower theme appeared only sporadically (Rogers, p. 127).

By the 17th century, the Safavid capital of Isfahan had become the center for all manner of goods traded from East to West, as well as an international emporium for ideas, tastes, and fashions. European interest in horticulture undoubtedly stimulated a pre-existing love of flowers in Safavid Persia. Travelers frequently refer to the magnificent gardens in which the Safavid palaces were situated and to the abundance of roses (including the hundred-petalled rose and the bi-colored rose, pink and white or yellow and white, known in Persian as *do-ru'i*, two-sided; Chardin, III, p. 348). At this time, the

bird and flower theme began to gain favor in a wider variety of media, including textiles and lacquer-painted objects. Bird and flower imagery underwent a dramatic change and evolved into a novel hybrid style based on the European flower painting genre. The age of exploration fostered a new "culture of flowers" in European society and in the arts, a process in which Persia and other Asian countries played a significant role (Goody, pp. 188-89, 213-14).

The popularity of the new decorative vocabulary may also be linked to the socio-economic importance of rose petals and especially rosewater (see ʿAṬR; GOLĀB), a celebrated Persian export (Chardin, II, p. 66). The rose had traditionally played an integral role in the gracious customs of Persian social life and its refined cuisine: rosewater is a common ingredient in Persian sweets, sherbets, and preserves (Wilber, p. 289; Sackville-West, pp. 277-79). Less well known is its use as an ingredient of the renowned pink enamels of Benares in 19th-century India, a production established by immigrant Persian craftsmen. The role of roses in Safavid cultural life may also be seen in references to customs now fallen into disuse, such as the "festival of roses" (*ʿid-e golrizi*) and the presentation of floral bouquets (Herbert, pp. 261-68; Della Valle, II/2, pp. 115-16; Francklin, I, p. 84; Tavernier, p. 144). These references, taken together, evoke a luxury- and pleasure-loving society. Such a "culture of flowers" was undoubtedly encouraged by the economic prosperity of the Safavid period. In a telling example, the bi-colored rose gave its name to an important Persian innovation in weaving technology, the two-sided (*do-ruʾi*) silk.

Bird and flower designs played an increasingly important part in architectural decoration. The reception halls and side chambers of the Čehel Sotun palace of Isfahan (q.v.), constructed between 1647 and the 1660s, were painted both with large narrative compositions and with floral designs, trellises, and flowering gardens. Flower and bird painting and textile designs were given a new impetus by Dutch and English herbals available in Isfahan (Le Brun, p. 222; Gray, pp. 219-25; Farhad, pp. 196-97). As a result of the new imagery derived therefrom, Persian painters such as Moḥammad-Zamān b. Ḥāji Yusof Qomi (active 1649-1700) and Mohammad-Šafiʿ ʿAbbāsi b. Reżā-Šafiʿ ʿAbbāsi (active 1634-72) produced novel floral compositions of botanically exact flowering plants which incorporated for the first time insects and butterfl;ies and prominently featured the earthy mound from which the plant emerges. The wealth of botanical details in the illustrations of Safavid botanical

manuscripts is evidence that other local painters were inspired by the direct observation of indigenous flora (Petrosyan et al., pp. 254-65). The majority of extant works resulted from courtly taste and patronage in a cosmopolitan atmosphere, and were intended either for practical use in manufacturing or for connoisseurs' albums and painting collections.

Textile designs, especially the sumptuous metal-ground woven silk brocades, display a variety of elegant design variations on the *gol o bolbol* pattern (PLATE II). This new hybrid floral vocabulary was particularly widespread in lacquerwork, and was used extensively for penboxes, mirrors, and trays. In general, densely packed designs, often featuring nightingales, were set against a profusion of flowers and fruit and nut branches or tree trunks. In this medium, flower and bird designs were commonly combined with figural scenes and portrait designs in medallions and cartouches, or, alternatively, with poetic inscriptions. The theme exercised a lesser impact in ceramics, metalwork, and rugs, in which the traditional decorative repertoire still predominated.

The culmination of bird and flower themes in post-Safavid times (1722-1925). From the Safavid period onwards, the theme of rose and nightingale began to predominate in the Persian decorative repertoire, so that the term *gol o bolbol* came to designate all bird and flower designs. By the late Qajar period, it even came to be synonymous with the land of Persia and its culture. The city of Shiraz, the capital of the Zand dynasty (1750-79), played a key role in this development. The tilework revetments and marble dadoes of such Shiraz buildings as a pavilion in the garden of the *haft tan* (the burial place of seven mystics) were decorated with delicate tilework panels embellished with designs of flowering rose bushes and nightingales executed in the pastel palette of the Zand style. The *gol o bolbol* design tradition is best seen in the St. Petersburg album dated 1736-51 and other related works (PLATE III), and was frequently used for lacquer-painted bindings of religious texts and Korans (Diba, 1989, pp. 243-53; idem, 1996, pp. 100-12). Roses were especially favored as symbols of the prophets (particularly the Prophet Moḥammad, who was said to have created the rose from a drop of his perspiration) and more generally with paradisal imagery (Schimmel, 1971, p. 31).

The ever-increasing popularity of bird and flower designs in painting and the decorative arts of the Qajar period is largely a reflection of the period's cultural colonialism, when European travellers' tastes stimulated the production of flower drawings and albums of flower paintings in Persia, as it

had previously in the 17th century and as it did elsewhere throughout Asia, most notably in India and China (Rich, II, p. 224). Now court painters produced variations on the theme of the rose (PLATE IV) linked to the Victorian fascination with that flower as a symbol of mortality, a cliché of Orientalist literature but also one aspect of the rose's meaning in Persian literature as well. In this painting, verses by the poet Saʿdi serve as commentary to the image, evoking the impermanence of life's rose garden and offering eternal happiness in the rosegarden of art. By contrast, the lacquerwork and architectural decoration of the later 19th century, although technically extremely proficient, exhibit considerable eclecticism and, increasingly, little discernable relationship between the floral imagery and the accompanying portraiture (PLATE V;PLATE Vb; Diba, 1996, pp. 100-12).

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