

## Lesson: Simurghs and Nightingales

This lesson is accompanied by a handout,  
*Visual Analysis: Four Steps toward Critically Thinking about Art.*

Essential questions: Which animal symbols were important to Islamic artists, their patrons and audiences? How did European Renaissance artists' use of perspective and of light-and-shadow influence the arts of Islam?

Learning experience: Students will evaluate and compare two Iranian lacquer pieces: a sixteenth-century Safavid (1501-1732) bookbinding and an eighteenth-century Qajar (1785-1925) album cover. The style of the former is derived from the Islamic [arts of the book](#), the latter reflects Western influence on eighteenth-century Iranian art.

Anticipatory set: In the everyday world what are some visual cues whose meanings you reflexively know and respond to? Traffic lights are an easy place to start: red for "stop," green for "go." What about in the realms of romance, religion, or politics?

Context: This lesson focuses on two Iranian lacquer pieces that feature images of birds. One bird is mythical, the [Simurgh](#), and one is real, the nightingale. Both objects are elaborately decorated and crafted from papier mâché, a hard material made from paper pulp or shreds of paper mixed with glue or paste.

The surface of a papier mâché object is prepared for lacquer painting with a coat of fine gesso [plaster and glue mixed together] or plaster. The decoration is then painted on in watercolors, and sometimes also gilt. Finally, a glossy layer of transparent or slightly golden varnish covers the surface. This is known as "lacquer" because of its appearance, but it is not true lacquer, produced from tree sap in China. . .the arrival of true lacquer items from China prompted craftsmen to produce imitations. . .Lacquer had first been used to decorate bookbindings, but from the later Safavid period (seventeenth century) onwards, the use of lacquer broadened from bookbindings to papier mâché mirror-cases, pen boxes, jewellery boxes and even [playing cards](#) (www: Lacquer).

The [Simurgh](#) appears in epic literature, in folktales, and in religious texts as an all-wise, benevolent bird. It has a sharp, eagle-like beak and long tail feathers. It is also a healer, able to effect cures and advise humans about medicine. (A Turkish painting from 1703 shows [Hippocrates](#) riding the Simurgh on his way to compound medicines.)

The Safavid bookbinding (1) depicts various animals and birds in gold against a black background. Mythological creatures are mixed with real ones. One sees a unicorn (lower left) and, most prominently, a Simurgh is depicted twice, once at the center of the rectangular cover-piece and again grappling with a dragon on the flap (far right).

The second lacquer piece in this lesson, a late eighteenth-century Qajar album cover (2), shows European Renaissance influence in the three-dimensional modeling of birds and flowers.

During the late sixteenth century the Safavids welcomed English and Dutch traders into the Persian Gulf. Imports from not only Europe but also from India and China made “Iran’s arts more cosmopolitan than they had been for centuries” (www: Welch 2011). [European influence](#) continued and intensified under the Qajar dynasty (1785-1925).

The roses and nightingales (“*gol o bolbol*”) depicted in this Qajar piece had long been a common figure in poetry and a stock motif in the visual arts. Iran was called the “land of the rose and nightingale” in the West

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 (www: Diba 2012).

“In mystical poetry the nightingale stands for the soul that is still enraptured by the world of appearances and so unable to penetrate to the world of transcendence” (www: Clinton 1989). In Farid-al-Din Attar’s (late 12<sup>th</sup>-early 13<sup>th</sup> centuries) famed [Manteq al-Tayr](#) (“The Conference of the Birds”) the birds go in search of a king. Their leader tells them how hard the journey will be. The nightingale is the first to withdraw from the expedition:

My love is for the rose; I bow to her;  
From her dear presence I could never stir.  
If she should disappear the nightingale  
Would lose his reason and his song would fail,  
And though my grief is one that no bird knows,  
One being understands my heart—the rose (Darbandi 1984: 36).

In [Sufism](#), or Islamic mysticism, the Simurgh is a metaphor for God. In [Manteq al-Tayr](#) the birds

are told by the [hoopoe](#) that they have a king—the Simurgh—but that he lives far away and the journey to him is hazardous. The birds are at first enthusiastic to begin their search, but when they realize how difficult the journey will be they start to make excuses. . . The journey itself is quickly dealt with and the birds arrive at the court of the Simurgh. At first they are turned back; but they are finally admitted and find that the Simurgh they have sought is none other than themselves (Darbandi 1984: 15).

The two luxury objects featured in this lesson encourage students to think critically about three important historical and cultural phenomena: religious symbolism in Islam; the relation between sacred and secular in the visual arts; and the exchange of painting techniques between early modern Europe and Asia.

**Rationale:** The Simurgh and the nightingale are important symbols in the early modern Persianate visual and literary arts. They are also multivalent, that is to say, they have more than one meaning. This lesson approaches these multiple meanings through study of two luxury objects created in contrasting artistic styles.

**Instructional resources:** A Safavid lacquer bookbinding and a Qajar lacquer album cover; *Visual Analysis: Four Steps toward Critically Thinking about Art* handout.

The observations below are meant to be a partial teacher's guide.

1. Safavid Lacquer Bookbinding  
Afghanistan, Herat | Safavid (1501-1732)  
Mid-16<sup>th</sup> century  
(KHAL.2006.0102)



(A) [Simurgh](#)  
Iran, Qazvin  
1557

- In some pre-Islamic texts the Simurgh is associated with sowing seeds:  
  
The Simurgh's nest is on the "tree without evil and of many seeds." When the bird rises, a thousand shoots grow from the tree, and when he (or she) alights, he breaks a thousand shoots and lets the seeds drop from them (www: Schmidt 2002).
- One precursor of the Simurgh is a dog-headed animal with the tail of a peacock depicted in [Sassanian art](#). The Sassanians (224-651) were the last pre-Islamic rulers of Iran. In the Islamic period, the earliest known [images](#) show the Simurgh as a giant bird. The myth of the Simurgh shares some features with the stories of [Garuda](#), the bird ridden by the Hindu god Vishnu.
- In Firdawsi's *Shahnameh* ("Book of Kings"), Iran's national epic completed in 1010, the Simurgh rescues the infant Zal, who grew up to become a famous warrior. Zal was abandoned by his father because he was an albino and considered inauspicious. The Simurgh takes him back to her nest and raises him with her own children. Later, his father repents, Zal is found and [returns](#) home (www: Schmidt 2002; [click here](#) for the entire story).
- In Sufism the Simurgh is a metaphor for God as seen in al-Attar's [Manteq al-Tayr](#) ("The Conference of the Birds").
- The style of this lacquer bookbinding derives from the arts of the book. Compare it to the roughly contemporaneous manuscript page (A) from Qazvin in

northwestern Iran. One difference is that the lacquer artist uses color to fill in some shapes (the flowers, for instance) while the manuscript page is monochrome—gold line and gold wash on a brown background.

- Although this image is basically flat, there is vertical movement: we are looking down on a forest and our eyes are led upward to a sky full of birds and clouds.

2. Lacquered Album Cover  
Iran, Shiraz | Qajar  
Late 18th century  
(KHAL.2006.0070)



<p>(A) <a href="#">Large Textile</a> Iran, Isfahan 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century</p>	<p>(C) <a href="#">Mirror Case</a> Isfahan, Iran 1850-1875</p>
<p>(B) <a href="#">Mirror Case</a> Isfahan, Iran 1747</p>	<p>(D) <a href="#">Ladies Around a Samovar</a> Iran, Tehran 1860-1875</p>

- Albums were a popular format for assembling calligraphic pieces.
- In the Safavid bookbinding (1) shape is clearly defined by outline even where figures (such as the Simurghs) are filled in with color. This Qajar lacquer (2) dissolves outline in favor of tonal gradation and color, somewhat similar to [this](#) nineteenth-century French still life.

- Notice how the birds and flowers do not seem to share the same space. The nightingales' feet do not rest on the flower stems. Does this seem to contradict the overall naturalism of this piece?
- Textile (A) is an earlier example of the nightingale and rose from Safavid times. A flower/bird/butterfly motif repeats across the background.
- Roses and nightingales were also depicted on objects such as this mirror case (B).
- Mirror case (C) is a portrait of Ali (d. 661), Muhammad's son-in-law and a [Shi'ite](#) martyr. The figure is noteworthy for its three-dimensionality, another example of Renaissance European influence.
- The group portrait (D) is an example of the mid-nineteenth-century phenomenon of Iranian painters receiving art school training similar to that of their European counterparts. One key result was the frequent production of official portraits painted from photographs.

Procedure:

- The class is divided into groups. One-half of the groups studies the Safavid bookbinding (1); the other half studies the Qajar album cover (2). All use *Visual Analysis: Four Steps toward Critically Thinking about Art*.
- The groups work on describing what they see and what they think about what they see. Of the seven design elements—line, color, value, texture, space, shape, and form—do some stand out as more important than others? Can you make a general statement with respect to the design issues that the creators of these pieces regarded as important?
- The groups then do the same with the basic artistic principles—balance, unity, emphasis, contrast, pattern, movement, and rhythm. Do some of these principles stand out as more important than others? Can you make a general statement with respect to the artistic principles that the creators of these works thought important?
- The class compares their evaluations of the two objects. The teacher writes the main points of difference and similarity on the board.

**Stylization:** Representation of natural forms in a simplified or exaggerated manner. More broadly, the representation of appearances in accordance with conventions of a particular style rather than with observation of individual examples.

**Naturalism:** Art based on direct observation of the external world, particularly contrasted to works that are more stylized. Naturalism is distinguished from realism because it does not tend to include or focus on the flaws and imperfections of the subject depicted.

Adapted from the *Getty Art & Architecture Thesaurus® Online*  
<http://www.getty.edu/research/tools>

- If the class can agree that the Safavid bookbinding (1) is stylized and the Qajar album cover (2) is naturalistic, then would it be possible to reverse styles, that is to say, create the Simurgh piece in a naturalistic style and make the nightingale piece stylized? This could be attempted as an art project or through gathering a portfolio of [images](#) and [styles](#) by searching the internet. Comics and video games might also be helpful in exploring this.

Whole group reflection: As symbols, the Simurgh and the nightingale have both religious and secular associations. What makes sacred and secular compatible? Can you think of any other symbols—West Asian or European—that are similar?

Instructional modification: Students can research other mythical creatures and their representation in art.

Application: Students will define the words “myth” and “legend.” How do pop stars, movie stars, comic book and video game heroes play the role of modern mythic or legendary figures?

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