

Original Research Article

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The symbolic position of the rooster in Iranian culture and art based on pottery, metal and textiles

Abstract

Problem definition: The rooster, this extraordinary and beautiful bird, plays a major role in the beliefs of the Iranian people, due to its faith foundations and symbolic concepts. This deep connection has transformed the rooster into a sacred and cosmic bird. The objective features and behavioral style of this bird have caused many artists to use it as a basis for making their artworks and to express their thoughts via an ironic and mysterious language. Emphasizing the motif of rooster in pottery, metal and textiles within the pre-Islamic and Islamic periods, the present study investigates the application of this symbol and reasons for its importance in the Iranian art.

Objective: The rooster motif in pottery, metal and textiles of the pre-Islamic and Islamic periods and the expression of its symbolic concepts.

Research Method: The present study has been conducted in a historical-analytical manner and the required information has been collected through searching in library and museum sources.

Results: According to the studies conducted in the field of Islamic arts, while referring to the stories and narratives, especially the references made to the story of the Ascension of the Prophet, the sanctity of this throne bird has been emphasized as well. The reflection of the rooster image in ancient Iran has been based upon the written sources of this period, especially the Avesta and the ancient Iranians highly valued and cherished this bird. The application of the rooster motif relies on the aesthetic themes and symbolic concepts. This has caused the motif of this bird to be regarded in the Iranian artworks.

Keywords: Symbol, rooster, ancient Iran, Iran of the Islamic period.

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Introduction

Symbols are one of the most important updated tools for expressing ideas which are used based on a set of symbolic norms or conventions. They carry indirect and mediated meaning. They are the product of the conscious and unconscious imagination of the human mind. Conscious symbols are made on the basis of external and objective factors, while unconscious ones are formed based on the internal factors and the ability to think abstractly. Human being uses symbolic language to show the truths beyond reason by encrypting his thoughts and ideas toward perception of these concepts and purposes, transcendental revelations and knowledge gained from the invisible terrestrial dimensions. The emphasis of symbols is on their abstract and unconscious aspects, while guiding us indirectly in an aura of mystery to define their intended subject. By expressing his thoughts in the form of symbols, human being found a way to convey them in an effective as well as permanent manner so that he could induce a meaning beyond the arrangement of syllables and words. Hence, he achieved this goal with the artistry of using objects, animals, etc. In the meantime, birds are considered as one of the suitable symbolizing tools whose history of use has continued from pre-Islamic to the Islamic era. The rooster symbol, as one of the most widely used ones in Iranian art, in addition to considering the artistic and aesthetic concepts (balance, equilibrium, form, motif and color), includes the spiritual and ideological interpretations. Although the use of this bird is not only devoted to Iranian art due to its symbolic meanings, the present study has focused on Iranian art. The present study investigates the rooster motif in Iranian art with an emphasis on pottery, metal and textile artworks. The purpose of this study is to recognize the motif of this bird in pottery, metal and textiles of the pre-Islamic and Islamic periods and to express the symbolic position of this bird. In this regard, the following questions will be answered. 1- What are the characteristics of the rooster symbol in the artworks of ancient Iran and the Islamic period?

2- How has the rooster symbol changed during the pre-Islamic period compared to the Islamic era?

Research method

The present study is a qualitative one whose achievements are presented in a descriptive-analytical manner using historical context of the Iranian pottery formation. The data collection has been carried out using libraries and museum studies and the existing images have been prepared using internal and external sources. Among the works examined in Iranian art, the authors emphasize the pottery, metal and textile artworks and an attempt is finally made to conduct a detailed investigation on the subject through examining the collected information.

Research background

Despite previous studies in this field, it should be mentioned that most of the research has been conducted on the general symbolic evaluation of animals and plants and no detailed and in-depth research has been specifically carried out on the present subject. Perhaps the most relevant research in this field is an article entitled "Rooster and its role in seven paintings" by "Mehdi Hosseini" (2011). The researcher has introduced and analyzed several paintings, investigated the structure and compositions in these works and discussed the role of rooster in them. In another study entitled "Evolution of the motif and symbol in Iranian traditional art" written by "Pardis Bahmani"(2010), the plant, animal and geometric symbols have been examined in Iran and other nations. In addition, the position of the rooster symbol in ancient Iran as well as sources and hadiths of the Islamic era has been mentioned as part of the research. Among the foreign sources, one can point out to the article entitled "The cock as A Sacred Bird in Ancient Iran" by "Jivanji Jamshedji"(1911). In this research, the author has discussed the importance of the rooster as a sacred bird within the ancient literature of Iran and culture of the ancient Iranians.

The symbolic position of the rooster in the pre-Islamic period

The symbol of the rooster in the pre-Islamic era is mixed with concepts such as good and evil. In the past, people believed that the rooster drives away the demons and devils, so they often kept this bird at their homes (Modi, 1911, 105). The rooster was considered as a sacred symbol in the ancient Iran religions and was often used in good and decent matters. In Behi faith¹, killing the rooster is not permissible and it is considered necessary for everyone to keep this bird at their house in order to avoid the devil. Special importance has been also given to the rooster motif in Mehr ritual (Mithraism). The rooster symbol in this era has been mostly based on the beliefs and convictions of the people and mixed with mythological concepts. The use of rooster symbol in pre-Islamic period has not been specific to any particular art. Displaying the rooster in woven and textiles of the Sassanid period with halos around the head and a string of pearls on the mouth is considered as one of the features of the illustration tradition and textile industry of this period. Figure 1 depicts the rooster motif in these weaves in a circular text with floral adornments and combined petals that are repeated alternately. Figure 4 shows a rooster-shaped clay ewer. The discovery of this clay ewer related to the Iron Age indicates the importance as well as antiquity of using this symbol in Iranian artworks. Many precious metal specimens can be also found from this period of Iranian art history which have benefited the shape and motif of this bird. The design and patterning methods have often been realistic and sometimes with the use of abstract forms and motifs. The early Iranian silver specimens from the Sassanid period were imported to China, where they were imitated and used in

"Porcelain" pottery during the "Tang and Song" periods. These dishes which have special shapes such as a ewer with a bird's head and long neck, were decorated with sprinkled and colorful glaze common in the Tang and Song periods. Chinese specimens that were made as jugs with phoenix-like heads due to changes in shape and symbol, entered Asia in the tenth century (Lotfi et al., 2015, 52-53). A silver plate from the Sassanid period is exhibited in Figure 8. This plate is decorated with six roosters around and an eagle in the center. Other examples of textiles, pottery and metal artifacts associated with the pre-Islamic period are classified and presented in Table 1.

The symbolic position of the rooster in the Islamic period

With the advent of Islam in Iran, the concept of the rooster symbol was linked to the religious and ritual narratives as well as the pre-Islamic beliefs and found a deeper meaning. In this period, the most important references to the rooster symbol are related to the ascension story of the Prophet of Islam and observation of the divine rooster, which inspired many illustrators in writing Iranian manuscripts during the religious illustration. The visual reflection of this bird in two Iranian illustrated versions is one of the best mystical illustrations in the Iranian style and influenced by the oriental painting. The first painting of the scene of the Prophet's visit to the "White Rooster" in the sky is an illustration associated with the Ilkhanid period from "Bahram Mirza's Album". In the mentioned painting, by emphasizing the glory of the heavenly rooster and the holy image of the Prophet (PBUH) and the angels in regular rows who are glorifying God Almighty, the richness of the religious nature of the illustration has been added. In the second version, "Prophet Mohammad (PBUH), in the eleventh painting of "Shahroki's Ascension Letter", points to this white rooster with his forefinger while turning to Gabriel" (Hosseini, 2012: 8). Figure 9 depicts this manuscript version associated with the Timurid period and is known as the "Herat Ascension" or the "Mir Haydar's Ascension Letter". In this painting, the face of the Prophet is depicted on the right side as a young man with beard and a white turban on his head while riding his horse (Buraq)" (Bahmani, 2010, 87). The common point of the two manuscripts corresponding to the Ascension Letters of the Ilkhanids and Timurids is the depiction of the extraterrestrial and sacred nature of the rooster that has given it a trans-temporal as well as trans-spatial aspects.



Figure 9.

A leaf from Mir Haydar's manuscript, the ascension of the Prophet in meeting the heavenly rooster.

Source: br.pinterest.com

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Table 1. Examples of textiles, pottery and metal artworks with the rooster symbol in the pre-Islamic period.

Type	Image	Features
Textiles	 <p>Figure 1. Sassanid cloth with a rooster motif from the 8th-9th century. Source: www.pinterest.com</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The rooster motif with halo around the head 2. Creamy fabric background texture 3. Lacquered borders with abstract patterns
	 <p>Figure 2. Fabric with the rooster motifs and lotus flowers from the 7th-8th century. Source: www.pinterest.com</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The rooster motif with halo around the head and a string of pearls around the neck 2. Lacquered fabric background texture 3. Decorated border in the shape of lotus flowers
	 <p>Figure 3. Silk fabric with the rooster motif from the 7th-8th century. Source: www.pinterest.com</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The display of two roosters facing each other with halo around their heads 2. Brick-colored fabric background texture with black patterns 3. Margins in the form of concentric circles with abstract motifs
Pottery	 <p>Figure 4. Rooster-head clay ewer of the Iron Age. Source: www.pinterest.com</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Rooster-shaped body 2. The body is made of cooked clay without glaze 3. Simple and abstract decorations (including circle and line)
	 <p>Figure 5. Rooster-head clay ewer of the Iron Age. Source: www.trocadero.com</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Rooster-shaped body 2. The body is made of cooked clay without glaze 3. Simple with no decorations
Metalwork	 <p>Figure 6. Silver ewer associated with the Sassanid period from the 6th-7th century. Source: www.pinterest.com</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Body is shaped of the abstract form of birds 2. Silver made 3. Frequently used and complex decorations
	 <p>Figure 7. Silver jug or bottle associated with the Sassanid period from the 6th-7th century. Source: www.pinterest.com</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Bottle with the rooster emblem 2. Silver body material with gold plating 3. Decorations with motifs of roosters and flowering plants
	 <p>Figure 8. Silver plate associated with the Sassanid period. Source: www.pinterest.com</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Silver plate 2. Decorations in the form of six roosters around and an eagle in the center

Other religious references to the rooster symbol are related to the story of Prophet Ibrahim (AS) and his request to God to show him the life renewal. One can observe the brightest and most beautiful symbolization of the rooster in Masnavi in the story of four chickens of Khalil (AS) and interpretation of verse 260 of surah Baqarah where God said "Take four birds, kill them, tear them to pieces and mix them all together. Then, place each piece on top of each mountain and recite them to yourself. You will see that they are coming to you in a hurry". Rumi introduces these four birds as duck, rooster, peacock and crow, each of which is a symbol of human traits. However, two general concepts are attributed to the rooster in Masnavi in terms of the symbolism, the first meaning is lust and the second one, which has a sacred aspect, is the relationship between this bird and the heavens and saints (Sarfi, 2007, 70-71).

Among the metalworks of the Islamic period, one can point out to the Iranian bronze ewer related to the Umayyad period (8th century) as depicted in Figure 13. The outlet of this bronze ewer is in the shape of a rooster and its body surface is free of decorative patterns. Moreover, the decorations on the handle and beginning of the neck are in the form of a plant scroll and according to its construction time (beginning of the Islamic period) and finishing techniques, it seems to have followed the metalworking style of the Sassanid era. The rooster-head ewers, accounting for the masterpieces of Seljuk pottery, are from the clay sculptures influenced by the shape of animals, many samples of which are present and in good condition. An azure blue monochrome clay ewer is shown in Figure 12. The container opening, which is in the shape of a cockerel, with a long and sharp crown, dates back to pre-Islamic period. This shape can be also found in Sassanid silverware and Chinese porcelains of the "Tang and Song" period. In fact, the use of animals' shapes on the openings of containers for pouring liquids dates back to the first millennium AD and probably has a symbolic meaning [...]. Although a significant number of ewers with cockerel-shaped heads are available, the monochromatic specimens are rare. There are many simple and white specimens but most of them are metal ornaments or painted on the glaze liner. Most of these patterns are black on the green glaze liner or decorated with white and blue stripes (Khalili, 2005, 134-136). Regarding the textiles of the Islamic period, it should be noted that during this period the Iranian artists retained their originality in applying ancient Iranian motifs on the artifacts and warmly embraced Islam and Islamic culture (Dadvar and Hadidi, 2011, 15-16). Examples of pottery and metalworks associated with the Islamic period have been presented in Table 2 in a categorized manner.

Table 2. Examples of the pottery and metalwork with the rooster symbol in the Islamic period.

Type	Image	Features
Pottery	 <p>Figure 10. The golden clay plate associated with the Umayyad period. Source: jameelcentre.ashmolean.org</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Clay plate 2. Painting technique: glazed painting (metallic luster) 3. Realistic design of the rooster motif with floral and abstract adornments
	 <p>Figure 11. Clay bottle made by Ali Behuni, The first half of the 12th century. Source: Islamic Pottery Book, p.134</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Pea-colored clay bottle 2. Fabrication technique: two-piece mold 3. Painting technique: azure monochrome glaze 4. Embossed and molded decorations
	 <p>Figure 12. Rooster-head ewer of the 12th century Source: www.pinterest.de</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Clay ewer in the shape of a rooster 2. Painting technique: matte turquoise monochrome glaze 3. Decorations in the form of molded and embossed patterns
Metalworks	 <p>Figure 13. Silver Persian ewer of the Umayyad period Source: www.pinterest.com</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Bronze made 2. Form: Ewer with a rooster-shaped opening 3. Decoration: simple with lattice patterns on the top and casting

Conclusion

The long history of using animal symbols in the artworks has led to their continued application from the past to the present due to their close relationship with human life, ideas and beliefs. Among these symbols, the rooster emblem is considered as one of the most widely used ones, the most beautiful manifestations of which can be observed in Iranian artworks, especially in the field of pottery, metalwork and textiles. The rooster motif in pre-Islamic textiles, pottery, and metalwork is largely based on the abstract features, simplification principles and symbolic themes. The clay specimens were often unglazed and without intricate adornments. However, the decorations in the metalwork of this period are widely used and naturalistic in general. In the artworks of the Islamic period, the rooster carries symbolic and mystical concepts along with religious beliefs, and on the other hand, it is in connection with the sources and traditions of ancient Iran. The rooster symbol in the Islamic period has been used in a masterful manner with more details in terms of the fabrication technique while it is more prolific and bolder in terms of the design and coloring ones. This symbol combines the aesthetic concepts, visual basics, religious and mystical principles, and its extensive application in many Iranian artworks testifies to this fact.

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Endnotes

1. The Bahi faith or Zoroastrian religion is one of the oldest religions in the world and is considered as the first monotheistic religion in the world.
2. Ewer means waterfall or the bride's crown, Persian words, from 'Abri' root means to water falling.

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