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## Symbolism of Ducks Motif in Iran's Artworks\*

Shakila Karimi \*\*

M.A. Student in Art History of the Islamic World, Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Tehran, Iran.

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### Abstract

Iranian art is a symbolic and mystical reflection of realities and truths. Mythological-symbolic culture of Iran is closely related to the nature and earthly and heavenly elements of it. Since time immemorial, the agricultural life conditions across Iran have always forced people to be dependent on water and as a result this has led to the consecration of this sacred element. Presence of the elements related to water, like plants and birds, and particularly ducks, in various eras of the history of art in Iran, bespeaks of the colorfulness of the nature-grounded beliefs by Iranians. Since the motif of this bird has become manifested in arts in the Sassanid era and in the heydays of worship of Anahita (Goddess of World Waters), one can raise the hypothesis that duck is a symbol of Anahita, the goddess of fertility and pure waters. On the other hand, given the historical past, duck could have been used as a motif representing a bird that was found in countless numbers in Iran's canebrakes and considered to be an indigenous species in the region. The motif of duck can be seen on containers and objects in decorative and applied arts of Iranians and its continuation in the Islamic era to Safavid era is visible. This motif has been repeated in the history for several times but no independent study has yet undertaken the explanation of its continuous presence.

In this article, after a short review and identification of the motif of duck in each era we have sought to answer the question what changes have been made to the meaning and form of motif of duck in the art of Iranian people from the ancient times up to the Islamic era.

This study is of theoretical and exploratory type and it drew upon a descriptive and analytic method to analyze the data collected through library and electronic sources which contain the pictures of ducks in decorative and applied arts of various historical eras.

It seems that artists have had a realistic view of the ducks in the beginning and they would picture what they saw in their surrounding environment and in the course of time the motif of ducks has turned to a symbol with a spiritual and royal content insofar as at the climax of this process the duck has been pictured as a goddess. Finally, after a while and following the developments occurred in the beliefs of people, it has declined to a mere decorative motif.

**Keywords:** *Symbol, Art, Iran, Anahita, Water, Motif, Ducks.*

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\*\*. 09124958603 venuskarimi2@gmail.com

## Introduction

The importance of water for humanity and his dependence on water particularly in agriculture-centered or agrarian societies have led to the consecration of this vital element. Creation of myths and goddesses related to water can be seen among various nations and tribes. Water is one of the Classical Elements along with wind, fire and earth in the eyes of Iranians, and has always been praised by them. In historical time, due to the difference of Iran's climate and existence of numerous wetlands and lakes, which are among the key factors that have led to the emergence of early civilization, ducks have continuously lived in Iran in huge numbers and were hunted by people for food. Thus, for people of those times ducks were of paramount importance. The motif of duck in various forms, sometimes alone and sometimes in combination with other symbols and motifs including water can be seen in artworks. As civilization made progress and the beliefs and myths evolved, some goddesses came to be considered as the natural elements. Goddess of Anahita the symbol of water, fertility and divine effluence emerges. Purdavood writes: "Nahid is an angel that is responsible for guarding the element of water, in the same way that Tishtar is the angel of rain and Mitra is the angel of radiation. In Mazdisnaism for all sacred creatures, (i.e. what is useful and good), there is an angel and archetype; therefore, it is not surprising that for water as the most important element we have an angel with high and noble stature" ([Purdavood, 1998, 162](#)). Later following the emergence of Zoroaster along with Mitra, who is himself one of the greatest goddesses, these two became the companions of Ahuramazda. In Aban Yasht of Avesta, this goddess has been described and consecrated. The heroes for attraction of this support would have offered sacrifices, heroes from Sassanids who guarded the temple of Anahita and took significant

steps in establishment of magnificent temples. This goddess is known by symbols which are related to water and fertility like lotus, shell, duck, fish and pearl. These symbols can be seen in the decoration of her temples in Iran and abroad. Although in historical era, the mythical place of the goddess of waters experienced a decline, the influence of Anahita on people's belief was so powerful that it retained its signs in Iran's art up to contemporary era and its relevant elements became eternal in the history of Iranian art. Among these signs, diverse motifs of ducks can be seen in pre-Islamic and Islamic Iranian art and they appear in different forms and meanings. This denotes the importance of water and its goddess, Anahita, in the unconscious of the people of this land. The goddess of water has continued to exist through Islamic beliefs, and its symbols can be seen in architectural decorations specifically paintings of the Qajar era.

## Research Background

Numerous articles and books have been published so far on the goddess of Anahita and beliefs concerning her. Among the books in which short discussions can be found on the motif of ducks, one can refer to the book entitled *Anahita and Other Goddesses in Myths and Beliefs of Iranians* ([Taheri, 2013](#)) which refers to duck as one of the relevant symbols in this context. Moreover, in the following articles, i.e. *Anahita Iranian Goddess and Sarsooty Indian Goddess of* ([Lomel, 1991](#)), *Myth of Anahita in Iran and Ancient Armenia* ([Javadi & Nikoei, 2017](#)), and *Khosrow Parviz High Relief of Taqe Bostan* ([Javadi, 2006](#)), there are short discussions on the relationship between Anahita and the motifs of birds including ducks. In the article *Landscape Elements in Sassanid Art* ([Javadi & Bastar, 2004](#)), the authors have discussed the importance of nature in the belief of Iranians particularly in the Sassanid era as well as the continuous presence of the thought of Anahita in other eras and in the

book entitled Mythological Culture and Parables in Persian Literature (Yahaqi, 2007), a discussion has been provided as regards Anahita and relevant themes of this goddess like duck. In History of Art in Iran (Pope & Ackermann, 2008), some issues have been discussed on the continuous presence of duck motif in Iranian textiles from ancient times to Islamic era. Of course, these sources do not provide an independent study of the symbol and motif of ducks and we can see a gap in the research on the concept of the motif of this bird and its formal changes in the history of Iranian art. The author has studied 182 samples from various arts of different historical eras in Iran in the course of one-year research and reached determinate results which are clearly concerned with the symbol of ducks. In the aforementioned samples the motif of ducks has emerged as main or secondary motifs in museums, personal collections or library documents.

### **Anahita and Symbol of Ducks in Pre-Achaemenid Era**

Numerous clay items have been discovered from the hills of Kashan, Hill of Hesar, Astarabad, Cheshmeh Ali and other regions that date back to pre-Achaemenid civilizations. These clay items make it completely clear that people in this era were painting on the clays. Most of these paintings have indigenous and local features. On these objects, the motifs of bird perched on a mountain as well as agrarian symbols in checkered lines were painted so that their relationship with agricultural products to be revealed. In the same way, birds on water, i.e. wavy horizontal or vertical lines were drawn. Among these birds, one can refer to hen, goose, duck, stroke, sea bird, eagle, crow, osprey, rooster, pigeon and peacock. In Iran's climate in those eras there were numerous appropriate habitats for ducks. Since these places had access to water and were located near the civilizations and these conditions have created a type of

coexistence among ducks and men in those eras. Then one can say that sea birds like goose, duck, teal, etc., were birds that got hunted by the local people due to their abundance and provided the original food supply. The motif of these birds can be found in clay objects of various regions in Iran. In these motifs, we are faced sometimes with birds swimming in ponds and sometimes long-legged birds in the wetlands and this bespeaks a realistic view of these birds. Continuous presence of these birds in human life has made them a symbol of life and water and the artist for consecration of this element and its bounties, including people's life and their survival, has painted this motif in a symbolic and abstract form on containers which carried water (Figs. 1&2).

In those eras, humans considered natural elements to be sacred and believed that life is created by woman or archetype of fertility and this culture makes its way right into the second millennium BC in Ilam. But these civilizations do not mention the name of Anahita as the goddess of waters and one cannot establish any relationship between her and the ducks (Taheri, 2013, 33).

### **Anahita and Symbol of Ducks in Achaemenid Era**

Anahita emerges with the relief of Achaemenid Ardashir II in Hamadan and Shush. Ardashir announces: "Upon the will of Ahuramazda, Anahita and Mitra, I built this palace; I hope Ahuramazda, Anahita and Mitra would guard me against all harms and what I have constructed would not break and damage ..."

In his time, contrary to the normal course of affairs, in a number of cities, the temple of Anahita was built and the statue of this goddess was constructed in Shush, Hamadan, Babel and other great royal centers. According to Grischmann, statue of Anahita was constructed in Balkh, Sard and Damascus based on the idea of establishment

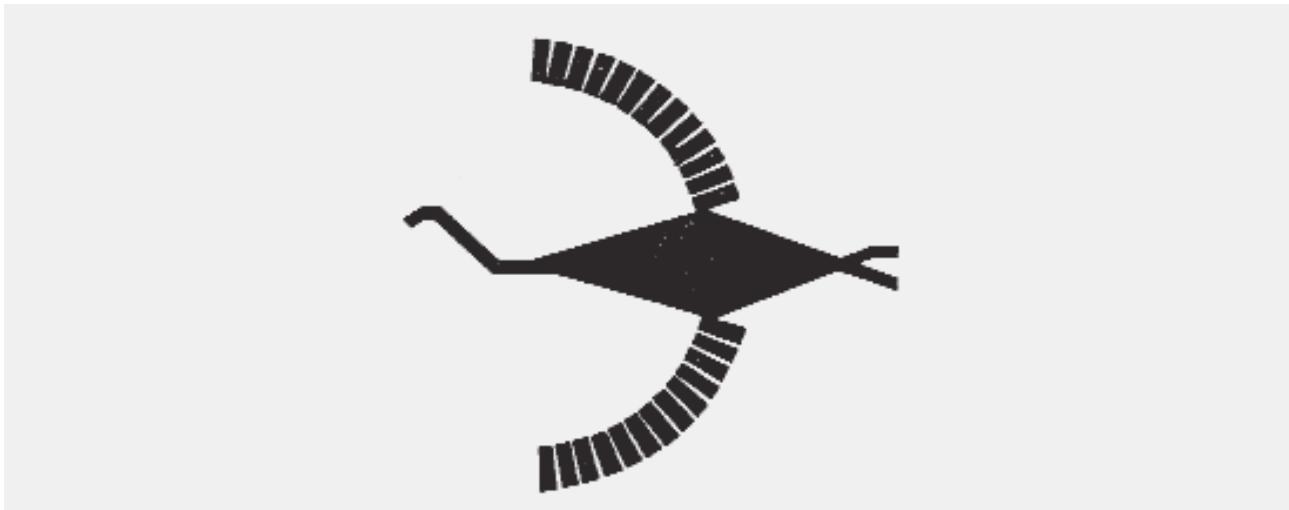


Fig.1. Water Bird from clay objects. Source: Khosrawi, 2012.



Fig. 2. Water (aquatic) bird from Tappe Hesar. Source: Khosrawi, 2012.

of a common religion among various nations. Perhaps life based on the principle of agriculture in Achaemenid lands persuaded people to have a deeper belief in Anahita (*Ibid*, 45). Scattered reports suggest that in this era the temples of Anahita enjoyed lots of wealth and such temples as the temple of Hamadan, Kangavar or Nahavand, in addition to the , had numerous lands. This shows the first belief of people in Achaemenid era in Anahita. Thus, in the art of this era we are witnessing the existence of symbols of Anahita which is sometimes used along with the symbol of

other gods like Mitra. It has been said that Anahita the guard and angel of waters became pregnant by the seed that was in the water and gave birth to her child, i.e. Mehr or Mitra. Perhaps this is itself a reason for coexistence of symbols of these two goddesses in this era. For example, in the circles of Mehr which are related to the God of promise and word Mitra and is seen at the hands of Fravashi and offering entities in Takht Jamshid, sometimes a symbol of Anahita is used that duck is among them (*Figs. 3 & 4*).

Designs and motifs of this era not only were an



Fig. 3. Achaemenid Bracelet with Duck Motif, Japan Miho Museum.  
Source: [www.miho.or.jp](http://www.miho.or.jp)

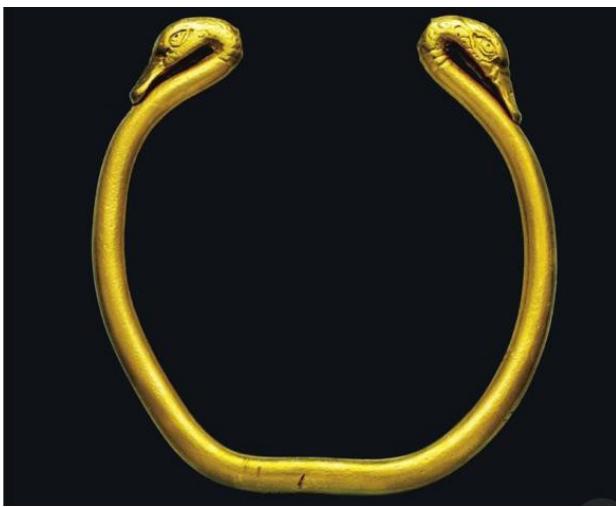


Fig. 4. Achaemenid Bracelet with Duck Motif. Source: [www.christies.com](http://www.christies.com).

honest conception of nature rather they were influenced by literature and myths. This helped the artists to create its symbolic aspects to draw Iranian motifs as attractive and highly impressive motifs. The motifs of this era consist of lion, man, goat, cow, fish, snake, scorpion, duck, swan, rose,

waterlily, palm tree and hybrid animals (Mohammad Ibrahim; Dadvar; Khojasteh & Khalesi, 2011, 4). These motifs were used sometimes alone and some other time along with each other. The motif of duck took a mythical and divine feature in this era. The more metaphysical became the concept of this motif in this era, the closer its form became to reality and it left its mere abstract state.

### Anahita and the Symbol of Ducks in Sassanid Era

The change in the method of worshipping Anahita and arrangement of a ceremony at Anahita Temple started from the era of Ardashir the founder of the Sassanid dynasty, insofar as in the time of Shapur II the chopped head of the enemy was presented to Anahita as a gift. Moreover, we see the eulogy of Anahita on the relief of Nersi I who describes himself as the one who praises Anahita and makes sincere efforts for more expansion of the belief in this goddess. In his royal seal, he also makes use of the crescent and duck which have been the symbol of Anahita (Taheri, 2013, 61). Moreover, Sassanid seal was made by red opal with black streaks the motifs of which might be the legs of a duck (Dehpahlavan & Qanawati Hendijani, 2015, 63); (Fig. 5).

In Taq-e Bostan which presents the ceremony of coronation of Khosrow Parviz, we see the human face of Anahita. Moreover, in this arc we see the portrait of Ardashir II on both sides of whom Mitra and Ahura stand and under the feet of Mitra there is a waterlily or sunflower which are her symbols and this shows that in this era gods always existed. In Sassanid coins, we also see that Anahita has turned powerful and is within a circle of fire. The motif of waterlily, duck and heron can be seen in various forms on silver trays, stucco and jewelries due to the power that Anahita has achieved in this era. These birds have an array of pearls on their beak or a crown around their neck which serve as



A



B

Fig. 5. A: Royal Seal of Narseh with Symbols of Anahita and Opal  
Sassanid Seal with Drake Motif. B: Reflections on Some Symbolic  
Motifs on Sassanid Seals and Clay Seals. Source: Source: www.  
instagram.com/sasanian\_heritage.

the symbol of their relationship with Anahita the goddess of water and throne (Javadi, 2015, 36). Crown, which is in the form of a ribbon or branch and leaves, is one of those signs the holder of which either have power or is in some way related to the king. Then, the king's special animals are known by their crown (Figs. 6 to 9). It seems that in this era, the ducks not only refer to the beyond and myth rather they are depicted as perching near the king who is himself a shadow of God. In the scenes of hunting including those in Taq-e Bostan, on the clothes of the king and the companions and also the hunting place which shows a canebrake, there are so many ducks. It is interesting to note that duck in these scenes is not drawn as a prey, rather it is depicted as a companion of Shah. In Sassanid containers, this motif has been used either in individual form or along with the symbol of other gods, including lion which is the symbol of Mithra, or along with human and animal symbol of Anahita. In one of Sassanid containers, there are two ducks the position of their wings remind us the wings that were carved on the coins of this era over the head of the king (Fig. 10). Among other arts in which the motif of duck has been frequently used is the art of Sassanid silk weaving and brocade. In fact, as Arthur Pope states, various types of Sassanid textiles like the arts which have been created by other materials, all are considered to be an outcome of ancient clay motifs (Pope, 1959, 77); (Figs. 10 to 14).

Moreover, according to Shahnameh, in this era, there is a musical instrument called oud (Shahnameh Ferdowsi, 2010) the players of which are court musicians like Barbad, Nakisa, etc; Kharazmi has explained the word oud (Barbat) as a word composed of two parts, i.e. Bar (chest) and Bat (duck) (Kharazmi, 1963, 137).

The motif of duck in this era has emerged in a completely realistic form and its identification as compared to other birds is simpler than previous eras.



Fig. 6. Sassanid Silver Container with signs of Anahita like duck, fish, water and lion. Source: [www.heritagemuseum.org](http://www.heritagemuseum.org).



Fig. 7. Sassanid steel container with a motif of duck. Source: [www.pinterest.com](http://www.pinterest.com).



Fig. 8. Sassanid Gold Bracelet with a duck motif, Metropolitan Museum  
Source: [www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org).



Fig. 9. Sassanid Soccu with a duck motif, Louvre Museum. Source: [www.louvre.fr](http://www.louvre.fr).

### Anahita and Duck Symbol in the Islamic Era

In early years of the arrival of Islam in Iran, the worshipping of Anahita like many other Iranian beliefs lost its popularity and only a part of the ceremony and culture of worshipping of this goddess and her symbols kept the company of

Iranian rituals and ceremonies. For example, on the clay items excavated in Abbasid era the decorative motifs are devoted to various types of birds including goose, stroke, heron and drake and the aquatic birds as a whole.

This group of birds had a special role in people's life; they were kept like the fowl; sometimes they



Fig. 10. Sassanid Steel Container with a duck head motif. Source: www.pinterest.com.



Fig. 11. Sassanid textile. Source: www.dualtonart.com.



Fig. 12. Sassanid textile; Sourec: www.metmuseum.org.



Fig. 13. Sassanid Textile. Source: www.metmuseum.org.

were hunted; and some other time they would have been used as a symbol of affluence and water. They are distinguished by their broad beak with curved lines that feature the ducks and also

long legs which are a major characteristic of the aquatic birds. In fact, the most popular bird in people's life among the birds whose images were used to decorate the stuff is this aquatic bird. Some clay items have been excavated in Sari, Amol and Astaneh-ye Ashrafiyeh which date back to the fourth and fifth centuries of Hijrah. The majority of their motifs are circles of flower and leave with animal figures and birds like peacock, goose, and eagle. In Mazandaran, most of the motifs used on the background of the containers are the pictures of goose, duck, fish and other animals some of which are so similar to the motifs of Sassanid metals and textiles. The containers excavated in Neyshabur are divided into two groups. A group of clay containers are colorful and painted and relate the stories of myths while the other group hosts white containers with renowned black designs better known as black and white containers which have central decorations and such birds as duck and crane are the chief motif on them. The duck figure is usually small and may be drawn with two continued strokes of black pencil and sometimes with the beak. In Seljuqi containers along with the main story the image of duck is drawn (Khazaei & Samavaki, 2013, 4); (Figs. 15 to 18) (Mohammadi Rad, Samanian & Dastan, 2018) as well as the type of continuation of presence of ducks in the hunting scene as if it is a tradition of Sassanid era. After the arrival of Mongols and the beginning of Ilkhanid and Teymurid eras and under the influence of Chinese art, the role of the motif of ducks became more significant. Paintings of this era including the painting of the funeral of Esfandyar of the Ilkhanid era are associated with Chinese elements (*Ibid*). The motif of duck is one of those motifs that can be found on the royal clothes and the men in the court and has a long history in the designs of Iranian textiles (Fig. 19). It seems that the duck motif on the textiles continues a local tradition the history of which



Fig. 14. Sassanid textile. Source: [www.pinterest.com](http://www.pinterest.com).

seems to date back at least to Sassanid textiles. In this era, duck is seen along with other decorative Motifs. Although the duck motif in this era is a continuation of the duck motif in Sassanid or Seljuqi eras, some modifications have been done on its design. Nevertheless, it is implemented in superficial and partial manner. These ducks can be seen in the tenth century in a more sophisticated form as swimming and flying. Of course, this motif can be seen in the Chinese sewing in a realistic form and Iran's relations with China provided the ground for the prevalence of this motif in Iran. Ducks often are beside plants such as waterlilies which have their origin in Iran's ancient beliefs (Pope & Ackermann, 2008, 2328; Barari & Rahmati, 2017). In miniatures of the Islamic era, the motif of duck can be seen in the scene of hunting or in the water pond



Fig. 15. Neyshabur Plate. Source: [www.flickr.com](http://www.flickr.com).



Fig 18. Seljuqi Plate. Story of Bahram Goor and Azadeh. Source: [Metmuseum.org](http://Metmuseum.org).



Fig. 16. Neyshabur Plate. Source: [www.islamic-arts.org](http://www.islamic-arts.org).



Fig. 17. Neyshabur Plate. Source: [www.louvre.fr](http://www.louvre.fr).

around which an important figure like king or prophet or religious scholars is present. They also appear in epic miniatures on the flag or the armors of the warriors. This seems to be a sign of acknowledgement of sacredness and power of one person (Fig. 20).

The duck motif in this era has been different, depending on the type of art in which it has been used. For example, in the textile products of the Islamic era, this motif is used in an abstract form; while, in tiles, it has been totally realistic. In some arts like clay work, the image of this bird has been simultaneously used in abstract and realistic forms.

Moreover, sunflower is considered to be one of the Merh-Mitra symbols. In literature of the Islamic era, Bat in Arabic as used in Persian literature denoted being related to water and sea and has numerous manifestations. For example, Sanaei believes that water is the world of meaning; while, duck serves as the symbol of a soul that has forgotten its origin and has become submerged in the world (Shojaee, 2017, 89).

Although it was young and new/ the vessel seeking

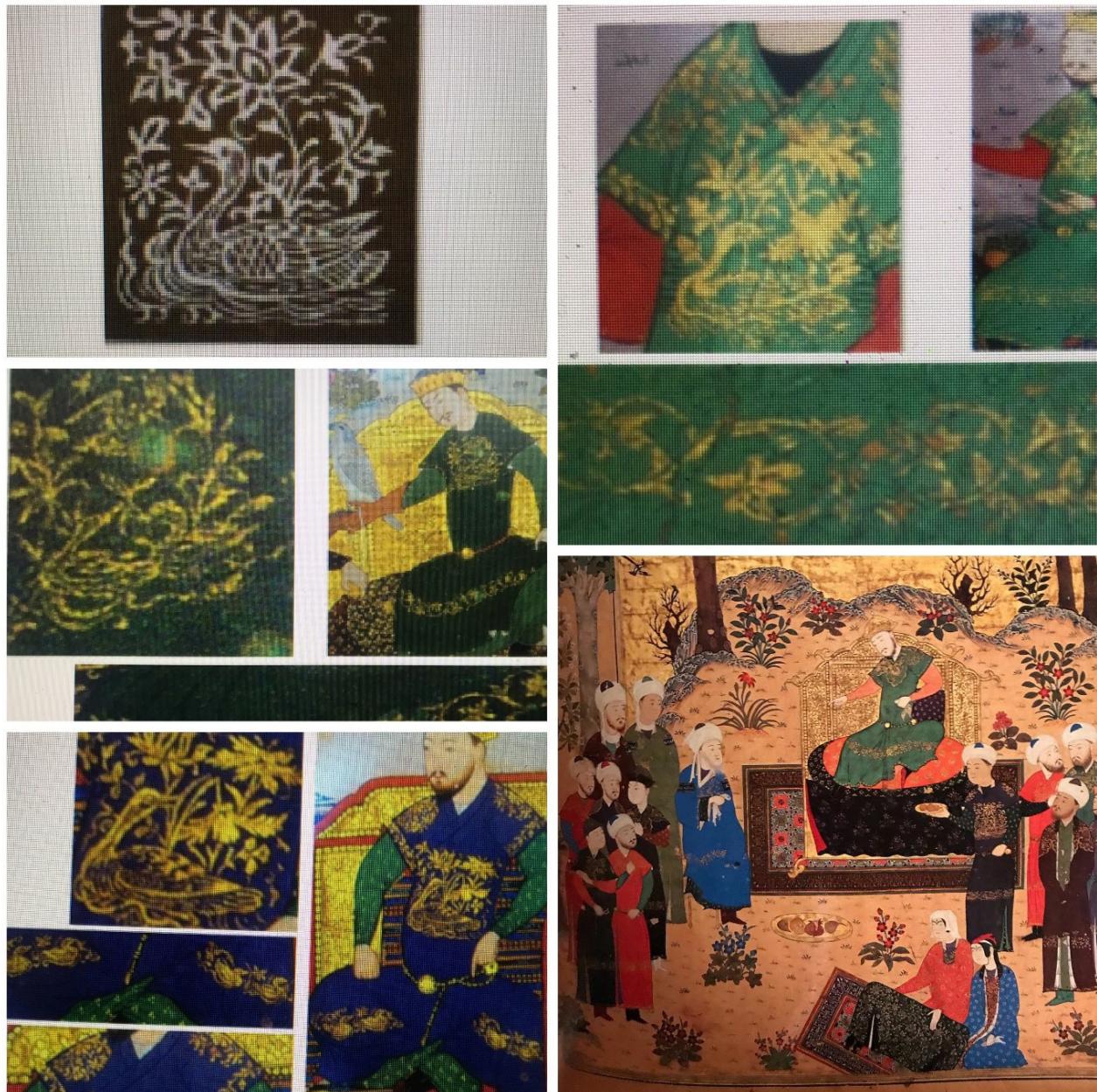


Fig. 19. Duck Motif on the clothes of the miniatures of the Teymurid era. Source: Right: Pope, 1959 & Left: Kahrizi, 2015.

duck was truly wonderful (*Ibid*).

Moreover, duck in Conference of Birds by Attar represents a group of servants who were stuck at the obsession of purification and spent much of their life time on washing like the ascetic who insist on superficial actions that ensure paradise

(Azargoon, 2004).

**The duck came pure out of water/ and entered the gathering neat**  
It said that no one can ever find/ in both worlds anyone pure like me

I have continuously washed myself/ I pray every moment on the water (*Ibid*)

Jami's Haft Awrang is also among the works in which birds have been used as a symbol in the heart of its stories for teaching a piece of wisdom or an ethical lesson. For example, in this work there is a miniature under the title of "Sagacious Elder and His Refusal of Accepting the Duck Brought by the Pupil". In this image, there are birds including ducks and falcons and the gifted ducks could be a symbol for the purity of the soul of the king as gifted by him to the sagacious elder. However, since the elder does not see the purity of intention in the king he does not accept the gift (*Barari & Rahmati, 2017, 59*); (Fig. 21).

It seems that these approaches can relatively show that in mystical literature a negative reaction has

been shown to this bird as a continuous associate of the king. This reaction has repressed its earthly features and in this way, a protest is expressed against the king or the associates.

### Conclusion

Symbol and symbolism can be considered as the primary principles of Iranian art by which Iranian artists seek to provide a conceptual expression of the sensible nature. The symbol of ducks in Iranian art has been continuously in the course of historical evolution , particularly in the light of the ideological requirements it has been associated with Of course, the beliefs related to this symbol as the consecration of water and its goddess have their origin in Iranian unconscious. For disappearance of a belief is not necessarily

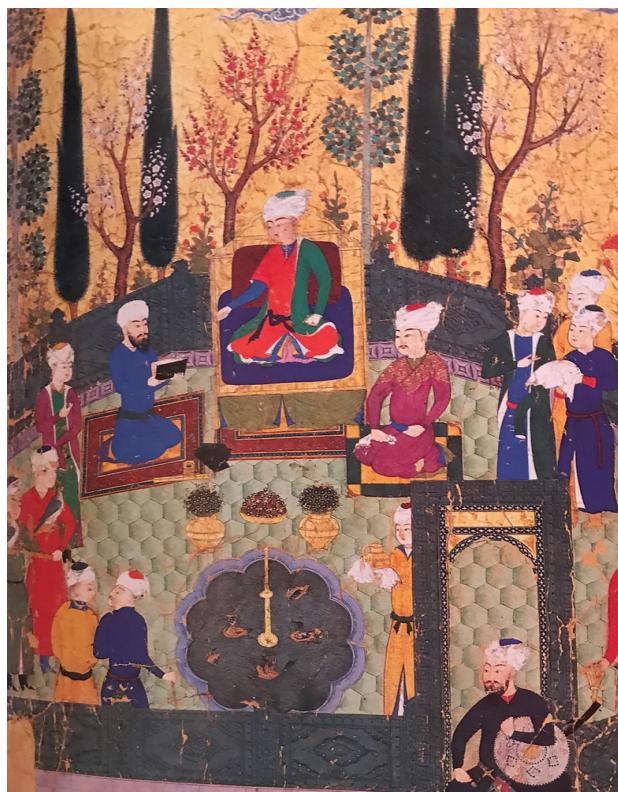


Fig. 20. Borzuyeh takes the book of Kelileh to Anushirvan. Source: Pope, 1959.

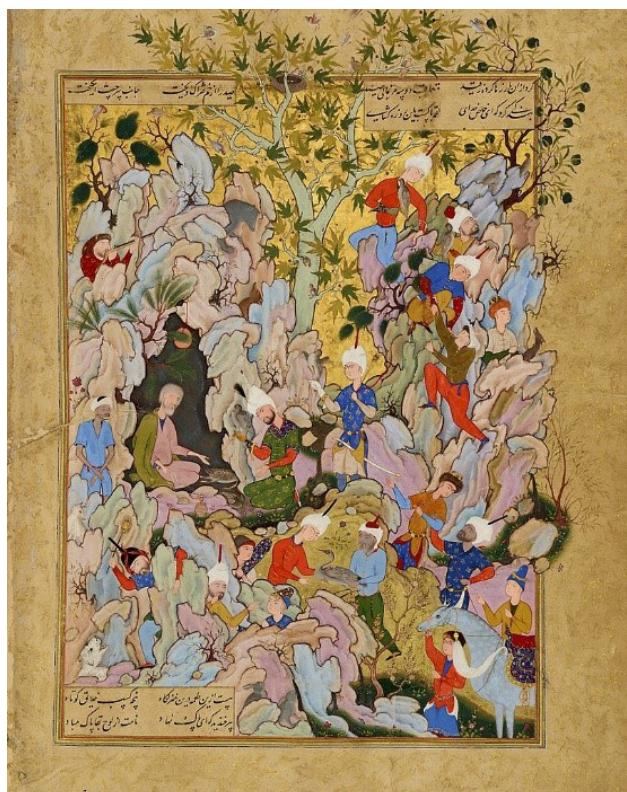


Fig. 21. Sagacious Elder and His Refusal of Accepting the Duck gifted by the Pupil. Source: Contemporary Arts Museum, 2005.

tantamount to the uprooting of its manifestations from the heart of the life of Iranians and only a different perspective has been achieved. This motif at first had a realistic feature and it was the symbol of what the people would see around themselves and was the key to the development of their life. Following the evolution of beliefs and birth of goddesses, the symbol of ducks became metaphysical and mythical. Thus, this bird becomes the symbol of one of the greatest Goddesses of Iran, i.e. Anahita. This took place in the Achaemenid era and culminated in the Sassanid era insofar as the symbols either sought to show the power of the king or were used for consecration of the goddesses. However, upon the arrival of Islam and the evolution in the belief of the Iranians, the symbol of ducks not only continued its life, rather it found a more decorative aspect in Iranian art which was different from its early meaning. Iranian artist whether consciously or unconsciously makes use of this symbol derived from the beliefs of the ancient people for decoration of his own works and even takes advantage of the symbol of ducks in depiction of the sacredness and power. This motif has emerged in the history as a mere abstraction and later it has become realistic and finally ended up with a combination of abstraction and realism. Familiarity with the symbolic beliefs of Iranians is not possible but through the study of these motifs.

### **Endnote**

Waterlily is a plant that has its roots in the sludge, its stem grows on the surface of water and its flowers grow towards the sun. This flower is referred to as the symbol of Mitra, goddess of the sun.

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