

Classical theme, contemporary touch

by Muhammad Yusuf

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JAMM Art Gallery Dubai's upcoming presentation *The Rose and the Nightingale: A Persian Iconography*, which is a group exhibition curated by Maneli Keykavoussi, will explore a vast range of expression of the "gol o bolbol" (the rose and the nightingale) theme in contemporary Iranian art.

It features works by Farideh Lashai, Rozita Sharafjahan, Dariush Hosseini, Ladan Broujerdi, Navid Azimi Sajadi, Masoumeh Bakhtiari, Farid Jafari Samarghandi, Gizella Varga Sinai, Rasool Soltani and Sara Rahanjam, among others. To run Apr. 24 - May 29, it is a sample of various ways in which contemporary Iranian artists approach the theme. The

continued prevalent use of the gol o bolbol in Iran's contemporary art testifies to its status as an inseparable iconography of the Iranian cultural identity and as a supreme aesthetic template.

The rose and the nightingale have been used in Persian literature and visual imagery for many centuries. In literature, they have symbolised both earthly and spiritual love: the rose as a metaphor for perfection, beauty and the beloved, sometimes self-absorbed and cruel; and the nightingale representing the lover or the poet who sings endlessly his passion and devotion for the rose.

The rose has symbolised the Almighty, the prophet or the earthly beloved; the nightingale has represented transcendence of the soul yearning to become one with the beloved. The theme of rose and nightingale, a sub-theme of flower and bird painting, was a central imagery in the decorative arts of the Safavid (1501-1722) and Qajar (1785-1925) eras. The origins of this imagery may even be traced back to the 14th century and the Ilkhanid period (1256-1353), where the image of the rose appeared as a distinct motif in illustration of Persian poetry and epic texts, drawing upon its literary images as a metaphor for youthfulness, beauty and young love.

From manuscript illustration, the gol o bolbol pattern entered decorative arts and later, during the Safavid period when the city of Isfahan was a major trading centre, it merged with botanical arts and European flower painting genre. It became a distinct form of iconography used to decorate many different objects from ceramics to lacquered boxes and objects.

It became such an important vestige of Persian repertoire of imagery and culture that, by the late Qajar era, the country was referred to as the "Kingdom of the Rose and Nightingale" in the West. Oscar Wilde's fairytale *The Nightingale and the Rose* is a well-known European treatment of the theme.

Broujerdi's rendition of the Rolling Stone "Tongue and Lip" logo in a gol o bolbol pattern is a tongue-in-cheek reference to the fusion of a universal pop culture penetrating the psyche of a society with deep traditional roots.

Young artist Soltani, in a humourous language, decorates images of an Iranianised bearded Superman with the gol o bolbol pattern, and in another work mocks the slogans of equality, brotherhood, freedom and justice along with the same pattern in the background.

In a darker, more cynical tone Samarghandi prints the gol o bolbol design on burnt aluminium foil used for smoking heroin. The work is part of a larger experimental collaborative project during which Samarghandi, along with other artists, used

heroin for three months to produce this body of work attempting to immerse the experience of heroin addiction.

Tackling an extremely widespread taboo phenomenon, the gol o bolbol pattern on the foil serves as a direct reference to the social disguise for the sufferings and corruption that are lurking underneath. (According to its own figures, Iran has the world's highest incidence of drug addiction with two million people, in a population of seventy five million, addicted to hard drugs).

The cadence of the exhibition becomes more desolate in the works of Sharafjahan, Hosseini and Bakhtiari. In Sharafjahan's Childhood of Jamshid, beautiful roses are embroidered on a photograph of a child martyr of the Iran-Iraq war. The rose here may also be a reference to the impermanence of life, which is also one of the classical meanings of the rose in Persian literature.

In a similar vein, perishing roses and collapsing birds are represented in Hosseini's gestural abstract works. Contemporary Iranian artists have poignantly transformed a symbol of decorative and non-critical vocabulary into a pungent expression of critical thought. Art, after all, is a reflection of the zeitgeist of a society, and no less a powerful medium of change.

Lashai was a multimedia artist. She had been painting more than forty years and having held 25 solo exhibitions and participating in more than 80 group exhibitions, was one of the most active Iranian female visual artists ever known. She was also active in the field of video art and multimedia installations.

Her presence in international art auctions together with her brilliant, valuable works and her successes on a global scale, turned her into one of the most well-known pioneers of visual arts not only in the Arabian Gulf region and the Middle East, but also in Europe and America, until her untimely death by cancer.

Sharafjahan lives in Tehran. The Islamic Revolution of 1979 is the shared fault line running through the biographies of her generation. And this fault line is

the focus of her work, which strikes a wise balance between emotion and coolheaded analysis.

Sajadi uses heterogeneous media including photography, sculpture, installation, painting, drawing and the written word and covers many of the symbols of ancient Persian culture as well as those recently conveyed through Iranian television screens.

His work, in fact, is based on the connection of elements and symbols that arise from the confluence of cultures and traditions of the Middle East. He puts into effect a possible paradigm of cultural flows resulting in the constant movement of thought in the places and times of the great ancient civilisations in the borderland between Asia and Europe.

Samarghandi was born shortly after the Iranian Islamic Revolution. He grew up in a climate of nationalistic neo-exoticism with, among other things, its endless stream of 'eastern' (Egyptian, Turkish, Iranian and Indian) remakes of Hollywood blockbusters. These movies were re-enactments of western stories and themes with the moral and religious values of the original adapted to suit the local audience's taste and traditions. He has been influenced by these "Halollywood" re-productions.

Sinai was born in Hungary in 1944, studied art education at the Akademie für Angewandte Kunst in Vienna/Austria and came to Iran in 1967. "Gradually", she says, "I was drawn more and more into Iranian culture. I became familiar with the existentialist poems of Hafez and Khayyam and today I feel that, mentally, I have been greatly influenced by them".

Soltani uses acrylic paint, on canvas or cardboard, to create images in the style of 1950s magazine advertisements. These images resonate powerfully in Iran where they hark back to a world disconnected from today's reality. Her works are hugely popular in Iran.

Rahanjam was born in the northern Iranian city of Lahijan, and studied sculpting at Tehran University of Fine Arts, graduating in 2009. She is a permanent Member of the Society of the Iranian Sculptors, and member of the Exhibition Committee of the Society of the Iranian Sculptors.

She dedicates a major part of her work to addressing women's issues, stressing that women are just very capable of hard work and artistic creation. She is also concerned with preserving Iranian tradition, and supports this cause by enclosing elements of traditional Iranian architecture in her works.