

# *The Rose and the Nightingale: A Persian Iconography*

Curated by Maneli Keykavoussi

24 April–29 May 2014

*The Nightingale with drops of his heart's blood  
Had nourished the red rose, then came a wind,  
And catching at the boughs in envious mood,  
A hundred thorns about his heart entwined...*

Shams al-Din Hafiz Shirazi

JAMM Art Gallery is pleased to present *The Rose and the Nightingale: A Persian Iconography*, a group exhibition curated by Maneli Keykavoussi. The exhibition explores a large spectrum of expression of the *Gol-o-Bolbol* theme in contemporary Iranian art and features works by Navid Azimi Sajadi, Masoumeh Bakhtiari, Ladan Broujerdi, Dariush Hosseini, Farid Jafari Samarghandi, Farideh Lashai, Farshid Mesghali, Houman Mortazavi, Tarlan Rafiee, Amin Roshan, Yashar Samimi Mofakham, Rozita Sharafjahan, Rasool Soltani and Gizella Varga Sinai. It will run from 24 April to 29 May 2014 with a preview on Wednesday 23 April from 6-9 pm.

The Rose and the Nightingale (Persian phonetic: *Gol-o-Bolbol*) have been used in tandem in Persian literature and visual imagery for many centuries. The Rose and the Nightingale together symbolised both earthly and spiritual love: the Rose as an image of flawless beauty, the beloved, sometimes self-absorbed, occasionally cruel; and the Nightingale, selflessly singing in the mania of its passionate love for the Rose. The Rose symbolised god, the prophet or the earthly beloved; the Nightingale represented transcendence of the soul yearning to become one with the beloved.

The theme of the Rose and the Nightingale, as a subtheme of the more general flower and bird motif painting, was a central notion in the decorative arts of the Safavid (1501-1722) and Qajar (1785-1925) periods. Its origins may even be traced back to the 14th century Il-khanid (1256-1353) period, where the image of the rose appeared as a distinct motif in illustrations of Persian poetry and epic texts, drawing upon literary images of the rose as a metaphor for youthfulness, beauty and young love. From manuscript illustration, the *Gol-o-Bolbol* pattern entered the decorative arts and later, during the Safavid period when Isfahan was a center of trade, it merged with the botanical arts and the European flower painting genre. The imagery became a distinct form of iconography that surfaced in decorative materials ranging from ceramics and lacquer to illuminated manuscripts. In fact, it became such an important constituent of the Iranian cultural repertoire that during the late Qajar era, Iran was referred to, by the West, as the Kingdom of the Rose and Nightingale.

This exhibition is a contemporary sampling of the *Gol-o-Bolbol* and its interpretations by current Iranian artists. The enduring prevalence of the icon is a testament to its status and its inseparability from the Iranian cultural identity.

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The poetic dreamlike painting and sculptures of Farshid Mesghali draw inspiration from the lyrical and formal aesthetic of the *Gol-o-Bolbol*, while Ladan Broujerdi has used the design in its traditional function of decoration with, of course, a contemporary twist. Broujerdi's rendition of the iconic Rolling Stone 'Tongue and Lip' logo, offers a tongue-in-cheek reference to the all-pervading reach of universal popular culture and its penetration in the psyche of a society with deeply traditional roots. Another young artist, Rasool Soltani, decorates an Iranianised Superman in beard with the *Gol-o-Bolbol* pattern, and in another work makes mocking references to slogans of equality and brotherhood, freedom and justice, along with the *Gol-o-Bolbol* pattern in the background.

In a darker, more cynical tone, Farid Jafari Samarghandi prints the *Gol-o-Bolbol* design on burnt aluminium foil typically used for smoking heroin. The work is part of a larger experimental and collaborative project where the artists immersed themselves in the experience of addiction and used heroin for three months while producing the body of work. Addressing an extremely widespread but still very taboo societal condition of addiction, the *Gol-o-Bolbol* pattern on the foil represents the social disguise for the suffering and filth that pursues addiction.

From the cynicism in Farid Jafari's picturesque miniature-like tableaux the cadence of the exhibition becomes more desolate in the works of Rozita Sharafjahan, Dariush Hosseini and Masoumeh Bakhtiar. In Sharafjahan's *Childhood of Jamshid*, beautiful images of roses from the *Gol-o-Bolbol* pattern are embroidered on a photograph of a child soldier, "martyr" of the Iran-Iraq war. It may also be a reference to the impermanence of life, another significance of the rose in Persian literature. Dariush Hosseini's strong gestural abstractions depict flowers and birds in various stages of suspension or collapse, the birds almost bat-like and the flowers uprooted and hung to dry. Peril is woven in an almost diabolical frenzy around the roses and nightingales of Hosseini's canvases.

*The Rose and the Nightingale: A Persian Iconography* attempts to capture this most prevalent of Iranian cultural themes in contemporary practice and explore its newfound versatility. Iranian contemporary artists have poignantly transformed a symbol of decorative art and non-critical vocabulary into a formidable expression of critical thought. Art after all is a reflection of the zeitgeist and a powerful medium of change in our society.

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