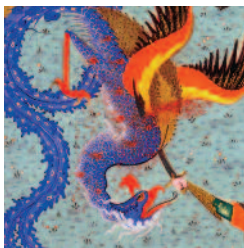




Mythical creatures in Islamic art



In Islamic art, mythical creatures can be both good and evil, amiable and frightening, but first and foremost they are fun and inspiring to look at. They moreover often have an exciting story to tell. Here is a brief description of three types of mythical creatures in the art of the Islamic world.

The Islamic dragon

The Islamic dragon can be traced to two different traditions: Central Asian/Chinese and Persian/Indo-European. Essentially, the Chinese dragon is a good and fortuitous creature that is believed to cause thunder and the rain that makes the earth fertile. It has also symbolized the emperor. The Indo-European dragon, in contrast, is thoroughly evil. It is believed to live in barren, infertile mountainous regions and is associated with fire and drought. In different Islamic works of art, the dragon is sometimes found in its eastern form, sometimes in its western.

The Islamic sphinx

The sphinx is a lion-like animal with a human head. It was found long before the emergence of Islam, in Egypt and Greece as well as in Persia. In Islamic art, the sphinx often appears in princely scenes, but it has no clear symbolism. As a rule, the Islamic sphinx has wings and a tail that ends in the head of a dragon or lion. Many mythical creatures in Islamic art incorporate parts from several types of animals.

The simurgh or phoenix

The simurgh is most often described as a gigantic, fortuitous bird with colorful plumage and a magnificent tail. Its origins are not completely clear, but in Persian art after 1300, the simurgh was frequently akin to the Chinese fenghuang. In literature, it is associated with immortality, like the European phoenix, which when its end approaches immolates itself and a new phoenix rises from the ashes.





Good questions – and answers

Where did the mythical creatures of Islamic art come from?

Some Islamic mythical creatures originated in ancient myths and tales, but some are known only from the visual depictions of earlier ages. When Muslim artists encountered mythical creatures from older cultures that may have long since disappeared, they were often inspired by them and continued the tradition of mythical beings in Islamic art. Fantastic creatures that were adopted from earlier depictions and carried on through art included the sphinx, harpy, and griffin. These creatures usually had little or no direct symbolic value, but were often found in princely contexts.

Are there pictures of mythical creatures in the Koran?

No, there are no pictures of mythical creatures in the Koran. In fact, the Koran has no pictures of living creatures at all – a tradition that has been maintained in order to avoid idolatry and to keep artists from being tempted to emulate God's creative force.

Are there angels and demons in Islamic art?

Yes, there are plenty of angels and demons in Islamic art. Several Islamic angels are moreover closely associated with ones familiar from the Jewish and Christian traditions, including the archangel Jibril (Gabriel), who revealed the Koran to Muhammad, and Israfil, whose trumpet will awaken the dead on the Day of Judgment. Others are more like fairies and elves, rooted in popular traditions. Demons (jinns and divs) are found in many places and in many forms. In illustrated Persian literature, demons are most often shown as half-naked, hairy male creatures with horns and a tail.

DURING THE GUIDED TOUR OF THE MUSEUM:

When pupils are shown around the museum, they will see a large number of fantastic creatures from the art of the Islamic world.

Historic aspects will be highlighted and, depending on the work of art, the relevant historical and cultural aspects will also be discussed.