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THE CONFERENCE OF THE BIRDS AND ITS ARTISTIC LEGACY

FEW WORKS OF PERSIAN LITERATURE have inspired the visual arts across Asia more than Farid al-Din 'Attar's *Mantiq al-tayr*, literally 'the language of the bird' or, as it is best known, 'the conference of the birds'. From fifteenth century illustrated manuscripts to contemporary artworks, the tale of these God-seeking creatures inspired a wide range of visual adaptations and interpretations, immortalising the poem's characters and message.

Completed around 1177 in the city of Nishapur, in northeastern Iran, the *Mantiq al-tayr* is an allegorical poem framed by a story within which shorter tales and parables are told. The main narrative describes the long and perilous journey of a group of birds in search of their king, the Simurgh. In their quest they are led by the hoopoe, 'the courier of every valley' and Solomon's trustworthy messenger, who convinces them to abandon the transient and temporary constraints of their present existence in favour of greater rewards:

*'If you desire this quest, give up your soul
And make our Sovereign's court your only goal.
First wash your hands of life if you would say:
"I am a pilgrim of our Sovereign's Way";
Renounce your soul for love; He you pursue
Will sacrifice his inmost soul for you.'*
- 'Attar 1984, lines 730-735.

Ali Kazim, *Conference of Birds, in 5 parts (detail)*, 2019, watercolour pigments on paper, 198 x 570 cm
©Ali Kazim, courtesy Jhaveri Contemporary

Seven valleys separate the travellers from their king's abode on Mount Kaf. Each tests their motivation and resilience, but also reflect the steps they need to take to reach their final goal. The first is the valley of the quest, where all beliefs, true and false, are cast aside; the second is the valley of love, where reason is abandoned; the third is the valley of knowledge, where the travellers realise the uselessness of worldly experiences; the fourth is the valley of detachment, where mundane attachments are left behind; the fifth is the valley of unity, where the birds realise that everything is connected; the sixth is the valley of wonderment, where all previous assumptions are shattered; and finally, the seventh is the valley of poverty and annihilation, where by transcendence the self becomes one with the universe.

During the trip many birds succumb – some to thirst and illness, others to attacks by beasts, or to fear. In the end, 30 birds reach the coveted destination, only to recognise their own image in their king. The Persian word *simurgh*, in fact, consists of the terms *sī* – 30 – and *murgh* – bird – a cunning poetic hack that distils the story's morals into a single word. The journey towards the Simurgh is thus one of self-discovery: by finding their king the birds, in fact, find their true selves.

The journey of these birds has yet a higher spiritual meaning in Islamic societies. The journey symbolises the experience of the soul yearning to become one with God, a concept central to Sufism, or Islamic mysticism. Like the birds, Sufis follow the guidance of an older master (known as *pir* or *shaykh*) and embark on a path of transformation that eventually leads to unity with the Godhead. Although 'Attar is not known to have been a Sufi, his exposure to Sufism at the peak of its development – and to contemporary masters such as Majd al-Din Baghdadi (d.1219), one of the deputies of the Kubrawiyya order – helps to explain the intensely mystical inspiration of his works (Lewihsohn, 1999). Indeed, along with two other Persian masters – Sana'i (d.1131) and the ever-popular Rumi (d.1273) – 'Attar sat at the pinnacle of the Persian literary renaissance before the Mongol invasion, helping to make poetry into one of Sufism's most powerful attributes.

The medium of book painting also proved crucial for the dissemination of the *Mantiq al-tayr* and its inspired teachings. From Shiraz to Herat, the ateliers of the Timurid (1370-1507) and Safavid (1501-1722) dynasties produced sumptuous illustrated copies of 'Attar's poem as early as the fifteenth century, revealing which tales most inspired artists and readers at that time (Sturkenboom, 2016). Significantly, and maybe



The birds gather together with the hoopoe; *Mantiq al-tayr*, manuscript copied by the scribe Na'im al-Din of Shiraz, Iran, 1493
Bodleian Libraries,
University of Oxford (MS
Elliott 246, fol. 25b)

surprisingly, the actual journey of the birds was hardly ever illustrated in these early interpretations. Exceptions appear in two late fifteenth-century copies of the *Mantiq al-tayr* – one in the Bodleian Libraries, Oxford (left) and the other in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Both capture the dubious voyagers debating how to reach their sovereign (Kamada, 2010; Scollay, 2012). They both also record the individual characteristics of the birds so effectively that even twenty-first century viewers can identify them. Ali Kazim's centrepiece in this exhibition, *Conference of Birds*, is heir to this past mastery, but also offers the flight of the birds its first powerful visual interpretation, masterfully capturing the drive and commitment of the travellers as they take off on their transformative journey.

Deeply influenced by Sufism, and 'Attar in particular, Kazim is a master at reimagining and reinterpreting traditional material and visual culture in a contemporary vein. While scholars debate the details of the poet's life and death, oral traditions abound within the folklore of the Indian subcontinent. Of these, the most repeated legend recounts the meeting with a poor *fakir* (religious ascetic who lives on alms)

in 'Attar's famous perfume shop (the word *'attar* meaning 'perfumer' in Persian). The beggar's presence in the opulent shop makes 'Attar uncomfortable and he asks the man to leave. The *fakir* says he has no difficulty with his ragged looking self and undertakes to leave, but not before asking 'Attar how he plans to depart the world with all that he has accumulated. 'Attar retorts that his soul will leave his body in just the same way as the *fakir's* will. In response, the *fakir* promptly lies down on the ground and his soul departs his body. This encounter leaves a deep impression on 'Attar, who leaves his trade to travel extensively in search of true wisdom.

Kazim's process and practice inspire him to search for connections with the past and find alternative understandings

of reality. In every work, including *Conference of Birds*, Kazim seeks ways of understanding the forces that shape and reshape human beings. His oeuvre is underpinned by the idea of a spiritual encounter that is ultimately a discovery and celebration of the beauty and the divine within everyone. Drawn to the traditional practices and history of the subcontinent and its neighbours, Kazim's five-panel watercolour is an interpretation of 'Attar's mystical poem – a life-size representation of a variety of birds as they begin their quest to locate their true leader. Kazim's delicate and meticulously rendered birds symbolise individual souls flying towards the perpetual and collective human desire for ultimate spiritual unity. The panels were displayed unframed in the exhibition, as Kazim did not wish to physically restrict or capture the birds, letting them 'be free'.

Like all of Kazim's works that appear suspended in time, this large watercolour is charged with other vestiges of the past. Beyond its obvious connections to Sufi poetry, it also captures his interest in the refined natural history studies commissioned between 1777 and 1782. These meticulously detailed, life-sized pictures of birds and animals were produced on large sheets of paper by Mughal artists such as Shaikh Zain ud-Din, Bhawani Das and Ram Das. Kazim's five-panel watercolour retains the format and plain ground of such scientific studies, showing great assurance and sensitivity in the birds' elegantly flowing outlines and finely painted plumage and legs. Flying alongside each other, the large flock of different species appear united as they soar upwards in a graceful composition that renders their plumage in subtle and effective greys and black tones. While large in scale, there is an impermanent and fragile quality in the material and medium. This is echoed in his faded monochromatic ruins and self-portraits, also displayed in the exhibition.

Kazim's 2020 *Bird Hunter* series introduces hurdles that the birds must face in their quest – many will not survive. Like 'Attar's poem, Kazim's works suggest a commitment to perseverance and faith. While hunters have no place in 'Attar's narrative, they feature in Kazim's exploration of Sufism and the experience



Ram Das, Crested honey buzzard, gouache on paper, 87.4 x 58.9 cm, Kolkata, commissioned by Mary Impey, c.1780
Bodleian Libraries, on long term loan to Ashmolean (L1901.9)



Lahore Biennale, 2020, Conference of Birds (detail), installation
©Ali Kazim

beyond the rituals of Islam: the journey towards a personal experience of God and the inner personal aspects of faith. Instead of focusing on the 30 birds that survive the journey, Kazim wonders about those who did not make it; he calls them 'the heroes' that make it possible for others to reach their goal. For a clay installation of *Conference of Birds* at the Lahore Biennale in 2020, Kazim created 3,000 sundried, unfired clay birds. Displayed outside, within the barely standing walls of a ruined building, the clay birds literally dissolved in the rain by the end of the show. (The exhibition includes video footage of the installation) During his 2019 residency Kazim was delighted to find several clay birds, including a *hoopoe*, in the Ashmolean's collection. These birds inspired the installation several months later in Lahore.

Like the work of other contemporary practitioners in the region, Kazim's reinventions of 'Attar's story confirm this tale's timeless value. Furthermore, by reimagining and reanimating the objects held in the Ashmolean Museum, he has ensured that the tale's message remains relevant.