


The use of mythological animal motifs in the works entered into the graphic design biennials of Iran (1987-2017)

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Abstract

The period following the Islamic Revolution in Iran marks a new era in the field of graphic design. During these years, Iranian graphic designers were influenced by the spread of computers and digital graphic software, the post-revolutionary social atmosphere, and exposure to Western culture and design practices. Consequently, the use of Iranian mythological animal motifs in graphic works has received less attention. The main objective of this study is to investigate the use of mythological animal motifs in works selected for the Iranian Graphic Design Biennials through both quantitative and qualitative analyses. The research seeks to answer the question: How have various mythological animal motifs been represented in the works selected for the Iranian Graphic Design Biennials (1987–2017), and in which media have they appeared? Works containing mythological animal motifs were extracted from different editions of the Tehran Graphic Design Biennial and the Silver Cypress Biennial. The findings show that, among all the media examined, poster design exhibited the highest use of such motifs, while web design showed the least. Among the motifs, the dove appeared most frequently, and the winged cow least. In terms of representation, most works across all media were digitally executed. The approach to using motifs was predominantly symbolic (the motif performing a function other than its original role), the relationship between motif and subject was largely indirect (indexical), and the placement of the motif was consistently significant within the composition. The research employs a descriptive–analytical methodology, and data were collected through both library and field research methods.

Keywords: Motifs of Mythical Animals, Iranian graphic design, Graphic Biennials.

1. Introduction

Iranian mythological motifs, owing to their rich semantic and cultural background, have long held a distinctive place in the history of Iranian visual arts. Among these, various animal motifs—often composite or abstract—have appeared throughout different historical periods and carry substantial significance. This study aims to identify the use of mythological animal motifs in Iranian graphic design, particularly in the works presented at the Tehran and Silver Cypress Biennials—the most important events organized by the Iranian Graphic Designers Society. The goal is to analyze how these motifs were employed to express meaning and convey concepts, and to interpret the meanings embedded within them through a descriptive and analytical lens. Accordingly, this research explores the diversity and multiplicity of mythological animal motifs in terms of form, content, and concept in works entered into the Iranian Graphic Design Biennials after the Islamic Revolution. The guiding question of this study is: How were mythological animal motifs represented in the works selected for the Iranian Graphic Design Biennials between 1987 and 2017, and in which media are they employed?

2. Literature Review

Several studies have explored mythological and symbolic motifs in Iranian graphic design. For instance, Alireza Yazdani (2017), in *An Introduction to the Semiotics of Contemporary Iranian Graphics*, examined the function of symbols and their roles in contemporary Iranian graphic works, thereby providing a partial foundation for this research. However, Yazdani's study does not comprehensively address the variety or classification of mythological animal motifs. Similarly, Somayeh Gholami (2018), in *Ritual and Religious Symbols in Contemporary Iranian Graphics*, investigated deep religious concepts and their visual manifestations in

contemporary Iranian design. While relevant to the present study, her research mentions only a limited number of animal motifs, including the peacock, Simorgh, and lion. A review of prior studies reveals that, although existing research facilitates the present investigation, none has specifically addressed the subject of mythological animal motifs within the context of Iranian graphic design biennials. Several institutions have contributed significantly to the development of Iranian graphic design, including the Art Center of the Islamic Revolution, the Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults, the Iranian Graphic Museum, *Hamshahri Magazine*, *Neshan Magazine*, *Sooreh Mehr Publications*, individual design studios, and the graphic activities of prominent Iranian designers. The Tehran Graphic Design Biennial, launched in 1987, was held nationally up to its eighth edition in 2009, featuring sections such as poster design, logo design, and cover design. From the eighth edition onward, it evolved into an international event with expanded categories reflecting global trends. Improvements in printing technology, paper quality, creativity, and conceptual diversity have resulted in higher-quality works in recent editions.

The Silver Cypress Biennial, established in 2010 following the final Tehran Biennial, continued this tradition through 2017 and remains ongoing. It includes major categories such as visual identity, logo design, poster design, book and publication cover design, packaging, layout design, and web and multimedia design. The quality and diversity of works in this biennial, especially in its fifth edition, are considered exemplary. Unlike the Tehran Biennial, the Silver Cypress Biennial features works exclusively by official members of the Iranian Graphic Designers Association.

3. Research Methodology

In graphic design, effective communication with the audience and the conveyance of meaning through visual elements require the use of motifs with cultural and historical depth. Therefore, the rich formal and visual characteristics of ancient Iranian mythological animal motifs motivated their selection as the focal point of this study. Given the credibility and comprehensiveness of the Tehran and Silver Cypress Biennials as major showcases of Iranian graphic art, their archives were selected as the research corpus. Animal motifs used in works from the Tehran Graphic Design Biennial (1987–2009) and the Silver Cypress Biennial (2010–2017) were first identified and then categorized into three main types: Single animal motifs, Composite motifs, and Imaginary motifs.

Further explanations and typologies are presented in the full paper. The study also found that motifs of non-mythical animals—such as the bear, dog, donkey, wolf, deer, cat, mouse, snake, chicken, sparrow, lark, parrot, duck, and rabbit—were used occasionally, though much less frequently.

4. Findings

The analyzed artworks—those containing mythological animal motifs presented at the Iranian Graphic Design Biennials—exhibited all three dimensions of representation: functional, semiotic, and iconic. Each work demonstrated a functional purpose (informative, identificatory, or promotional) within various graphic media such as posters, logos, and publication Covers. The semiotic dimension was also present, ranging from symbolic to indexical and iconic representations. The works were examined across different media and evaluated according to technique, approach to motif usage, relation between motif and subject, and positional importance within the composition.

The results, expressed as percentages, indicate that:

In terms of technique, most works were executed digitally. The approach to motif use was predominantly symbolic—meaning the motif performed a role distinct from its literal identity. The relationship between motif and subject was primarily indirect (indexical). In indexical signs, the relationship between signifier and signified is indirect yet interpretable, whereas in symbolic signs, the connection is conventional and culturally established. The placement of motifs was consistently central and visually significant, confirming their role as key visual elements that facilitate communication and meaning. Quantitatively, the poster medium demonstrated the highest use of mythological animal motifs across all biennial editions, while web design exhibited the least. Among individual motifs, the dove appeared most frequently, and the winged cow appeared least often.

5. Conclusion

This research was conducted in two analytical parts:

The extent of motif usage, and the method of motif representation.

In the first part, the study quantified the number and variety of mythological animal motifs used across different media in all editions of the Tehran and Silver Cypress Biennials. The highest and lowest frequencies of motif and media usage were numerically measured and presented in charts. In the second part, the methods of representation were analyzed according to artistic technique, approach, motif-subject relationship, and motif placement. The results were organized in tables and expressed as percentage distributions. The findings indicate that mythological animal motifs in the Tehran (1987–2009) and Silver Cypress (2010–2017) Graphic Design Biennials were diverse in terms of media application, motif variety, and representational style. Specifically:

Poster design demonstrated the highest level of motif usage, while web design showed the least. The dove motif was the most prevalent, whereas the winged cow motif was the least used. Across all media, most works were digitally executed, employed a symbolic approach, maintained an indirect (indexical) relationship between motif and subject, and positioned the motif as a central and significant visual element. The findings affirm that mythological animal motifs continue to serve as key communicative devices in Iranian graphic design, even as their forms and meanings evolve in contemporary digital contexts.

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Author's Contribution

This study was conducted solely by the author.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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