



Safavid Textile with Birds and Flowers

Iran, Late 17th century

Woven silk, silver and gilded metal wrapped thread

19cm high, 70cm wide

Stock no.: A5825

Provenance: French private collection

This metal-ground silk textile is adorned with a repeated motif of a bird in a rosebush and a nightingale overhead with a small deer approaching the scene. In addition to the roses, a poppy, tulip, and foxglove-like plant are also evident. A particularly popular motif in Safavid art was the *gul-u-bulbul* or 'rose and nightingale'. It derives from Safavid miniatures, such as a painting of a bird on a twig with a butterfly in its beak in the British Museum, London (accession no. [1922.0316.0.1](#)). The birds in these painting may have, in turn, come from European ornithological books, such as Ulisse Aldrovandi's *Ornithologiae hoc est de avibus historiae libri XX*, published in Italy in 1634 (see Zentralbibliothek Zürich, no. [10.3931](#)). The *gul-o-bulbul* motif references Nizami's poetic image of a nightingale singing to a rose as a metaphor for unrequited love:

In every plane tree the ringdove cooed their love-stories

And on the topmost branch the nightingale was sitting.

Sighing like Majnun: while below, the rose lifted her head

Out of her calyx towards the bird, like Layla.¹

When the Safavids came to power at the turn of the 16th century, the Iranian textile industry was already well developed. However, it was under the reign of Shah Tahmasp (1524-76) that the industry began to be centralised, with royal workshops established to service the court. It was Shah 'Abbas who developed a state monopoly over the silk trade. When the capital of the Safavid Empire was established in Isfahan in 1598, Armenian textile workers were moved to New Julfa, a neighbourhood near Shah 'Abbas' palace.²

This strip would once have comprised a larger panel, with the pattern flipping so that the direction of the birds and deer alternates with each row. An example of a full silk with this pattern is held in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (accession no. [49.32.99](#)). Patterned silks were made into garments, such as overcoats, turbans and sashes, with multiple patterns clashing in one outfit. A pair of oil paintings in the Museum of Islamic Art, Qatar (accession nos PA.106.2009 and PA.72.2011) dating from the 2nd half of the 17th century provides an excellent depiction of the use of silk in male and female Iranian court dress. The tightly woven, rigid structure of this silk means it may have been more suitable for use as a curtain or door-hanging. Certain garments did, however, require rigid fabric. The liturgical copes of Armenian clerics were made from rigid fabric with metallic threads.³ An example of a silk cope with adorned with irises in metal-wrapped threads is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (accession no. [49.32.71](#)).

Other fragments of silk of the same pattern are preserved in the Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven (accession no. [1937.4871](#)) and the George Washington University Textile Museum, Washington, D.C. (accession no. [3.141](#)). A piece of silk with a similar design but with an additional rabbit motif is held in the same museum, and another with a pattern of birds and flowers is held in the Nelson Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City (accession no. [R57-9/13](#)). These textiles, like the present example, are all approximately 71.5cm-72.5cm in width, suggesting that this was the standard size of looms.

n.b. accession nos are clickable links

[1] Nizami, Layla and Majnun. pp. 61-62 in Bier, Carol (ed.) *Woven from the soul, spun from the heart: textile arts of Safavid and Qajar Iran, 16th-19th centuries*. Washington, D.C.: The Textile Museum, 1987. p. 176, cat. 20.

[2] Munroe, Nazanin Hedayat. 'Silk Textiles from Safavid Iran, 1501-1722.' In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (2012). New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000-. Retrieved online from https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/safa_3/hd_safa_3.htm on 2 August 2024.

[3] Bier. *Op. Cit.* p. 172.