GRAHAM DAY

Monoprints from the Conference of the Birds

Graham Day: 'Conference of the Birds', Monoprint 5, 83x106 cms. 1991

28th April to 14th May 1993

JALIYAN GALLERY

13 Masons Yard, St James's, London SW1

The *Manteq at-Tair*, known as the Conference or Parliament of the Birds, is a *mathnavi*, i.e. a poem in rhyming couplets composed towards the end of the twelfth-century by Farid ud-Din Attar, the celebrated Persian poet from Nishapur in north-east Iran.

It is an animal fable that involves the birds of the world in the search for their king, the Simorgh. The birds, who represent a range of human archetypes such as the timid finch and the coy duck, elect the hoopoe - because of its knowledge of the World gained whilst acting as courier between King Solomon and Bilqis, the queen of Sheba - to lead them to the object of their desire. Each bird expresses its reservations and apprehensions; each in turn is placated by the hoopoe. The journey takes them over seven valleys that chart the progress of the aspirant. Only thirty birds survive the arduous voyage and these thirty (*si* in Persian) birds (*morgh*) finally come face to face with the Simorgh. This pun is the crux of the tale: They are confronted by themselves.

Sources for Attar's story can be found in an earlier poem in the *Divan* of Sana'i, in which the different cries of the birds are interpreted as the birds' way of calling on or praising God. A second source may have been the *Kalila wa Dimna*; this extraordinarily popular work, also called the *Fables of Bidpai*, originated in India and was translated into many languages. Another work which probably influenced Attar is the Arabic treatise *The Bird* by Avicenna. This is the first person narrative of a bird (clearly representing the human soul) who is freed from a cage by other birds, and then flies off with his new companions on a journey to the 'Great King'.[1]
Annemarie Schimmel writing about Jalalodin Rumi, describes bird imagery before Attar: "The Koran has attested that birds have their special language which is understood by Solomon (sura 27/16)....take four birds and slaughter them'' (sura 2/262) these birds are explained as the duck 'greed', the peacock 'eminence', the crow 'worldly desire' and the rooster 'lust'.[2]

The imagery in Graham Day's monoprints is derived from popular talismans found in the Middle East and India. Zoomorphic calligraphy is not exclusively Persian, Arabic or Turkish; there are numerous Greek, Hebrew and Chinese examples. The motivation to twist text into images has more to do with human curiosity and ingenuity than the Islamic prohibition on image-making. The pious pictures are often associated with the Bektashi order whose origins are obscure and history fragmentary. "Its founder is said to be Haçi Bektas-i Veli (1248-1337), thought to be a descendant of the Imam Musa al-Kazim."[3] Animals, plants and human figures made of letters existed in branches of Islamic art such as metalwork of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Later Indian artists excelled in the construction of these artful tugras. "Many images consist of mirror-image halves, a symbolic reference to the exoteric (*zahir*) and esoteric (*batin*) aspects of being."[4] Day specifically chose to work with these images using relief printmaking which is inevitably concerned with mirror-images and symmetry.

Amongst the other techniques, materials and ideas in Day's interpretation is paper marbling. This purportedly Chinese method of decorating paper was practiced at Bukhara during the fourteenth century, before continuing its journey along the Silk Road to Constantinople, Venice and points further West. It is often connected with mysticism. In the Fogg Art Museum[5] there is a drawing where the artist has inked over the swirling marbled forms, creating flying sufis, animals and plants. Turkish marblers, where the technique is known as *ebru* (meaning cloud), have made the tulip motif their speciality, perhaps because of the anagram possibilities in Arabic. Day has extensively researched oriental marbling and has revitalised the integral technique where separate areas of patterns are juxtaposed using elaborate masking methods and are not collaged onto the sheet. [6]

Another link that determined the use of monoprint techniques - where the blocks are used by hand and not in a press - was anaphora; this is a literary device popular with Attar, where words or phrases are repeated and strung together like pearls:

> "Love's built on readiness to share love's shame
> Such self-regarding love usurps love's name"[7]

Day sees the repeated printing of the bird-images, which are themselves made up of text, as a visual equivalent.

This is an unusual exhibition; at first sight it appears to lack originality: why should a present-day European artist be motivated by a twelfth-century religious poem? Primarily because of the subject matter. Day has no hesitation in labelling this series as 'illustrations of', which is anathema to most contemporary artists. His idea of interpretation is to accept the grandeur and seminal quality of a work as a given force and rework it, adding a gloss or nuance that reflect the time and context of its rebirth. These working methods are standard practice in theatre, music and architecture.

The printed image fascinates Day, who as a student worked with John Furnival and the Concrete Poets at Corsham, going on to do postgraduate studies at the Slade School in London. He has lectured on fine art printmaking since 1973.

His work is in the collections of the British Library in London; the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris; the Museum of Modern Art in New York; H.H. Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan and numerous other private collections.

Finally, in this age of Western "cultural imperialism", it is reassuring to see that Persian and Arab culture can still inspire a Western artist and be enriched by it.

Rose Issa, London 1993.

1. The introduction to Attar's The Conference of the Birds, (Penguin Classic edition, transl. by Dick Davies and Afkhan Darbandi, London, 1984)

2. The Triumphal Sun (East-West publications, London and the Hague, 1980), p.113

3. Frederic De Jong, Pictorial Art of the Bektashi Order, The Dervish Lodge (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1992), p.128

4. De Jong, op. cit.

5. accession number 1950 135

6. Integral Marbling, Graham Day (Bibliothèque Municipale de Rennes, France, 1990)

7. Attar, op. cit., p.70

1 Graham Day 1991
Monoprint and marbling on handmade Indian paper.
53x83cms.

"The world's birds gathered for their conference
And said, 'Our constitution makes no sense.
All nations in the world require a King,
How is it that we alone have no such thing?".

2 Graham Day 1991
Monoprint and marbling on handmade Indian paper.
53x83cms.

"Whoever can evade the Self transcends
This world and as a lover he ascends.
Set free you're soul; impatient of delay,
Step out along our sovereign's royal way."

3 Graham Day 1991
Monoprint and marbling and gold on handmade Indian paper.
53x83cms.

"Give up the intellect for love and see,
In one brief moment all eternity;
Break nature's frame, be resolute and brave,
Then rest at peace in Unity's black cave."

4 Graham Day 1991
Monoprint and marbling on handmade Indian paper.
53x83cms.

"Why do you waste your life in slothful sleep?
Rise up, for there is nothing you can keep;
What will it profit you to comprehend
The present world when it must have an end?"

5 Graham Day 1991
Monoprint and gouache on handmade Indian paper.
83x106cms.

"And panic spread among the birds, they feared
The endless desolation which appeared.
The clung together in a huddling crowd,
Drew in their wings and wailed aloud."

6 Graham Day 1991
Monoprint and gouache on handmade Indian paper.
83x106cms.

"I am a mirror set before you're eyes,
And all who come before my splendour see
Themselves, their own unique reality."

7 Graham Day 199
Monoprint and gold on handmade Indian paper.
83x106cms.

"Though you have struggled, wandered, travelled far,
It is you yourselves you see and what you are."

8 Graham Day 1991
Monoprint and gouache on handmade Indian paper.
83x106cms.

"They see the Simorgh - at themselves they stare,
And see a second Simorgh stand there;
They look at both and see the two are one,
That this is that, that this, the goal is one."

9 Graham Day 1992
Monoprint and acrylic on handmade Indian paper.
Tryptch, each 83x53cms.

"'Before we reach our goal,' the hoopoe said,
'The journey's seven valleys lie ahead;
How far this is the world has never learned,
For no one who has gone there has returned.'"

10 Graham Day 1992
Monoprint, acrylic and gold on handmade Indian paper.
83x159cms.

"Their life came from that close, insistent sun
And in its vivid rays they shone as one.
There in the Simorgh's radiant face they saw
Themselves, the Simorgh of the world - with awe."

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