

## **An Interdisciplinary Study of the Theriomorphism Component in Human and Animal Figures in Some Illustrations of Literary Texts from the Ilkhanid and Safavid Periods**

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### **Abstract**

Iranian painting, in different periods, has been influenced by Persian literature, relying on the power of imagination, and has been transmitting narratives and moral themes.

The topic of this research is related to the painting of Ilkhanid and Safavid periods.

In the painting of this two historical period, it is observed that various techniques such as animism and characterization have been used, which often try to depict imaginary and transformed creatures that originate from a folkloric component in anthropology called theriomorphism, which is a combination of the body and spirits of animals and humans mixed together with a special and legendary force.

**Objective:** To show the presence and function of the theriomorphism component in two faces - human and animal - in the painting of the Ilkhanid and Safavid periods in Iran. **Statement of the problem:** On what basis and according to which definitions does the use of the theomorphic component create a two-level distinction between humans and animals? **Research method:** Descriptive-analytical.

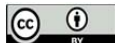
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The collection of materials is based on library studies, articles, and documentary research methods. This study analyzes the methodological and content of Iranian painting works to examine the role and application of the theromorphic component in the creation of human and animal images. Findings: It seems that the author of the text or the painter was aware of the functional role of theomorphism by that time and used it to pursue two goals with moral and psychological dimensions.

**Keywords:** Theriomorphism, Anthrozoomorphism, Imaginary Physicalism, Zoomorphism, Iranian Painting.

### 1. Introduction

In Iranian painting, various techniques of illustration have been employed, including identification in the sense of characterization, which is sometimes accompanied by an imaginary theme. Undoubtedly, this ability to create and establish a connection with the literary texts of the time demonstrates the artist's skill and mastery of various fields such as painting, literature, and philosophy. At the same time, it reflects the creative power of the artist's mind and the use of imagination, which made it possible to visually depict literary narratives. Literary texts themselves have served as descriptive guides, while the artist's imagination has been the driving force behind the creation of the characters in these paintings. Creativity, therefore, is rooted in two fundamental sources: imagination and imaginative power.

The power of imagination is one of the manifestations of God; more precisely, it is the manifestation of the noble name *Al-Maswar*. Since the divine names are true, the manifestations of these divine names are also true. Moreover, because the names are fixed—that is, verbal and objective names cannot be removed from their place without causing disruption in the system of creation—the power of imagination, too, is good and excellent in its proper position. In the best system, this power must exist and cannot be removed (Hassanzadeh Amoli, *Asl* 12).

The function of imagination and imaginative power in the creation of images enables the artist to transform inner visions into visible forms.

The artist seeks to express her inner thoughts through a composition that combines the power of human intellect with the physical strength of an animal, along with a mythical force, to create a being capable of confronting challenges and prevailing over all adversities.

These characteristics give rise to a being endowed with an inner essence of metamorphic and transformative nature. This composite entity is referred to as *theriomorphism*. In a narrower sense, the term *therianthropism* designates the anatomical combination of human and animal traits. However, scholars have also used the term to describe deities who, though primarily depicted as anthropomorphic, possess the ability to transform into animals (Policardi, 2019: 91). Examples of such *theriomorphism* include deities like Zeus and Dionysus (Walens, 2005: 9155). *Theriomorphism* is defined as the attribution of divine characteristics to non-divine composite beings, and it is most often employed in theological and philosophical discourse. Policardi (2019:91) further clarifies the distinction: “Employ the term *therianthropism* solely to refer to composite animal–human figures (and, as a subcategory, *theriocephalism* to define animal-headed or animal-faced beings), and *theriomorphism* for purely animal forms.”

“The word *Theriomorphism* has an ancient Greek root, derived from the full term *theosmorphē*” (Sojudi, Javidi, & Dehdashti, 1385: 372). The word *θεός* (*theos*) means “god,” “goddess,” or “divine” in Greek and was used in classical Greek texts. This root appears in numerous Greek religious and philosophical terms and concepts, such as *divine wisdom* and *theology*. The second component, *morphē* (μορφή), means “form,” “shape,” “transformation,” or “image/face.” It appears in words such as *morphology* and in philosophical and historical discussions of form and formation. Chiara Policardi, in her article *Mastering the Self, Meeting the Other*, introduces the concept of *theriomorphism*, citing the historical text *Nīlamatapūrāṇa*, as follows: “One of the various belief and worship systems that once existed in ancient Kashmir is introduced” (Policardi, 2015: 231). The religious conception of animal gods is considered by some scholars to have preceded anthropomorphic conceptions; however, there is no concrete evidence supporting this theory other than pictorial documents such as surviving images and sculptures. Policardi also notes that “theriomorphism is not unknown. Three incarnations of Vishnu—Matsya, Kurma, and Varaha—are mentioned in the *Nīlamata*, along with two other incarnations that demonstrate a combination of metamorphism and anthropomorphism” (Ibid.). *Theriomorphism* can, in fact, be regarded as the foundation of myth itself: “Myths were born for the reason that early humans, who had not yet mastered industry and technology, were powerless in confronting wild nature” (Najari & Safi, 2012: 11).

The component of Theriomorphism is beyond the human and animal states. This characteristic can be considered related to gods, ancient myths, and demons. On the

other hand, there is the theory of the physical representation of the imagination, which has a content close to Theriomorphism. The component of Theriomorphism, with its content of imagination, allegory, and anthropological dimensions, has a strong presence in Iranian painting works. Theriomorphism is an image of divinity, which in relation to religion means attributing animal characteristics to a non-divine being. This component is the cause of the creation of a hybrid being, of human and animal, with power, similar to demons. In Iranian culture, "a demon is a supernatural being" (Barati, 1398:30).

## 2. Statement of the problem

From an anthropological perspective, Iranian painting has moral and educational dimensions, which in some cases, with the characteristics that has a fantasy motif that has, the processing of mental and visual images has led to the creation of beings that do not exist in nature and the universe, which is known and introduced as Theriomorphism what is its basic The Theriomorphism component and according to which definitions does it include the two-level separation of the human and the animal in paintings? For what purpose is the element of Theriomorphism present in Iranian paintings? This research is of a fundamental type and seeks an answer to the questions posed and attempts to explain the Theriomorphism component in Iranian painting by explaining the relationship between the fields of literature, anthropology, psychology, and art history.

## 3. Research Method

This research is organized into two main sections. The first section analyzes the concept of the *theriomorphism* component and its role in Iranian paintings, while the second section explores and interprets the meanings of this component from the perspectives of anthropology, imaginary physicalism, and art history. The study employs a descriptive–analytical method and aims to provide a comprehensive interpretation of the concept of *theriomorphism*. Initially, the characteristics of the selected paintings are introduced, after which the *theriomorphic* component is identified and examined separately from both human and animal perspectives. The required data have been collected through the study of existing research, relevant Iranian historical texts, scholarly articles (both domestic and international), and visual documents.

#### 4. Literature Review

A review of available sources—including scholarly articles, lectures, and Iranian research databases—reveals that no study to date has specifically addressed *the component of theriomorphism in Iranian painting*. Previous studies have primarily focused on cataloging and introducing demons, devils, deities, and myths depicted in Iranian paintings from different historical periods. However, these works differ from the present study in terms of their perspectives, research approaches, hypotheses, objectives, and problem statements.

- Hessami, Hamid Reza, and Sheikhi, Alireza (1401). *The Evolution of Divs in Iranian Painting with Emphasis on Shahnameh Illustrations from the Ilkhanid Period to the End of the Qajar Period*. This article discusses how *divanism* (the depiction of demons or divs) developed a distinct visual identity through the repetition of certain artistic traditions. Features such as the shape of the hands and feet, the demon's attire, the use of ornaments, and the incorporation of hybrid forms—half-human and half-animal combinations, particularly in the structure of the skull and face—became recurring motifs. Over time, these visual commonalities contributed to a gradual standardization of the representation of divs in *Shahnameh* paintings.
- Abolhasan Moghaddi, Souda, Namwar Motlaq, Bahman (2010) in an article titled *Reopening the Concept of Jinn in the Quran and Its Comparison with the Painting of Rumi and Divanism in the Thawqeb Al-Manaqeb Edition Based on Northrop Frye's Mythological Criticism*. During the research, it was discussed that, according to the verses and interpretations of the Quran, regarding the characteristics of the jinn and how they are related to the close friends of God, the image in the paintings is not a water demon but a jinn, and as a result, it shows that Rumi caused the possession of the jinn and that jinn converted to Islam.
- Babaei-Falah, Hadi; Mohammadzadeh, Mehdi; and Khazaei, Mohammad (2018), in their article *Visual Culture of Depicting Demons in Iranian Painting*, examine the relationship between paintings and the religious and mythological texts in which demons are mentioned. Using a descriptive and analytical approach, combined with semiotics and library research, the study aims to identify common visual features in the depiction of demons and to understand the visual culture that governs their representation. Although

demons in paintings often resemble humans, jinn, or the denizens of hell—making them difficult to identify—the authors emphasize that familiarity with the subject matter and story of each painting is key to recognizing demonic figures. The visual culture governing the depiction of demons, while dependent on the audience's knowledge of the painting's narrative, manifests in two primary forms: demonic and human, each aligned with the story the painting conveys. This article differs from the preceding one primarily in terms of its verbal content.

- Jeon Ahn (2012) completed a master's thesis at Wellesley College entitled *The Return of Colonialism's Repressed: Postcoloniality in the Art of Walton Ford*. The study finds that the scale and precision of Ford's techniques are reminiscent of the pictorial realism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. His primary subjects are American animals and birds, depicted with complex characterization that references artistic, literary, and cultural-political histories. The objectives of the thesis include examining complex concepts in art archaeology, strategies for interpreting Ford's works, his adaptation and specific reinterpretation of Audubon's images, the study of natural history (biology), and a deconstructionist approach applied throughout the research. The findings relate to the socio-political implications of animal legends and advocate a postcolonial and postmodernist perspective. The thesis presents its insights in the following order:

1. Nature and narrative in the legacy of imperialism, emphasizing that nature itself carries cultural burdens.
2. Ford's practice of quoting texts from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which necessitates contextual analysis.

Overall, the project seeks to uncover repressed postcolonial narratives that are expressed through Walton Ford's art. The use of anthropomorphic personification in the thesis demonstrates Ahn's clear understanding of the distinction between anthropomorphism and zoomorphism. (Ahn, 2012)

- Robertson, Venice Laura (2013) *Anthrozoomorphic Identity and Alternative Spirituality in the Online Therianthropy Movement*. This article introduces a relatively new and lesser-known phenomenon: the socio-spiritual movement of Therianthropy. Therianthropes are individuals who identify as being biologically, mentally, and metaphysically part human and part non-human.



Unlike the preceding article, which focuses on the terramorphic function, this study emphasizes the online Therianthropy movement, though it draws on some content from the earlier article as referenced in the text. It makes little reference to the presence of the terramorphic component in society and primarily addresses contemporary developments.

## 5. Findings

The connection between painting and literature in Iran is inseparable, as most works of Iranian painting are derived from literary texts. Among these works, some exhibit a surreal or imaginative theme. This group of paintings reflects animatism and anthropomorphic characteristics, with origins tracing back to earlier periods. Animatism refers to the act of giving life to objects that are otherwise lifeless. Jean Piaget defines anthropomorphism as “giving life to everything that is inanimate” (Piaget, 1933, p. 534), though anthropomorphism specifically involves attributing human-like qualities or personality to entities beyond their original nature. Shafi'i Kadkani, a contemporary Iranian poet, observes that “the field of anthropomorphism has expanded from humans to animals” (Shafi'i Kadkani, 1372, p. 153), suggesting that certain human behaviors may be projected onto animals. While animatism and anthropomorphism are distinct concepts, both share a foundation in fantasy. According to available interpretations and sources, fantasy relies on two fundamental capacities: imaginative power and the power of imagination. The difference between these lies in the functions they perform (Table 1).

**Table 1 – Differences between the Two Powers of Imagination and the Faculty of Imagination According to Selected Philosophers.**

Imagination	<p>Al-Farabi: “The function of this faculty transcends both sense and reason” (Bazargan, 1402:137).</p> <p>Avicenna: “A faculty is called intellectual when it is used by reason, and imaginal when it is an animal force.” (Avicenna, 1430:230)</p>
Power of Imagination	<p>Al-Farabi: In his view, the power of imagination is a faculty of the soul “responsible for preserving the forms of sensible things and for their decomposition and synthesis” (Al-Farabi, 1371:182).</p> <p>Avicenna: “The power of imagination, as a consequence of the perception of partial forms, is by no means devoid of material interests, and for this reason, it requires physical instruments” (Avicenna, 1430:167).</p>

Compiled by the authors.

The position of the theriomorphism component in literature is closely related to its similarities with certain literary devices. Theriomorphism resembles metaphor and simile due to its inherent capacity for metamorphosis and mental transformation. As Tarihi (1983, vol. 5, p. 471) notes, "Simile in the general sense is synonymous with analogy, and whatever meaning is intended from analogy is also intended from simile. The use of the root of the word simile, i.e., likeness, further confirms this meaning." Logicians also view the relationship between simile and analogy as reciprocal: every analogy is a simile, and every simile can be considered an analogy. Mohammad Aref (1403:108) similarly writes, "A metaphor is a simile that everyone needs and it does not need anyone."

The similarity between theriomorphism and simile is particularly evident in the narrative function of both, as each describes one thing in terms of another. Zabihullah Safa (1392:448) explains simile as "similarity based on falsehood or accompanied by exaggeration; that is, we must liken two things that are not actually similar or do not clearly resemble each other." In other words, imagination forms are "imaginary or expressive arrays examined within the internal form of style. Imagination is one of the main elements of poetry, encompassing simile, metaphor, and allusion" (Najari & Morshedi, 2014:136).

Among philosophers, Suhrawardi also addresses this issue. According to Hassanzadeh Amoli (2002:194), "Suhrawardi's approach to the abstraction of imaginary powers, implicitly following the practice of the Masha'is, was based on the physical representation of the imagination." This physical representation includes three elements: body, image, and imagination, which at a higher level are transformed into forms. In this framework, body corresponds to physical substance, image to embodiment and representation, and imagination to illusion. Physicalism, defined as "a philosophical theory that believes all that exists, whether physical or mental, is ultimately reducible to physical things or processes. Nothing exists outside the physical realm, and all phenomena can be explained using physical science" (Stoljar, 2009:5), when combined with imagination, results in form-like or shaped phenomena. These three dimensions are central to the creation of imaginary beings, studied in fields such as anthropology, phenomenology, and epistemology under the term **theriomorphism**, which denotes imagination and transformation.

Stephen Brown (2011:5) describes theriomorphism as "the attribution of illusory, imaginary, supernatural, or fantastic characteristics to a character," often involving shapeshifting or surreal combinations. In psychology, the related term



**therianthropy** refers to “a concept that combines human and animal characteristics” (Clegg, Collings & Roxburgh, 2019:29) and appears across cultural, psychological, and mythological contexts. The word derives from the Greek *therion* (beast) and *anthropos* (human), while Brown also notes a related Greek root, *téras*, meaning monster, marvel, or superhuman phenomenon (2011:5). Historically, therianthropy appeared in sixteenth-century criminal trials against suspected werewolves (Ramsland, 2005:256).

This physical and mental transformation is evident in folklore, mythology, and modern subcultures, including communities known as **therians**, who participate in movements promoting non-human ontology, often categorized as bloodsuckers or psychic energy feeders (Robertson, 2013:10). The belief or experience of being part-animal is often described as a mental or psychological state, encompassing aspects of identity and belief in which individuals feel a deep connection with non-human animals and may perceive themselves as part of a supernatural animal kingdom.

The theriomorphism component thus intersects with multiple dimensions—including history, society, biology, psychology, and philosophy—highlighting its interdisciplinary significance. These dimensions are summarized in Table 2.

**Table 2 – The Theriomorphism Component Across Various Categories and Sources.**

Environmental Art	Elements of Theriomorphism have been applied across various art forms, including literature, visual arts, and performance. "These works explore themes of transformation, identity, and the relationship between humans and nature" (McCaffrey, 1986, p. 377).
Philosophical Perspectives	"These works examine the relationship between humans and nature, including discussions of landscape transformation, particularly within environmental philosophy" (Stoljar, 2009, p. 5).
Psychology	In contemporary times, individuals who identify as Therians "often describe having a spiritual or psychological connection to a particular animal. This connection may manifest as an affinity for the animal's traits and behaviors or even a belief that they embody the essence or spirit of that animal. Others interpret this experience through the lens of psychological phenomena, such as intense supernatural animal identity disorders or constructs related to mythical creatures" (Brazil & Halverson, 2019, pp. 50–85).
Mythological and Historical Context	Throughout history, figures such as gods, myths, werewolves, vampires, in Western popular culture, skinwalkers in Navajo tradition, and ancient Egyptian gods have combined human and animal characteristics in cultural stories that are sometimes anti-human.

**Source: Authors**

Theriomorphism is a complex, interactive phenomenon, encompassing identity, culture, and personal experience. Whether examined through the lenses of mythology, psychology, or contemporary identity studies, it remains a rich area of exploration for researchers seeking to articulate a unique connection to the animal world. In most texts and studies, theriomorphism also refers to processes of transformation and metamorphosis, often depicted in art, where animals, objects, or figures morph into one another, creating surreal and hybrid combinations.

### **6. The Presence of Theriomorphism in Iranian Painting**

Painting in Iran has been strongly influenced by literature, encompassing national, religious, and mythological themes. In depicting characters and landscapes, Iranian artists often reflect their imagination by transforming natural forms into artistic and abstract perceptions. The use of human and animal forms, known as the theriomorphism component, is evident in Iranian painting through the merging of human and animal figures.

The combination of animal and human is essentially an antrozomorphic identity, representing one of the spiritual and supernatural associations of the animal kingdom. These figures are introduced as animal-human shapeshifters, highlighting the sacred and liminal identity that such individuals formulate through engagement with popular occult practices (Robertson, 2013, p. 7).


Anterzomorph identity describes the connections of furry fandom members with non-human animals (Roberts, Plante, Gerbasi, & Reysen, 2015).

The theriomorphism component is complex, as it combines multiple elements. It emerges from the intersection of human imagination with a higher, supernatural force and is fundamentally rooted in human thought. To fully understand its significance, theriomorphism can be categorized into two aspects: its manifestation in humans and in animals.



### **7. Theramorphism in the Animal Body**

The Theramorphism, originates from human thought and thought, has the ability to manifest itself in various forms and bodies. In the first stage, it appears in the form and body of an animal, which is combined with the anthropomorphism component, which is accompanied by a powerful force that transforms into the Theramorphism component. This type of combination is abundantly seen in Iranian painting, and this research has attempted to address less frequently seen examples.


Table 3 - Theramorphism component in some Iranian paintings.

 <p>Image 1 - Iranian painting from the book of Al-Mawlid.</p> <p><a href="https://i.pinimg.com/736x/3e/b8/84/3eb884af28e5dc476a4d7c5bf9760045.jpg">https://i.pinimg.com/736x/3e/b8/84/3eb884af28e5dc476a4d7c5bf9760045.jpg</a></p>	<p>This image is taken from one of the paintings in the <i>Book of Al-Mawlid</i>. The depicted demon resembles a goat-like animal that exhibits human behavior and characteristics, representing an anthropomorphic component. In addition to its human-like conduct, its clothing, posture, and even the act of speaking emphasize its human qualities. This example perfectly illustrates an anthrozomorphic form that has developed into a theriomorphic component. By combining animal imagery with human attributes, it manifests a superior and imaginary force that transforms it into a mythical being or demon, referred to as the theriomorphic component.</p> <p>The image of a goat with human behavior is frequently seen in the art of various religions. Some texts state that it was “used as a sign for pagans (a term used to refer to infidels in the Middle Ages) in the texts of the Inquisition of the Knights Templar in the 14th century AD” (Barber, 1994, p. 375). From this reference, the goat endowed with satanic power came to be called <i>Baphomet</i>. Originally, it symbolized the beliefs or deities of the Knights Templar, whom the Church accused of worshipping it. Later, these symbols were adopted by secret societies, such as the Freemasons, and by groups opposing religious tyranny, including Satanists. Most depictions of demons display human characteristics because they are imagined as beings with emotions similar to those of humans, constantly lurking around them. As the Qur'an says:</p> <p>“Remember when Satan made the deeds of the polytheists seem fair to them, and said: ‘No man can overcome you today, for I am your ally.’ But when he saw the two parties (the warriors and the angelic support of the believers), he turned back and said: ‘Indeed, I am disassociated from you. I see what you do not see’” (<i>Al-Anfal</i>, verse 48).</p>	<p>1</p>
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<div data-bbox="371 497 715 949"></div> <div data-bbox="371 963 722 1088"><p>Image 2 - Ta-Rish, the king of the domestic jinn, hunting a lion, Book of Al-Mawlid. <a href="https://i.pinimg.com/736x/3e/b8/84/3eb884af28e5dc476a4d7c5bf9760045.jpg">https://i.pinimg.com/736x/3e/b8/84/3eb884af28e5dc476a4d7c5bf9760045.jpg</a></p></div>	<div data-bbox="751 627 1187 969"><p>This image depicts <b>Tarish</b>, the king of the domestic jinn, from the <i>Book of Al-Mawlid</i> by <b>Abu Ma'shar al-Balkhi</b>. King Tarish has a face resembling a combination of a lion and a cow, with long horns similar to those of a buffalo, and a body that resembles that of a feline. He is shown hunting a lion that has been wounded by a snake, while another snake appears in the lion's mouth. This scene may relate to a passage from the ninth-century writer <b>Al-Jahiz</b> in his <i>Book of Al-Hayawan</i>, where he states that "preventive charms can be used to hunt snakes in houses" (<i>Al-Jahiz</i>, 392, vol. 4).</p></div>	<div data-bbox="1214 788 1230 806"><p>2</p></div>
<div data-bbox="389 1234 697 1686"></div> <div data-bbox="371 1700 722 1753"><p>Image 3 – Ekvan the demon hurls Rostam into the sea.</p></div>	<div data-bbox="751 1314 1187 1688"><p>In this image, six demons are depicted, each with distinct identities. Two of the demons have black skin and dog-like red eyes. Their hands and feet resemble those of wolves. The demons' crescent-shaped horns, human-like ears, and feline snout, mouth, and nose together create a hybrid, animalistic face. The tail of each demon is designed in the form of a snake or dragon, with an open mouth and visible fangs. The similarity between these two figures lies in their identity: "The demon <i>Mitukht</i> represents rude speech and ugly words. He is the first creation of the devil and is the demon who brings suspicion" (Hinles, 1385, p. 160).</p></div>	<div data-bbox="1214 1491 1230 1509"><p>3</p></div>

 <p>Image 4 – The scene depicts Rostam killing the White Demon (Seventh Period) (Sheila R., 1993, p. 59).</p>	<p>The werewolf myth is deeply rooted in human history, reflecting humanity's fears, values, and psychological complexities. The legend became closely associated with the local traditions of <b>Arcadia</b>, a region in ancient Greece, where <b>Zeus</b> was worshipped as <i>Lycian Zeus</i> ("Wolf Zeus"). Around 380 BC, the Greek philosopher <b>Plato</b> recounted the story of a <i>guardian-turned-tyrant</i> of the temple of Lycian Zeus, linking human transformation to divine punishment. In popular culture, a <b>werewolf</b>—derived from Old English "<i>wolf-man</i>" or the Ancient Greek equivalent—is described as a person who can transform into a wolf or a hybrid wolf-humanoid creature, either intentionally or as the result of a curse or misfortune. Such transformations are often said to occur during the full moon or after being bitten or scratched by another werewolf (de Blécourt, 2015, p. 34).</p>	<p>4</p>
 <p>Image 5 – Depiction of the Battle of Tahrurth with Divan, from the <i>Shahnameh</i> of Tahmaspi, Tabriz School.</p>	<p>In this image, there are six demons, each with distinct identities. Two of them have black skin and red, dog-like eyes. Their hands and feet resemble those of wolves. The demons have crescent-shaped horns, human ears, and feline features in their snouts, mouths, and noses, giving them an overall animal-like appearance. Their tails are shaped like snakes or dragons, with open mouths and visible fangs. The similarity between these two demons is that "the demon Mitukht represents rude speech and ugly words. He is the first creation of the devil and is the demon who brings suspicion" (Hinles, 1385, p. 160).</p>	<p>5</p>



 <p>Image 6 – A depiction of the Battle of Rostam and the White Demon, from the <i>Shahnameh</i> of Tahmasbi (Tabriz School). Source: <a href="http://www.artsy.net">www.artsy.net</a></p>	<p>This painting is attributed to two prominent Safavid painters, Mir Masovar and Abdol-Wahhab, of the Tabriz school. It depicts the battle between Rostam and the White Demon. The face of the White Demon resembles that of a dog. In this painting, Rostam's clothing, as described in the <i>Shahnameh</i>, consists of a robe resembling tiger skin, and he wears a hat made from the head and skin of a tiger. In fact, we also observe a kind of zoomorphic component in Rostam's appearance, which conveys the awe-inspiring qualities of the tiger.</p> <p>Zoomorphism (Zhang ,2022,19) is part of the theriomorphic component. It refers to "the tendency to view human behavior in terms of animal characteristics" (Dunwich, 1997, p. 7). In this painting, the concept is reflected in Rostam's clothes and hat. The term was coined by Rostovtsev, who referred to early forms of it as "animalistic art" or "zoomorphic art" (Claudia, Sergievich, &amp; Tourtellotte, 2023, p. 14). Zoomorphism is "the attribution of animal characteristics to anything other than the animal itself."</p> <p>6</p>
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Source: Authors

Theriomorphism has deep roots in most cultures, which may stem from the human aspiration to augment physical strength and dominance over nature.

**8. Theriomorphism in the Human**



The theriomorphic component, as it is capable of incarnating in an animal body, can also manifest itself in the human body as its primary form. Just as a human being who adopts the attributes of a demon or a god may possess the appearance of a human face while exhibiting the savage temperament of an animal and the malevolent power of a demon. In fact, it is defined as a combination of qualities that include the zoomorphic component, along with superior strength and power—encompassing the intelligence of a human and the courage and fearlessness of an animal.



When gods change their shape and assume the form of a fearsome and powerful animal, as often occurs in Greek mythology, this is not merely zoomorphism but a





subset of theriomorphism. This combination is referred to as **anthrozoomorphic**—a term that combines *anthro-* (referring to humans) and *zoomorphic* (referring to animal forms). “The technique can serve a variety of purposes, including exploring human nature, providing moral lessons, or offering entertainment in a relatable way” (Roberts, Plante, Gerbasi, & Reysen, 2015).

Gods, goddesses, and demons in Iranian painting serve as clear examples of the manifestation of the theriomorphic component in the human figure. For instance, the god of time and fate, Zorvan, is an ancient deity who held significant importance and had his own cult in pre-Zoroastrian times. “The god Zorvan is both the god of light and the god of darkness, because he is both the father of Hormozd and the father of Ahriman” (Zamani, Mohammad Rezaei, 1403, p. 156). It is Zorvan’s humanoid identity that makes him a perfect example of theriomorphism.

<p>1</p>  <p><b>Image 7. Rostam Killing the Sorcerer in Khan IV, Topkapi Saray Library, Istanbul.</b></p>	 <p>This image depicts a sorcerer with a human body and form, yet exhibiting animalistic behavior, highlighting the presence of animal traits within a human figure. The sorcerer’s dark skin conveys a sense of evil and power, while his claws resemble those of a wolf. As Ebrahimi (1392, p. 68) explains, “A demon in Iranian culture is a supernatural being depicted with a distinctive form and appearance. Demons are described as harmful and unnatural creatures, often black-skinned, with long boar-like teeth, thick lips, and occasionally blue eyes. Their bodies are covered with dense hair and adorned with multiple horns, tails, large ears, and a pair of wings; they are also cannibalistic.”</p>
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2	<div data-bbox="395 495 687 891"></div> <p data-bbox="395 907 687 963"><b>Image 8.</b> <i>King of the Jinn Zub'ah Abu Hassan</i>, from <i>The Book of Al-Mawalid</i>.</p> <p data-bbox="459 976 624 999"><a href="https://i.pining.com/">https://i.pining.com/</a></p> <p data-bbox="448 1012 635 1034">/736x/3e/b8/84/3eb884a</p> <p data-bbox="448 1048 635 1070">f28e5dc476a4d7c5bf976</p> <p data-bbox="507 1084 576 1106">0045.jpg</p>	<p data-bbox="726 421 1238 573">Zub'ah Abu Hassan (also known as Aba al-Nur al-Abiyyah Zub'ah), titled “<i>Storm, Father of the Well-Clad</i>” (<i>Al-Abiyyah</i>), is the King of Zub'ah and the Lord of Friday. Associated with Venus, he is depicted as green in color, connected with the metal iron, and is overseen by the angel Anael (Anyael).</p> <p data-bbox="726 586 1238 999">This creature has ochre-yellow skin and four animal heads. Two of the heads are in profile, positioned on the main head, featuring hooked noses and two green eyes that glow with red flames. The upper head bears two bull horns curving inward, a symbol of satanic influence. According to Dehkhoda’s dictionary, Zub'ah is “the name of a devil or a chief of fairies, and hence the name of the whirlwind is Zub'ah, Umm Zub'ah, and Abu Zub'ah” (Dehkhoda). One of the kings of the jinn of Nusaybin (or the jinn of the island) belonged to a group of jinn who were originally Jewish but converted to Islam after hearing verses from the Qur'an recited by the Prophet (PBUH) during his morning congregational prayer, either outside the market of Ukaz, in Hajun, or beneath the heart of a palm tree.</p> <p data-bbox="726 1012 1238 1196">Their number is sometimes reported as seven, eight, nine, or ten. There are also variations in the recording of their names; however, the following have been mentioned: Shasir, Shasi, Masir, Basir, Messi, Munshi, Mashi, Al-Ahqab, Al-Ahqam, Amr ibn Jabir, Al-Ard, Ward, Eitan, Inan, Hassi, Sarq, Khasa, Shasa, and Zub'ah (Balnesi, vol. 2, p. 501).</p>
3	<div data-bbox="386 1256 697 1550"></div> <p data-bbox="395 1565 687 1653"><b>Image 9.</b> <i>Bazur the Sorcerer Brings Darkness and Storm to His Feet</i>, folio from the <i>Shahnameh (Book of Kings)</i>.</p> <p data-bbox="437 1666 646 1688"><a href="https://www.rawpixel.com/">https://www.rawpixel.com/</a></p> <p data-bbox="410 1702 673 1753">image/9613492/image-abu-qasim-firdausi-iranian-1920</p>	<p data-bbox="726 1451 1238 1570">During the battle between the Persians and the Turanians, a sorcerer named Bazur (depicted here in a blue cloak) climbs a mountain and conjures a blizzard that engulfs the Persian forces. This image illustrates the demonic influence on the human soul.</p>

<p>4</p>	 <p><b>Image 10.</b> <i>The Face of a Genie</i>, from <i>The Book of Al-Mawlid</i>.  <a href="https://i.pinimg.com/736x/3e/b8/84/3eb884af28e5dc476a4d7c5bf9760045.jpg">https://i.pinimg.com/736x/3e/b8/84/3eb884af28e5dc476a4d7c5bf9760045.jpg</a>  pg</p>	<p>Mohammad ibn Mahmud al-Tusi, in his <i>Ajaib al-Makhlūqat</i>, describes a type of jinn in India who “from head to waist were in the form of humans, and from waist down, in the form of animals” (Tusi, <i>Ajaib al-Makhlūqat</i>, vol. 1, p. 507). Some jinn may have a human body with an animal head, or hands and feet resembling those of animals. Others, in order to deceive and harm humans, disguise themselves in human form (Fazuni Astarabadi, 1328, vol. 1, p. 527).</p>
<p>5</p>	 <p><b>Image 11.</b> <i>The Battle of Ali and the Jinn</i>. Source: <i>Ahsan Al-Kubār fī Ma'rifaṭ Al-A'imamah Al-A'thaar</i> (Gray, 1930, p. 82).</p> 	<p>According to Al-Jahiz, “Every type of jinn, whether male or female, that appeared to travelers in various forms, was a giant” (Qazvini, 1849, Vol. 1, p. 370; Barakhshi, 1374, Vol. 1, p. 249).</p> <p>In this painting, which depicts the battle between Imam Ali (AS) and the jinn, two members of the jinn group stand out from the others. One of these is a demon with a human body but fiery red skin and flaming eyes that convey a sense of destructive power. This jinn shows no animal characteristics, distinguishing it from other figures. The second character similarly lacks any animal traits.</p>

<p>6</p>  <p><b>Image 12.</b> <i>The Battle of Talmurth with Divan</i>, from the <i>Shahnameh of Tahmaspi</i>, Tabriz School.</p>	 <p>In this depiction, the demon has a human face and body. Elements that categorize as human include its hands, smile, and gaze which convey thought and awareness. At the same time, animal characteristics are subtly present such as its limbs, two horns, and long sharp teeth, blending human and animal traits in a single figure.</p>
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## 9. Conclusion

The theriomorphic component encompasses dimensions of moral teaching that have contributed to the creation of imaginary beings, formed in the artist's mind through psychological characteristics. Humans possess a range of aspirations and desires that are often unattainable, which they cultivate in their imagination. The creation of such beings reflects unspoken needs and deep, unconscious desires.

Due to physical weakness and limitations, humans have always sought ways to express strength and overcome these constraints. This vulnerability has stimulated the development of mental powers and imagination, enabling humans to envision themselves as more powerful, superior, and beyond natural limitations. Consequently, the imagination has been strengthened, giving rise to ideas that surpass objective reality.

Through this process, various mythical and imaginary creatures emerged, combining human and animal characteristics. These symbolic beings reflect the inner dualities of humanity and its desires. One significant concept in this context is the theriomorphic component, which appears in literary works and, through these ancient texts, dominates the imagery in Iranian painting. In Iranian paintings, the presence of these composite creatures can be analyzed and interpreted in two main ways:

- **In the human form**, these figures represent the lofty and often unattainable aspirations and desires of humanity, particularly the pursuit of immortality,

unlimited power, or abilities that humans do not naturally possess (such as wings, horns, or control over fire). These traits are depicted visually in paintings as symbolic expressions of mankind's desire to overcome natural and physical limitations—a theme with deep historical roots. Just as humans have historically felt powerless in the face of natural disasters, these images reflect the conceptualization of a restraining or transformative force in the human mind.

- **In the animal form**, these creatures symbolize humanity's struggle with the soul's darker impulses and destructive desires. In paintings depicting humans in conflict with demons, the carnal or evil aspects of the self are often represented through demonic or monstrous figures, symbolizing the challenges and moral struggles humans face. In some works, following literary sources, this struggle is framed as the broader conflict between good and evil, in which humans may sometimes succumb or fail.

The interpretations of the theriomorphic component described above, in addition to their symbolic and psychological dimensions, also possess moral significance. The design and illustration of these creatures by pictorial artists, using specific techniques and symbolism, convey moral and spiritual messages. *Recognition* serves as a tool for analyzing visual elements and symbols, carrying profound philosophical meaning in the depiction of these composite beings. It becomes evident that the theriomorphic component—both in literary texts and in their visual representations, shaped by the artists' interpretations of these texts—reflects human challenges, cultural heritage, and existential concerns, inviting viewers to contemplate their own existence, the universe, and their place within it.

## Endnotes

1. **Anthropomorphism:** This term is derived from the Greek roots *anthropos* (meaning "human") and *morph* (meaning "form"). It refers to the attribution of human characteristics to animals. "It is the explicit addition of human characteristics to something other than human" (Guthrie, 1995, p. 28). In 1753, the term was also used to explain the polytheistic practice of attributing human form to deities in Christianity (Hornby, 2012, p. 55).
2. Al-Jahiz, Abu Uthman Amr ibn Bahr, was a Mu'tazilite theologian, writer, and prolific author of the third century. He wrote *The Book of Animals* in seven volumes. A Mu'tazilite scholar, zoologist, psychologist, eloquent speaker, and calligrapher, he was also a member of the House of Wisdom and a native of Basra, to whom the Jahiziyyah sect is attributed (Setayshgar, 1376, Vol. 3, p. 45).
3. Anthrozoomorphism is a term that combines "*anthro*," relating to humans, and "*zoomorphic*," relating to animal forms. This technique can serve various purposes, such as exploring human nature,



conveying moral lessons, or providing entertainment in meaningful ways. Roberts, Plante, Gerbasi, and Reysen (2015) define *anthrozoomorphic identity* as the connection between members of the furry fandom and non-human animals.

4. **Morphology:** The term *morphology* is generally attributed to the German poet, novelist, playwright, and philosopher Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), who coined it in the early 19th century in a biological context. The word derives from Greek, where *morph-* means “shape” or “form,” and *-logy* denotes “the study of.” In biology, morphology refers to the study of the form and structure of living organisms; in geology, it concerns the configuration and evolution of landforms; and in linguistics, it denotes the mental system involved in word formation (Aronoff & Fudeman, 2016, p. 1).
5. **Mikhail Ivanovich Rostovtzeff:** Rostovtzeff was a Russian historian whose scholarly work in the 19th and 20th centuries focused on ancient Greece and Rome. He was a member of the Russian Academy of Sciences, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the American Philosophical Society. He summarized his expertise in this field in works such as *Iranians and Greeks in Southern Russia* (1922) and *Scythia and the Bosphorus* (1925). His most significant archaeological discoveries at Yale University are documented in *Dura-Europos and Its Art* (1938). The concept of zoomorphism describes a historical artistic style characterized by the depiction of imaginary animals, hunting scenes, and animal carvings—often embossed in precious metals such as gold, silver, and bronze—frequently found in burial sites across Eurasia. How the semi-sedentary agricultural-pastoral societies of Talgar aligned themselves with the aristocratic traditions of the nomadic elite remains an important question (Andreeva, 2023, p. 24).
6. **Zoomorphism:** It can be defined as an artistic style that depicts one species of animal as another, or as art that employs animal forms as visual motifs—sometimes referred to as the *animalistic style* (Najovits, 2004, p. 40).

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