

## A Comparative Study of the Lion Motif in Sassanid and Seljuk Metal Works

### Abstract

The art of metalwork enjoyed a significant growth during the Sassanid era and turned this history into a glorious period in the metalworking art of Iran before Islam. After the arrival of Islam, metalworking continued with a short break and reached its peak during the Seljuk period. The metal works of these two glorious periods of Iranian metalwork have been rich in various decorative motifs. In the interim, animal motifs are abundantly seen in metal works, and in fact, it can be declared that the distinctive feature of Sassanid and Seljuk metal works are the use of animal motifs, and the motif of the "Lion" is the most abundantly applied role. The current research has been conducted with the aim of a comparative study of the motif of the lion in sixteen samples of Sassanid and Seljuk metal works, and the result shows that the motif of this animal was drawn realistically and imaginatively in both periods; furthermore, the types of drawing methods include: ١ - the composition of similitude; ٢ - the scene of catching and grasping; ٣ - the combination of the lion and the sun; ٤ - the scene of chasing and fleeing; ٥ - in the form of a vessel handles; ٦ - symbolically between winged creatures and finally ٧ - in the form of hybrid-imaginary beings. This research has been accomplished with a historical-descriptive method and follows a comparative approach by relying on library sources.

### Research aims:

١. Expressing the features and how to draw the motif of the lion in the metal works of the Sassanid and Seljuk eras.
٢. Determining the visual similarities and differences of the lion motif applied in Sassanid and Seljuk metal works.

### Research questions:

١. Is the motif of the lion used in Seljuk metal works influenced by Sassanid metal works?
٢. What were the visual features and common themes in the use of the lion motif in the Sassanid and Seljuk periods?

**Keywords:** lion motif, metalwork, Sassanid period, Seljuk period.

## Introduction

Animal motifs in decorative and applied arts of Iran, especially metal works, have occupied an significant place since ancient times. One of the most important of these animal motifs is the "lion" motif, which has always acquired its symbolic meanings in different periods of Iranian culture, and is seen abundantly in the Sassanid era with special splendor and effect. Since the symbolic themes of the motifs include the religious and cultural beliefs of their time and play a key role in introducing the thoughts of the people of their time, it can be said that the beliefs of the people have had a significant impact on the type of drawings of animal motifs. Among the symbolic meanings of this animal include fire, majesty, piety, sunshine, victory, summer, bravery, spirit of life, predatory, king of animals, royalty, courage, reason, pride, thought, divine thinking, strength of soul, watchfulness, care and human power (Dador, ۲۰۰۶: ۷۴). After the Sassanid period and the arrival of Islam in Iran, especially during the Seljuk period, the motif of the lion is considered significant; as well as the image of the lion and the sun also seen in this era. The lion has continued to exist in the Islamic era and has preserved almost all its characteristics and symbols. It was also accepted by Islamic religious beliefs (Tahiri-Wahsami, ۲۰۱۳: ۳۰). The main problem of the current research is to discover the type of changes in the visual qualities and the themes of the application of the motif of the lion in the Sassanid and Seljuk periods and their probable changes. The main goals of this research are: to express the characteristics and the way of drawing the motif of the lion in the metal works of the Sassanid and Seljuk periods; and determining the visual similarities and differences of the lion motif used in Sassanid and Seljuk metal works. In line with the mentioned goals, the art of metalworking in the Sassanid and Seljuk eras has been briefly described.

The research method of this research is historical-descriptive with a comparative approach and the method of collecting information is carried out in library form. Also, the sample images of metal works in libraries and museums have been examined. The statistical population of this research are sixteen samples of metal works, of which eight samples are related to the Sassanid era and eight samples are related to the Seljuk period, which are preserved at the Metropolitan Museum, the Hermitage of St. Petersburg, London, Victoria and Albert, Kansas City, Reza Abbasi, Cleveland Art and the National Library of France.

Thus far, many researches have been conducted regarding the influence of Islamic art on Sassanid art. However, no research has exclusively discussed the issue under study in the present article. In the book "Influence of Sassanid Art on Islamic Art" the technique of artworks and the influence of the art of the Sassanid period on the art and architecture of the Islamic ages have been discussed (Zamani, ۱۳۸۰). Also, in an article titled "The Role of Sasanian Art Decorations in the Formation of Islamic Art in the Third to Fifth Hijri Centuries", it was concluded that national beliefs and artistic traditions, especially the visual arts of ancient Iran, played a vital role in the creation and flourishing of Islamic art of the third to fifth centuries. Hijri (Khazaei, ۱۳۸۶). In another article entitled "The Motif of the Lion of the Silk Carpets of the Metropolitan Museum", the lion motif and its various modes of drawing are examined and discussed (Tahiri and Hesami, ۱۳۹۳).

The Sassanid and Seljuk eras constitute two glorious periods of metalworking in Iran, one before Islam and the other after Islam. Correspondingly, undoubtedly the efforts of a number of rulers and Seljuk artists in reviving the pictorial tradition of the Sassanid period have led to similarities in the use of animal motifs in the metal works of the two periods. Despite the fact that no research has been conducted specifically in relation to the comparison of the animal motif of the lion in the existing metal works of the two periods of Sassanid and Seljuk, it seems necessary that the present study should be carried out in a meticulously and delicately manner.

## Conclusion

The presence of the lion motif in various forms in the metal works of the Sassanid period and its continuity in the metal works of the Islamic period, especially the Seljuk period, verifies that this role was institutionalized in the mythological and religious beliefs of the Iranian people. Based on the investigation and comparison carried out in this research, it is conceivable to express various modes for drawing the motif of the lion in the metal works of the two mentioned periods while maintaining the symbolic themes, which are: ۱- in the combination of analogies, ۲- In gripping scenes in order to represent symbolic themes, ۳- in the form of a combination of lion and sun in order to express cosmic themes, ۴- in the chase scene, ۵- in the form of a vessel handles in order to represent the tradition of symbolism, ۶- in a symbolic form between winged creatures with the concept of guardian and protector, ۷- in the form of mixed creatures and the form of a winged lion. In terms of visual quality, it can be said that in the Sassanid period, drawing and engraving the image of a lion on metal works was accomplished

with strong and clear environmental lines and the induction of its violence and rapacity was completed. However, during the Seljuk period metal works, in the representation of the motif of the lion, the surrounding lines are often more delicate and weaker, and there is no trace of violence and vehemence; additionally, the motif is shown in the form of positive and negative surfaces. It also seems that there has not been a dramatic change in the representation of the appearance of the motif of the lion, and in both periods this motif has been observed in a completely realistic manner with detailed face painting, and in some cases by adding features such as wings and a beak for a more abstract effect. Regarding the symbolic themes related to this motif, it can be said that during the Sassanid period, the motif was applied in various scenes in connection with the concepts of monarchy, power, guardian and also the dominance of the seasons (cosmic conflict) and this continued to the Seljuk era with the same themes. By examining and comparing the samples Seljuk metalwork, it was understood that similar to their predecessors, the Sassanids, they highly accepted the significance of the lion motif and despite the spread of the new religion, Islam, they accepted all its symbolic features and themes, and in the way of drawing this motif, they did not make many changes to the metal works of this period from the visual point of view and method of engraving, merely in a number of cases they simply changed the form of engraving based on the style of Islamic drawings.

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