

SPIRITS INSIDE/ OUTSIDE THE FRAME - A NEW FIGURATIVE REPRESENTATION FOR THE ANCIENT EGYPTIAN SYMBOL THE 'BA'.

أرواح داخل/ خارج الإطار - تناول تشكيلي جديد للرمز المصري القديم الـ 'با'

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ABSTRACT

The avian humanoid hybrid creatures appeared in many visual representations in Egypt and other different cultures, either as human-headed birds or bird-headed humans, however, the Ba - soul bird - from Ancient Egypt, was the clearest ancient representation of human-headed birds, among other examples. The main objective here is to revive the depiction of the Ba - soul bird - and represent it by new forms of the human-headed bird imagery using the hoopoe birds. This paper is a documentation of the process of the paintings executed by the researcher between March 2020 and April 2021, which will be discussed until they got exhibited in the small art gallery of the Faculty of Fine Arts-Helwan university in May 2021. This output follows previous theoretical research that the researcher executed earlier, which presented a brief history of the appearance of such depiction - of the human-headed bird hybrid creature - in many different cultures.

KEYWORDS

Ba; Hoopoe; Human-Headed Birds

المخلص

المخلوقات الهجينة من الطيور البشرية ظهرت في العديد من التمثيلات التشكيلية في مصر والثقافات المختلفة، إما كطيور برؤوس بشرية أو بشر برؤوس طيور، ومع ذلك فإن البيا - طائر الروح - من مصر القديمة، كان أوضح تمثيلاً قديماً للطيور ذات الرأس البشرية بين العديد من الأمثلة الأخرى. الهدف الرئيسي من هذا البحث هنا هو إحياء رسم رمز البيا - طائر الروح - وتمثيله بأشكال جديدة من هجين الطيور ذات الرأس البشرية باستخدام جسم طائر الهدهد. هذه الورقة البحثية عبارة عن توثيق لعملية تنفيذ اللوحات التي قامت بعملها الباحثة في الفترة ما بين مارس ٢٠٢٠ وأبريل ٢٠٢١، والتي سيتم شرحها ومناقشتها حتى تم عرضها في صالة العرض الفنية الصغيرة بكلية الفنون الجميلة - جامعة حلوان - في مايو عام ٢٠٢١. يأتي هذا النتاج بعد بحث نظري سابق أجرته الباحثة في وقت سابق وقدمت فيه نبذة تاريخية عن ظهور هذا التصوير - للمخلوقات الهجينة من الطيور ذات الرؤوس البشرية - في العديد من الثقافات المختلفة.

الكلمات المفتاحية

با؛ هدده؛ طيور برؤوس بشرية

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is a documentation of the process that the practical research (Spirits Inside/ Outside the Frame - A New Figurative Representation for the Ancient Egyptian Symbol 'Ba') went through. It is specifically concerned about new means of depicting the 'BA' or soul bird, which was originally symbolized by the human-headed bird imagery in Ancient Egypt, in the paintings executed by the researcher between March 2020 and until April 2021 and then got exhibited to the public in May of the same year in the small art gallery of the Faculty of Fine Arts – Helwan University. In an attempt to revive ancient concepts and motifs from our genuine culture, this practical research is based on another theoretical research (The Human-Headed Bird Figure in Painting from the Bronze Age to Early Twentieth Century), where the same author presented a brief history of the appearance of avian humanoid hybrid creatures and their many representations in Egypt and other different cultures. Their function mostly seemed to bridge between heaven and earth by combining human and avian features together, referring to the souls lingering between the living and the divine, such as the Bird-Goddess figurines of female fertility in Old Europe from the Neolithic period (ca.7000-3000 BCE), the Ba soul bird, Sirens, Harpies, Humayun, Alkonost, Sirin, and the Gamayun all around the old world. Nevertheless, the human-headed bird representation of the Ba soul bird in Ancient Egypt could be the most ancient and clear representation of this specific fusion. (Elhelw, 2020)

2. THE BA - SOUL BIRD

In Ancient Egypt, the constitution of a human individuality is composed of many different parts for its physical, psychic, and spiritual nature. One of these parts is the Ba - soul bird - and despite that the Ba concept started in the old kingdom it only started to get an image for representation in the new kingdom, as it was symbolized by a human-headed bird that occasionally had arms. (Zabkar, 1968, Pp. 1, 76 and 83). According to the historian Lesley Jacson, there are two suggestions for the type of bird that were used in the depictions, first is the body of a small falcon that might be an association of the deceased with Horus; and the second is a swallow, the species that used to nest in tombs at night that eventually represents the soul bird's flight every morning and its return to the tomb in the evening to reunite with the mummy and reanimate it. This resembles the journey of the sun god Ra in the skies every day from dawn to dusk, until the reunification with Osiris happens in the Duat (afterlife) every night, which precedes the sun's resurrection once again at dawn. (Jacson, 2018, p. 32)

The portrait of a Ba always personified the soul of the deceased regardless the type of gender as appears quite often in the New Kingdom, like in (fig. 1) that shows the portraits of the Ba birds of Ani and his wife Tutu depicted in a scene standing on top of his tomb, in frame seven from the papyrus of Ani that dates back to the 19th Dynasty, and was excavated in Upper Egypt in the Tomb of Ani (Thebes). Currently it is showcased in the British Museum with Museum number EA10470,7 - Asset Number: 684939001.



Figure 1: Ba birds © The Trustees of the British Museum. (British Museum: Unknown,

3. REASONS FOR CHOOSING THE THE HOOPOE AS A SYMBOL

In the artworks of that practical research that was previously exhibited, the researcher chose to change the type of body that was depicted in Ancient Egypt to represent the Ba birds from a swallow or a young falcon and used the body the hoopoe birds instead in various ways. This choice was taken for different visual and conceptual reasons. First, because of its many supernatural connotations with magic and medicine in many middle eastern cultures, and second, for its aesthetic form and colors that will be explained more clearly later.

3.1. The Connotations of The Hoopoe In Different Cultures

In brief, the hoopoe was used as an embodiment for different meanings since early history. In Ancient Egypt it referred to two meanings, one was to the protection of the deceased on his daily journey along with the sun, where the solar hoopoe awaits the rebirth of the deceased in the eastern sky. While in another context in the Old Kingdom, the hoopoe was found depicted as held in children's hands implying that the child was the caretaker of his father in old age and his heir and successor after the father passes away. Then later between the third and eighth century in Coptic Egypt, demotic manuscripts had magical and medical prescriptions that included using the hoopoe's blood and various body parts in making magical charms, and sometimes it was used as a treatment to be rubbed on the eyes to see visions. (Abd El Hameed, 2017. Pp. 143, 149, 168) Moreover, the hoopoe appeared in many texts, such as in the ancient Greek comedy "The Birds" by Aristophanes, where it represented the role of the metamorphosed king. (ancientadmin, 2019). The hoopoe also has a spiritual connotation in Islam due to its dialogue with the Prophet and King Solomon (PBUH) in the Holy book of Quran, Surat An-Naml, verses 20-28. The holy text was analyzed in a linguistic study that revealed the personality of the hoopoe and was characterized by having a unique power of concentration and observation, a strong persona and sense of self-importance, besides how comprehensive it is in its opinions and judgments. (Hussein, 2020, Pp. 407 and 419). It also appeared in the medieval Islamic world in the Persian book of Sufi poems "The Conference of the Birds" by Farīd ud-Dīn Attār, symbolizing guidance and leadership of the birds in their spiritual journey to the Simurgh. (Saebipour, Zare, Ghaemi, & Joghataie, 2018)

3.2. The Aesthetic Characteristics of The Hoopoe

Aesthetically speaking, the hoopoe's body is found in nature colored in a very light tint of warm dusty beige as if it is mixed of a bit of nude flesh tint with carbon black ashes. While the feathers of the wings are in black and white stripes alternatively, that create a sort of zigzagged lines while the wings are fanned out, which transform to smooth curved lines of black and white when the wings are pulled close to the body. Furthermore, one of the most unique characteristics of the hoopoe is its big crest of feathers that seems like a crown when it is fully raised on its head, which gave it its association with kingship. The whole body and its colors give an aesthetic feeling that it is a fiery creature with supernatural powers. Look (fig. 2).



Figure 2: Linear relations between black and white.
 (AntoGros; Dutt; and Gilt: Creativecommons.org, 2014; 2020; 2014)

3.3. The Exhibition Statement

The original representation of the Ba bird always showed the deceased's head covered with a wig; however, the researcher substituted that form of representation and chose to use the different forms that the hoopoe's crest takes instead, while fully raised or gathered to the back of its head like human hair, over the heads of unstudied human portraits. This subtle way was chosen to depict the souls of the deceased to give the sense that worldly personalities had faded away in such an etheric realm.

In the exhibition statement, the researcher explains the concept of the artwork in a few lines to the visitors of the exhibition:

[Spirits Inside / Outside the Frame]

These are the good spirits who left us wandering outside their frames between the heavens of pomegranates, figs, olives, and orange blossoms. They fly under the trees of wisdom with the solar boat during the day, until they return to their homes at night to light up stars in our skies.

The avian humanoid creature here is derived from the original 'Ba' that symbolizes the spirit of the deceased in ancient Egypt, which was most associated with the ability to fly away from the tomb during the day to join 'Ra' on his solar boat while sailing across the sky. Then at night, it returns to its framing corpse to revive itself through the revitalizing power of Osiris, to complete the cycle of the spiritual continuum. While the original 'Ba' was mostly associated with the swallow birds, here the hoopoe was chosen instead to represent the bird's body for its solar symbol in the ancient traditions, which was also often related to wisdom, kingship, and familial devotion. The Hoopoe's body was also believed to possess powerful supernatural and therapeutic properties, which makes it more suitable for our concept here.]

4. THE EXHIBITION ARTWORK

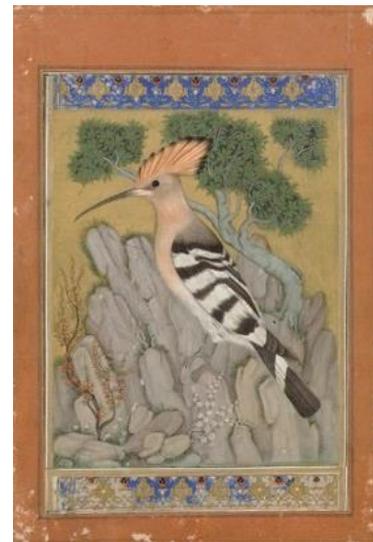
The Exhibition is composed of five groups of paintings, some are pieces of the single artwork and others are just separately belonging to the same group of style. All are executed primarily in acrylic colors on canvas and then finished with layers of oil painting. It is important to mention that the artwork was designed in advance in specific dimensions to be displayed properly in the small art gallery of the Faculty of Fine Arts – Helwan University.

4.1. The “Orange Blossoms” Painting

The first painting of the exhibition is “Orange Blossoms”, (fig. 3). It is a group of five pieces of canvas painted in acrylic and oil painting and are installed in a certain sequence, where a couple of hoopoes are wandering over a huge and fruitful orange tree, with a background full of rhythmic lines in warm colors. The researcher got inspired by the Indian miniatures’ illustration scenes from the Persian poetry book the “Conference of the Birds”, such as the one by an unknown artist ca. 1610 (Jahangir Period) (fig. 4), that is a hoopoe drawn with opaque watercolor and gold on paper with dimension (27.6 x 18.7 cm). The piece is a gift of Jane Werner Watson to the Chazen Museum of Art under Accession No.1973.17. Similarly, the researcher decided to mix two- and three-dimensional styles of drawing together in the same scene to form an imaginary place that resembles a paradise full of flowers, fruits, and



*Figure 3: Orange Blossoms.
(Author: Author, 2020).*



*Figure 4: Hoopoe Illustration.
(Gift of J.W. Watson: Chazen
Museum of Art, 2020)*

joyful colors. The sizes from above to below: A- Above: (93 x 30.5 cm), B- Middle/Left: (17 x 58 cm), C- Middle/Middle: (43 x 58 cm), D- Middle/Right: (43 x 58 cm), E- Below: (93 x 24 cm).

4.2. “Heavens” Group of Paintings

Followingly, there is another group of three separate paintings called “Heavens”, executed on unframed canvas, and installed on the walls suspended freely between two wooden sticks from above and below for each of them, creating a surface that waves naturally and freely over the walls, as an artistic impression of the spacetime fabric.

In “Heavens 1 and 2” (fig. 6 on the left and fig. 7 on the right), the researcher got inspired by the celestial constellation charts (fig. 5) and decided to draw the hoopoes in a two-dimensional linear style on a dark blue background filled with different tints of blue spots. The birds are drawn in white lines with different values of thickness, and its coloring appears from the first colored layer in the background.

“Heavens 3” (fig. 8) is a depiction of the hoopoe bird from backwards. This time the figure itself is executed in different light tints of warm colored spots over a background of irregular warm colored lines and spaces of dark red shades. The overall execution is inspired with the traditional aboriginal painting technique of drawing in Australia, such as in “Witchetty Grub Dreaming” by the artist Jennifer Napaljarri Lewis. (Wepf, 2018). Similarly, the researcher used different spaces of coloring in relation with different values of colors and sizes for the spots, like in (fig. 9). Moreover, the vertical body is drawn in a position that resembles the Osirian form of the deceased.

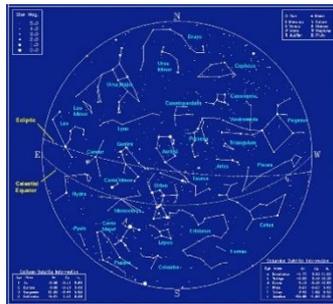


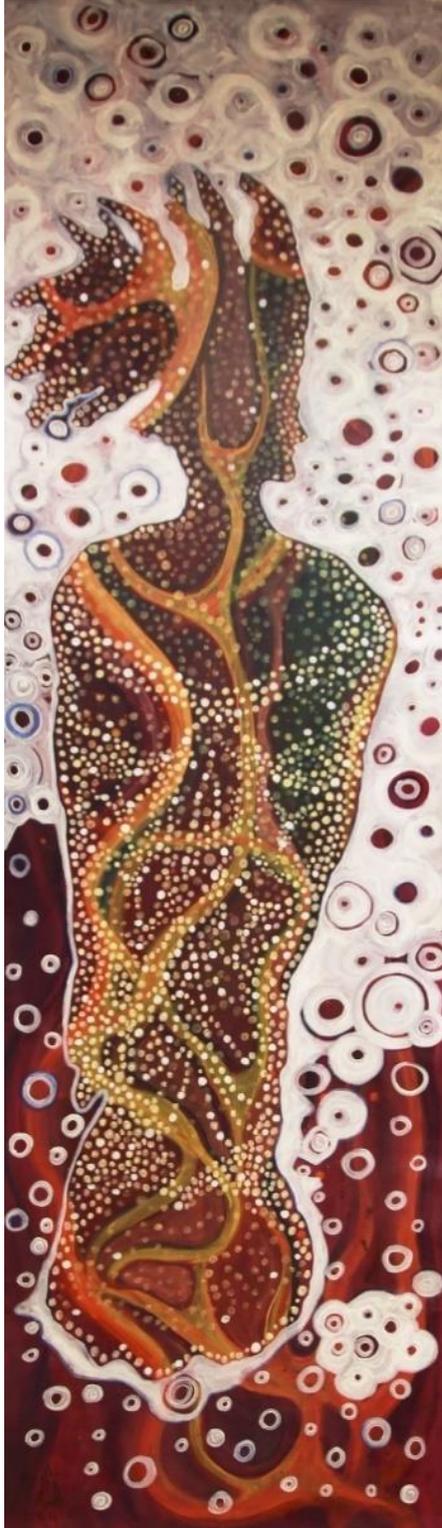
Figure 5: Celestial Constellations by aeroman3.
(Unknown: Creativecommons.org,2021)



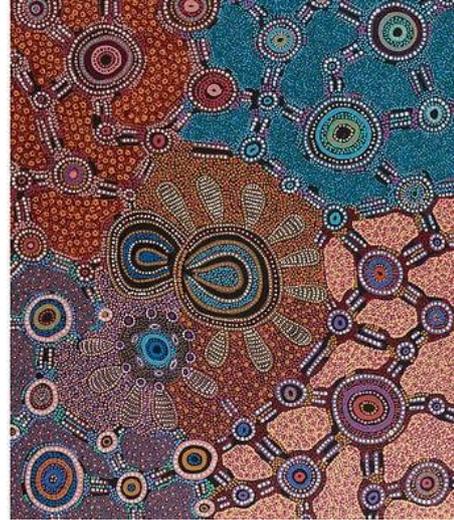
Figure 6: Heavens (1), (60x79 cm). (Author: Author, 2020).



Figure 7, Heavens (2), (60x120 cm). (Author: Author, 2020).



*Figure 8: Heavens (3), (200x60 cm).
(Author: Author, 2020).*



*Figure 9: Witchetty Grub
Dreaming. (Wepf: The
Conversation, 2018).*

4.3. “DJEHUTI TREES TRYPTYCH” Paintings

Next, we move to (fig. 11) “Djhuty Treas Triptych”, where a scene of hoopoes hovering under Doum-palm trees raised in the background of the three long and vertical pieces of canvases on the same level. Each is suspended through a wooden stick from above and another for weighing down the canvas from below. The researcher decided to give each of the three parts a different mood of colors for a certain time of the day, such as grades of green for dawn, grades of pink for sunset, and grades of yellow for noon. Further details of the three scenes are shown in (fig. 12).

Doum-palm trees have been related with the Egyptian deity Thoth that embodied wisdom, intelligence, and knowledge, who was usually depicted either by a scouting baboon or an ibis bird. The Ancient Egyptian associated Doum-palm trees with baboons who were found living on their highest points and fed on Doum fruits. (Abd El-Ghany et al., 2016. P. 8). An example of an ostracon depicting such a scene with Thoth as a baboon (fig. 10) was found in Deir El-Medina and is currently showcased in room 5 in the Department of Egyptian Antiquities in the Louvre Museum in Paris, under Louvre E 27666. (LEJEUNE, 2014).



*Figure 10: Ostracon of a baboon picking doum fruits, © Christian Décamps.
(LEJEUNE: EgyptoMusée à Marcel Proust, 2014).*



Figure 11: Djehuti Trees Triptych each (200x60 cm). (Author: Author, 2020).



Figure 12: Details from *Djehuty Treas Tryptich*, 2021. (Author: Author, 2020).



Figure 13: At Night (1), (45x58 cm). (Author: Author, 2021).

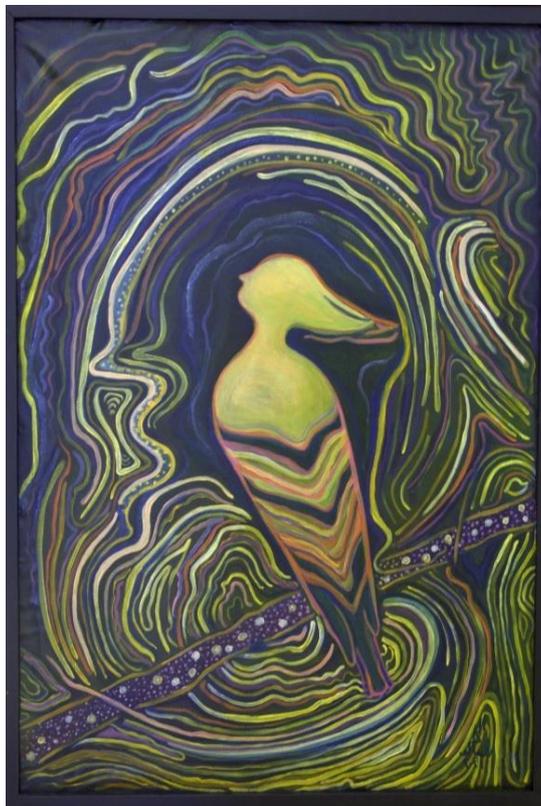


Figure 14: At Night (2), (74x58 cm). (Author: Author, 2021).

4.4. “At Night” Group Of Paintings

Afterwards, comes another group of separate paintings called “At Night”. All three are drawn mostly in a linear manner rather than creating form with light and shadow nor through coloring the drawn birds; while getting the inspiration from the different photography images of the outer space showing stars and galaxies from far, as well as the exceptional colors of the aurora phenomenon that appears in skies of the northern countries. The first is “At Night (1)” (fig. 13), where a female bird is drawn as an outline that seems floating over a group of interlacing lines in warm and cold colors forming something like a flower, in a dark sky lit with light spots like the stars. Then in “At Night (2)” (fig. 14) the universe that appeared in the first image in the background is all enclosed in the body of a male bird, looking downwards at the successive irregular lines in several green grades moving like clouds of space dust. The third painting in the group “At Night (3)” (fig. 15) is a depiction of a colored female bird floating on a branch enclosing the whole universe. The bright colored intermingling lines surrounding it are more like vibrations in the realm around the figure.



Figure 15: At Night (3), (85x58 cm). (Author: Author, 2021).

4.5. The Red Group of Paintings

The last group of paintings of this research is composed of two separate paintings. The first one is “Olives” (fig. 16), and the second one is “Figs and Pomegranate” (fig. 17). Both red paintings are executed on a mixture of bright grades and shades of magenta, crimson and primary red in the backgrounds. The choice of figs, pomegranates, and olives were set because they are mentioned in some verses of the holy book of Quran denoting that they are to be found by the kind ones who will get resurrected in paradise. However, the researcher chose the figs and the pomegranate to be suspended in the space around the female figure for their aphrodisiac connotations for love and prosperity, while the olives were chosen for the male figure in the other painting without having any special connotations with gender other than it just symbolizes peace and the power of healing. Moreover, we can find the main difference in how the wings are in clear regular lines when they are fanned out as mentioned before to represent the male figure, while the lines get soft and a bit irregular when the wings get to pulled close to the body to represent the other female figure.



Figure 16: *Olives* (84x135 cm). (Author: Author, 2021).



Figure 17: *Figs and Pomegranate*, (78x64 cm). (Author: Author, 2021).

5. CONCLUSION

Driving inspiration from the hoopoe birds in a trial for reviving the depiction of the Ba - soul bird - and representing it by new forms of the human-headed bird imagery turned out as a suitable choice, because of the different connotations of the hoopoe in different cultures such as in Ancient Egypt, in Greek mythology, in its story with Prophet Solomon (PBUH) in “Surat An-Naml” of the Holy Book of Quran; and finally in the Persian Islamic Sufi poetry “The Conference of the birds”. All that helped in associating the hoopoe with the spiritual concept of the Ba – soul bird - that it was intended to take its form. The hoopoe’s slim body form along with its flexible elegant crest above its head, over its warm beige shoulders made it simple to imagine it in a more human form with a crowned head. While its complimentary tones of black and white wings created different aesthetic inspirations to benefit from; and the linear changes that happen between the geometrically arranged feathers when closely held to the body or when fanned out led to depict the birds in a bit realistic form, like “Orange Blossoms” (fig. 3), “Djhuty Treas Triptych” (fig. 11),

“Olives” (fig. 16), and the last one “Figs and Pomegranate” (fig. 17). These linear relations also inspired the author to present the Ba soul-bird in more abstract ways like in the group of paintings “Heavens (1, 2, 3)”, where the birds were depicted in a sort of geometric abstraction, with lines and spots of colors used in different values of thickness (as showed in fig. 6, 7, and 8); and in the group of paintings “At Night (1, 2, 3)”, where the birds and the backgrounds were depicted together in interlacing lines, also with different values of thickness and color, creating a totally different visual effect that resonates the spiritual realms it should be in, (look fig. 13, 14, and 15). To have an overview of the exhibition, (fig. 18) shows the paintings installed in relation to space.



Figure 18: The paintings of the exhibition installed in the gallery. (Author: Author, 2021).

It is strongly recommended to practically revive the presentation of symbols and concepts from our genuine historical resources based on theoretical research of art history, to be able to protect forms and concepts at the course of art and cultural development along time. Hence, it is important to work from one’s own culture in all sorts of visual arts as a means of conservation as well as development of the visual and conceptual heritage along history; where visual arts create points of attraction to the viewers and would help in reforming the public taste of aesthetics as well as helping in raising the critical skills of the public if it touched some relevance to their background. It could be said that it also enforces what is known as the soft strength and sense of belonging to the people’s cultural roots, which is essential in facing the contemporary world of globalization that happens to be ours.

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