The *Mantiq al-tayr*
or “Language of the Birds”,
by al-Farid al-Din Attar (c. 1142–1222)

Al-Farid al-Din Attar, who died in around 1222, was a religious figure and a mystic from Nishapur in north-eastern Iran and author of the *Mantiq al-tayr*. He composed poetry dedicated to Sufism, reflecting his own spiritual experiences. Studded with anecdotes, his writings shed light on his way of thinking.

In an extraordinary, rocky landscape, with a stream running through it and a tree that appears to escape the frame of this miniature, some 20 birds, almost all different, have gathered to listen to a hoopoe perched on a rock in the center right. They are all getting ready to leave in search of the almighty bird that has featured in Iranian culture since Antiquity. After numerous adventures, they discover that the almighty in fact exists within themselves.

This is a typical parable of the mystic message guiding the believer towards union with the divine. The painting is admirable for the precision with which the birds are depicted. The variety of the peacock in particular, referred to in the text, is well illustrated by its impressive tail. The scene takes place out of sight, hidden by rocks dotted with the heads of animals and humans—indeed, nature, though it may appear vague and unusual, is shown to be just as alive as birds and people. And there is an ironic touch, two thieves and a hunter with a gun, his finger on his mouth, appear strangely surprised by this scene, finding it incomprehensible. Also worthy of note is the originality of the color, not only in the selection but also in the gradations of tone, which is somewhat reminiscent of certain late-nineteenth-century European Impressionist experimentation, such as Monet’s Water Lilies.
Page from the Mantiq al-tair or "Language of the Birds" by al-Farabi al-Din-Arter [c. 1342–1322]
13486 (Ferd, Afghanistan)
New York, MET, Fletcher Fund, 63.230, fol. 35

The image is also, even though it may be difficult to link it to a specific passage of Al-tair's text. On the right, led by a bearded man, a professional mourner and a richly-dressed man, also in tears (perhaps the son of the deceased) are the first two coffin bearers. Accompanied by a beggar, they are greeted at the gateway to a burial enclosure [a harem in northeast Iran] where a grave is being dug, not far from another, older one, on a platform surrounded by a wooden fence. The extraordinary realism of the detail—the gestures of the grave-diggers and mourners in particular—of the principal scene is immediately apparent. Of particular note is the precision of treatment of what might be termed secondary motifs: a cat and a lamp on the platform, a bird trap hanging in a tree, a nest with two eggs that four birds are trying to protect from a snake climbing the tree. In fact these are the principal scene.

One of the themes of the poem is indeed life and death: "You who came into this world with nothing, the wind has already shred your tomb in dust. Even though you may be seated on a royal throne, you will have nothing in your hand but the wind." Here, a common moral lesson and a simple composition are embellished by the originality of the detail and gesture.
death. "You who
weary of a glad
and on a royal
or wind." Here, a
are established