Notice of the Final Oral Examination
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

of

BEHRANG NABAVINEJAD

MA (University of Toronto, 2009)
MFA (Bangalore University, 2000)
BA (Alzahra University, 1997)

“The Simurgh: Representations and their Meaning in Persian Painting”

Department of Art History and Visual Studies

Friday, December 8, 2017
10:00 a.m.
Fine Arts Building
Room 109

Supervisory Committee:
Dr. Marcus Milwright, Department of Art History and Visual Studies, University of Victoria (Supervisor)
Dr. S. Anthony Welch, Department of Art History and Visual Studies, UVic (Co-Supervisor)
Dr. Martin Bunton, Department of History, UVic (Outside Member)

External Examiner:
Dr. Sheila S. Blair, Fine Arts Department, Boston College

Chair of Oral Examination:
Prof. Juliana Saxton, Department of Theatre, UVic

Dr. David Capson, Dean, Faculty of Graduate Studies
Abstract

The fantastic Simurgh, the mythical bird of ancient Persia, has maintained a significant presence in Persian culture. The visual and textual references to this bird manifest a mysterious and complex symbolism shaped around this super-natural creature in Persian literary sources. The Simurgh evolves from a myth, to the symbol of royalty, to the guardian of Persian kingdom, and finally to represent the Divine. This promotion and transformation is facilitated through the idea of divine protection and kingship inherited from ancient Persia, transforming the representations of the Simurgh into powerful images.

The intertextual analysis of the Avestan and Pahlavi references to the Simurgh, and their comparison with the characteristics of the Simurgh in the Shāhnāma, allows this study to trace the amalgamation of these sources in the Persian national epics. Through a process of literary creativity, Firdausi combines the characteristics of the two mythical birds, Saēna and Vāreghna, to shape the Simurgh in the Shāhnāma. The transformation of ancient Persian myths into Islamic Persia continues in the works of Islamic philosophers such as Suhrawardi who, once again, synthesized the mythical bird of pre-Islamic Persia with its recent embodiment in the Shāhnāma. In this phase of transformation and in the work of Suhrawardi’s contemporary, ʿAttar, the Simurgh was raised to the symbol of the Divine.

It is in the light of these literary sources from the genres of epic literature and religious writings that the representations of the Simurgh are contextualized in this study, and the formation of three iconographic prototypes for the bird are proposed. In addition, the presence of the royal, divine, and Iranian glory (farr-i īzādī, farr-i Īrānī), sought for by both rulers and individuals in the Persian system of though, charges the representations of the Simurgh in the illustrated manuscripts of the Shāhnāma produced between the fourteenth and the seventeenth century, in the realm of Persian painting in particular, as well as in Iranian visual vocabulary, in general.