

Dragon and Phoenix (Simurgh): Sufi Philosophy and Hidden Symbols in Ancient Textiles

By Amir Oskouei — Aug 28, 2025

Introduction

In Eastern philosophy and Sufism, the Dragon and the Phoenix represent two eternal symbols of spiritual journey. The Dragon symbolizes the ego, desires, fears, and worldly attachments, while the Phoenix embodies divine wisdom, enlightenment, and unity with God. These symbols were not only philosophical but also deeply integrated into carpet and textile art, carrying hidden messages over centuries.

I. Historical and Spiritual Roots of the Symbols



1. Phoenix — The Bird of Divine Perfection

The word Phoenix (Simurgh) derives from Persian 'si' (thirty) and 'murgh' (bird), meaning 'thirty birds.' In Attar's 'Conference of the Birds,' thirty birds embark on a long journey in search of the Phoenix, only to discover their own reflections at the summit: 'You were seeking the Phoenix, but the Simurgh was you.'



2. Dragon — The Guardian of the Self

The Dragon has multilayered meanings in Eastern traditions. In Sufism, it represents the nafs — the ego, fears, and internal trials. As Rumi said: 'It is not the mountains ahead that stop you, but the dragon within.'



II. Hidden Symbols: Dragon and Phoenix in Carpets and Textiles

From the 15th to the 19th centuries, Dragon and Phoenix motifs carried secret meanings embedded in carpets and ceremonial textiles.



1. Before the 15th Century — Earliest Traces

The earliest examples of these motifs are found in Göktürk, Seljuk, and Khorasan textiles. Inscriptions from the Orkhon-Yenisei region suggest these symbols were perceived as sacred protectors.



2. 15th–17th Centuries — The Birth of the Sufi Secret Language

By the 15th century, these symbols became part of a secret symbolic language used by Sufi circles. In Karabakh, Tabriz, and Quba workshops, the Simurgh represented divine wisdom and sovereignty, while the Dragon symbolized the internal struggles of the seeker on the path to God.



3. 18th–19th Centuries — Abstraction and Concealed Codes

From the mid-18th century onward, under Ottoman, Qajar, and Russian influence, carpet production became commercialized, and motifs were abstracted. These symbols looked decorative but preserved secret meanings understood only by the initiated elite.



III. The Sufi Path: Struggle Between the Self and Light

According to Sufism, the human journey consists of four stages:

Nafs-i Ammara,

Nafs-i Lawwama,

Nafs-i Mulhama,

Nafs-i Mutmainna.

The Dragon represents the lower self, while the Phoenix symbolizes illumination and divine unity.

Conclusion

The Dragon and Phoenix are more than philosophical symbols; for centuries, they served as hidden codes within textiles and carpets. They preserved layers of meaning — spiritual, political, and personal — passed secretly between generations and chosen initiates.



