

BIRDS IN FOLKLORE, CULTURE AND RELIGION

Birds play prominent and diverse roles in folklore, religion, and popular culture. In religion, birds may serve as either messengers or priests and leaders for a deity, such as in the Cult of Makemake, in which the Tangata manu (Bird Man) of Easter Island served as chiefs; or as the rooster (cock) serves as a tangible vessel of Christ as in the gospel of - Matthew, Mark and Luke in the New Testament with Christ speaking through the rooster; or as attendants, such as the two Common Ravens, *Corvus corax*, Hugin and Munin, who whispered news into the ears of the Norse god Odin. In the Etruscan and Roman religions of ancient Italy, priests interpreted the words of birds while the "auspex" (from which the word "auspicious" is derived) watched their activities to foretell events. Birds have themselves been deified, as in the case of the Indian Peafowl, *Pavo cristatus*, which is perceived as Mother Earth by the Dravidians of India. Some birds have also been perceived as monsters, including the mythological Roc (in Sinbad the sailor) and the legendary Māori *Pouākai*, a giant bird capable of snatching humans.

Since prehistoric times birds have been featured in art and culture, as shown in early cave paintings. Later birds were used in religious or symbolic art and design, a fine example of which is the magnificent Peacock Throne of the Mughal and Persian emperors. When the scientific study of birds began, artists were commissioned to paint birds to illustrate books. There have been many famous bird artists including: John James Audubon, Frederick W. Frohawk, Edward Lear, Elizabeth Gould (wife of John Gould), John Gerrard Keulemans and of course our own Australian artists, Neville Calley (both father and son), William Cooper (of Forshaw and Cooper), Tony Pridham and our own South Australian Jeremy Boot.

Birds also figure prominently in poetry; for example, Homer incorporated Nightingales, *Luscinia megarhynchos*, into his *Odyssey*, and Catullus used a sparrow as an erotic symbol in his Catullus 2. The relationship between an albatross and a sailor is the central theme of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, which led to the use of the term as a metaphor for a 'burden'. Some other English metaphors derived from birds include: vulture funds and vulture investors, which take their name from the scavenging Vulture (family *Accipitridae*).

Perceptions of various bird species often vary across cultures. Owls are associated with bad luck, witchcraft, and death in parts of Africa, but are regarded as wise across much of Europe. Hoopoes were considered sacred in Ancient Egypt and symbols of virtue in Persia, but were thought of as thieves across much of Europe and as harbingers of war in Scandinavia.

Adapted from a Wikipedia article