

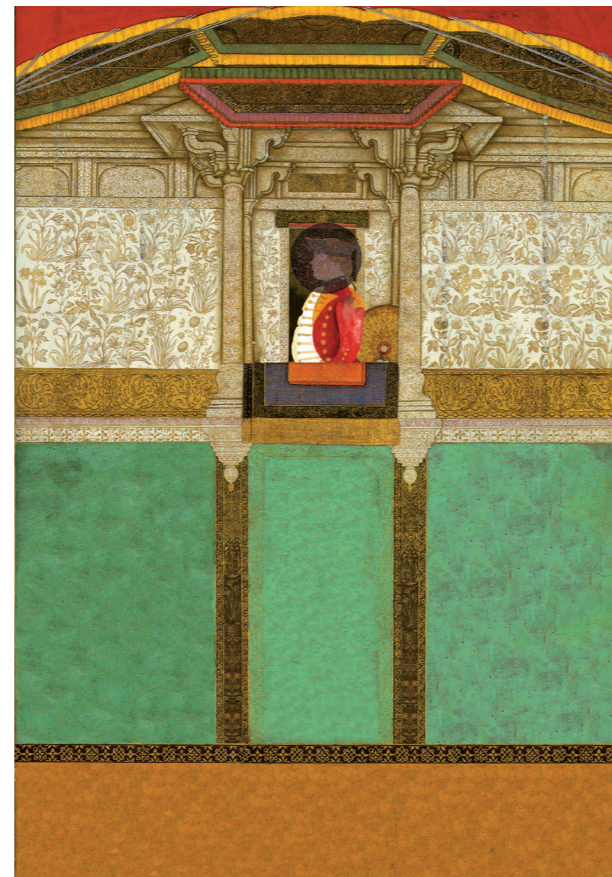
Paying Court

Meera Menezes studies how contemporary artists in India and Pakistan are reinterpreting miniature painting, and in so doing, enriching it

AT FIRST GLANCE IT APPEARED like the site of a terrible terror attack: splotches of crimson red stained the courtyard of the Bait Al Serkal, a heritage building in Sharjah. Closer examination of these dramatic pools of blood revealed them to be bunches of floral forms which the artist Imran Qureshi had painstakingly rendered, drawing upon his training in miniature painting. This act of transformation in his site-specific installation, *Blessings Upon the Land of My Love*—created for the 10th edition of the Sharjah Biennial in 2011—could be viewed as a gesture of recuperation for the bloody conflicts that have wracked the Middle East and his native Pakistan.

Qureshi belongs to a band of artists from Pakistan and India who have succeeded in reinterpreting the centuries-old practice of miniature art in South Asia to engage with present-day concerns. In their hands, the miniature has moved out of the narrow confines of manuscripts and folios, and has often assumed more radical avatars. However, contemporary artists in the two countries who reference miniature art in their works have followed divergent trajectories to arrive at their own pictorial vocabularies.

In Pakistan, artists employ the syntax of the miniature to beguile and attract the viewer, but a closer examination often discloses subtle strategies of subversion at work. While Qureshi references the foliage from Basohli paintings for his dramatic installations, his compatriot Rashid Rana draws on the grid, which students of miniature art often have to laboriously fill in with finely spaced hand-drawn lines. Rana's *Veil* series (2004), for



instance, is a stinging critique of the position of women in society and the hypocrisy that surrounds it. His prints depict a burqa-clad figure; closer inspection reveals the burqa itself is a collage made up of tiny pornographic stills of women.

The burqa has also been used as a motif by Aisha Khalid, whose work was on show this year, along with Qureshi's, at Delhi's Nature Morte. Many of her paintings proffer claustrophobic views of curtained rooms, at the centre of which is a fully veiled, amorphous figure. Working within the strict norms of Islamic art, which does not allow the



Images courtesy: Sikander Studio

depiction of faces, and using classic Islamic motifs, her work dwells on issues of gender and geopolitics.

The narrative format of the miniature certainly lends itself to social and political commentary. BN Goswamy, noted art historian and India's foremost authority on miniature art, has referred to them as presenting a "layered world of meaning". These meanings are often couched in the seductive language associated with the miniature, with its courtly figures and delightfully detailed, intricate motifs. It is only by a careful peeling away of the layers and a closer reading of these paint-

ings that the viewer can lift the veil on these hidden intentions. (Occasionally they are more obvious, as in Saira Wasim's gouaches *Peace Talks* [2004] and *Season of Pretentious Friendship* [2004], which offer a tongue-in-cheek take on the Indo-Pak relationship, where both countries are depicted as jokers.)

One of the pioneers and most prominent proponents of this neo-miniature movement is undoubtedly Shahzia Sikander, who majored in miniature painting from the National College of Art (NCA) in Lahore. She studied under Bashir Ahmad, who in turn had been trained by Ustad Sheikh Shuja Ullah,

The Last Post, 2010
Shahzia Sikander
Colour HD video
animation with 5.1
surround sound
(10 minutes)
Linda Pace Foundation,
San Antonio

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I Want You to Stay With Me, 2015
Imran Qureshi
Acrylic paint
(site-specific installation)

a descendent of painters from the Mughal court. Apparently the only student in the department at the time, she ignored well-meant warnings by her contemporaries that the rigid strictures of miniature painting would rein in, or even stifle her creativity. Instead, she saw in this pre-colonial, representational

and Islamic (Mughal) form the possibilities of creating a personal idiom. After years of rigorous training at NCA, she broke free to create works across different media—from intimate drawings to large paintings and animated videos. Sikander sees a natural progression from drawing to animation, as they involve layering, whether physical layers of paper or virtual layering of images using Photoshop.

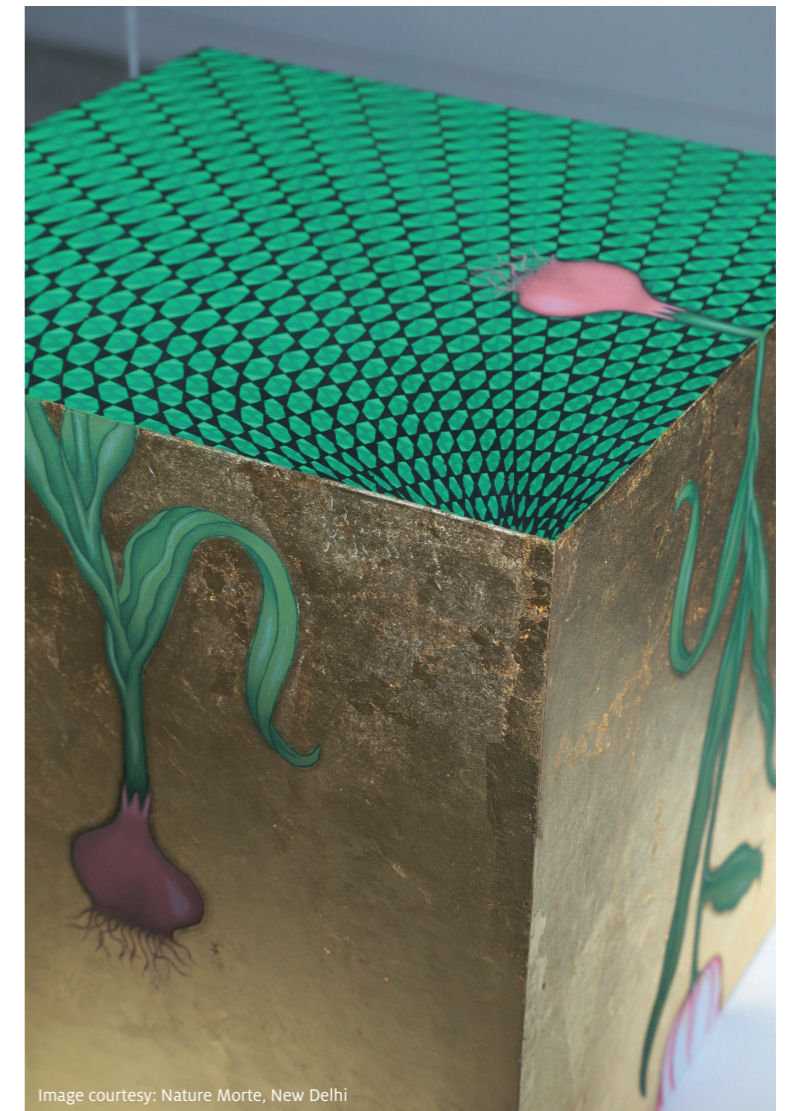
Over the decades, she has developed an imagery that is hybrid, melding influences from Mughal and Kangra sources, while articulating themes that draw as much from the past as from the contemporary landscape. One such example is her animated video, *The Last Post* (2010), which deals with the subcontinent's colonial history and how the British exploited it for its opium trade with China. For the musical score, she collaborated with the Shanghai-born composer Du Yun.

Other prominent Pakistani artists who have mined the miniature tradition to arrive at their own unique vocabularies include Nusra Latif Qureshi, Talha Rathore and Muhammad Zeeshan. An interesting collaborative project was taken up by a group of these artists some years ago: it included Aisha Khalid, Hasnat Mehmood, Imran Qureshi, Nusra Latif Qureshi, Talha Rathore and Saira Wasim. Each of them would come up with an image on a sheet of paper before mailing it to the next artist, who would in turn contribute to it before sending it on. The result was an amalgam of traditional and modern motifs with Mughal dress patterns, flowers, birds and trees juxtaposed with New York subway maps, missiles, bullets and guns. These were interspersed with scribbles and calligraphy and seasoned with a liberal sprinkling of

satire. At the India Art Fair in Delhi this year, Muhammad Zeeshan, in *On Indefiniteness*, suspended his paintings in glass vitrines which were slowly erased by rising levels of black ink over the course of four days. This act of erasure came to a fitting end on the last day, when one of the vitrines came crashing down, merging accident with intent!

Intrinsic to the practice of contemporary miniatures is a mastery of the craft skills that underlie it. The NCA in Lahore has served as a crucible, where the talents of these neo-miniaturists have been honed. It was founded as the Mayo School of Art in 1875 and its first principal was Rudyard Kipling's father, Lockwood Kipling. While miniature painting was taught at the school, it was not until the 1970s that it received a contemporary flavour under Pakistan's leading modernist painter and educationist, Zahoor ul Akhlaq, who had studied at the Royal College of Art in London. It was at Akhlaq's urging that Bashir Ahmad started the miniature painting department in 1985. Even today it resembles a *karkhana*, or Mughal painting workshop, where students sit on the floor and learn to make line drawings in black ink with fine squirrel-hair brushes. Only once they have mastered this technique can they move on to filling in the colour, which is done with a technique similar to pointillism known as *par dokht*. They must also learn to make their own materials, which include tea staining pages and making the multi-layered *wasli* paper. The only thing they are no longer required to do is catch squirrels to make their brushes!

However, while miniature painting forms an intrinsic part of the contemporary Pakistani art scene, the same does not hold true in India. Pakistani artists have made



I Was You, 2015
Aisha Khalid
Gouache, gold leaf
on paper box

allegorical use of the miniature to critique the political and socio-economic conditions in their country. In contrast, perhaps because of the more liberal climate, artists in India have not felt a compelling need to use miniatures to question society. There has also been no concerted effort to reinvent the genre,

Charmed by the manner in which several events, separated by space and time, are brought together in a single frame by miniature painters, Manjunath Kamath said, "I love the way they play with space. The artist is giving you the job of imagining the in-between frames, very much like the steps in an animation."



Image courtesy: Manjunath Kamath

primarily because artists lack the formal tools to do so, given that Indian art educational institutions do not impart formal training in miniature painting. Instead, the craft today has been largely relegated to copyists, who cater to the tourist trade. For this genre to survive, artists need to develop what art historian Virginia Whiles has called a "miniature as attitude". This would allow them to converse with tradition, rather than fall into the trap of blindly copying it.

Yet there is a flip side to this story. Because Indian art students are not trained in this rigorous, refined art, they are freer in their use of it. It is one of the many traditions they can take recourse to in formulating a visual language. This is clearly evident in the works of certain contemporary artists.

Consider the husband-wife duo Gulam-mohammed and Nilima Sheikh. As a student at the Royal College of Art in London,

Gulam was exposed to collections of Indian miniatures in Britain's museums. His interest in the genre was further cemented by a residency in Italy, where he was struck by the similarities between Italian Renaissance art and Indian miniatures. These influences often seep into his handling of space and perspective. Nilima, on the other hand, turned to miniatures in the middle of her career, as she saw the Rajput and Mughal schools as part of her artistic lineage. Their influences in her

work are, however, more covert than overt. It was Gulam and Nilima who recommended Bannu Ved Pal Sharma, a master miniature artist from Jaipur, to Desmond Lazaro, who had come to the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda for his master's degree. Lazaro picked up the nuances of the genre from Sharma; for his PhD, he focused on the *pichwais* of Nathdwara. Later, he came under the influence of Pahari miniatures, incorporating their stylistic elements. While

Self-ish Portraits, 2014
Manjunath Kamath
Gold leaf and gouache
on paper

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Image courtesy: Manisha Gera Baswani

Jatayu, 2015
Manisha Gera Baswani
Tea water, watercolour
and gouache on paper

his works draw on the *pichwai* in their scale, the central sacred deity has given way to more secular objects. He often enshrines the quotidian—whether a Vespa, an Ambassador car or a bicycle—in the centre of his paintings. These radiate a jewel-like iridescence, which is possibly a result of the various pigments he insists on preparing in-house.

Varunika Saraf is another contemporary Indian artist who has studied miniature

art. Elements from the genre crop up in her paintings, which she meshes with other art forms such as calligraphy, collage and textile art. This is clearly evident in her rendering of a stylised landscape with its high horizon, in works done on rice paper and cotton cloth, such as *Island* and *Each Day You Drown a Little* (both 2010). She uses her paintings to interrogate issues relating to gender and the hierarchy of fine and applied arts.

Influences of Mughal miniatures and architecture can also be traced in Delhi-based Manisha Gera Baswani's oeuvre, especially in her fine and intricate motifs, and her use of space and colour. In the past she has combined them with Christian manuscripts and Japanese landscapes, as is evident in her work *Kyoto* (2008). Her recent works have been inspired by Safavid miniatures, and she has also employed the technique of tea staining, for its subtlety and richness. Writing about the influence of miniatures on her work, Goswamy pointed out: "What she has learnt from them is how to build layers of thought and embed them in a work. This, combined with a turning towards precision and crispness of execution, forges a clear link between her work and that of the past."

Manjunath Kamath has long been fascinated by the genre of the miniature, taking a deep interest in the various schools. His solo exhibition at Gallery Espace in Delhi titled *Postponed Poems* (2015), comprised of a series of works which spoke of his love of the miniature format with its details and layered meanings. There was sly humour in his self-reflexive paintings titled "Self-ish Portraits", created with gold leaf and gouache on paper. The special use of space is another aspect of this art form that intrigues him.



Image courtesy: Waswo X Waswo

Charmed by the manner in which several events, separated by space and time, are brought together in a single frame by miniature painters, Kamath told me, "I love the way they play with space. The artist is giving you the job of imagining the in-between frames, very much like the steps in an animation."

Jagannath Panda's area of fascination is Jain miniatures, and he actively references them in his paintings. Lately, he has also been influenced by the work of the Pahari school and draws on their motifs to espouse more contemporary concerns, such as the water woes in a metropolis.

An imaginative use of the miniature tradition can also be seen in the works of

Waswo X Waswo, an American photographer who has made Udaipur his home, and his collaborator, the trained miniaturist Rakesh Vijayvargiya. Depicted in a linen suit with a white fedora, Waswo is often the central protagonist of these works, which are located within a landscape that borrows its formal elements from the miniature tradition. Intricate borders frame the central narrative, which could depict autobiographical scenes, many of them laced with irony and gentle humour.

Clearly the art of miniature painting continues to exercise a fascination for artists in both India and Pakistan. By reinventing the genre, they've breathed new life into it. ■

A Third Dream of Death, 2013

Waswo X Waswo
with R Vijay
Gouache on wasli