

Contested legacy, congested future

By Hammad Nasar

"...after 1820 there is a slow but steady decline"

- *Basil Grey*¹, Keeper, Department of Oriental Antiquities, British Museum (1948)

"Why cannot our miniaturists create original work? Has the technique become archaic to do this or have they become mere craftsmen?"

- *Ijaz ul Hasan*², Artist (1984)

"All the great achievements of Pakistani painting for centuries were in the field of miniatures."

- *Munira Alam & S. Amjad Ali*³, Academic & art critic (1998)

"Instead of inserting the miniature into Western art historical progress, [Shahzia] Sikander inserts facets of modernity into the jewel-like space of the miniature. Sikander's work addresses the unfulfilled promise of modernity's universal vision, a vision that rested upon the very narrow shoulders of cultural translation."

- *Susanne Ghez*⁴, Director The Renaissance Society (1998)

"[Imran] Qureshi's 'appropriation' of miniature painting ...lies far from the concern with 'authenticity' or 'pastoral preservation' which is manifested in the mode for reproductions. Such an approach denies the spirit of tradition which survives by continual transformation."

- *Virginia Whiles*⁵, Art historian and curator (2002)

"There is a profound difference between the universalism of our traditional art and the globalism of western art."

- *Dr. Akbar Naqvi*⁶, Art critic (2002)

1. **The Art of India and Pakistan, catalogue of the exhibition at The Royal Academy of Arts 1947-48, Faber & Faber, London, p.103**

2. 'Introduction', Catalogue for the 5th National Exhibition 1984, Idara Saqafat-e-Pakistan, Islamabad, p. 8
3. Ustad Bahsir ud Din – The last master from Lahore School of Painters, Ferozsons, Lahore, 1998
4. 'Shahzia Sikander', The Renaissance Society, Chicago, 1998, p. 10
5. 'Imran Qureshi', ART Asia Pacific, Jan/Feb/Mar 2002, p.56
6. 'Plentitude (sic) of Smallness', in The Herald, December 2002, p. 134
7. In conversation with Hammad Nasar, 'First Step', in The Herald, February 2004
8. 'A divine comedy of errors' in the catalogue for Transcendent Contemplations – Paintings by Hasnat Mehmood and Saira Wasim, Green cardamom, London, 2004
9. Ustad Bahsir ud Din – The last master from Lahore School of Painters, Ferozsons, Lahore, 1998, p.7
10. Private conversation with Jamil Naqsh and Najmi Sura.
11. Naqvi, Dr. A., Image and Identity – Fifty years of painting and sculpture in Pakistan, Oxford University Press,

Karachi, 1998, p. 48
12. Muraqqai Chughtai and Amale Chughtai
13. Naqvi, Dr. A., Image and Identity – Fifty years of painting and sculpture in Pakistan, Oxford University Press,

Karachi, 1998, p. 41
14. Conversations with Traditions: Nilima Sheikh and Shahzia Sikander, Asia Society, New York, 2001, p.69
15. 'Imran Qureshi', ART Asia Pacific, Jan/Feb/Mar 2002, p.58

“I had put my finger inadvertently on a scene by choosing ... two very different manifestations of a tendency of an old tradition... it suggests to me that this tradition is a very healthy and vibrant part of the culture.”

- Lawrence Rinder⁷, Curator, Whitney Museum of American Art (2003)

“In [Saira] Wasim’s hands, the centuries-old format of miniature painting has been transformed into a stage for human drama; a jam-packed cinematic space that approaches the grandeur of Cecil B. DeMille and the glamour of Bollywood.”

- Anna Sloan⁸, Art historian and curator (2004)

Introduction

Art, artists and art histories have always been the subject of myths. As ‘contemporary miniature’ from Pakistan continues to meet enthusiastic critical response internationally – just this year museums in the US, Europe, Japan and South Asia have held exhibitions exploring this theme – there is no shortage of artists, academics, writers and curators scrambling to add to the general mythology on how this phenomenon came about.

An Indian artist passing through London confidently shared her belief that the credit should go to a young academic who has made a significant contribution over the last few years. An American curator thinks that new artists coming out of Pakistan must have climbed onto the bandwagon after Shahzia Sikander’s success in the late 1990s. Neither seems aware that the miniature technique has been a taught subject at Lahore’s National College of Arts for nearly sixty years.

It is timely to place the recent rise in its proper context – as part of the postindependence history of the miniature in Pakistan. There is a need to move beyond issues of style, aesthetic and technique to recognise that ‘miniature’ is culturally specific shorthand for a sensibility – an attitude – over and above the skill and content that the genre is associated with. This sensibility has been a constant presence in the artistic atmosphere of South Asia well before partition. Its latest manifestation in Pakistan seems so bold because it rejects the tyranny of binary choices – traditional or modern; indigenous or imported; formal or conceptual. What is needed is a reflection on how the miniature form has morphed into its current state.

The polemics of nomenclature

What is a miniature?

The word miniature, as Syed Amjad Ali and Munir Alam point out in their monograph on the master miniature painter Ustad Bashir ud Din⁹, has its etymological roots in the Latin *minium* – the red oxide of lead used for drawing in olden times. The label also fits with respect to size; the paintings were constrained by the size of manuscripts that they illustrated. But size is a secondary consideration. In the opinion of Ali and Alam, miniature painting is above all a style, constituted by the work being:

1. **Coloured drawings – that is, they are drawn and then coloured**
2. **Either portraits, figure studies or compositions that tell a story**
3. **Figurative**
4. **Depict figures with highly stylised postures**
5. **Done in opaque water colour**
6. **Detail oriented with particular emphasis on ornaments like jewellery**
7. **Characterised by the laborious application of colour in small dots – a technique referred to as *pardakht***

This checklist may cover the majority of illustrated manuscripts produced in Mughal times, but most of the works in the 'miniature' section of this show would fail to get the requisite ticks in all seven boxes. Some (those that are not paintings, for example) may fail to register any ticks at all.

There are further linguistic complications. The word 'miniature' has no Urdu or Persian equivalent – it is a colonial imposition and hence inherently damaged goods. Many artists prefer to call themselves *musawwirs* – the same name given to miniature painters in the South Asian courts. But many of these artists' practices have gone beyond *musawwiri* (painting). Aisha Khalid's powerful video work and installations are as essential an element of her work as her claustrophobic interiors in gouache on *wasli*. Usman Saeed's recent stunning self-portrait, part of the 'Dunny Show' at the Visionaire Gallery in New York, was executed on a three-inch, three-dimensional vinyl figurine. Rashid Rana's digital manipulations and Hamra Abbas' installations highlight the failure of language to keep up with post-modern art practices. They also serve to illustrate the notion of 'miniature' being more than just style or technique – it is, for example, the sensibility or attitude with which Khalid shoots her video in one take, with no add-on soundtrack to produce an intensity of experience, both visual and aural.

What unites the contemporary band of miniature artists is their formal training. They may not all have had to atch squirrels to make their own brushes, and they may use Windsor and Newton rather than ground lapis lazuli, but they continue to follow an exacting regime that places an emphasis on 'traditional' skills of application like drawing. Perhaps referring to them as artists trained in the miniature technique may be closer to the mark.

One last ingredient – the rigour of application – is a function of time. The Mughal art scholar John Seyller highlighted the role of time in the quality of work produced. And this is as applicable for contemporary miniature as for that of Mughal times. Put these together and we have a better articulation of contemporary miniature – an artistic practice whereby training, technique and the rigour of application combine to produce an artistic experience (optical or haptic) that shares a sensibility with the illustrated manuscripts of South Asian courts. A mouthful, but if we accept the centrality of training, technique and rigour of application as constituents, we can continue to use the 'contemporary miniature' sobriquet – but in a more purposeful way.

Chughtai: the source of Pakistan's miniature tradition

No figure has cast as large and pervasive a shadow on the history of Pakistani art as Abdur Rehman Chughtai. It is appropriate that any consideration of the Pakistani miniature begin with him (even though his work was on the larger side). His stamp on the visual consciousness of the nation has been such that when Najmi Sura was learning the art of miniature painting from Jamil Naqsh (himself a student of Haji Mohammad Sharif) Naqsh forbade her from seeing even reproductions of Chughtai's work to ensure that she could develop her own style¹⁰.

Chughtai's visual vocabulary was an amalgam of European drawing and printmaking, East Asian washes and Mughal miniatures and architecture. His inspiration for washes and Japanese sensibilities was the Bengal School of Painting. Chughtai has often been labelled the Abanindranath Tagore of Pakistan by Indian writers, not merely because they were considered to have fathered modern painting on either side of the border, but also because Chughtai had patently observed and absorbed aspects of the Bengal School's style. Partha Mitter uses Chughtai's *Jahanara and the Taj* modelled on Tagore's *The Last Moments of Shah Jehan* to underline the strength of this influence. But while the School claimed him as one of their own, Chughtai himself "was always at pains to exclude himself from the Bengal School.¹¹" Part of this may have been artistic rivalry and pride, but part must have been inspired by what Dr. Akbar Naqvi sees as Chughtai's ambition to create an art that rejoiced in the Persian and Mughal heritage of the sub-continent's Muslims.

Chughtai's paintings are suffused with nostalgia for Muslim identity, reinforced by the poetry of Ghalib and Iqbal that his principal artistic projects¹² accompany. This harking to past glories,

combined with highly stylised figures and a post-impressionist penchant for colour can give his work a superficial decadence. But his nostalgia was probably of the type defended by K.G. Subramanyan in his essay, "What is wrong with nostalgia?" – where the past can provide the identity and pride needed to build the future. So buttressed, decadence slides up a notch to romanticism and a heightened sense of nationalism.

If Iqbal was the national poet of Pakistan, Chughtai was the national artist. As the nation recovered from its birth pangs and searched for a new identity, younger generations distanced themselves from both in favour of an art more visceral, more relevant to new realities. But as even a single Chughtai painting demonstrates (Fig. 1) there is no finer exponent of the line in Pakistani art history.

Updating the ustad-shagird legacy

Chughtai published *Amale Chughtai* in 1968 and died in 1975. The resulting estrangement of the miniature aesthetic or sensibility could have decimated the skillbase of this art form. That it didn't was down to two artists and one institution.

Haji Sharif and Sheikh Shujaullah seem to be all that was left of the grand tradition of miniature painting that Pakistan inherited at the time of partition. They were both "essentially copyists"¹³ and taught miniature painting at the National College of Arts (NCA) in Lahore in the manner that they had learned it. Haji Sharif was born in Patiala in 1889, recognised as the court painter of Patiala by 1906, awarded an MBE in 1924 on exhibiting in the UK and ensconced in his post at the NCA by 1945. Sheikh Shujaullah and Haji Sharif formed a cryogenic chamber where the essence of miniature painting was frozen: to be retrieved by a later generation, giving time for artistic imagination and pedagogic ambition to catch up.

Hundreds of students benefited from their teachings. Most of them were unable to make it as professional artists – one who did went on to become one of the titans of Pakistani art: Jamil Naqsh. In the recent retrospective of Naqsh's work at the Mohatta Palace Museum in Karachi, three small miniatures executed more than three decades ago reminded all that mining the miniature tradition was not a recent discovery. While Naqsh never developed this aspect of his work, his training shines through. His line drawings, in particular, are probably unmatched by any save Chughtai. Naqsh also served as *ustad* to Najmi Sura, whose composition (Fig. 2) is imbued with that same cryogenically preserved aesthetic that Haji Sharif passed on to Naqsh.

It was, however, one of Naqsh's contemporaries at the NCA – Zahoor ul Akhlaq – whose vision of the untapped critical potential of miniature painting opened the door for this current revival. Akhlaq

had studied art in both East and West, and his close examination of the miniature collection at London's Victoria & Albert Museum inspired him to engage with this tradition at two levels. On a personal level, he worked with calligraphy and images from miniatures to develop abstracted explorations of time and space that recall the black on black, grid-centred world of Ad Reinhart (Fig. 3). But arguably his greater contribution was in opening up a critical dialogue with the miniature tradition and in persuading a promising student, Bashir Ahmed, to take over and update the teaching of miniature painting. Akhlaq's presence was also inspirational in motivating Ahmed's young charges. In an interview with Vishaka Desai, Shahzia Sikander pointed to Akhlaq's singular influence in developing her interest in the genre:

"... my interest grew through watching him do the opposite of what I was pursuing – he was deconstructing miniatures in relation to larger-size paintings¹⁴."

Bashir Ahmed, as Head of the Miniature Department, has been the resident ustad at the NCA for over two decades, and has been the driving force behind raising its stature – from a minor to a major – highlighting a sense of ambition which has buttressed his students' own. His particular contribution has been to develop an academic approach to an art form predominantly taught through apprenticeship. The core remains a relentless focus on technique, an acquisition of skill through repetitive exercises and the age-old practice of copying.

As the success of the miniature department has grown over the last fifteen years, it has given Ahmed less time to devote to his own artistic practice, and has required teaching assistance to ensure that the rise in numbers does not lead to dilution in rigour. This assistance has come principally from Imran Qureshi, and from Usman Saeed, until he left for the UK in 2004. For a time, Qureshi and Ahmed were alternating the supervision of the degree theses of final year students, bringing out a healthy diversity in approach.

Virginia Whiles, a curator and lecturer in critical theory at London's Chelsea School of Arts, and a visiting scholar and lecturer at the NCA, writes and speaks of a conflict between orthodox and experimental tendencies at the NCA's miniature department. But such tension, is probably inevitable and quite possibly the spark needed for creativity to flourish without sacrificing technique.

Passive smoking

Before the more recent rise of contemporary miniature, there have been many others who did not undergo the rigorous training or innovate from within the tradition, but were still conspicuously influenced by its pervasiveness.

Bashir Mirza was a celebrity artist before the concept existed. Far too energetic to limit himself to simply one facet – he was an advertising man, a gallery owner, an arts publisher, an artist and a socialite. In a high profile, varied and prolific artistic career he produced paintings and drawings in a bewildering array of styles and formats. While known primarily for his dense pen drawings and his bold *Lonely Girl* series, he undertook explorations of miniature composition on a large format with shades of the later work of Amrita Sher Gill. He drew tired of his explorations in quick measure, and moved on. This was unfortunate, as paintings like *Toilet* (Fig. 4) bear witness to the obvious promise.

In India, the work of artists such as Gulammohammed Sheikh has shown the power of using the multi-layered Mughal perspective for landscapes – for instance in his largescale *City for Sale* that now resides in London's Victoria & Albert Museum.

Beware the Zen archers

By the late 1990s, contemporary miniature painting – born a stone's throw from Kim's gun at Lahore's National College of Arts, with half a century of teaching behind it – had arrived at the world scene. What started with Shahzia Sikander being 'discovered' by the New York art scene in 1997 has mushroomed into something much larger. This year, Sikander had three museum exhibitions in the US alone and has begun to make her name known in Europe with a high-profile London commission and an appearance at the Seville Biennial.

She is not alone. Last year's ground-breaking exhibition, *The American Effect*, was the first exhibition of non-American artists in the history of New York's Whitney Museum. And among the thirty-eight artists chosen from around the world for this historic show were two contemporary miniaturists – Imran Qureshi and Saira Wasim. Works by the same teacher-student duo (Wasim, now working in Chicago, still refers to Qureshi as Sir) have also been the inaugural purchases by the Victoria & Albert Museum – as they build up a collection of contemporary Pakistani miniature paintings to go with their Mughal and Persian collections.

The above are merely highlights of a large wave, developing over the last twelve months. Japan's Fukuoka Museum is currently showing the work of twenty contemporary miniature trained artists in possibly the biggest such survey show of the genre. New York's apexart and the Kunsthalle Fridericianum in Kassel, Germany (the home of Documenta – the Olympics of contemporary art) shared the *Playing with a Loaded Gun* exhibition. The Smith College Museum held a retrospective of the work of Australia-based Nusra Latif Qureshi. There have been numerous solo and two person shows in New York, London, New Delhi, Melbourne and Palo Alto – not to forget Lahore and Karachi.

But perhaps the crest of the wave will arrive next year, when the *Karkhana* exhibition begins its multiple-museum trek across the US. An extraordinary collaborative effort between six artists – Saira Wasim and Talha Rathore in the US; Nusra Latif Qureshi in Australia; and, Imran Qureshi, Aisha Khalid and Hasnat Mehmood in Pakistan – it is the artistic equivalent of free jazz: with twelve works being passed around by courier as each artist improvises on what they get with no agreed theme and no rules.

The secret of success abroad is possibly the backswing of the pendulum towards what the critic Robert Hughes calls slow, deliberate art away from the formulaic excesses of the past two decades. At home it is still looked upon with equal measures of suspicion and fascination – its political comment too uncomfortable to hang in the drawing room; its practitioners too young and irreverent to be considered 'established'. With 'success' no longer in the purview of a small clique to apportion to the chosen few, the critical establishment is not sure whether to applaud or knock them off their pedestal.

More startling than their youth, perhaps, is the heterogeneity in styles, concerns and approach in contrast to the homogeneity in training. Imran Qureshi's abstract political musings comment on hegemony and power – with references, for example, to the simultaneous drop over Afghanistan of bombs and food parcels (Fig. 5). Wasim Ahmed, the youngest of the artists on show, appropriates iconic images from the Western canon (Fig. 6) to comment on how, in a society where religion has subsumed culture and been used as a political tool, the old symbols have lost their meaning. Nusra Latif's informed engagement with post-colonial discourse, and Aisha Khalid's effort to revive beauty from its early demise in post-war Europe runs side by side with her frustration at the lack of effort made in communication.

It is appropriate to end with a wonderful analogy from Virginia Whiles¹⁵ in describing **Qureshi's work:**

"Having reached a stage where he has mastered the medium, Qureshi can let go, not unlike Zen archery, where the aim is to have no aim."

As this growing army of Zen archers lets go, we can sit back and observe the paths of the arrows. Watching them land will be interesting – as long as we do not get in the way.

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