

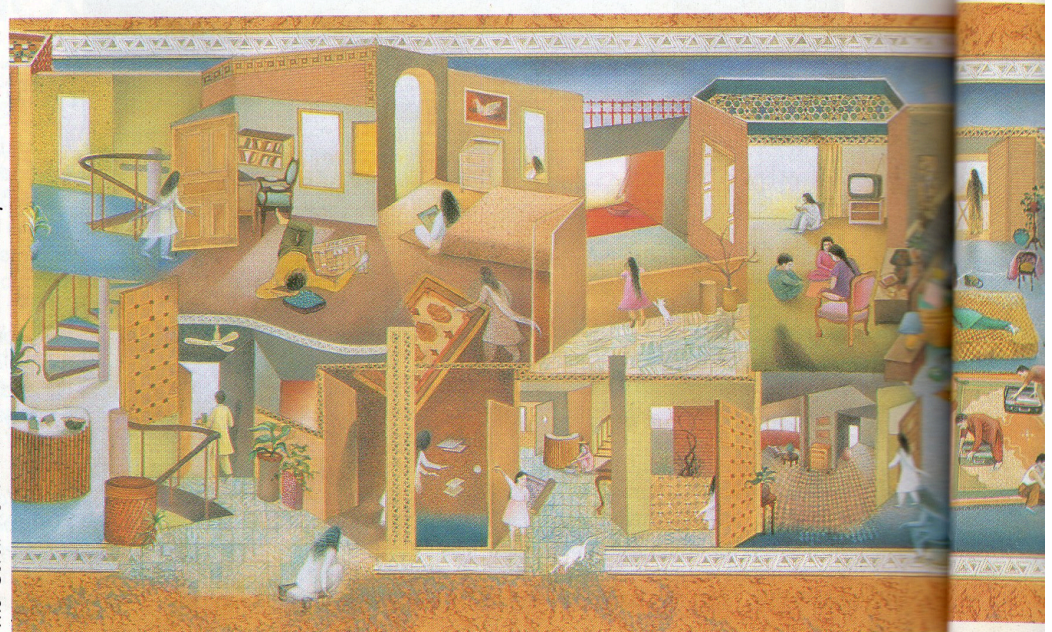


Shazia's MINIATURES

by Salima Hashmi

Shazia trained as a miniaturist at National College of Arts, Lahore, and paved a way for contemporizing miniatures through skilful use of traditional materials and techniques.

The "Scroll" - Shazia Sikander's Miniature Masterpiece.



It is a difficult matter to describe the visual traditions of the Indo-Pak subcontinent. The sheer complexity of the region, the geographical and topographical diversity, religious variants, regional and linguistic multiplicity, rural, provincial, imperial court traditions, make any simplistic over-view an impossible task. The contemporary painter, trying to make contact with tradition often falls into the trap of reducing such a varied tradition to stylistic simplifications or mannerisms. Modern painters who consciously choose a highly traditional genre such as the sub-continental miniature are faced with an even greater challenge. How to make a highly stylised method of image-making and expression, relevant to the contemporary idiom?

The National College of Arts in Lahore, a modern art school which trains also miniature painters, has had distinguished miniaturists like Haji Sharif and Sheikh Shujauallah as its faculty in the past. However, the debate as to whether the modern miniaturists should restrict themselves to copying old masters or instead try to arrive at a modern idiom has been raging for over two decades. This year the Graduate Exhibition of a final year student, Shazia Sikander seemed to pave

the way for contemporizing the miniature in a convincing way. Her show gave ample evidence of her superb handling of traditional skills, with miniatures done in all the major 'styles'; the Persian, the Moghul, Deccani, Pahani and the Rajput. But Shazia's copies were departures from the usual mode of working; she re-composed her own paintings, borrowing freely from several works at a time. Her 'Persian' painting was her own which retained all the conventions of the original period and style. Her exhibition included 'siah-qalam's, semi-coloured paintings, as well as fully gilded works with profusely decorated borders.

Her major work was her thesis painting, simply entitled "Scroll", a 12 inch wide, 5 foot long, miniature painted on the traditional 'wash'. Inspired from the Bengali folk-scroll (Patua) the painting is an auto-biographical portrayal of her own house. The unfolding of the narrative, which began as a self-portrait and then proceeds to become a delicate blend of fact and fantasy is a real tour-de-force. Shazia is easily identified in the painting as a mysterious figure in white, both an onlooker and a participant in the emerging architectural spaces. She intelligently incorporates conventions from the Persian and the Moghul and then defies them in her treatment of form and surface. In parts the painting is highly finished (padakht) and in other

areas left deliberately diaphanous and underpainted. Shazia also worked simultaneously on a smaller scroll, which incorporated layers of tree-bark as collage, tinted with tea-water and worked on with acrylic. This accompanying painting both dainty and humorous complemented its more formal sister scroll through its exploration of unconventional media. Shazia is very articulate about her motivations to train as a traditional painter. She felt the need to channelize her creative energies in a substantial aesthetic framework, and felt that training as a miniaturist would provide crucial skills and a familiarity with traditional materials and techniques. The process taught her both patience and a respect for tradition. However, she often found the conventions inhibiting and suppressed her spontaneity and need to innovate.

The modern painter in Shazia led her to analyse the miniature and to really 'see' it in ways that other's don't. "People are bedazzled by the sheer skill and technique, and don't see how it's put together", says the artist. Looking at the arrangement of spaces within the miniature format, playing around with 2-dimensional and 3-dimensional devices, setting up contradictions, developing an individual palette have been some of Shazia's artistic challenges. Shazia has also dabbled in calligraphy, not in a formal way, but for the sheer pleasure of handling the kalam and making it a vehicle for creating texture and pattern. She has mixed screen-printing with qalam on wasli and has created "mixed-media" miniatures to the consternation of the purists and the delight of the contemporary audience!

Shazia Sikander's work implies that sentimental revivalism need not be the *raison d'être* of the miniature, to the contrary, it can be a means of innovating, re-interpreting and transforming the past ●

