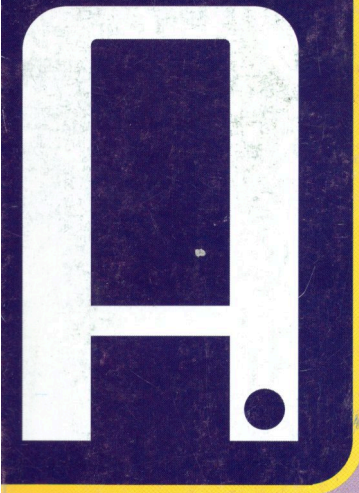


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# Her Vibrant JOURNEY

By combining classical Indo-Persian technique with a contemporary vision, **Shahzia Sikander** creates a brand new palette for the art world.

**T**his fall, thirty-year-old Shahzia Sikander's artwork will be seen by more than 1.6 million Americans when her painting is featured in the *New York Times Magazine*'s "Millennium Project", a six-part special that kicked off earlier this spring. As a follow-up, over half-a-million others in the Washington, D.C. area will have the opportunity to visit her solo exhibition at the at the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum (November 1999 through February 2000)—making Sikander one of the youngest Pakistani Americans to exhibit there.



A view from a 1998 exhibition of Sikander's work at the Renaissance Society in Chicago.

Shahzia Sikander's work as a painter has taken her on many a journey—geographically from her childhood in Pakistan to the creation and exhibition of her work around the world, and artistically, from pieces small enough to be hand-held to incarnations to works large enough to cover an entire wall. She has taken on a pilgrimage driven by her artistic exploration of "identity" and the meanings and values ascribed to it. By combining "re-energized" traditional icons with original images in sensuous and rhythmic displays, she has transcended both the academic reputation of miniature painting and its commercial aspect as "tourist art" in India.

By introducing the craft of miniatures to the art scene and applying those same classical techniques to her contemporary visions, she has quickly established her reputation as one to watch. The drastic contrast in scale between her different pieces is an interplay that is integral to her working process. The larger pieces are "more gestural, like drawing out of memory," she explains, abstracting experience into simple forms. This



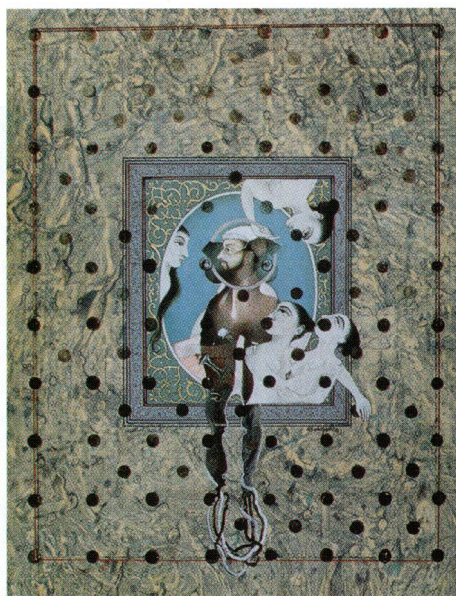




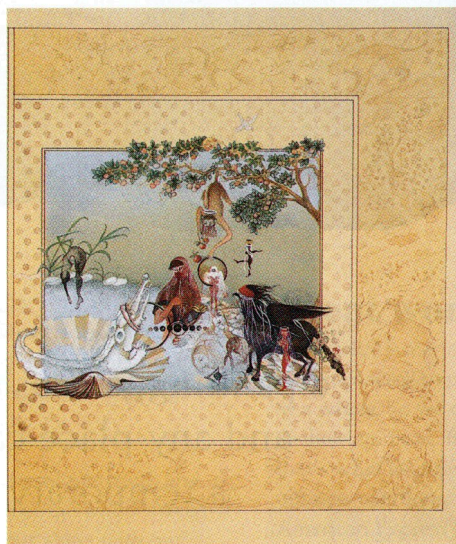
process of simplification is then reversed for the miniatures. "I try to have both of the processes because both inform each other. A lot of the forms develop here [in the larger works]. I bring them back into the space of miniature painting and then start playing with them there and accessorizing them, sort of developing the form further. One is aware of developing icons that are neither personal nor cultural, but somewhere between the both. That's what I always strive for."

**SIKANDER SPENT HER** first year of classroom sessions learning to make squirrel-hair bristle brushes that might be applied to the creation of miniatures in the future. [Animal-rights activists, take note: a tail taken from fresh road kill near her Houston home yields enough brushes to last for years]. In the world of Indo-Persian miniature painting, patience is a very necessary virtue. Sikander would draw a piece only to spend the next several months adding the layers of color with intricate brush strokes.

Aside from handmade brushes, Sikander prepares her own paper, called *wasli*, made from several sheets of paper pasted together with wheat glue (a concoction made by cooking flour and water) and coated with copper-sulfate (a vital preservative). She also uses tea (like Lipton!) as a staining agent, which again is mixed with copper sulfate. The paint she uses can be made from conventional artist pigments, vegetables such as beets, clay, or even powdered pearls. These colors are mixed in shells, which she explains, are very convenient. "When the water dries, the pigment stays on [the shell interiors]. I have colors that I made a couple of years ago. I can remove the dust and dip it in water and use the color." If she were to use the conventional plastic container that is so often seen in artists' studios, she explains, the paint would merely "peel off and fly



*Perilous Order, 1994-1997.*



*Venus's Wonderland, 1997. Vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, tea on wasli paper.*



*E-ing Those Armorial Bearings, 1994-1997. 8 1/2 in. by 5 3/4 in. Courtesy of Deitch Projects.*

away" once they're dried. Since the miniatures are portable, Sikander can carry a painting, a brush, and a shell and, any place can become a temporary studio.

Whatever the means, her images often challenge the questions of identity with an intelligent, but heartfelt, seriousness and a mischievous sense of humor. Take, for instance, the recurring image of the veil in her work. The veil manifests itself in many guises: a veil hides the face of the Hindu goddess (combining Muslim and Hindu iconography); the tattered veil covers the face of a Griffin; tissue paper veils over images painted on a wall; veils turn into wings. Aside from being a formal element in her work, she also explores the religious and cultural symbolism of the veil and how it informs other people of one's identity. Sikander experimented on herself back in the mid-'90s by wearing a veil in public spaces in the Mid-West and in Massachusetts. She found herself amazed by the reactions that the "veil performances" elicited: "When I'd walk down the street, people wouldn't talk to me. When I'd walk into a grocery store, everybody would give me way so that I could stand in the front of the line."

But the learning process didn't come without criticism. "I offended so many people" she says. "They thought that I trivialized the seriousness of the issue. Yet, it was totally out of the reasons that I wanted to understand it; I was very aware of manipulating it." However, for Sikander, ascertaining her own reaction to wearing the veil was equally as important, "I felt so much more comfortable. I could get up, wear it and not fuss about what to wear outside. I could literally wear my pajamas out on the street. I knew that people were so aware of my presence, and yet it was sheer anonymity. I felt very empowered. But, it was by choice—I could take it off after



three weeks."

Sikander discovered her life's work a little later than most. She started painting after first spending two years studying English Literature, French and Economics at the Kinnaird College for Women in Lahore, Pakistan. When she finally enrolled at the National College of Arts, also in Lahore, she says it had less to do with an internal need to study art or painting than a yearning to be a part of an artistic community. "I was interested in the school itself," she says. "I wanted to go participate in that environment." There, she found her calling in the traditional craft of miniatures painting—an art form that some critics have dismissed as merely "rigorous copying" and ultimately, in the contemporary world, a form that has lost much to commercialism. Shrugging off the criticism, Sikander folded new ideas into the old art form and emerged with pieces that have received numerous accolades.

**ONE OF THE GREAT** ironies of miniature painting is that even though Sikander had the opportunity to study the process in Pakistan, resources like museum exhibitions and books on the topic are more plentiful and accessible in the United States. So in 1993, she left Pakistan to attend the Rhode Island School of Design, where she continued her study of miniature painting. Prior to graduating with her Masters of Fine Art in 1995, Sikander was already successfully exhibiting her work in numerous shows. But it was a favorable *New York Times* review of her pieces displayed at The Drawing Center in New York City that led to an invitation to participate in the highly renowned Whitney Biennial in 1997. She has been working hard ever since. Sikander spent much of 1998 creating site-specific works (mostly wall installations) in San Francisco, New York, Chicago, St. Louis and Kansas City. And this summer, she received an invitation from the Smithsonian's museum of contemporary art, the Hirshhorn Museum, for a solo exhibition to open in the fall.

Over the course of a year, Sikander spends much of her time shuttling between her Houston home and her Tribeca art studio in New York City (afforded by Deitch Projects, the SoHo gallery that represents her work).



## Sikander can carry a painting, a brush, and a shell and any place can become a temporary studio.

With her Pakistani origins and her transient lifestyle, Sikander might be considered a 'global citizen.' But she finds the questions of origin and identity a little useless. Sikander rejects the categorizations of "Pakistani painter," "Muslim Feminist painter" and "Asian American painter," because all of these labels contain some element of truth, she says. "I have gone through these different categories, where I am Pakistani woman, and then it's woman art, then it's Asian—suddenly I was Asian American. You know how it's like, being a foreign person for a couple of years [and then] being an Asian American?"

Sikander wonders whether those insistent on categorizing her and her work realize that they are forgetting the larger context of her work. "What about my teachers, people who paved the way for me to be here?" She adds, "The absence of that context, I think is the most harmful. [Once] you are removed from that, you sometimes are seen as the spokesperson for your culture." Such attitudes do not seem to discourage Sikander; now that she has the attention of the art world she can use this platform to bring these other peers to light. ■