

# ASIAN ART

THE NEWSPAPER FOR COLLECTORS, DEALERS, MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES • MARCH 2005 • £5.00/US\$8/€10

## Grant to restore Phnom Bakheng

THE US DEPARTMENT OF STATE and the World Monuments Fund (WMF) have announced a grant of US\$550,000 from the State Department to WMF for the conservation of the Phnom Bakheng temple complex. The complex was constructed in the late ninth century in Angkor, Cambodia, seat of the Khmer Empire (802–1462). Despite its importance, Phnom Bakheng is perhaps the least understood and explored of the major temple complexes, which make up the Angkor Wat complex.

The grant allows the establishment of the Phnom Bakheng Conservation and Presentation Project and represents the first time that the United States government has directly supported conservation work in Angkor.

The Phnom Bakheng temple complex was constructed when Khmer King Yasovarman I (r. 889–900) moved his capital from Roluos to Angkor, where it became the first of five capital cities to be built over the

course of nearly five centuries. It is located north of the western entrance of Angkor Wat. The complex was at the centre of the large city, built atop one of three hills that punctuate the alluvial plain on which Angkor was established. It is one of the foremost examples of the 'temple mountain' style (which originated in Yasovarman's capital at Roluos), in which the composition of the temple complex was meant to represent Mount Mehru, dwelling place of the Hindu gods.

The hill (*phnom*) occupied by the Phnom Bakheng complex measures some 650 metres long by 430 metres wide by 65 metres high. A series of stepped terraces hewn into the sides of the hill and faced with sandstone create a 13-metre high, pyramid-shaped incline leading to the temple at the top. Here five towers, representing the five peaks of Mount Mehru, once stood. Below, around the base of the hill and on the terraces, were 108

additional tower shrines.

While little remains of Phnom Bakheng's central shrine and the principal towers, there are some very fine extant sculptures, important early examples of the stylised, deeply carved figures that became known as the Bakheng Style. Moreover, the hill affords stunning views across the plain to Angkor Wat and over the Western Baray reservoir and Great Lake (Tonle Sap).

The disappearance of many of the Phnom Bakheng towers was caused by 16th-century efforts to use the towers' sandstone to build a large seated Buddha. In modern times, during Cambodia's prolonged civil conflict, the site was commandeered by the military and used as a heavy-gun emplacement and a military encampment, and the surrounding area was extensively land mined. More recent threats include heavy and poorly managed tourism and monsoon rains. Due to the site's deforestation,



PHNOM BAKHENG temple complex at Angkor, built in temple-mountain style

conducted in order to provide access for de-mining and, later, visitors, the monsoon rains are especially damaging, causing erosion and creating dangerous areas of potential collapse of the manmade structures.

The State Department grant will be used for a three-to-five year programme of detailed site assessment, planning, and mobilisation. Amongst

the activities undertaken by the team will be archaeological research, environmental and architectural conservation assessments, the development of recommendations for ensuring the structural stability of the site, the creation of a plan for the management of tourism, and emergency conservation measures.

For more information, [www.wmf.org](http://www.wmf.org).

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### US EMBARGO: PUBLIC HEARING

The Department of State's Cultural Property Advisory Committee met for its first public hearing in Washington D.C., on 17 February. It was the committee's first step in the process of formulating a report to the Department of State on how it might officially respond to the Chinese request of 24 May, 2004, for a US embargo on all pre-1949 Chinese art. Twenty-one people spoke; three entities had two or three presenters (Field Museum (2); Saving Antiquities for Everyone [SAFE] (3); Sotheby's (2) and to count each entity fairly, a factor of one presenter for each of these three was used. The results of the presentations were four pro-embargo and 15 anti-embargo. There were 64 people in attendance (including presenters), plus the 11 Committee members: 3 professors (2 anthropology, 1 archaeology); 2 museums; 3 public; 3 dealers (2 coins, 1 tribal art). The pro-embargo presenters, who spoke most firmly were Robert Begley (Princeton) and Deborah Bekken (Field). However, it seems that the anti-embargo speakers carried the day, not only in numbers, but by sheer conviction, based on open eyes, deep and detailed understanding of the situation, sheer practicality and a clear understanding of the *realpolitik* behind the Chinese action. Both James Cuno of the Art Institute of Chicago and James J. Lally, prominent New York dealer, had total attention from the entire room, bordering on applause. The Committee members' questions were clear and intuitive, sometimes tough.

With the prevailing anti-embargo tone of the majority of letters/questionnaires the committee received in advance, my feeling is that the Committee will go back to the drawing board, fortified by what they heard (and had read), and will call another hearing at some stage, soon we hope. More detailed coverage will be published in Asian Art Newspaper, April 2005.

MARTIN BARNES LORBER.

### CLIFF CARVINGS PROTECTED, URUMQI

Northwest China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region will invest 1 million yuan (US\$120,000) in 2005 to protect 3,000-year-old cliff carvings in Xianjiang. Located in the Tianshan Mountains (which run through the middle of the province), 75 kilometres southwest of Hutubi County, the cliff carvings are composed of hundreds of human figures. Archaeologists consider the figures, with bushy eyebrows, big eyes, big mouths and Roman noses, to be cultural relics of the Silk Road and represent the people living in the Tianshan Mountains some 3,000 years ago.

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# An Interview with Shahzia Sikander

**Shahzia Sikander's work has been widely discussed and written about following her first exhibitions in the United States in the early 1990s. By incorporating traditional miniature painting into her work, her paintings have added to the current debate on painting traditions, religion and her status as a female artist from Pakistan. These observations were made in the early stages of her career, but now Shahzia Sikander's work has evolved in many different directions. Following her previous interview with the Asian Art Newspaper (January 2002), she addresses the latest developments of her work, hoping it will be subject to new readings and interpretations. Olivia Sand reports.**

**Asian Art Newspaper:**  
In the exhibition at the  
Aldrich Museum  
(Ridgefield, CT), which  
ended in December 2004  
and is presently on view  
at your gallery in New  
York (Brent Sikkema),  
your work takes on a new  
direction.

**Shahzia Sikander:** Absolutely.  
When working on these  
most recent pieces, I knew I  
wanted to do a show that  
would require the viewer to  
engage in the work. I want-  
ed to do something different  
so that people would not  
read any more into the work  
than what is actually there.  
All too often, people have  
tried to read too much –  
mainly culturally related. As  
the title of the piece *51 Ways*

*of Looking* (a series of 51  
graphite drawings) suggests,  
my work is based on dia-  
logue – the endless ways to  
continue an ongoing dia-  
logue. The piece requires  
you to look at various ways  
of seeing something. It em-  
phasises the aspect of de-  
construction, but it is also  
suggestive of the complete  
liberty of association to nar-  
rative or memory.

**AAN:** These new pieces  
seem to engage the  
viewer more than before.  
How did that  
development come about?

**SS:** In this latest body of  
work, I tried to create a sep-  
aration and to reduce infor-  
mation – to go to the core of  
*continued on page 4*



SHAHZIA SIKANDER. Photo by David Adams (2004)

## NEWS IN BRIEF

### NEW DIRECTOR TEXTILE MUSEUM, WASHINGTON

The board of trustees have  
announced the appointment of  
Daniel Walker as director of the  
museum. Mr Walker's previous  
appointment, since 1988, was as the  
Patti Cadby Birch Curator in Charge,  
Department of Islamic Art at the  
Metropolitan Museum of Art in New  
York. He assumes his post at The  
Textile Museum on 1 May.

### COMMONWEALTH WRITERS' PRIZE

Four international judging panels  
met to award the Best Book and  
Best First Book regional winners for  
the 2005 Commonwealth Writers' Prize,  
now in its 19th year. The  
regions are split into Africa, the  
Caribbean & Canada, Eurasia, and  
South East Asia & South Pacific.  
These eight books are now short-  
listed for the overall Best Book and  
Best First Book prizes. Best new  
book in the Eurasia section went to  
*The Sari Shop* by Rupa Bajwa  
(Viking, UK/Viking, India).

### SINGAPORE SEASON, LONDON

The Singapore Season opened in  
late February, and runs until 5 April  
in major London venues. Some of  
Singapore's best artists and arts  
companies will be featured: Director  
Ong Keng Sen and TheatreWorks,

the Singapore Dance Theatre, the  
T'ang Quartet, a Singapore Season  
Film Week of popular films by top  
Singapore film makers, and the  
Singapore Chinese Orchestra with  
multi-disciplinary artist Tan Swie  
Hian. More information on  
www.singaporeseason.com.

### TRIENNIAL AWARD, INDIA

Singapore sculptor Han Sai Por has  
been selected as one of the award  
winners at the XI Triennial-India for  
her sculpture series entitled *Bud*,  
*Leaf & Seed* in brass, bronze, marble  
and granite as well as for her  
charcoal paintings. Prize awards of  
Rs.1 lakh (approx US\$2,500) were  
presented to Han and the nine other  
winning artists at the triennial's  
closing ceremony on 10 February.  
The triennial is one of the most  
prestigious visual arts events in Asia  
and is organised by the Lalit Kala  
Akademi, attracting the participation  
of artists from over 40 countries.

### ASIAN PLANT CULTURES, LONDON

The Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew  
has announced a new project - Plant  
Culture. It tells the story of 25 Asian  
plants, from tea and sugar to indigo  
and henna, lotus and marigold,  
which are now part of everyday  
British life. Hundreds of images  
from important library and museum  
collections provide an insight, both

historical and contemporary, into  
Asian life. Many of these images are  
now digitally available for the first  
time and form a unique online  
gallery of South Asian culture, visit  
the website at  
www.plantcultures.org.uk.

### SCULPTURE TALKS, BRITISH MUSEUM

Jasleen Kandhari, of the British  
Library, is conducting a series of  
gallery talks on the renowned Asian  
Sculpture collections of the British  
Museum in the Joseph Hotung  
gallery, starting March and  
continuing until November. The  
talks will cover the Museum's Indian  
Buddhist, Hindu and Jain sculptural  
collections as well as Tibetan and  
early Chinese sculptural material.  
The first lecture for the Spring  
period, on 26 March at 11.15am, is  
*Tantric Buddhist Sculpture of Tibet*.  
For information, tel. Jasleen  
Kandhari on +44(0)20 741 27249,  
email Jasleen.Kandhari@bl.uk.

### SYMPOSIA ON JAPAN, NEW YORK

*Revisioning Reality: International  
Japonisme and the Influence of  
Japan on the Visual Arts, 1853-2005*,  
is a three-day symposium, which  
starts at 1pm on 17 March. In  
addition to examining Japanese  
history and craft practice, talks cover  
the creation of the aesthetic of  
Japonisme, the importation of

Japanese architecture, and its  
influence on Western architecture  
and landscape gardens. One-day  
registrations are available. Held at  
the Cantor Film Center at 36 East 8th  
Street between University Place and  
Greene Street. For information, tel.  
+1 212 998 7137,  
www.scps.nyu.edu/japan.

*New Design Japan: Cool Ideas &  
Hot Products*, organised by Japan  
Society and Museum of Arts &  
Design. Japan Society presents a  
three-day symposium *New Design  
Japan: Cool Ideas & Hot Products*,  
18 to 20 March, starts 6.30 pm. *New  
Design Japan* highlights the new  
wave of Japanese design, including  
fashion, interior, furniture, and  
product design. For information,  
Gayle Snible, tel. +1 212-715-1205,  
gsnible@japansociety.org.

### BOOK SIGNING, NEW YORK

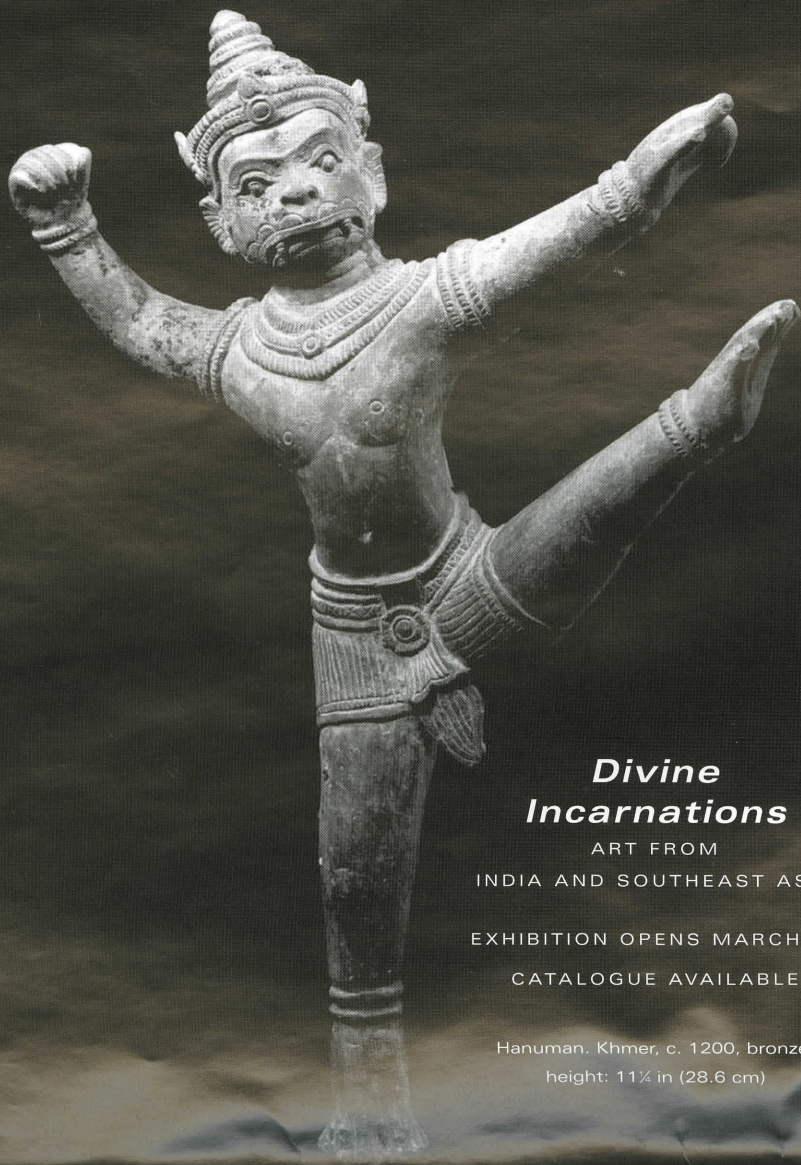
Sarah Handler will be signing copies  
of her new book, *Ming Furniture,  
in the Light of Chinese Architecture*  
(published by Ten Speed Press), on  
28 March, during the Fuller Building  
opening night for Asia Week.  
The book signing is at the  
William Lipton Gallery, 8/F,  
The Fuller Building, 41 East 57th  
Street, New York, for details,  
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Hanuman, Khmer, c. 1200, bronze, height: 11 1/4 in (28.6 cm)

things and presenting that as a proposition, then start a new dialogue. That development is fairly recent. I feel it comes from a concern to stop and reflect on a lot of what the press was saying, on how my work can exist in public.

Recently, I have been looking at the reviews and writings about my work. I realised that there was a lack of substantial material, and that people primarily continued to focus on the polarity of somebody coming from another culture (Pakistan). That was fine 12 years ago, but today I consider it ridiculous as I have produced so much work over these years. People still refer to paragraphs that were in print in 1994 or 1995. I consider this as a refusal to engage with the work, which may of course only reflect people's insecurity. I definitely feel that a lot of it is repetitive, and it is also very simplistic in its representation.

I see my whole engagement with miniature painting as very liberal. I am not an art historian, and to me, it is all about taking liberty. I have nothing against being submitted to a post-colonial discourse, but it should not be the only discourse to address the work. There are many ways of reading the work. I feel my work has always been very conceptual and about a formal engagement.

**AAN: The latest exhibition features an animation piece. What draws you towards animation?**

**SS:** Adding sound is definitely something that shifts the whole work into a different gear, and adds another dynamic. Also, completing the animation piece is somewhat effortless – the way it is constructed is very similar to the way I do my work: based on layers of information. When working on a painting or a wall installation, you literally begin from the first layer of information outwards, until it ends. It is open ended. I have always liked that aspect of 'open-endedness' in terms of its meaning.

**AAN: Has your re-appropriation of miniature painting had a strong impact in Pakistan?**

**SS:** In a way. My going back to miniature painting triggered the miniature painting department in Lahore (Pakistan) in 1989, when I was a student there. That is more than 15 years ago, and now there are more than 50 miniature painters throughout the world exhibiting internationally. As for the department, it now produces 20 to 30 artists every year with the premise that it is very experimental.

**AAN: As a student, you brought miniature painting to another level, going back to an art form that was not very popular**



51 WAYS OF LOOKING (2004), graphite on paper, #22 of 51 works, 30.5 x 22.9 cm.

All images courtesy Brent Sikkema NYC

**amongst aspiring young artists. Looking back, what difficulties did you face?**

**SS:** When I was first introduced to miniature painting (at the age of 17), everybody thought that this was going to be detrimental to my intellectual growth as a young artist. That was mainly due to the fact that miniature painting was strongly linked to the burdens and restrictions of technique and that ritualistic notion of copying, which is embedded in the traditional art. With that

basic understanding, miniature painting was reduced to something very archaic. Furthermore, I felt that the lack of critical discourse around the aesthetic of miniature painting was what made it less accessible to the world. The people that have explored it remain primarily curators with interest in the Indian section of the leading museums in the field. If you pick up a publication printed by such institutions, it is a catalogue classifying the various schools and the various images that are owned by



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51 WAYS OF LOOKING (2004), #28 of 51 works, 30.5 x 22.9 cm.



*When I was first introduced to miniature painting, everybody thought that this was going to be detrimental to my intellectual growth as a young artist.*

the museum. It provides information of the painting and the event represented in the piece. That is the type of material from which I learned miniature painting. I looked at these catalogues, going through every painting (that for the most part are not exhibited), but held by the museum. Often, very few pieces are on view, sometimes only 10 or 20 a year. Therefore, it is primarily through private collections or through the Western museums that you can get access to miniature paintings, as they are not integrated in the mainstream collection.

People presume that because miniature painting has been practised in recent years in Pakistan, it is assumed that it is part of Pakistan's history, but it is not. I acquired it by looking at these books that came out of the West. For me, it is (by choice) a very indirect, non-nostalgic look at miniature painting. Previously, miniature painting existed for tourist consumption, so it was quick, fast, gimmicky, slick, and kitsch. Then, it existed at the level of the art school – and that department was the least popular for years. To me, the function of the department was solely to serve as a cultural display for foreigners or when money was needed from the government. Within the peers and the intelligentsia of the school nobody was interested in pursuing the miniature. Those circumstances gave me freedom to do whatever I wanted, because no precedent had been set. That was a truly wonderful thing to have.

**AAN: It seems that you have rarely been part of exhibitions, which include other Asian artists. Was that a deliberate choice?**

**SS:** My first intuitive response, when I started gaining attention in New York, was to avoid exhibitions that were about South Asians. There were a lot of opportunities to do shows with other Indian or Pakistani artists, to be part of Asian shows, or Asian-American shows. At the time, just coming out of school, it was very tempting. However, I was very aware that I would have to wait for other opportunities, as I would get 'ghettoised' into it. Once an artist is stereotyped, it is hard to get out of it.

What I really wanted, at that time in New York, was to do a show with the Drawing Center, where the context was to do experimental drawing and it did not matter what type of work I did. It was wonderful when it happened, because it was an excellent introduction to New York City. If the first introduction had happened as purely South Asian, I believe I would have been imprisoned in that forever.

**AAN: What were the reactions to your work after September 11th? Did people show more interest/animosity towards your work and towards the culture from that part of the world?**

**SS:** Right after September 11th, and for almost two years, I did experience a shut down of dialogue. Nothing was happening in the press, and nobody wanted to shake the surface and say anything incorrect. I felt that was a very dark moment, and there were very few people with whom to engage. Now, I feel there is an open dialogue around the world. I believe people did not have any choice but to show interest in the dialogue. Right now, there seems to be an opportunity to engage and to communicate. People want to know more, they have had to think a little harder, read a little bit more, and refer to some more sources than the ones they take for granted such as cable tv and local newspapers. Presently, there is a far deeper curiosity, and people are not embarrassed to ask questions about things they may not have come across before.

**AAN: In the future, do you see yourself engaging in politically oriented work?**

**SS:** No, I do not think so. I have always been very interested in work that has a larger resonance within the community that can live after it is over and that has some effect socially. I gravitate towards that, towards people active in the community and thinkers that question the relevance of art, its purpose, and are challenged by creating.

Shahzia Sikander was born in 1969 in Lahore (Pakistan). She presently resides in New York City. Her work is presently on view at Brent Sikkema, 530 West 22nd Street, New York



PURSUIT CURVE (still) (2004), digital animation, colour, sound, approx. 7 minutes, sound: David Amir



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