

# SHADES OF THE DIVINE

*New SAM exhibit highlights  
the mind-altering colors of Indian painting*

BY SHEILA FARR  
*Seattle Times art critic*

Indian painters of the Hindu and Mughal courts began each picture by mixing their own pigments: blue from ground lapis lazuli, iridescent green from beetle casings, red from vermilion and lead, silver and gold from precious metals. And how did they get that gorgeous, ever-present Indian yellow? They distilled it from the urine of cows fed exclusively on mango leaves.

Mind-altering color is a hallmark of traditional Indian painting. It's used to help express the erotic yearning between humans and immortals, the clashes between monsters and gods, and the trappings of power among the ruling class. The small paintings were bound in manuscripts or assembled in folios to illustrate epic poems and royal histories. Originally, they were held and examined closely, one by one.

That close contact won't be possible in the double show opening tonight at Seattle Art Museum. But the considerate installation — complete with carpets and cushions to lounge on, mauve-colored walls, and music that complements certain pictures — is certainly the next-best thing. The exhibition explores the old styles of South Asian painting and the way two contemporary women artists — one Indian, one born in Pakistan — are refreshing those traditions for the 21st century. If you have a magnifying glass, you may want to bring it: The fine detail in both the classical and contemporary work is astonishing.

"Intimate Worlds: Masterpieces of Indian Painting from the Alvin O. Bellak Collection" features 90 paintings, most in miniature format, that date back to a 14th-century manuscript page, one of the earliest works on paper produced in India. The latest works in the collection date to the 19th century and the advent of photography, which put many Indian court painters out of business.

On the other side of the gauze curtains from "Intimate Worlds" hangs a show of contemporary art: "Conversations with Traditions: Nilima Sheikh and Shahzia Sikander." Both are contemporary artists who mine the past for imagery and techniques, then use them in unconventional ways. Sikander has been at SAM since last week, working on a mural in the entryway to the exhibition. She and Darrielle Mason, Indian art curator at the Philadelphia Museum of Art (where "Intimate Worlds" originated) will discuss Indian and Pakistani painting at 7:30 this evening during opening-night festivities. The museum will stay

## **Pakistani-born painter**

*Shahzia Sikander evokes today's symbols through traditional techniques. D 2*



**The Alvin O. Bellak collection favors masculine themes, such as this 17th century portrait of Rajput warrior-prince Rao Ratan.**





TOM REESE / THE SEATTLE TIMES

**Shahzia Sikander**, left, works on her wall painting at the Seattle Art Museum with assistant Shahbano Agha. Her art blends the traditional with the contemporary.

## Detailed artist evokes today's world with ancient Indian techniques

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Growing up in Pakistan in the 1970s, all Shahzia Sikander knew about traditional Indian miniature painting was the kitschy stuff she saw being produced for tourists. She hated it.

"I didn't completely grasp the old work. You're not born with it," she said Tuesday, sitting among her paintings at Seattle Art Museum. "It was a very conscious decision on my part to understand the history of Indian painting."

Her work is part of the new exhibit, "Conversations with Traditions: Nilima Sheikh and Shahzia Sikander."

Sheikh, born in New Delhi in 1945, references in her work the traumatic social events that accompanied the severing of India and Pakistan in 1947.

Sikander, born in Lahore, Pakistan in 1969 and now living in New York, puts social issues in a more personal context.

When Sikander went to art school in Lahore, she decided to study miniature painting, from making her own pigments to the painstakingly intricate paint application. She was the only one at the school who took the traditional approach seriously, and her final project — a single epic painting titled "The Scroll" on

view at SAM — was a year in the making.

After Sikander moved to the United States for graduate school and her work started getting international attention, things changed. Now, she says, lots of art students in Pakistan are learning to paint miniatures — you can get famous that way, they say — and even copy her style, blending traditional techniques with a personal vocabulary of symbols and contemporary innovations.

Sikander's paintings are technically awe-inspiring, so exquisitely rendered it takes a magnifying glass to appreciate their minute detail. They are also utterly attuned to the present and to trends in 20th-century art. Her drawing "Dark Kingdoms" shows the outline of a Mughal prince joined at the heart to a shirtless young tough, his baseball cap stuck on backwards, an earring in his left ear. The picture, reminiscent of Frida Kahlo's double self-portraits, characterizes the way Sikander imagines her own work and self-image — joined to a strong tradition, but incorporating an increasingly global culture.

"Conversations with Traditions: Nilima Sheikh and Shahzia Sikander" is a satisfying counterpart to the traditional paintings of "Intimate Worlds" and reveals the deeply rooted cultural past shared by Hindus and Muslims.