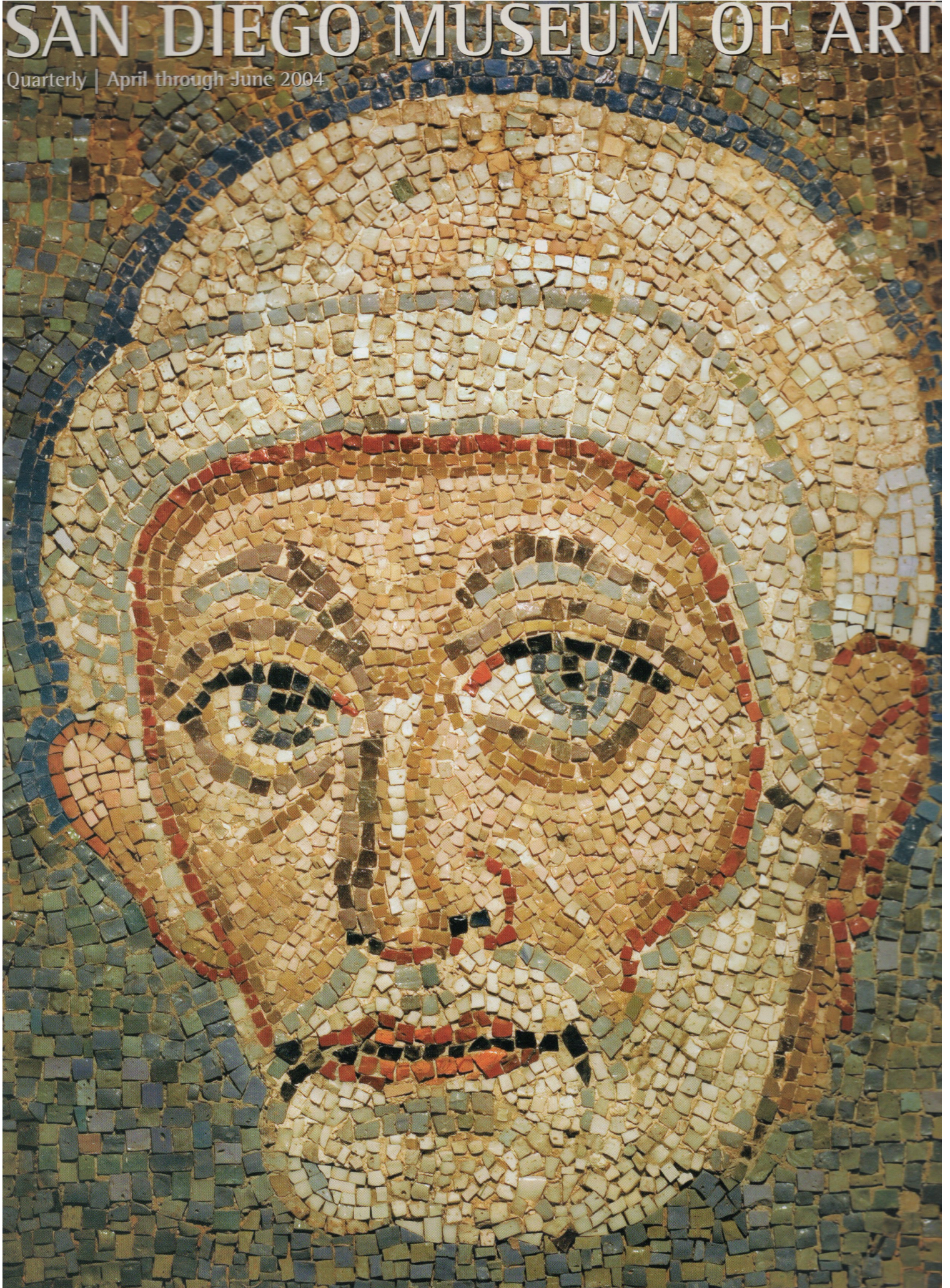


# SAN DIEGO MUSEUM OF ART

Quarterly | April through June 2004





Contemporary Links 2  
*Shahzia Sikander: Flip Flop*

March 27 through June 27, 2004



Shahzia Sikander, *Flip Flop Series: To Reflect*. Ink and gouache on paper. San Diego Museum of Art, 2004.



Shahzia Sikander, *Flip Flop Series: To Extend*. Ink and gouache on paper. San Diego Museum of Art, 2004.

The Pakistani-born artist Shahzia Sikander is renowned worldwide for her experimental approach to the highly codified traditions of Indian and Persian miniature painting. This spring, in a three-part project titled *Flip Flop*, Sikander turns the tables on a group of South Asian paintings from the Museum's Edwin Binney 3<sup>rd</sup> Collection currently featured in *Sultans and Sufis: Paintings from the Deccan*. Part of SDMA's ongoing *Contemporary Links* series, her elaborate installation in the upper rotunda consists of a series of eighteen works on paper that correspond one-to-one to works in *Sultans and Sufis*, a dramatic site-specific composition of colored polyester film for the central staircase window, and a wall installation of paintings on dense layers of tissue paper.

As a student at the National College of Arts in her native Lahore, Pakistan, Sikander encountered and studied two schools of miniature painting, Indian and Persian. Most Indian miniatures, as anyone familiar with the Binney Collection is aware, are small in size, meticulous in detail, and delicate in brushwork. Intended for close, private viewing, they depict, either simply or with densely packed

compositions, complex worlds—courtly life, mythological tales, and battles. Persian manuscripts offer elaborate calligraphic texts, arabesque forms, and intricate decorative patterns—qualities that represent the opposite of Indo-Hindu visual narratives.

Sikander uses her training in both these traditional art forms as a basis for the imaginary worlds that she creates. It is from the miniatures' vast storehouse of figures, animals, mythological creatures, landscapes, design, and architecture that Sikander selects pieces and fragments to be filtered through her personal iconography and political views. She often subverts traditional stereotypes and overlays her own pictorial language onto the traditional artwork's subject matter.

Sikander has said, "When I first left Pakistan to come to the United States, I encountered a new geographical space. Living in this fairly neutral space, I was interested to express in a personal voice antithetical issues concerning historical animosities between India and Pakistan, and to expose Western stereotypes about women from the Third World." Accordingly, the artist inserts imagery into her

work that expresses the historical turmoil of the region, the split between Muslim and Hindu societies, and the hostile and violent clashes brought about by these differences. Her work often features women in diverse roles and situations that allude to the overlapping histories of her sources and her own life experiences.

In the complex world of the Deccan, as seen in the paintings featured in *Sultans and Sufis*, historical sources are replete with stories of accomplished women—ladies of the court, performing artists and writers, courtesans, and temple girls. With plenty of information to choose from, Sikander adds her own iconography to pre-existing ones, writing her own story on top of the historical visual narratives. The subjects of the originals as well as the paintings' marginalia are equally available as resources for her symbolic collaborations. As a Pakistani and a Muslim, Sikander takes these investigations into the imaginary past, where repercussions of colonialism and relations between "Orient" and "Occident" function as a place to begin a dialogue between history and self.