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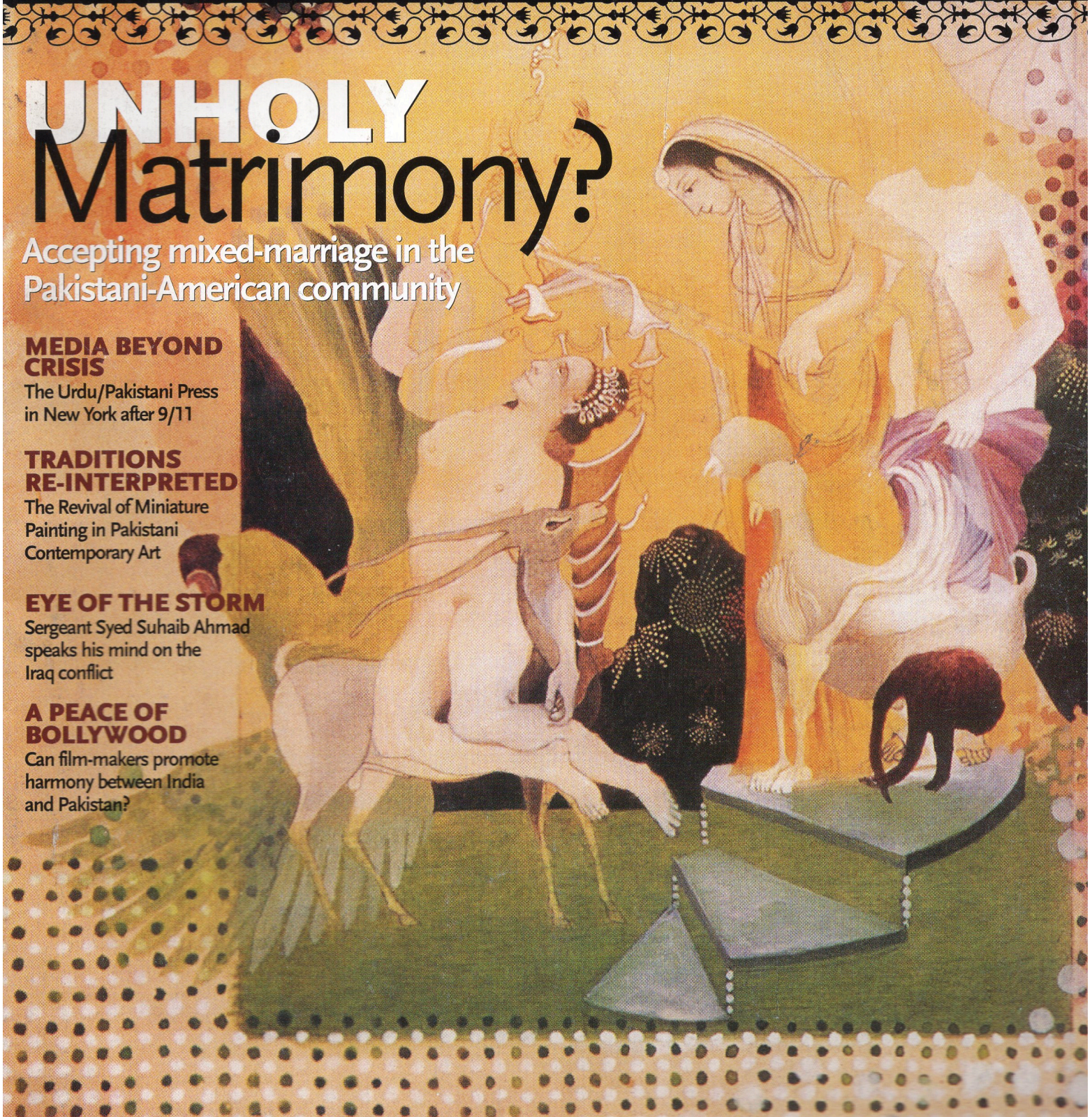
The Revival of Miniature
Painting in Pakistani
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Traditions Re-interpreted

By Qamar Adamjee

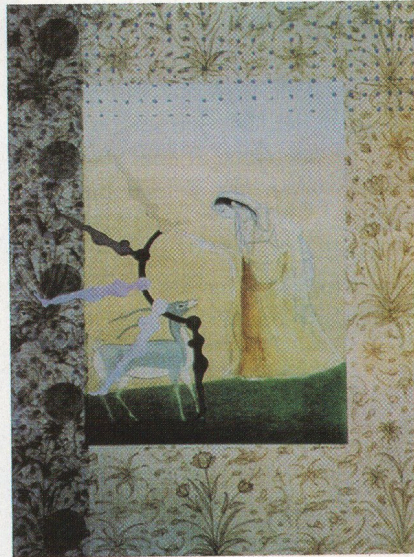
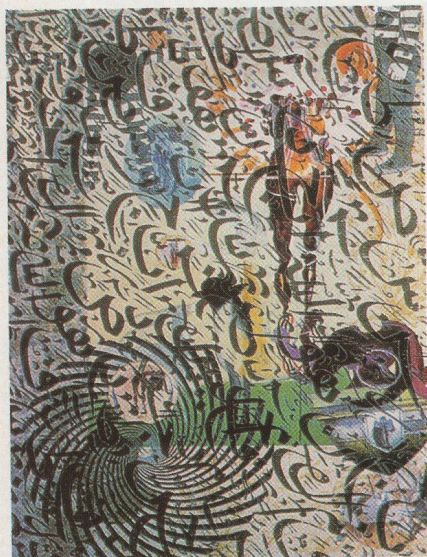
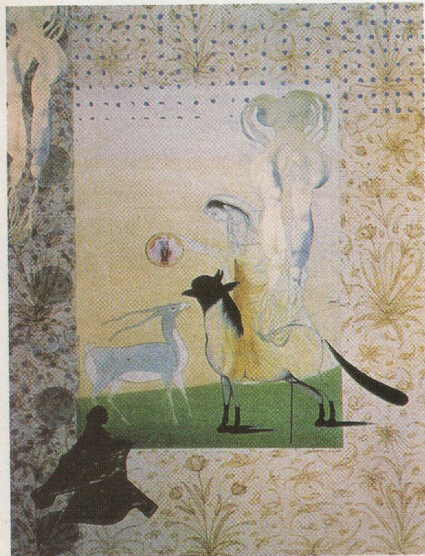


Figure 1a. Shahzia Sikander. *Intimacy* (2001)

The Revival of Miniature Painting in Contemporary Pakistani Art

Living traditions are far and few between in our increasingly global society. The word 'tradition' itself connotes something antiquated, frozen in a long-lost time, and is posed as mutually exclusive to the highly valued 'modern' and 'contemporary'. But must these really be oppositions? Recent art from Pakistan shows us that the two can co-exist. A growing number of artists over the last decade have been using so-called 'traditional' painting forms to create works that address present realities, extending their sphere of influence across a global artistic arena and beyond a purely Pakistani context. Artists like Shahzia Sikander, Talha Rathore and Nusra Latif Qureshi are using techniques associated with Islamic book painting outside of their original framework, employing themes and images common to that vocabulary in order to question, subvert or reassess not only traditional painting but also Western modernism in the process.

Historical Context

From the seventh to the seventeenth centuries, the principal form of painting across the Islamic world was manuscript illustration, and small-scale paint that enlivened texts such as medical and scientific treatises, histories, poetry and prose. Books, especially illustrated ones, were highly prized and expensive objects. Greatly coveted, they were often used as diplomatic gifts and formed an essential part of the spoils of war. The labor-intensive process of book illustration and the high cost of materials usually required a workshop setting and, frequently, royal patronage, although illustrated manuscripts were also produced as luxury goods for sale in bazaars. By the seventeenth century both in India and Iran, stand-alone works gained great popularity, and were produced by artists for compilations in albums that contained paintings and calligraphic samples chosen by the patron.

Contemporary Pakistani artists trace their association with this painting tradition to the Muslim Mughal and Hindu courts of North India, where a Persian model of painting was introduced in the mid-sixteenth century. At the court of the Mughal emperor Akbar (r.1556-1605) and under his active patronage, artists created a new style which, while retaining its strong roots in a Persianate idiom, fused Persian, indigenous Indian, and European forms and united them with a strong interest in realism. With the decline of Mughal power and resources in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, new painting centers emerged in the Rajput courts of Punjab at Kangra, Basohli, Guler, Mandi, and in Rajasthan. But in the face of changing tastes and growing British colonialism, this art form lost its traditional patronage. Miniature painting became reserved for commercial tourist fare, while the skills associated with the production were safeguarded by a handful of masters.

Miniature Painting in Pakistan

The formation of Pakistan required a new process of identity development. To put it simplistically, at various times in its history, Mughal history was used to create a historical and cultural Muslim identity for the republic. For example, traditional painting, though maintaining a constant, if limited, presence, received an 'official' revival in the 1970s under President Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (1971-79). Greater impetus, over the last twenty years, was provided by the renowned artist and professor Zahoor ul-Akhlaq at The National College of Arts (NCA) in Lahore. NCA's department of Miniature Painting has seen significant increase in the number of students majoring in the field. Today, the students work under

a direct master-student training system and are trained in not only the visual elements of the practice, but also taught to make paper, brushes, and pigments according to centuries-old techniques.

Shahzia Sikander

One of the first graduates to gain international acclaim was Shahzia Sikander, now working in New York. Sikander's work breaks with the tradition in that she experiments with the strict function of the miniature, as well as with scale-producing small-scale works, wall paintings, installations, bold gesture drawings and computer animations. While her visual vocabulary derives from a South Asian artistic heritage, Sikander's interest in traditional painting is largely for its form rather than function. She is less concerned with preserving a narrative content in her work and instead explores post-modern ideas - for example, creation of meaning by appropriation from varying sources, or the impermanence of visual and conceptual cues - through the medium of Mughal and Indian painting. Her work, immediately recognizable as miniature painting, creates multiple points of rupture for the viewer at closer examination, where it is simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar, forcing the formation of new associations. Sikander challenges viewers to reexamine their conceptions, introducing alternative points of view while blurring boundaries, and presenting thought-provoking ideas with wit and humor. The works address personal and theoretical concerns that have interested the artist over the years - issues such as cultural identity and displacement, authorship, originality, the sanctity of a 'finished' painting, psychological perceptions in the creation of meaning, and temporal relationships in art and in the process of making art.

Sikander's recent work, titled *Intimacy* (2001), is a series of animated drawings in which carefully executed paintings are digitally manipulated to create a gradual unfolding for several minutes, with one scene/form morphing into another to create a continuous narrative with no story-telling function. The individually identifiable elements stem from the artist's personal iconography that frequently combines Hindu and Muslim imagery, figural and landscape forms inspired by the Pahari* painting schools, Mughal manuscript border decorations, and calligraphy - combined into a series of surreal images that juxtapose the familiar with the unfamiliar. The simultaneous use of two completely different mediums-computer animation and delicately rendered paintings on *wasli* paper* - emphasizes and bridges the temporal gap between the artist, the art and the viewer, and allows us a glimpse into the artist's creative process.

Talha Rathore

Another artist based in New York, Talha Rathore uses the tools of her trade in a different manner. In the series



Figure 1b. Shahzia Sikander. *Intimacy* (2001)

Between the Worlds (2002) executed on New York City subway maps, Rathore explores the issue of cultural displacement while navigating relationships between east and west. Each painting has a starkness and simplicity that recalls the nostalgic and meditative mood of many Kangra school paintings. The works are in a conventional book illustration format where the central image is framed within narrow inner borders and surrounded by wider decorated margins. The cypress tree-a metaphor in Persian poetry for the beauty of a beloved-is the principal subject, and is the only element that actively engages the space within the picture in an otherwise surrounding stillness. She exploits the undulating, multicolored subway lines to activate the image, while the text on the maps recalls the function and relationship between text and images in a manuscript. Added dimensions in the work derive from Rathore's use of collage and block-print - the former was first used by Picasso and the Cubists in the early twentieth

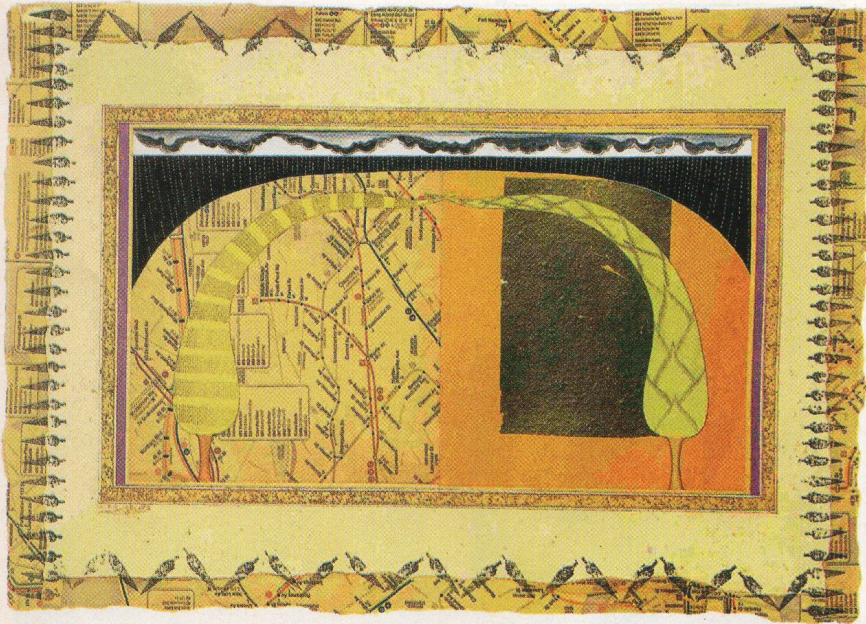


Figure 2. Talha Rathore. *Their bodies turned to gold* (2002)

century, while the latter refers to a technique in textile production, particularly in the east. Here, the two unite the once unchangeable division between the 'high' and 'low' arts. Rathore's use of tea-stained subway maps, an age-old technique for imparting richness of tone to paper and also suggestive of the yellowing of paper with age, brings together more oppositions. In employing these devices, Rathore exposes polarities—a hand-made *wasli* is juxtaposed with the mechanically reproduced map, dichotomies are expressed of the individual and impersonal, historical past and present reality, east and west, modernity and tradition. The appeal of these works lies in their overt simplicity which on closer examination express multiple layers of complex ideas; Rathore's works communicate concepts produced in a contemporary context through the visual medium of an entirely different culture.

Nusra Latif Qureshi

The works of Nusra Latif Qureshi have but a surface resemblance with that of the others, displaying small scale, compositional and visual elements drawn from the Mughal and North Indian schools, and strong qualities of draftsmanship. At the same time they share the attempt to cohesively unite different worlds and cultural contexts. Using the techniques of lithography and collage along with materials such as *wasli* paper, acrylic paints and gouache, Qureshi explores histories—personal, national, cultural—in the series recently on view at the Smith College Museum of Art in Massachusetts titled *The Way I Remember Them* (2004). She questions the formation of collective memory and the function of images as 'true testimonies' of a past. For this she looks at imperial portraits and court scenes from the period of the Mughal emperors Jahangir and Shah Jahan and from the Rajput courts, documentary photographs from the British colonial period, and works of the British Company School whose artists set out to document the sites, people, flora and fauna of the British colony. Qureshi forces the viewer to confront the process by which images are invested with power. In many of these paintings, she starts with lavish, minutely detailed images with a heightened sense of realism, that were intended to convey imperial splendor and power. She then strips the images of all extraneous detail leaving behind only single forms as symbols of this power, such as the turban ornament (*sarpeech*), the horse, dagger, or throne. These are represented as outlines, frequently stacked one upon the other or superimposed with contours of British colonial images of

polo players or a carcass of a hunted tiger - new images of power that in turn draw upon earlier precedents of the same. In doing so, she coolly removes the layers off images heavily laden with visual cues that were intended to project 'historical truths' (however biased or flawed they may be) and exposes their underlying romanticism and propagandistic aims. In isolating individual forms from their context she also highlights the process of artistic selection, the deliberate omissions and inclusions in the historical works and in her own, which serve to create new spaces and new meanings.

This original artistic expression emerging from Pakistan straddles cultural, geographic and historical boundaries, reflective in many ways of rapidly changing Pakistani society. These artists and others that work not only with miniatures but also in other forms of painting, video, and sculpture, are seeking to produce new identities and meaning. They are forging new territories where they question and expose, in the words of Homi Bhabha, "the limits of any claim to a singular or autonomous sign of identity or transcendent value—be it truth, beauty, class, gender or race..." Their art "emerges *in-between* the claims of the past and the needs of the present,... whereby the past dissolves in the present, so that the future [of identity or art] becomes once again an *open question*, instead of being specified in the fixity of the past."

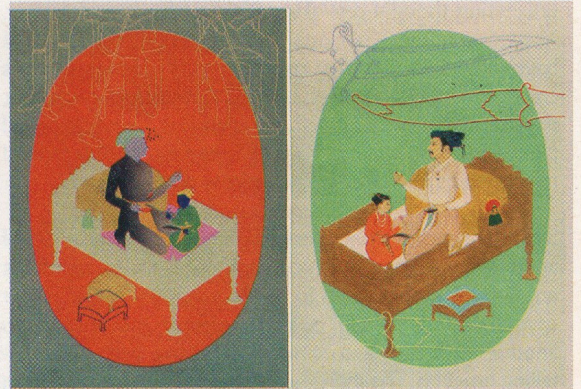


Figure 3. Nusra Latif Qureshi. *The hilt overlaid with gold* (2001)

* Pahari is a style of miniature painting and book illustration that developed in the independent states of the Himalayan foothills in South Asia, c. 1690-1790

*Wasli comprises of multiple sheets of paper fused together with wheat paste and burnished smooth to create a thick working surface

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