

When the Curator Becomes the Attraction

Curators love to tie up loose ends; artists prefer to leave them hanging. That's why it can be so refreshing when a museum allows an artist to rummage

ART REVIEW

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through its permanent collection. The Artist's Choice series at the Museum of Modern Art is one example; the Cooper-Hewitt's Selects series is another. (It's also a cost-effective way to put on a show, so chances are we'll be seeing more of this type of exhibition.)

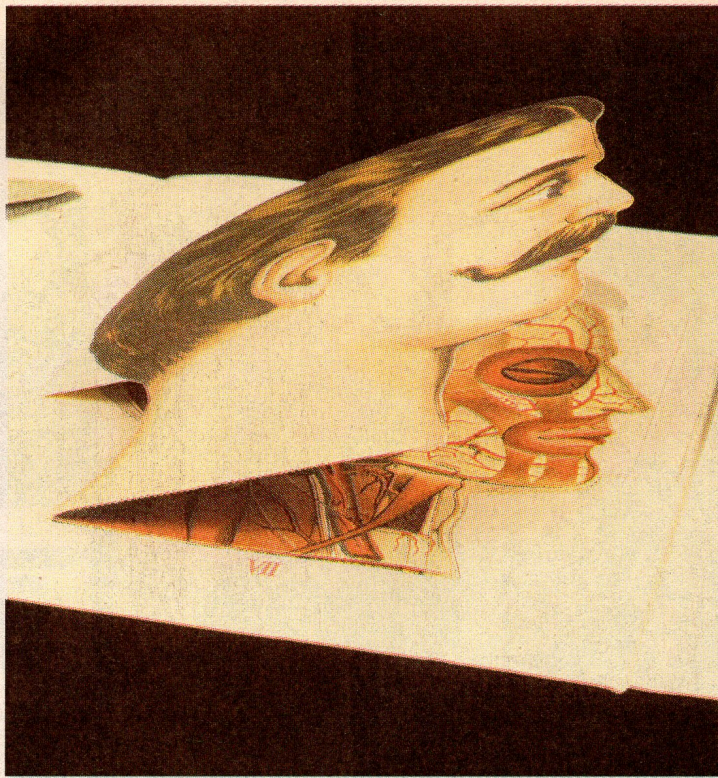
It helps, of course, when the permanent collection is as rich as MoMA's or the Cooper-Hewitt's. These shows are low risk for the museum, but they can be more of a gamble for the artist: the threat is that the artist-as-curator outshines the artist-as-artist. That happens, to a certain extent, in "Shahzia Sikander Selects" at the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum.

Ms. Sikander, a 40-year-old MacArthur fellow who studied at the National College of Arts in Lahore, Pakistan, makes paintings, videos and installations infused with the themes and techniques of traditional South Asian miniatures. She is the second contemporary artist to be given free rein over the collection; the first was Yinka Shonibare, who organized an exhibition on the theme of travel in 2006.

Mr. Shonibare's show was drawn entirely from the Cooper-Hewitt collection. Ms. Sikander took advantage of an additional Smithsonian Institution resource: the Vever Collection of Islamic book arts at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in Washington. The two collections mingle beautifully; the decorative art and design objects pick up on the richness and embellishment of the miniatures but with thematic twists.

As did Mr. Shonibare, Ms. Sikander takes a "meta" approach; her show is as much about the history of collecting as the history of design. In a brochure essay Ms. Sikander says she thought about "the individual

"Shahzia Sikander Selects: Works From the Permanent Collection" continues through Sept. 7 at the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, 2 East 91st Street, Manhattan; (212) 849-8400, cooperhewitt.org.



MATT FLYNN/COOPER-HEWITT

A work by Friedrich Eduard Bilz from "Shahzia Sikander Selects: Works From the Permanent Collection."

tastes and interests of late-19th- and early-20th-century connoisseur-collectors." These collectors took objects out of context but also, occasionally, made profound connections: the upside of cultural imperialism, in a sense.

The inspired juxtapositions in "Shahzia Sikander Selects" also bring to mind "Rebus," the artist Vik Muniz's recent romp through MoMA's collection. Mr. Muniz established free-associative relationships between the museum's art and design holdings, jumping from a Rubik's cube to a Giacometti figure. Ms. Sikander has a similarly irreverent touch. She links midcentury scenic wallpaper to Safavid miniature painting and pairs a sheet of Islamic calligraphy with a copy of the signatures from the Declaration of Independence.

Mostly Ms. Sikander groups objects into thematic clusters rather than one-to-one relationships. This works especially well in a section on pattern and ornament. An English cabinet with floral marquetry, a set of Japanese fabric stencils, a Bengali embroidered coverlet and a 15th-century German engraving surround a folio from the Mughal dynasty. The subject of the painting

in the folio — a woman disguised as a man enters a jail to release a prisoner — is less relevant here than the motif on the blue-tiled prison floor.

Another theme starts with the hybrid or composite figures in many miniatures. Ms. Sikander juxtaposes a Safavid painting of flying angels and demons with a Goya print, "Modo de Volar" ("A Way of Flying"), of nightmarish

An artist goes through a museum's collection.

creatures with bird masks and man-made wings.

Elsewhere she displays an early-20th-century German volume of medical illustrations by Friedrich Eduard Bilz. Created as a hygiene primer, it features lift-up and fold-out layers depicting bone, muscle and flesh. Nearby is an album folio, from Uzbekistan and dating from around 1600, of a seated princess whose robes appear to be made of small human

Shahzia Sikander Selects

Works From the Permanent Collection

Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum

and animal figures. Both objects offer arresting visions of bodies-within-bodies, although the similarity ends there.

Ms. Sikander also draws attention to the disorienting backgrounds of miniatures, which often combine conventional perspective with flattened, tilted or compressed areas. In a manuscript folio by the 15th-century Afghan artist Kamal-uddin Bihad, interior and exterior space are subject to different rules. Seated figures appear to float on a hanging carpet, but the plane is fractured by gates that open to a flowering garden. In another work space is compartmentalized in a more literal way. The woodblock illustrations in an early-20th-century Japanese book depict rooms of samurai armor, weapons, bonsais and other objects arranged on shelves.

Other sections of the show focus on caricature and textiles. Here objects from the Cooper-Hewitt collection take the spotlight: 18th-century silhouettes on tiny keepsake boxes, Victorian-era satirical drawings by the Englishman George Augustus Sala, jacquard-loomed portraits of Lincoln and other presidents.

The show, like past installments of the Selects series, includes a new work created for the exhibition by the artist-curator. A large silkscreen with hand-painted areas, it resembles an oversize book open to the middle and bears the groan-inducing title "Provenance and the Invisible Hand." It synthesizes Ms. Sikander's curatorial musings a little too antiseptically: there's an ornamental border, a gated landscape, traces of calligraphic writing and a peculiar pair of hybrid bird-human creatures.

Perhaps the new work in Ms. Sikander's forthcoming gallery show, which will open next week at Sikkema Jenkins in Chelsea, will make a better coda to her Cooper-Hewitt exhibition. Either way, the objects she's chosen are marvelous and the relationships between them lay the groundwork for more interesting, original art.