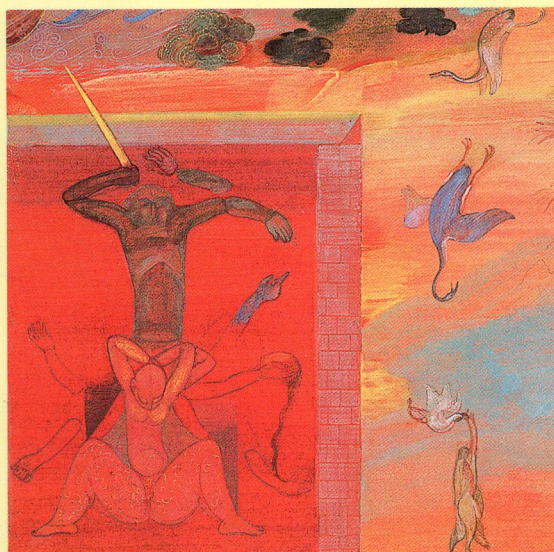


CONVERSATIONS

WITH

TRADITIONS

NILIMA SHEIKH • SHAHZIA SIKANDER





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Cover:

Left: Nilima Sheikh *After Amnesia* (detail), 2001

Right: Shahzia Sikander *Intimacy* (detail), 2001

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Preface

In recent years, the position of contemporary Asian art in the West has changed dramatically, exemplified by artists who transcend geographic and temporal borders. A number of Asian and Asian American artists have captured the imagination of critics, curators, and other art cognoscenti. Artists from South Asian cities such as Mumbai and Lahore have gone from being hardly noticed to prominence in the international art scene. In the last decade, the Asia Society has played a significant role in encouraging this shift.

One of the key reasons for renovating the Asia Society building was to create galleries that could better present contemporary artistic expressions at multiple scales without sacrificing the conditions desirable for traditional art exhibitions. We hope to accommodate an exhibition program that suggests interesting relationships between the past and the present as well as between Asian and Western cultures.

All three inaugural exhibitions at the new Asia Society and Museum are designed to illuminate this powerful dynamic. *Monks and Merchants: Silk Road Treasures from Northwest China* suggests east/west connections and intentionally focuses on an aspect and a phase of Asian art that is not apart from the outside world but an integral part of it. *The Creative Eye: New Perspectives on the Asia Society's Rockefeller Collection* allows the viewer to see traditional objects from our permanent collection selected by some of the most creative minds of our times. *Conversations With Traditions: Nilima Sheikh and Shahzia Sikander*, in a similar vein, focuses on two contemporary artists who interrogate the very notions of tradition and contemporaneity.

My training as an art historian, with a specialty in court paintings of the Indian subcontinent from

the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, has led to the study of the work of South Asian artists who use the miniature tradition as the basis for their work. As Shahzia Sikander's work began to receive critical acclaim in the United States and Europe, I realized that there was little awareness of how her work fits into a broader context of South Asian contemporary art practice in the region or even in the Asian diaspora. The need was not to create a survey but to suggest the complexity of the use of tradition in India and Pakistan. In my view, the best strategy was to juxtapose the work of two accomplished artists—one from India and one originally from Pakistan—who eloquently articulate the many ideas suggested by the terms “modern,” “postmodern,” “traditional,” and “national.”

Sheikh and Sikander make a powerful pair. First and foremost, both artists constantly push the boundaries between the personal and the cultural, not to mention the traditional and the modern. They have taken the miniature format as a starting point for very personal reasons—often in resistance to the artistic fashions in their home countries—but each uses the technique and form quite differently. Almost a generation apart and living in different parts of the world (Sheikh in Vadodara in India and Sikander in New York), they respond to their surroundings and their cultural worlds in very distinctive ways. At the same time, Sheikh and Sikander are both acutely aware of the complex political realities that imbue cultural productions with references to the past. It is hoped that the exhibition, consisting of some of their early works and new paintings created specifically for this show, will be as much a feast for the eye as a rich treasure trove of ideas.

Normally, as a director, one does not have the luxury of pursuing a project as a curator. When I

undertook this project, I was aware that finding the time to do justice to this very exciting enterprise was going to be difficult. However, it is also clear that were it not for the responsiveness of the artists to the project and their interest in working with each other, this project could not have been realized. From the very beginning, both Sheikh and Sikander were very interested in learning about each other and were aware that this project, bringing together two women artists from India and Pakistan, had far reaching implications for the cultures of the subcontinent. I consider this project an active collaboration amongst the three of us, in which we decided its scope together. The major essay in the book, a discussion among us, is evidence of how this partnership has worked. I am deeply indebted to both of them for their work and for their willingness to be considered together in an exhibition.

Many different people have been instrumental in the development of this exhibition and the accompanying publication. On behalf of the artists, I should like to thank their families and their artistic colleagues who have supported them during these intensely busy months in a variety of ways. Of course, without lenders who graciously agreed to part with their work, we would not have the exhibition. I acknowledge the following institutions and individuals from whom we have been able to borrow works: Ms. Niva Grill Angel; J. S. Blanton Museum of Art, University of Texas, Austin; Gregor and Christine Eichle; Mickey and Jeannie Klein; Rachel and Jean-Pierre Lehmann; New Walk Museum and Art Gallery, Leicester, U. K.; Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Australia; Mr. A. G. Rosen; Mr. Jerry I. Speyer; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Special thanks go to the following individuals whose efforts have helped us to present such a full and well-rounded exhibition: Adrienne Avery-Gray and Mary Hider, Leicester City Museums; Sonia Ballaney, Vadehra Art Gallery; Suhanya Raffel, Queensland Art Gallery; Riley Robinson, ArtPace; and Elizabeth Schwartz, Deitch Projects. The exhi-

bition is designed by Perry Hu and the publication is designed by Ram Rahman.

Within the Asia Society, the following individuals have been actively involved with the successful implementation of the project: Helen Abbott, Assistant Director of the Museum; Clare Savard, Exhibition Coordinator; Joshua Harris, Installation Coordinator; Mirza Burgos, Executive Assistant; Todd Galitz, Director of Foundation and Corporate Relations; Neil Liebman, Editor; Amy McEwen, Collections Manager and Registrar; Kaoru Ishizaki, Galleries Associate; Heather Steliga, Public Relations Director; Linden Chubin, Assistant Director for Cultural Programs; Melissa Chiu, Curator of Contemporary Art, and Deanna Lee, Museum Associate.

I was delighted that the project was enthusiastically endorsed by a number of funders at a fairly early stage. The Society is grateful for major support for this project from the following sources: The Rockefeller Foundation, The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, and Booth Ferris Foundation. Support for the Asia Society's Cultural Programs is also provided by the Friends of Asian Arts, Wallace-Reader's Digest Funds, The Starr Foundation, Booth Ferris Foundation, Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, Hazen Polsky Foundation, The Armand G. Erpf Fund, the Arthur Ross Foundation, Ruth and Harold Newman, and the New York State Council on the Arts.

We are pleased that a number of institutions in the United States and abroad have shown interest in hosting this exhibition after it closes at the Asia Society. It is our hope that *Conversations* will be widely seen and generate active discussions about the nature of art making that explicitly looks to the past to create a future.

Vishakha N. Desai
Senior Vice President
Director of the Museum and Cultural Programs

Engaging “Tradition”

in the Twentieth-Century Arts of India and Pakistan

Vishakha N. Desai

The works of Shahzia Sikander and Nilima Sheikh resolutely refer to the pictorial practice of the past. Equally apparent is the fact that neither engages in an obvious revival of the miniature painting technique of precolonial India or uses pictorial technique to create a romantic nostalgia of the “golden age” of premodern India. In the trajectory of twentieth-century art in the subcontinent of South Asia, Sikander and Sheikh are among a relatively small group of artists who engage in developing an active relationship with the forms that refer to earlier visual traditions of India.¹

It is easy to see the presence of received customs, beliefs, and practices in all aspects of society in India. In fact, Indian society is often defined as more traditional than many others because of the persistence of premodern elements in contemporary life. It is thus assumed that many such elements are actually traditional in the sense that they represent an “unbroken chain” that is handed down from generation to generation. In the practice of urban visual arts of the twentieth century, however, the presence of the traditional is almost contrary to the customary meaning of the word. Invariably, for most Indian artists of the twentieth century, the use of the traditional—ranging from the folk and rural crafts to the courtly paintings of the Mughal and Rajput worlds—is a very conscious choice.² And that very consciousness implies both a distance from the tradition itself and an attempt to recover it for personal, cultural, national, and political reasons. This essay attempts to place the experiments

of Sikander and Sheikh with premodern painting in the larger context of the use of traditions in the twentieth-century arts of the subcontinent. The goal is not to provide a historical survey of all the artists who have engaged with these traditions but to highlight those who are particularly relevant to the work of Nilima Sheikh and Shahzia Sikander.

Decline of Court Painting

To understand the precarious place of premodern traditions in the history of twentieth-century South Asian art, it is useful to go back to the twilight era of court culture and the nascent power of the British imperial rule in the middle of the nineteenth century. The confluence of three interrelated factors caused the decline of the court painting tradition in much of northern India. First and foremost was the decline of royal power and the corresponding lack of patronage. Warfare among rulers and their increasing indulgence in leisurely pursuits at the cost of proper administrative management had caused a precipitous decline in the fortunes of the Mughal and Rajput courts. Since they were the principal patrons of paintings—from illustrated manuscripts and celebratory scenes to court portraits—their diminished financial power was bound to affect the production of paintings. The rising influence of the British also affected changes in taste at courts. As the court artists began to lose their connections, a number of European artists, especially in eastern India, gained a strong foothold at several courts. Oil paintings on canvas with a Western perspective became the preferred form. The third

factor is the political vacuum created by the weakening of Rajput and Mughal powers that was quickly and readily filled by the British officers of the East India Company, who not only made important political and economic deals with these rulers but also patronized the court-trained artists to create a new kind of picture, known as Company School Painting.³ Painted by artists with some hereditary connections to traditional families, these “company” pictures gradually supplanted the court painting tradition. On the one hand, the new British patrons employed professional artists for their own use and for the depiction of exotic Indian subject matter. On the other hand, they began the project of creating a new India as a colonized subject, in the image of “civilized” British society.

The establishment of art schools, with dual aims of inculcating the “right” taste in art and providing design skills for employment, was also an integral part of the British imperial strategy.⁴ The practice of art making in an educational framework, especially in Calcutta, led to new definitions of “fine art” and “artist” in the Indian context. Artmaking practice came to be seen as an autonomous activity and an artist began to be identified as an independent entity, closer to the conception of the artist in Western societies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For the first time, India had a class of artists who could be seen as “gentlemen” artists rather than paid artisans. By the turn of the century, the idea of a modern artist had taken root in India and the break with the earlier form of artmaking at the courts of northern India had been firmly established.

“Tradition” at the Nexus of the “National” and the “Modern”

The resurgence of tradition in the first decade of the twentieth century in Bengal has to be understood through the paradox of the national and the modern. The very idea of an artist in the modern sense of the word came to India as part



Fig. 1 Abanindranath Tagore, *Bharat Mata Mother India*

of the increasing stronghold of imperialism, but it was a problematic construct for those leaders of the society beginning to ferment the idea of nationalism and self-rule in the subcontinent. While the very notion of self-rule or an independent, democratic India was a product of Western influence on Indian society, this idea had to be translated into an indigenous movement. All of the debates between British and Indian intellectual leaders of the time indicate this dilemma: how best to develop a uniquely Indian artistic practice while also being part of a broader nationalist discourse without being nostalgic about the past?⁵ As a result, from the beginning of the developing Westernized art movement, the

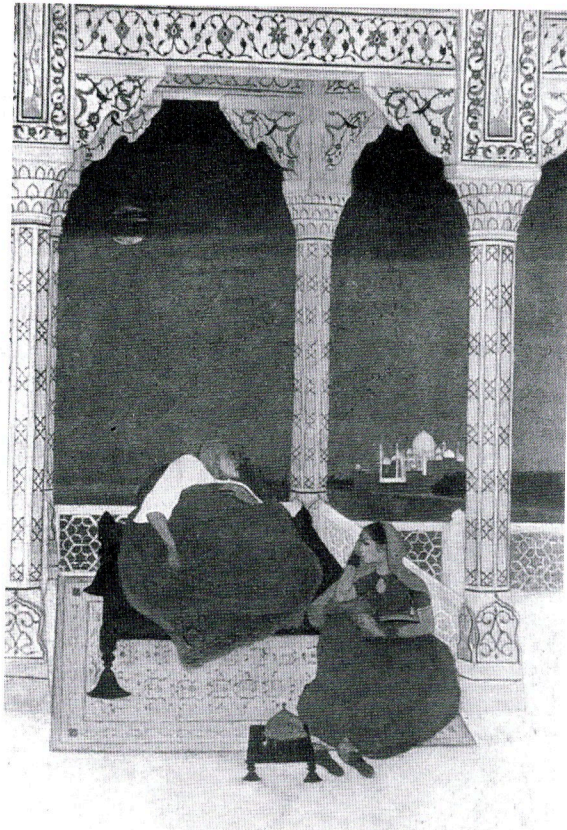


Fig. 2 Abanindranath Tagore, *The Passing of Shah Jahan*

use of premodern Indian painting techniques or forms had to be a conscious choice that was inextricably linked to nationalist discourse.

A key player in the conscious use of tradition as an antidote to Western studio-based oil painting was Abanindranath (Aban) Tagore (1871–1951).⁶ Arguably, both Sheikh and Sikander could trace their artistic genealogy to Aban. Even today, his works such as *Bharat Mata Mother India* (fig.1) and *The Passing of Shah Jahan* (fig.2) stand out as the earliest examples of the conscious use of traditional arts in modern Indian art history. Significantly, these paintings are not nostalgic re-creations of the past nor are they about re-creating earlier techniques. Rather, based on a combination of techniques, ranging from the miniature tradition to Chinese and Japanese ink painting to Art Nouveau styles, these pictures aimed to create a

new expression. Infused with personal choice and psychological involvement, Aban's works can be seen as the product of a modern artist. Artists such as K. G. Subramanyan have suggested that Aban should be seen as the father of modern Indian art because he identified an individual creative impulse as opposed to collective practices.⁷ Ironically, one could argue that Aban's conscious use of tradition as a new personal style was not so much to counter a modernist tradition but rather to locate an Indian style of modernism.

Aban's initial experiments with traditions coincided brilliantly with the powerful intellectual, political, and cultural forces that were sweeping India at the end of the nineteenth century. His works also served as catalysts for the maturing ideas about nationalism and Indian independence. Such intellectual stalwarts as Ananda Coomaraswamy and E. B. Havell sought to create an image of India as the spiritual counterpoint to Western materialism and mechanical dependence. This idea was accompanied by theories of British Orientalism, which sought to project an image of India as an "abstracted essentialist entity, encapsulated within an idealized past."⁸ Such thoughts were shared by Indian political activists, who longed to identify a visual form that could be seen as authentically and uniquely Indian to serve the independence movement. This was the beginning of an intellectual framework in which India would be the fountainhead of broader Asian values as articulated by the Japanese scholar Okakura Kakuzo.⁹

Aban's search for a visual form went beyond the prevailing aesthetic of romantic realism and was driven by personal rather than political motivation.¹⁰ But soon after Aban's artistic approach became public, it was adopted by the nationalists and the arts and crafts enthusiasts as iconic of the new Indian age. For a while, Aban himself was caught in this fervor and became conscious of his role: a creative artist and a mentor who would

groom future artists to “recover the lost language of Indian art,” as he put it, infused with the spirit of individual creativity. One work above all others, *Bharat Mata* (fig.1), served to catapult Aban’s reputation as the artist of the nationalist age. Painted in response to the agitations centered on the British Partition of Bengali in 1905 and the subsequent protests by the nationalists, *Bharat Mata* showed a four-armed woman clad in a Bengali sari holding symbols of the aspirations of a newly independent nation. This figure was painted in subdued colors with a virginlike countenance. This mother goddess of the new nation held a cloth and pages from a book in her upper hands and tufts of wheat grass and a chain of rosary beads in her lower hands. Together, these attributes symbolized the economic and cultural self-sufficiency of a nation. In contrast to the traditional voluptuous images of Hindu goddesses and literary heroines in the neorealist renderings of Raja Ravi Varma (fig.3), Aban created a new model of Indian beauty that was totally desexualized and in keeping with the Victorian notions of femininity.

It is clear that works such as *Bharat Mata* were not created as part of an “unbroken chain” of painting tradition. For enthusiasts of the arts and crafts movement such as E. B. Havell, Aban’s works were “infused with spiritual sincerity,” suggesting an alternative to the insidious charms of corrupted Western training.¹¹ Havell argued that the style developed by Aban, later known as the Bengal School, was the only true “living” connection to the grand ancient civilization of India. For the nationalists, the same work was adopted as the icon of the nationalist struggle. Aban’s work was hailed as heralding a new era, to be reprinted by the “tens of thousands and scattered all over the land, until there was not a peasant’s cottage nor a craftsman’s hut that had not a representation of *Bharat Mata* on its walls.”¹² For proponents, such as Okakura Kakuzo, of the ideals of a pan-Asian style, the same style mediated by Westernized Japanese forms and romantic



Fig. 3 Raja Ravi Varma, *The Triumph of Indrajit*

Victorian sensibilities served to articulate the organic unity of art that was so essential to their definition of an Asian aesthetic.

In the Service of Nationalism

Ultimately, it was the nationalist cause that became firmly attached to the “neotraditional” or consciously traditional style developed by Aban and pursued by his followers. In this sense, the nationalist ideology injected a sense of belonging, or at least a sense of longing, for a uniquely indigenous expression into the agenda of the Bengal School. Aban fostered a large number of students who called themselves the “followers of the path of Aban” (Abanpanthi), gradually spreading themselves all over India through government art schools. Ironically, as the Bengal School became synonymous with the independence movement, especially through the efforts of

Nandalal Bose (one of Aban's most talented followers), it also became more dogmatic. Aban himself retreated from the overtly political aspects of artmaking while the style he developed became an established national canon by the early 1920s. Even Aban's venerated uncle, the Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore, criticized the orthodoxy of the Bengal School and its blind adherence to the notion that it alone could speak for national aspirations. The Bengal School consciously used premodern court painting and developed an affinity with village crafts as a form of creative resistance to Western academic realism, but it eventually became a form of academic exercise in itself. The style was ultimately lost to the forces that developed a more modernist, internationally oriented "progressive" approach to art practices in India.¹³

As Geeta Kapur has stated, the discourse on the traditional and the modern in India can never be fully understood without considering the struggles and ideology of the nationalist agenda.¹⁴ This was true not only in the preindependence period but also after India became a sovereign nation. In fact, it can be argued that this tripartite relationship of the traditional, the modern, and the national is inescapable for many non-Western cultures in the twentieth century, especially those colonized in the previous century. Thus, it is fair to say that the use of traditional forms, motifs, and techniques by twentieth-century artists is never without some level of consciousness about the problems of appropriating such forms in the context of developing a nationalist agenda. This is particularly true of artists on the subcontinent who came of age in and after the independence period.

The Pursuit of the "Traditional" as a "Modernist" Practice

One artist who looms large in any discussion of the sources of the traditional in twentieth-century South Asian art, and the one who has had a major impact on both Sheikh and Sikander, is

K. G. Subramanyan.¹⁵ A product of the Bengal School in Santiniketan and a student of Nandalal Bose, Subramanyan had been steeped in the discourse around the notions of the modern and the traditional, or the vernacular. As noted by Sheikh and Sikander, he was a major inspirational figure for both of them. If Aban's main source of tradition came from miniature painting, Subramanyan's came from folk tradition and its materiality. For him, this focus was not so much based on a desire to articulate a nationalist agenda or to defy the onslaught of the Western aesthetic as much as on a commitment to find fresh and inventive strategies for the practice of artmaking. This philosophy was also directly connected to the teaching methodology developed at Santiniketan under the tutelage of Nandalal Bose, Aban's protégé and Subramanyan's teacher. Geeta Kapur writes about the curriculum at Santiniketan, describing the triangular, interconnected relationship among the notions of the national, the personal, and the traditional that defined the Bengal School when Subramanyan was a student there:

Gradually a pedagogical method was devised at Kala Bhavana [the art school at Santiniketan] for the Indian artist seeking to define her national and artistic identity. Tradition yielded the possibility of a communicable language that in turn assumed an empathy with environment and community. These organic structures nurtured the individual whose praxis, so to speak, furthered the tradition. The triangle was thus activated.¹⁶

Nandalal Bose actively encouraged students to work with traditional craftsmen to produce new works to be sold at village fairs as a way of generating a revitalized aesthetic. While most of the students at Santiniketan earnestly sought to change the hierarchical system of artmaking in India by privileging the folk, Subramanyan was distinct in the way that he used folk traditions—

ranging from terracotta reliefs to glass painting—in a more modernist context, with a sense of irony, humor, and intellectual awareness. Geeta Kapur makes an eloquent case that Subramanyan is at once a modernist with a strong affinity for such twentieth-century modern masters as Matisse and a playful traditionalist with an ambivalent attitude toward the modernist insistence on the supremacy of individual creativity.¹⁷

In some ways, Subramanyan's use of "traditional" materials and motifs are similar to the use of the "primitive" artifacts by the modernists in the West. Like Western artists, he relishes the eclecticism of ideas and forms that emerges from the folk or the vernacular and finds its way into the discourse of the modern. He clearly understands that one of the privileges of a "modern" artist is the ability to consciously choose what he may want from wherever he may find it. Subramanyan writes,

Today's artist or poet is not bound by any established social predispositions or traditional ties. His physical environment is what he is born into and grows up in, but his cultural environment comprises the whole world, which is brought to his doorstep through various avenues of communication—exhibitions, books, cinema, recordings, radio, or television. Each artist considers himself a kind of Robinson Crusoe on an imaginary island whose beaches are piled up with cultural bric-a-brac from all over the world, from the past and the present, amidst which he can putter about.¹⁸

However, the fact that Subramanyan remained committed to the practice of making folk art and has continued to engage with craftsmen suggests that he is not simply interested in appropriating the forms and then moving on (fig. 4). His engagement with the process of securing the "traditional" is consistent and ongoing. In his work as well as in his numerous publications,

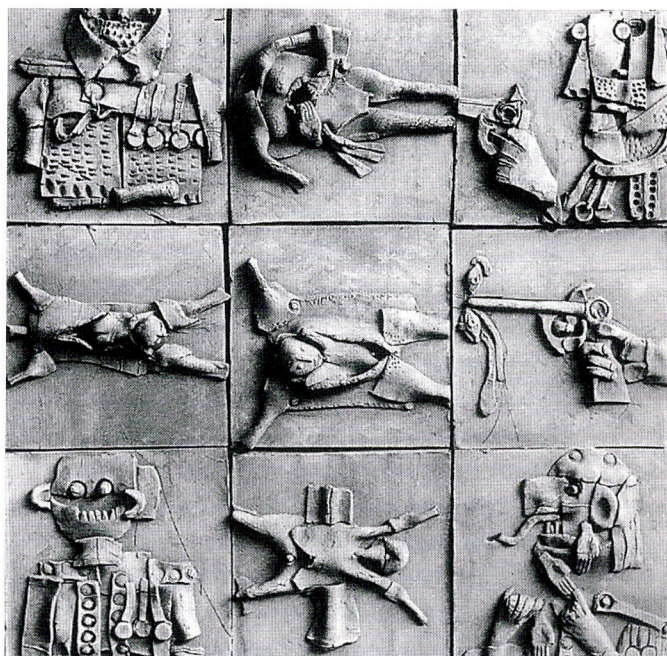


Fig. 4 K.G. Subramanyan, *March 1971, 1971*

Subramanyan makes it clear that he is not interested in easy classifications or categorizations. His relationship to tradition is neither a simple form of revival nor a yearning for the past, nor is it an ideological position by itself as a statement against the modernism of the subcontinent. For Subramanyan, the use of tradition is about having a choice to move backward and forward, to create a personal language firmly rooted in both the contemporary art world and traditional craft practices. Subramanyan richly articulates these possibilities in one of his memorable essays entitled "What is Wrong with Nostalgia?"¹⁹ where he makes a strong case for an affiliation with the past that can provide strength for the present and pave the way for the future. While recognizing that some forms of nostalgia can serve only to cloud the mind and lead to "escapism, self-delusion, and stagnation," he argues that it also "catalyses our self-image, and deepens and reconfigures our experiences," allowing us "to rediscover the world with renewed wonder and the tantalizing ambivalence of multisensory perception."²⁰ In other words, Subramanyan is

attracted to traditional forms not only because they strengthen his relationship to the culture but also because they provide enormous creative possibilities in a direct personal way.

Although Subramanyan is a very influential figure in the development of the contemporary art scene in India, he does not have large numbers of followers who have chosen to pursue a path leading them to traditional forms. And yet, to a great extent, it is this multifocal vision of tradition and its place in contemporary life as articulated by Subramanyan that is an important starting point for both Sheikh and Sikander. In the conversation that follows this essay, both artists make it very clear that their choice of working with the Indian court painting tradition was as much about trying to find a personal language as about resisting the temptation to create derivative or familiar work.

Political Implications of "Traditions" in the Subcontinent

Both Sikander and Sheikh are singular in their experiments with "tradition." Yet it is important to note that traditional miniature works have very different connotations in India and Pakistan. When Pakistan was carved out of India to become an independent nation in 1947, it had to develop a narrative of its own history that would be distinct from the Indian framework. This meant that the young nation had to create its own sense of tradition and national history. The use of traditions in Pakistan can thus be seen in a different light.

The pedigree of Aban notwithstanding, miniature painting in India has maintained the level of craftsmanship set by traditional painters who paint primarily for the tourist market. Paintings are created in large collectives with very little personal interpretation. Such workshops remain quite separate from the art schools in urban areas, and art students have few opportunities to learn the techniques of miniature painting, such

as preparing colors from natural pigments and making the brushes from fine squirrel hairs. The distinct divide between these professional miniature painters and the art school-trained urban artists is as much based on the class/caste fault lines, which determine so much of social interaction in India, as on different training. Sheikh describes her frustration with not being able to incorporate the traditional technique of the professional painters of Rajasthan into the urban practice of artmaking in one of her essays, "On Visiting Nathdwara."²¹ She acknowledged that paintings at Nathdwara (one of the most important religious centers in Rajasthan, where some two hundred painters create works on cloth and on paper) "traverse boundaries of the religious and aesthetic, modern and traditional, sacrosanct and commercial. . . . But why does this wonderful world of delights and contradiction remain inaccessible [to urban painters]? . . . That we who belong to the other urban art world feel that our participation can only extend to an appreciation of its craft, or conversely a deprecation of any vulgarization or depletion of this craft."²²

For Sheikh, a student of Subramanyan, exposure to the miniature painting tradition came through the study of miniature painting collections in museums and infrequent contacts with miniature painters, who would tell her about the surface of the paper or the creation of a color. It is not surprising, therefore, that Sheikh would focus initially on the narrative structure or the formal compositions of court painting and then proceed to find her own emotional tenor and visual form. Sheikh has talked about turning to small-scale works when she had children and felt the need to find a format that would reflect her new intimate reality. She has also discussed her frustration with easel-based work, which often creates a sense of distance between the painter and the viewer. At the same time, much of her work is based on larger themes or texts that refer to earlier times. In other words, for Sheikh a search and a desire for an intimate worldview has not result-

ed in a personal narrative. Through earlier textual sources such as the Jataka tales and Tamil poetry, Sheikh creates images that are less about her personal angst or aspirations and more about the larger sentiments of longing, quietude, and femininity.

It is significant that the only place on the subcontinent where traditional miniature painting has been taught as a proper subject is at the National College of Art (NCA) in Lahore. To understand Sikander's relationship to miniature painting technique and form, it is useful to look at the place of this tradition within the Pakistani art hierarchy. If Aban is known as the father of modern art in India, one of his contemporaries in the Bengali art movement, Abdur Rahman Chughtai, is often referred to as the father of modern art in Pakistan. Like Aban, Chughtai turned to the miniature painting tradition to develop his unique style of painting, but he also injected a conscious sense of Islam into his art by focusing on themes and forms that would connect him to the Mughal tradition.²³ He came to the Bengal School in 1905 after the Partition of the state into East and West Bengal, which highlighted the divisions between the Hindu and Muslim communities of Bengal. Chughtai was conscious of the need to create a distinct Muslim identity through his work. He continued to focus on this after he returned to Lahore, where he was born, and had a major impact on the development of miniature painting in Pakistan.

The newly independent nation of Pakistan, which had been part of the larger land mass known as India, had a complex and tumultuous relationship to its past. On the one hand, much of local history and crafts at rural levels had been wiped out or subjugated by the imperialist powers. On the other hand, to acknowledge a shared heritage with India was very problematic. Artists could choose between two opposite directions: to escape the issue of local heritage and find meaning in Western forms, or to align themselves with

the Mughal tradition of painting as Pakistan's heritage and embrace the Mughals as the true ancestors of the young nation. Consequently, an emulation of Mughal painting was not simply a style available to all artists. The NCA's inclusion of miniature painting as an integral part of its courses was a consciously political act, an aspiration to identify and solidify Pakistan's ever-elusive cultural roots.

By the time Sikander decided to study at the NCA, there had been two generations of miniature painters who taught at the college. Her own teacher, Bashir Ahmed, had been trained by two great professional miniaturists, Mohammad Haji Sharif (1889–1978) and Sheikh Shujauallah (1908–1980), who had also taught at the NCA. Ahmed was taught strictly as a miniature painter, and in some ways his training was part of an unbroken tradition. His placement at the NCA, on the other hand, could be seen as part of a larger national agenda to refine a sense of national cultural identity. Once Ahmed became a full time teacher and his teachers passed away, he began to change the syllabus and to promote miniature painting at the college by making it more contemporary. He also worked relentlessly to change miniature painting from a minor to a major course within the four-year syllabus. Ahmed worked to bring Mughal painting into a new era by having his students not only copy the old works but also create contemporary compositions, encouraging his students to push the limits of the medium.²⁴

Two other people at the NCA seem to have had a strong impact on the study of miniature painting there: Zahoor ul Akhlaq (1941–2000) and Salima Hashmi (b.1942). Both ul Akhlaq and Hashmi trained as artists in the more traditional neocolonial style of art schools prevalent in the subcontinent but, once they went abroad to study, began to question oil on canvas as the only acceptable mode of modern art. Discussions with Sikander and other graduates of the NCA suggest that

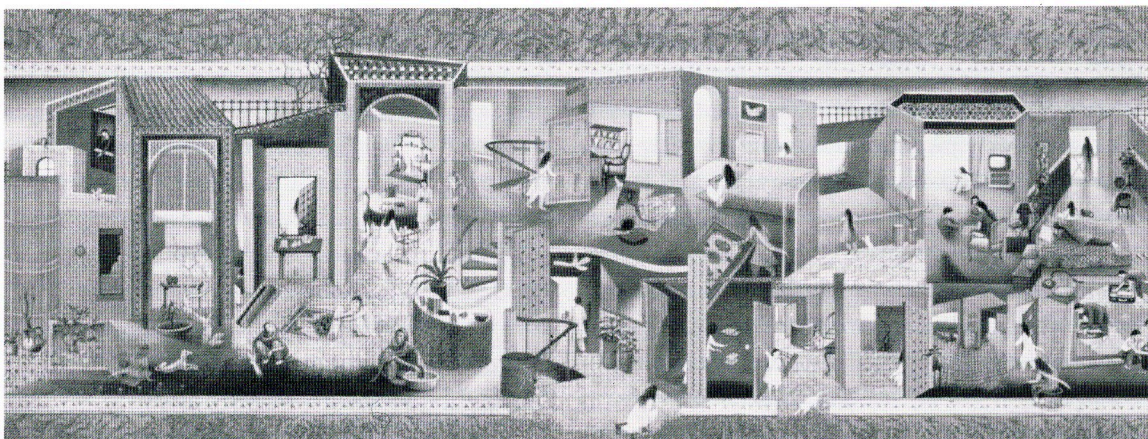


Fig. 5 Shahzia Sikander, *The Scroll* (detail), 1991-92

these two teachers, distinguished artists in their own right, were instrumental in according some prestige to training in miniature painting at a university and in supporting Ahmed's efforts to put this training on par with other studio-based training. It has been said that if Ahmed provided the technical knowledge and the discipline, ul Akhlaq contributed to the intellectual framework around the study.²⁵

Sikander began her studies at the NCA in the late 1980s when miniature painting had been firmly established as a proper academic subject. Unlike in India, the rupture between the past and the present had begun to mend in Pakistan, and miniature painting was well on its way to being integrated into the modernist idiom of the school. However, as Sikander states in the following interview, this did not mean that this seemingly archaic training was accorded prestige within the school. Sikander's attraction to the miniature was actually a form of resistance to the prevailing fashion of working with oil on canvas. It was almost as if turning to miniature painting, with its labor-intensive technique and its demand for solitude, was the ultimate subversive or avant-garde act. In this sense, her relationship to the form was quite different from all of her teachers' connections. Ahmed related to it initially as a traditional painter with a focus on perpetuating the

technique and then made the form modern by incorporating contemporary realities into the work. While ul Akhlaq and Hashmi (trained in Western oil painting and printmaking) came to appreciate the tradition in a conscious cerebral manner, especially when they were in the United States on graduate fellowships. They occasionally sought to incorporate the world of miniature painting into their formal expressions. Sikander, on the other hand, chose to train in miniature painting and was determined to make it her personal expression from the very beginning of her training (fig. 5).

Both Sikander and Sheikh have very personal relationships to the form of the miniature painting, but one could argue that the differences in their approaches come from divergent cultural trajectories as well as from different personal histories. Sheikh turned to the form of miniature painting after she was already a successful oil painter from a personal desire to create a more intimate world view. She has sought to embed the formal qualities of Mughal and Rajput painting with a strong sense of personal vision, using the collective heritage of older poetry, stories, and themes to create works with poignant contemporary implications. This comes through clearly in her series *When Champa Grew Up* (pp. 18-25). Sikander, more than twenty years younger

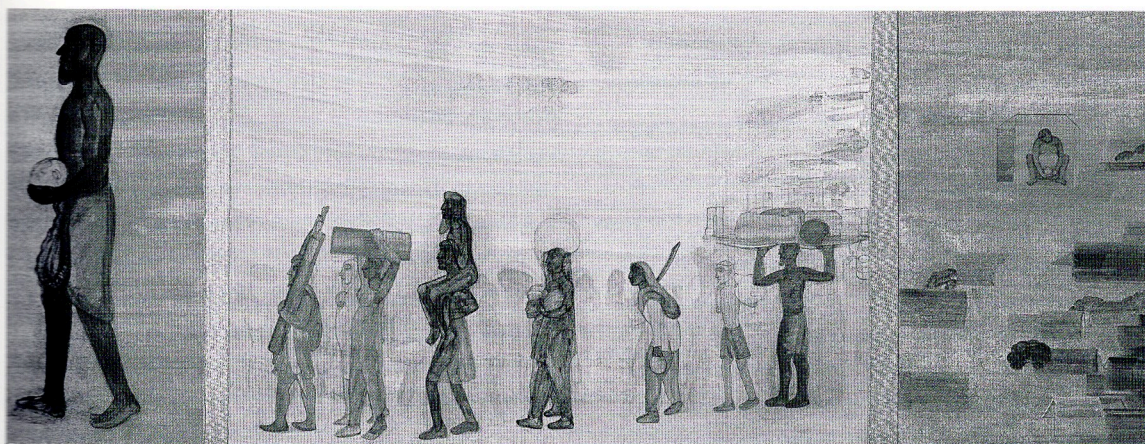


Fig. 6 Nilima Sheikh, *Carrying Home* (detail), 2001

than Sheikh and born in Pakistan, initially connected to the miniature form as a rejection of artistic fashion. For her, using the technique and the form is resolutely about creating a new personal idiom and conveying personal narratives that emerge out of, but go beyond, her background in Pakistan and her life in the United States. Her professional career has developed since she came to the United States to study at the Rhode Island School of Design. Reflective of her experience as a woman of South Asian origin living in the United States, Sikander's work has a bifocal quality that is similar to writers of the Asian diaspora. Her work is about multiple locations and about her place in them. As Sikander says, "It is the dichotomy of both my experiences which holds the most fascination for me. . . . It is more about how to find a space that's neither personal nor cultural but informed by both."²⁶

Nowhere is this more evident than in Sikander's most recent work. Using the labor-intensive miniature painting technique as the basis for a digital image, Sikander is able to produce much larger-scale works. It is the ultimate marriage of the two worlds and two scales, moving from the most intensely personal to a mechanically-produced image that can be manipulated by the tiniest movement of the mouse. Her new works also begin to speak more confidently the language of

the streets of New York, while still retaining some references to her original love of miniature paintings. In Sikander's banner, a female figure straight out of a Rajput painting sits comfortably within a framework of an angular staircase suggestive of the grand stairs of the new Asia Society and Museum. "No Parking" signs, ever present in the New York cityscape, occupy the same space as flying Garuda, eaglelike emblems of the Hindu god Vishnu. Sikander's love of hybridity goes beyond being purely autobiographical or being strictly referential to older painting traditions.

For the exhibition, Sheikh has chosen to create new works that go to the very heart of India-Pakistan estrangement. Using the trauma of the Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, when her family had to leave their belongings in Lahore and go to India, Sheikh creates intensely poignant works that are at once personal and reflective of a collective trauma. If Sikander is trying to make some sense of her new life in New York, Sheikh, with her new works, goes to the very beginning of the cultural trauma that was part of her past. Even for Sikander, the complicated but shared history of India and Pakistan is displayed in various ways. Her awareness of the India-Pakistan relationship is further heightened by her living in the United States. For example, when she uses a traditional image of the goddess Kali and super-

imposes it onto a female form, she is acutely aware of the fact that she is claiming an image that is not supposed to be part of her heritage. She also knows that this is not as simple as taking any motif that is available to her but that it has implications for the reading of her work. Because she lives in this country, her relationship to the miniature form is further complicated by how her work is sometimes perceived in the West as simply exotic. In contrast, Sheikh is one of the few artists in India today working closely with the miniature form. Her relationship to this tradition would never be seen as exotic. For Sikander, that perception or charge is never too far from the surface. Sometimes one wonders if the U.S. art establishment would have paid attention to Sikander's work except in the last decade of the twentieth century, when the power of the modern canon has been drastically eroded.

Seen together, the works of Nilima Sheikh and Shahzia Sikander provide a rich texture of traditions in a contemporary context. In the early

years of the twenty-first century, they place the use of centuries-old traditions in an entirely new position. Some early twentieth-century artists of the subcontinent developed a relationship to the old forms from which they were alienated out of a desire to counter the weight of colonialism and to search for their cultural roots. Artists such as Sheikh and Sikander go beyond the nationalist agenda and seek to develop a form that can simultaneously be about the past and the present, resisting the globalizing trends toward uniformity of expression to create a personal vision that is culturally rooted. Together, they provide a background against which one can begin to unravel the complexities of the relationship of artistic traditions to the contemporary political and cultural landscape of the subcontinent.

¹ When Sikander arrived on the New York art scene in 1997, no other artists working in the miniature painting styles were known to the U.S. art world. Now that her work has become highly regarded, there are other Pakistani or Pakistan-born artists who have begun to show in New York and in Europe. However, there is little understanding or knowledge in the West about the place of contemporary artmaking in the twentieth-century history of South Asian art. This essay attempts to provide that broader historical context.

² This is not true of other art forms in India. The classical music tradition, for example, as performed today, represents more of an "unbroken chain." While it may have incorporated elements from other tradi-

tions in its vocabulary, it has fundamentally retained its overall shape and form. The history of visual arts follows a very different trajectory.

³ For further information on Company School Painting, see W.G. & M. Archer, *Indian Painting for the British, 1775-1880* (London: Oxford University Press, 1955) and Stewart Cary Welch, *Room for Wonder: Indian Painting During the British Period 1760-1880* (New York: The American Federation of the Arts, 1978).

⁴ For a detailed account of the establishment of art schools and its impact on the Indian art production, see Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New "Indian Art": Artist, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) chap. 2, pp. 45-77.

Shahzia Sikander

I am often asked what tradition means to me in relation to experimentation, whether I am consciously blurring boundaries. While my aim is not to subvert, let alone re-invent a tradition, such boundaries are blurred in the act of painting miniatures. I knew from the start that I was engaging in an anachronistic practice—labour intensive and limited in its impact—but I was attracted to an art form whose present was of the past. I am interested in the play, the flirtation with tradition, but it remains primarily conceptual, focusing on issues between scale and labour, precision and gesture, the norm and its transgression.

Narrative also came as a device to insert the personal into the traditionally thematic space. Works from 1993 to 1997 express antithetical issues concerning historical animosities between India and Pakistan and address Western stereotypes about women from the third world, but are always underlined with humour. For me art is not a conduit to politics, feminism, or religion. It is a ticket to experience. I feel that no matter how transcending, liberating or empowering an artistic act becomes, boundaries always exist, be they economic, cultural, national, religious, political, geographical, historical or psychological. As an artist it is essential for me to understand and address such boundaries, only if it were to break them down, to open up discussions, to raise questions, or to articulate their shifting nature.

Shahzia Sikander Below: *The Scroll*, 1991-92, vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, and tea on hand-prepared wasli paper, 13 1/8 X 63 7/8 in., courtesy the artist. Opposite Page: (left) *Mirrat I*, 1991-92. (right) *Mirrat II*, 1991-92, vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, gold leaf, and tea on hand-prepared wasli paper, 11 1/4 X 8 1/4 in., courtesy the artist.



New Works: Shahzia Sikander

Since the beginning of her career Shahzia Sikander has been captivated by the rigors of miniature painting, yet she longs to break out of its confines and preciousness. In her most recent work, created specifically for the exhibition *Conversations with Traditions*, she has turned this tension into a bold, new vision.

Sikander's laboriously prepared and finely detailed paintings in the miniature tradition form the basis for her recent experiments with digital technology. In these new works, her drawings and painted motifs are manipulated digitally, allowing her the freedom to subvert content and merge media by adding yet another layer to the traditional and somewhat tedious technique of miniature painting. This experimentation is in keeping with Sikander's previous works that question the very notion of authenticity and cultural purity.

These new works also contain more potent multilayered cultural references. Her paintings have always juxtaposed visual elements from Mughal painting (identified primarily as a Muslim tradition, hence the national tradition of Pakistan) and Rajput painting (patronized by the Hindus living in northwestern India). Some of the new works are in keeping with tradition and are entirely hand-painted, while others apply digital subversion through photogravure techniques prior to the final hand-painted layers. The overall impression is that of expressive chaos but with tremendous beauty and cohesion. These works create a truly new world neither solely about tradition nor about the present; they embody the emotional resonance of real experience.

Vishakha N. Desai