

Critic Note

by **virginia whites**

It is perhaps a curious fact that the very tradition of miniature painting, particularly the Mughal style which is promoted as Pakistan's cultural heritage, has become the inspiration for some of the most radical contemporary art work in Pakistan today. Within the current 're-invention' of miniature painting, practitioners are interrogating the ideological motives behind such revival strategies, while still fascinated by the tradition.

Although Islamic dynasties succeeded each other for more than three centuries in India, leaving grandiose architectural memorials to their Imperial court, it is only in the sixteenth century, with the Mughal dynasty, that painting was developed. Akbar initiated the first court studios with artists from all over India, whose main task was to create visual documentation for album texts describing historic events. Originally under Persian masters, they were also commissioned to provide illustrations for poetic and legendary tales, for myths, fables and romances from both Indian and Persian sources, as well as to compose portraits of court personalities. Such albums have since served as valuable documentary sources for information on India and her contacts with other cultures over three centuries.

Whilst theological injunctions against depiction of human and animal life forced the painting to be secular, it nevertheless remained polemical. It flourished only under the protection of those powerful enough to deny the ban: the Mughal emperors. It was thus an aristocratic art with corresponding limitations. However, due to the enlightened religious tolerance of Akbar, there evolved a great variety of styles in the painting, emanating from collaborative work between artists from Hindu, Jain and Islamic origins. This eclectic Mughal policy, seen by some as a sign of prudent politics through artistic decisions (Sundar 1995), is potentially a key link with the intention of this show.

The paintings on exhibition here are by six young Pakistani artists: Waseem Ahmed, Aisha Khalid, Nusra Latif, Imran Qureshi, Risham Syed and Saira Wasim, all of whom have studied miniature painting at the National College of Arts in Lahore.

Their works combine the traditional medium with modernist techniques in ways which appear to reject any totalising synthesis. They demonstrate how convergences between a 'traditional' cultural heritage and postmodern transcultural appropriations, can go beyond the trap of the copy to reclaim the original function of the miniatures: as chronicles of contemporary social issues. The complex history around the shifting status of miniatures is due to 19th century modernist (and western) categorisation of art and artifacts into the distinct genres of Fine Art or Applied art. Such a split was encouraged by both colonialist education and enterprise in India, thus enabling hegemonic control over class, race and gender. (Guha Thakurta 1992, Mitter 1994). Since the imposition of colonial rule in the Punjab in 1849, the production of miniatures was halted by the gradual eradication of patronage, the policy of western art education and the 'displaced' status of the miniature painters. Many of them had to learn to apply their medium to alternative surfaces from the traditional 'wassli': to decorative imagery on walls, furniture and other objects. Coming from a culture which had no distinct terms for art and craft, they were re-classed as craftsmen by a system which constructed hierarchical differences between artists and craftsmen.

Investigation of the polemical categorisation of art and craft within the western modernist discourse has been a subject of feminist art history. It is interesting to apply such arguments to the colonialist division of arts and crafts (which has undoubtedly influenced the reparatory privileging of material culture over contemporary art production by anthropologists.)

With the extinction of the Mughal dynasty, artists often left the Imperial studios to work for commercial patrons, including those Hindu princely courts where local styles were still strong. Aurangzeb's 'feckless successors' dispersed the grand Imperial libraries. Many of the finest paintings went with the 'booty' of the Afghani conqueror Nadir Shah and are still in Iran, others went into the 'collections' of officials from the East India Company and are still in England...: "which makes London a particularly good place to study Mughal painting"...as solicitously pointed out by J.M. Rogers, curator at the British Museum. (Rogers 1993:119).

In the early days of nationalist fervour, Bengali artists were determined to overthrow the western art academies established under colonial rule and to install indigenous structures of pedagogy and patronage. There ensued a search, by the Orientalist movement based in Calcutta, for imagery suiting a nationalist ideology. Their opposition to all forms of industrialisation led to the interest in reviving certain crafts and folk arts as well as rebuilding on the Indo-Aryan foundations of Indian culture. In 1896, E.B. Havell, the Principal of Calcutta Art School, threw out the Gallery's collection of western plaster casts and oil paintings in his zealous mission to persuade Indian students to look at Indian art. This dramatic gesture has recently been deconstructed to reveal its ambiguity. (Jamal 2001:21) The interesting point to make here is that although Havell's policies may well have indirectly served to legitimise British rule in India, they did not: "reduce Indianness to the moment of the Indo-Aryan." (Jamal 2001: 24), since he also created a rich collection of Mughal miniatures, encouraging Abindranath Tagore and the students to take inspiration from these different (Persian) sources of Indian art.

In Lahore, at the Mayo School of Art, John Lockwood Kipling was the Principal from 1875 to 1893. Like Havell, and Birdwood in Bombay, his concern was with the survival of Indian handicrafts in a way which suggests the influence of both Orientalist ideology and nationalist discourse. Yet this era is plainly ambivalent: although originally in accordance with William Morris's socialist ideals of guild organisations as transmitters of tradition, the Mayo School soon imposed a programmed pedagogy based on the clear division between Fine Arts and Applied or Minor Arts. The purely craft orientated teachings devised by Lockwood Kipling were re-directed towards Fine Arts between 1901 and 1911, under the Principals Percy Brown and Bhiram Singh, and miniature painting was tentatively re-introduced, as a minor art.

So what is left of the original Mughal miniature painting in Lahore: site of the only school in the world, the National College of Arts, where the theory and practice of miniature painting is still taught? Since so much of the Lahore Museum collection is either 'missing' or in a very poor condition, young practitioners of contemporary miniature are obliged to perform the ritual initial stages of copying by using black and white photographs of colour reproductions, poorly reproduced in western art history books on Oriental art, printed in China or Singapore. An additional irony is that the primary inspiration for the artist and teacher Zahoor-ul-Akhlaq's 'revision' of miniature painting within the Fine art department came from his looking at the Victoria & Albert collection whilst he was a student at the Royal College of art in the sixties in London.

As yet no thorough research has been undertaken regarding the modifications evolving in miniature painting during the 20th century. There is a line of development in Pakistani art from Chughtai's looking at both Bengali and European sources up to Zahoor's fusion of formal elements from Mughal, western pop and abstract expressionism in the seventies, the period when the 'vulgarisation' of the miniature image via popular media and commodities such as calendars, post card, cushion covers and adverts began. This is of particular interest to young practitioners enthused by current modes of post-pop or neo-dada. Ironically therefore, it was at precisely the same time as its transformation into cultural curio (for tourists at one level and for visiting dignitaries at another) that miniature painting's 're-invention' took off in Fine Art. Thus the practice split along two divergent paths.

With the 'official' revival of the traditional Mughal practice under President Bhutto, commercial reproduction increased, backed by a promotional rhetoric which emphasised its courtly origins, (one of the paradoxes of socialist discourse). The curio market functions via copies of copies whereas the conceptual changes envisaged by Zahoor were based on his observations of pictorial factors which could relate to 20th century western painting: "...accidents and incomplete areas, looseness of paint application, collage, the play with margins...the overall formalism." (Mirza 2000) Zahoor's idea was to encourage students in Fine art to look at miniatures as a potential source of inspiration for their own painting.

However, the teacher who eventually promoted it as a major study, Bashir Ahmed, disciple of Ustad Sheikh Shujallah, disciple of Ustad Haji Mohammed Sharif, declared miniature painting's autonomy within a separate department. "As a responsibility to this department I continue to engage in ways of enhancing awareness of this endangered Islamic tradition of miniature art" (Ahmed 2000). Renowned for its rigorous discipline, defending the concept of an ongoing Mughal tradition in face of postmodern infiltrations, the department's state of flux may well motivate the current explosion of energy manifested by the very different miniature production over the last few years.

The critical shift is to be seen in those works commenting on actual issues: fundamentalism, violence against women, corruption and nuclear warfare. Substantial debate is taking place between the protagonists and antagonists of the miniature practice. For example, the politicisation of content is viewed by certain students and teachers as reflecting a modish political correctness; others reject outright the miniature medium on modernist grounds of its dependency on traditional values; whilst in between the question has been raised as to whether: "... the miniature project is a postcolonial quest to retrieve cultural identity." (Hashmi 2000) In the work of the six artists showing here, experimentation is taking place at both formal and conceptual levels. Alongside the evident homage paid to their lineage of masters, current practice seeks to push the limits of miniature painting, literally and metaphorically, beyond the margins.

Many of the contemporary miniatures reflect concerns with popular culture and events in ways which suggest 'contemporary chronicles', as Geeta Kapur describes the miniature influenced style of Sher-Gil (Kapur 2000:10). Sources for their imagery are as eclectic as they were under Akbar, including a play on the graphics inspired by the Flemish engravings brought to the Mughal courts by Jesuit missionaries. Whereas such European techniques of a 'realist' or 'naturalist' kind were encouraged in Mughal works for ideological reasons, such as acclaiming Imperial cosmopolitanism, (Koch 1997) they are revisited by today's practitioners with wholly different intentions

Saira Wassim's work, executed in a photo-realist style, is indeed traditional by Archer's standards: "...minute attention to detail, characterisation and concern for drama" (Archer 1959: 37, and yet its

hyper-consciousness of media effects makes it very postmodern. There is a deliberate use of the spectacular which plays ironically on the reverential: the satire is masked by a familiar veneer of stereotypical publicity mixing classical and modern images. For example; the inclusion of cherubs refers to the Renaissance influence on the Mughal style whilst their cradling of missiles recalls the sinister lobbying for arms trafficking. Her series from earlier this year was based on the so called 'honour killings'...a subject untouched as yet in art and rarely mentioned in the Pakistani media. Her current series presents the participants in the recent Pakistan -India peace talks riding a merry-go-round in a circus fairground.

Similarly, much of Nusra Latif's earlier work mocked the corruption within dominant power structures. This was expressed through the use of symmetrical imagery which formerly reflected the rigid hierarchy of Mughal control over the pictorial world. As with all six artists, this is a brilliant example of 'detournement', or 'diversion', whereby traditional visual strategies are appropriated and artfully re-deployed in order to conceive a critical image. Imran Qureshi's work is deeply concerned with the issue of nuclear arms: a polemical subject in view of the present defence policies on both side of the border. His missiles are treated like Mughal Emperors: with a flamboyant display of respect which only serves to stress their tragi-comical nature. They emerge from misty romantic landscapes like Ubu Roi figures inflated with their own rhetoric to the point of internal combustion, 'garlanded with mango leaves or spattered with sperm-like fall-out'.

Aisha Khalid's interiors frame women immersed in pattern: a metaphorical camouflage from the pressures of purdah? They stand invisible yet resolute in their burkas, 'resistant behind their veils of roses and lotus blossoms'... The exquisite ornamentation in Khalid's work distils a dual sense of oppression and subversion. Her manoeuvring hints at how the Islamic motif of repeated pattern can be appropriated towards conveying an image which is reassuring by way of its repetition of the familiar,² but also disturbing by its underlining of hypocrisy: "...there is a reluctance to acknowledge the possibility of its corrosive nature and the futility of such resistance." (Mulji 2000)

Gender issues play important parts in the content of both male and female miniature painters. The extraordinary work by Waseem Ahmed, youngest of the artists, having left N.C.A. only last year, presents images of the celebrated nudes in western art history, such as Cranach's Eve or Manet's Olympia, shrouded in transparent burkhas. Notions around the male gaze have been thoroughly investigated in western film and art imagery by feminist historians but as yet, no major study, using this as a matrix has been applied to contemporary South Asian art.³

Risham Syed manoeuvres her miniature technique in ways which often depart far from the traditional. The imagery in her work has always been directly linked to the socio-political. These works express this through memories of her childhood and the Victorian values of home-making which were instilled into individuals by those institutions left as a legacy from the colonial era. She writes: 'It is coming into contact with those memories through the introspection that I experienced after having a child myself. One was embroidering "Good Night" and knitting baby sets when one was hardly old enough to hold the needles... but at the convent that was 'the right age' to start acquiring skills practised by competent home-makers.'

There is a sociological sense to these miniatures which extends its traditional heritage by a transformative process. How much this process is influenced by actual resistance to the globalisation of oppressive regimes (be they corporate capitalism or militant dictatorship) remains to be explored. If tradition survives through transformation, do the formal and conceptual changes brought about by the

radical content and (post) modernist techniques in these works serve to question or to preserve tradition?

This exhibition hopes to show that contemporary miniature painting is a form of art which transcends tradition by belonging to what Tagore has called: "the procession of life...making constant adjustment with surprises..."(Tagore 1961:62).

Virginia Whiles. Sept. 2001