

Ustad Haji Muhammad Sharif (1889-1978)

“Art in Pakistan”

BFA-IV (Visual Arts)

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A brief History of Miniature Painting in the Region

- It was in the 16th century in Tabriz, when the second Mughal emperor Humayun observed Persian miniature painting with admiration and brought with him two accomplished artists on his return to India. After decades of artwork thereafter, the distinct style that emerged from fusion with native styles soon began to be referred as Mughal miniature painting. Today, this art has taken a whole new dimension, humbling traditional barriers and advancing with every passing day.
- It is in Lahore and its celebrated National College of Arts (NCA) that an indigenous identity of miniature art was made. But much like the tradition of miniature art, this indigenous identity too has evolved and absorbed many historical influences to become what it is today.
- During the Sikh and British periods, for example, Western art and architectural styles helped in evolving a new aesthetic canon. The miniature tradition, which had already embraced the Mughal style, absorbed the secular dogma of the Bengal school with matchless skills of A. R. Chughtai before and after Partition in 1947.
- However, the traditional court-style miniature painting sneaked into this city along with Ustad Haji Sharif, the court painter of the Maharaja of Patiala. He joined the Mayo School of Arts, now the NCA, to earn a living.

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- His presence ensured that an imperial style of miniature painting reserved a place in the academic arts of Lahore.
- *“Documentation for miniature painting as part of the curriculum in the Mayo School begins in 1945, with the appointment of Ustad Haji Sharif, Miniature painting, however, remained an optional subject till 1958 when it was finally included in the Fine Arts syllabus”* (according to Rukhsana David).
- Ustad Haji Mohammad Sharif is a known master of miniature painting, a tradition strongly patronized by the Mughals. Born in 1889 in Patiala state, East Punjab, he belonged to a family of court painters to the rajas of the small hill states of Punjab. He inherited the art of miniature painting from his forefathers who were also established miniaturists of their own times. Later he became a teacher of miniature painting in Mayo School of Art in Lahore, now known as the National College of Arts.
- He continued the traditional manner of making miniature paintings repetitively using the same subject matters which were evident in Mughal regime and continued with amendments in Rajput states. Haji Sharif after partition of the country revived the traditional practice of his fore-fathers on this side of the border. Making a strong connection with regional (indigenous) history, his contribution can never be ignored when it comes to Miniature Painting.

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- Whereas looking on the other side Abdur Rehman Chughtai also practiced miniature painting under the influence of Bengal's School's wash technique. He created his own style with modernized treatment of his subject. Both these artists played their role in reviving the indigenous tradition but in their own individualized manner.
- In the words of Nadeem Omer Tarar: *“Practitioners of the art such as Haji Sharif had often been shunned for not being innovative. He said Abdur Rehman Chughtai was the only renowned miniature artist of his time. Omar said this was due to his western outlook and approach to the art. He said Sharif had contributed in equal measure to miniature painting in the subcontinent”*.
- Haji Sharif's style was renowned for his mastery of skills and techniques. Haji Sharif had been seen as an artisan and not an artist due to this.

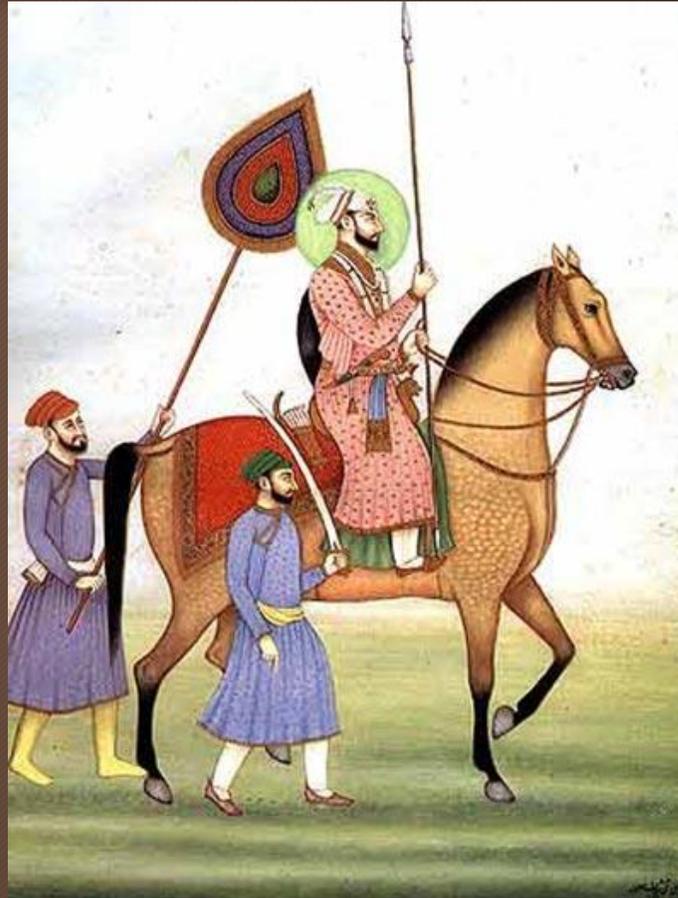
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- Haji Sharif worked with dedication and commitment but never wanted to modernize his technique or subject. For him there was no need for this. His work embraces the historical references with delicately handled surface of the wasli. His aura created an atmosphere in National College of Arts, which attracted young artists to follow the same tradition. Bashir Ahmed is one such example.
- Nadeem Omar Tarar shared during a talk that *“it was because of this perception that Sharif had not been acknowledged in a manner befitting his stature even after the establishment of the National College of Arts”*. He said *“those who had dismissed Sharif’s work as repetitive had failed to realize that the repetition of motifs in his work represented the creation of a citation, a code that could only be deciphered and modernized after its meaning and context had been comprehended”*.
- Analyzing the contemporary miniature painting, it has been observed that the traditional objectives have again been revived and the initial credit for this goes to Haji Sharif for consistently using the same repetitive motives in his traditional practice. In Today’s art scene references have been taken from historical context and used often repetitively as can be visible in the works of Shazia Sikander.

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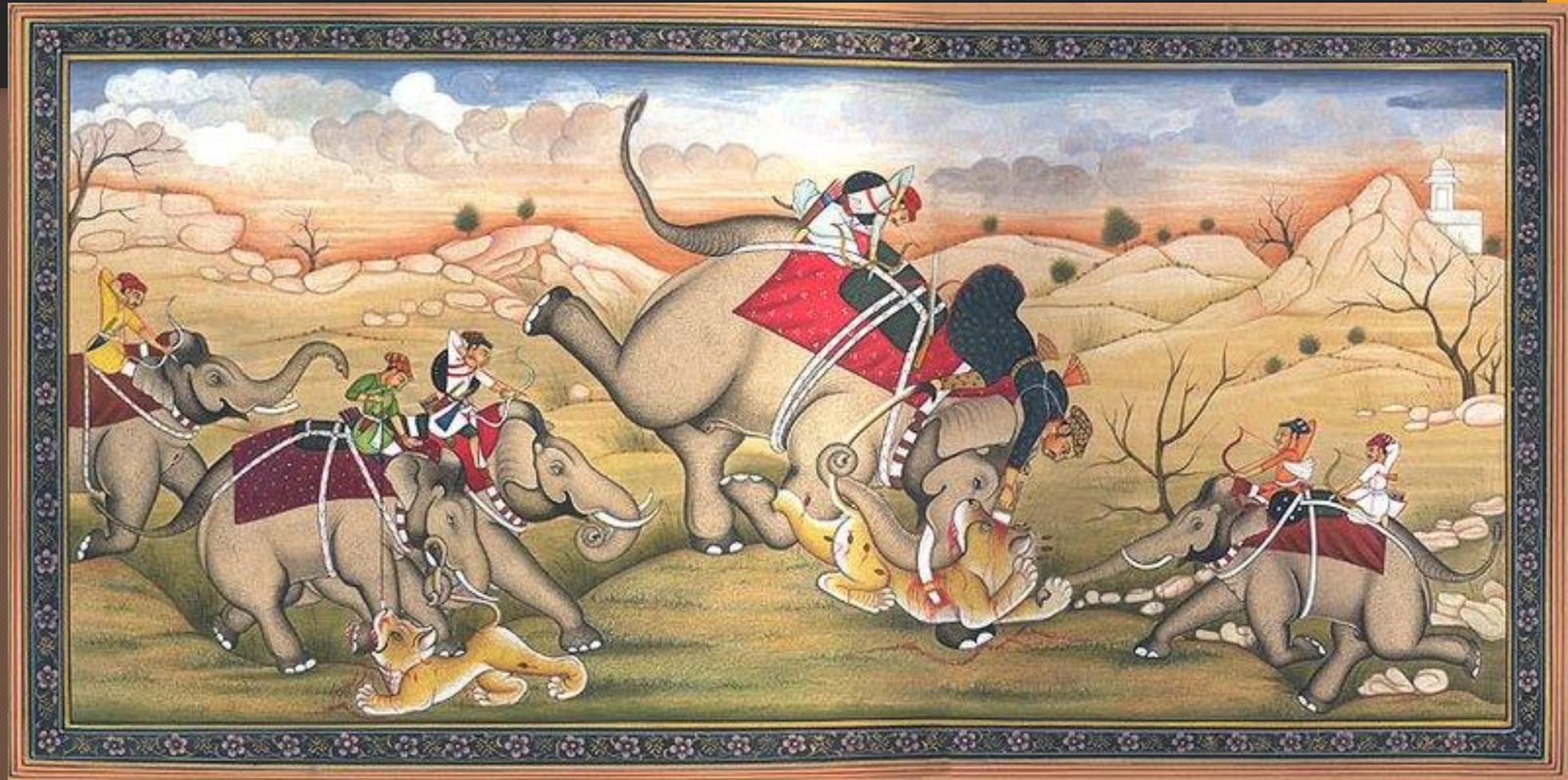
Shahalam Badshah



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Postage stamp with images of Haji Sharif

