

Miniature Painting as Muslim Cosmopolitanism

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South Asia Muslims over the last century have produced an important body of visual arts, drawing upon a complex of frameworks that included Indo-Persian aesthetics, Indian regional schools, and the influence of Western art. By the beginning of the twentieth century, modern art had become firmly established in South Asia. One significant development by artists has been to creatively reinterpret seventeenth century Mughal miniature painting and its successors. The city of Lahore has witnessed two such revivals during the last century, by the artist Abdur Rahman Chughtai (1897-1975), and more recently, by the graduates of the Miniature programme, Department of Fine Arts, National College of Art (NCA) from the late 1990s onwards. The contemporary miniature produced by the recent NCA graduates has been the focus of recent critical attention, but also needs to be situated in relation to the earlier twentieth century-developments. An aspect of my research seeks to understand the issues that preoccupied Chughtai—by examining his works, writings, and the wider intellectual circle in early twentieth century Lahore—and to see how these issues resurface in contemporary miniature. But first, a brief historical background is necessary.

Painting in (pre-)colonial South Asia

North Indian elite Muslim cultural practices were deeply informed by Persianate influences, which increased in intensity during the Mughal period from the sixteenth century. Poetry, literature, painting, and calligraphy all closely followed Persian models. The Timurid *kitabkhana* (royal bookmaking workshop) had functioned as a royal design studio, producing designs for architectural facades, carpets and decorative objects, along with its central function of producing illustrated and illuminated manuscripts, and albums (*muraqqa'*) composed of calligraphy and painting. The status of the painter, which until the fifteenth century was generally considered lower than the calligrapher, grew in importance. In the sixteenth century, during the Safavid dynasty that followed the Timurids, the general status of painting rose further, and acquired greater diversity and a certain independence as an autonomous medium, rather than its earlier role as illustrating text. It was this later Timurid and Safavid Persian influence that was imported into India by the second Mughal emperor, Humayun, on returning from his exile in Iran to India in 1555.

Humayun's successor, the great emperor Akbar (r. 1556-1605), abundantly expanded royal support of the ateliers, leading to the flowering of the highly influential school of Mughal painting and bookmaking. During Akbar's later years, the character of painting changed, becoming less action-oriented and more naturalist and realist. By this time, the aesthetics of Mughal painting had departed considerably from the earlier Persianized formal mannerism, and individual styles of various painters were appreciated for their particularities and their realism. With the ascension of the more religiously conservative Aurangzeb to the Mughal throne, painting lost a great deal of royal patronage starting around 1668; instead it witnessed a partial dispersal to local courts, which led to the development of greater diversity in the process of diffusion, leading to regional schools such as Pahari, Sikh, etc.

Painting developed in relation to the overall arts of the book, in which calligraphy played a central role. Of particular interest in this regard are the *muraqqa'* albums composed both in Timurid and Safavid Persia, and in Mughal India.¹ These albums, which can be considered a scrapbook for elite pleasure, compiled esteemed but heterogeneous

Artists in Lahore have creatively reinterpreted Mughal miniature painting and its successors. The artist Chughtai initiated this process when he started to reorient his "Indian" painting towards consciously Islamic styles. Although he had no immediate followers, since the 1980s a new group of artists inspired by Chughtai's works has started to produce playfully subversive miniature paintings. By using "obsolete" painting techniques in depicting familiar political themes, important questions are raised about the "reality" of the media imagery that surrounds us.

examples of painting and calligraphy, and framed them in elaborate decorated borders. In Indian albums, prized samples of Persian and Indian painting and calligraphy were inserted, and the album functioned as an important aesthetic benchmark for an age in which mechanically reproduced samples of work were absent. The *muraqqa'* album was reinterpreted by Abdur Rahman Chughtai in 1928 when he published his *Muraqqa'-i chughtai*, which I discuss shortly.²

Early twentieth century Lahore

The rise of British control over South Asia led to the decline of Mughal painting, which was almost complete after the Mutiny of 1857. Thereafter, during the later nineteenth century, Indian painters largely emulated European salon and academic styles. There were painting ateliers in Lahore since the Mughal times, and a small number of practitioners had continued to paint the miniature in the later nineteenth century. At that time, the British founded the Mayo School of Art (later renamed as NCA)—which was the most traditional of the art schools set up in colonial India. By the early twentieth century, Lahore, as the capital of the prosperous province of Punjab, was renowned for its higher educational institutions and a vibrant Muslim intellectual culture that included the poet-philosopher Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938) and other influential writers, scholars, and poets well versed in Urdu, Persian and English.³

The rise of a modern Indian style of painting begins in Calcutta in the early twentieth century, called the Bengal School of Art, which flourished till the 1930s. The Bengal School was self-consciously "Indian," rejecting British academic oil painting, and drew its themes from Indian mythological and historical texts. The Bengal School painters synthesized conventions of the Mughal miniature with Japanese watercolor wash techniques, and the linearity and symbolism of Art Nouveau.⁴

Abdur Rahman Chughtai, the first prominent modern Indian Muslim artist, studied at the Mayo School of Art from 1911, and began painting early on. Chughtai did not study in Calcutta, yet has a vexed relationship to the Bengal School. Despite formal and thematic correspondences between the work of Chughtai and many of the Bengal School artists, Chughtai vigorously argued that he belonged rather to the Lahore School of Painting, whose centrality and continuity he traced back to the Mughal era.⁵ Chughtai was well versed in Urdu and Persian literature, poetry, and over the years became increasingly interested in Persian, Mughal, and Pahari painting. Generally, the larger rubric of decolonization at the time provided for an experimental and creative atmosphere.

Chughtai started painting in the 1910s, initially creating works based on Hindu mythology. By the 1920s, under the influence of Iqbal's pan-Islamic ideas, he began reorient his paintings towards a consciously Islamic and "Mughal" aesthetic. The *Muraqqa'-i chughtai* (1928), illustrating the poetry of the nineteenth century Urdu poet Ghalib, marks this shift. Chughtai's earlier Indian Paintings are set outside or in simple architectural frames, showing Hindu mythological figures. By contrast, the later paintings are carefully set in elaborate arabesque interiors, with the female figures covered in elaborate, stylized layers of clothing. The later paintings are not narrative based, but create an idealized and romanticized aesthetic universe akin to the classical Urdu *ghazal*. In his own Urdu introduction to the *Muraqqa'*, Chughtai had praised, among others, Bihzad's use of imagination as a guide for pictorial depiction, rather than observing reality itself. The Persian artist Bihzad



COURTESY OF SAIRA WASIM

Contemporary miniature

By the 1980s, the NCA had started a separate Miniature programme, where a strictly traditional training based on copying Persian, Mughal, Rajput, and Pahari styles has continued to be imparted. By the mid 1990s, its students began fracturing the traditional space and narrative of the Mughal miniature. The contemporary miniature is currently flourishing in Pakistan—there are now numerous graduates of the NCA living around the world, and developing their own reinventions of the miniature based on its narrative, arabesque, and allegorical dimensions. My contention is that while oil-based abstract and post-Cubist works were dominant during the first few decades of national independence in Pakistan, the playfully subversive miniature today is perhaps better suited to participate in a globalized and postmodern cultural sphere in which Pakistani art is inextricably linked to diasporic practices, international mega-exhibitions, and promotion by Western galleries.

I present here only two examples of the contemporary miniature scene. Aisha Khalid, based in Lahore, who also studied in the Netherlands, has created works that explore questions of veiling, gender, and its relation to interiority, domesticity, and the decorative in a compelling and urgent manner. In many of her works, the minimalist space and the repetition of arabesque pattern that also recalls colonial floor tiles, creates an enclosure from which no escape appears to be possible. The figure of the woman itself becomes the decorative background, interchangeable with objects of furniture or drapery.

Chicago based Saira Wasim deploys her striking technical skills to create potent political allegories, reminding us that many Mughal works were oriented to serve as allegories of the elevated status of the Mughal emperors. Her works depict persistent crises of national sovereignty in Pakistan and the Muslim world, and have for example, addressed religious and political hypocrisy in Pakistan, the fall of Iraq to US forces, and the propaganda of the Bush administration. Her reliance on an “obsolete” painting technique precisely serves to create the temporal and aesthetic distance from pervasive media imagery, which allows her paintings to be read as allegories, rather than cartoons or parodies. Her works fully recognize political representations circulated by the electronic media, but by retaining a critical distance, prompt us to question whether the events we see every day on television are world-historical, or utterly banal and cynical instances of religious and political manipulation.⁷

Conclusion

Contemporary miniature is often claimed to be an unbroken continuity with tradition, but also a new way of celebrating hybridity and cosmopolitanism. These are seen as formations that venture beyond the ideological dictates of the Pakistani nation-state. However, South Asian Muslim identity in modern history has been too complex and overdetermined to be easily confined in a national register. The return of the miniature today is neither an unbroken continuity with “tradition,” nor fully new in its acknowledgment of hybridity, although its playful and ironic potential is certainly a new development. But in many ways, it parallels the revival of the miniature by Chughtai, who also negotiated cosmopolitan frameworks, even while articulating an idea of a Lahore-based Muslim art. The Chughtaian and the contemporary miniatures draw upon the legacies of Mughal painting, (post)modernism, and Indian vernacular painting traditions to create a kind of post-national cosmopolitan Muslim aesthetic. The miniature either arises too early, before the founding of Pakistan, or too late—when the great national drive for modernization from the 1950s to the 1970s has been exhausted—to be unproblematically considered as national art. The miniature today also unwittingly recreates Chughtai’s object of longing, the Lahore School of Painting, but whose geographic locale is ironically, globally dispersed and diasporic.

Buzkashi, (2004). Gouache on wasli paper. 25.5 x 16.5 cm. Buzkashi, literally "goat-grabbing," is an old game still popular in parts of Pakistan.

(1465-1535) has become celebrated in legend, and for Chughtai, Iqbal, and others, is an antonomastic figure characterizing perfection in the art of painting. By consciously following the path of imaginative depiction that he ascribed to the great Bihzad—Chughtai inserts himself in a history of Muslim painting that traverses the Timurid, Safavid, and Mughal eras. Chughtai and Iqbal share a cosmopolitan Muslim imagination during a time when pan-Islamic ideas were still prevalent, and the rise of independent Muslim nation-states in South Asia and much of Middle East was not yet a settled affair. But there were also key differences between them.

Iqbal’s later poetry and philosophy is characterized by revolutionary dynamism, which clearly departs from the introspective stasis of the classical *ghazal*. The relationship between Iqbal and Chughtai was thus characterized by asymmetry. Although Iqbal agreed to write a Foreword to the *Muraqqa*, he remains rather evasive about the actual merits of Chughtai’s illustrations. Indeed, Iqbal goes so far as to claim, “[I]t is my belief that, with the single exception of Architecture, the art of Islam (Music, Painting and even Poetry) is yet to be born—the art, that is to say, which aims at the human assimilation of Divine attributes ...,” implying that neither Chughtai nor any other painters’ works are properly “Islamic.”⁶

Interestingly Iqbal’s unease with modern Muslim painting should also be seen in relation to the larger critique leveled against the Bengal School by Bengalis and British modernist critics during its heyday. The Bombay Progressives, who oriented themselves in relation with International Modernism, and painted with oil in abstract and post-Cubist styles, also attacked the Bengal School for its decadence, idealism, and an illustrative relationship to text and myth, rather than creating works that would be artistically autonomous in their own right. The art of Pakistan during its first five decades (1947-1997) largely develops from this engagement with modernism. Chughtai was over 50 years old when Pakistan was created. In terms of subsequent influence, Chughtai’s recovery of the miniature was largely neglected in Pakistan for decades. He remained a highly admired figure, but one who had no immediate followers.

Notes

1. David J. Roxburgh, *The Persian Album, 1400-1600: From Dispersal to Collection* (Yale University Press, 2005); Imad al-Hasani, *The St. Petersburg Muraqqa*, 2 vol., ed. Ivanov Akimushkin (Leonardo Arte, 1996).
2. *Muraqqa-i chughtai* (Lahore: Jahangir Book Club, 1928); reprint edition (Lahaur: Aivan-i isha`at, 1971).
3. Akbar Naqvi, *Image and Identity: Fifty Years of Painting and Sculpture in Pakistan* (Oxford, 1998), 40-99.
4. Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1850-1922: Occidental Orientations* (Cambridge, 1994).
5. See his *Lahaur ka dabistan-i musavviri* (Chughtai Miyuziyam Trust, 1979); Naqvi, *Image and Identity*, 46-58.
6. Iqbal, “Foreword,” n.p.
7. Her work can be viewed on her website www.sairawasim.com.

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