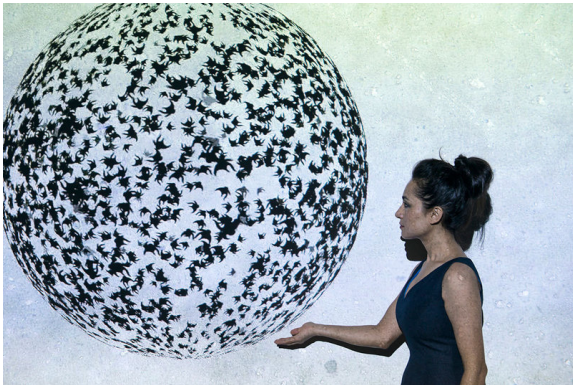


SEAN KELLY

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Breaking The Mold: Artist's Modern Miniatures Remix Islamic Art



Shahzia Sikander, pictured here, created the film *Parallax* (also pictured) to explore the layers of history and change that are remaking parts of the Middle East and South Asia.

Courtesy of Shahzia Sikander

Shahzia Sikander is one of the contemporary art world's most celebrated stars. She's projecting her hypnotic video installations onto Times Square billboards; she's led exhibitions at major art museums across the world; and she was recognized by the MacArthur Foundation as a "genius" fellow in 2006. The Pakistani-born artist says art has always been a "ticket to life," but what distinguishes Sikander's art from her contemporaries is her training in a centuries-old handmade form of Islamic art — the bejeweled world of Indo-Persian miniature paintings.

The Finest Pictures With The Finest Lines

While the Renaissance masters were going big, the royal ateliers of India's Mughal dynasty were going small. Miniature painting thrived in the 15th- and 16th- century courts of India's Islamic kingdoms. Sometimes as small as 3 inches by 3 inches, these paintings were highly decorative, graphical pages that wove stories of heroism, lovers and political intrigue into gilded works of art. Artists followed stringent rules, and in addition to years of training, the craft required incredibly precise techniques. Pakistani art historian F.S. Aijazuddin says, "For the finest pictures and for the finest lines, they would use what was called an *ek baal*, which was a single hair — a single squirrel hair — to achieve the finest line."



Traditionally, India's miniature paintings told stories of heroism, lovers and political intrigue through gilded works of art. *Sultan 'Ali 'Adil Shah II Slays a Tiger* (ca. 1660) is part of that tradition.

The Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. Lent by Howard Hodgkin./Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art

These miniature paintings are often at the center of the world's leading collections of Islamic art. Navina Haidar curates one such collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. She says miniature paintings are "dependent on tremendous technical finesse. As an artist, you are trained by your father, your forefathers, in a workshop setting to create a world that's miniaturized in its scale but absolutely universal sometimes in its content or in its ambition."

But as the Muslim kingdoms of India faded in the 18th and 19th centuries, so did the patronage and the practice of miniature painting. Then in the 1980s, the artist Bashir Ahmad revived the tradition by establishing a formal department of miniature painting at the prestigious National College of Arts in Lahore, Pakistan.

Taking Miniatures To A New Level

As a young art student at Lahore's National College of Arts, Shahzia Sikander says she was fascinated by miniature paintings. And while she acknowledges it was a strict and "craft-oriented way of working," she saw miniatures as a language to say new things. For her graduate thesis, she created a miniature painting that broke the mold: a scroll that was 13 inches tall and 5 feet long and featured more than a dozen interconnected illustrations. More importantly, it was a deeply personal piece depicting the daily life of a modern Pakistani woman.



The Scroll, Sikander's graduate thesis, depicts the life of a modern Pakistani woman.
Courtesy of Shahzia Sikander

Pakistani historian Ayesha Jalal says that thesis was a breakthrough in the history of miniature painting. "Miniature went in decline only because of absence of patronage, not because of loss of technique — so that technique was there," she says. "So when these techniques were passed on by Bashir Ahmad to younger people — I mean especially Shahzia, Shahzia took it to a new level. I mean, it was her thesis work that was sensational. Everybody talked about her work."

Sikander was invited to show *The Scroll* and other works at the Pakistani Embassy in Washington, D.C. The show lasted one day and she didn't sell a single piece of art, but she spent the rest of her visit knocking on the doors of as many American graduate schools as she could, eventually winning a spot at the Rhode Island School of Design. There, Sikander began the academic process of further deconstructing miniature paintings. She says she often faced questions about her ethnic origins and was frustrated to be reduced to an ethnic artist. After all, at the heart of her ambition was the same ambition as any artist — the burning desire to communicate.

She says, "People want to know ... 'What is that cultural practice? Do you, like, run around catching your squirrel?'" So I think some of these topics hijacked [the work], actually. They were detrimental."



Once in New York, Sikander began mixing modern techniques with traditional elements of Islamic art. *Unseen* is a projection that also features intricate Indo-Persian borders.

Courtesy of Shahzia Sikander

Finding A Home In New York

Sikander eventually moved to New York City and began creating a new body of work that integrated her illustrations with her training as a modern artist. She says, "This is the first place that I'd been in my three or four years in the U.S. [where] I wasn't being seen through an ethnic lens. ... So I could be who I wanted to be. ... I felt the same kind of confidence that I had when my work got recognized in Pakistan."

In New York, Sikander began merging components of miniature paintings with modern, abstract designs. The result was a blend of surreal shapes and vivid colors that would be at home in a Salvador Dali painting. But her pieces were also tightly controlled, featuring geometric patterns and intricate Indo-Persian borders.

Glenn Lowry, director of New York's Museum of Modern Art, was astounded by the craftsmanship and beauty of her work. "There is a visual lushness," he says. "She has a capacity to draw that's absolutely breathtaking, so she can make images small or large with such precision that you look at them and you're dumbfounded."

In recent years, her illustrations have moved beyond the page into animation, video and large-scale projections.

Control, Exploitation And Hope In 'Parallax'

Sikander's latest piece, *Parallax*, is cinematic in its scale and ambition. It's a 15-minute film derived from hundreds of handmade illustrations and paintings. The title of the piece suggests a shifting point of view, disorientation and new ways of seeing. Sikander says she was inspired by a drive she took across the United Arab Emirates. She spent that trip reflecting on the conditions facing millions of migrant workers from Pakistan, and both the curse and opportunity of the country's immense oil wealth. The result is a work where colorful flows of paint (echoing oil) collide with layers of illustrations and animated forms. She's interested in the layers of history and change that are remaking this region.



Shahzia Sikander poses with *Parallax*, a 15-minute film she made using hundreds of handmade paintings and illustrations.
Shahzia Sikander

Parallax made its American debut at Tufts University at the invitation of historian Ayesha Jalal. She says Sikander is not an overtly political artist, but by disorienting the viewer she's forcing you to see reality in a new light. "She's not really making a political statement but the way in which she presents her work makes you understand that there is exploitation," Jalal says. "Something is going on here — there's control and there is exploitation but there is hope as well."

Breaking Out Of The Muslim Artist Label

So is Shahzia Sikander making Islamic art? Is she making American art? Or is what she does contemporary? Ruba Kana'an is a curator at Toronto's Aga Khan Museum of Islamic art. She says Sikander evades easy categories, and that is a breakthrough in its own right. "It takes quite a lot for artists from Muslim heritage to lose that sort of hyphen that identifies them," Kana'an says. "You're either [an] Arab contemporary artist or you're [a] Pakistani contemporary artist. Well, many artists want to be identified first and foremost as artists. ... Their work is not limited to or restricted to their heritage."

That's exactly what Sikander has been trying to do since she first tried her hand at traditional miniature painting. She says, "Whether it was the Muslim identity, whether it was the female identity or the Asian identity or the Asian-American identity or the hyphenated identities ... I felt all of them were essential to who I was. All of it. I couldn't reject one for the other. I didn't want to be labeled by just one. That's still part of who I am." And in the process of establishing who she is, Sikander has paved the way for other Muslim artists to break out of the frame.