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Contemporary Visions of Mystical Indo-Persian Miniatures



Shahzia Sikander, "Portrait of the Artist" (2016), a suite of four etchings, with accompanying collaborative text with Ayad Akhtar. Paper size: 68.5 x 53 cm; image size: 56 x 43 cm. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution: Acquired through Federal support from the Asian Pacific American Initiatives Pool, administered by the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center. Published by Pace Editions, Inc.

WASHINGTON, DC — [Eye to I: Self Portraits from 1900 to Today](#) at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington explores how American artists have

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viewed themselves in relation to American history and culture. It also includes a first: Shahzia Sikander is the first Pakistani-born artist to be collected by and exhibit works in the renowned gallery. The artist's work is displayed alongside over 70 pieces by such American luminaries as Elaine de Kooning, Jacob Lawrence, and Josef Albers.

Spanning nearly three decades, Sikander's body of multimedia art focuses on Indo-Persian miniatures, a genre that fuses Central Asian and Mughal painting. Since the 16th century, miniature painting in the Indian subcontinent (now Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh) has followed traditional pictorial laws and thematic content. Lyrical tales of romance from epic Hindu texts, *darbaars* (essentially Mughal emperor courts), holy wars, and flora and fauna dominate the bright, lavish manuscripts. Miniature painting popularized illustrations of the *Mairaj* (Arabic for *ladder*) from the life of the Muslim prophet Muhammad, where the creature *Buraaq* takes the Prophet above the skies and beyond the heavens. Muhammad is said to have met angels and past prophets. The night of "Ascension" is one Islam's most mystical and striking themes. It has enthralled and inspired Sikander, whose self-portraits are artistic manifestations of this magical journey.



Figure 1 Shahzia Sikander, "Portrait of the Artist" (2016), a suite of four etchings, with accompanying collaborative text with Ayad Akhtar. Paper size: 68.5 x 53 cm; image size: 56 x 43 cm. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution: Acquired through Federal support from the Asian Pacific American Initiatives Pool, administered by the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center. Published by Pace Editions, Inc.

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Representations of the artist are generally absent in historical Indo-Persian miniature manuscripts, and while the imagery is often crowded within the picture plane, it is not layered or overlapping. Collectively titled *Portrait of the Artist*, Sikander's four-etching suite, which is accompanied by an essay by playwright Ayad Akhtar, subverts the conventions of the miniature genre in multiple ways. The works are palimpsests of symbolic iconography that layer the portraits — two of Sikander herself and two of Akhtar — with the silhouettes of the Prophet and angels. The color palette, evoking celestial skies and deep sunsets, is more subdued than that of traditional miniatures. In one etching, the artist's three-quarter profile displays a serene hint of a smile, as gold and yellow hues illuminate her gray-toned face. The portrait is superimposed on a silhouette of a figure riding a winged creature, along with outlines of angles within the picture frame. The featureless icons of the Prophet and the angels are recognizable as their style borrows from Central Asian and Indo-Persian miniatures.

The two portraits of Akhtar are featured in a second exhibition at the National Gallery, *Recent Acquisitions*. One etching, reminiscent of Persian court artist Jami's *The Ascension of Muhammad* (1556-65 AD), the outlines of the angels border the artist's shaved head. Centrally placed in the frame, Akhtar's gray face contrasts with the deep navy blue of the background, channeling the mystical energy of the night of the Ascension.



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Sikander is barely visible in the subtlest of the portraits, her face camouflaged by the background. The silhouette of the Prophet is at the top right, while an angel hovers near the top of the picture plane. The Islamic scripture that narrates the night of the *Ascension* suggests that this angel is Gabriel, who accompanied the Prophet on his journey. The narration also mentions a destination where the shrub-bearing tree, called *Sidra-tul-Munteha*, thrives. This is where the Prophet travels forward alone, without Gabriel. In Sikander's etching, the tree rests on the bottom zone of the pictorial space, its branches permeating her hidden face.

Depictions of the Ascension in traditional miniature painting can be a metaphor for spirituality and mystical connection with a supreme entity and could have appealed to the local literati as a basis for intellectual dialogue. They were considered emblematic of an Islamic identity in the Persian lands. For Sikander, the Ascension has been a means for opening her imagination, as she visualizes traditional imagery in her contemporary miniatures.



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The artist first integrated personal imagery within the miniature format in her final work as an undergraduate student at the National College of Arts in Lahore, Pakistan. Her five-foot-wide painting "The Scroll" (1989-1991) is often read as an autobiographical family saga that introduces the artist as its protagonist. The mammoth painting hides her face from sight as her figure, clad in white, is always involved in activities such as reading or drawing. The work is a commentary on youth, changing identity, and her creative processes. While the self-portraits that comprise Portrait of the Artist and other works she has made over the past three decades show her face, she remains fully immersed in the visual landscape. However, these works evinces a motivation that is unseen in her previous works, allude to an level of artistic insight gained not through autobiography but through creative intuition. The series suggests that Sikander has found what she has been looking for: an artistic identity that furthers her forays into cultural and artistic plurality.

Eye to I: Self-Portraits from 1900 to Today continues at the National Portrait Gallery (8th and F Streets NW, Washington DC) through August 18, 2019.