

SEANKELLY

Yerebakan, Osman Can. "Women Artists of the Middle East and South Asia Are Reinventing Miniature Painting." *Artsy*. June 14, 2021.



Hiba Schahbaz, installation view of "In My Heart" at Rockefeller Center, New York, 2021. Photo by Olympia Shannon. Courtesy of the artist and Art Production Fund.

As a student at the National College of Arts in 1980s Lahore, Shahzia Sikander was not encouraged to practice miniature painting. She had first encountered images of miniature as a child in books, but access to her nation's traditional practice was scarce due to many Western museums' large holdings of the genre. Studying "the colonial legacy and its orientalist interpretations" through archives helped Sikander grasp miniature's intricate trajectory, but "making sense of this complex history first as a young teenager and to this day as an older artist has been a long journey of several decades," she said.

The New York-based artist is a leading figure in a wave of Middle Eastern and South Asian women artists reclaiming miniature painting to tell their stories of transcendence and corporeality. She and fellow artists like Hayy Kahraman, Arghavan Khosravi, Hamra Abbas, and Hiba Schahbaz defy the tradition's visual and conceptual style through their own technical and narrative complexities. They transfer miniature painting to a variety of media, including video and sculpture, while foregrounding women-centric stories. While centering female autonomy, as well as sexuality, these artists still harness the introspection and transcendence of miniature traditions.

SEANKELLY



Shahzia Sikander

Miniature painting flourished in Persia around the 13th century, despite Islam's strict ban on figuration and creating human likeness. Soon after, the genre emerged in the Ottoman Empire, as well as India, especially during the Mughal Empire in the 16th and 17th centuries. These artworks were small-scale renditions of a broad variety of subjects, such as historical events, everyday court life, or nature, with the occasional addition of calligraphy. Formats varied from a manuscript with numerous pages to a single sheet of paper, but the artists' commitment to a flattened perspective and figures was consistent.

In a world of chaos and injustice, contemporary approaches to miniature traditions promise alternative modes of thinking, according to curators Azra Tüzünoğlu and Gülce Özkara, who recently co-organized the group exhibition "Miniature 2.0: Miniature in Contemporary Art" at Istanbul's Pera Museum. "Women find it productive to engage with traditional miniature aesthetics because the politics of miniature is very similar to the colonialist white male subject's control over the female body," Tüzünoğlu and Özkara noted. "The invisibility of both women artists and miniature aesthetics in Western-centric progressivist art history is the result of similar sociocultural structures which affect contemporary art today."

SEANKELLY



Hayv Kahraman
Back Bend 2, 2020
Pilar Corrias Gallery
Contact for price

The female figure in Sikander’s universe is an archetype of historical feminine resistance. “They have thoughts, emotions, feelings, and iconographies born out of the intellectual and virtuosic manuscript traditions of Central, South, and East Asia,” she explained.

Sikander’s seminal thesis project *The Scroll* (1989–90) came out of a search to craft her critical voice against colonial and patriarchal oppression—and her answer was in the miniature tradition. The work is composed of meticulous depictions of female figures over a stretched piece of the traditionally used *wasli* paper. Sikander, an avid poetry reader, describes *The Scroll* as “an epic poem,” which unfolds a narrative from left to right about women’s internal and social conflicts. Immense labor and contemplation were critical for the work’s conception due to the era’s strict laws that regulated women’s freedom.

SEANKELLY



Shahzia Sikander, detail of *The Scroll*, 1989–90. © Shahzia Sikander. Courtesy of the artist; Sean Kelly, New York; and the Morgan Library & Museum.



Shahzia Sikander, *Uprooted Order*, Series 3, No. 1, 1997. © Shahzia Sikander. Courtesy of the artist; Sean Kelly, New York; and the Morgan Library & Museum.

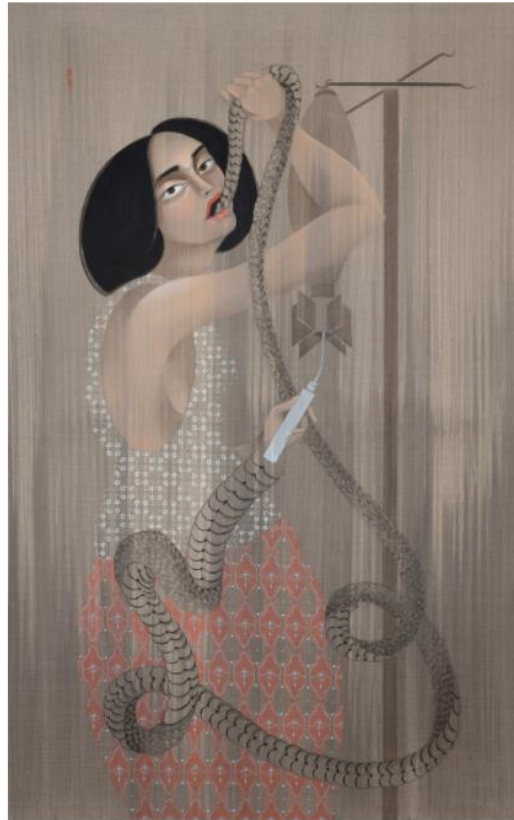
“This work marked the beginning of my depicting women as proactive, intelligent, witty protagonists connected to the past in imaginative and abundant ways,” Sikander said. The artist’s upcoming survey “Extraordinary Realities,” at the Morgan Library and Museum, looks at a period following *The Scroll*, which launched the movement later coined as “Neo-miniature.” “Transforming its status from a traditional and nostalgic form into a contemporary idiom became my personal goal,” Sikander said, referring to the time period that began when she moved to the U.S. and later had solo exhibitions at the Whitney and the Hirshhorn.

For Iraqi American artist Hayv Kahraman, books similarly served as an entryway into understanding her culture’s miniature tradition. As a child in Baghdad, she encountered images of the Baghdad school of miniature painting and learned about the tradition’s peak during the 12th century. Kahraman is known for her radiant depictions of female perseverance through the impossibly contorted bodies, hazy facial expressions, and a sense of tranquility which she achieves through painting on tan linen. She paints women with bulbous coifs of hair and piercing eyes, populating dreamscapes in which ethereality and resilience coalesce.

SEANKELLY



Hayv Kahraman
Chameleons, 2021
Jack Shainman Gallery
Contact for price



Hayv Kahraman, *IV*, 2021, in "Anti/Body" at Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, 2021. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery.

Kahraman's contemporary approach to miniature traditions nods to the 11th-century manuscripts of *Maqamat al Hariri*. "The emphasis was placed on the expression of the characters' faces and movements, which is something I tried to adopt in my work," she said. She also connects with tradition on a literary level by writing in vernacular onto the canvas in Iraqi Arabic. Moreover, *Maqamat* has been an unexpected source of inspiration for portrayals of the body, including "a full frontal view of a woman, her legs wide open, giving birth."

Beyond their dynamic appearances, Kahraman's absorbing depictions of female sexuality deliver sharp remarks on gender liberation, and she feels particularly committed to bridging the contemporary with the past. "Many iterations of the *Maqamats* were censored and destroyed at the time, but to think that they were part of the collective imaginary and were widely read and discussed in that region is quite emancipatory," she said. The artist's most recent paintings at Jack Shainman Gallery's group exhibition "Anti/Body" convey a tension between tranquility and horror. The women possess a timeless ease inherent to miniature, while visuals of war gear or serpents populate the contemporary chaos.

SEANKELLY



Arghavan Khosravi, *Black Rain*, 2021. Courtesy of the artist and Rachel Uffner Gallery.

Iranian artist Arghavan Khosravi learned of miniature traditions through her father, an architect who specialized in traditional Islamic and Persian forms. Yet it wasn't until she started her MFA in illustration at Tehran University that she delved into miniature's legacy in Iran. At school, a large portion of the painting history she learned focused on local miniature tradition, but Khosravi's first real encounter with the masterpieces was at an exhibition at the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art about a decade ago. The exhibition catalogue was one of the few books she brought across the Atlantic during her move to the U.S. "Whenever I feel I am running out of inspiration, I browse that book and it never ceases to amaze me," she said.

The New York-based artist's recent exhibition "In Between Places," at Rachel Uffner Gallery, demonstrated her interest in miniature's particular sense of architecture and depth, which she transforms into a language to convey emotion. "Depictions of architecture is one of the aspects of Persian miniature which has always fascinated me," Khosravi explained. Her three-dimensional paintings both embrace and subvert that admiration. She resists the tradition's emphasis on flatness with her stacked perspectives and elimination of the vanishing point. Her introspective mise-en-scènes often refer to politics between her native country and the U.S. "I am interested in appropriating that unreal space with traditional architecture and placing in it realistically rendered figures in contemporary clothing," she said.

SEANKELLY



Arghavan Khosravi, *The Suspension*, 2020.
Courtesy of the artist and Rachel Uffner Gallery.



Arghavan Khosravi, *Patiently Waiting*, 2021. Courtesy of the
artist and Rachel Uffner Gallery.

Khosravi's figures occasionally seem out of proportion in relation to the architectural elements. Beyond simply tricking the eye, the in-betweenness of perspective helps the artist add a veil of social commentary over her radiant hues and absorbing juxtapositions.

Pakistani artist Hamra Abbas started miniature painting only during art school, "but it never felt unfamiliar, and today, it has a special place in my practice," she said. Abbas's "Every Color" painting series, which was featured in part one of the 2020–21 Asia Society Triennial, captures members of Lahore's transgender community through the resilience of portraiture. Entirely eliminating background and the body, she brings the viewer face-to-face with her subjects. While homogeneity was critical in traditional miniature, Abbas's attention to detail gives distinction and persistence to each individuals' expression. "I rendered the faces with a sense of realism, which connects my painting practice with sculpture that is quite different from the stylization in miniature tradition," she explained.

SEANKELLY



Hamra Abbas, from the series *Every Color*, 2020. Photo by Asif Khan. Courtesy of the artist and Asia Society Museum.



Hamra Abbas, detail of work from the series *Every Color*, 2020. Photo by Asif Khan. Courtesy of the artist and Asia Society Museum.

While making this work in Lahore, Abbas was on her own journey of transformation. “I had just given birth to my son, and the prospect of learning something new in a new place spoke profoundly to my process of postpartum healing and the idea of rebirth,” Abbas said about visiting the city after living in Boston for many years. She also felt the need to slow down after observing the difficulties faced by transgender performers on the streets of Lahore. Infusing elements of Chinese *Gongbi* painting into miniature yielded a particular sense of depth and radiance in her subjects. Instead of the typical wasli paper, she used silk and applied paint on both sides of the surface. “The process helped me realize the poetics of this everyday yet marginalized queerness in Pakistan,” Abbas said.

Whenever Abbas seeks refuge from the chaos of studio life, miniature offers an escape. “Miniature painting is the one place where I am in a quiet conversation only with myself,” she reflected, “which I highly value in the noisy lives we love to live all the time otherwise.”

SEANKELLY



Hiba Schahbaz
Untitled (Protection Painting), 2019
Unit London
Contact for price



Hiba Schahbaz
Self Reflection, 2020
De Buck Gallery
Sold

The painter Hiba Schahbaz was drawn to the intricate details of miniature. “When I was formally introduced to painting miniatures at the National College of Arts in Lahore, I immediately fell under its spell,” she said. The artist considers the practice a form of meditation and ritual, which includes mixing the colors or preparing the brushes.

“It was like meeting a soul mate,” Schahbaz said of her early days of engaging with the genre. Today, at her Bushwick studio, she makes cutouts of women immersed in nature, unburdened by the mundane chaos.

SEANKELLY



Hiba Schahbaz, installation view of "In My Heart" at Rockefeller Center, New York, 2021. Photo by Olympia Shannon. Courtesy of the artist and Art Production Fund.

Schahbaz's recent exhibition "In My Heart," displayed in and around Rockefeller Plaza through the Art Production Fund, was a love song for collective healing. "I intentionally focused my energy outward and took into consideration the space and context of Rockefeller Center," she said. The show's centerpiece was a 125-foot-long mural featuring contemplative women, inspired by her own self, in otherworldly habitats. After painting miniature for 15 years, the transition to such a large scale was a new challenge, but her approach largely remained the same. "The soft stylization of figures and landscapes, the dreamlike colors, the topsy-turvy perspective, and areas of intricate details are very much a part of my vocabulary," Schahbaz explained.

Sikander sees her miniature practice as a way to consider the question, "What is our sense of self versus someone else's idea of us?" She, as well as many contemporary artists who narrate stories of transcendence within their physical realities, keeps returning to miniature. The tradition's offerings of mystery and tranquility help them render the mundane with contemplation. Amid chaos, miniature traditions offer a means through which to unveil the resilient self.