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Editors. "Shahzia Sikander: Unbound." *Cambridge Edition*, November 2021.



EXHIBITION SPOTLIGHT

Exclusively at Jesus College, Unbound is an exhibition by Pakistani-American artist Shahzia Sikander which speaks to issues of post-colonialism, decolonisation, feminism and feminine ideals. It has been curated by postdoctoral associate in Islamic art, Dr Vivek Gupta, who knows the artist, having first met with her in 2019 – and subsequently published a book chapter analysing the significance of her works.

This is a particularly special display of Shahzia's work, as it's not only the first time the exhibition has been shown outside – it's the first time it has been displayed in the UK.

"The location was chosen specifically due to the nature of British archives," Vivek explains. "There's an extremely large, rich collection of south Asian and Islamic materials that have ended up in the UK, although the majority of art historians here focus on the Mediterranean." Placing the exhibition at the heart of this contrast highlights the disparity between the resources available and the extent to which they are being utilised; the materials are there, but what are we doing with them?

It is split into three segments. The first explores manuscripts as products, delving into the significance of the medium. The second extrapolates and abstracts their feminist aspects, particularly in relation to Muslim women and the idea of theorising the veil. And the third segment explores decolonisation, specifically in relation to the history of sculptural displays at Jesus College – and the assertion that the theme doesn't need to be violent to be resonant.

One of the most striking pieces from Unbound– a patinated bronze sculpture entitled *Promiscuous Intimacies*, depicting contrasting feminine ideals – occupies a central outdoor position at Jesus College, making it obvious to all who pass through. Showcasing the sculpture in this manner brings the issue of visibility to the forefront, and situates the sculpture in a stylistically appropriate setting: exposed to the environment, just as a traditional temple sculpture would be. "It's stunning – you just want to reach out and touch it," Vivek comments. "We're proud to have it displayed in the UK, and to have it showing outside is even better."

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Jesus College is a fitting location for the political undercurrents of Shahzia's work, as there is still a marked disparity in the racial diversity of the college's faculty. Although there is now a broader makeup of Muslim students and students of African descent, there are still no art historians of colour in the department. The need to confront 'the other' in order to better understand ourselves is a theme that underpins the works, along with a distinctly feminist perspective and unique spin on decolonisation.

"The exhibition is extremely relevant to the UK right now, as it offers a new take on decolonisation that embraces tradition. Given the history of British sculpture artists at Cambridge, it's an impressive feat," Vivek adds. The artist and curator worked closely with the faculty, in a truly collaborative effort. "It wouldn't have been possible without the unfailing support from everyone involved – including the master of the college – along with a generous grant from the Centre of Islamic Studies. The planning all went ahead despite the circumstances, and we're so grateful to see it come to light."

Many of Shahzia's paintings present themselves as detached from the colonial baggage of the archival manuscripts among which they are situated, allowing the viewer to access its politics through the iconography the artist has chosen to work with. These intercultural interactions ensure audiences are always involved in the exhibition, asserting the need for the UK – and perhaps specifically Cambridge – to probe more deeply into its archives, looking beyond Europe and America to a more inclusive world view. As Unbound implies, the exploration of cultural issues within art history needs to be more global – because the issues always have been.

Shahzia Sikander: Unbound will be showing at West Court Gallery in Jesus College until 18 February 2022. Find out more on the website [.jesus.cam.ac.uk](https://jesus.cam.ac.uk)