

# PAKISTAN

## MODERNIZING MINIATURE PAINTING

*A new generation of Pakistani artists employ principles of an ancient tradition to create a new style of miniature that includes abstract and sculptural works.*

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In the midst of unprecedented interest from the international art market, Pakistan's art world is evolving quickly. The contemporary coterie of artists have come of age during a period of massive political, social and cultural upheaval. Art by leading lights such as Rashid Rana are selling to breathless demand at Sotheby's and Christie's, with more recent artists like Ali Kazim, Hasnat Mahmood and Muhammad Zeeshan leading the younger pack. Several established artists such as Jamil Naqsh, Faiza Butt and Huma Bhabha live and work abroad, but virtuosos including Rana, Imran Qureshi and Naiza Khan continue to create their art in Pakistan, teaching at local universities and producing work that is reflective of their immersive existences.

### An Ancient Tradition

One of South Asia's oldest art forms is miniature painting, a style with deep lyricism, imbued with rich colours,

delicate penmanship and balanced compositions. Traditionally found in ancient Persian manuscripts; miniature works were small enough to fit within the confines of a page, and detailed enough to portray an entire narrative. Scholars of Islamic Art write extensively of the earliest Persian miniature paintings, dating back as far as the 13th Century. In the centuries that followed, miniature painting was championed in Mughal India, becoming exceptionally elaborate and dynamic as its reach expanded. Indian miniature utilized wasli - a layered, hand prepared paper, as well as a non-transparent, water-based paint called gouache. The style was similar to the Persian school, with the addition of Indian patterns, architectural characteristics, and elaborate costumes and jewelry.

### Merging Miniature and Abstract

It was not until the 1970s that miniature was revived in Pakistan. At a time of political and national flux, with General

Ayub Khan's ascent to power through military coup, graduates of the Mayo School of Arts in Lahore (now called the National College of Arts) were eager to reclaim South Asian traditions and culture. Amongst them was Zahoor ul Akhlaq (1941–1999) who popularized postmodern ideas in the 1970s when he became a professor at NCA. Insisting that traditional South Asian forms of art be included in the syllabi, his own work merged miniature and abstract art.

Akhlaq and his contemporaries trained a generation of artists who were to push miniature to the furthest edges of contemporary art and expression. Shahzia Sikander (b. 1969), Imran Qureshi (b. 1972) and Aisha Khalid (b.1972) took classical techniques and aggressively layered on contemporary themes and scenarios, probing social issues, and depicting modern clothing and architecture.

Perhaps more than any other of this group, Sikander has brought modern



## AN EVOLVING ART

Left: Miniature painting originated in Persia and moved to South Asia, where it evolved based on the local culture and influences.

Right: Imran Qureshi, 'Moderate Enlightenment' 2009.



Sahyr Sayed  
'The New Address Is', (2012),  
Styrofoam  
panel, gypsona  
strips, acrylic  
paints, junk  
items

### Breaking Existing Moulds

Younger artists continue to modify and transform the rules of the genre. Using a range of mediums (plastic, wire, glass, clay) to create their pieces but sticking to traditionalist techniques, they have produced unexpected and distinctively South Asian work.

Deeply personal art is also increasingly common in Pakistan, as a generation in flux has turned the lens around from depicting the outside world and into the mind and soul of the artist. Rather than depicting the lives of historical characters, this new generation of artists are creating pieces centered on their own emotional minutiae, daily challenges, interactions, and relationships. Sahyr Sayed (b. 1987) is the product of a broken home. She uses doll's houses to create traditional home-like situations out of tiny objects that she selects, builds, or paints and fills with familial clutter. Taking this break with tradition one step further and daring to make herself the subject of her own work, the physically disabled Attiya Shaukat (b. 1980) paints herself in the brace she is required to wear – emphasizing her own confinement. Her twisted, somber images play in direct contrast to the

miniature to the global mainstream. She has had pieces on show at the MoMA in New York and is represented by the prestigious Pilar Corrias Gallery in London and Sikkema Jenkins in New York. Expanding the scale of miniature artwork, Sikander demonstrated that the genre need not be constricted by traditional rules.

Also choosing to deviate from the traditional in distinct ways, the 2013 Deutsche Bank Artist of the Year, Imran Qureshi has created a series of massive pieces, including commissions for the Sydney and Sharjah biennales. Pakistan's battles with terror and militancy cast an obvious pall on the work – he paints intimidatingly bearded modern-day men in jarring, yet mundane scenarios. The darkness of the gold-flecked satire is unmissable.



Attiya Shaukat  
Structure, (2012) - Tea  
wash, silver paper,  
thread and gouache  
on wasli

BREAKING ALL OF THE MOULDS LAID OUT IN THE THOUSANDS OF YEARS OF THIS ART FORM IS THE INTRODUCTION OF THE SCULPTURAL MINIATURE.



Noor Ali Chagani, 'Pixels of My Portrait,' 2011, terracotta bricks, cast iron and rubber solution



Noor Ali Chagani explores the ancient technique of clay brick making using kilns; he makes his own bricks in miniature size that act as units for his art objects.

historical role of miniature as depictive of beauty and an idealized reproduction of reality.

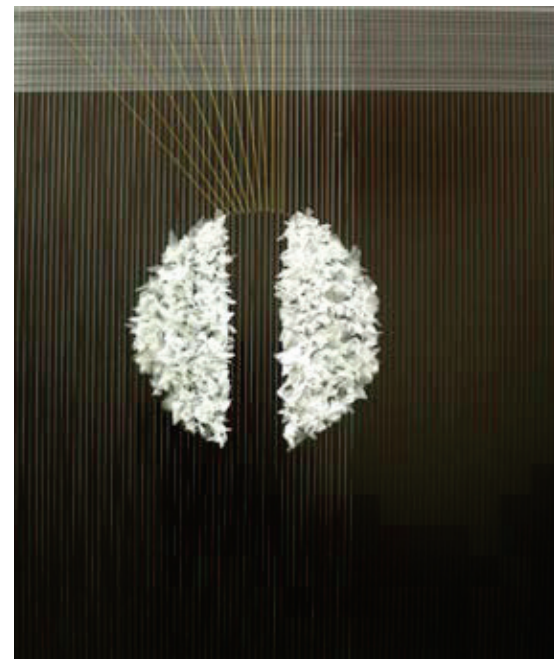
Lines and architecture also figure prominently and issues of perception are examined by artists like Noureen Rashid (b. 1982), who deconstructs miniature into its bare essentials – lines and planes. The repetition of slender threads on aluminium creates entire pieces– a dichotomy between these vulnerable fragments and what is solid and complete.

### Sculpting in Miniature

Breaking all of the moulds laid out in the thousands of years of this art form is the introduction of the sculptural miniature. The brilliant Noor Ali Chagani (b. 1982) and newcomer Maha Ahmed (b. 1989) both use cubes and boxes to build pieces. The youngest nominee of the

Victoria and Albert's Jameel Art Prize, Chagani utilizes miniature, handmade bricks to build walls, mirrors, and other architectural pieces; his tiny creations are an ode to the rich architectural history of cities like Lahore, and represent his search for order and stability, creating a home, fitting in. He encases these bricks in mirror frames and metal stands, warping perception. Similarly, Ahmed creates sculptures out of miniature handmade paper boxes that are then sealed within larger plastic trays.

Contemporary Pakistani miniaturists have inherited an ancient school of Art and made it their own. As the international art world watches, the Pakistani modern miniature school evolves, a generation of artists with more questions than answers, a nation at a crossroads, and a society in seemingly perpetual transition.



Noureen Rashid, 'Neem Rang', (2012), Thread on aluminium composite panel