Conclusion

The Cholistan desert is vast and arid. One can still find traces of all the lost civilizations in its sands of time. The desert tells a tale of its timeless and perpetual landscape through its decorative motifs. The local flora and fauna enter the weave of the cultural lifestyle in the form of motifs to become an eternal part of the Cholistan lifestyle. It is amazing how the patterns have survived and evolved to remain within the traditional realm of the Cholistani landscape. The motifs are used again and again in a repetitive style on various objects of use, even buildings, to reiterate the tales which are woven in the historic fabric of this land and to represent its philosophy of life; a philosophy that reiterates that they want to live as one with nature and create harmony with its various elements by adopting them as part of their subsistence.

Endnotes


The Space of the Mughal Miniature: Exploring the Shifting Boundaries of Painting in Pakistan

Abdullah Qureshi

As in any art, the meaning of a new work is relative to its position in relation to other works in the same field, past and present – its significance emerges of diachronic and synchronic planes. (Schawbsky, 2011, p. 012)

Painting is noted as a self-referential discipline, one that constantly refers to its own history. While its death is pronounced every few years, it also continues to rise from its ashes like a phoenix. The ability of the practice to regurgitate on its past and sustain relevance within an age dominated by digital media cannot be compared to any other practice within the fine arts.

Within this paper, I look at specific miniature paintings from different periods and link them to the works of contemporary artists. How aspects of traditional miniature painting are reinvented and contribute to the concerns of artists working in this region is significant. This is done through examining space, other pictorial aspects and the relationship between space and figuration itself. The pictorial space of the miniature paintings, historical as well as contemporary, is scrutinized and linked with other disciplinary practices. Shazhia Sikander’s practice forms a crucial link between the historical tradition of Mughal miniature painting and its reinterpretation or appropriation today. Hence, she forms a prime example that eventually opens up the discussion to other works.

When discussing Pakistan it is essential to note that its history is older than its age as noted by Dr. Akbar Naqvi, who carries on to write, “It has a span of more than 4000 years of which 900 years is that of the Muslim presence on the Subcontinent” (Naqvi, 1998). The Mughals form approximately 350 years of that history from 1526-1858 (Malini & Roy, 2012, p. 11). In my opinion, this part of history seems to have the most dominant influence on practitioners working in this region, to which there must be a deep-rooted reason as to why we particularly embrace our Mughal past more than other areas of our history. One reason would be as Wille observes, “A fact clearer today than ever before: the only real alliance between the people of Pakistan was, and has always been, that of “Islam”” (Wille, 2005). The Mughals beautifully bringing together an Islamic identity with the richness of the Subcontinent in art can be seen as symbolic of this region’s (Pakistan’s) own identity. Perhaps this was an area that best fit with what was envisioned as a “Pakistani identity”, hence, it was claimed as our own.
When discussing contemporary art in Pakistan, one primarily observes that it is very much informed by its recent past, political and social, not only post 9/11 but also prior. Wille writes, “Social upheaval raises questions of personal identity, of belonging and departure”, questions that have been part of the formation of Pakistan from the start (Wille, 2005). When bearing this in mind it is interesting to form a connection with the broader past of the region, when Pakistan was part of the Subcontinent. While wars, social turbulence, conquering and being conquered were very much part of this land’s history also were traditions of drawing from other cultures that merged to form these art forms. Hence, at first glance it was slightly perplexing for me as to why out of “4000 years” of history we choose to focus on specific aspects collectively. In that sense we not only suffer from the residue of colonialism but also of our Mughal conquerors. The influence trickles down but this of course is not so bad. While the battle between retaining the tradition and its natural evolution is an on-going discourse, I feel many of our artists today have broadened the understanding of what a Mughal miniature can be and further expanded its boundaries.

I must clarify that I do not see the miniature as merely a technique but an idea as well. In fact, when one observes the art form of painting during the three and half century period of Mughals in India, it becomes apparent how much it has evolved; originating in the Persian tradition, amalgamating with local schools to become something of its own, in my opinion, continuing through periods of stylization to reduction. It is an exquisite journey that reflects criticality and one ends up questioning, why it should stop there.

Historically as various styles came together, “by the mid-1570s, artists were concerned, unlike earlier schools from which it sprang, to depict the real world, with a naturalistic approach to the expression of volume and weight in figures, and to the depiction of space in surroundings.” Naturalism was a trend reinforced when examples of European art first came to the Mughal court in 1578. These were brought back with the mission sent to Goa under Hajji Abdallah in 1575 to collect such works.” (Malini & Roy, Mughal India - Art, Culture and Empire, 2012, p. 27)

Figuration, for instance, within Mughal miniatures formed an essential part of the paintings even though the more conservative elements in the society questioned it, basing their criticism on religion and one example being the following hadith:

Allah’s messenger (PBUH) said, thou who draw pictures will be punished on the day of resurrection. It would be said to thou, breathe soul into what you have created – (Sahih Muslim vol.3, Hadith 5268)

In Ain-e-Akbari, Akbar responds to the discussion as follows, “I cannot tolerate those who make the slightest criticism of this art. It seems to me that a painter is better than most in gaining knowledge of God. Each time he draws a living being he must draw each and every limb of it but seeing that he cannot bring it to life must perforce give thought to the miracle wrought by the Creator and thus obtain knowledge of Him.” (Malini & Roy, Mughal India - Art, Culture and Empire, 2012, p. 27)
Figuration became so embedded within the tradition of miniature painting in South Asia that for some contemporary artists it became a necessary challenge. For instance, Imran Qureshi quoting his Ustad, Bashir Ahmad said, “A miniature painting cannot be a miniature painting with an absence of a figure”. Qureshi transports a miniature on paper within an architectural space, recent work being the MET’s roof top commission, where large spills of red paint are on closer inspection for foliage and ornamental patterns.

There is figuration here as well in a sense, where the audience itself becomes part of the miniature. The surrounding space is not a mere background, it cannot be. The spaces that these figures are housed or situated in, whether on paper or in the physical, are not merely spaces but also symbolic of a particular space. If the characters within traditional miniatures form narratives then the space around it provides a context and in fact invites us to experience the time. By definition, space can be physical as well as conceptual and in the case of painting, pictorial as well. In 1905, Henri Lefebvre wrote, “Not so long ago, the word ‘space’ had a strictly geometrical meaning: the idea it evoked was simply an empty area” (Lefebvre, 1991). Now that has changed and our understanding of space is much broader. Some of these understandings are mentioned above. Within discourses of contemporary art, the notion of the white cube and addressing the gallery space has been significant as well. In the case of Mughal miniatures, the many spaces that it creates include not only the space of time and its location but also that between the viewer and the viewed. Within the image are created various architectural spaces, piled on each other in a hierarchical manner. Even though interior and exterior spaces are depicted, yet the narratives that these paintings create are not limited to the picture itself, rather the viewer’s relation can be seen as experiential, creating a new space between now and then.

A recent exhibit at the British Library titled ‘Mughal India’ explored works created in the 18th and 19th century as well. When examining these works in relation to paintings created during the times of Akbar and Shah Jahan, one can certainly draw comparisons but the evolutionary shift also becomes apparent. In fact, most local historians who have commented on Pakistani contemporary miniature paintings root it in the Akbari or Shah Jehani periods, this showcase suggests otherwise. The reduction of ornamentation and focus on subject matter is a dramatic shift, especially in the provincial portraits (1750s) made during the time of Muhammad Shah.

During the earlier periods, one can spot clearer influence of the traditional Persian roots, for instance, ‘The child Akbar recognises his
During Shah Jehan’s time, the political landscape as well as the social structure of society within Mughal India was much more stable and in control. This showed through the art of painting and its patronisation, where one sees grandiose and magnificence of expression. Modes of depiction also vary.

The formation of the image is much more complex. However, it does not appear to be as luxurious as ‘Prince Aurangzeb reporting to Shah Jehan’. Other paintings of the time also deal with the picture plane as a whole scene and not many simultaneous ones as is the case here.

In the relatively less explored works of the 1750s, for instance, the provincial portraits seem to have a drastic shift in the color palette. “Major artists who flourished during the reign of Muhammad Shah

outlived their beneficent patron and relocated to Delhi, to provinces where they had a profound impact on the development of regional styles.” The use of a greyish-blue is dominant; other colors are muted as well and the image is definitely less ornate and simplistic in its expression. The mood and atmosphere has changed. One sees newer subject matter and the addition of ships and boats in the portraits of Ashraf ‘Ali Khan and Muttub, his mistress. “As both Delhi and regional artists established themselves in towns such as Patna and Faizabad, they had the privilege of securing patronage from an entirely new source: Europeans living in the region... These commissions would have a visible impact on the artistic tradition in the second half of the eighteenth century, both in terms of style and subject matter.” (Malini & Roy, 2012, pp. 168-172)

In relation to these, when we look at the work of Shahzia Sikander, I guess there is a newer understanding. This is a practice so rooted within the miniature that it dives into the plethora of visual vocabulary and reframes and re-presents it and through this process creates something new. Through combining abstraction and figuration, reworking of the tradition and lacing it with contemporary theory, the traditional practice of the Mughal painting is made relevant today. Her earlier works can certainly be rooted in the Shah Jehani period; however, it would be fair to say that the approach to her practice is that of any contemporary painter.

“Today, a painter might equally be inspired by, for instance, Chinese ink painting or Australian aboriginal bark painting – irrespective, of
course, of where he or she happens to be from.” (Schawbsky, 2011, p. 11). However, in the case of Sikandar, the choice of miniature content is definitely more significant. Tackling a broad subject matter and engaging with diverse visual vocabulary, her practice forms a union between the East and the West; juxtaposition of traditional Mughal motifs as well a contemporary forms, political at times and at others personal.

Sean Kissane in the introduction to his European museum exhibition writes, “The construction of silence within the language of Beckett allows for the creation of spaces within which meaning oscillates, is obscured, discarded then re-enacted. Beckett thinks across languages, moving through them to another place. Ambiguity is created, a rejection of the truth in language leads to virtually endless possibilities of interpretation. Language is fixed, meaning is transcended.” (Juncosa, 2007, p. 27). He continued by writing, “Shahzia Sikander’s language, too, is untranslatable. Like Beckett’s, it is a language that exists on too many planes to be assimilated on one level. Like Beckett, her words go through language, building new visual territories beyond it.” (Juncosa, 2007, p. 28). In my opinion Sikander’s works are not really meant to be translated at all, rather they are an attempt to appropriate a tradition within a space that invites the viewer to immerse in the experience.

It is very difficult for one not to get lost in the worlds Sikandar creates, for example, the trees and colors she uses in her animations remind us of ‘Prince Gauhar on a hunting ground’, 1734-9 (Malini & Roy, 2012, p. 196). In a sense, these images evoke the nostalgia of walks through similar gardens. For instance, imagine a walk through the Shalimar Gardens giving us the same feeling. If works by contemporary artists such as Qureshi evoke a Mughal space through painterly intervention then that same theory applies to a public space of that time. Passing through the space we are in fact part of a larger miniature.

Within the ‘illustrated page’ Sikandar employs the format of a large-scale open book. According to the artist, this work is about “re-organizing ‘space’ through framing devices. It plays with the notion of borders, containment, scale, embellishment and framing systems.” At the Doris Duke Foundation, Honolulu, the illustrated works are projected within space, developing newer relationships with the physical space as well outside the parameters of its tradition. The fact that they are temporary, further points towards the idea that these are meant to be an experience only. These extend the boundaries of what a miniature can be through engaging with architecture, landscape and environment itself. The engagement is two way of course, as not only the space is altered but also the original image making the process truly osmotic.

The experience of the Mughal miniature is certainly not limited to the visual arts. For example, by examining the practice of Nahid Siddiqui, the kathak dancer, one is made aware of how the body itself can be used to create a sense of space. In her case a very specific space. Siddiqui’s ‘improvisations’, which are soundscapes really, is where she stands and showcases her mastery of the footwork in kathak. Together with the sound of gunghroos and subtle movements one is really transported in a time we have been discussing so far. Technically speaking, it is the moments of stillness that she brings after highly charged passage of emotional content that encapsulate the viewer. Frozen moments are exaggerated and the dancer and the viewer are locked in a dialogue, which is where another space is created.

These ideas continue to expand what is considered the traditional miniature and its space. These practices also draw attention to the diversity in content that a Mughal visual vocabulary can draw today. Practices feed into each other and artists are not restricted to their specificity, hence the boundaries of painting expand, not only physically but conceptually as well.

References


