

Alam, Rumaan. "Painting in the Shadow of Colonialism." *Working*, Slate. Podcast audio, August 8, 2021. <https://slate.com/podcasts/working/2021/08/artist-shahzia-sikander>.



Shahzia Sikander Matin Maulawizada

On this week's episode of *Working*, Rumaan Alam spoke with painter and multimedia artist Shahzia Sikander. They discussed her early life and education in Pakistan, the fraught relationship between artists and museums due to colonialism, and her experience as an established artist compared with when she was first starting out. This partial transcript has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Rumaan Alam: Let's talk about miniature painting for a minute. It's a term that is not unproblematic, as so many art-historical terms can be. It describes a form of painting that would be recognizable to almost anyone who's ever wandered in an art museum, we just may not know it by that particular language. It developed in the 16th century on the Indian subcontinent. It depicts scenes from myth, scenes from sacred texts. What was this school of art? How was this viewed by you and your contemporaries when you were growing up as a college student in Pakistan?

Shahzia Sikander: The nature of this medium is that, because of a vast colonial legacy, so much of it was dispersed, dismembered, and the provenances are very complicated—how they often arrive at the storage of Western institutions. This is part of that legacy, and there is a level of violence behind all of it. When you go at the Met, you might see some of it in the Islamic art department or in the Indian/South Asian department. So you can definitely get a sense of what we're talking about. But, for me as a visual artists growing up in Pakistan, I was just looking at black-and-white Xeroxes, often of a handful of images. It wasn't something that was right around the corner in that one Lahore art museum.

Right, because it's all in storage at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

It is. A lot of it is, of course, in storage at the British Library, at the British Museum, [the Victoria and Albert Museum], of course in India also. It was

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impossible to travel to India growing up in Pakistan. So there are all these layers of access—or lack of access. But at the same time, one emerges as a spokesperson or a cultural representative of a language or vernacular that embodies a very complex history.

To go to *The Scroll*, which was your undergraduate thesis project: It is a manuscript painting. It is horizontal. I'm going to read a little bit of the review from the show from the New York Review of Books by Molly Crabapple. She writes, "*The Scroll* is Mughal in form, existentialist and uneasy in content. Sikander doesn't just copy the grades, but so internalized their grammar that she could use it to portray any room and its tchotchkes and all their particularities tying the present to tradition, proving the tradition urgently alive." What she's talking about is that this painting depicts what seems to be your own childhood home. We're seeing a contemporary domestic space. We're seeing furnishings from the '70s. We're seeing suitcases and telephones rendered with the detail and specificity that painters at court in the Mughal empire would have used to paint a throne or a flower.

It occurred to me—this is something that Crabapple notes in her review, so it's not my observation—the manuscript form is like a comic book. You render the walls as cutaways. You imply domestic spaces, but don't show the whole wall. You read the action from left to right. The same figure might recur on the same plane, but the viewer understands that it's a single person moving through space and time. That makes it timeless, in a strange way. It's this old-fashioned form, but the contemporary eye understands what to do with it.

Yeah, I think that's a great way of describing it. It is meant to be a day, a lifetime. The protagonist is almost like a ghost. It's rendered in this diaphanous form where it becomes very transparent and then often opaque, but it's never situated in that same time and space as the rest of the characters, so that there's the artist observing the environment—or whether the protagonist is going back in history and moving forward in time—this timelessness. It's also because I was interested in examining even the painter Behzad, that would be 1400s. I started to bring that in conversation with contemporary architecture in Pakistan. That's what this unfolding of space is really about, is looking at the vernacular, which is already in conversation with other people, other artists, and the interiority is informed by looking at Nayyar Ali Dada, but also David Hockney.

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