



The Art of Gimmickery

Eastern art sells out to the West

By Murad Khan Mumtaz

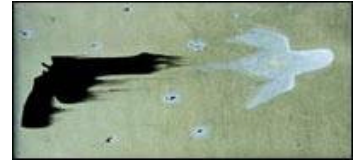
From the weekly *Friday Times*, Pakistan 11-17, 2006

‘Contemporary miniature’ painting seems to be the latest plaything the Western oriented art market has found. Mostly paintings under this banner, though done by different artists and clearly covering disparate themes, somehow seem formulaic. As a rule, a few archaic miniature images are combined with contemporary ones, there is a conscious layering of objects, and stylistically all the paintings are executed in the traditional Mughal technique taught laboriously at the National College of Arts. Overall it is as if some subconscious formula has driven the artists to produce this mechanical, lifeless work only because it sells! Seeing these perfunctory artworks makes me conclude that this must be what the ‘patron’ wants.

In the Subcontinent, the miniaturist has always worked for a patron. In the pre-Timurid era the miniaturist had the privilege of working for the numerous Hindu courts that dotted the region. Later on he worked for the Mughals, and still later there were the Punjab hill states that gave the artists refuge once the great empire had weakened. By the end of the 19th century the patronage had once again swung, this time to the colonials. The Mayo School set up by the British was essentially a crafts school. The function of miniature had shifted from being a transcendental one to being a mere commodity. Like our other indigenous art forms, miniature painting eventually dwindled into obscurity.

In the '80s this art form once again emerged from anonymity. By the mid '90s it was already gaining fast recognition, but this time under a new patron – the Western ‘art’ market. Like every other patron that miniature painting has had, this new patron also has its own set of rules.

Before expounding the rules of the artwork I saw recently, I would like to explain the various world views that the previous patrons of the art had. Miniatures of the sub-continent are divided into three



basic schools which chronologically are the Persian, the Mughal, and the Hindu school.

The Persian school is famous for its 16th – 18th century Safavid period manuscripts which were mostly illustrations of Sufi poetry and parables, including writings of Nizami, Sheikh Hafiz, Maulana Rumi and Farid-ud-din Attar. Its patron was the Persian court. In Seyyed Hossein Nasr's words, "The majority of Persian miniatures depict not a profane world but this intermediary world (imaginal world, or 'alam al-khayal) which stands above the physical and which is the gateway to all higher states of being. Like the 'Lesser Mysteries', which prepare the adept for the entrance into the abode of the 'Greater Mysteries', the miniature, along with similar so called 'courtly arts', is a traditional art of the intermediary world in its positive angelic aspect and by virtue of this character has for its subject what we might call the earthly paradise whose joys and beauties it seeks to recreate."

In his book "The Art of Islam," Titus Burkhart explains the three styles clearly, "In general terms, the Persian Miniature – and we are here considering it in its best phases – does not seek to portray the outward world as it commonly presents itself to the senses, with all its disharmonies; what it is indirectly describing is the 'immutable essences' of things, by which a horse is not simply a particular member of its species but the horse par excellence; it is this generic quality that the art of miniature seeks to grasp. If the 'immutable essences' of things, these archetypes, cannot be apprehended because they are beyond form, they are none the less reflected in the contemplative imagination; hence the dream quality – not one of idle reverie – that pertains to the most beautiful miniatures; it is a clear and translucent dream as if illumined from within".

"Persian painting was later perpetuated in Mughal painting which developed into a court art and was used in particular to illustrate the imperial chronicles in a highly detailed and 'realistic' style."

To explain the Hindu school he adds. "It is said that Mughal art influenced certain Hindu schools of miniature painting. In fact, however, this cannot amount to anything more than a purely outward and technical stimulus, for these miniatures, which chiefly depict scenes from the life of Krishna, draw directly upon the rich heritage of sacred Hindu art and they do, for this very reason, achieve a spiritual beauty which the essentially worldly Mughal art of painting could never have." The Hindu miniature school is said to have taken its roots directly from the Vedas, which are the revelation given to the Aryan prophets.

The fourth patron, namely the British Raj, saw this art as a tool for foreign exchange! The Mayo School of Art and Industry (presently the National College of Arts) was initially established as a "craft" school, which was no place for an "artist". The colonialist robbed the indigenous artist of his central role of being the 'spokesman of the Spirit' and replaced it by the "easel tradition". The artist either became fodder for the Industry or else left his heritage in exchange for the canvas. Art eroded gradually to the point of becoming a superfluous activity. A side show to the serious business of life!

It is perhaps our latest patrons, the Western as well as the Indo-Pak Western oriented art market, which is the cause of the revival of an otherwise defunct art. We must realize that in the fields of art the colonial masters had already shifted the goal-post. The local artist had to learn the new rules of the game, or move on to another playing field. This is the root of the WOG mentality. The Westernised Oriental Gentleman! Only after Shazia Sikender, a miniature graduate from the National College of Art, had taken miniature painting over to the West playing field, in the mid-'90s, and gained recognition thereafter, did we, the local connoisseurs, start taking this art form seriously. So what does this new market demand, and which we in our eagerness to please the Masters willingly provide? The contemporary miniaturist is obviously required to be connected to the traditional forms so as to give his artwork an ethnic, quaint appeal. It should have a certain outlandish, foreign charm but not to the extent of the artist seriously believing the traditional perspective. The work has to qualify as 'art' as defined by the euro-centric modernism.

The contradiction here is that the artist wants to be recognized as an 'artist' as defined hitherto, but since the authentic tradition does not qualify as art any more, that tradition is used as a device to market his own product. All that he is doing is mine his heritage for attractive sellable gimmicks. He doesn't need to go into any depth. He has no desire to be an artist in the traditional sense; he only wants to exploit the tradition for its marketability.

The argument here might be that if the euro-centric world view has now become the universal yardstick, why shouldn't we follow it? The only difference here is that the Western artist's work is directly connected with a whole ethos. It is a part of a historical past. What he produces now is deeply rooted with his past, even a rejection of his roots is part of a historical process with which he is connected. Our Eastern artist is merely mimicking/aping the outer apparent surface which is the end product of that process.

Contemporary miniature then becomes a new toy the West has just found, and which it might discard soon in place for the other.