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Framing of a National Tradition: Modern Masters and National Art History in Pakistan

Since its inception in the 50s, the National College of Arts, Lahore has grown substantially from a provincial art college to an autonomous federal institution, with liberal credentials.¹ While enjoying relative freedom from the strictures of the ideological state, it has emerged as a center of excellence in visual arts. From its initial areas of concentration in the visual arts such as fine arts, design, and architecture, NCA has initiated programs such as musicology, multi-media arts, film and television. Spread over two campuses in two major cities of Pakistan, NCA continues to expand itself into higher education by offering doctoral programs in cultural studies and art history. A large number of its students have gone onto government service as well as private business. Most of the contemporary artists, designers, and architects of Pakistan are trained at NCA. In the last two decades, artists from NCA have gained international acclaim and worldwide exhibitions by reworking the traditional practice of

¹ Established as an industrial art schools under the tutelage of John Lockwood Kipling in 1875, the Mayo School of Art was restructured and upgraded as the National College of Arts, (NCA) in 1958 to provide art and design education to the modern artists of a newly independent nation. For a historical study of Mayo School of Arts, see, Nadeem Omar Tarar, *Colonial Governance and Art Education: 1849-1920s*, Ph.D. Dissertation, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia, 2007. Also see, Naazish Attaullah, "Stylistic Hybridity and Colonial Art and Design Education: A Wooden Carved Screen by Ram Singh," Tim Barringer and Tom Flynn (eds.), *Colonialism and the Object: Empire, Material Culture and the Museum*, (Routledge, 1997). Sajida Vandal and Pervaiz Vandal. *Lahore, Bhai Ram Sing and the Raj*, (Lahore, 2007).

miniature painting into a contemporary art form that blurs the distinction between traditional and avant-garde.²

Whereas in the early years of the NCA, the category craft was being reformulated to connect it to industry, in the later decades, it was expelled from the registers of art education. NCA continues to resonate with the older debates between tradition and modernity, art and craft, and skills and creativity.³ This is signaled by the fact that Indian manuscript painting survived on the margins of fine art instruction as a “traditional” craft for more than half a century given its alleged emphasis on copying and craftsmanship. The “traditional” form had to be re-invented by the modern artists before the art of book illustration could be accepted in the art world as equal to the pedigree of “fine arts.”

The contemporary reinvention of “traditional” Indian manuscript painting, as an index of national modern art form, rests on an ahistorical view that a traditional medium simply exists as a transhistorical object readily available to be retrieved. The notion of an unchanging tradition that invokes a singular national identity of painting in India, thriving in royal ateliers as well as in artisanal workshops, is an outcome of nationalist history, which traces its stylistic evolution and iconographic variations to the political chronology of Indian ruling dynasties and patterns of feudal patronage in different regions.⁴ From its imperial origins in Timurids *kitabkhanas* and Safavidi courts, Persian painting arrived in Mughal ateliers, transforming yet maintaining its essence, under European pictorial influences as well as indigenous-Hindu aesthetic conventions. As if by hot house effect of the Mughal court, manuscript painting declined with the fall of Mughal Empire in India in the 18th century, dispersing the artists who took refuge in smaller regional kingdoms in Rajasthan and hill states of Punjab. Under the British rule, it degenerated into a pictorial art for the pleasures of British elite and Indian bourgeoisie, and it was only the advent of revivalist movements in Indian art in the late 19th century that manuscript painting re-asserted itself as the traditional art form.

What holds this (arguably Orientalist) nationalist narrative together is an uncritical subscription to the sociology of unbroken life of Indian painting in South Asia. It is by policing the borders of an objectified genre, which is already locked in an ageless past, that one can begin to talk about an Indian miniature “tradition,” whereby a variety of regional styles, caught up in the logic of Self-same are seen as permutations of its timeless essence. By analyzing the workshop practice of copying as a symptom of either an enervated culture or one that does not distinguish clearly between the past and the present, Indian painting has been consigned to a world in which time has no historical meaning.⁵ Given the static notion of time attributed to Indian manuscript painting, it is pertinent to unpack the relationship of Indian manuscript

² Homi Bhabha (interviewer), “Alter/Native Modernities - Miniaturizing Modernity: Shahzia Sikander in Conversation with Homi Bhabha,” *Public Culture: bulletin of the Project for Transnational Cultural Studies* 11.1, (1999), p. 146-152.

³ Nadeem Omar Tarar, Aesthetic Modernism in the Post-colony, the Making of a National College of Art, *International Journal of Art and Design Education*, Volume 27, Issue 3, 2008. Pages 332 - 345

⁴ See, Percy Brown, *The Indian Painting under the Mughals, A.D. 1550 to A.D. 1750*, (Delhi, 1981). Also see, Pramod Chandra, *On the Study of Indian Art*, (Cambridge, 1983); Alvan Clark Eastman, “On Three Persian “Marine” Paintings,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 9, (July, 1950), pp. 153-163.

⁵ See Daniel Ehnborn, 1996, The “Copy” in Mughal and Rajput Painting, conference paper, *College Art Association*, 1996. Unpublished

painting to the past, envisaged in the idea of a “tradition,” rather than assuming it as if a matter of logical deductions.

In the course of its institutional career in South Asia, from its eminence in the Mughal court as the medieval art of book illustration to its fall as a de-classed handicraft in British colonial period; its ascendancy in the post-independence period as the “traditional” fine-art of Pakistani Islamic culture to its post-modern renaissance as “contemporary” art practice, which – to use Homi Bhabha’s words, is “the re-evaluation of tradition to the extent that tradition is no longer opposed to modernity” – offers penetrating clues to the taxonomic shifts that have taken place in the construction of Indian painting in the past five hundred years.⁶

Neo-Orientalist Discourse of Revivalisms: Chughtai and Haji Sharif

By the dawn of twentieth century, the two pioneering Orientalists, E B Havell and A K Coomaraswamy, crafted an ontology of the unbroken life of manuscript painting in India by painstakingly reconstructing the continuous process of the unfolding of various schools of painting, which evolved over time by accepting and injecting stylistic influences from one another.⁷ In this chain of transmission, the provenance of manuscript painting was made with reference to courtly patronage, which in default of individual inscriptions, stood as the only methodological option to historicize it. In the process of invention of a tradition implying a continuity with a “suitable historical past” that framed the discursive formation of Indian manuscript tradition in India and Pakistan in the last quarter of the 20th century, the modern Indian artists such as Abanindranath Tagore, and Abdur Rehman Chughtai were active contributors to the neo-Orientalist discourses through their art practice as well as scholarly writings.

Working with a mandate to discover an “authentic” tradition of Indian fine arts, and in the face of an active defiance to British colonial aesthetic judgment that found little merit in Indian painting and sculpture, there was little consensus in the Orientalist ranks as to the configuration of a “suitable historic past.” It was Havell's discovery of the aesthetic merits of Persian and Mughal manuscript paintings that obliged him to collect with a missionary zeal the specimens of Indo-Persian manuscripts for the Calcutta art school gallery from 1896 onwards, which would serve as models for emulation by Indian students. Eventually for him, it was only when the Persian element in Mughal art “was transformed by the greater force of pre-existing Hindu traditions” that Mughal paintings could qualify as a wholly “original,” “Indian” school of painting.⁸ In many ways his successor Coomaraswamy went a step further, with his discovery and study of medieval Rajput paintings in 1916 to argue that “this Hindu religious genre of painting was projected as more purely “Indian” than Mughal court painting and was placed

⁶ Shazia Sikander, op.cit, p. 16.

⁷ E B Havell, *A Handbook of Indian Art*, (India, 1927) and A K Coomaraswamy, *Introduction To Indian Art*, (Kessinger Publishing, 2007).

⁸ Tapati Guha Thakurta, Orientalism, Nationalism and Reconstruction of “Indian” Art in Calcutta', Catherine B Asher and Thomas R Metcalf, (eds.) *Perspectives of South Asia's Visual Past*, Oxford, XX. P 51

within an unbroken line of an 'Indian' art tradition that can be stretched back to Ajanta."⁹ Abdur Rehman Chughtai entered in the debate at a later stage, when the revivalist movement in Indian art began to turn into orthodoxy, to mark his position in the delineation of a suitable historic past.¹⁰ Although his early work tried to synthesize multiple styles of paintings from the Indian historic past, he was keenly aware of the need to create a Mughal sensibility. Claiming a Persian descent from the architects of Taj Mahal, he invented his repertoire of tradition, by claiming an unmediated link from Mughal and Persian manuscript paintings.

In the Orientalist discourses on Indian visual traditions, a single point perspective failed to gain ground and led to the fragmentation in the fields of aesthetic resistance, which were increasingly intertwined with *Swadeshi* politics and cultural nationalism in the early decades of twentieth century. As critic Geeta Kapur has stated, the discourse on tradition and modernity in India can never be fully understood without considering the struggle and ideology of the nationalist agenda.¹¹ To some degree, it is fair to say that if Abanindranath Tagore and *Abanpathis* of Bengal school invented a uniquely indigenous tradition of Indian art, which became synonymous with independence movement, Abdur Rehman Chughtai and his coterie of Punjab School artists self-consciously chose to invent an Islamic cosmopolitanism in the service of Muslim nationalism, aligning themselves with the cause of Muslim independence movement in India.

I would enter a caveat here. One must be careful in reading too narrowly a play of communal politics into the struggle for the mastery of Indian past along the lines of inter-religious conflict. Abanindranath Tagore had drawn on Mughal paintings much earlier than Chughtai: *Passing of Shah Jehan*, for which Tagore was awarded a medal at Delhi Darbar exhibition of 1903, can be cited as case in point. Painted in oil on wood, the painting is widely known for its emotional purchase, and is held as a masterpiece of modern Indian art. The empathy for the deposed Muslim King dying in despair, with a lonely figure of his daughter at his feet and the Taj Mahal looking on from the background is not colored by religious belief. If Chughtai illustrated the verses of Omar Khayyam, a 12th century Persian poet, for the Indian Empire Exhibition of 1924, so did Roop Krishna, an Abanpathi and scion of leading Hindu booksellers in Lahore. The cultural formations of Indian art history are too complex and overdetermined to be confined exclusively to a national register.

Vishaki Desai, in an exhibition catalog essay, intended to provide a cultural antecedent to two exhibiting artists from India and Pakistan, Nalani Sheikh and Shazia Sikander. Titled 'Conversation with Tradition,' the essay offers a teleological reading of Indian history inspired by nationalist and religious imagination. Citing Chughtai as the cultural antecedent to

⁹ Ibid. p 51. In one of his earliest correspondence with British Indian art historian Rothenstein, A K Coomorsway, with whom he shared his largess, couched his admiration for Pahari miniatures in nationalist terms: 'The whole country is full of beauty and romance. I find the indigenous element in this art larger than I surmised, and the Persian elements very much smaller'. Regretting the fact that he had not realized the importance of Pahari paintings in his earlier works, in another letter, he considered Pahari painting as the 'great thing and the other [Mughal painting] in spite of its wonderful and beautiful qualities lesser' despite fearing that it may sound of as his 'Hindu prejudice'.

¹⁰ Marcella C Sirhindi, "Painting in Pakistan: 1947-1997," Arts and the Islamic World, No. 32, Special Volume: 50 Years of Art in Pakistan.

¹¹ Geeta Kapur, When was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practices in India, New Delhi, 2000.

Pakistani artists, Desai reads Chughtai's assertion of Islamic identity as the direct response to the aftermath of partition of Bengal.

He came to the Bengal School in 1905, after the partition of the state into East and West Bengal, which highlighted the divisions between the Hindus and Muslims identity through his works...He continued to focus on this after he had returned to Lahore, where he was born, and had a major impact on the development of miniature painting in Pakistan.¹²

Notwithstanding the factual error, as in 1905, Chughtai, born 1896, was barely 9 years old, her reading of identity politics of Chughtai in communal terms feeds into the ideological dictates of two-nation theory. Chughtai's encounter with tradition, which began in the years preceding his pan-Indian success in the second decade of the 20th century, was fueled by his personal ambition to carve a niche for himself and cannot to be read as reflection of Hindu-Muslim conflict engendered by the aftermath of partition of Bengal. His foray into tradition was underpinned by a nostalgia for the glory of the Mughal imperial past, which he shared with the Muslim intellectual elite in North India. At Lahore he was in company with progressive poets, writers and artists like Sir Muhammad Iqbal, M D Taseer, and Mary and Roop Krishna, who in their cultural nationalism were more cosmopolitan in their outlook.¹³ Chughtai's sense of collective identity was premised less on an antagonistic sense of religious conflict with his fellow subjects than in inventing his own distinct cultural identity within an Indo-Islamic literary and painting tradition.¹⁴ Denying a Persian pictorial influence in Chughtai's painting, which is "more of a mannerism than a distinct influence, Abdullah Chughtai locates intercultural context.....He has observed the beautiful legends of Hindustan, at the same time he is a glorious product of Muslim culture. In his paintings, one comes across old Hindu gods and Persian Sufis in a happy company."¹⁵

Despite formal and thematic correspondence between Chughtai and the artists of Bengal School, Chughtai claimed to be representative of what he called the Punjab School of painting, a claim which was duly acknowledged by Lionel Heath, principal of the Mayo School of Art, Lahore, and curator of Punjab section of the Indian Empire Exhibition, while reporting on the Punjab painting exhibits.

The Punjab artists, whose works are exhibited in these galleries, may be congratulated upon having set a high standard of merit and also upon having formed a very definite and distinct style of their own. One or two of these artists were, I believe, pupils in Tagore's Calcutta school in the past, and will not deny the value of their training; but they with their Punjab contemporaries are showing...a beauty of form...truly Indian in character, and which promise well for the future formation of a strong North Indian School of Painting.¹⁶

¹² Conversations with Traditions: Nilima Sheikh and Shahzia Sikander. Exhibition catalogue. New York: Asia Society, 2001. Interview by Vishakha Desai.

¹³ Abdul Rehman Chughtai, *Lahore Ka Dabistan-e-Muswari*, (Lahore, 1979).

¹⁴ Iftikhar Dadi, "Miniature Painting as Muslim Cosmopolitan," *ISIM Review*, 18. Autumn, 2006.

¹⁵ Wazir Aga, A. R. *Chughtai, Personality and Art* (Lahore – 1980), p 58

¹⁶ Lionel Heath, *Examples of Indian Art. At the British Empire Exhibition*, London, 1924, p X

To be sure, the regional specialties on display in London had been famous for centuries for their distinct styles of paintings, but before the 19th century, they had not come together as representing a single, coherent “Indian character,” deemed by national characteristics. The fuzzy categories of local products came together in the late 19th century into a bounded entity of national art and a single category called Indian art.¹⁷ To perpetuate their aesthetic visions of cultural differences, formal aesthetic borders of the historic styles of painting were painstakingly constructed through connoisseurship around regional schools of Indian paintings and policed by museum officials, exhibition organizers and trainers of hereditary artisans in traditional workshops in British India.

If for Tagore and Chughtai tradition was evoked less in terms of particular styles and modes than by rarefied ideas of beauty, sublimity and spirituality in form that for them marked the essence of Indian manuscript painting, for Haji Sharif, a hereditary court painter from Patiala family of Muslim painters – who sought employment in Chughtai's alma mater Mayo School of Art three years before partition – a faithful adherence to particular historic styles of the past came to define a notion of Indian tradition. Seen as a living embodiment of the quintessential tradition of Indian manuscript painting in the annals of art history, it is the legacy of Haji Sharif that contemporary painters from Pakistan came to negotiate with.

Although Haji Sharif was part of a neo-Orientalist milieu, as a court painter, his exposure to the revivalist art movement, both in Punjab and Bengal, was rather limited. While he was serving the princely court in relative isolation, the rest of Indian art world was reverberating with the resurgence of Oriental styles of painting as the supreme Indian tradition. The work of Nandala Bose, the scion of Bengal School and father of Bengali revivalist art movement, who instilled the commitment to work with traditional Indian painters and artisans to produce new works to be sold at village fairs, led to the rejuvenation of historic styles of paintings in the leading centers of Indian manuscript paintings.¹⁸ As an extension of this, Shailendra Nath De who became principal of Jaipur School of Art in 1920s trained another generation of students in the classical styles of Rajput paintings. One of his students, Ram Gopal Vijayvargiya – a collector, art dealer and artist – dominated the Rajasthan paintings almost to this day as he passed away in 2003 at the age 98. It is a curious fact of history that he was also one of the younger and more educated candidates, who, having achieved a pan-Indian fame by then, competed with Haji Sharif, an old and uneducated artist for the post of 'Artists in old indigenous style in Indian miniature painting' at the Mayo School of Art in 1944.¹⁹

¹⁷ Abigail S McGowan, “All that is Rare, Characteristic of Beautiful: Design and the Defense of Tradition in Colonial India, 1851-1903,” *Journal of Material Culture*, 2005, 10: 263.

¹⁸ The invention of authentic Oriental styles of Indian manuscript paintings and their continuation through carefully guided reproductions, made often through photographs of painters of old masters in the later part of 20th century, was analytically distinct from the invention of a rarefied Indian aesthetic tradition by the founders of Bengal and Punjab School of painting.

¹⁹ On 21st September, 1944, I B Quershi, Secretary, Punjab-NWFP Joint Public Service Commission advertised a temporary post, for 'an artist in the old style of Indian [miniature] painting' for the Mayo School of Art Lahore. Intended to be for a period of six months, the post was non-pensionable, and could be terminated on a one month's notice. With a fixed pay of 300 Rs, it entailed no special benefits such as free housing or medical treatment. The post was open to British Indian subjects and subjects of notified Punjab states, but Punjabis and Sikhs were to be given preference. Even women were eligible to apply, though none came forward.

This rather obscure selection of an artist in the Lahore Art and Craft School three years before Partition not only is a bit of anomaly in the history of colonial educational service but offers penetrating clues to the nature of Indian “miniature” tradition that was being invented at the NCA, the foremost art school in Pakistan. Suspending the government service rules, which required formal educational qualifications and a certain age bar, the job advertisement required “no academic qualifications” or “age-limit” but the ideal candidate was to demonstrate his or her grasp over “the technique of Painting of the old Indian Masters.” The only criterion for mastery of the visual past that was spelled out in the guidelines for selection was familial or hereditary: “an artist with a family tradition will be given preference.”²⁰ No wonder, despite his education, experience and fame, Ram Gopal Vijayvargiya lost to Haji Muhammad Sharif, who was selected on the strength of his distance from the neo-traditional revivalist school, reflected in his so called unadulterated association with the Oriental styles of Indian manuscript painting as a hereditary painter without a formal art education. His origin as a court painter in Patila, where painting with multiple themes based on illustrations from manuscripts, miniature paintings on paper, cloth or canvas and murals or wall paintings, was patronized by the royal decree, granted him an aura of authenticity. The myth of authentic tradition would be devised through a discourse on old masters and original techniques, untainted by foreign influences: Haji Sharif, as I mentioned earlier, was seen as the living embodiment of a quintessential tradition.

Haji Sharif: Encounter with Tradition and Modernity

In contemporary Pakistani art history, if Chughtai is perceived as a modern western educated artist, whose individual signature of creativity located “a suitable historic past” for Indian Muslims, Haji Muhammad Sharif is seen as unlettered traditional painter, who succumbed to the encounter with tradition through his strict adherence to and copying of historic styles of Indian manuscript painting. If formation of Pakistan came as a boon to 55 years old Chughtai, who having illustrated poet Sir Muhammad Iqbal, in addition to his other manuscript publications and had earned an unofficial title of Painter of the East was keenly patronized by the young state, Haji Muhammad Sharif Patialvi, at Mayo School of Art teaching “old indigenous style in Indian miniature painting,” continued to languish in relative obscurity. His professional career at the Mayo School of Art, which was upgraded and restructured as the National College of Arts in 1958 as well as his art practice was besieged with problems of survival. Like the provisional nature of his non-pensionable post as a “Miniature Artist,” which was initially intended to be only for 6 months on a fixed pay of Rs 300 (but was later extended

²⁰ Out of five candidates, two were educated artists, but without a family tradition. Gurdit Singh had diploma in painting from Mayo School, and Central School of Art and Craft London, and Kanwal Nain Kotra had studied painting at Visva Bharati Santiniketan and was lecturer in Sikh National College, Amritsar. Jogindera Nath, was a self-taught Hindu artist, but without a family tradition. Muhammad Sharif and Aftab Ahmad, were only two Muslim candidates with family tradition, with Aftab Ahmad, young enough to be Muhammad Sharif son, thereby lacked experience that was required to qualify for the post. NCAA Box File No. 133-E, *Personal File of Haji Muhammad Sharif, (1944-89)*.

on annual basis), the career of manuscript painting in the Lahore art school remained fortuitous and peripheral to the mainstream art education.²¹

Student interest in miniature painting in the early years at MSA was negligible compared with the interest in modern painting. Over a period of thirteen years, from 1945 to 1958, only twenty-one students entered in Haji Sharif's studios, many of who left without completing it. To "revive this special art," Punjab government granted two scholarships of Rs 20 per month each to students. However, as Shakir Ali, leading artists and principal NCA explained, the dismal prospects of a "special art" at old MSA and its traditional sources of patronage dried up. Due to lack of patronage from the public, the qualified students could not get any employment in this line of work. Some of them took petty jobs as Drawing Masters or as Commercial Artists and gave up this profession all together. With the formation of NCA, miniature painting was introduced as one of the courses in the fine arts department, "so that students know the basics of this discipline as well."²²

It was not merely an indicator of his distance from the circuits of exhibitions and galleries, but an index of his marginal position as artist-craftsman in the art world that it took joint efforts of Mark Sponenburgh, the first principal of NCA, and the poet Faiz A Faiz, Secretary Arts Council, to hold first solo exhibition of Haji Sharif at the advanced age 75 marking his official entry onto the Pakistani art scene. Motivated by a nationalist impulse "to revive the art of old style Indian miniature painting in the province," the exhibition was inaugurated by none other than the President, Field Marshall, Ayub Khan in 1962, who, duly impressed with the show, granted a life time pension of Rs 200 per month to the artist. The success of Lahore art exhibition was followed up another exhibitions of 'Mughal miniatures' by Haji Sharif, arranged as part of an initiative by the Small Industries Division 'to promote and display the handicrafts of Pakistan to the world outside' in Rawalpindi on 29th June, 1963. Introducing the artist as craftsman, the General Manger of the Small Industries Division, M Mahmoud lauded, 'Haji Muhammad Sharif's art is a source of inspiration to our present day artisans', mentioning the fact that 8 of his paintings were sold for Rs 6000 on the spot!²³

The institutional location of Haji Sharif 's two exhibitions points to two different sets of opposing demands on his painting practice. No doubt Haji Sharif was selected on the strength of his mastery over the historic styles of the past, and the vast amount of cultural geographical information that was required to practice them, and not on the basis of his personal style as an individual artist. However, with the formation of NCA as a premier art institution, his art practice was found to be lacking in individual creativity. His grasp over ancestral styles that was the very basis of his eligibility for the post, while his artistic renown became a liability in the community of modern artists, given then prevailing modern aesthetic sensibilities that emphasized individual creativity. In the words of artists academic Ijaz ul-Hassan, 'Why cannot our miniaturists create *original* work which depict their own experience and perceptions? Has the technique become too archaic to do this or have they become mere

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

craftsmen?²⁴ In contrast, for the department of industries, which controlled the NCA until 1963, he was a prized craftsman who excelled in his folk art. An artisan among artists and artist among artisans, his hereditary art practice was caught up in the conflicting demands of modern art and the nationalistic state. To be recognized as an artist, he was obliged to forgo his hereditary training to learn new tricks, but as a craftsman, he was expected to preserve his skills and conform to authentic styles, techniques and subject matters as they were considered an important part of the repertoire of national cultural heritage.

Despite the fact that Haji Sharif had little success at art schools, in attracting students to learn the "old style of Indian painting," he had acquired sufficient visibility by the 60s in the official quarters through his earliest exhibitions. A high profile bureaucrat, G Mueenuddin, an alumnus of Indian Civil Service (ICS), who was present at his first exhibition and became an avid collector of his paintings, expressed his concerns over the future of Indian painting in Pakistan, referring to Haji Sharif, as "the last painter in a tradition of the Mughal miniature" who had to be salvaged to save it from oblivion.²⁵ "It would be a great pity," he wrote to the Principal NCA, "if this form of painting is permitted to die with him," given the advanced age of the artists at 75. To forestall that, his collector's instinct stressed that "it is all the more important that during the rest of his life Haji Muhammad Sharif should be enabled to produce as many paintings as possible." To facilitate that, he suggested that he should be allowed to retire, accumulate gratuity, pension and grant of land so that he could "live comfortably and to produce a substantial amount of work." With these paternalistic and preservationist suggestions, the pedagogic aspects were not lost sight of. Some promising students would be apprenticed to him on a full time basis. That is to say, they should learn nothing but miniature painting and should work with him daily so that they can become real experts in this form of painting.²⁶ In view of 'larger interest' of the country, the paternalist bureaucrat pleaded "to cut through the red tape and make some satisfactory arrangements under which Haji Sharif is enabled to produce a lot of work during the rest of his life and is able to leave behind one or two pupils to carry on the tradition."

Shakir Ali adopted a cautious tone by acknowledging the contribution of Haji Sharif, who was "highly respected by his colleagues" due to his "age and position as miniature painter." His presence there was considered a source of inspiration for students as well as beneficial to him in the way "that it has promoted the sale of his work to many visitors from abroad, who visited this college." However, he took an exception to the suggestions by Mueenuddin, and considered the practice of miniature painting as beyond redemption.

As regards placement of Haji Muhammad Sharif, I am afraid, no young man will come forward for this career. Haji Muhammad Sharif has taken a lifetime to achieve a proficiency in his art, and any shortcut arrangement to revive this art will not solve the problem.²⁷

²⁴ Exhibition Catalogue, the Fifth National Exhibition, Pakistan National Council of Arts, Islamabad 1984. p. x

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Ibid.

Inhabiting a space between technology and art, manuscript painting was seen by Shakir Ali as an art craft whose evolutionary time had run out. As an art of book illustration, it was bound to disappear due to wide spread use of mechanization of visual production and reproduction process such as printing presses, lithography and photography in India. The ascendancy of modern art on the Pakistani art scene also led to diminished commercial prospects for a “spatial art” even at the art school. However, Shakir Ali's observations omitted the fact that Jamil Naqsh had proved to be one such students in 1953, who having studied at the fine arts department at NCA for a year, dropped out of the Mayo School to voluntarily apprentice with Haji Sharif at his home studio for several years. Concealing his real identity, he used to sign his painting in his formative years as *Shagird Haji Sharif*. In his later years, he worked by combining the techniques of miniature paintings with post-war abstractionism, and painted by drawing on his subconscious. Pigeons, a pictorial motif that he repeatedly used in the picture frame, were borrowed from Indian manuscript painting. At the same time, he managed to pass on painting skills he learned at Haji Sharif's studio to a younger generation of miniature painters. Today he is cited as one of the modern masters of Pakistan, for whom manuscript painting proved to be a point of departure and not a point of closure.

Shakir Ali's modernist slant cast a gloom over the future of miniature painting at NCA, as it was not able to fulfill the revivalist dream of an evangelist bureaucrat. Nor did it serve Haji Sharif, who, dismayed by dwindling prospects of state patronage, made desperate pleas for privileges in return for generations of national service. In his last appeal to the Governor of West Pakistan, he tried in vain to bargain for two hundred years of hereditary painting practice.

I am a hereditary artist as my forefathers for the last two centuries were attached to this profession. I started my career as Artist in Patiala Darbar at the age of 15, and remained in Maharajah's service, up to age of 55 years... At the present my age is about 77 years, and the Government is not able to find a miniature Artist of my caliber and therefore my services are continued from year to year [...] Neither I was allowed a promotion nor my pay was increased during last 20 years. I had applied for the purchase of agricultural land so that my children may get maintenance after me.²⁸

Despite his pleadings, his case was dismissed by the government, and the decision was communicated to him rather unceremoniously by a section officer. “It is observed that the lifetime pension of Rs 200 [awarded by President] is adequate recognition of the services of Haji Muhammad Sharif. In the circumstances, it is not possible for the grant of land to him.”²⁹

Haji Sharif, “the last painter” left the institution distraught a few months later, never to come back. He died incognito ten years later in 1978 and remains to date a shadowy character. The miniature painting survived only on the margins of fine art instruction at the NCA as a traditional “craft” for another few decades given its alleged emphasis on copying and craftsmanship. It is not until it was re-invented by modern Pakistani artists by freeing miniature painting from the stigma of copying before it could be accepted as equal in the pedigree of fine arts.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

On Old Masters and the Myth of Tradition in Miniature Painting

Despite the unprecedented success of contemporary miniature painters from Pakistan in the international art world, invariably all of whom, including Shazia Sikander and her renowned Ustad, Professor Bashir Ahmad (presently the head of fine arts at NCA) are context-bound to Haji Sharif: there is not a single essay much less monograph on him. Although his paintings are also kept in Pakistan's National Gallery of Art, connoisseurship around his paintings is singularly lacking. The information on the provenance of Haji Sharif's paintings is scarce and is left open to speculation; it is obvious that his style and subject matter continued to change with the passage of time. By the time he was retained at NCA in 1958, he had come a long way from his grandfather Allah Ditta and father Bashrat Ullah, who were both court painters of Patiala Court in the 19th century. They painted murals depicting scenes from The Mahabharata, incarnations of Vishnu, Shiva, Lakshmi, Krishna Leela and Janamsakhis of Guru Nanak Dev along with poetic illustrations of scenes from Radha Krishna, Gita Govinda, Nayak-Nayika and Raag Mala according to customary courtly practices. In a post-independence Pakistan, Haji Sharif painted exclusively on paper, as painting on other surfaces was no longer in vogue. In terms of formal properties, an element of minimalism came to dominate his canvass and was reflected in a denuded landscape that lay emphasis on figures. No longer were themes of Radha Krishna or Sikh Gurus relevant to his immediate viewing public, who were more favorably predisposed towards illustrations of Mughal subjects. However, folktales of Punjab, which were popular themes for painters, continued to stimulate Haji Sharif's imagination.

However, most of his paintings, which are reproduced in coffee table books on Pakistani art history as illustrations of "traditional" art form, do not locate them historically along the axis of time and often are not often dated. Time as a measure of moment does not seem to have any bearing on a traditional artist, who using John Fabian's concept, existed only in Typological time, divested of its vectorial, physical connotations. It is by utilizing a temporal metaphor of tradition existing in an Other time, that Indian manuscript paintings produced by Haji Sharif in the present moment are systematically excluded from the membership in the category of modern art. The construction of Indian manuscript painting as existing in an Other time, renders it susceptible to the full import of the concept of "tradition" as a contrast to modernity with latter's association with writing and future orientation.

Western modes of connoisseurship, inherited by Pakistani art historians and art critics, locate the "tradition" of manuscript painting on the evolutionary map as art-craft of the pre-modern period tied to royal patronage in a feudal society. The oral transmission of visual, tactile and empirical information in Indian manuscript painting from *Ustad* to *Shagird*, and reproduction through copying from archetypal examples of the past were construed to be the distinguishing features of a pre-modern forms of knowledge or part of the decadent traditions of India. As the concept of tradition was interrogated in the national art history for its association with feudal past and primitive forms of knowledge, the workshop/studio practice of copying has been singled out for illustrating the reductive nature of traditional modes knowledge transmission in an enervated culture. In contemporary re-evaluation of "traditional" art in Pakistan, the workshop practice of copying is held singularly responsible for the repetitive and old forms,

and suppresses the agentive role of artists in the creation of art, rendering them anonymous instead.

In this context, Haji Muhammad Sharif and his successor at NCA Sheikh Shujullah who had earlier taught at the Punjab University, Lahore, has been routinely rebuked for being “essentially a copyist” by almost all leading Pakistani art critics, however, without an adequate analysis of either copying process or their paintings.³⁰ American art historian, Marcella Srihandi, who did pioneering work on Chughtai, offers a most generous albeit half-page account of Haji Sharif in her book *Contemporary Paintings from Pakistan*, reproducing in color, two of his historical portrait paintings, [portraits of Guru Gobind Singh, the last Guru of Sikhs who raised *Khalsa* the militant brotherhood of Sikhs and Bhadur Shah Zafar, the last emperor of Mughal Empire, who died while in British incarceration in Rangoon,] noting “like many of Haji's paintings,” the former is, “a copy of an original.”³¹ Incidentally, latter claim is not cited. The most unsympathetic dismissal comes from a young evangelical curator of Pakistani contemporary manuscript paintings, Hammad Nasar of Green Cardamom in a catalog of Pakistani art exhibition in India *Beyond Borders*, in which he notes with a pronounced disdain that, along with his successor Sheikh Shujullah, Haji Sharif “formed a cryogenic chamber, where the essence of miniature painting was frozen: to be retrieved by a latter generation and giving time for artistic imagination and pedagogic attribution to catch up.”³² British curator Timothy Wilcox offers a more dramatic description of the deconstructive gesture of contemporary miniature painters, while reading the ‘faith in the copy’ as the defining feature of traditional art practice, which restricts individual creativity, originality and the evolution of a personal style.

Until recently, it was the subjects and images of miniature painting, that provided an important stimulus; the cherished techniques, preserved through the execution of copies, exhibiting an almost obsessive craftsmanship, seemed the epitome of antiquarianism. Then came Shazia Sikander and *The Scroll*. The work is a kind of visual diary, a painted autobiography set in modern Lahore: the very shape of it proclaims that the medium is no way limiting, but offers unique possibilities of self-definition. No longer concerned with the distant past, the work is both present and personal.³³

At the same time, for the critics and art historians, Shazia Sikander expresses ‘modern and very personal themes’ in art form, which is ‘the epitome of antiquarianism’ derives its legitimacy through her ‘very rigorous and traditional’ training under an apprenticeship system by a “traditional” Ustad “whose teachers were the last of a line of traditional painters going back to the well springs of Mughal painting.”³⁴ The appreciation of her work is coded in a language that is sustained through a myth of “authenticity” attributed to the traditional manuscript painting

³⁰ As an indicator of their marginality, Shiekh Shujallah is rarely cited on the Pakistan art historical publications.

³¹ Marcella Sirhandi, *Contemporary Painting in Pakistan*, (Lahore, 1982). Marcella Sirhandi, *Contemporary Painting in Pakistan*, (Lahore, 1982). p X

³² Virginia Whiles, *Miniature Manoeuvres, Tradition and Subversion in Pakistani Contemporary Art*, PhD dissertation, SOAS, University of London.

³³ Timothy Wilcox, *Pakistan: Another Vision: Fifty Years of Painting and Sculpture in Pakistan*. PNCA, Islamabad: March, 2000

³⁴ Scherr, Apollinaire, “Small wonders: miniature paintings with big ideas about gender and tradition” *Elle* magazine, Oct, 2001, no 194.

as prized imperial art form as well her *acquired* association with a unbroken chain of “hereditary” transmitters of painting skills and techniques from the Mughal royal ateliers. By the same token, Hajji Muhammad Sharif, the grand Ustad of Sikander is referred in a NCA Gallery exhibition catalogue as having descended *directly* from a line of court painters in Patiala. By assuming the continuity traditions holding the timeless secrets of an original technique, the myth of authenticity is sustained.³⁵ The re-invention of miniature painting is mediated through a recreation of a traditional art practice, where workshop practice of copying became synonymous with traditional method whose excessive concern with the past blocked the possibilities of self-expression. Ontology of unbroken continuity of tradition through copying has to be presumed before the modernity of Sikander's work could be established through innovation and change.³⁶

Miniature Painting as *Kitsch*: Shazia Sikander's Innovation

In marking the cultural space for a “traditional” form of painting, artist Shazia Sikander deplores the debasement of miniature painting as *kitsch* by observing that “the images taken from the Mughal school were abundant on gifts items everywhere, saturating the tourist market.”³⁷ She specifically mentions, miniature painting reproduced on calendars for mass consumptions. While, *kitsch* in western art history has negative connotations and refers to cheap paintings that are found in suburban stores and working class homes, miniature painting was never industrially mass produced nor it has folk base to become *kitsch* in Pakistan. Although in the early decades of miniature painting enjoyed brief spells of individual patronage from collectors and connoisseurs which includes high profile bureaucrats, industrialists and foreign dignitaries, as the last vestige of a waning style in Indian painting, the traditional Indian painting was condemned by progressive artists of the country as the remnants of a decadent and feudal past. To cite an example, Haji Sharif's paintings were reproduced on a calendar once in his lifetime, produced by a leading industrial group in Lahore in the 1960s, whose owner, Syed Babar Ali, a highly acclaimed patron of arts and incidentally the largest collector of paintings by the artist in Pakistan. After a span of forty years, the Merck Marker, an international pharmaceutical company, chose three traditional miniatures for its calendar theme of 2008, which was only to be circulated, like its predecessor, among the national elite and foreign dignitaries. Do these two calendars in fifty years qualify traditional Indian painting to be considered as “kitsch” in Pakistan?

There are more historical and cultural reasons for contesting the application of *kitsch* to Indian manuscript painting in Pakistan. India fully exploited the symbolic capital of traditional Indian paintings, by officially mass producing the traditional Mughal, Rajasthani and Pahari styles under artisanal workshops and extending patronage to a large number of hereditary artist and artisans in Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh, among numerous other centers of art craft productions. The National Handicrafts and Handlooms Museum or Crafts Museum Delhi,

³⁵ “Celebration Folio”. NCA 125th Anniversary Exhibition.” NCA Gallery 2000.

³⁶ At a geo-political level, Shazia Sikander's reception in the metropolitan art world is mediated through a representational index that aims to salvage non-western identities from the one-dimensional view of the Other. The hybridity of artwork produced by the artists is partly extended by his or her location in the West, which is rarely theorized into the artist's location.

³⁷ “Order. Desire. Light. : An Exhibition of Contemporary Drawings,” Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, July 25- October 19, 2008.

patronized a wide range of Indian crafts for mass production and export, including miniature paintings. Unlike, India, where artisanal artist communities in Himalayan regions and Rajasthan practice miniature painting in villages, Pakistan had no comparable “folk” base. As a result, miniature painting, though considered as one of the traditional arts of Pakistan, does not figure prominently in Lok Virsa (Heritage) Museum, a counterpart to Crafts Museum in Delhi, and managed by National Institute of Folk and Traditional Heritage in Pakistan. Without a strong folk/artisanal base in the region, its patronage remained confined to individual itinerant artists, who had left their ancestral homes to come to urban centers such as Lahore for better opportunities. In Lahore, there were once a large number of families of artists who adhered to regional styles in Indian painting and could claim their direct descent to Mughal artists in Akbar's ateliers, such as Chughtai family or Murtanawala family, as late as twentieth century. Owing to increasing social mobility due to education and commerce, influx of cheaper technologies of reproduction and print discontinued their hereditary practices and graduated into other styles or moved into professions, sometimes not related to what is considered as “traditional” art practice.

Copying Process in Indian Painting

While reflecting on the copying process in Indian manuscript painting, it may be instructive to apply the distinctions that Vishakha Desai made between two types of copying practices, which are generally conflated by art historians and curators in their condemnation of the copying methods in Indian painting. She argues that a process of copying by replication of the original arose in 19th century India to meet the demands of art dealers and British collectors for the “authentic” copies of 17th century Mughal originals, and should be distinguished from another type of copying method, integral to the manuscript painting practice. The later model of copying that had been glossed over in Indian art history is achieved by emulating an archetype or model which involved following faithfully iconographic conventions and formal compositions while updating the pictorial details of the painting. This method became significant in the context of literate viewing public which could read the painting like a book by drawing on conventional motifs in manuscript paintings as culturally shared codes from which meaning is produced.³⁸

Despite the fact that they have always been lumped together as twin fathers of modern miniatures from Pakistan, Desai's distinction allows us to understand the different historical trajectories of modern masters of Indian manuscript painting at NCA. One can begin to conjecture the ways in which the two *Ustads* have led very different lives and brought a different set of approaches to the teaching of miniature painting in the fine arts departments at NCA and Punjab University. Haji Sharif, whose family had found employment at the court of Patiala in the eighteenth century and worked on royal commissions by drawing on ancestral examples of archetypes for a literate audience that was familiar with iconography of his paintings, was closer to following an Indian method of copying as described by Desai. In contrast, Sheikh Shujullah came from a lineage of manuscript painters which had gradually

³⁸ Vishakha N. Desai 'Reflections of India's past in the present: copying processes in Indian painting', in Asher and Metcalf (eds.), *Perceptions of India's Visual Past*, Oxford, 1994. p 135-148.

been forced to come to terms with the loss of sustained feudal patronage and dwindling means of livelihood due to mechanical processes of book and picture production and reproduction such as photography, lithography and printing presses worked in an Orientalist fashion. Surviving as itinerant commercial artists in Lahore and Delhi, in a bid to survive in the changing times, they adapted to make portraits by copying from photographs for a largely European clientele – thereby re-learning their role as copyists. The documentary evidence from a family member of Sheikh Shujullah, Shakir Ahmad Khan, studied by Virginia Whiles in her pioneering study of contemporary miniatures, tends to offer preliminary evidence in illustrating how the practice of copying arose in response to demands for representation in the traditional styles in the 19th century.³⁹ Furthermore, the emphasis on copying from photocopies of images from art books that gained ground at the NCA under Bashir Ahmad, which modern artists saw as a sign of a decadent tradition, was not the product of age-old method of copying in Indian manuscript tradition but arose in response to a very different set of conditions in the 19th century.

The canonical art historical model, in which the teleological progress towards mimesis relies on artistic agency – the material aspects of court production in most cases, be it Mughal or Rajput-Pahari where in, paintings were not signed, and copying was a cultural practice and generic conventions often transcended personal style – bolstered the view that the traditional artist had no agentive role in the creation of art. Given the strength of disciplinary framework, for a highly accomplished Mughal art historian like John Seyeller, it has been difficult to construct art history of the artist as creative individual, as he identified Mughal *Karkhana* as a site of hegemonic imperial ideology, which left little scope for “an individual artist to develop his own visual ideals or habits.”

Although a full treatment of workshop practice of copying in Indian manuscript painting is beyond the scope of the paper, a brief reference to a historical study of Indian manuscript paintings that seeks to address copying process can lead to more insight into the cultural context of what get constituted as “traditional” in Indian art history. The references to the unimaginative adherence to formulaic compositions and repudiation from past conventions in “traditional” miniature paintings serves well a devolutionary model of art history, which is accompanied by a constant use of passive language so that artist's productive contributions are suppressed.

While the workshop practice of copying is generally regarded as a stimulus to seek the “original” or serves as the justification for a negative valuation of traditional miniature painting, several recent studies have approached the topic of copying. Drawing on semiotic approaches to painting, Debra Diamond has read conventional motifs in Rajput paintings as

³⁹ An example from Shakir Khan's press book was a letter of recommendation sent by G Bourne in 1860, which described his forefathers as 'a picture painter who does very clever copies from photographs'. Another document states a commission to his grand father for 'two ivory miniatures from the two photographs enclosed'. Virginia Whiles, *op.cit.*

culturally shared codes from which meaning is produced.⁴⁰ Rather than considering copying as mindless expedience by relating it to perpetuation of tradition, she reads copying as a process of citation and active interpretation and artists as active interpreters of the image source. This is achieved by closely analyzing the process of copying which obliges an artist to act on the image source, by first selecting it from the pool of signs, and then by tracing it wholly or partially onto a new sheet of paper, whilst the artist re-uses the sign as a commentary on the source of previous meaning. In this account of Court Painting from Rajasthan, the historical viewer is a literate courtier, who interprets the motifs as signs in reference to their visual source as well as to the context in which they appear. Thus she argues that a portrait of a king derives his semantic authority not only through awareness of King's power in the world or through an active appreciation of the painting's formal qualities but through indexical and iconic referencing to other paintings. The courtier or historical viewer may have understood cited motifs and almost identical paintings as semantically textured rather than tediously repetitive. By offering a pleasure similar to the pleasure of tracing a poetic metaphor, through its appearances in various texts, the citation and recontextualization of a canonical image in a painting would have motivated literate viewers to follow a chain of associations.

Art historians and artists from Pakistan continue to frame traditional art practice as a constrained operation, which suppresses individual creativity, evolution of style, artistic growth, personal volition and restricts the artists to a slavish submission to the aesthetic demands of the patron or the visual conventions of the past. The past appears to be a part of cultural straitjacket that is to be abandoned in order for modern artists to proclaim their individuality and originality. The limiting view of tradition is not restricted to a place but is projected onto entire cultures, religions and geographies. Therefore, the Islamic artists from Iran and Central Asia are perceived to be tied up with a tradition as much as the artists, both Muslim and Non-Muslim, who subscribe to the tradition in South Asia are restricted by it. It is only by side stepping from the canonical model of history that frames the contours of a national tradition, that we can begin to understand the discursive nature of traditions that has been invented and reinvented long before the present generation of miniature painters from NCA began to deconstruct the genre through their post-modernist renderings in the age of global capitalism.⁴¹

⁴⁰ See Debra Diamond, *The politics and aesthetics of citation Nath painting in Jodhpur, 1803--1843 (India)*, PhD Dissertation. Columbia, 2002.

⁴¹ Homi Bhabha (interviewer), 'Alter/Native Modernities - Miniaturizing Modernity: Shahzia Sikander in Conversation with Homi Bhabha', *Public Culture: bulletin of the Project for Transnational Cultural Studies* 11.1, (1999), p. 146-152.