

## Contemporary Miniature 1999

Pakistani painters have always found miniature painting a rich lode of our multi-cultural visual legacy and mined it as a creative resource. However, its emergence as a complete art form with a contemporary ethos can be traced to a movement by young Lahore painters that I would like to refer to as neo-miniaturism. While the miniature painting which resurfaced with new vibrancy in the 1990s was in continuum with time-honoured techniques of painting and substrata preparation, the content had begun to reflect the living culture of our time. This iconoclastic step, taken by the students of Ustad Haji Sharif, delinked miniature from the moribund practices of faithful reproduction and traditional content.

One of the outstanding talents of this movement, **Imran Qureshi**, and his wife **Aisha Khalid**, a relatively new entrant in the field, exhibited their latest works at Chawkandi Gallery recently.

'Painting miniature is like expressing yourself in Urdu' says Imran. Once equipped with the confidence born from the comfort of linking the medium of his dreams with the medium of expression, it released a creative energy that encompasses humour, romance and social awareness with equal ease in his work. No longer inhibited by the social correctness of a naturalised visual expression and the need to compromise on imported metaphors, Imran began to spontaneously weave themes of love and conflict into his iconography. He uses the miniature like a *ghazal*, the versatile form of Urdu poetry, to articulate diverse issues close to his heart. Perhaps inspired by the same tradition, the artist, in the paintings entitled *Love Stories* evokes the tender longing of *visaal* by creating a bed of silken leaves and the serenity of a garden with elegantly foliated trees of paradise. Its content is constructed from the allegorical idiom of Urdu poetry that measures the pleasure of love in the pain of longing rather than fulfilment. When concerns as a citizen of the 20th century world surface, he paints displaced people and nuclear missiles with their double-edged values of mass destruction and national honour. On a dark tea-stained newspaper heading stands a lone deadly projectile, stark in its bare outline, without the trappings of rhetorical claims. The mirror image of the newspaper headline in the background shows disjointed words 'Ghalat hain', 'mujahideen'. Is the painter questioning how the warriors of Islam are unaware that they can be robbed of martyrdom by this indiscriminate press button weapon, or that destruction by nuclear war can be recognised as the ultimate destruction and denial of God's bounties? To highlight its danger to the plant world a missile slyly nestles among flowers in the monochrome lower border of the painting [...].

Deeply linked to her everyday experiences is **Aisha Khalid's** art. It is work that is dominated by her love for floral motifs which she enjoys painting and its subtle transformation into feminist emblems. The purdah or curtain that she extensively paints is a multi-layered icon. Not only is the word purdah used for curtain but also for the veil. 'Purdah daalna' means to conceal. The women in her paintings have a tendency to disappear behind the curtain as if to suggest that much of their lives is screened off. The purdah or wall-like curtain used in many middle class homes to create private spaces within a larger more communal space is allegorical of the segmented lives of women who despite their careers are expected on the domestic level to recede behind the veil of customs.

Adorned by colourful floral and vegetable sprays, Aisha's purdah is used repeatedly to comment candidly on the contemporary world's obsession with the veil. She refers in her work to how a so-called liberal Scandinavian nation did not have enough tolerance to give a veiled woman her freedom to work in a public place – a prejudice earlier experienced by headscarf-wearing Muslim schoolgirls in France. Visible is the artist's outrage at the global typecasting exacerbated by the international media's inability to recognise socially and professionally active veiled women in orthodox communities. The world waits for the curtain to finally rise to the reality of their productive lives.

**Nilofur Farrukh**, *Newsline*, November 1999