

Tradition in Transition: Contemporary Miniature Painting and Global Cross-Cultural Flows

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Abstract

The Indian subcontinent has been home to very rich artistic traditions, among which some of the finest examples are in the schools of miniature painting that flourished here in the medieval period. Generally, the miniature painting tradition is perceived as rooted in cultural traditions and yet an examination of the practice suggests global cross-cultural influences. And interestingly, this has always been the case, as seen in the different schools of miniature paintings in India. Persian and Sienese art' influences are seen in Mughal and Deccani miniature paintings, respectively, whereas miniature paintings in Rajasthan and Punjab Hills draw upon Mughal art while indigenizing it. Contemporary times have allowed this cross-cultural aspect to become trans-cultural with artists who are working in the miniature genre spread across the subcontinent and further across the globe. This has imparted a vibrant contemporaneity to their expression. Some artists from the subcontinent are practicing an expression that is closely aligned to the traditions of this painting style, be it in symbols, themes, or motifs, whereas some have employed the painterly style to envision a modern visual and thematic oeuvre. Diasporic artists, situated in a different cultural milieu, employ a somewhat transformed miniature style to reflect on the contemporary and topical in the country of their residence and of origin, where they trace their roots. This paper seeks to examine the continuations, elisions, and transformations that continue to enrich the visual vocabulary and thematic richness of the miniature tradition in contemporary times, thus situating the "tradition" within a globalized art.

Keywords: Indian art, miniature painting, contemporary Indian art, South Asian diaspora art

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Introduction

The tradition of miniature painting in the Indian subcontinent can be traced to extant examples dated to the eleventh century AD, which in turn clearly suggest that this art had been in existence from much earlier. Ancient textual sources and travelogues of travellers to the subcontinent, underline that the art of painting was one of the *kalas* considered essential (Goswamy & Agrawal, 2018) and that it was practised across the continent, from Tamruk in the East to Marwar in the West (Chandra, 1949; Saraswati, 1971) respectively. And it was an art form that retained its vitality as it showed an openness to influences from different cultural milieus. Such as seen in Indian manuscript painting of the fifteenth century from Western India where the influences of art from Persia, in the form of border decorations as a significant part of paintings, to Chinese ribbon like clouds, evidence the ingress of non-Indian influences. This cross-cultural influence was to escalate with the Mughal emperor Humayun inviting Persian masters to work for him, laying the foundation of what was to become the Mughal atelier (Chakraverty, 1996). The Mughal style of painting encompassed within it the best from Indian, Persian and European painting thus exemplifying what is now termed trans culturalism in art. Almost parallel to it towards peninsular India emerged Deccani painting in the kingdoms of Ahmednagar, Bijapur and Golconda that too drew upon Persian and Turkish artistic and cultural influences while also being rooted in the indigenous milieu. These examples limn the rich cultural and artistic heritage of the Indian subcontinent, that is now also a shared heritage of both India and Pakistan.

It was in the early twentieth century that scholars of Indian art began to bring back the limelight on to the art of Indian miniature painting, thus saving it from relative obscurity that had befallen it during British rule. Their focus on this traditional form of Indian art kept the flame alive, which later led to Indian artists turning towards this art for inspiration. The Bengal School of painting is one such example that, to some extent, is inspired by Indian miniature painting. However, since independence and partition, there has been a more concentrated revival of interest among artists of both India and Pakistan in the miniature style of painting. Although it is essential to mention that the formal training of miniature painting in any art school of the subcontinent was first initiated in the National College of Arts, Lahore, in the 1980s but in the present times, some institutions, like Punjabi University, Patiala, in India, also run such academic programmes. Training in miniature painting was also imparted in various workshops in Jaipur, New Delhi, and other centres of tourism and schools of painting from earlier times.

Analyses of the works have led to the understanding that the contemporary miniatures may be grouped under two categories, one, where the traditional and contemporary meet, and from which emerge elisions in themes and techniques, and the other where for diaspora artists the form of the miniature and its traditions connect their artistic expression to cultural pasts and histories that are reimagined in global terms.

Tradition Meets Contemporary

It is interesting to know that certain families who were custodians of the art of miniature painting passed their skill to their future generations. Even today, artists like Mohan Kumar from Jaipur and Prakash Paliwal from Udaipur are continuing their family tradition of creating miniature paintings. Besides them, there are other artists too who have made a conscious effort to self-learn and practice this traditional style of painting. Vijay Sharma, artist and art historian, from Chamba in Himachal Pradesh, is one such artist who learned the art despite not coming from a family of miniature painters. He is known for preserving the art of three-hundred-year

miniature painting. In fact, Vijay Sharma was awarded the Padmashri for his contribution in reviving miniature painting by learning, practising and also teaching the art (Karelia, 2020). Sharma creates his paintings by employing traditional techniques and generally shows traditional themes in them. However, he also sometimes gives a contemporary twist to his works by adding contemporary elements. Here, Vijay Sharma has painted Westerners in the guise of Indian royalties in the Basoli style of miniature painting (see Figure 1). By adding these figures, he induces a cross-cultural reference in his work. It is an attempt to connect with the world outside the sub-continent. By including people of a foreign ethnicity in traditional Indian paintings, he also reflects the contemporary times where the world is a global village and nobody is an outsider.

Figure 1

Sharma, Vijay. Contemporary Basoli Miniature Painting, © By Sakoya Foundation.



There are other artists like Nilima Sheikh who have borrowed influences from Central Asian, Persian, Chinese, pre-Renaissance European and Indian miniature, with which she creates her own visual vocabulary (Sahasrabuddhe, 2016). Her paintings are an amalgamation of the visual cultures from around the world. In her *Mountain Tales-2* (see Figure 2), we can see the influence of the Chinese landscape while she narrates the story of the Bodhisattva. Nilima creates an interesting texture by blurring the background, adding mystery to her painting.

Figure 2

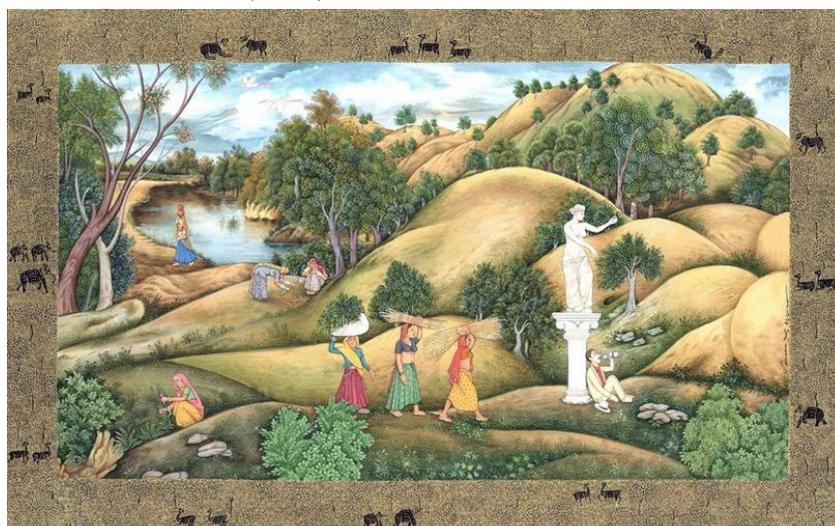
Sheikh, Nilima. (2003). *Mountain Tales-2*, Watercolour and Monoprint on Paper, ©2024 Artnet Worldwide Corporation.



Waswo X. Waswo, besides being an artist, is an American poet, photographer, and traveller who has lived and exhibited in India for more than two decades (Singh, 2019). He is known for creating contemporary miniature paintings, with meticulous detail and with clear influences of the visual traditions of Mughal and Mewar court painting and also the Company School. Waswo, often works in collaboration with a team of skilled traditional painters from Udaipur, Rajasthan (Bhuyan, 2022), transforming narratives into richly symbolic and visually layered compositions. These works are an intricate alliance of Indian and colonial history, contemporary identities, creating and narrating multi-genre stories. He adds a personal touch in these creations by putting his own image in the paintings, generally looking out of place (see Figure 3). However, his presence creates a feeling of an outsider observing and being absorbed by Indian society. It is a semi-autobiographical approach where a feeling of harmony is juxtaposed with the awkwardness of being the “Other,” addressing its tensions while simultaneously suggesting the possibility of its transcendence in ways that are as problematic as they are poignant.

Figure 3

X Waswo, Waswo. (2025). *The Mother Earth Series*, New Delhi, © Waswo X Waswo.



Imran Qureshi is another South Asian artist whose work sprouts from the sixteenth-century Mughal miniature style of painting (Jalil, 2025). His paintings deal with contemporary issues while incorporating traditional motifs and techniques. His paintings are concerned with political and environmental threats wrapped in the visual language of traditional paintings. “Threatened” indicates the dangers of war that engulf everyone, and “Other Side Story” is a painting in which the globe is seen from afar, where all humanity is seen as one, facing similar issues and threats (see Figure 4). In his works, he brings the world together in its worries as his medium of expression unites various influences in its pictorial style. Qureshi lives and works in Lahore, Pakistan.

Figure 4

Qureshi, Imran. (2023). (L) *Threatened*, Gouache and Gold Leaf on Wasli Paper (R) *Other Side Story*, Gouache and Gold Leaf on Wasli Paper, © 2025 Thaddaeus Ropac.



Contemporary themes in Manjot Kaur’s paintings suggest her preoccupation with the environment as well. However, she expresses her concerns with a feminist accent by painting the protagonist in a female form. In “Hybrid Being”, Kaur portrays the nayika in one of the eight states of relationship (see Figure 5), as described in the Indian treatise *Natyashastra*. Her “While She Births an Ecosystem” (see Figure 5) shows the mother goddess giving birth to ecosystems and trees. The woman in this painting is reclaiming her body and the dominion of nature. Kaur is an Indian artist from the state of Punjab (Grewal, 2019).

Figure 5

Kaur, Manjot. (L) (2022). Hybrid Being 1, Watercolour and Gouache on Paper, (R) (2020). While She Births an Ecosystem, MANJOT KAUR STUDIO © 2019.



Memory, Nostalgia and Hybrid Identities

The South Asian diaspora has produced many influential visual artists who reflect on questions of identity, migration, memory, hybridity and cultural belonging in their art. Their art often reflects a concern for both their cultural heritage and the global contexts in which they live and work, creating art that speaks to both personal and collective experiences. Interesting, some of these artists have chosen the medium of miniature painting to express themselves, leading to a vibrant body of art that is both rooted in tradition and a global outlook. These works create bridges between cultures, histories and contemporary issues.

Figure 6

The Singh Twins, (L) (2022). Maharaja Ranjit Singh at Dawn, Mixed Media and Digital (R) (2000). Laird Singhs His Tartan's Praises, Poster Paint, Gouache & Gold Dust on Mountboard, © The Singh Twins.



The Singh Twins, Amrit Singh and Rabindra Kaur Singh, are internationally acclaimed contemporary British artists whose award-winning work challenges social, political, and cultural issues while redefining Eurocentric perceptions of art, heritage, and identity. In the artwork, “Laird Singhs His Tartan’s Praises” (see (R) Figure 6), the Singh Twins reflect on the assimilation of Sikhs into Western society by accumulating large estates like a Scottish laird. This also indicates the financial success of the Sikhs in a foreign land. Here, the Sikh gentleman is shown wearing a Tartan (A textile generally used for Scottish kilts), and interestingly, the two weavers at the bottom are Indians as well, who are busy weaving Tartan and presumably Indian patterned textiles on their traditional looms. The Sikh man in this painting wears his turban, holding on to his cultural as well as religious identity. The Singh Twins’ connection to Punjab is reflected in the works that are on the religious history of the Sikhs and also the history of Punjab. Their works include regal images of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, evoking the nostalgic memory of the golden era of Punjab (see (L) Figure 6). Here, they have used mixed media while maintaining the visual imagery of the miniature painting. Their works reflect both tradition and contemporary outlook.

Figure 7

Durhailay, Jatinder Singh. (2024). (L) Panth Patshah 96k Akali Baba Santa Singh Ji (R) Two Lovers, Natural Stone Pigments Heightened With Gold and Silver on Handmade Wasli Paper, © Jatinder Singh Durhailay.



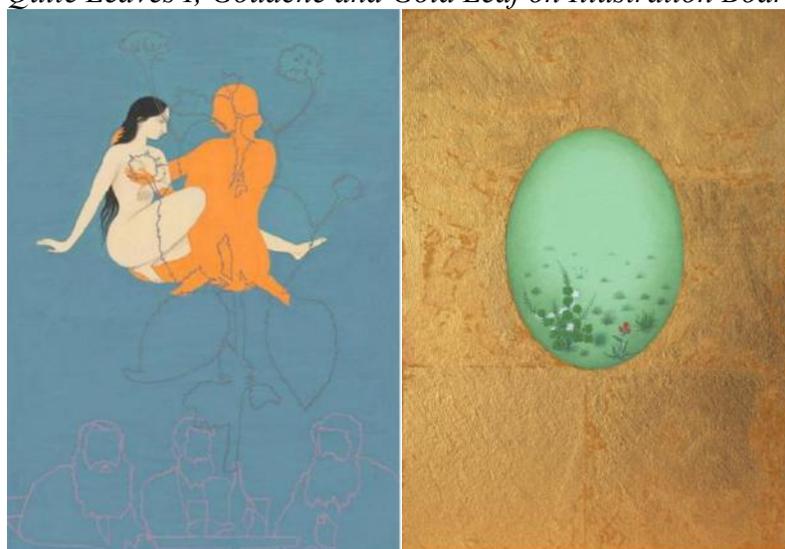
Jatinder Singh Durhailay is another artist of the Indian diaspora from London. Durhailay is particularly fascinated by the use of naturally derived pigments and is also trained in Indian classical music, both of which influence his creative process. In his art, Durhailay blends myths with contemporary culture, offering a unique portrayal of the Sikh community and its culture. Through his art, Durhailay navigates the intersection of tradition and modernity, offering nuanced perspectives on cultural identity and societal issues. His work serves as a vibrant reflection of the diverse influences that shape his artistic vision and the rich tapestry of contemporary Sikh culture (Banerjee, 2025).

The people in Jatinder’s paintings are real people who look like him, heroes who represent his race. In the Western world, it is not very often that he sees people belonging to Punjab hailed

as heroes. The paintings here show Sikhs as central characters. While giving the Mughal background to his “Two Lovers”, he adds a contemporary essence by showing a Sikh man attired in contemporary clothing (see (R) Figure 5). In the other painting, a scene from Hindu mythology depicting Lord Vishnu in Varaha avatar challenging the demon Hiranyaksha (see (L) Figure 5), a copy of an 18th-century Pahari miniature painting by Manaku of Guler (Goswamy, 2014), forms the lower part of the work, while the top part consists of a Sikh sant with his disciples, both of Indian and European origin. The group is surrounded by images of the WWF wrestlers, emphasising the warriorship in the work. The Pahari miniature refers to the emergence of Lord Vishnu in Varaha Avatara to eliminate the threat posed by the *daitya* Hiranyaksha.

Figure 8

Qureshi, Nusra Latif. (L) (2002). *Gardens of Desire II*, Gouache on Wasli Paper, (R) (2017). *Quite Leaves I*, Gouache and Gold Leaf on Illustration Board, © Nusra Qureshi.



Through a research-oriented practice, Nusra Latif Qureshi draws upon diverse visual sources such as colonial-era photography, botanical and anatomical illustrations, and historical textile designs to reimagine the connection between subject and environment. While deeply rooted in the formal discipline of classical miniature painting, Qureshi gives a feel of Nostalgia when she paints plants in an oval, as if seen from afar through a lens. This work of hers seems heavily influenced in its pictorial representation by the eighteenth-century miniature painting titled “Hiranyagarbha”; however, Qureshi has painted the background opaque gold while in the original painting (see (R) Figure 8), the oval or the egg was painted opaque gold, floating in swirling lines depicting the whirlpools of timeless waters (Goswamy, 2014). She lives and works in Melbourne, Australia. In her works, she uses the imagery of Mughal miniature painting to reflect on the colonial past and memories of her homeland. In the work “Gardens of desire II” (see (L) Figure 5), the image of lovers from the Pahari miniature painting titled “The Pavilion of Love” by a member of the first generation after renowned artist Nainsukh, painted in c. 1775 (Goswamy, 2014) is superimposed on the outline of a botanical study of a plant, below which the outline of three men is shown drinking, probably a reference to a colonial photograph.

Conclusion

The Indian miniature painting was a jewel of the royal ateliers of the Indian subcontinent, and it has never been a static tradition. From its earliest appearance, it absorbed and transformed diverse influences like Persian, Central Asian, and European into a uniquely local idiom. The contemporary miniature painting shows an adaptive capacity to incorporate global influences, enriching it further and allowing it to flourish as both a preserved craft and a contemporary language of pictorial expression. Artists from India, Pakistan and their wider diaspora continue to paint in this tradition, while dabbling between their heritage and modernity. They also incorporate both local and global aspects, often relying on the collective memory of the community applied in an innovative way.

Artists like Vijay Sharma uphold the legitimacy of the traditional miniature painting techniques and themes in his work. Other practitioners, such as Nilima Sheikh, Waswo X. Waswo, Imram Qureshi, Manjot Kaur, the Singh Twins, Jatinder Durhailay, and Nusra Qureshi, bring new cultural and political aspects of the contemporary world. Their works reflect issues of environment, gender, identity, colonial memory, and diasporic belonging, proving that the miniature painting in the present times also retains its resilience and relevance.

Thus, miniature painting as practised in present times exemplifies how in present times, the tradition has transformed itself into an art that in its vocabulary, both pictorial and thematic, is bridging the past and the present, allowing artists to evolve a modern heritage in their work. Today's practice of miniature painting is transcultural and transhistorical, taking one forward to the past, and emerging as an art form that exemplifies how tradition can be reinvented in a manner that cements its relevance in a globalised world and yet retains the essence of its rich history.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

In writing this paper, Grammarly, an AI-assisted writing software, was used in proofreading and refining the language used in the manuscript. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors and rephrasing statements for accuracy and clarity. We further declare that, apart from these, no other AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate content in writing the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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