

Press Release
Friday 6 October 2023

NEW EXHIBITION AT MK GALLERY
EXPLORES HOW CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS HAVE
RECLAIMED AND REINVENTED ANCIENT TRADITION OF
SOUTH ASIAN MINIATURE PAINTING

Beyond the Page: South Asian Miniature Painting and Britain, 1600 to Now
7 October 2023 – 28 January 2024
MK Gallery, Milton Keynes



Unknown artist, A late Mughal Album of Calligraphy and Paintings, c.1720-1740. Royal Collection Trust / Attributed to Abid, Prince Khurram departs from Ajmer for his first Deccan campaign, c.1635-40. Royal Collection Trust / Imran Qureshi, *A Lover Waiting For His Beloved*, 1999. Private Collection, London / Karachi

Press Images: <https://tinyurl.com/2rzpec82>

Featuring over 180 works by artists from India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Australia, Netherlands, UK and USA, *Beyond the Page* tells the dynamic story of contemporary art's engagement with the ancient tradition of South Asian miniature painting.

With a long history stretching back to the 9th Century, South Asian miniatures are exquisite, small-scale paintings of exceptional beauty and technical skill which depict grand narratives from sacred and secular texts, illustrating tales of gods and goddesses, rulers, romances, mythology, and political intrigue.

Opening at MK Gallery on 7 October 2023, the exhibition explores how the traditions of South Asian miniature painting have been reclaimed and reinvented by modern and contemporary artists, taken forward beyond the pages of illuminated manuscripts to experimental forms that include installations, sculpture, and film. In the early 20th Century miniature painting represented a strand of cultural resistance to colonial rule. In the late 20th and early 21st Centuries, artists in South Asia and beyond continue to find contemporary

relevance in the possibilities offered by the miniature tradition, including its: capacity to tell multiple narratives; challenge Western hierarchies of material and techniques; privileging an intimacy of encounter; and its propensity to combine conceptual strategies with exquisite craft skills.

The exhibition features work by artists from different generations working in dialogue with the miniature tradition, including Hamra Abbas, David Alesworth, Nandalal Bose, Noor Ali Chagani, Lubna Chowdhary, Adbur Rahman Chughtai, Samuel Fyzee-Rahamin, N.S. Harsha, Howard Hodgkin, Ali Kazim, Bhupen Khakhar, Jess MacNeil, Imran Qureshi, Nusra Latif Qureshi, Mohan Samant, Nilima Sheikh, Willem Schellinks, the Singh Twins, Shahzia Sikander and Abanindranath Tagore.

Contemporary works are shown alongside examples of miniature painting dating as far back as the mid-16th century drawn from major collections including The Victoria & Albert Museum and The British Museum, many on public display for the first time.

A highlight of the exhibition is a selection of pages from the *Padshahnama* (The Book of Emperors), loaned by His Majesty The King from the Royal Collection – a 17th century manuscript with illuminated miniatures which constitute some of the finest Mughal paintings ever produced – whose reproductions in modern publications have inspired numerous contemporary responses.

Raising questions of culture and power in the entangled histories of Empire and globalisation, many of the greatest collections of South Asian miniature paintings and manuscripts are held in Britain. For more than 400 years Indian miniatures have arrived in Britain, from Mughal royal portraits presented to James I by his envoy to the Mughal court in the early 17th century, through to the vast collection of fine paintings and manuscripts amassed by employees of the East India Company. The process of these acquisitions and their central role within British and South Asian art histories is explored in the exhibition.

For example, studying at London's Royal College of Art in the mid-20th century, Zahoor ul Akhlaq (1941 – 1999) and Gulammohamed Sheikh (b. 1937) discovered new ways of engaging with the miniature tradition through the Victoria & Albert Museum's rich collections of Indian miniature paintings. Returning to the Subcontinent as influential teachers and practitioners, Akhlaq and Sheikh went on to inspire generations of artists—including N.S. Harsha, Imran Qureshi and Shahzia Sikander—associated with two of South Asia's most important art schools, the National College of the Arts, Lahore, and the Faculty of Fine Arts at the Maharaja Sayajirao University, Baroda.

The exhibition includes historic works drawn from major collections, including the Royal Collection, Tate, The Ashmolean Museum, National Museums Scotland and The British Museum as well as private collections including Deutsche Bank, many of which are rarely on display, and include a number of new commissions from contemporary artists.

The exhibition is curated by Hammad Nasar and Anthony Spira with advice from Emily Hannam and is accompanied by a new catalogue.

The exhibition is grateful of support from The Bagri Foundation, Paul Mellon Centre, Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai and Vadehra Art Gallery, New Delhi.

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