



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Reimagining Miniature Painting: Two Agencies Of Artistic Practice In Contemporary Indian Art

Meenakshi Sengupta

Research Scholar at Department of Painting, Kala Bhavana,
Viva-Bharati University, Santiniketan, West Bengal, India
&

Assistant Professor of Department of Fine Arts & Design,
Sister Nivedita University, Newtown, Kolkata, West Bengal, India

Abstract:

Use of traditional iconography (both local and court tradition) was pitted up against the colonial institutional paradigm. Thus, there was an urge to take the private practice into the public. Therefore, practice of miniature as part of traditional art became powerful in the 19th century. It was very crucial during the first decade of twentieth century India, to develop a uniquely Indian artistic practice while also being part of a broader nationalist discourse without being nostalgic about the past. Bengal School consciously used pre-modern court painting and village crafts as a form of creative resistance to Western academic realism, but it eventually became a form of academic exercise in itself. Keeping the pedigree of Abanindranath aside, miniature painting in India has maintained the level of craftsmanship set by traditional painters who paint primarily for the tourist market. Such initiatives remain quite separated from the art school in urban areas. As such, two distinct practices developed in the same time, one was the professional miniature painters and second, the art school-trained urban artists.

This article will focus on the artistic practices of Vinita Sharma, (Jaipur, Rajasthan, India) who being known as 'traditional miniature painters' have pushed the boundaries of tradition within their institutional framework and Karine Rougier (Marseille, France) who was fascinated by magic rituals later appropriated the iconography of Mughal court painting in her practice. I will discuss about their image-making, visual play and the way they build their statement about their agencies of thought informed by Indian court painting tradition.

Index Terms: Miniature painting, Tradition, Appropriation, Contemporary Art, Woman artist, Globalization

Introduction

During the disintegration of the Mughal Empire (1748) painters from court patronage scattered around the country outside the imperial courts like in other regional kingdoms like Rajput and Maratha courts. They brought naturalistic depictions within Indian themes. For example, the folds of cloths, depiction of drapery, portraiture and many more. The emphasis on European naturalism has been later incorporated in Company School. Renaissance images arrived at the Mughal courts as prints with visiting merchants and missionaries. Eventually in the mid-nineteenth century Industrial Art School was set up in, Madras(Chennai), Calcutta(Kolkata), Bombay(Mumbai) and Lahore(now in Punjab, Pakistan). The curriculum focused on European academic styles and techniques, emphasizing on perspective and more importantly adhering to the Western ideals of representation. This led to the formalization of art education in India, which shifted the focus from traditional Indian craftsmanship to a more structured and Westernized approach to artistic training.

The Bengal School sought to modernize and revive the Mughal and Rajput miniature traditions to counter the influence of the Western academic art being taught in art schools under the British Raj. In 1947, national independence precipitated major upheavals in India's social, political and economic systems, facilitating the development of new economic sectors. In post-independence era, Indian art became more and more integrated into international commercial networks. In Rajasthan this change was more dramatic and visible. The Royal Craftsman and painters tried to earn a living through artistic production. This transformation of notion of art production can be seen as part of the establishment of a modern tourist trade in Rajasthan around 1950s. Beginning in the 1980s, the local economy based on miniature painting was stimulated by the rapid increase in the number of international tourists visiting the old royal cities of Rajasthan. Thus the neo-colonization impacted the practice of miniature painting mostly in different cities of Rajasthan, which became the hub for tourist market in twentieth century. This shift in the local economy, driven by tourism, introduced a fresh perspective to the traditional art form, as it adapted to meet the demands of international visitors and collectors.

In 1991, economic liberalization created a multitude of new opportunities and possibilities. With its emphasis on the globalization of trading networks, this economic atmosphere was favourable to the market in miniature paintings, which could capitalize more effectively on the taste in Western countries for the products of 'exotic' culture.¹ As part of this new production system of miniature painting an agency of Guru came into vision, sometimes they are the heir of Royal painters or their followers, who primarily ensure continuity in traditional miniature painting. They took the position of guru for their followers/disciples to whom their skill and knowledge is passed. They sell their own works and those of their disciples to dealers or directly to the tourists. Their income is irregular since it is subject to the volatility of tourist demand. In course of my academic institutional training, I met one of such fine painters, Ajay Sharma(b.1962) in Jaipur, Rajasthan. The idea of my research starts by my interaction with master painter Ajay Sharma and his wife Vinita Sharma in their studio in Jaipur. They both are prominent names in their respective field of practice. Ajay Sharma came out from the tutelage of master painter (guru) Mahendra Sharma in Jaipur. He

¹ Panagariya, A. (2004). *India's trade reform*. Brookings Institution.

is one of the very few 'miniature' painters who primarily cater to the tourist market, yet consistently reflects on his own practice to push its boundaries and create new meanings. However, Sharma considers himself a 'craftsman', rather than an artist; since he reproduces old masterpieces with hardly any personal interpretation. He asked me to lay out three major ways, about he could be an artist. With no prompt answer, the question haunted me for some time and helped me to gear up a project called 'The other side of the Wall' in March, 2019. This was a presentation/exhibition of a set of works/practices followed by a series of discussion and presentation as part of my on-going PhD research process. I was looking at practices that stood out from within the traditional institutional background, practices informed by tradition as taught in academic spaces and practices which look at tradition from a distance.

Not only does this project raised questions about the so-called traditional language of art in the works of painters like Ajay Sharma and Vinita Sharma but also how they position themselves in the contemporary global art scene. This project brought a common platform where art school-trained practitioners met traditional painters who emerged out of the tourist market. Artists like Ajay Sharma, Waswo X Waswo, Vinita Sharma, Gopa Trivedi, and Khandakar Ohida among others were part of this initiative. They were engaged in numerous discussions, presentations, workshops, and exchanges. The most interesting part that came out of this exchange was the distinctive positions that each artist chooses to build their own narratives. While researching this particular project I was introduced to the works of Karine Rougier by French Curator/Collector Justine Grandchamp. Justine is the founder and director of Shifting Frames, an Art Forum that is interested in the place and the integration of tradition and vernacular in a globalized world. Shifting frames was one of my prime collaborators in this project and we invite Karine Rougier to be a part of this initiative. Among all the practices that I encounter during this period, I was fascinated by two practices that emerged out of diverse institutional backgrounds, one was Vinita Sharma, who developed a series of works within the traditional institutional structure whereas Karine Rougier looked at the notion of miniature painting tradition as an outsider. Karine in her practice juxtaposed images from a range of inspirations from Greek mythology to Indian mythology, from old engravings to pop magazines. On the other hand, Vinita Sharma, trained in traditional techniques developed her practice, by looking at Mughal and Pahari miniatures with an urge to produce new narratives. This paper will discuss and closely analyse these two artistic practices and their engagement with Miniature painting tradition.

Artistic Practice of Vinita Sharma:

Vinita Sharma (bn1965 at Jaipur old city) is an independent artist who is trained under the supervision of her husband Ajay Sharma. Unlike other miniature painters of traditional background, she does not necessarily carry any baggage of tradition within her practice. She was fascinated with the minute details and intimate handling of miniature painting. She started her training after marriage and continued balancing her household, family, and creative endeavour simultaneously.

**Fig-1**

Vinita Sharma & Ajay Sharma at their studio in Jaipur

Fig-2

Vinita Sharma at work

Vinita stated in an interview (2018) inside her studio at Jaipur, that, she considers herself an artist whereas her husband Ajay Sharma was hesitant to be regarded as an artist as he reproduces miniature paintings from old masters with almost no personal rendition. I was interested in the strong position that Vinita took, irrespective of her institutional background. Although she is quite exposed internationally as one of the finest painters and trainers of international institutions, like, Heenat Salma Farm in Doha, Qatar, Les Beaux-Art de Marseille-Paris, Virginia Commonwealth University in Doha among others, her artistic endeavour is hardly visible in Indian contemporary art scene. She is quite aware of the individualistic approaches that an artist sought to be fitted into the contemporary art discourse to establish herself. Initially, she started her work by looking at her surroundings and deliberately subverting the tradition into her own narratives. In the work 'Bird' (Fig 3) she juxtaposed the linear quality of drawing from miniature painting and motives of Rajasthani textile to depict a local bird, whereas in 'Shell' (Fig 4) there are women, covering all their bodies that came out of a shell. This ambiguous presence of a shell which was a mere tool used by the traditional painters to keep their pigments has become so significant in the context of this painting. It was rather surprising for me to witness her socio-political consciousness and image-making even without any educational

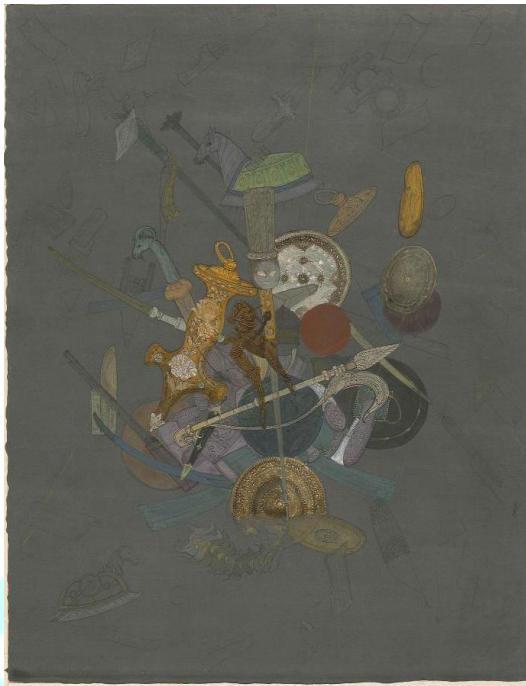
**Fig- 3**

'Bird', Vinita Sharma, , pigments on wasli, 2014

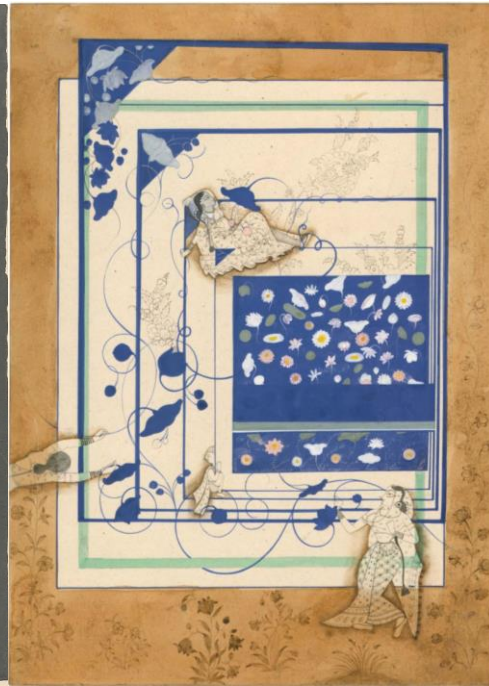
**Fig- 4**

'Shell' ,Vinita Sharma, pigments on wasli,2014

institutional paradigm. The way she took the challenge to illuminate the background and focused on a single image in the foreground has shown her conscious play around with the notion of tradition. Later works like 'Untitled' (Fig 5) have taken a shift from her earlier image-making. It is more abstract in terms of content and handling.

**Fig-5**

Vinita Sharma,Untitled, pigments on wasli, 2017

**Fig-6**

Vinita Sharma, Untitled, pigments on wasli, 2017

In another work, also 'Untitled' (Fig 6) Vinita pushed the boundaries of traditional framework and consciously/unconsciously made an arrangement that is similar to the notion of the Decorative Art movement of the late 19th century, that blurs the line between so-called art and craft to build an altered discourse. In (Fig 7) and (Fig 8) are two very important among all as they involved the decorative elements from Mughal miniature and the influence of the geometric arrangement of Persian miniature in an abstract composition which is very unlikely

**Fig- 7**

Composition, pigments on wasli, 2017

**Fig- 8**

Untitled, pigments on wasli, 2018

in any traditional setting. Although Vinita started her journey accompanying Ajay Sharma in several short courses and workshops on miniature painting techniques at esteemed institutions worldwide, she felt the necessity to render her language in a parallel practice. Her proximity to international students, artists, and esteemed institutions helped her to shape the artistic practice by making a dialog with the past.

'The other side of the Wall' hosted Vinita Sharma in Santiniketan and she met Marseille-based artist Karine Rougier and exchanged their thoughts. This conversation also brought the context of two distinctive parallel practices of miniature painting and its potential as well as strategies to build a dialogue with contemporary.

Artistic Practices of Karine Rougier

In the mid-20th century, a lot of foreign artists started revisiting India and discover the potential of Indian miniature painting in their own artistic practice. Few artists collaborated with the traditional painters of Rajasthan and few started their training under the tutelage of master painters. But this practice remains quite separated from practice of Indian traditional painters who work in the limited iconoclasts within traditional boundaries.

Traditionally the workshop or 'Karkhana' of miniature painters were mostly ran by the male painters, and women were largely portrayed as Subjects who reflected the wealth of men who commissioned them and potential of those who painted them. It has maintained its legacy as a masculine periphery even after so many decades. In late 20th century. Artists like Waswo X Waswo, Alexander Gorlizki has redefined the notion of 'Karkhana' and collaboration with traditional artists. But women artists like Shahzia Sikander (b.1969, Lahore, Pakistan) has emerged with a distinct approach by negotiating the traditional miniature format with contemporary themes. British twin sisters Amrit and Rabindra Kaur Singh (b.1966, London) have made significant contributions to the appropriation of Indian miniature painting, particularly by incorporating the contemporary political landscape into their work starting from 2002. Olivia Fraser (b.1965) moved to India in 1989 and started redefining her practice informed by Indian miniature painting tradition. As such there are a number of women who are outside of Indian origine but have re-contextualize Indian miniature painting and have pave way for the neo-miniature tradition.

Singh Twins stated in their inspiration that "we were disappointed to find that within India's Contemporary art scene the miniature genre seemed to have been largely neglected in favour of Western role models by Indian artists and Institutions eager to be accepted by the world of Modern Art. Indian miniature paintings were viewed as a historic and outdated tradition. Consequently, the tradition has only really survived in the form of mass produced, and often badly executed, copies of conventional scenes churned out for the tourist souvenir market." Interestingly, these women artists were predominantly trained in art schools and consciously developed their artistic language to engage with a broader global art scene. However, they did not collaborate with traditional artists, instead forging a unique, intimate relationship with the materials, techniques, and processes of miniature painting, focusing on precision and narrative in their work. Karine Rougier has also examined the tradition of miniature painting from a geographically distant perspective. In today's era of globalization and the internet, such geographical

distances are increasingly irrelevant, allowing for the bridging of gaps between cultures and artistic practices.

Karine Rougier (b. 1982, Malta, South Europe) grew up in Ivory Coast and lives and works in Marseilles (France). Her practice includes a range of media from oil to natural pigments, gouache to graphite. Karine holds a special interest in drawing on various surfaces, like wood, old prints, wasli, found pieces of boat wood, and many more. Her narrative compositions and drawings are sometimes surreal and they blur the lines between fantasy and reality. In the manner of medieval or Indian miniatures, she represents women, masked, disguised creatures, and various rituals. Her inclination toward the detail drawings of hair, tiny figures, and landscape holds her interest in the Indian miniature painting and its intimate handling. She recently exhibited her drawings and paintings in her solo show titled "We who desire endlessly" at the Drawing Lab and 17th edition of the Drawing Now Art Fair in Paris. She showed some of her small format works on wasli that



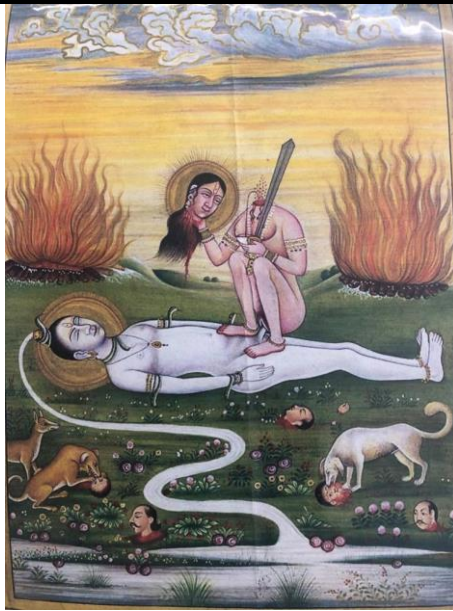
Fig 9



Fig 10

Karine Rougier at a private Gallery Vinita Sharma & Karine Rougier at Santiniketan, 2019

have inspiration from Indian Mythological characters, iconography, or stories. As the primary source of Karine's practice is grounded on childhood memories of the Ivory Coast, filled with extraordinary tales and rituals of bewitchment, her interest in the image of Goddess 'Kali' was quite obvious. She said in one of our conversations that although she was aware of Indian miniature but when she encounters the original miniature painting in India, she got more connected with the iconography, image-making, and mythological stories. Her training in miniature techniques with Ajay and Vinita Sharma has made a visible shift in the representation of her later works.

**Fig 11**

Karine Rougier, inspiration of miniature painting of Chinna-Masta

**Fig-12**

Karin's work in progress, 2023

**Fig- 13****Fig- 14****Fig- 15**

Karine Rougier, Details of paintings

Confluence and Contrast

Unlike artists of non-Indian origin who have settled in India, such as Olivia Fraser, Jethro Buck, Waswo X. Waswo, Alexander Gorlizki, who often engage with Indian miniature painting in specific ways, some artists adopt a more distinct approach in appropriating its iconography. In particular, Karine Rougier's engagement with Indian miniature painting reflects her broader exposure to European miniatures and Greek mythological illustrations, which influence her interpretations. Rougier consciously examines the history of particular iconographies and reshape them to generate new meanings. Her practice positions Indian miniature painting outside traditional institutional frameworks, creating an alternative dialogue with the medium. This engagement, shaped by mythological depictions and the 'exotic' as well as meticulous act of making, underscores a global perspective on appropriation, where historical and cultural narratives are reinterpreted to form contemporary visual languages.

Where as Vinita Sharma with her exposure to European and American culture, has juxtaposed images from two diverse cultural background. Both of them have developed a free flowing, intuitive narrative of their

own. I find it quite interesting that both Vinita and Karine influence the art and design movement shaped by history and culture but both of them respond to the notion of design, narration, and tradition in their distinctive way. Karine with her educational institutional training deliberately choose miniature painting to make her practice wider and more meaningful, whereas Vinita being part of a broader national cultural Identity could not choose any other language to be able to transmit her ideas. Production of miniature paintings was subject to very strict codes within the exact vectors of religious and royal power. Indeed, the exercise of this power shaped all aspects of miniature painting, from the methods of production to the subject matter and modes of representation. It is indeed the most challenging task for an artist like Vinita to find a meaningful space for herself being part of a larger political discourse of Contemporary Art Global Art scenario.

References :

- Bautes, N. (2003), A city within the city. Spatial trends of tourism development in an urban context: Udaipur, in C. Henderson & M. Weisgrau (eds.) (2003) Tourism and cultural Politics in India: the Case of Rajasthan, India's Heritage State, in Press.
- Bautes, N. (2003) « Forms and Expressions of a Local Heritage in a changing socio-economic context: The Case of Ancient Royal Capital of Rajasthan with a special reference to Udaipur City, in Singh, S. & Joshi, V. (eds) (2003) Institutions and Social Change in Contemporary Rajasthan, New Delhi-Jaipur: Rawat Publications.
- Saïd, E. (1978) L'Orientalisme. L'Orient crée par l'Occident. Paris: Ed. Seuil.
- Scott, A.J. (2000) The Cultural Economy of Cities: essays on the geography of Image-Producing industries, London: Sage.
- Urry, J. (2002) The Tourist gaze, 2nd edn, London: Sage.
- Murty, S. (ed.), (1995) The divine Peacock. Understanding Contemporary India, 2nd ed, New Delhi: Indian Council for Cultural Relations.
- Bagol, Yogeshchandra, (1822-1922), The Centenary volume of Govt. College of Art and Craft
- Chatterjee, Partha. (1993). Princeton: Princeton University Press The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories.
- Ray, Sangeeta, (2000), Duke University Press, Durham and London. En-Gendering India, Woman and Nation in Colonial and Postcolonial Narratives.
- Bhattacharya, K. S. (1966). The Story of Indian Art. Michigan: The University of Michigan.
- Randhawa, S. M. (1981). Indian Miniature Painting. New Delhi: Roli Books International.
- Berggruen Gallery. (n.d.). *Alexander Gorlizki - Artists*. John Berggruen Gallery. Retrieved March 13, 2025, from <https://www.berggruen.com/artists/alexander-gorlizki>
- Sen, G. (2024). Alchemy: Contemporary Indian painting and miniature traditions (Classic Edition). Mapin Publishing.