

Revisiting the Miniature: The Enduring Legacy from Abanindranath Tagore to Contemporary Indian Art

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Abstract

Miniature painting, revitalized by Abanindranath Tagore during the colonial period, played a central role in the nationalist art movement led by the Bengal School of Art. Tagore's works synthesized elements from Mughal, Rajput, and Pahari miniature traditions, establishing a visual idiom that countered Western academic art. His approach not only celebrated Indian heritage but also laid the foundation for future generations of artists to re-engage with miniature styles. This paper aims to explore the evolving influence of miniature painting from its revival by Abanindranath Tagore to its reinterpretation by contemporary Indian artists. It investigates how traditional miniature aesthetics have been transformed and recontextualized to address modern themes, including sociopolitical issues, personal narratives, and cultural hybridity. The study involves a critical analysis of key works by Abanindranath Tagore alongside the contemporary practices of artists such as Ghulam Mohammad Sheikh, Waswo X Waswo, Shahzia Sikander, and Manjunath Kamath. Through comparative visual analysis and contextual interpretation, the paper traces stylistic continuities and thematic shifts in the use of miniature techniques. The findings reveal that contemporary artists have adapted the miniature style in diverse and innovative ways. Ghulam Mohammad Sheikh fuses historical and mythical narratives with modern concerns through layered compositions. Shahzia Sikander redefines the miniature form to address gender, identity, and geopolitics on a global stage. Waswo X Waswo and Manjunath Kamath similarly engage with the miniature tradition, merging it with digital media, satire, and postmodern storytelling. The influence of miniature painting extends beyond stylistic imitation; it serves as a conceptual framework through which artists reinterpret tradition in contemporary contexts. From Abanindranath Tagore's revivalist vision to today's experimental and critical adaptations, miniature painting continues to evolve as a dynamic and relevant art form in the modern world.

Keywords: Indian Miniature Painting, Abanindranath Tagore Bengal school of Art, Rajput Pahari painting, Gulam Mohammed Sheikh, Waswo X Wasswo, Manjunath Kamath, Shahzia Sikander, Contemporary Miniature painting

1. Introduction

Background of Indian Miniature Painting

Indian miniature paintings are known for their fine detail and brilliant color application. This art has a deep history. It grew in popularity in the Mughal Empire and later in the Rajput, Pahari, and Deccan schools. In Mughal times the patronage of rulers like Akbar, and Jahangir Sahajahan, the masterpieces like "Hamzanama"(1558-1573), and "Akbarnama"(1590-1596) showed high-quality artworks.

In the early 19th century, the Swadeshi movement emerged as a major role in India, protesting against colonialism and encouraging self-sufficiency. In 1905, Abanindranath Tagore painted "Bharat Mata". This painting had a big impact on the Indian people. It reflected the spirit of the Swadeshi movement and evoked a sense of patriotism that was like a volcanic eruption.

Miniature painting is still relevant today. Artists are incorporating contemporary themes, taking elements from old miniature paintings or juxtaposing them. Contemporary artists like Ghulam Mohammad Sheikh, Waswo X waswo, Sajia Sikandar, and Manjunath Kamath have expanded the boundaries of miniature painting. They have explored materials and technology in their paintings. Their paintings have created a historical and cultural connection. This study focused on the continuity and transformation of miniature painting from Abanindranath Tagore to the present day.

Some Notable artists and their art work influenced by Indian Miniature paintings

- Abanindranath Tagore
- Gulam Mohammad Sheikh
- Waswo X Waswo
- Shahzia Sikander
- Manjunath Kamath

Abanindranath Paintings

Abanindranath learned his Western painting skills from Signor Gilhardi and Charles Palmer, which he skillfully mixed with Indian traditional painting(cave painting, Ajanta, Mughal). In his early paintings such as the Krishna Leela series, there is a collaboration of Western perspective and proportion with the Indian miniature painting approach. E.B. Havell who instructed him to explore Indian traditional art.

On the advice of A. B. Havel, Abanindranath Tagore studied Indian art and culture and was inspired by Rajput, Mughal, and Ajanta-Ellora painting styles. He learned academic painting methods from the Japanese artist

Okakura Kakuzo. By combining these different styles and techniques, he gave birth to a new style. His notable paintings include the Krishna lila series, The Passing of Shahjahan, and Omar Khayyam (Nandakumar, K., 2015).

His paintings painted between 1897 and 1900 show the influence of medieval miniatures, such as the Birth of Buddha, the Scene of Buddha and Sujata, and the Death of Shah Jahan. His paintings painted between 1906 and 1911 show the influence of Mughal miniatures, such as Omar Khayyam (Shil, Bilasendu, p. 117). Abanindranath used watercolors, the subject matter of which was mainly related to Indian mythology, religion, and history.



Figure 1: Krishna with Cowboys, **Source:** Abanindranath Tagore - Google Arts & Culture. https://artsandculture.google.com/story/abanindranath-tagore-victoria-memorial-hall/HgXx4Bz_4BcPLg?hl=en

"Krishna with the Cowherds" (*Image 1*) is one of Abanindranath Tagore's early paintings, which show the use of Western influences alongside Indian miniature techniques. The surface texture and colour palette of the painting are similar to the Indian miniature style, and the Bengali script at the bottom reflects the scriptural quality of miniature painting. The right-hand section is inspired by the Mughal painting "Tutinama (*Image 2*)". However, the characters depicted in this work express the European style (Banerji, A., & Majumdar, A. 2021), which he had already mastered. By combining these two methods in a single painting, Tagore initiated an important transformation in Indian modern painting.

"Passing of Shah Jahan"1902 (*Image 3*) is an important painting that demonstrates the artist's mastery of the Mughal



Figure 2: Second Night; **Source:** Rooftop. (2023, December 19). Tales of a Parrot: Emperor Akbar's fascination with the Tuti-nama. Retrieved from <https://rooftopapp.com/tales-of-a-parrot-emperor-akbars-fascination-with-the-tuti-nama/>

style and his distinctive compositional style. In this painting, the artist skillfully combines many features of the Mughal style, such as the rich architectural background, exquisite textiles, and delicate floral designs, all of which are meticulously rendered.

There is an emotional attachment to this composition. It depicts Shah Jahan counting down the days to his death, a narrative, and the floral and geometric patterns that are characteristic of miniature paintings.

"Marriage of Nurudin" (*Image 4*) This painting is by Abanindranath, the next painting (*Image 5*) is from Akbarnama and the next painting (*Image 6*) is in Rajput's miniature. The seen in Akbarnama where the king is riding an elephant and many people are gathered, in Abanindranath's painting, the gathering of people and the architectural references are like Mughal style. The brilliance of the colors is like the Rajput style. He has created a beautiful fusion of many styles and processes. Abanindranath has shown us the importance of traditional culture and art practice, finding a unique expression for his time.

Next, I would like to explore the influence of Indian miniature painting on the work of modern contemporary artists. A notable contemporary artist, Ghulam Mohammad Sheikh, has been inspired by the perspective of the miniature style and has incorporated it in his way into the modern contemporary world.

Gulam Mohammed Sheikh

Ghulam Mohammad Sheikh has beautifully reinterpreted Indian miniature paintings in his unique style. In his painting *City for Sale*, the streets and houses of Surendranagar, where he once lived, emerge vividly, reflecting his deep connection to the place. This painting is not only a realistic representation, but more than that, his mind has been expressed more expressively. The



Figure 3: The Passing of Shah Jahan; **Source:** The Passing of Shah Jahan. (2023, May 17). Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Passing_of_Shah_Jahan

perspective of this painting, the trees seem to have more of a Persian influence. Sheikh's paintings have a collage effect, a technique he mastered when he was in England. He used to mix various photographs, use social and political issues in his paintings, and with that a wide range of perspectives. In an interview, he said that he drew the outside view from his house through the window and then drew the inside of the house from the outside, merging the two to create a multiple perspective.

Ghulam Mohammad Sheikh's paintings display a narrative that can be seen as a style of Mughal miniature painting. Mughal artists' paintings of Baswan and Miskin depict a gathering of many people, such as the king with his soldiers, a possession. Tilted perspective and high detailing were used in the paintings, similarly, when you look at Ghulam's works, you can find that flavor somewhere.

Ghulam Mohammad Sheikh's painting "Meghdoot" (*Image 8*) uses aerial perspective, the buildings seem to be coming down step by step, to see this perspective a little more, I have put the picture made by Faizullah at the Mughal Miniature School (*Image 9*), here I am trying to see how much miniature influence there is in the perspective, space division.

The artist lives in Surendranagar, this painting from *City of Sale* (*Image 10*) has an impression of the streets of Surendranagar. This painting is not only a realistic representation but also a lot of emotion. At that time there was a riot, he presented that narrative, where many common



Figure 4: Marriage of Nuruddin; **Source:** Marriage of Nuruddin - Abanindranath Tagore - Google Arts & Culture. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/marriage-of-nuruddin-abanindranath-tagore/_gHeUQxiIspdUw?hl=en

people were present. If you look at the trees and angels in this painting, you can see the influence of the Persian style. Behind this painting, I have placed a painting by Mukund Sarkar taken from Akbarnama (*Image 11*). From this, I want to understand how the composition arrangement is inspired by the Mughal style.

Ghulam Mohammad Sheikh had mastered the college style when he lived in England. Photographs, history, and social and political issues are present in his work. So we can see that contemporary subject matter and miniature style is coming in his work .

Waswo X Waswo

Now I am going to discuss Waswo X Waswo. Waswo X. Waswo (born 1953) is an American visitor, poet, and photographer who has carved out a distinct place for himself in the Indian art scene over the last two decades. He has his studio in the state of Rajasthan, India. His association with local artists, notably miniaturist painters like Dalpat Jingar, has played an important role in his artistic development.

His work is renowned for its intricate workmanship and complex narrative content, which considerably expands the visual language of modern miniature paintings. Waswo's style is profoundly steeped in the traditions of Mughal Miniature Paintings, Mewar Court Miniatures, and The Company School, but he modernizes them by incorporating contemporary subjects and sensibilities.

Waswo's painting (*Image 12*) is presented in the Rajasthani Bundi style of miniature painting. The depiction of diverse plants like banana trees, fan-shaped trees, thick branches of mango trees and tall, linear trees accentuate the ornamentation as seen in the Bundi School of Miniature Painting. Further, the dramatic sky, water with lotuses,



Figure 5: Akbarnama; **Source:** The Akbarnama: A Digital Art History Student Project. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://hkeshani.github.io/darc/akbarnama/>

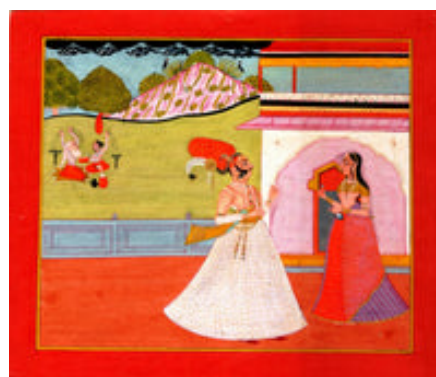


Figure 6: **Source:** Rajasthani Kota Painting Handmade Indian Miniature Rajput Maharajah Folk Art. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://artnindia.com/products/copy-of-rajasthani-kota-painting-handmade-indian-miniature-rajput-maharajah-folk-art-1>



Figure 7: Meghdoot; **Source:** Meghdoot - contemporary art. (Google Arts & Culture) Meghdoot - Gulammohammed Sheikh - Google Arts & Culture. (n.d.-d). Retrieved from <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/meghdoot-gulammohammed-sheikh/MQHLcxcIYBbM3w>



Figure 8: Women bathing before an architectural panorama (1765); **Source:** Rethinking The Future. *Exploring the colours of the past through the miniature paintings of Mughal architecture in India.* Retrieved February 24, 2025, from <https://www.re-thinkingthefuture.com/architectural-community/a6650-exploring-the-colours-of-the-past-through-the-miniature-paintings-of-mughal-architecture-in-india/>



Figure 10: Rai Surjan Hada making Submission to Akbar; **Source:** Museum, V. a. A. (n.d.-b). Rai Surjan Hada making Submission to Akbar | Shankar | Mukund | V&A Explore The Collections. Retrieved from <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O9608/rai-surjan-hada-making-submission-painting-mukund/>



Figure 9: City for Sale; **Source:** Museum, V. a. A. (n.d.). City for Sale | Sheikh, Gulammohammed | V&A Explore The Collections. Retrieved from <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O71784/city-for-sale-painting-sheikh-gulammohammed/>

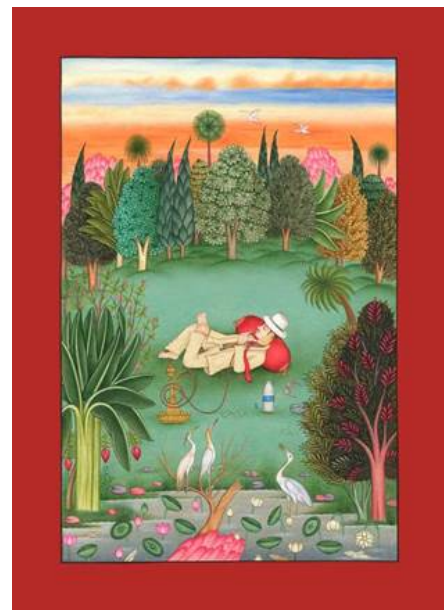


Figure 11: A dream in Bundi; **Source:** Waswo X. Waswo | Galerie ISA. (n.d.-b). Retrieved from <https://galerieisa.com/artist/waswo-x/>



Figure 12: Dream of the orientalist 25,2022; **Source:** Waswo X. Waswo | Galerie Isa. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://galerieisa.com/artist/waswo-x/>

mountains and cranes are elements characteristic of the Bundi style of painting. The pink mountains in the background and the addition of various patterned trees in the foreground add to Waswo's creative representation of the revival of the old style of Indian miniature painting tradition. Like Lord Krishna, who is often depicted playing the flute around cows near the Yamuna river in miniature paintings, here Waswo is trying to create a similar representation by depicting himself smoking a hookah near a pond with birds and flowers delighting nature. Here, the artist Waswo is the center of attraction, painting a Krishna-like figure in Indian miniature painting. The combination of classic miniature painting methods with Waswo's current, self-referential subject matter results in a distinctive and entertaining artwork that combines historical beauty with contemporary comedy (Jalan, 2020).

This painting (Image 13) shows the influence of the Bundi School. An influence of the Bundi School can be seen in the trees, plants, lotuses, and figures. Lord Krishna used to play with gopis, the artist himself thought like Krishna himself and played with the royal queens. The female figures are all busy harvesting, and the artist wearing a Western dress has gone down to the water lake, raising both hands and asking for help. This is how the narrative of the painting is portrayed very beautifully. The artist has created a fusion of his tradition with the Indian miniature tradition.

Shahzia Sikander

Another prominent artist in the realm of contemporary miniature painting is Shahzia Sikander, a Pakistan-born American artist. Born in Lahore in 1969, Sikander has redefined the traditional miniature style by blending it with contemporary themes, exploring issues of identity,

culture, and globalization. Her works are heavily influenced by manuscripts and miniature paintings. Sikander's work transforms the centuries-old history of miniature paintings, rich in diversity and cultural characteristics, using an exciting and inventive technique. Her paintings explore topics such as colonialism, self-identity, female power, relocation, social and political challenges, and childhood memories. Her artwork incorporates all of these components, resulting in a varied and significant tale.

This painting named "The Scroll" (Image 14) by Sahajiya Sikander is a horizontal presentation where she emphasizes the miniature quality and break the rule of miniature painting. Paintings in this format often feature mythological subject matter, but she has also brought out her own autobiographical qualities here. In this painting, the artist has depicted his own childhood home. A memory has worked in his mind. His presence in this painting is like a ghost. He is traveling from one room to another at the same time. (Raagini Riya, 2022)

Manjunath Kamath

Kamath was initially influenced by Persian miniatures, architecture (Middle East), Victorian motifs, and Chinese pottery. (Chawla, 2020) The Karnataka-based artist demonstrates a strong skill in miniature painting in his work. He is skilled in a variety of mediums, including digital photography, sculpture, and installation. In miniature painting, spatial separation is essential. Kamath's paintings often capture the spirit of space, with most of the area left empty while the borders or corners are filled with an item. Kamath's art features multi-perspective and two-dimensional elements, which are common in Mughal paintings. He depicts his themes in a playful and often humorous manner. In today's globalized world, Kamath incorporates figures from classic paintings, such as those of Ravi Varma, as well as modern subjects, combining history with his ideas. Thus, Kamath, while influenced by Mughal art, has his distinct way. Here are some examples of Kamath's paintings.

Kamath tells stories through his paintings (Image 15). However, his stories are not fixed and unchanging; rather, they are constantly changing and adapting to the environment, so that the story carries new meaning each time. As a visual artist, Kamath feels the need to constantly reinvent his storytelling. By constantly working on his own expression and modernizing his artistic techniques, he constantly gives new dimensions to his pictorial language.



Figure 13: “The Scroll,” 1989–90(Watercolor and gouache on tea-stained wasli paper); **Source:** The Scroll. (2021, June 24). Retrieved from <https://www.themorgan.org/exhibitions/online/shahzia-sikander/scroll>



Figure 14: Someone Doing Something in Historical City 2006; Source: Modern And Contemporary Indian Art -Dec 3-4, 2014 -Lot 20 -B Manjunath Kamath. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.saffronart.com/auctions/postwork.aspx?l=13784>

2. Conclusion

The appeal and influence of the miniature style in modern Indian painting have set a unique precedent. The renaissance initiated by Abanindranath Tagore was not just a revival of a traditional style, but also a profound soul-searching of art. His artistic ideas, representations, and philosophical views have permeated subsequent artists and laid the foundation for various experimental attempts in contemporary painting. painting in their paintings, sometimes in space division, sometimes in elements. That is, this art has been practiced for time after time.

Waso x Waso, Manjunath Kamath, Shahzia Sikandar, Ghulam Mohammad Sheikh—these artists have created their own identities by being inspired by the style, materials, and structural subtleties of miniature painting. Waso x Waso highlights political and social realities by combining Western painting styles and Indian miniature painting. Manjunath Kamath has taken the traditional pictorial language into a new framework and conducted philosophical research. Shahzia Sikandar presents feminism, migration, and political realities by combining elements of Islamic miniature painting and modern perspectives. Ghulam Mohammad Sheikh has given a new language to contemporary art by blending history and literature on his canvas.

Studying the work of these artists, we understand that miniatures are not just a relic of the past, but an important medium for modern thinking. They have taken from tradition its artistic subtlety, symbolic representation, and storytelling power, and made it timely. Through research, we realize that miniatures continue to be a vehicle for the excellence of artists' thinking and are giving rise to new perspectives in contemporary art practice. The work of these artists teaches us to establish a link between tradition and modernity and reveals the future potential of miniature.

Authorship contribution

Tanmay Sen is the sole contributor to this research article titled “*Revisiting the Miniature: The Enduring Legacy from Abanindranath Tagore to Contemporary Indian Art.*” He conceptualized the research topic, conducted the literature review, and analyzed the artworks discussed. He was responsible for writing, structuring, and editing the manuscript. All interpretations and conclusions presented are his original contributions. The author approves the final version for submission.

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Similarity Index

I hereby confirm that there is less than 10% Plagiarism was achieved in this case study.

Data availability statement

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Declaration

The author declares that this paper is an original work and has not been published or submitted elsewhere. All external sources have been properly cited.

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