SHADES OF THE
DIVINE

New SAM exhibit highlights
the mind-altering colors of Indian painting

BY SHEILA FARR
Seattle Times art critic

Indian painters of the Hindu and Mughal courts began
each picture by mixing their own pigments: blue from
ground lapis lazuli, iridescent green from beetle casings,
red from vermilion and lead, silver and gold from precious
metals. And how did they get that gorgeous, ever-present
Indian yellow? They distilled it from the urine of cows fed
exclusively on mango leaves.

Mind-altering color is a hallmark of traditional Indian
painting. It’s used to help express the erotic yearning
between humans and immortals, the clashes between
monsters and gods, and the trappings of power among the
ruling class. The small paintings were bound in manuscripts
or assembled in folios to illustrate epic poems and royal
histories. Originally, they were held and examined closely,
one by one.

That close contact won’t be
possible in the double show opening
tonight at Seattle Art Muse-
um. But the considerate installation — complete with carpets and
cushions to lounge on, mauve-
colored walls, and music that com-
plements certain pictures — is
certainly the next-best thing. The
exhibition explores the old styles
of South Asian painting and the
way two contemporary women
artists — one Indian, one born in
Pakistan — are refreshing those
traditions for the 21st century. If
you have a magnifying glass, you
may want to bring it: The fine de-
tail in both the classical and con-
temporary work is astonishing.

“Intimate Worlds: Master-
pieces of Indian Painting from the
Alvin O. Bellak Collection” fea-
tures 90 paintings, most in mini-
ture format, that date back to a 14th-century manuscript
page, one of the earliest works on paper produced in India.
The latest works in the collection date to the 19th century
and the advent of photography, which put many Indian
court painters out of business.

On the other side of the gauze curtains from “Intimate
Worlds” hangs a show of contemporary art: “Conver-
sations with Traditions: Nilima Sheikh and Shahzia Sik-
ander.” Both are contemporary artists who mine the past for
imagery and techniques, then use them in unconventional
ways. Sikander has been at SAM since last week, working
on a mural in the entryway to the exhibition. She and Da-
rielle Mason, Indian art curator at the Philadelphia Museum
of Art (where “Intimate Worlds” originated) will dis-
cuss Indian and Pakistani painting at 7:30 this evening
during opening-night festivities. The museum will stay

The Alvin O. Bellak collection favors masculine
themes, such as this 17th century portrait of Rajput
warrior-prince Rao Ratan.

Pakistani-born
painter
Shahzia Sikander
evokes today’s
symbols through
traditional
techniques. D 2

PLEASE SEE SAM ON D 2
Detailed artist evokes today’s world with ancient Indian techniques

BY SHEILA FARR
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Growing up in Pakistan in the 1970s, all Shahzia Sikander knew about traditional Indian miniature painting was the kitschy stuff she saw being produced for tourists. She hated it.

“I didn’t completely grasp the old work. You’re not born with it,” she said Tuesday, sitting among her paintings at Seattle Art Museum. “It was a very conscious decision on my part to understand the history of Indian painting.”

Her work is part of the new exhibit, “Conversations with Traditions: Nilima Sheikh and Shahzia Sikander.”

Sheik, born in New Delhi in 1945, references in her work the traumatic social events that accompanied the severing of India and Pakistan in 1947.

Sikander, born in Lahore, Pakistan in 1969 and now living in New York, puts social issues in a more personal context.

When Sikander went to art school in Lahore, she decided to study miniature painting, from making her own pigments to the painstakingly intricate paint application. She was the only one at the school who took the traditional approach seriously, and her final project — a single epic painting titled “The Scroll” on view at SAM — was a year in the making.

After Sikander moved to the United States for graduate school and her work started getting international attention, things changed. Now, she says, lots of art students in Pakistan are learning to paint miniatures — you can get famous that way, they say — and even copy her style, blending traditional techniques with a personal vocabulary of symbols and contemporary innovations.

Sikander’s paintings are technically awe-inspiring, so exquisitely rendered it takes a magnifying glass to appreciate their minute detail. They are also utterly attuned to the present and to trends in 20th-century art. Her drawing “Dark Kingdoms” shows the outline of a Mughal prince joined at the heart to a shirtless young tough, his baseball cap stuck on backwards, an earring in his left ear. The picture, reminiscent of Frida Kahlo’s double self-portraits, characterizes the way Sikander imagines her own work and self-image — joined to a strong tradition, but incorporating an increasingly global culture.

“Conversations with Traditions: Nilima Sheikh and Shahzia Sikander” is a satisfying counterpart to the traditional paintings of “Intimate Worlds” and reveals the deeply rooted cultural past shared by Hindus and Muslims.