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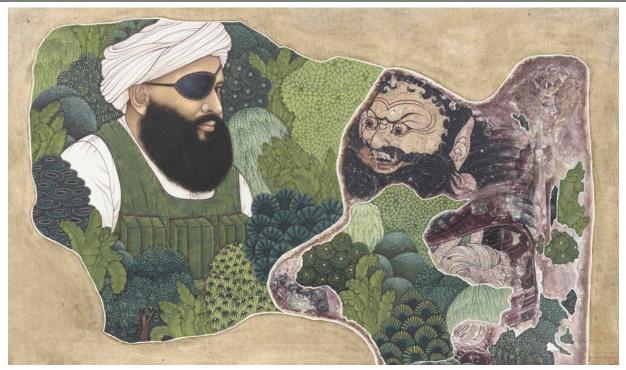


Fig. 1 Waseem Ahmed, Perturbing Dialog, 2014, pigment colours on wasli paper, 30.7 x 52.8 cm. Asian Art Museum, inv.no. I 6082. © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum für Asiatische Kunst. Photograph by Jörg von Bruchhausen

How come Vajrapani meets a Taliban Warrior in the Woods of North India?

Christine Bruckbauer

Last fall, the Humboldt Lab Dahlem¹⁾ invited Waseem Ahmed to create a contemporary art intervention for the Asian Art Museum in Berlin.²⁾ The agenda of the Humboldt Lab Dahlem is to prepare the Dahlem Museums for a new era in the future Humboldt-Forum.³⁾ Scrutinizing

- For more information, see http://www.humboldt-forum.de/ en/humboldt-lab-dahlem/ and http://www.kulturstiftung-desbundes.de/cms/en/index.html.
- The initiative actually came from Martina Stoye, the museum's curator for South Asian and South East Asian art. Her project proposal, submitted to the board of the Humboldt Lab Dahlem, was welcomed enthusiastically. Thanks to her enormous engagement and due to continuous support from the Lab team the very complex project was successfully carried out.
- 3) The Humboldt-Forum is to be installed in the Berlin Palace, which is currently being reconstructed. Its inauguration is planned for 2019. The Asian Art Museum as well as the Ethnological Museum of Berlin in Dahlem will be part of the new Humboldt-Forum.

conventional museum concepts on so-called 'rehearsal stages' would open up new contextual dimensions that question presentation norms and rethink the communication of distinctive collections. Hereby, emphasis is placed on international exchange as well as diversifying collaborations.⁴⁾

Waseem Ahmed is a renowned player on the scene of contemporary miniature painting, which has emerged through the re-animation of traditional Indian court painting. Therefore, it was rather surprising for museum staff when the artist chose to enter into dialogue with fragments of Buddhist wall paintings from Central Asia, instead of the treasures from the museum's remarkable collection of Mughal and Rajput painting. Yet, Waseem Ahmed was most drawn to precisely these fragmented

⁴⁾ See leaflet *Probebühne 5* [*Rehearsal Stage 5*], Humboldt Lab Dahlem, 2014.

pieces from Xinjiang, with their ample areas of effaced surface. They provided him with the space to project his own imagination and imagery.

Over a period of forty-eight days, a traditional painting workshop called a *karkhana* was set up within the museum. There, visitors could not only observe the genesis of a new body of work unfolding but also had the chance to pick up a paint brush themselves and receive a taste of the art of miniature painting under the guidance of the guest master. During his residency in Berlin-Dahlem, Waseem Ahmed has produced four new paintings (**Figs. 1, 12, 15, 17**). Three of them incorporate the imagery of the selected Buddhist paintings and reframe them within a highly charged contemporary context. The fourth refers to the famous oil painting "The Man with the Golden Helmet", at home at the Gemäldegalerie Berlin.⁵⁾

Once again, these works attest to the great potency of a reinvigorated discipline of contemporary miniature painting, where the highest caliber of draftsmanship generates a delicate sense of visual delight (in terms of form and content), when married to the highly desirable concept of a peaceful coexistence between diverse ethnic groups.

Contemporary Miniature Painting

Today, the term *contemporary miniature painting* is understood as a radical art movement, which originated at the National College of Arts in Lahore, Pakistan, and identifies more or less contemporary art production bearing reference (technically or iconographically) to the historical court painting on the Indian Subcontinent.

'Miniature painting', parenthetically, is a term, which was introduced by the British in Colonial India, motivated by a desire to categorize everything alien as a means of hegemonic control. The name was mistakenly coined due to the paintings' small size and superficial resemblance to medieval illuminations.⁶⁾

During the colonial period, European techniques like oil painting and printmaking were introduced in newly founded art schools in South Asia, while traditional 'miniature painting' was shifted to a 'minor' in the field of applied arts. It remained categorized thus until it was upgraded to a 'major' in 1982, placed on par with printmaking, painting and sculpture within the academic masters program in the Fine Arts Department of the National College of Arts (NCA).⁷⁾

It is not incidental that the academic establishment of miniature painting within its own department of the NCA coincides with the Islamic socialist agenda of Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who tried to create a national identity for the young state. The search for a distinctive identity was a means to separate itself from post-independence India. The glorified Muslim past with its grand Mughal heritage was therefore destined to be an ideal focal point for this pursuit of a new identity.⁸⁾

It was Bashir Ahmed who was assigned with the "challenging task to convert the traditional art form into the academic syllabus". Bashir Ahmed, the last custodian of the exquisite Mughal painting style, was still trained within the *ustad-shagrid* (master-apprentice) legacy. Bloodline descendants of princely court painters ¹⁰⁾ had been his teachers and had inducted him into the alchemy of album painting. In those days, paints were still made of precious stone pigments and insect wings were applied to produce a jewel-like lustrous effect.

While in the traditional workshops, the apprentices reputedly spent more than eight years as copyists; Ustad Ahmed's students attended a four-year long training program at the NCA. Beginning with copying Persian and Mughal paintings, they later moved to works of the Rajput and Pahari schools. Only in the last few months of their thesis preparations, modern vocabulary and technical experimentation was allowed. In Bashir Ahmed's opinion, "only the technique makes a miniature painting a miniature painting" and technique is acquired by endeavored repetition.¹¹⁾

⁵⁾ Like the Asian Art Museum, the Gemäldegalerie Berlin belongs to the Berlin State Museums (http://www.smb.museum/en/museumsand-institutions/gemaeldegalerie/home.html). Martina STOYE (email 5/20/2015) clarifies here that Waseem Ahmed initially was asked to contribute either to the collection of the Asian Art Museum or to work in a wider context on the city of Berlin.

⁶⁾ The term 'miniature' originally had no implication as to size. It describes an artwork, especially manuscript of initials, done with a red lead pigment 'minium'. According to British scholar Eleanor SIMS (email 7/26/2005), the technical manner of painting in the East does not in the least involve the use of the red clay 'minium', as a foundation for gold, as it is used almost exclusively in Western painting. See BRUCKBAUER 2007: 27-29.

⁷⁾ BRUCKBAUER 2007: 29; SIMS (email 5/22/2004).

⁸⁾ Bruckbauer 2007: 46.

⁹⁾ AHMED 2000.

¹⁰⁾ Haji Mohammad Sharif was born in 1889 into a famous family of court painters from Patiala. Sheikh Shuja Ullah, born 1912 in Alwar, started his career as a court painter in the small Rajput state Amber before migrating to Pakistan during the partition.

¹¹⁾ Bashir Ahmed, interview with the author 4/29/2004.

For more than three decades (1982-2014), Bashir Ahmed passed on his precious knowledge to a platoon of students. His orthodox and hierarchical teaching style, which also included manufacturing painters' tools like the fine squirrel-hair brushes and the *wasli*, a specific type of handmade paper, was often accused of out-datedness.

However, in the early 1990s, students started to blur the boundaries of the meanwhile rusty discipline and use the seductive aesthetic as a strategy for critical reflections on contemporary issues. For some of them, this formative education would become a springboard for an international career from which they would harvest great distinction. Today, these artists participate in and submit their work to important shows at museums, biennales and art fairs all around the world.

Only recently, Bashir Ahmed went into retirement. There was hardly a single successor to be found who could equal him in his devotion to the tradition. Quddus Mirza, the actual head of the Department of Fine Arts, therefore nominated a number of former graduates to teach in the Miniature Department.¹²⁾ Some of them, like Imran Qureshi and Hasnat Mehmood, are well recognized internationally.

Waseem Ahmed also intermittently taught drawing and miniature painting at the NCA from 2005-2008. Due to other commitments, he has not been able to pursue Mirza's recent request that he again takes up a teaching position there. ¹³⁾

Waseem Ahmed was born in 1976 in Hyderabad, one of the hottest and most humid towns in Sindh, the southern part of Pakistan. His father earned a moderate income with his welding workshop while his mother took care of the household and the six children.

At an early age, Waseem Ahmed was already showing considerable talent in drawing and started to work for a billboard painter. Later he had the opportunity to attend drawing and painting classes at the Iranian Cultural Center and the Fine Arts Department at Sindh University in Hyderabad. His teachers must have had absolute confidence in the young talent, as they persuaded his family to send him to Pakistan's most prestigious art school, the National College of Arts in Lahore. There, Waseem Ahmed increasingly discovered an interest in traditional miniature painting and decided on Bashir Ahmed's



Fig. 2 Waseem Ahmed, Burqa Series (Eve), 2001, pigment colours and tea wash on wasli paper, 35.6 x 25.4 cm. Collection Salima Hashmi. Photograph by Rohtas 2 Gallery

department. Today, the artist talks about the hardship of these four formative years, of his struggling with the prevailing archaic teaching methods and the severity with which the *ustad* especially treated students of modest family backgrounds.

In 2000, Waseem Ahmed completed his academic degree and very soon afterwards began to paint series with a focus on certain socio-political themes. They attracted attention immediately.

Burga Series

The paintings in the *Burqa Series* depict exquisite reproductions of celebrated nudes in Western art history. Draped in filament-thin transparent *burqas*, these nudes have been compressed and resituated within contemporary

¹²⁾ MIRZA (facebook message 2/2/2015).

¹³⁾ Waseem Ahmed, interview with the author 11/4-10/2014.

¹⁴⁾ He might have inherited his talent from his grandfather's brother, who was a painter in the Indian railway service.



Fig. 3 Waseem Ahmed, Burqa Series (Olympia), 2001, pigment colours and tea wash on wasli paper, 13 x 16.5 cm. Private collection. Photograph by the artist

miniature frames. The artworks' launch was perfectly timed, coinciding with the re-inflamed *hijab* debate, which reached its climax in the immediate aftermath of 9/11.¹⁵⁾

Hans Baldung Grien's *Eve*¹⁶ acts as premier source of inspiration (**Fig. 2**). Separated from her male counterpart, the primeval woman finds herself in an oriental environment, still bearing the fateful fruit in her left hand. Meanwhile, a gossamer-thin *burqa* alludes to an altogether new dimension. Softly flowing, transparent gauze conceals her face, whilst her voluptuous body is revealed in all its splendor.¹⁷

Next, it is Manet's scandalous *Olympia* of 1863 rendered captivatingly in the exquisite garment (**Fig. 3**). Olympia has abandoned her plump white feather bed in exchange for a rustic camp. The stage-curtain-like drape and the *gao-takkiyah*, a traditional thick bolster, are both unmistakable remnants from historical court painting, where voluptuous princesses recline in wait for their lovers (**Fig. 4**).



Fig. 4
Detail from Dipak Raga,
Seduction scene from a
Ragamala album,
North India, Lakhnau,
ca. 1775/80,
gouache on wasli paper,
30 x 23.2 cm.
Asian Art Museum,
inv. no. I 5062-18.
© Staatliche Museen
zu Berlin, Museum für
Asiatische Kunst.
Photograph by
Jörg von Bruchhausen

And yet again, the beautiful Victorine Meurent, the model who posed for Manet's *Olympia*, is captured in the *burqa*, this time as she is stolen away from the famous *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1863) under male escort (**Fig. 5**). As in the afore-mentioned paintings, Waseem Ahmed replaces the original background with a wash of tea stains. This technique with natural pigments was used to create illusory, spacious settings within portraiture and studies of animals in Moghul art. The melting stained backgrounds stand for everything earthly and identify specific landscapes and continents. Ominous thunderstorm clouds announce violence and bloodshed. The spontaneously applied wash contrasts vividly with the meticulous execution of figures, highlighting the fragility of humanity.

The same concept is repeated with Sandro Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingre's *La Grande Odalisque*, *The Turkish Bath*, *La Baigneuse de Valpincon*, etc. Waseem Ahmed takes possession of all of these classical Western nudes by swathing them in his exquisite *shuttlecock burqas*. ¹⁸⁾

Here, the artist's approach to the clichéd male gaze, subject to elaborate analysis by feminist art historians like film theorist Laura Mulvey, is contextualized "in a world ordered by sexual imbalance [where] pleasures in looking [have] been split between active male and passive female". Women are objectified in relation to the controlling *male*

¹⁵⁾ The debate around the veil has also taken place in contemporary art discourse. One of the most influential art projects is documented in the publication *Veil: Veiling, Representation, and Contemporary Art* (BAILEY & TAWADROS 2003).

¹⁶⁾ The diptych representing Adam and Eve from ca. 1507 is part of the collection in the Landesmuseum Mainz. It is attributed to Albrecht Dürer's workshop, where Hans Baldung Grien was one of the most important members.

¹⁷⁾ Garments of similar light material are worn by courtiers in traditional miniature painting. Made of the most superior muslins, they were called by such poetic names as *Ab-e-Rawan* (running water), *Baft Hawa* (woven air) and *Shabnam* (evening dew). See LAL 1988: 122.

¹⁸⁾ The *shuttlecock burqa* is an all-encompassing veil, traditionally worn by women from Afghanistan and Northern Pakistan. In the Afghani war, in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, the blue *shuttlecock burqa* became a misinterpreted target symbol. The liberation of women from the *burqa* was celebrated in the Western media and was used to justify the deaths of thousands of victims and human tragedies during the war.



Fig. 5 Waseem Ahmed, Burqa Series (Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe), 2001, pigment colours and tea wash on wasli paper, 17.8 x 22.9 cm. Private collection. Photograph by the artist

gaze, and "obsessively subordinated to the neurotic needs of the male ego". 19)

Waseem Ahmed uses the veil in a context similar to the one that Orientalists dealt with in the 19th and early 20th century. They discovered the veil as a symbol of mysticism, exoticism and eroticism. Gazing through it, the woman becomes an object of fantasy, excitement and desire.

The scenery turns controversy when the Orientalist gaze is avenged. In an act of postcolonial retribution, it is now the Western woman who becomes the object of exotic desire for a predominantly Oriental audience.²⁰⁾

Krishna Series

Waseem Ahmed celebrated his breakthrough abroad with his next project, the *Krishna Series*. A significant contribution to this may have been the scandal where Waseem Ahmed's paintings provoked violent reactions from Hindu fundamentalists and an entire group show in Bombay was taken down.²¹⁾ The series draws on the popular love story between Krishna and Radha from the *Gita Govinda*, illustrated in many Rajput paintings. The traditional iconography is subverted when the handsome Hindu god is dressed in jeans and a T-Shirt (he bears



Fig. 6 Waseem Ahmed, Krishna Series, 2001, pigment colours and tea wash on wasli paper, 14 x 20.3 cm. Private collection. Photograph by the artist

some token resemblance to the artist). His beloved is not Radha, the milkmaid, but the American sex symbol Marilyn Monroe, who lounges on a giant sunflower bed (**Fig. 6**).²²⁾

The framing, rectangular subdivision of the pool and erect lotus stems within the lower image half are strongly influenced by Hindu painting.

The lotus pool is also a recurring theme, "a topos of Indian bucolic sceneries. In the context of Krishnaite iconographies of mythic events situated in Brindaban it is often an abbreviation" for the river *Yamuna*. Krishna led the *gopi*s to its banks by moonlight. "Flowers have blossomed and the music of the waves is intoxicating".²⁴⁾

Padma, the lotus, symbolizes a state of innocence and purification, ²⁵⁾ and is frequently used in metaphor as the loving female, ²⁶⁾ for instance within the *Bhagavata Purana*: "The very river has fallen in love with him and its tiny waves[;] it touches the feet of Krishna and asks him to be kind to her". ²⁷⁾

¹⁹⁾ MULVEY 1989: 19, 26.

²⁰⁾ Bruckbauer 2007: 135.

Virginia WHILES (2001: 256) reports that, in 2001, Hindu fundamentalists of Shiv Sena threatened to attack and burn down the show of miniatures in Bombay with *lathis*, so that the exhibition had to be cancelled.

²²⁾ Martina STOYE (email 5/20/2015) compares the sunflower bed with the lotus pedestal, an omnipresent support for worshipped idols in Hindu art.

²³⁾ STOYE (email 5/20/2015).

²⁴⁾ The 189th section of the *Bhagavata Purana*, translation rendered by Kamala Subramanium and quoted by Sen 2004: 210.

²⁵⁾ The 'lotus effect', which refers to the self-cleansing properties of the leaves of the lotus flower, is also mentioned in the *Bhagavad Gita*; see PRABHUPADA 1971: chapter 5, verse 10.

²⁶⁾ ZIMMER 1972/1992: 90.

²⁷⁾ The 178th section of the *Bhagavata Purana* (cf. note 24).



Fig. 7 Waseem Ahmed, Untitled, 2009, pigment colours and ink on wasli paper, 35.6 x 19.1 cm. Collection John and Fausta Eskenazi. Photograph by the artist

While historically, Radha is depicted as *Nayika*, the romantic heroine who expresses a passionate longing for her lover, the opposite can be said of Waseem's work. Here, the wooing is clearly initiated by the male counterpart.

British expert Virgina Whiles reveals here "irony hints to the hypocrisy of the censorship in Pakistan, which bans female performers on the ground of prostitution, whilst officially authorizing cinema hoardings of turgidly sexist imagery" and macho violence. "A witty touch in Ahm[e]d's miniature lies in the Kalashnikow clasped by Krishna, [...] the only allowed public caress under Islamicist surveillance".²⁸⁾



Fig. 8 David Hockney, Sunbather, 1966, acrylic on canvas, ca. 183 x 183 cm. © David Hockney, Coll. Ludwig Museum, Cologne

Mullah Series

In the post-9/11 world, media coverage and scholarly literature has largely focused on external markers of Islamic identity. First, the veil, *hijab* and *burqa* have become highly politically charged symbols standing for subjugation and backwardness.

Ten years later, the image of the oppressed, draped woman has received a strong male counterpart in "the angry man with a long beard touting a gun". The beard, whether worn by terrorists, Islamic fundamentalists or religious citizens, has grown into the new concept of the enemy and today represents the "dangerous other". ²⁹⁾

This shift is also manifest in the imagery of Waseem Ahmed's paintings. Ahmed's protagonists have become men – bearded men, usually dressed in traditional Islamic clothing, the pure white *shalwar cameez* or the turban, sometimes supplemented by a green combat vest. This time, the artist did not have to draw on another cultural tradition for suitable models for his painting series. Instead, his models are ready at hand in his immediate vicinity. Friends, the plumber or the electrician, have kindly agreed to pose for him. Waseem Ahmed treats them like Mughal kings by painting them with the same meticulous care and outstanding delicacy demonstrated in the execution of the gossamer fabric of his *Burqa Series*. Waseem Ahmed's *mullahs* display such refined features that each whisker is visible. Royal attributes like the *gao-takkiyah*, the bolster

²⁸⁾ WHILES 2011: 162-163.



Fig. 9 Waseem Ahmed, Untitled, 2010, pigment colours and silver leaf on wasli paper, 39.7 x 25.8 cm. Asian Art Museum, inv.no. I 6070. © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum für Asiatische Kunst. Photograph by Jörg von Bruchhausen

or the *dari*, the carpet, ³⁰⁾ emphasize the subjects' superior status. Only their relaxed bodily postures differ clearly from the strict conventions of imaging Moghul nobility. While they take on meditative positions, praying or drowsing, their expressions are filled with inner peace. As if being conscious of the elusiveness of worldly existence – accentuated by the nebulous wash of tea-stains – they anticipate paradise, its fertility and plenitude customarily represented in *Rajput* court painting through lush mixed forests. Waseem Ahmed clearly borrows elements from Indian and European art history. For instance, a man, with a long white beard, stretches out Hockney-like, ³¹⁾ fishing



Fig. 10 The orange fort in Hyderabad, Waseem Ahmed's birth place. Photograph by the artist



Fig. 11 Krishna, dressed as a female musician, approaches Radha, Rajasthan, Bundi style, 2nd half of 18th century, gouache and silver leaf on wasli paper, 32 x 21.7 cm. Asian Art Museum, inv.no. I 5913. © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum für Asiatische Kunst. Photograph by Jürgen Liepe

at a pool of chastely covered *houris* (**Figs. 7, 8**). It is a world of desire and fulfillment. Here, Ahmed's exquisite surfaces whisper of the false piety and hypocrisy of religious fundamentalists in their stifling of women's rights.

Elsewhere, a figure slumbering peacefully in a bed of *Rajput* tree-crowns camouflages violence and political tension (**Fig. 9**): the presence of his loaded ammunition vest hints at the suspense of the coming massacre like the orange fissures on the silver panel. The artist associates the colour orange with his hometown Hyderabad sweltering in Sindh, where the evening sun makes the massive walls of the old fort glow like fire (**Fig. 10**). It was in its streets, that he experienced deadly violence and terror from his early childhood onwards.

³⁰⁾ Dari: traditional red-and-white striped carpet used in madrasahs.

³¹⁾ Here, one is reminded of David Hockney's pool paintings, especially of Hockney's work *Sunbather* (Fig. 8).



Fig. 12 Waseem Ahmed, Preaching, 2014, pigment colours, silver leaf and tea wash on wasli paper, 17.8 x 40.4 cm. Asian Art Museum, inv.no. I 6083. © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum für Asiatische Kunst. Photograph by Jörg von Bruchhausen

Indeed, everywhere in his paintings, subversive elements can be detected, hinting at hidden danger: dark clouds gather on the horizon and munitions protrude from between the ennobled surfaces of metal leaf (**Fig. 11**).³²⁾

Dahlem Dialogues

Bearded men also play an important role in the new body of work, which was produced during the *karkhana* workshop at the Asian Art Museum in Dahlem in the fall of 2014. The distinctive *shalwar cameez* and the turban or *kufi*, distinguish the men as serious followers of Islam.

What is new, however, is their juxtaposition with Buddhist figures.

When Waseem Ahmed was invited to work with the museum's collection, he surprisingly chose to work with certain fragments of Buddhist wall paintings, brought to Europe by Grünwedel and von Le Coq from Central Asia.³³⁾ Waseem Ahmed has scaled down the originals, transferring them carefully onto the *wasli* paper, where he juxtaposes them with contemporary figures and has filled

the empty spaces in-between with the lush green vegetation of Rajput painting.

Preaching Scenes

One painting simultaneously shows two scenes of preaching (Fig. 12). On the left, Buddha Shakyamuni is irradiated by a halo and mandorla and surrounded by Bodhisattvas and other princely characters;³⁴⁾ the right panel shows a Muslim scene of preaching. The main *mullah*, clearly identifiable as the *imam* dressed in white with upraised forefinger, is depicted in the conventional kneeling position (Fig. 14). The head in profile and the chest in three quarters frontal, together with his golden nimbus, are signs reserved for high-ranking members within the Mughal hierarchy. As for his four bearded companions, only their heads and shoulders can be seen, while emblazing Arabic characters seize the rest of their bodies in flame. Whereas in historical paintings, the calligraphic texts are inscribed first, thereby providing the subject matter for the painter's illustration, in Waseem Ahmed's work, they play an active visual role and become a symbol of religious indoctrination.

The middle part of the triptych is made of a silver panel; the profiles of pistols are raised up against its

³²⁾ The method of using beaten silver or gold leaf was already familiar to the illuminators of the pre-Mughal era. In the past, painters used the 'raised effect' munavvat for the depiction of pearl jewelry. See CHAKRAVERTY 1999; 21.

³³⁾ Albert Grünwedel and Albert von Le Coq led four expeditions to Turfan, Xinjiang, between 1902 and 1914 and returned to Berlin with thousands of paintings and other art objects from caves and temple ruins.

³⁴⁾ The artist copied only this one detail (**Fig. 13**) from a long wall painting that shows many other scenes of preaching. It stems from Kizil, presumably from cave 179, the so-called Japanese cave (KONCZAK, email 2/10/2015).



Fig. 13 Preaching scene, detail from a wall painting on plaster, 168 x 318 x 5.7 cm, Kizil, presumably from cave 179, ca. 7th century. Asian Art Museum, inv.no. III 8660. © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum für Asiatische Kunst

foundation. Produced through the delicate application of extremely thin silver leaf, the shiny foil surface cracks around the weapons, forecasting a blood bath caused by war in the name of faith. The pistols point in different directions, drawing us to question the origin of violence, when all religions preach humanity and the welfare of humankind.

Perturbing Dialog

In the second image, two dangerous looking characters are portrayed, both with bushy black beards (**Fig. 1**). The one to the left, whose features are executed in the most refined Mughal style, wears a turban, an eye patch and a vest loaded with explosives. He is easily recognized as a contemporary warrior in the name of Islam. Perturbingly, his healthy eye is turned to the viewer.³⁵⁾

To the right, a wrathful character appears with pointed satyr ears and bulging eyeballs.³⁶⁾ The scowling brows on his forehead as well as the half-open mouth displaying



Fig. 14 Detail from Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan's Visit to a Holy Man, North India, Mughal style, 17th century, gouache on wasli paper, 25.8 x 17 cm. Asian Art Museum, inv.no. I 5037. © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum für Asiatische Kunst. Photograph by Jörg von Bruchhausen

sharp fangs accord him an angry expression. Throughout Mughal and Indian painting, divine heroes and heroines combat such ferocious demons. And it is notably this violent rage radiating from the Buddhist figure, which draws the artist's attention. Waseem Ahmed is convinced that evil in the world, as also the good, emanates first in the human being, in his internal self, within himself, and is not linked to any particular religion.³⁷⁾

Yet, the Buddhist iconography delivers an interesting twist. Albert Grünwedel, the leader of the first German expedition to Turfan in 1902-03, interpreted the figure as *Vajrapani* ³⁸⁾ (Sanskrit: *he who has a vajra in hand*). In the original wall painting, his major attribute, the *vajra* (thunderbolt), distinguishes him as the most loyal of the protective characters surrounding Buddha. Vajrapani's wild and demonic nature in this Central Asian painting and in certain other Buddhist contexts is undoubted.³⁹⁾

³⁵⁾ The artist (interview with the author, 11/6-10/2014) admits that this portrait derives inspiration from the most wanted Taliban leader Mullah Omar, who lost one of his eyes during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the late 1980s.

³⁶⁾ See the original painting (Asian Art Museum, Berlin, inv.no. III 4459a,b); LE COQ & WALDSCHMIDT 1928: 89f., pl. 29.

³⁷⁾ Waseem Ahmed points here to recent anti-Muslim riots led by Buddhist monks in Myanmar (interview with the author, 11/6-10/2014).

³⁸⁾ GRÜNWEDEL 1906: 64. More specifically, Le CoQ identified the figure in the remnant of a larger-format *Pranidhi* depiction from the 9th century in the Alpha Temple of Khocho; see Le CoQ & WALDSCHMIDT 1928: 89f., pl. 29.

³⁹⁾ See for example the Pali Canon mentioned in JONES 2005: 9512, MALALASEKERA 2009: 487, and STOYE (email 5/20/2015).



Fig. 15 Waseem Ahmed, Crowd, 2014, pigment colours on wasli paper, 27.8 x 18.4 cm. Asian Art Museum, inv.no. I 6084. © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum für Asiatische Kunst. Photograph by Jörg von Bruchhausen

The Buddhist mandate, however, tames the beast (*yakkha*) and lets it become the protector of the 'king'. ⁴⁰ Through his powerful appearance, Vajrapani finally succeeds in "neutralizing negative forces", ⁴¹ which makes him the antithesis of the bellicose Taliban warrior.

Crowd

As a work in dialogue with ancient Central Asian murals, the third painting of Ahmed's newly produced works is literally crowded (**Fig. 15**). *Acolytes from a Buddhist Wall Painting* (**Fig. 16**) reads the title of the original – a heavily fragmented 6th-century cave painting from Kizil.⁴²⁾



Fig. 16 Acolytes, Kizil, Maya Cave, 6th century, painting on plaster, 83 x 58 x 3.6 cm. Asian Art Museum, inv.no. III 9189. © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum für Asiatische Kunst

It was the plurality and diversity of the depicted figures, which here drew the keen interest of Waseem Ahmed. 43) Besides the familiar round Buddhist faces with half-lidded eyes, there are all kinds of followers of different origins and age groups. The artist thought he was able to identify the Hindu deity Shiva, 44) a figure painted with beautiful lapis lazuli, a mark on his forehead and the matted hair of a Hindu ascetic. 45) In his version, the artist has filled in the empty gaps – could this be where golden halos were once scraped off? 46) – with representatives of Islam: bearded men in white prayer caps. The vegetation

⁴⁰⁾ BUSWELL 2003: 911.

⁴¹⁾ RUSSEL-SMITH (email 1/28/2015).

⁴²⁾ The painting derives from the Maya Cave in Kizil in Central Asia and carries the museum's inv.no. III 9189.

⁴³⁾ Waseem Ahmed, interview with the author (11/6-10/2014).

⁴⁴⁾ Quite early on, gods from the Brahmanical (later Hindu) pantheon were integrated into Buddhism, but never as Bodhisattvas; KONCZAK (email 2/10/2015).

⁴⁵⁾ STOYE (email 5/20/2015).

⁴⁶⁾ RUSSEL-SMITH (email 1/28/2015).

in between produces the impression that the figures are emerging from behind banana and *Rajput* trees.

While in the first two paintings (**Figs. 1, 12**) Waseem Ahmed has maintained a respectful distance between the copied sections and his painterly additions, ⁴⁷⁾ here a fusion of old and new takes place: the 1500-year-old figures from the Central Asian Buddhist frieze happily merge with contemporary Muslim figures. ⁴⁸⁾ Flower garlands enhance a festive mood. Mere wishful thinking? The tableau's central figure is equipped with a loaded combat vest, and the horizon glows in the fiery orange of Waseem Ahmed's hometown.

Golden Bullets

Waseem Ahmed's decision to also work with the oil painting of *The Man with the Golden Helmet* ⁴⁹⁾ was motivated by nostalgia (**Fig. 17**). The first time he saw a reproduction of the masterpiece was back in his hometown Hyderabad, in the Iranian Cultural Center where he took his first drawing and painting classes. Here, Waseem Ahmed's admiration for the work began. His (re-)encounter with the original in the Gemäldegalerie Berlin, triggered a deep wish to copy and use it within his own artistic work. Remarkably, he has relegated the portrait itself a small and obscure position in relation to the work as a whole. He instead gives the ornamental bullet motifs pride of place in gold leaf, reference to the antique helmet in all of its golden glory. Ostensibly, this is in criticism of the exaltation of violence, a central concern of the artist.

Reflections

Throughout Waseem Ahmed's oeuvre, a keen curiosity in imagery from different cultural backgrounds is manifest. He absorbs and appropriates it through skillful reproduction. By arranging imagery with other historical and contemporary elements, he creates artworks, which critically scrutinize current issues in a subversive way.



Fig. 17 Waseem Ahmed, Golden Bullets, 2014, pigment colours on wasli paper and gold leaf, 36 x 27.7 cm. Asian Art Museum, inv.no. I 6085. © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum für Asiatische Kunst. Photograph by Jörg von Bruchhausen

In the *Burqa Series*, it was an interest in female flesh – hardly visible in his own environment – that led him to exploit the tradition of the nude in European art history. Later Hindu mythology such as the *Gita Govinda*, but also the dream factory of Hollywood and images from global media coverage have served as a great fundus for his pictorial elements.

And surprisingly there is absolutely nothing new about this.

Mughal Court painters traditionally pursued crosscultural and transnational experiences. Imperial patronage drew a large number of artists from different regions to the royal *karkhana*. ⁵⁰⁾ Akbar's *Hamzanama* (1562-77), to which more than thirty artists contributed their creations, ⁵¹⁾ manifests this practice of stylistic eclecticism perfectly, mainly through the collaboration and fusion of diverse know-how brought along from different schools.

^{47) &}quot;In 2006, I participated in a restoration workshop, where we were taught to respect the old part, not to touch it and to maintain a respectful line between the original and the new." (Waseem Ahmed, interview with the author 11/6-10/2014).

⁴⁸⁾ Here, Martina Stoye does not totally share the author's view, like when she describes how Waseem Ahmed depicts the various identities as separated: though seemingly unified in one crowd, they are ostensibly detached from one another through their hidden and unshared heterogeneity; STOYE (email 5/20/2015).

⁴⁹⁾ The Man with the Golden Helmet, ca. 1650, oil on canvas, 67.5 x 50.7 cm, Gemäldegalerie Berlin, once attributed to Rembrandt van Rijn.

⁵⁰⁾ Som Prakash VERMA (2005: 35) reports that the painters in Akbar's workshop came from Iran, Kashmir, Punjab, Gujarat and Central Asia. He counted 145 Hindu and 115 Muslim studio members in total during Akbar's period of regency.

⁵¹⁾ SEYLLER 2002: 36.

Moreover, the emperor, who had a deep personal interest in spirituality ⁵²⁾ and a tolerant stance toward other religions, strongly encouraged the artists to acquire the accomplishments ⁵³⁾ of European Renaissance painting for which he and his son Selim, the later Jahangir, in particular, developed great appreciation. Examples had trickled into the Imperial Court as gifts from missionaries and ambassadors.

Thus, the celebrated and distinctive Mughal style was ultimately forged through cultural fusion.

Yet, where are the differences between traditional Mughal painting, Waseem Ahmed's work and contemporary miniature painting from the 21st century in general?

They "lie in the nature of the conceptual framework of the practice", says Virgina Whiles, ⁵⁴⁾ in the artistic approach, its goals and the use of the paintings. While an artist from the workshops of the Mughal Court was required to collaborate with other painters, to deliver according to the demands of his commissioner, the emperor, by contrast, the contemporary artist rejects any degree of patronage.

Mughal paintings were chronicles about heroic deeds of the Moghul Clan, they were a means of propaganda for the patron and were intended to legitimate Akbar and his descendants as *padshas* of the huge and highly diverse empire. The representation of multicultural concepts therefore garnered special attraction.⁵⁵⁾

In contrast, the works of Waseem Ahmed and those of his contemporaries reflect on personal concerns and often take a critical glance at their own society and at current world affairs.

Waseem Ahmed was invited to enter into dialog with collection artifacts of the Berlin Asian Art Museum or also with Berlin-related topics. He pursued that task by applying traditional Moghul methods: copying, pasting and tracing, and finally uniting historical, local and foreign agents within the confined space of the *wasli*.

By bringing together motifs from various ethnic and religious contexts, Waseem Ahmed initiates a conversation

leading in multiple directions. He opens up a discourse between past and present, between historical and current events, between the West and the East, the North and the South, between members of different religions, and lastly, between Vajrapani and the Taliban. The confrontation of the ancient Buddhist wall paintings with the Taliban evokes the horrific events of recent Islamic religious iconoclasm.⁵⁶⁾

Waseem Ahmed strongly believes that dialog contributes to a peaceful and enriching coexistence between human beings. With this in mind, he has endowed the museum and its respective audience with four most remarkable pieces of art, remarkable in their skillful and delicate execution, and especially remarkable for their witty, forward-looking message.

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⁵²⁾ Akbar established the *ibadatkhana* ('House of Worship') in 1575, where an increasing range of religions were discussed, with Shiites, Hindus, Parsis, Jains, and Christians all participating. See Nizami 1989: 317; Koch 2002: 23.

⁵³⁾ These accomplishments implied applied realism in particular, in relation to the treatment of space, corporeality and individual features.

⁵⁴⁾ WHILES 2011: 162.

⁵⁵⁾ KOCH 2002: 21.

⁵⁶⁾ It was the same Mullah Omar, depicted by Waseem Ahmed, who ordered the destruction of the *Buddhas of Bamiyan* in March 2001, after declaring that they were idols.

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Deutsche Zusammenfassung

Der vorliegende Artikel stellt die zeitgenössische Intervention Waseem Ahmeds in den Ausstellungsräumen des Berliner Museums für Asiatische Kunst vor und setzt diese in ihren kunsthistorischen Kontext.

Während eines zweimonatigen Artist-in-Residence-Programmes im Herbst 2014 hat der pakistanische Miniaturmaler Waseem Ahmed für das Museum vier außergewöhnliche Werke geschaffen, die mit örtlichen Sammlungsgegenständen in einen angeregten Dialog treten. Dies gelingt ihm vor allem mittels Anwendung von Methoden der Malerei am Hof der Großmoguln, die sich durch handwerkliche Exzellenz sowie einen kreativen Eklektizismus auszeichnet. Durch das Zusammenbringen von Elementen bzw. Figuren unterschiedlicher Kulturen und ethnischer Hintergründe entfacht Waseem Ahmed eine Konversation, die aktuelle Spannungsfelder thematisiert.

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