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The miniaturist



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Varunika Saraf | Photo Credit: Nagara Gopal

As she discusses her work, Varunika Saraf dispels misplaced notions about miniature paintings

A large mood board warrants attention at Varunika Saraf's studio. On it are postcards, clippings and drawings that could trigger a thought process. Varunika points to a small drawing with a shade of canary yellow. She's using a similar shade for a larger painting now. The floor of the studio has large work-in-progress paintings. Rice paper sheets pasted on cotton cloth come alive in watercolours. A small wall cupboard has some of her prized possessions – pigments she uses to make watercolours.

Layered narratives

Her work is a study in contrast, with large (sometimes 6ft by 6ft or more) watercolour paintings and the miniatures. Many a time, she incorporates miniature drawings into a larger work to arrive at complex, layered narratives like she did with one of her initial solo show *Chair in the Cloud* and later with *Excavating Realities*, *Erupting Reflections* curated by Yashodhara Dalmia among others.

"I have drawn and painted ever since I can remember," says Varunika, leafing through a few of her miniatures. On her 13th birthday, she received a copy of

Stuart Cary Welch's *India: Art and Culture, 1300-1900*, and the following year, Pratapaditya Pal's *Master Artists of the Imperial Mughal Court*. "I was so inspired by the beauty of the Mughal drawings and paintings in these two books that I decided to seek formal training," she reflects. Her schools gave her the option of pursuing fine arts, where she became familiar with portraiture, still-life and landscape paintings. Eventually, she enrolled in a BFA programme.



To a layman, miniatures might conjure up images in really small sizes. She dismisses that notion, "Etymologically 'miniature' is derived from the Latin word *Minium* (red lead) and was widely used in the context of medieval European illuminated manuscripts because of the extensive use of red lead in many of the early codices. In Indian art history, we use miniature as a label to refer to a vast array of paintings from the 10th to 19th century. Many contemporary artists associate this word with producing something very small in size even though several historical paintings are quite large. Some believe that any painting rendered with minute brush strokes can be called a miniature."

A section of the art community believes that to create an authentic miniature, one has to paint on a *wasli* (special, handmade paper) using natural mineral and vegetable colours, just as artists in the past had done, even though the bulk of paintings available today are created using poster colours on handmade paper or cloth. "Many practitioners fear that their work will not qualify as an authentic miniature if they digress, and this leads to a repetition of old compositions and techniques," Varunika explains.

On one of the walls are a line of miniature drawings done with a silver nib on a white, treated paper. These drawings are a part of her ongoing project *Citizen Z*, in which she references people and incidents from newspapers and magazines.

Socio-cultural references

The historical, socio-cultural references are unmistakable in her work. She shows us a painting in progress in which she will have floats on water, carrying things that are now being labelled unnecessary. “For instance, our history books will soon do away with Aurangzeb, Akbar and maybe even Nehru... There’s nothing we do about it,” she says, pointing at a sea of tiny faces that are mere spectators. Varunika considers her paintings as socio-historical documents, using the past to explain the contemporary.



In fact, what drew her initially to miniatures are the stories they narrated. She felt they were windows into a different time, place and culture. One of her miniatures is a take off on the 17th century Mughal painting portraying the death of Inayat Khan. “Inayat Khan wastes away slowly because of his opium addiction, a prince of Baghdad drowns his favourite princess into the Tigris, Tuti the parrot narrates tall tales to his mistress Khojasta to keep her away from her lover, Shaji pines for his beloved Mahji, it’s hard not to respond to these works. Moreover, I am inspired by the technique; the fine drawing

layered with washes of colour. The way colour is used to create a mood or an atmosphere is absolutely stunning,” says Varunika.

Over the years, she has built her technique on these aspects and likes working in detail on a large scale. Some paintings take her a month to complete and others, six months or more.

Academically speaking: Varunika is pursuing her Ph.D on Souvenirs, Heritage and Fakes: The Making of Indian Miniatures from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. “In my thesis, I examine why we call certain painting miniatures and where this term came from. Why is it considered a dead tradition? If art historians claim that miniature painting



declined with court patronage why are there several artists who continue this practice? Where have they come from, why are they not a part of the art world around us? These are some of the questions that fascinate me,” she says.

Making colours: Varunika started making her own colours out of necessity. Her paintings required deep hues that come from a concentration of pigments unlike commercially available watercolours that have a thick base and fewer pigments. She began sourcing pigments from art conservators. “I need more colours

since my paintings have several layers of colours,” she says. A bowl of copper sulphate blue lies on her desk. In another bowl are crystals she’s derived by reacting copper with acetic acid. “These crystals are ground to create the blue,” she says. The colour is corrosive and she intends to use that corrosive nature as part of an art work.

(Varunika will be in conversation with artists Priyanka Aelay and Pranati Khanna at Kalakriti Art Gallery, March 9; 6 pm on ‘Women’s Practice in Today’s Art Fraternity’)

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<http://www.thehindu.com/entertainment/art/varunika-saraf-dispels-misplaced-notions-about-miniature-paintings/article17427135.ece>

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