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# Social Pages

Rebel With a Cause?  
– Nisha

The Appeal of Novelty  
– S. A. Noory

ARY – Prime Time Quality  
for Prime Viewing

Time Saving Casseroles

Gardening In Holidays

The Opening Dilemma  
Continues to Haunt Pakistan

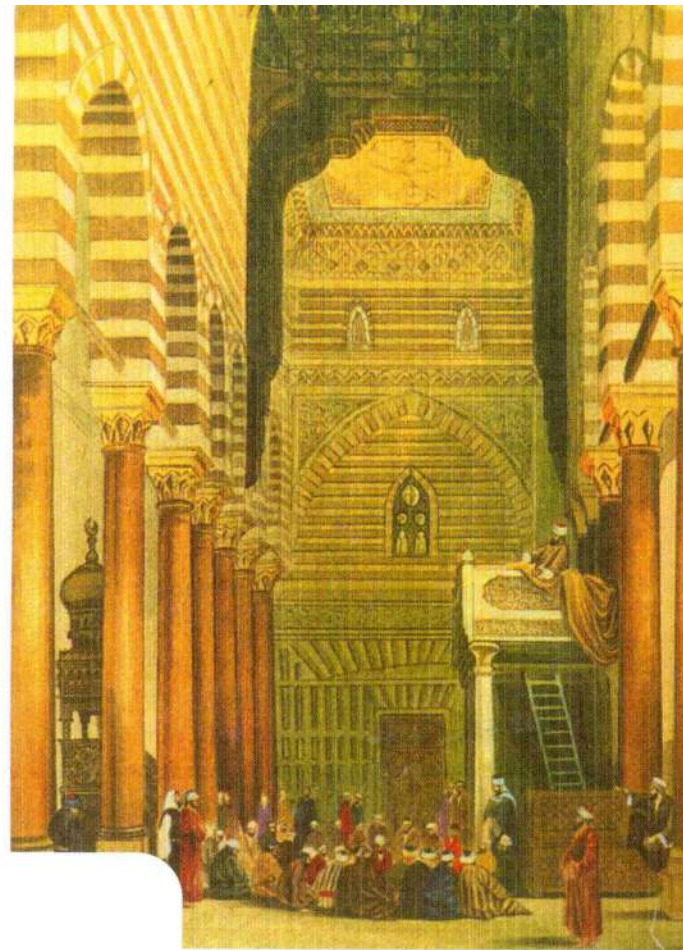




*Cast in a different mould: An exhibition of miniature paintings by S. A. Noory at Zenaini Art Gallery was held in April.*

# The Appeal of Novelty

By Salwat Ali



Just as when one thought one had seen enough of the miniature genre for the time being, along comes another show, deftly painted, delightfully rich, a piquant narrative of a varied order. A recent exhibition of miniatures by S. A. Noory at Zenaini Art Gallery is not just another expose of Mughal album painting. On the contrary, it is a tastefully curated mix of Afro-Arab oriental works, calligraphy and European storybook romance, all condensed in a mini-format.

By far the most impressive pieces are Noory's remixes and reproductions of oriental art by the European masters in the mid 1800's. The French colonialist ambitions in North Africa, were accompanied by a wave of orientalism among artists. Painters like Delacroix fully entered into the exoticism of their subjects emphasizing traditionalism and the cultural richness or decadence found in North African Muslim locales like



Morocco, Tangiers etc. The grandiose mosque interiors, palatial courts 'durbars', exotic 'zenana' quarters, armed combats, grand hunting scenes and animals struggling or confronting the elements, were just some of the scenically rich subjects they worked upon. Today, these reminiscences of antiquity redolent with oriental colour har-

monies, carry a pictorial thrill that only historical extravaganzas, handled with charm and finesse can emit.

By trying to emulate the masters and paint in the grand manner, requires considerable drawing and painting skills and a keen sense of observation. Artist Noory seems to have a remarkably clear eye and a fine steady hand. His reproductions, a mere 6" to 8" in scale are meticulous facsimiles of full-size works. In miniaturising his content, he manages to retain the exquisite detailing lavished upon the interlacing geometric patterns, floral arabesques and cursive calligraphy of early Muslim culture. The architectural decorations and structural nuances like gilded columnar pillars, cavernous pointed and rotund arches, mosaic floors and intricate oriental rugs etc, are transferred with ease.

Often, figure sketching on a



reductive format suffers from stiffness. However, Noory at least, in his oriental works, has been able to handle the human presence. He has painted the flowing robes, turbans and shawls according to the body language of the figures, which contribute considerably to the flow and movement of a picture. A bejewelled princess is painted with all the freshness and naivete of youth, albeit a slight dislocation in the shoulder region is only noticeable after a while. He fares better in his closeups of animals; his study of two horses in spirited motion, is fluently rendered.

Atmospheric sensitivity is also maintained with delicacy of tonal variation; the artist claims to have added his own mixes, as he has not adhered strictly to the copies

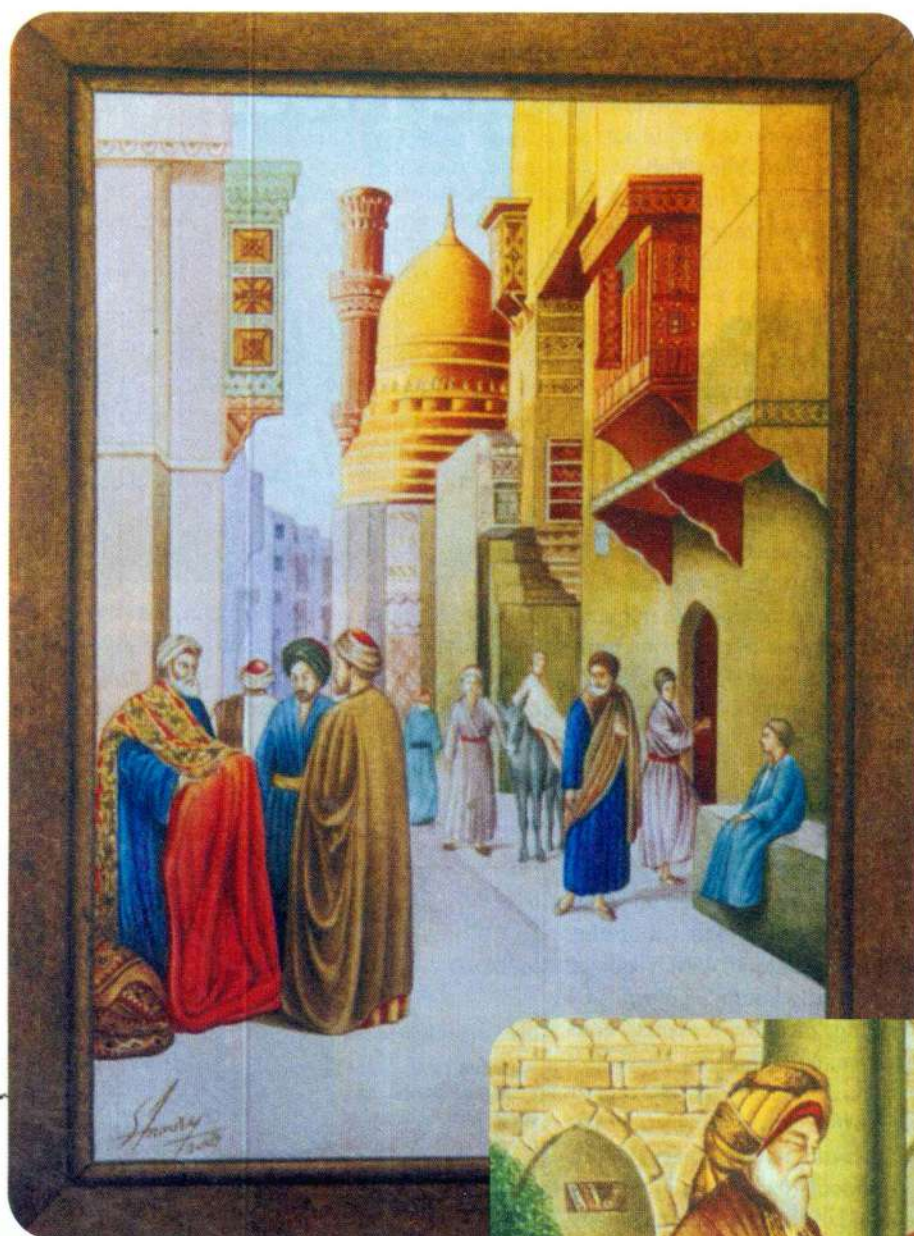
There are only a handful of calligraphy pieces in a single sepia tone. A cracked, fissured stone texture produced,



offsets the sword edged scripture to advantage. The artist has painted '*Rehman*' and '*Rahim*', '*Allah*' and '*Mohammed*' in prominent calligraphy. His contemporary; monochromatic studies of the female figure, in postures of muted lethargy and lassitude do not impact the eye, as well as his oriental compositions, inspite of the rich traditional apparel in which they are clothed. Proportion and angular harmony in shifting body postures should not be overlooked in figure anatomy. Moreover, reproducing from a painting is not the same, as reproducing from a photograph. In a painting composition, problems have already been solved and stroke work has been established; duplicating a photograph means that an artist has to bring his own sense of organisation and stylistic treatment to a painting.

Playing on the legendary Romeo-Juliet notion of





romance, Noory has framed his own 'Lover's Series'. Refreshingly different, it is a sequence of small paintings, in the European mannerism on young lovers' trysts in idyllic settings. Quaint and pretty to look at, they smack of fable and folklore, almost like illustrations in an Old Grimms fairy-tale edition. The novelty of the idea heightens, when the series is viewed collectively.

Having previously taught art for a spell of two years at the Bhattai

School of Art, S.A. Noory is presently a full time artist/miniaturist. He feels that his best working hours are at night, when there is absolute peace and quiet, something very necessary for the kind of deep concentration he needs for his work. His academic accolades are confined to diploma and certificate courses in fine arts from Karachi School of Arts and Bhattai School of Art. In miniature work though, he claims that he is self-taught, mainly refining his techniques by studying the old masters.

Instead of the usual *gouache* and water colour medium, Noory paints in tempera on paper. This is a fast drying medium and strokes have to be swift and sure with a scant chance of erasure. The artist is also sensitive about chromatic nuances, transparency, wash technique, and textural effects, aiming for a high degree of perfection. He also labours over the wooden textural frames, that he creates through painted effects around his paintings. They are look-alikes of the real thing.

A young painter, with just some group shows and a twin artist display to his credit, Noory is a relatively new entrant, who still has a long way to go. In this show at Zenaini, he has given a fine sampling of his potential as an artist with skills, observation and an inquiring mind. ♦

