



## Greeting

The Humboldt Lab Dahlem was a project of the Kulturstiftung des Bundes (German Federal Cultural Foundation) in cooperation with the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz (Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation). It developed new forms of presenting artefacts of the Ethnologisches Museum (Ethnological Museum) and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst (Asian Art Museum) of the Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin (National Museums in Berlin) in Dahlem for the planned Humboldt-Forum in Berlin-Mitte. The experiment began with the question of how objects accommodated in a museum can open up new perspectives on our globalized present. In its search for solutions, the Humboldt Lab Dahlem therefore collaborated with scholars, custodians, curators, and artists. The results were regularly presented in so-called “Probebühnen” during the opening hours of the museum. In this manner, the Humboldt Lab Dahlem provided stimuli for dealing with the current challenges of presentation and mediation that are also posed to other museums in Germany and Europe.

**Hortensia Völckers**

Artistic Director

Kulturstiftung des Bundes

**Prof. Dr. Hermann Parzinger**

President

Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz

## Waseem Ahmed – Dahlem Karkhana / Teaser

So far, the Museum für Asiatische Kunst has presented its inventory as a historically closed chapter. Meanwhile, lively and complex debates on the artistic tradition are taking place in the contemporary art scenes of Asian countries themselves. An artist-in-residence program for young artists, who come from the regions where the old artifacts were collected, is an attempt to take this reality into account more. The first guest was the Pakistani artist Waseem Ahmed, a prominent representative of the socio-critical school of contemporary miniature painting. He spent seven weeks in Berlin-Dahlem, creating four new works in response to and in dialog with the museum’s collection. These were exhibited at the end of Ahmed’s residency along with some of Ahmed’s older works, together with old album pages from the museum that contained comparable motifs. An intensive workshop as well as open atelier hours allowed visitors to partake of the artistic process.

## Waseem Ahmed – Dahlem Karkhana / Project Description

### A Young Artist, an Old Collection, a Space for Encounter

by Martina Stoye

Up to now, the art collections from South, Southeast and Central Asia in the Museum für Asiatische Kunst have been organized on an archaeological and art historical basis. The inventory (2nd century BC to 19th century AD) has been presented as a historically closed chapter; visitors still leave the permanent exhibition without hearing a single word about the survival of corresponding artistic traditions into the present. The contemporary art movements in the places of origin of these old objects are not addressed, although, since the



opening of the Bornemann version of the museum in 1970, a markedly increased intercontinental mobility and the internet have brought a completely new quality to the interaction between European and non-European cultures.

In the future Humboldt-Forum this living, contemporary artistic practice is to be brought into focus. With this in mind, the Museum für Asiatische Kunst has decided to do justice to the most recent developments in South, Southeast and Central Asian art by setting up an artist-in-residence program, bringing young artists from the places of origin of the older items in the collection, and giving them a platform. To establish a clear demarcation between the museum and institutions of contemporary art, this will take place in a way that is only possible in a house that holds a collection such as that of Berlin-Dahlem: establishing a relationship with the classic masterpieces and permitting a comparison with them.

### **Pilot Project: Contemporary Miniature Painting with Waseem Ahmed**

As a test-run, the Humboldt Lab Dahlem mounted the project “Dahlem Karkhana” or, to put it another way, set up a “Miniature Studio Dahlem.” It consisted of two phases: a studio phase during the Probebühne 4 and an exhibition during Probebühne 5. Waseem Ahmed, a prominent representative of the so-called contemporary miniature painting – a socially-critical art movement in Pakistan – was invited to be resident artist. He graduated from the National College of Arts in Lahore and is an expert not only in traditional South Asian painting techniques, but finds inspiration in post-modern discourse and current social issues. His paintings subtly deal with themes like abuse, religious indoctrination and fundamentalist violence. On first glance they appear to be idyllic, impressing with their masterful technique and harmonious compositions. But a deeper examination reveals disconcerting, deliberately placed alienation effects: blood seeps from the roots of a tree, its leaves become characters of an imaginary text. The idylls become friable.

For the museum visitor there arises a surprising linkage between the old miniatures in the museum’s collection (ostensibly belonging to a past epoch) and the topical, totally divorced from art, largely catastrophic media images from the region. To the voices of the media reporters, who, despite intensive research give essentially an “outsider” perspective, there is added an artistic language of imagery, a (critical) “insider” viewpoint.

### **Studio and Exhibition as a Space for Encounters**

For the residency, the Museum für Asiatische Kunst set up a temporary miniature studio with a Pakistani ambience: the room’s perimeters were laid out with carpets and cushions for prospective students; the designated workplace for the Ustad, the master, was established in a prominent place on a particularly large and beautiful carpet, with a low South Asian writing table. Here, in painstaking hours of work every day, Ahmed produced four fantastic new works, drawing inspiration from four art works in the Berlin collections (three from the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, and one from the Gemäldegalerie).

Very much to the surprise of the curators, after long deliberation, Ahmed decided not to work with any of the numerous miniature paintings in the Berlin-Dahlem collection. Instead, the artist was drawn to the Buddhist murals from Central Asia, which had previously been completely unknown to him. Their special color palette and motifs had him enraptured, and the empty spaces left by the passage of time (i.e. large areas of damage), as “void spaces,” inspired him to create his own original additions. They offered him a rich, new repertoire of motifs for his own core themes, mainly a discourse with forms of religious fundamentalism, which he also pursued during the Dahlem Project. Finally, for the fourth Dahlem miniature, he was inspired by “The Man in the Golden Helmet” from the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin. In this way, a completely new body of work was born.

In several open studio sessions and a full week’s intensive workshop, the public was given the opportunity of gaining insight into the art of painting miniatures and the use of traditional techniques, and even to take the first steps themselves. At the same time the public could become involved in the whole artistic creative process and also enter into a personal dialog with the artist. For the workshop participants it was particularly impressive to witness how much contemplative tranquility and patient practice is necessary, in order to coax the necessary fine lines from the squirrel-hair brushes, the primary tool of the miniature painter; or the mixing of pigments, gum arabic and saphed (white base paint) in order to make the paints and subsequently create the picture, layer by layer, in painstaking craftsmanship, building gradually from the rudimentary areas to finer detailing.

The exhibition displayed during his residency in Berlin Dahlem showed Ahmed’s newly completed pieces,



together with 33 of his older works. For this purpose 18 of these were on loan from Pakistan, England, Belgium and Switzerland. The exhibition was able to reveal important themes from Ahmed's work, from his final period as a student, up to the present, with a personal commentary by the artist himself. At the same time the exhibition connected his work explicitly with items from the South Asian collection, in the sense that the contemporary miniatures were confronted with thematically related old album pages in the collection of the Museum für Asiatische Kunst. These entered into a multi-layered dialog with Ahmed's own paintings. The filmmaker Lidia Rossner, lecturer in visual anthropology at the Freie Universität Berlin, accompanied the painter during his residency. The short film "Sound of Painting" that resulted, managed to capture important aspects of the project.

## Outlook

For the curator, the exchange with Ahmed was very important, and through their dialog she gained insight not only into the works he had created but, in addition, to many aspects of the old tradition. Through discussions on contemporary artistic creativity, as well as the way we look at art itself, the old miniatures in the collection could be seen in a different light. Alongside the opportunity of communicating with the artist directly, the public was, above all, impressed by the vitality of a skilled tradition that was thought to be defunct, and by the connection between that old tradition and the highly socially critical topicality of the paintings' subject matter. It is precisely here that the commissioning and the success of a future artist-i-residence program for the Humboldt-Forum could lie.

*Martina Stoye is curator for South and Southeast Asian art at the Museum für Asiatische Kunst Berlin.*

# Waseem Ahmed – Dahlem Karkhana / Positions

## The Intricacy of Realistic Details

**For seven weeks Waseem Ahmed worked in the Museum für Asiatische Kunst in a miniature workshop set up especially for him. Concentrated, in solitude, without daylight. It was a good time, says the artist: he is a night person anyway, and for inspiration there were the Central Asian murals from the Buddhist era in the collection next door.**

**Interview: Sarah Khan**

**Waseem Ahmed, the Dahlem Museums are in the midst of a bourgeois neighborhood. What did you think about this working environment when you arrived?**

I brought a lot of materials with me from Lahore, so it soon looked a lot like my atelier at home. I am used to working in different places and have had several artist residencies.

**You grew up in Hyderabad?**

Yes. My father was a blacksmith, my mother a housewife; both are illiterate, they never went to school. But we children received an education: one brother became a physiotherapist, one sister a radiologist and I became an artist. My father was very skeptical about my job; 20 years ago there was practically not a single gallery in Pakistan and in Hyderabad no one was an artist. My father was very concerned about my choice of career and didn't speak a single word to me throughout my entire studies at the National College of Arts (NCA). I lived in a hostel; we were housed like animals. I had no financial support and could hardly pay my bills. Only after my studies could I sell my art, and after that things improved. That's why I always tell myself I am a lucky fellow: I have seen and lived through all kinds of conditions.

**How did you experience Berlin?**

My schedule was very busy, so I was mainly working, but I could learn quite a bit about Berlin's history. Yesterday we were at the celebrations of the 25th anniversary of the fall of the wall. That was very moving for me. I have had very positive experiences with the museum staff. I did not just live like a prisoner in the museum.



**But a little bit like a prisoner?**

A prisoner of my schedule. There were a lot of meetings and a film was made with me.

**The film was surprising; they filmed you cooking. A Pakistani who cooks, one automatically expects a special dish, a fantastic curry. But we see you cooking a simple omelet.**

It was the first time I had cooked anything. I didn't know how. My wife explained it to me beforehand over the phone.

**You spent time concentrating on the collection of Asian art in Dahlem. In the archive there are 25,000 artifacts. Which objects interested you most?**

The frescoes, Central Asian murals from the Buddhist period.

**The region of present-day Pakistan has a multi-religious history, defined mainly by Buddhism and Hinduism. Now, Pakistan is a theocracy, based on Islam. Miniature painting, on the other hand, uses the imagery of an opulent Moghul era, a flowering of Islamic culture. Is that one reason to concern oneself with miniature painting: because it confers a positive energy to help deal with the troubled times of the modern day? Does that explain the popularity of miniature painting?**

When I began studying those were different times. Everything was very calm, there were no mobile phones, no internet, you hardly had any contact to the outside world. During that time I studied oil painting according to the western ideal. I grew my hair long and tried to paint in a wild way. French painters were my role models, above all Manet, whose colors fascinated me. My teacher had quite a few books about him, and I would look at them. But I was a bad painter, my teachers criticized that I filled the canvases with far too much detail. Only after six years of painting did I discover miniature painting as a minor subject at the National College of Arts. I realized straight away that I loved the wealth of detail and the intricacy of the details, I could simply immerse myself in them. That has nothing to do with a fashion. Nowadays many students want to study miniature painting, the courses are in demand and numbers of students are restricted, because at least now there is an international market for it.

**Let's talk about the European paintings that you deal with in your work. You reference for example Edouard Manet's "Olympia". The painting unleashed a scandal in its time because it dealt with the topic of prostitution in a new way. What connection does that have with Pakistani miniature painting?**

In Old Lahore there is the prostitution district Heera Mandi, it has been there since Moghul times. Heera Mandi means diamond market, which actually means woman market. Prostitution was always illegal but still went on. When Zia-ul-Haq came to power in the 1970s Heera Mundi was shut down, but that only meant that prostitution was spread all over the other districts.

**How did you utilize the Manet painting in your own work?**

I painted the figure of a woman with a transparent burka. That is a big difference. It is not about prostitution, it is about the thoughts that all men have when they see a woman in a burka. They ask themselves, what kind of body does the woman have beneath, what does she look like naked.

**The Alte Nationalgalerie in Berlin owns several Manets. Did you see them?**

Yes, I saw the Manets, and above all the Rembrandt in the Gemäldegalerie, "Man in a Golden Helmet." I was completely thrilled to see the painting of the soldier here; I sat in front of it for hours. I have had a strong connection to the painting for a long time, because the director of the Institute for Miniature Painting at the NCA had the poster in his office, and I saw it there every day. He bought it in Berlin during a restoration workshop.

**The painting you made in reaction to it in the Dahlem Karkhana is called "Golden Bullets." In the upper picture segment there are bullets to be seen. Gold and silver bullets are a reoccurring motif in your paintings.**

They represent the Taliban's propensity to violence. Sadly it has gone so far that the people turn themselves into weapons. By imbuing violence with a halo of glory. The shine of the golden helmet has rubbed off onto the modern bullets. Where I grew up everyone had weapons, even young kids. I was also offered weapons, but I refused. I don't like guns.

**You use gold leaf and silver leaf overlays. Is that part of the miniature painting tradition?**



Yes, the material was also used traditionally. You can see it in the paintings in Lahore Museum, but on the old paintings the silver has turned black.

**By coincidence I know your gold leaf and silver leaf supplier at the Old Bazaar in Lahore, he sells gold leaf mainly for celebratory décor materials, for sweet desserts and spices. He believes that eating it is good for you. Many well-known Pakistani artists are his customers, but he is not particularly interested in art is he?**

Yes, he is not easy to impress (*laughs*). He always tries to persuade me to eat powdered gold and silver for my health, but each time I tell him I don't believe in it.

**I almost have the impression that quite a few Pakistani miniature paintings use gold leaf to impress; they use it a bit too lavishly, as though you were at the jewelers.**

During the Dahlem Karkhana I only used gold leaf for one picture: for the bullets. Usually I use gold and silver leaf rarely. I prefer to use gold as a color, painting with it. I don't want to impress anyone with it: "See here, I am rich." No.

**You've been working in the Dahlem Karkhana for two months, in a museum room without daylight. How did you manage?**

I'm a night owl. In Pakistan I prefer to work at night, so I am used to working with artificial lighting. I know about the problem that the colors are different when you work under white lights. There are sometimes mistakes when it comes to the white and yellow tones and all the light colors. But I had special daylight lamps installed by a light specialist for the workshop. The walls were painted white beforehand to avoid distracting reflections. They were good working conditions.

**How did the miniature painting workshop with the Berlin participants go?**

It was a very nice experience. At first the participants were nervous: on the first day they had to paint squares and fill them in with fine lines. Initially I thought they would all run away as they kept looking at their watches. Only drawing squares and lines until 12 o' clock? But then they noticed that it wasn't that easy and time flew by. Afterward they didn't want to leave... Even after 5pm.

**How do you feel about seeing Asian cultural heritage here in Berlin? What is your opinion on restitution?**

I think the artifacts are better taken care of here. If they were with us, half of them would have been long gone by now. In the Lahore Museum water runs down the walls, because there isn't enough money to repair the roof. The artifacts are sold to private collectors or are simply destroyed.

**Would it be important for more Pakistani artists to come here to see their cultural heritage?**

For me it was important to see the sculptures and frescoes. Other things however, that are displayed in the ethnological museums, like clothing and household objects, are of course not so important for us as we see them in everyday life. But to discover the old art would certainly be valuable for other artists.

**The last question may be a little premature, but what significance will this Berlin residency have in terms of your biography, do you think? Have you learned something for your life or for your art?**

I have learned how to use a map, read a timetable and travel by bus and subway. That is a very important experience, even for an artist (*laughs*).

*Sarah Khan is a freelance journalist living and working in Berlin.*

The interview was held on November 10, 2014 in Berlin-Dahlem.

## Wastelands

**The anthropologist and art historian Virginia Whiles on the potential of interdisciplinary dialog between art and anthropology, illustrated by case studies from her practical work in teaching and curating contemporary art.**

My shift from art history towards anthropology has been a gradual one. I have taught both Western and Asian



art history for over forty years in Europe and South Asia, but fifteen years ago I introduced a seminar called "Ethnography as a Tool" for Artists into my teaching in art schools in the UK, France, India and Pakistan.

I had experienced mild yet confirmed prejudices throughout my teaching and curating of non-Western art in both France and England. Despite the new perspectives brought into art history from semiotics, psychoanalysis and feminist film studies there remained a huge gap in critical art history in the West, it had quite simply left out 'the rest': African, Asian and Amerindian cultures. Postmodernism had scarcely affected the modernist ethnocentric concept of 'Internationalism', still based on political, economic and cultural alliances between Europe and North America, as the artist and curator of "The Other Story" (1989), Rasheed Araeen, asked "Why has the history of art of the 20th century remained a white monopoly?"

Angered by this absence and enthused by my encounters with South Asian culture in the sixties (when I first travelled overland to India), I chose to run a course on non-Western art history in my first teaching post. A significant point here is that whereas the textile department saw this step as important, the Fine Art department viewed it as an unnecessary 'option'... Shades of the hegemonic structuring of colonialist art education, as witnessed by the art institutions set up under the Raj in South Asia, dividing and ruling by imposing westernised Fine Art over 'indigenous' art, re-classed as craft. The indifference on the part of the institutions towards such problems of ethnocentricity was not reflected in the student body whose increasingly multicultural formation was in demand of changes in the curriculum.

Western art's avant-garde in the early 20th century extended the orientalist 'self-othering' through its mode for 'neo-primitivism'. It entered, more or less consciously, into a relationship with both anthropology and psychoanalysis: the two fields described by Foucault as "the most privileged of modern discourses". With increasing globalization there have been various Western postmodern efforts to 'curate the world', the Third World in particular, as described by Gerardo Mosquera, the Cuban art critic: "The world is practically divided between curating cultures and curated cultures".

I turned towards anthropology in the hope of finding in its critique of ethnocentrism a means of developing a 'de-orientalised' understanding of how different modes of representation relate to their cultural context, to show how ethnographic theory and practice can explore ways of understanding diverse cultural formations. The seminar has proven to be both popular and useful to the multicultural student body due to the changing dynamics of cultural production and the diasporic shifts in cultural identity. Since Western cultural discourse has dominated and manipulated the processes and marketing by which cultural values are produced, the need to challenge such processes is sensed by art students everywhere who feel the crucial need for a postcolonial critique of globalization.

The context of the current art world is described as global yet the production is always local and scarce attention is paid to indigenous cultural histories. Citing art practice within a particular social field shows how ethnography can be a tool towards an understanding of 'other' art stories: those which disturb the ethnocentric narrative of Western art history. Ethnography denotes an empirical description of specific cultures. In my experience, this focus on context and agency motivates the self-reflexivity critical for the study and practice of art as a social fact. The initial reflection on the 'anthropological turn' was written by Hal Foster in his text "The Artist as Ethnographer" (The Return of the Real, 1996), a text that inspired my own 'turn'. The issues arising from the exhibitions I have curated and the consequent debates have fed into the seminar where various topics are discussed.

Recent art has revealed a number of practices which apply ethnographical modes, in particular participant observation, but also sociological mapping and documentation. Artists apply these methods, often through in-situ installation. The important questions posed by Foster refer to the oft discussed problem of the 'authoritarian' role, either ethnographic or academic. The issue of 'specialisation' throws up the fine line between specific and general, particular and universal, so the question is how to integrate such methodology into critical art practice in ways that can subvert the threat of post-colonial theory to "re-inscribe the West's cultural authority" (Aijaz Ahmad, In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures, 1992). One positive side I believe is that ethnographic fieldwork and its recent pressure on self-reflexivity may help reduce the generalized assumptions often witnessed in writings on the art of diverse cultures by Western art critics.

Ironically one example of the risk of authoritarianism is illustrated by the curatorial tendency, ever since the critiques of the shows Primitivism at MoMA (New York, 1989) and Magiciens de la Terre at the Centre Georges Pompidou (Paris, 1989), to frame works from 'other' cultures within an ethnographic discourse. Sally Price warns that this fails because its aim to 'legitimize' or academically contextualize the exhibition is nevertheless based on a selection framed by Western aesthetics particularly on account of the fascination with the 'primitive' or 'exotic' manifested by certain curators. Jean-Hubert Martin once stated that since any object



is 'decontextualised' by being placed in a museum, the question as to its derivation is irrelevant. He later reversed this attitude with his exhibition *Partage d'Exotismes* (Lyon, 2000), by inviting anthropologists to select ritual artefacts that were placed alongside Western artworks. However, the focus on visual affinities between art works and artefacts all but cancelled out the cultural and historical differences. Nancy Sullivan wrote that although works appear contemporary by sharing the site of display, "it is the lack of shared history that produces 'authenticity', the less history shared the more genuine the outsider".

It is curious indeed just how little serious attention is paid by anthropologists towards contemporary art, far more space is given to material culture and its focus on artefacts and craft production. As Everlyne Nicodemus, African artist and former anthropologist, wrote: "Surviving ritual image-making and folkloric artefacts, with no bearing on the time we live in, have been raised to the status of authentic cultural expression." This is the bugbear for any movement that plays with 'tradition', as also my experience working with contemporary Pakistani miniature painting revealed. Their use of traditional technique is based on their recognition of its potential function as a signifier of genuine religious tolerance. This is argued through the reclamation of the Mughal context as one of eclecticism and cultural diversity: values threatened today by the instrumental politics of the 'Arabist shift'.

*Dr. Virginia Whiles is an art historian and anthropologist. She has been working as a critic, curator and lecturer on art history and cultural studies in Great Britain, France and South Asia for more than 40 years. From 1999 to 2002 she developed and ran a master's program in theoretical education at the National College of Art in Lahore.*

The text is an edited version of the lecture "Wastelands: Between Art and Anthropology," which she held on January 22, as part of "Waseem Ahmed - Dahlem Karkhana" exhibition at the Dahlem Museums.

## Waseem Ahmed – Dahlem Karkhana / Credits

A project of the Probebühne 4, September 23 through November 1, 2014 and Probebühne 5, November 9, 2014 through April 6, 2015.

**Artist:** Waseem Ahmed  
**Curator:** Martina Stoye  
**Assistant:** Laura Voigt  
**Administrative support:** Mareen Hatoum  
**Restoration supervision:** Juliane Wernicke  
**Depot assistant:** Ines Buschmann  
**Design:** scala Ausstellungsgestaltung, Günter Krüger  
**Exhibition setup:** EMart Ruben Erber  
**Lighting:** Victor Kegli  
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**Assistance:** Carolin Nüser  
**Translation:** Galina Green  
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Waseem Ahmed painting at the atelier, photo: Lidia Rossner



Colours and material at the atelier, photo: Sebastian Bolesch



View of the atelier at the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, photo: Jens Ziehe



Waseem Ahmed talking to visitors, photo: Sebastian Bolesch



Exhibition view “Waseem Ahmed – Dahlem Karkhana,” photo: Jens Ziehe



Installation view “Waseem Ahmed – Dahlem Karkhana,” photo: Jens Ziehe