

Visual Narratives of Gulam Mohammed Sheikh

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Abstract

The art of Gulam Mohammed Sheikh occupies a distinctive and intellectually rich position in the history of modern and contemporary Indian art. His paintings are not merely visual compositions but layered narratives where history, mythology, geography, literature, and personal memory converge. Through a unique synthesis of miniature painting traditions, manuscript illustration, Sufi philosophy, and modernist concerns, Sheikh has created a visual language that transforms the canvas into a site of storytelling and cultural reflection. His work encourages viewers to engage with art as a medium that preserves memory, questions history, and celebrates plural identities.

This research project examines Sheikh's artistic journey, philosophical concerns, stylistic evolution, and contribution to the Baroda School of Art. It also explores how his paintings construct dialogues between civilizations and challenge linear notions of time and space. The study further highlights his role as an educator, writer, and cultural thinker whose influence extends beyond painting into academic and literary domains.

By analyzing his thematic concerns, major works, exhibitions, and recognitions, this project establishes Gulam Mohammed Sheikh as a pioneering figure who redefined narrative painting in India. His art stands as a visual archive of shared human experiences and a testimony to the richness of cultural coexistence.

Keywords

Gulam mohammed sheikh, miniature painting, Baroda school of art, Narrative paintings, Manuscript illustration, Cultural coexistence, Interdisciplinary of practice, Modernism in india.

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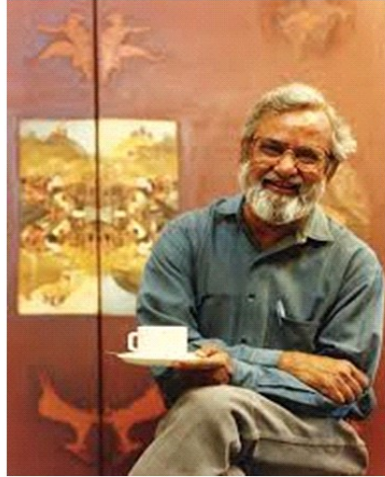
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Gulam mohammed sheikh (Google Art and Culture)

Introduction

Art has always served as a powerful medium for expressing cultural memory, social realities, and personal identity. In the landscape of Indian contemporary art, Gulam Mohammed Sheikh stands out as an artist who transformed painting into a space for intellectual inquiry and storytelling. Born in 1937 in Surendranagar, Gujarat, Sheikh grew up in an environment rich in oral traditions, folk narratives, and literary culture, all of which later influenced his artistic practice.

He studied painting at the Faculty of Fine Arts, MS University, an institution that became central to the development of modern Indian art. Under the guidance of visionary teachers and alongside contemporaries who later formed the Baroda School, Sheikh developed an interest in combining traditional Indian art forms with modern expression. His exposure to miniature paintings, medieval manuscripts, maps, and poetry shaped his distinctive narrative approach.

Over a career spanning more than five decades, Sheikh's paintings have consistently explored the themes of time, memory, migration, mythology, and coexistence. His works invite viewers into complex visual worlds where historical figures, saints, travelers, and common people share the same pictorial space, dissolving boundaries between eras and cultures.

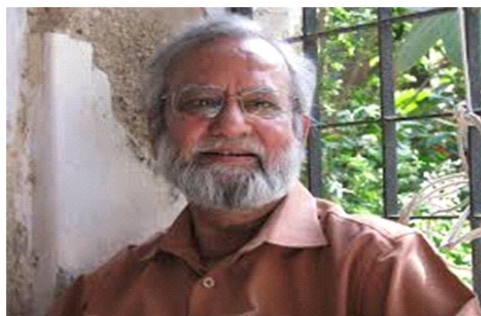
Beyond these influences Gulam Mohammed Sheikh's artistic journey shows a lifelong talk between tradition and modernity. He did not choose one over the other. Instead he developed a language where both could work together meaningfully. His works do not treat tradition as something fixed in the past. He brings it back to life in concerns.

Sheikh's identity as both a painter and a writer enriches his art. His familiarity with poetry, literature and philosophy lets him bring depth into visual form. In his paintings text appears alongside imagery. This blends. Visual storytelling.

This integration of word and image highlights his approach. It emphasizes that art, literature and thought are interconnected forms of expression. The viewer is invited not to look but also to read and interpret. The human figures in Sheikh's paintings often appear calm, reflective and timeless. They do not engage in actions. They seem to exist in contemplation. These figures represent travelers through history observers of change and carriers of memory. Their presence adds a dimension to his work. It encourages viewers to think about their place within cultural and historical narratives.

Color and detailing in Sheikh's paintings enhance their narrative quality. Inspired by traditions his palette is harmonious and subtle. Fine. Intricate detailing demands patience and attention from the viewer. This reinforces the reflective experience his art offers. This careful execution transforms each painting into a manuscript that unfolds gradually. Over the decades Sheikh's work has remained relevant. It addresses concerns like identity, migration, belonging and coexistence. At a time when cultural divisions often dominate discourse his paintings offer images of shared spaces and mutual respect. His art suggests that cultures are not entities but interconnected streams of human experience. His paintings are not merely images but thoughtful compositions that invite interpretation and introspection.

Gulam Mohammed Sheikh- The Art of Narrative Modernism



Gulam Mohammed Sheikh (AstaGuru.com)

Gulam Mohammed Sheikh holds a unique position in the history of modern and contemporary Indian art. He is a painter, poet, writer, teacher, and cultural thinker whose work has changed the way images convey memory, history, and complex storytelling.

Born in 1937 in Surendranagar, Gujarat, Sheikh grew up surrounded by various languages, faith traditions, and visual cultures that later fueled his artistic

imagination. He studied painting at the Faculty of Fine Arts at Maharaja Sayajirao University in Baroda. This institution encouraged young artists to explore local traditions while critically engaging with international modernism. This environment shaped his belief that modern Indian art should grow from its cultural roots without separating itself from global discussions. His time at the Royal College of Art in London broadened his grasp of modernist techniques, but he returned with a renewed focus on miniature painting, manuscript illustration, poetry, and Sufi thought as vital resources for contemporary expression.

A key aspect of Sheikh's practice is his revival and transformation of narrative painting. At a time when abstraction and formalism were prevalent, he argued that painting could still be a medium for storytelling, reflection, and intellectual exploration. Influenced by Indian and Persian miniature traditions, his canvases resemble illuminated manuscripts where figures, architecture, landscapes, symbols, and text fragments coexist. These works invite viewers to engage slowly. The eye wanders across the surface, uncovering episodes, references, and connections that resist a single perspective. By moving away from linear perspective and chronological time, Sheikh offers a cyclical, interconnected view of history, allowing the past and present to communicate with one another.

His paintings often look like maps or cities viewed from above, but they are not mere geographic records. Instead, they represent psychological spaces influenced by memory, travel, reading, and imagination. Streets, houses, monuments, rivers, and human figures appear together as if suspended in a shared mental realm. Baroda, Ahmedabad, and locations from his travels emerge as layered terrains where personal memories intersect with collective history. For Sheikh, geography symbolizes belonging. Space is never empty; it holds the traces of civilizations, migrations, and stories.



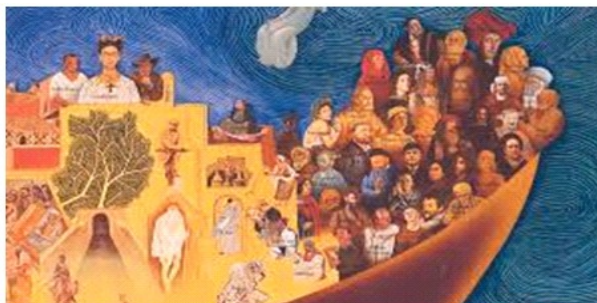
Title : Between memory and music (1989-1991)

Medium : oil in canvas

Literature and philosophy are also central to his visual language. Sheikh is a skilled poet and essayist, and this literary influence is evident in his art. Words,

calligraphy, and text fragments weave into the painted field not as decoration but as meaningful components. Sufi poetry and deep reflection contribute to the contemplative quality of many pieces. For Sheikh, painting is akin to writing a poem; both rely on metaphor, rhythm, and suggestion instead of direct expression. This blend of text and image offers an intellectually enriching experience where viewers are invited to think as they observe.

Among his notable works, “Returning Home from Mecca” showcases how themes of pilgrimage, memory, faith, and geography come together in one composition. The painting intertwines architectural forms, travelers, and symbolic spaces into a meditative narrative about return, belonging, and spiritual journeys. Many of his other works operate similarly, uniting historical figures, everyday people, and imagined presences within architectural or landscape settings. His color palette is often vibrant yet subtle, and the intricate detailing echoes miniature art while remaining distinctly contemporary. The stylized figures, flat spatial organization, and delicate patterns create a reflective visual rhythm.



Title :Kaarawaan (2019-2023)

Medium: acrylic on canvas

Sheikh’s long-standing role as an educator in Baroda is inseparable from his artistic contributions. He believed that art education should foster curiosity, reading, and research alongside studio practice. Generations of artists benefited from his insistence that painters should be thinkers engaged with culture, history, and society. This teaching philosophy helped define the Baroda School’s reputation for intellectual depth. His writings on art, aesthetics, and culture further enhanced discussions, establishing him as a bridge between practice and theory.

In Sheikh’s paintings, history is not a distant record but a living reality. He often positions figures from different periods within the same pictorial space, suggesting that time is fluid. Saints, poets, travelers, and ordinary people coexist, creating dialogues across centuries. This approach challenges narrow narratives and

embraces diverse identities. In a country as varied as India, such visual coexistence carries significant meaning. His art quietly asserts that cultures evolve through exchange rather than isolation.

Over the years, Sheikh's works have been widely exhibited in India and internationally. They are part of major museum and private collections, including the National Gallery of Modern Art in New Delhi. He has received recognition through numerous awards and honors, which acknowledge his contributions to painting, education, and writing. Yet his lasting influence is in how he broadened the possibilities of contemporary Indian painting—intellectual, narrative, rooted, and exploratory.

Sheikh's engagement with cultural memory also shows through his attention to daily life. Ordinary objects, travelers, readers, and observers fill his scenes, suggesting that history is experienced by common people. This human element prevents his work from being merely symbolic; it stays grounded in real life. Viewers sense warmth, curiosity, and empathy beneath the intellectual framework.



Title :Ark:kashmir (2015)

Medium: Acrylic on canvas

A remarkable feature of his art is its meditative pace. In a fast-paced visual culture, Sheikh's paintings invite viewers to slow down. They encourage lingering, detail tracing, and connecting fragments. This quality reflects his belief that art fosters reflection and dialogue. Instead of delivering immediate impact, his works unfold slowly, much like stories remembered through time.

Sheikh's blend of miniature tradition with contemporary issues shows that tradition is not fixed. He reinterprets historical forms without nostalgia, demonstrating how they can address modern questions of identity, faith, displacement, and coexistence. This approach has inspired many younger artists to revisit local traditions with new perspectives.

As a writer, Sheikh expressed ideas about art's relationship with culture and memory that mirrored his visual work. His essays often explore how images convey history and how artists navigate their role in society. This dual practice—painting and writing—adds unusual depth to his body of work. Each aspect reinforces the other, creating a rich cultural contribution.

In his later years, Sheikh's work evolved while maintaining fundamental concerns. New paintings revisited older themes with refined subtlety, reflecting a lifelong conversation with memory and place. Even as styles changed, his commitment to narrative, diversity, and reflection remained constant.

Gulam Mohammed Sheikh's legacy lies in showing that painting can serve as a crossroads for various fields—history, literature, philosophy, geography, and personal memory. He expanded Indian modernism from formal experimentation to a realm of intellectual storytelling. His art conveys that images can hold knowledge, preserve cultural memory, and invite reflection on who we are and where we belong.

Today, Sheikh's paintings continue to inspire artists, scholars, and viewers seeking depth and meaning in visual art. They serve as quiet yet powerful reminders that culture thrives through dialogue, that history endures in memory, and that art can be both personal and universal. Through decades of effort, Sheikh built a body of work that remains profoundly relevant to discussions about identity, coexistence, and the role of tradition in contemporary life.

Depiction of Culture, Memory, and Identity

A central concern in Sheikh's art is the idea of plural identity. He challenges the notion of a single, fixed identity by presenting cultures as layered and interconnected. His paintings often include historical personalities, mythological characters, poets, saints, and ordinary people within the same frame, suggesting that history is a shared and continuous process.



Title: city for sale (1981-1984)

Medium : oil in canvas

Memory plays a vital role in his work. Personal memories from his childhood, stories heard in his community, and literary references merge with historical events and mythological tales. Through this blending, Sheikh creates a visual archive that celebrates coexistence and cultural dialogue.

His art strongly advocates religious harmony and cultural pluralism. By placing figures from different faiths and traditions together, he emphasizes the shared heritage of humanity and counters divisive narratives.

Major Exhibitions and Art Events

Sheikh's works have been displayed at leading museums and galleries in India and abroad, including:

- National Gallery of Modern Art
- Kiran Nadar Museum of Art
- Tate Modern
- Victoria and Albert Museum

These exhibitions introduced global audiences to his narrative style and established his position in international contemporary art discourse.

Collections

His paintings are part of significant collections such as:

- National Gallery of Modern Art
- Kiran Nadar Museum of Art
- Victoria and Albert Museum

Publication and Media Presence of Gulam Mohammed Sheikh

Gulam Mohammed Sheikh is not only a painter but also an important writer, poet, editor, and public intellectual. His ideas about art, culture, memory, and identity have appeared widely in books, journals, catalogues, interviews, and documentaries. This strong literary and media presence deepens the understanding of his paintings, which often merge text and image in manuscript-like form.

Books and Writings

- *Gulam Mohammed Sheikh: About Painting* — A key collection of his essays reflecting on painting, tradition, and modernity.
- *Gulam Mohammed Sheikh: Speaking of Pictures* — Conversations and writings that explain his narrative approach and sources.
- Numerous essays in art journals discussing Indian miniature traditions, Baroda pedagogy, and narrative modernism.
- Poetry and reflective prose in Gujarati and English, revealing his literary voice alongside his visual practice.

Exhibition Catalogues and Gallery Publications

Detailed catalogues from shows at Vadehra Art Gallery, National Gallery of Modern Art, and international venues reproduce his works with scholarly essays. Curatorial texts frequently analyze his manuscript style, map-like cities, and integration of calligraphy universities.

National Level Recognition

Sheikh received the Padma Shri and honors from the Lalit Kala Akademi for his immense contribution to art and education. He is regarded as a foundational figure of the Baroda School.

International Recognition

His works are discussed in global art history for their synthesis of tradition and modernity and for reintroducing storytelling into contemporary painting.

Awards and Honours

- National Padma Shri (1983) — Government of India, for contribution to the arts.
- Padma Bhushan (2014) — One of India's highest civilian awards for distinguished service in art.
- Kalidas Samman — Government of Madhya Pradesh, for excellence in visual arts.
- Lalit Kala Akademi Fellowship — The highest honour of India's National Academy of Art.
- National Award, Lalit Kala Akademi — Recognition for outstanding contribution to painting.
- Honours and lifetime recognitions from art institutions and universities for his role as artist, writer, and educator at the Baroda Faculty of Fine Arts. awards for art and teaching

Favorite Artists and Influences

Sheikh was influenced by miniature traditions and modernists like K. G. Subramanyan and Bhupen Khakhar.

Conclusion

The artwork of **Gulam Mohammed Sheikh** shows how modern Indian painting can become a powerful way to remember culture, talk about identity, and think deeply about history and society. His paintings are not just images made with colors and shapes. They are like visual stories that carry ideas from the past into the present. Through his work, painting becomes a space where many things come together — history, geography, literature, philosophy, mythology, and his own life experiences. This is what makes his art rich, meaningful, and thoughtful.

Gulam Mohammed Sheikh believed that art should not be separate from life. He felt that paintings should speak about people, their memories, their surroundings, and their cultural roots. That is why his work often looks like a storybook spread across the canvas. When we look at his paintings, we do not see only one scene. Instead, we see many small events, characters, places, and symbols that are connected to each other. This storytelling quality is called narrative art, and Sheikh is known as one of the most important artists in India who brought narrative painting back into modern art in a fresh and powerful way.

He took inspiration from traditional Indian miniature paintings, old manuscripts, myths, poetry, and religious stories. He carefully studied these sources and understood how artists in the past told stories through images. Instead of copying them, he used their methods in a new and modern style. He showed that old traditions are not dead or outdated. They can still be used in exciting and meaningful ways in today's world. This is one of his biggest contributions to modern Indian art.

In his paintings, different time periods often exist together. You may see a medieval saint, a modern city, a mythological character, and a personal memory all in the same frame. This mixing of time and place shows that history is not something far away. It is always present in our lives. Sheikh wanted viewers to understand that the past and present are connected. We carry our history with us wherever we go. Our culture shapes who we are.

His work also makes viewers look very carefully. At first glance, his paintings may seem simple or decorative. But when you observe closely, you notice many small details, hidden symbols, and deeper meanings. This slow looking is important. Sheikh wanted people to spend time with the painting, to think, to question, and to discover connections between images and stories. In this way, his art becomes an experience rather than just something to see quickly.

Another important idea in his art is identity. Through his paintings, Sheikh asks questions like: Who are we? Where do we belong? What is our relationship with our culture and history? By placing people from different times, religions, and cultures in the same painting, he shows that many identities can live together. He gives a message of unity and shared heritage. His paintings suggest that culture is not divided but connected.

This idea is especially important in a diverse country like India, where many religions, languages, and traditions exist together. Sheikh's art reminds us that diversity is not a problem but a strength. He shows that people from different backgrounds share common stories and memories. His paintings promote harmony and understanding.

Gulam Mohammed Sheikh was not only a painter but also a teacher, writer, and thinker. He taught for many years at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Baroda, which later became famous as an important center for modern Indian art. As a teacher, he influenced many young artists and encouraged them to think deeply about art, culture, and society. He believed that artists must be aware of history and must respond to the world around them.

Through his lectures and writings, Sheikh explained that art is not only about technique or beauty. It is also about ideas, awareness, and responsibility. He encouraged artists to read literature, study history, and understand philosophy. He wanted them to use art as a way of thinking and questioning.

His role in strengthening the Baroda School of Art is very important. The Baroda School became known for its intellectual approach to painting, where artists used stories, symbols, and cultural references in their work. Sheikh played a major role in shaping this environment. His guidance helped many artists find their own voice while staying connected to their cultural roots.

One of the most powerful aspects of Sheikh's art is how he combines personal memory with collective memory. Sometimes his paintings include scenes from his childhood, places he visited, or people he knew. At the same time, these personal memories are connected with larger historical and cultural stories. This makes his art both personal and universal.

For example, a simple house in his painting may represent not only his own home but also the idea of belonging and shelter for many people. A road in his painting may represent both a physical journey and a journey through time and memory. These layered meanings make his work rich and thoughtful.

Sheikh's use of space in painting is also unique. Instead of showing depth in a realistic way, he arranges images like a map or a page from a manuscript. Different scenes are placed next to each other without following the rules of perspective. This style comes from Indian miniature painting traditions. It allows him to show many stories at once in the same frame.

Color in his paintings is calm, soft, and meaningful. He often uses flat colors and delicate lines, similar to miniature paintings. This gives his work a timeless quality, as if it belongs to both the past and present.

His paintings also include references to famous poets, saints, and thinkers from Indian history. By doing this, Sheikh connects visual art with literature and philosophy. He shows that art forms are not separate but related to each other. Another important theme in his work is the idea of journey. Many of his paintings

show roads, travelers, maps, and landscapes. These journeys are not only physical but also mental and cultural. They represent the search for identity, understanding, and belonging.

In conclusion, the artwork of Gulam Mohammed Sheikh brings together stories, images, past, and present in a beautiful and thoughtful way. His paintings prove that narrative art is still powerful in modern times. They show that remembering culture is an important part of creating meaningful art.

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