

Straddling History and Memory: Gulammohammed Sheikh

'The world as it came to me... came almost invariably manifold, plural or at least dual in form...'

-Gulammohammed Sheikh

This quote by painter, critic and professor Gulammohammed Sheikh captures the essence of his practice, which explores several key dichotomies in art and culture, such as the relationship between history and memory, as well as the confluence of varied sensibilities in Indian art. Sheikh was born in 1937 and has primarily lived and worked in Baroda since he enrolled at the Faculty of Fine Art at MS University in 1955. In the 1960s, Sheikh studied at the Royal College of Art in London.

Let's study a seminal painting he made upon his return to India and explore some of the unexpected juxtapositions and narrative-building strategies that exist across his practice.

Visual Journeys Across Space and Time

Returning Home after a Long Absence (1969–73) reckons with his homecoming and tries to find a point of convergence between childhood memories and his profession as a painter.

Looking at the background of the painting, we first notice the courtyard wall — a recurring theme in Sheikh's work that separates his past and present. He also adopts art historical references from European and Persianate traditions without hesitation, showing us that both visual cultures are a part of his world.

For instance, the centre of the work features an image of the Mi'raj, or the Prophet Muhammad's ascent to heaven, iconography often associated with Islamic art. We also see angular rows of houses that bear visual similarities to 14th-century paintings from the Italian Renaissance centre of Siena. Sheikh's own imagination comes to play in his depiction of angelic figures wherein we see references from different cultures.

Let's now turn to the foreground, which shows a central figure of a woman who is based on a photograph of Sheikh's mother. His decision to feature her in the painting is important because it connects the work to his own life and memory, a signal of his return home.

Many artists quote and borrow imagery from art history, but what does it mean when such complex references are personal, and when history is memory?

In references to his work, Sheikh has explained that his paintings are not a result of a single moment, but instead an aggregation of phases that unfold as he works. In this way, he introduces two different aspects of time — the presence of historical and other references in his works, and the time it takes to work through a painting itself, which is its own period.

'It's not that you don't refer to things . . . The process is neither totally conscious nor totally subconscious. There are phases in which you work — a painting is not done in a single moment. It is done over a period of time; and in that, it's not one kind of painting that you do, because times change, you change, the world changes, and then you decide.'

- Gulammohammed Sheikh

None of the elements we've looked at in *Returning Home* stand alone, instead they build a story. Sheikh's works often present 'itineraries' of images that can be read in different ways. This aspect of his practice has been inspired by looking at the murals at Shekhawati in Rajasthan, wherein the physical movement of the viewer is essential in grasping the scale and structure of these paintings. He thought about these in relation to the way he built stories across his canvases.

In one of his series of works exploring themes of migration and displacement, Sheikh appropriates a 'Kaavad', a portable shrine that contains multiple folding doors, each painted with scenes of Hindu mythology. In Rajasthan, Kavadia or Bhatt priests commissioned artisans from the Kumawat caste to create these objects. Sheikh also presents the structure of the Kavadi on a much larger scale, depicting saints, folk characters, the Sufi mystic and weaver, Kabir, together. By showing elements and figures that represent different times and spaces in the same frame, the works defy temporal, spatial and cultural limitations. One of the panels we see here, in fact, also has a version of *Returning Home*.

Having looked at how Sheikh builds complex narratives with historical and personal references in his paintings, we can now take some of the tools we've developed to understand broader relationships of 20th-century Indian art to recent and distant pasts.

In addition to being a prolific painter, Gulammohammed Sheikh (b. 1937) is also an eminent poet and writer and has won acclaim for his collections of Gujarati poems and prose. He was awarded the Padma Shri in 1983 and the Padmabhushan in 2014 for his contributions to the field of art.

Along with artists like Bhupen Khakhar (1934–2003), Vivan Sundaram (1943–2023) and Nalini Malani (b. 1946), he spearheaded the movement of narrative figuration in Indian art, which rejected abstract and non-representational forms in favour of social scenes that addressed contemporary concerns of people.

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