

STAR WEEKEND

Asif Noorani



Major Effort on Mini Scale

S.A. Irfan miniature paintings 31 in number on display at The Art Gallery in Karachi, are amazing. One can't agree with the curator more when she wonders why the artist hasn't lost his eyesight. One needs a very strong and steady coordination between the eye (read mind) and the hand. S.A. Irfan doesn't succumb to the temptation of using gouache which is cheaper and easier to handle than water color. Also, according to Irfan, it is not durable. "If art lovers invest money in my paintings, they should not be cheated, the colors should be long lasting," he says. Another point worth mentioning is that water color has transparency and silky smoothness. Gouache lacks in both these qualities.

Irfan started off as a brilliant copyist. His miniature of the empress Mumtaz Mahal sold for Rs 15,000 in his very first painting exhibition held at the same venue. The buyer wanted a pair, and he asked Irfan to do a portrait of Shah Jehan. "I was perplexed because all the paintings of Shah Jehan that I saw portrayed his profile, there was no full frontal view of his face to use as reference. However, I relied partly on his profiles and partly on my own imagination, and did a miniature of the emperor. The art lover liked it, much to my relief, or shall I say much to my satisfaction," recalls Irfan.

Irfan is self-taught. He started working on minuscule scales while he was still studying painting. "Our old masters, who have been my inspiration, were also self-taught miniaturists. A case in point is Ustad Allah Bakhsh, another is Ustad Miran Bakhsh," he says.

Irfan drew inspiration from both the East and the West. In the early stage of his career he copied the works of such renowned Western painters as Lord Leighton and John Frederick Lewis. The originals were not miniatures but they were in normal sizes.

His latest display shows such diverse themes as orientalism, suifism and romanticism. There is also one which depicts a battle scene, and it looks so realistic. One is astonished to see the depth in the painting, and what is no less there are fine details like the different shades of bricks in the background wall and the details on the face of the man seen from the small door in the wall. The details are not harsh, they are soft and mellow. Also there is nothing flat about his compositions, which range from six inches by four inches to two inches by one inch. There is three-dimensional appeal in most of his work.

Irfan says that water colour is a difficult medium it dries very quickly, and there is no chance of recovery. "One slip and you are gone. You have no chance of getting away with a mistake if you are doing a miniature because there you have to be extremely accurate and precise," he says.

Accurate and precise he is, and he also excels in recreating other painters' works, but what is more he is showing unmistakable signs of becoming an original artist. Whatever original work that is on display at The Art Gallery shows the man has potential. And now a word about the exhibition, it has been imaginatively curated. As you proceed from the first painting on display to the last you can't help feeling that they have been placed in a sequence. There is a visual continuity about the show.

