

Geometry, Illumination And Beyond:

Safavid and Mughal Manuscripts Inspire London Exhibition

By Karen Dabrowska

"Concentrate on the movement of the line and spiral and the next movement. Don't hesitate, don't be afraid, don't wobble". At a London workshop to accompany her exhibition *Geometry, Illumination and Beyond*, Anita Chowdry gives her undivided attention to conservators and crafts people making designs based on historical Mughal and Iranian manuscripts.

The workshops were run in conjunction with her exhibition at the Brunei Gallery at London University's School of Oriental and African Studies.

Painter, researcher and educator Anita Chowdry studied traditional miniature painting techniques under a hereditary master in India in the early 1990s. Since then her research has been centred on the techniques and



Anita Chopwdry assists Emlie Jackson a conservator from the Frer and Sackler Galleries at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington with her design.



London workshop participant from the Conservation Centre for Art & Historic Artifacts in Philadelphia.

"In the early 1990s I began my association with a hereditary master in Jaipur, whose forbears had served in the Rajput courts, Anita explained.

"As Mughal power declined, artists trained in the traditions of the imperial workshops gravitated towards new power bases, bringing with them their repertoire of imagery and technique. The family of my master, known as Bannu, is one that has valued its inherited body of accumulated technical expertise enough to keep it more

or less intact and pass it on".

By the mid 19th century, the art of manuscript illumination had been undergoing a long decline; new synthesised pigments from the West began to replace expensive mineral pigments: designs and execution became mannered and less considered; and the concept had become somewhat debased from its original intention, that of 'illuminating' exquisitely hand-written texts, to that of serving merely as decoration for albums or compiled pictures.

"My initial area of interest, which is the primary inspiration for the exhibition, is the working practice, aesthetic sensibility and mindset of the original 16-century illuminators", Anita explained. "The composition and execution of the designs in the exhibition are informed by close study of precious historical manuscripts and empirical practice based on technical observation.

"The starting point of Geometry, Illumination and Beyond, is an

illuminated shamsa, or sunburst, a motif that was used on the opening pages of royal manuscripts and a piece of pure geometry, demonstrating an underlying structure of squares growing out proportionately from the centre. I needed to follow a precise process based on my research, building up the shamsa using classical elements and authentic pigments, in order to gain as deep an understanding of it as possible. Real lapis lazuli is a difficult pigment to handle, and in the



A steel shamsa installation welcomes visitors to the Geometry, Illumination and Beyond Exhibition in London's Brunei Gallery.



Illuminated dragon: elements that derive from classic illumination and fractal images are playfully combined in a contemporary design using traditional pigments.