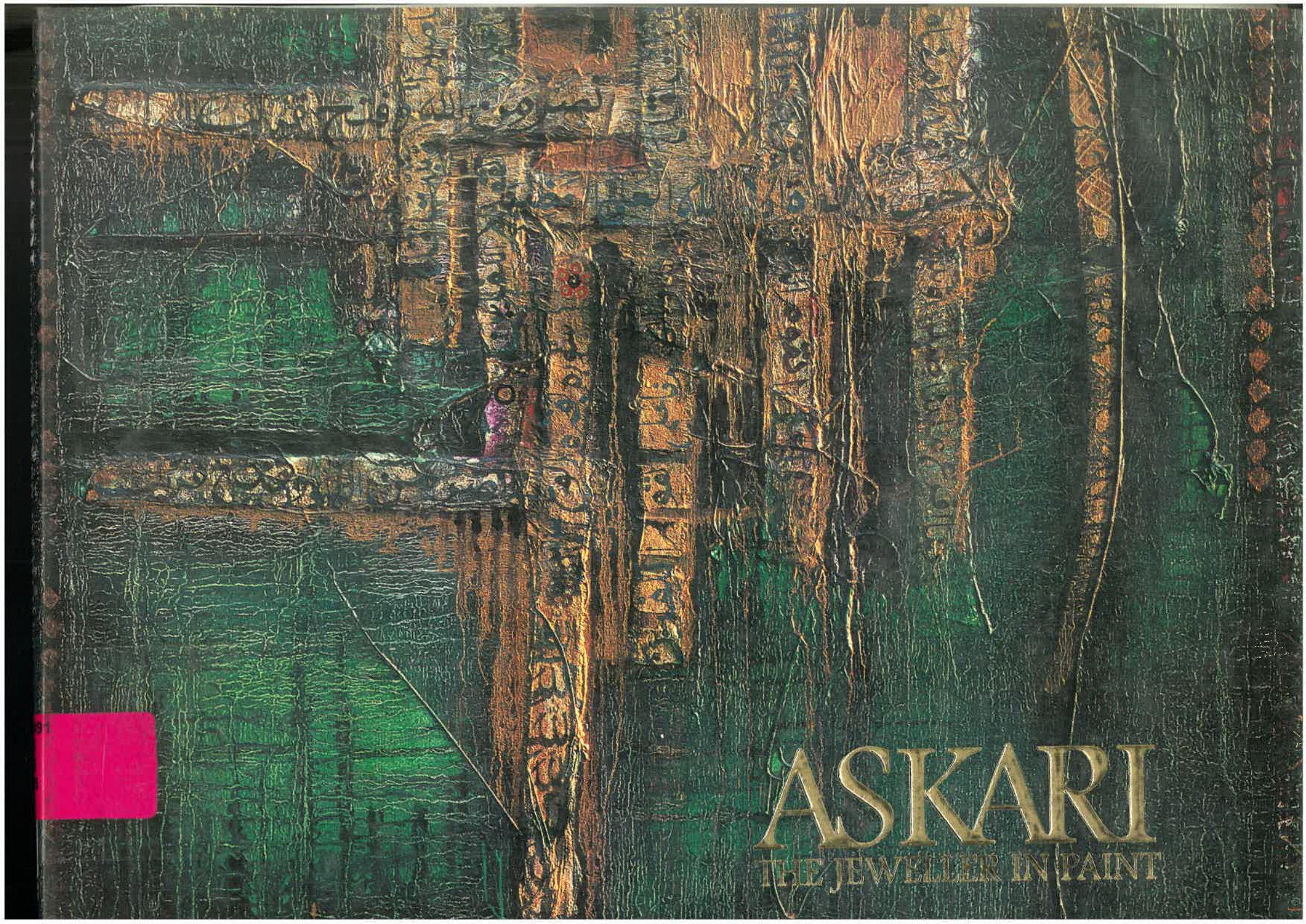




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ASKARI

THE JEWELLER IN PAINT

ASKARI

THE JEWELLER IN PAINT



10195

DATA ENTRED

ASKARI

THE JEWELLER IN PAINT



EDITED BY
AMINA HASSAN



ALHAMRA BOOKS

Dedicated to

*my father Prof. Shuaib Bin Hassan,
mother, husband Hamid & son Daniyal*

Acknowledgments

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PREFACE

Lahore Arts Council (LAC) was established, as the Pakistan Arts Council soon after Independence, in 1949. Such distinguished men of letters as Imtiaz Ali Taj, Faiz Ahmad Faiz and Dr. Tassaduq Hussain Khan were joined by singing legends Nur Jahan and Roshan Ara Begum, an eminent bureaucrat S.S. Jafri, Director of Radio Pakistan Agha Bashir Ahmad and the doyenne of Pakistani painting, Professor Anna Molka Ahmad to found this leading cultural organization.

Since the Ghaznavid dynasty of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Lahore has been celebrated for its cultural, literary, academic and spiritual pre-eminence. Not surprisingly the modest Council starting in a residence, developed over the years, into the largest and the most vibrant of the nation's cultural centres.

This organization prompted and promoted the traditional and the modern in the great creative continuum. Myriad events in the performing and the plastic arts enriched the life of the city. However, these events were limited by time and space. The publications produced -- exhibition brochures, programmes of plays, introductory leaflets, posters -- were occasional and ephemeral. No serious publication -- despite the presence of a galaxy of artists and actors, of musicians and vocalists, of writers and poets, of dramatists and dancers -- was undertaken.

A small -- and we hope a significant -- step has been taken to reduce this lack. A major publication *Lahore Colours* accompanied the exhibition which collected the work of local and foreign artists who had rendered the city since 1947. This is being followed by the current volume, a companion to the first retrospective of the painter. These volumes attempt to focus attention on important contributions in various fields, address the larger public and go beyond the instant.

22 November 1997

M. Athar Tahir
Chairman, Lahore Arts Council

INTRODUCTION

A leading artist of Pakistan, Askari Mian Irani has developed a unique blend of painting and calligraphy as the following pages reveal. If painting is silent poetry, then the views and reviews anthologized here, attempt to give voice to that silence and that poetry.

Askari Mian Irani was born in Sahranpur (U.P) India, in March 1940. His father S. Muhammad Mian Zaidi, a renowned *hakim* had adopted traditional medicine as his vocation in keeping with the practice of his forefathers. The family had a penchant for poetry and literature. However none had dabbled in painting or calligraphy. His parents, like many of their contemporaries smitten with the desire to see their sons as doctors and engineers, wanted Askari to take up engineering as a profession.

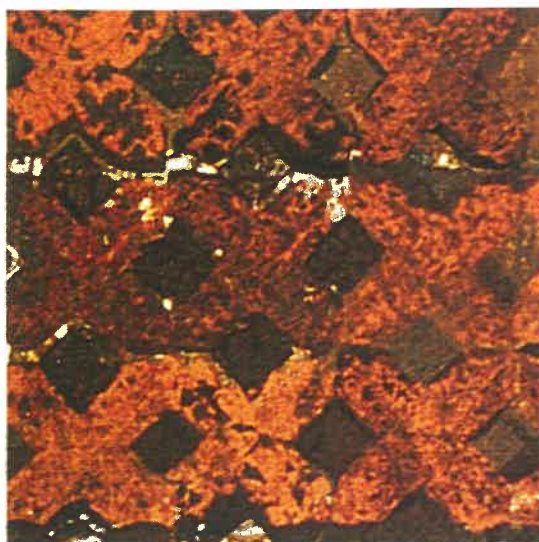
However, much to their dismay, their son even as a child, began to show signs of thwarting their plans. While still in junior school, he showed enthusiasm and aptitude for drawing and absolutely no knack or talent for mathematics. This aroused the awe and appreciation of his art teachers and the ire and exasperation of his father. His drawing in those days was mainly concerned with depiction of nature, for his father was fond of hunting and young Askari would accompany him on his forays into the wilderness, where nature reigned supreme and inspired the young boy with its savage beauty.

Askari was still in school when the family in 1947 migrated to Pakistan. A dominant influence of his childhood was the deeply religious and conservative atmosphere he found at home. Islamic culture loomed large at home and its values were strictly adhered to. Interest in literature ran in the family and Askari could not help being influenced by an environment in which literary pursuits were cultivated and encouraged. His was also a very close-knit family. As opposed to this set of forces, another vastly different world was simultaneously pulling at his heart. This was the world of drawing,

colour, and art. And for him its very quintessence was the elusive, magical place called the National College of Arts (N.C.A.).

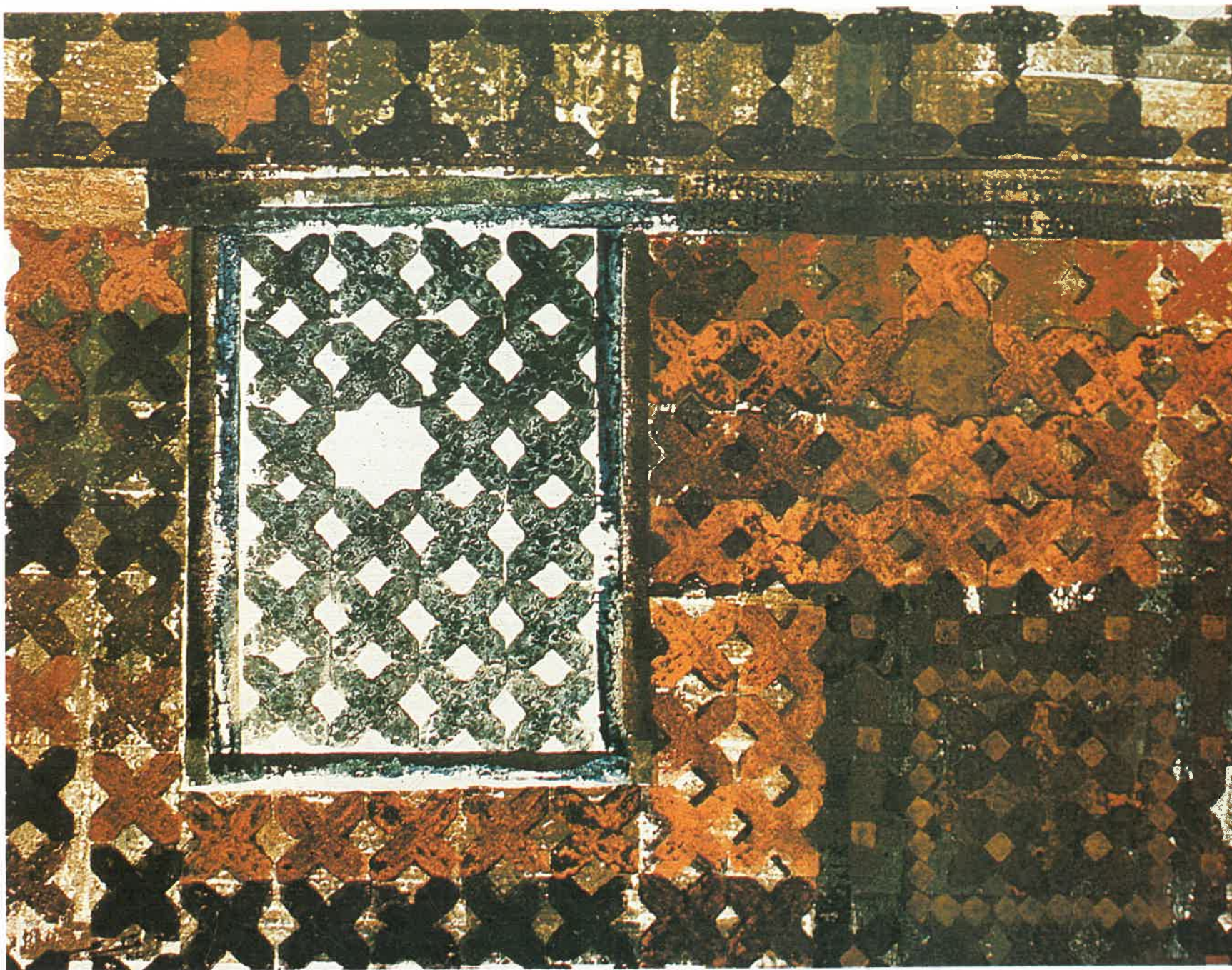
The family in Lahore lived close to the Royal Park which was the hub of cinema-goers and was studded with frighteningly-fulsome cinema hoardings and posters. Askari fancied these paintings and often sharpened his skills by copying and drawing the faces and figures of his favorite film-stars.

But it was the National College of Arts he passed every day on his way to school, which set his heart afire. There was no boundary wall in those days and one could see the activity on the lawns - - students gathered around a bull, sketching it from different angles, or drawing other interesting subjects. Standing close to the outer limits he would eagerly devour such scenes with a pair of wistful eyes. Throughout his school days, he concentrated less on his studies and more on his drawing to his father's chagrin and disappointment. The conflict came to a head when he spelled out his desire to join N.C.A. His family was furious, for painting was just a frivolous activity, and in any case not proper for the scion of a religious-minded family like theirs. On the other hand the prospect of studying Mathematics, which he could scarcely understand, and eventually engineering, was unacceptable to Askari.



As the crisis deepened Askari ran away to Karachi. For three days he lived on the streets, till the force of close family ties made him return. The incident finally melted away his father's opposition, although he still could not comprehend or approve of his son's passion for painting.

Joining N.C.A. was a watershed in Askari's life. The conflict was over. There was not a cloud on the horizon. Happily he plunged into the fascinating world where it was difficult to tell work and study from fun and enjoyment. The years at the N.C.A. were a period of fulfillment. He enjoyed his work and wallowed in the functions, festivities and traditions of the place founded by John Lockwood Kipling in 1876. In 1967, Askari graduated from N.C.A. in



Door & window 1975 • Mixed media • 54cm x 68cm

commercial design and not painting, which he would have personally preferred. But commercial design, he thought would be more acceptable to his father.

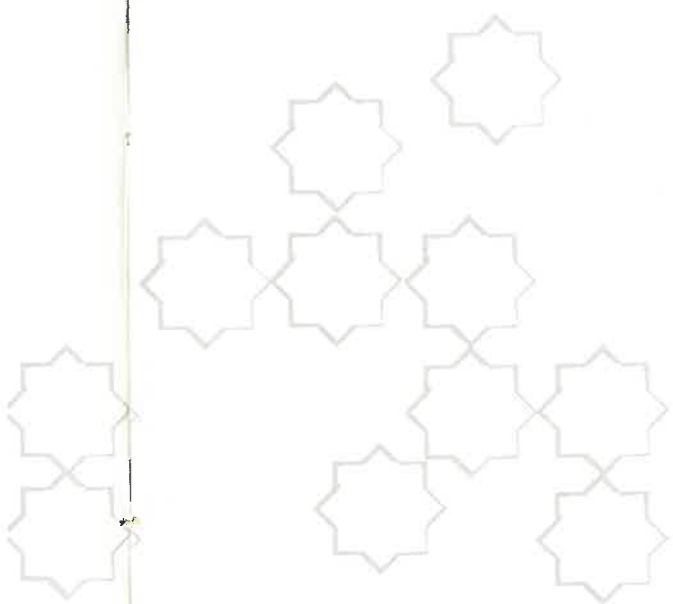
The first job offer Askari received and accepted was from a leading advertising agency in Karachi. Next he moved to Pakistan Tobacco Company as a visualiser, earning money, gaining experience and exposure in the process. Till 1976, he remained in the business of advertising, but became disillusioned and dissatisfied with the nature of his job. His first love and passion had always been painting and he felt that his potential as a painter was being stifled. So a job opening in the design department of N.C.A., seemed timely. In 1976 he came back to Lahore and has since been teaching. Currently he is an assistant professor of design at N.C.A.

During his stay in Karachi he had developed an intimate friendship with Sadequain (1930 - 1987) who used to "juxtapose scripts with 'smoky figures'." Bashir Mirza (11.07.1922) was also a close friend. Askari started painting while still in advertising and held his solo shows in Karachi in 1969, 1970 and 1975. Influence of Shakir Ali (1916 - 1975) and Sadequain can be discerned in his earlier work. The paintings were mainly a collection of land- and sea-scapes in oil, and figures of beggars on the streets. He was painting whatever caught his fancy. Askari Mian Irani had not yet arrived.



On coming back to Lahore, with a job he was fond of and with more time for painting, he began to experiment with mono-prints and collage-like effects. The paintings sold well.

The present work of Askari Mian Irani - - his styles and his themes - - did not develop or evolve gradually over the years. The idea just occurred to him. It was a mosaic of visual impressions from a film on sufi aspects of Islamic culture, calligraphy, forgotten Islamic traditions, motifs and images of a bygone era, that had a lasting impact on him. But he did not know how to revitalize these lost images. But soon a pictorial book on calligraphy suggested the mode.



Naqsh-i Taha-I, 1983 • Mixed media • 88cm x 88cm

It contained intriguing images of pictures and inscriptions engraved on slabs of stone alongwith geometrical figures giving them an aesthetic symmetry. The impressions and the images stayed in his mind, mixed and mingled. His talents for painting, calligraphy and design, all fused together, and guided by a rich imagination, gave shape and form to the many vague images floating in his mind. Using torrents of dripping colour and all kinds of media, deft fingers and dextrous hands translated on canvas what the mind's eye had perceived for all to see.

Askari had arrived. And since then the world has watched his masterpieces in some 35 solo and group exhibitions in Pakistan and abroad. His canvases today adorn private collections, public art galleries and museums around the world.





Princess with peacock, 1997 • Mixed media • 73.5cm x 147cm

ABOUT MYSELF

Askari Mian Irani

The lineage of my family can be traced back to Hazrat Ali, cousin and son-in-law of the Holy Prophet (pbuh). Propelled by difficult circumstances, my ancestors migrated from Madina. Some settled in Yemen, while others moved to Iraq. Among the latter were Hazrat Zaid Shaheed, son of Imam Zain ul-Abideen and grandson of Hazrat Ali, who was killed for his refusal to bow before, the forces of oppression.

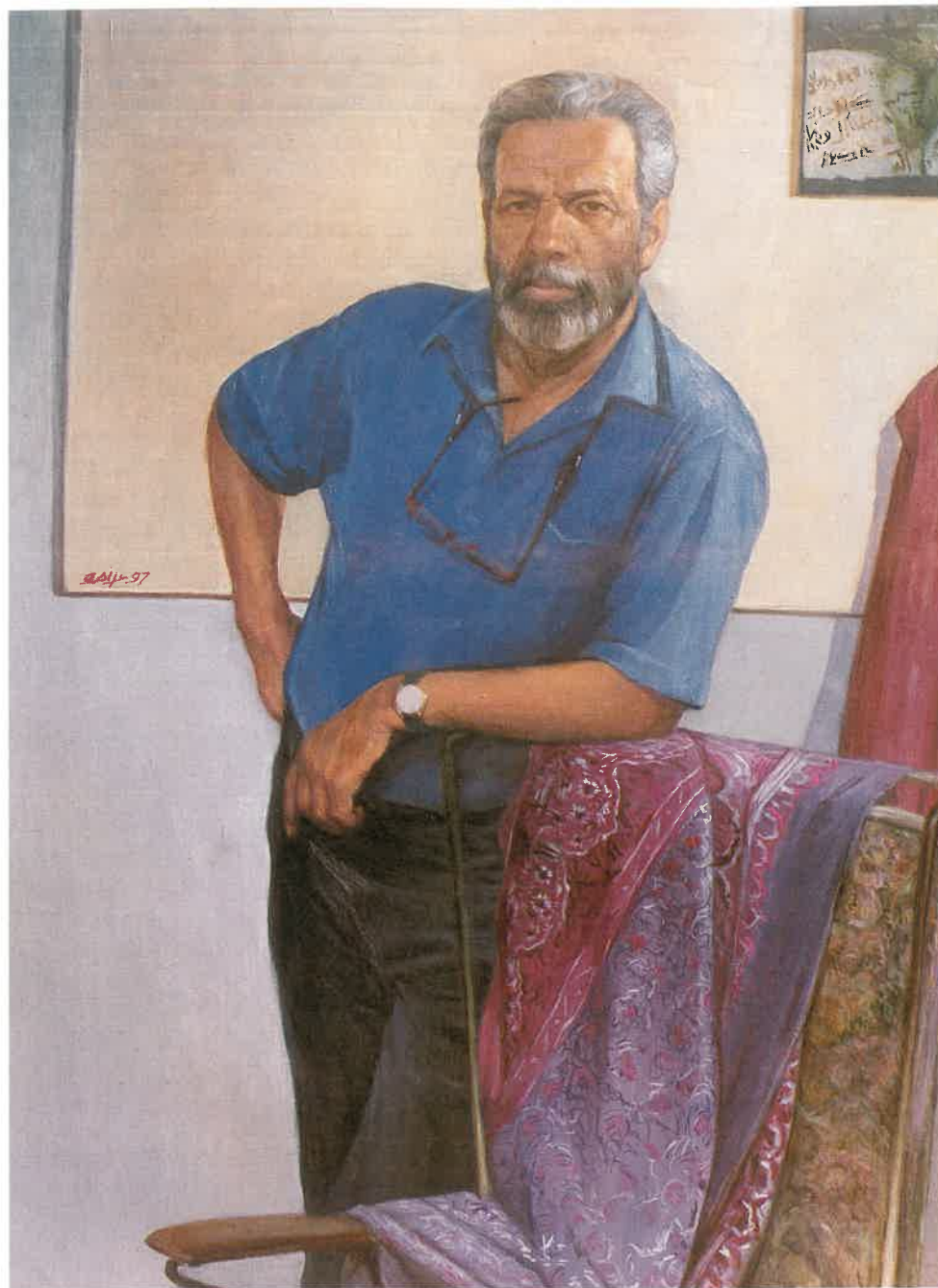
It was Syed Abdul Farah Wasti, known for his piety, who decided to leave Iraq and in early twelfth century and moved to Afghanistan and finally to South Asia. Sultan Mahmood Ghazanvi held him in high esteem and four of his sons, on Ghazanvi's insistence, settled in India. All four held important offices. Their descendants in one capacity or the other, were associated with different dynasties that ruled South Asia. They were especially influential in the late eighteenth century when the once mighty Mughal empire was disintegrating. Known in history as "Saadat-i Bahira" they were virtually the king-makers during this period.

Known for, their martial skills, my more immediate ancestors, settled in and around Delhi. They began to take interest in scholarly and literary pursuits specially poetry. My grandfather Syed Muhammad Hasnain (1828-1972) was an accomplished hakim and a renowned poet. He excelled in the art of Marsia (a genre of poetry commemorating the tragedy of Karbala). My late father Syed Muhammad Mian Zaidi (1899-1991) was also an eminent hakim. At the same time he was also kind-hearted, down to earth and religious. A truly remarkable personality, his liveliness and wit was infectious and all those who knew him, still remember him with great fondness and love.

My parents wanted me to become an engineer, a career toward which I had no inclination. I ran away from home and lived on the footpaths of Bandar Road in Karachi. The fact that I returned home after a



Hakim Syed Muhammad Huasnain Zaidi
1828 - 1972



Askari Mian Irani

three-day disappearance was because I had been brought up in a home where family ties matter. My upbringing in an environment where religion and literary pursuits were cultivated played a major role in my development. In those days, our only entertainment apart from games in school, were films. Royal Park, where most cinema hoarding were painted, was close to our house. The over life-size film posters encourages me to learn drawing. I started copying these board-painters' method. My early sketches were portraits of Dilip Kumar, Madhuballa and Nargis ~ ~ the faces I knew like the back of my hand. I finally got admitted in the National College of Arts and graduated with a commercial design degree.

Job hunting took me back to Karachi. Apart from a nine-to-five job in a design agency, I started painting seriously. Bashir Mirza, who also owned an art gallery, prompted me. My earlier work had strong influences of Shakir Ali. For the next ten years, I jumped from one style to another till I eventually questioned my own identity as an artist and what exactly I wanted to express.

As a Muslim, I believe that the word of God illuminates our lives and the impact of the divine word on the soul of a Muslim, practicing or otherwise, reconnects him to the value system of which he is a product. Painting naqsh, the Islamic tradition of numerology, felt close to home. My major themes remained incorporating design elements like the folds of a ta'viz amulet, arches from Mughal architecture, historical figures from miniature painting, which signify Islamic spirituality. The technique of painting I have evolved is such that the texture it creates on the surface of canvas enhances the age effect. The apparently damaged surface creates visual retrogression, validating the presence and revival of these antique design elements in a contemporary time-frame.



My family



Hakim Syed Muhammad Mian Zaidi
1901 - 1992



Lakht Zuharah bint Abadat Husnain Zaidi
1908 - 1953

CHILD PLAY AS ART

S. Amjad Ali

Almost everyone has enjoyed the pleasure, during childhood, of folding a paper and daubing ink on one side and then pressing it on the other. All kinds of fanciful shapes and images were produced. Who would have thought that this playful technique would be refined and developed to produce art work of a high order. But this is just what has been done by Askari Mian.

Askari discovered that impressions can be produced not only by pressing paper on paper but by successive impressions, one over the other, so that a composite and complex work of art is built up. This is obviously not possible either with water or oil colour or with printing inks, but it can be done with the special waterproof and quick drying ink used in felt-pointed marker pens, especially when the impression is taken on the chemically coated art card.

The ink is diluted in a thinner and used at once to take out an impression before it dries and the thinner evaporates. Even maximizing of two colours cannot be done on a palette but has to be done in the bottle. The range of colours in these inks is also limited but Askari has worked within these limitations and supplemented them with silver and gold.

Since the colour dries immediately, colour can be overlaid on colour. Any addition or correction must be done in the same technique and touching with the brush is permissible. Mostly the artist uses a sheet of plastic or cellophane in crumpled form to colour within and then to press on pure white art card.

Sometimes he even stamps on the plastic sheet to produce varied impressions. Since the ink in the wrinkles is deeper, it produces a deeper impression and interesting linear effects. Area by area of the paper in this way is treated to create a composite effect. Sometimes, with a piece of wood, without covering, impressions are made side by side.



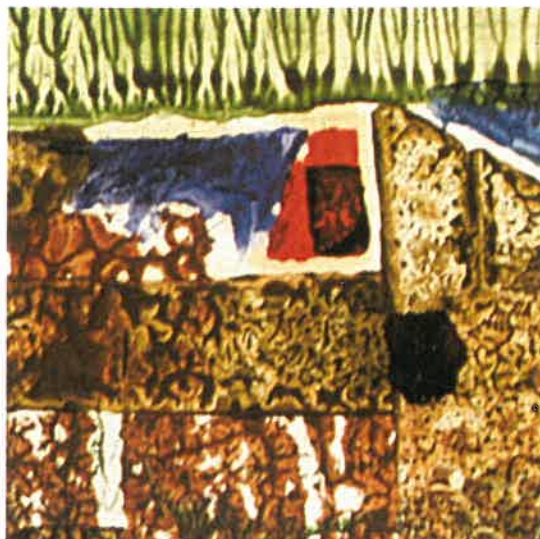


Window, 1975 • Mixed media • 54cm x 68cm

Thus, by using imagination and not skill, fascinating results are obtained. It may be pointed out that in etching also modern artists often do not draw a single line but only use variously textured material to produce impressions on the plate, link gunny cloth or gauze or netting.

Though the results are unexpected in all print making and more so in this technique, the artist has to have some rough idea of what result he wants. The choice of colour or colours, of course, has to be made and also whether they are to be in cluster or separate and whether in some linear, round or other form and whether there are to be blank spaces in between and so on. The impression can be kept well within a square or rectangular frame, leaving blank space around it or it can be trimmed so as to cover the entire area.

Simply the variation of tones and colours does not make a work of art, even if it might delight the eye. When the impression takes on some form, pattern or design, however free and diffused, it attains the status of art. This is rarely achieved with childlike haphazard printing. Some conscious artistry and careful contrivance is necessary to produce such results.

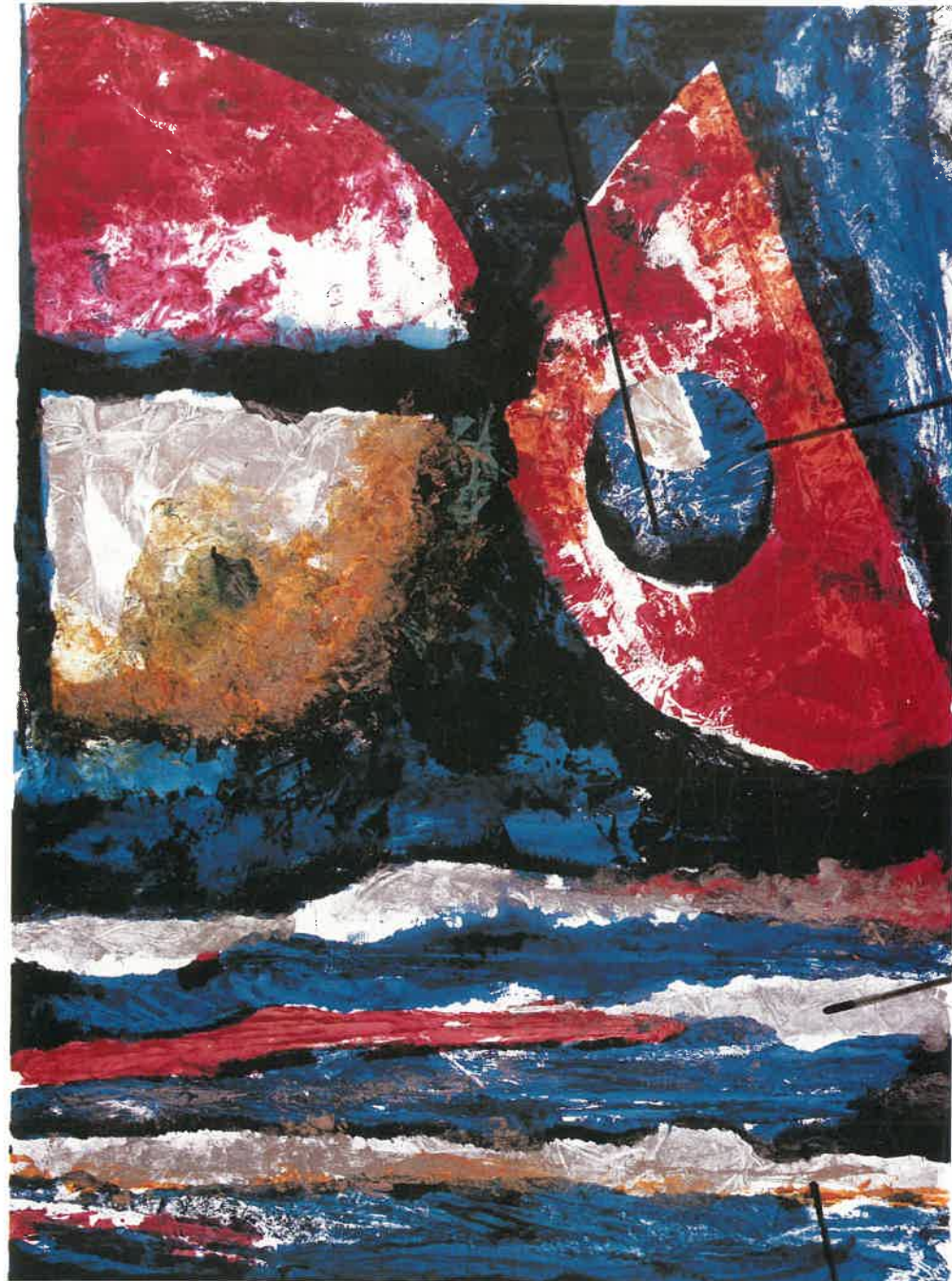


Usually this is progressively achieved. The artist is guided by his first tentative print. He daubs green and blue and yellow on the crumpled cellophane and presses it on a clean paper. After seeing the result, he either extends the pattern and colour, gives a darker tone to areas that need depth or gives a touch of red to areas that need to be brightened up to balance the dull patches. All this is achieved through repeated impressions.

The impression can be abstract - - geometric or semi-geometric shapes with bands of light on deep-shaded colours - - or they may suggest objects or even human or animal figures. There may or may not be a focal point. When Askari began to paint, he mostly used this monoprint technique, as painting after painting executed in the seventies shows.



• Swat landscape-I, 1975 • Mixed media • 54cm x 68cm



Moon & the sea, 1975 • Mixed media • 54cm x 68cm

- Play with the mud, 1975
- Mixed media
- 54cm x 68cm



- *Daricha*, 1975
- Mixed media
- 54cm x 68cm



- Lily Flower, 1975
- Mixed media
- 54cm x 68cm



- Image of new word, 1975
- Mixed media
- 54cm x 68cm



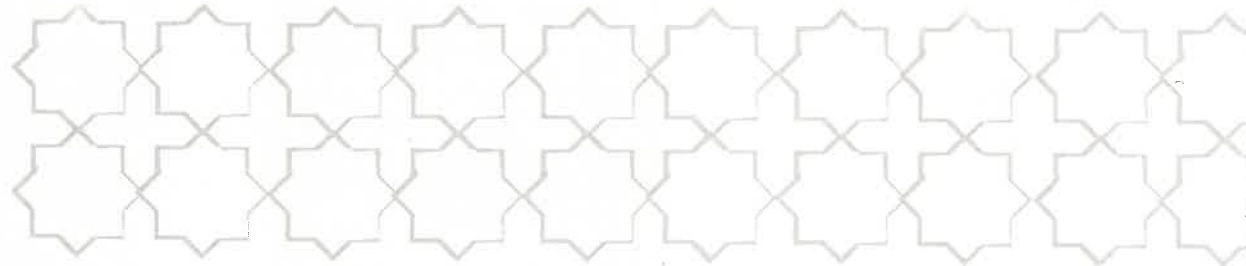
ASKARI'S TWO DIMENSIONAL WORKS

Salima Hashmi

The interest in traditional calligraphy has come to the modern painter of Asia in a convoluted manner via Kandinsky, Miro and Paul Klee. The First Pakistani painters to explore the formal possibilities of calligraphy forms were Hanif Ramay (01.03.1931) Shakir Ali and A. J. Shemza (1928 - 1985) each of whom dealt with the traditional and the modern in a sensitively "felt" manner. Unfortunately the present pre-occupation with calligraphy is often lacking in serious thought with little consideration given to the dictates of highly traditional norms, or to the formal qualities which give a two-dimensional form to a work of art.

However, inspite of the strong dictates of tradition Askari manages to manipulate his calligraphic forms to suit his own design sensibilities knitting them in a cohesive manner. It is also the designer in Askari which ensures that the calligraphic forms do not dominate the picture plan, but are woven into a textural fabric of tone and colour.

Askari renders ancient formats with all the finesse that the modern painter can employ, receding surfaces vibrate with delicately applied textures and calligraphic forms emerge with the dignity of their tradition to evolve into statements that are both old and new.





Naqsh-i Hafeez, 1984 • Mixed media • 59cm x 117cm

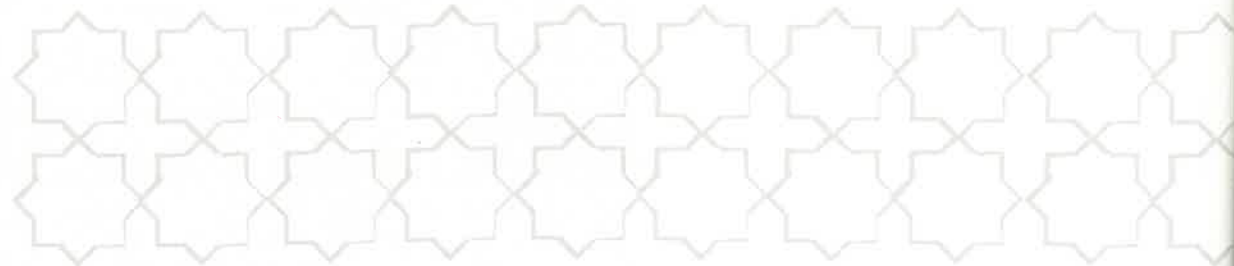
ASKARI'S CALLIGRAPHIC RAMBLINGS

Dr. Ijaz Anwar

In his maturer works, Askari Mian Irani has developed a new style. His alphabets, syllables and numericals show signs of digression. Architectural elements both structural and decorative are on the increase. Multifoiled niches, enclosing equestrian figures in princely costumes, are seen to have been derived from the courtly visions of Mughal India.

The calligraphic repeats, are still his favourite form of punctuation, sometimes mute and sometimes loud. The symmetric panels are broken by the use of subdued colours for some of the syllables; others are rendered in gold, copper or scarlet.

Blues and blacks that dominate his colour scheme are effectively broken by reds and the white of the canvas. The use of thin paint in some portions creates an effect of cascades of flowing turpentine in which the pigments seem to float. Though one might question the validity of this aquarelle technique, the result is at times interesting. He however, has retained the antique carpet-like appearance which makes his paintings highly decorative.





Naqsh-i Nad-I Ali, 1983 • Mixed media • 44cm x 44cm

REVIVING A WANING HERITAGE

Seema Raza Bokhari

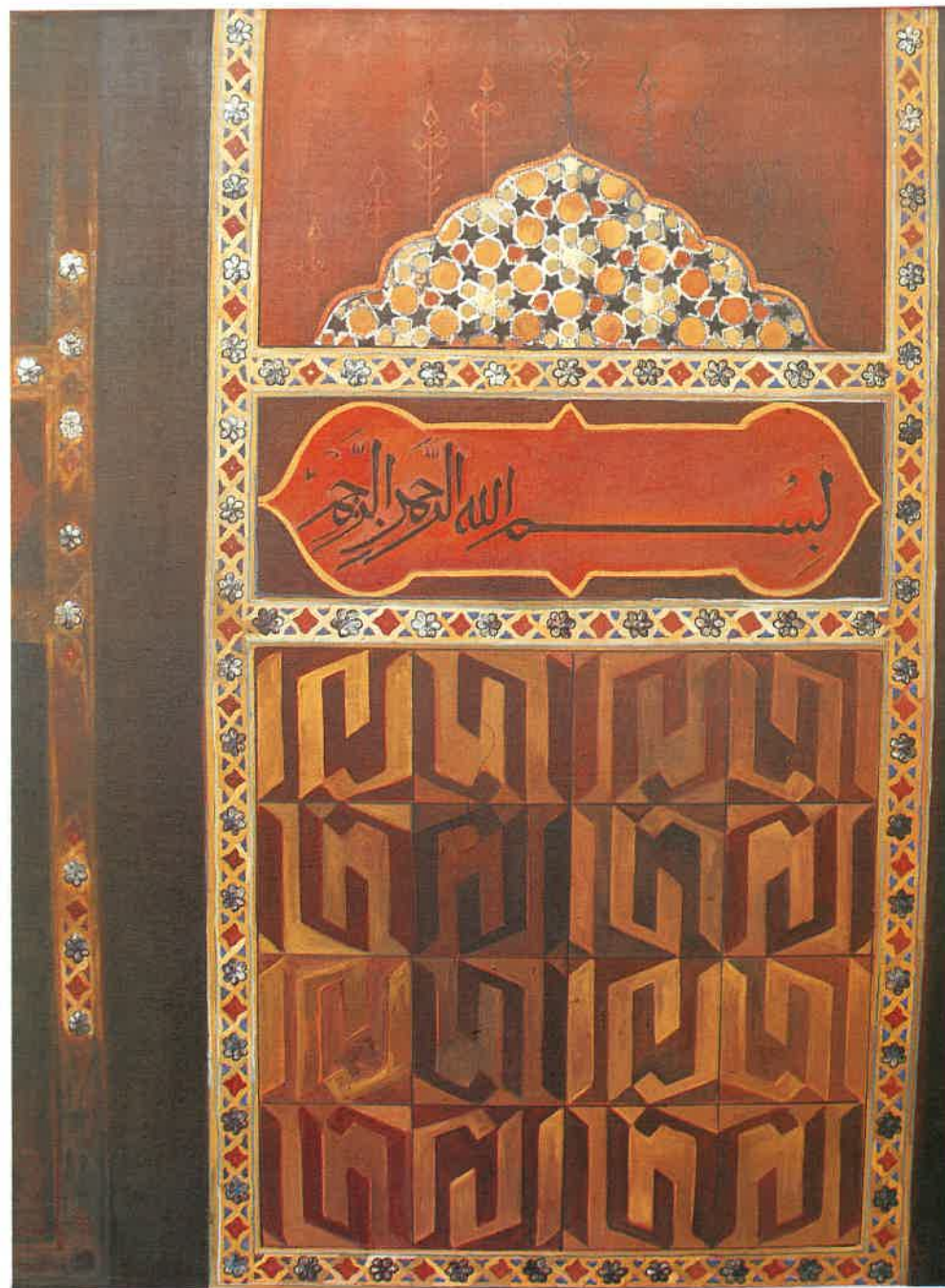
Askari calls his paintings *naqsh-i kohna*. As the name suggests it is a venture into the epoch of Islamic grandeur - - the glory that was lost over the centuries. Reviving the missing message, recreating the edicts of faith long lost in the clichéd preaching of fanatics, his paintings dig out the truth from the vestiges of traditional legacy.

Tracing the centuries old tradition of *naqsh* and numerology, a science fitting well in the squares of ancient beliefs, the artist has infused life into a waning heirloom. Deriving inspiration from the sacred names of Allah, the overbearing appellations reflecting distinct qualities attributed to the Almighty, Mian Askari has bolstered this neglected phenomenon of seeking energy and strength through spiritual knowledge - - knowledge that cannot be comprehended without transcendental thought, without a sublime exaltation within oneself.

Not playing with colours, but forming images and symbols out of intricate patterns, the painter delves into the ruins of the ages, to look for some priceless jewels, some invaluable evidence of a once alive tradition. With eye-catching colours and thought-provoking symbolism, the paintings actually seem to breathe with life, telling their tale themselves. Askari Mian has deftly blended the two genres - - creating art through purposeful lines and drawing new vocabulary from realism.

The paintings carry an explicit meaning, once one throws oneself in the labyrinth of shape and colour. The underlying inspiration comes to the surface, as one steps into the gossamers of numbers and signs. Displaying some rare calligraphic strokes the artist makes one delve in the past. The layers of paint, the mystic inscriptions are redolent of bygone ages. Though anyone looking at the paintings can appreciate the presence of a metaphysical force but a finer understanding require a deeper view.





Alif Laam Meem, 1983 • Mixed media • 88cm x 117cm

Askari's paintings are sometimes less complexed and earthly but the majority are esoteric and ethereal. Each curve and bend is exotic yet familiar, and one feels a strange kind of familiarity with the disparate periods that fall out of every canvas.

The titles of Askari's paintings are also important for they give voice to the inherent message. The *Naqsh-i Kohna* series in all its versions, stands out with force. The word 'Allah' in the ancient, Arabic style, forms a latticed pattern in the four corners with fiery amber and a comparatively dull hue of violet in one corner and auburn in another. It seems to draw a halo, signifying the omnipotence of the Creator. The unique pattern of lines crossing each other add force and determination to this belief. In others, bearing a similar connotation, like *Naqsh-i Taha* and *Naqsh-i Allah*, the undercurrent remains the derivation of strength from God. The painter underscores the importance of calling on the Creator for benediction whenever needed, like he himself has done, through potent usage of "*Ilm-i Adaad*", called *naqsh* or *ta'viz* in conventional terminology.



The "Letter from the Holy Prophet (pbuh)" has a certain realistic quality, the irrefutable fact made all the more vivid though mystic rendition. Askari Mian Irani has again plucked untouched chords. To even a non-Muslim, his works offer a certain amount of interest - - the religious mementos preserved with care in the brushstrokes of the devotee.

Diversified as his paintings are, *Naad-i Ali*, usually written in the shape of the lion, has been moulded in the shape of an eagle. The message still remains intact, the latter having much in common with the former. The new concept delineates the creativity of the painter through symbolism. The meticulous use of colours, the careful blending of geometrical shapes and selected architectural touches, give a touch of ambiguity to the paintings.

The Mughal period with its archways and domes, its richness, its architecture, also finds lucid expression in the versatile mixed media. Reminiscent of the Mughal kings, perched on their opulently adorned



Naqsh-i Hilha-I, 1983 • Mixed media • 88cm x 117cm

howdahs or sitting upright on their well-bred horses, the versions of *Naqsh-i Sawar* bring to light this prosperous era of Muslim history. The *sawar* against arched doorways, takes one to the period of Muslim triumphs, the crowns and tiaras of the golden period. While highlighting Eastern trends and Muslim traditions, Askari has given a tactile quality to his paintings. The mammoth-size painting, *Manzil-i Murad*, a masterpiece, portrays the carnage that befell the migrants at the time of Partition. The bloody price paid at the time of Partition is made more poignant with the profuse spatter of vermillion and diluted saffron across the sky. The force and beauty of Askari's paintings captivates the viewers, specially those looking at his works for the first time.





Naqsh-i Kohna, 1983 • Mixed media • 88cm x 147cm

CALLIGRAPHY'S NEW FACE

S. Irshad

Mian Irani is first a designer, then a calligraphist. In his paintings it is the design element rather than the calligraphic form that dominates. The calligraphic elements are, in fact, subtly woven into his graphic surfaces. He uses colour well, giving his surfaces both texture and a duality of dimension. Certain paintings are particularly imaginative, like the facade of a mosque with open archways which invite the viewer in and beyond into another dimension. His use of deep cobalt blues and play with light, creates shadows and invokes an ambiance of mystery, lending the painting an almost mystical quality. Another painting in bronze and burnt amber hues incorporated into the surface, acquires the appearance of an ancient rug, finely woven and superbly crafted.

There are other painting, however, in which aesthetics take a back seat to craft. In his purely calligraphic work there is a distinct shift to the mundane. Overall, Askari Mian's work is a peculiar blend of the ancient and the modern, of art and craft.



ASKARI'S TA'VIZ ART

Marcella C. Nesom

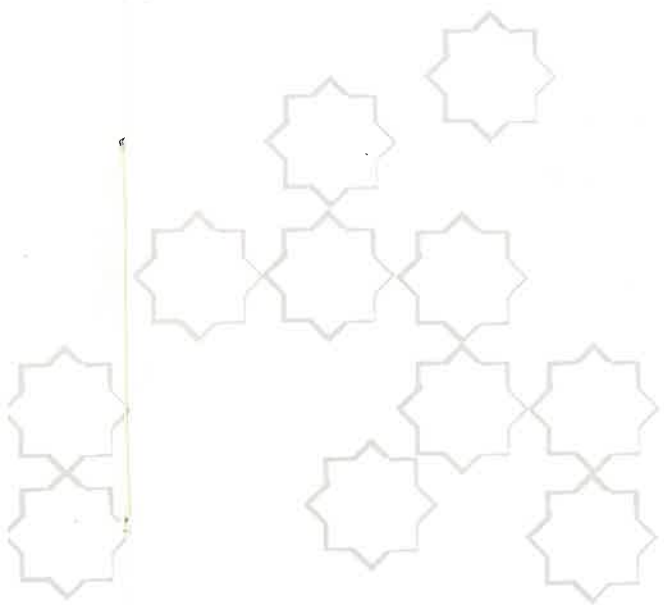
Askari Mian Irani's paintings to a considerable degree, are governed by a sense of mathematical precision and a desire for order. These same qualities, in combination with his analytical mind and religious inclinations, were natural prerequisites for evolving a unique concept I would call "fine art *ta'viz*". Askari's "*ta'viz art*" combines numerology and *naqsh* with historical, religious and cultural phenomena. Numerological signs and symbols superimposed on squares or arches form part of a larger composition that sets the tone of the message.

In *Naqsh-i Kohna* (ancient design) his abstract composition is based on the format of a traditional Asian manuscript (particularly Quranic) frontispiece. *Hashia*, or border, work has been transformed into blended linear drips at the bottom and the top is capped by turrets derived from Persian architecture. *Bismillah*, in white script near the top is given priority placement and superimposed above darker squares. It functions aesthetically to balance the smaller, lighter hued squares below. For Askari, these squares have various meanings. "The square is a complete (perfect) form, the Holy Kaaba is square; it is a Holy place". The larger squares contain sacred letters and numerological symbols. In essence *Naqsh-i Kohna* is a painting that functions like a *ta'viz*. *Ta'viz* is an arrangement of Quranic verses converted to numbers and symbols drawn or painted on paper or some other material. Most commonly *ta'viz* are hung above the entrance to a house or bedroom door to invite good luck and keep evil away.



Numerology, the raw material for creating the *ta'viz*, is a very old art, not widely used nowadays, nor well understood. It was esoteric information believed to be imbued with magical properties. It is interesting that Ali Reza, one of the 12 Imams was, according to Askari, one of the greatest numerologists. The privileged few who

56101 : 224



Naqsh-i Tauhid, 1983 • Mixed media • 117.5cm x 117.5cm

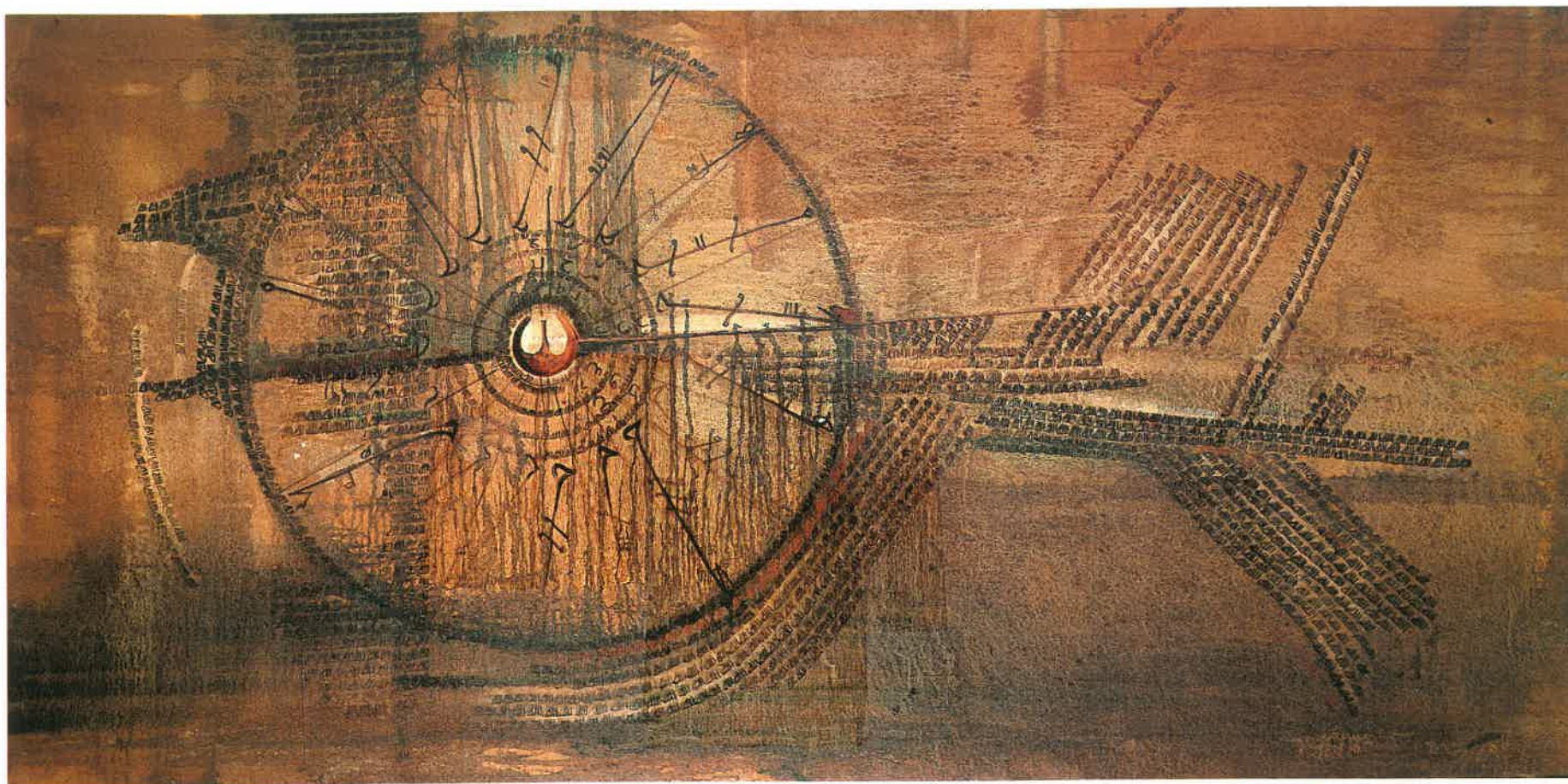
learned numerology were reluctant to casually pass it on for several reasons. It was first of all, a means of livelihood, i.e. casting horoscopes, predicting lucky days, or months, determining efficacious stones and colours for individuals, planning wedding or travel dates, etc. Secondly, it could be used as a power tool to convey secret messages or to cast a spell.

Askari's *ta'viz* art is not an idea that occurred to him all at once; it evolved over several years and is, of course, still evolving. He noticed the symbol for welcome some years ago, found it an exciting design and used it in his work. When someone asked him what it meant, Askari could not explain and decided to consult a numerologist. Impressed with the numerologist, Askari wanted to learn more from him but as Askari explained, "It was not easy. I would have to be his student in the traditional way. It would take lots of time and dedication and I didn't have that much time. So I'm reading a book about it and learning on my own". Askari takes his numbers and symbols from examples of *ta'viz* in this book as he is not experienced enough to create his own. Nevertheless his philosophy is sound. There are many traditional families who believe painting is un-Islamic. But they have faith in the *ta'viz*. Askari feels that his paintings, *ta'viz*-like in concept and design, would be acceptable to some of these people who wouldn't ordinarily take art into their homes.



Ta'viz art is only one aspect of Askari's fascination with numerology, *naqsh*, and the imagery imbibed from Subcontinental heritage. *Baradari* (12 doors) is an architectural abstraction that demonstrates a complex ideology and keen appreciation of local motifs and art forms. Askari's design represents a square structure (a palace or room) unfolded and layed out flat. It is reminiscent of old miniature paintings that ignore perspective by opening up and flattening out their buildings. His doorways (here in groups of three) derive from the repeating inset panels in the walls of Lahore fort, and the background stellar design is characteristic of floor patterns in other Mughal monuments around Lahore.

The doorways are meant to convey the message of *Bismillah* or 78.



Naqsh-i Nauroz, 1983 • Mixed media • 73.5cm x 147cm

But 12 and 3 are also numerological symbols for *Bismillah*. ($78=7+8+=21=2+1=3=1+2+12$). There are 3 doors in each group and 4 groups of 3 (on the ground floor) to equal 12. Each door has a different view. One reveals a cypress tree whose shape reminds Askari of the gesture of prayer (two hands clasped together). According to Askari, when the viewer reaches the centre (blue and green squares) he can find power and knowledge. The centre embodies the name *Rahim* (one of the names of God), and all religions, Askari suggests, call their followers to God so they may attain these treasures. Sitting in the center, the viewer will look out with complete knowledge. Through these doors he can see four periods of time: day and night, dawn and dusk. Doors are ubiquitous in Askari's art: some sit on the surface of his canvas as supports for numerical symbols or calligraphic script while others invite entry to a mysterious world.

The Golden Wall was inspired by the panels at Lahore fort and the dark doorway invites us into the world of the past. Smaller repeating arches with calligraphic symbols are faintly visible within the dim interior. One panel emulates the remains of a painting with two horsemen charging forth, while the other panels look weathered and discolored by the passage of time. In this and in Askari's other paintings, he has succeeded in creating an art form that is both pleasing to look at and uniquely Indo-Islamic. Furthermore, to his credit, it embodies a new and cerebral concept that surpasses the gimmickry which characterizes so much of the recent calligraphic rage.





Prayer of Holy Prophet (pbuh), 1983 • Mixed media • 88cm x 147cm

ASKARI'S BLENDING OF DESIGNING AND PAINTING

Colin David

Askari's earlier work is highly figurative and shows the strong influence that both Shakir Ali and Sadequain had on him at that stage of his development. There was then a brief period in which he did some straight forward landscapes and compositions. However, the designer in him obviously struggled to assert himself and the result was a series of work in which the design element totally dominates the surface of the canvas, more akin to a textile design than a painting. It was in the late seventies that he was able to maintain a balance between the designer and that part of him that was striving to be a painter. This is the period where Askari matured. The surfaces were broken into squares, triangles and other geometric shapes. These facets were further emphasized by numerals and alphabets inserted in them. The calligraphic element gained ascendancy and the name, "Allah" often formed the back-bone of such works, other decorative elements being subservient to it.



In his later paintings, the break-up of the surfaces into smaller geometric shapes is still present but are more tightly woven and tackled with more delicacy and control. Although the name "Allah" still figures strongly, it no longer dominates by its sheer weight. It is almost as if it has been embroidered into the entire fabric, often repeated, may be a thousand times or more. What one assumed was a fine decorative element meandering over the canvas is in fact the name "Allah" repeated again and again. What is most interesting however, is that Askari is once again bringing back the human form into his work. It is not the aggressive and distorted figures of his earlier paintings, but figures that are almost timidly making a comeback after a long absence. The figures themselves are much smaller in scale, hardly two or three inches high, set in a maze of geometric patterns that are vibrant with colour. They bring an air of tranquillity to a surface that is apparently full of movement.



Naqsh-i Kohna-II, 1988 • Mixed media • 73.5cm x 73.5cm

TALISMANS OF LOVE

Sabiha Ashraf

Talismans, *ta'vizes* of love, that is what Askari Mian's paintings are. Love for the age-enriched beauty of our cultural traditions expressed in work rich with the shades, tones and techniques of an artist who knows and loves his craft and culture well enough to transmute both into entrancing works.

Folded many time over into tiny squares, the *ta'viz* is used as a locket or kept under pillows, a private, personal thing - - the invocation known only to the scribe or the user who treasures the *ta'viz* as a talisman of hope and desire.

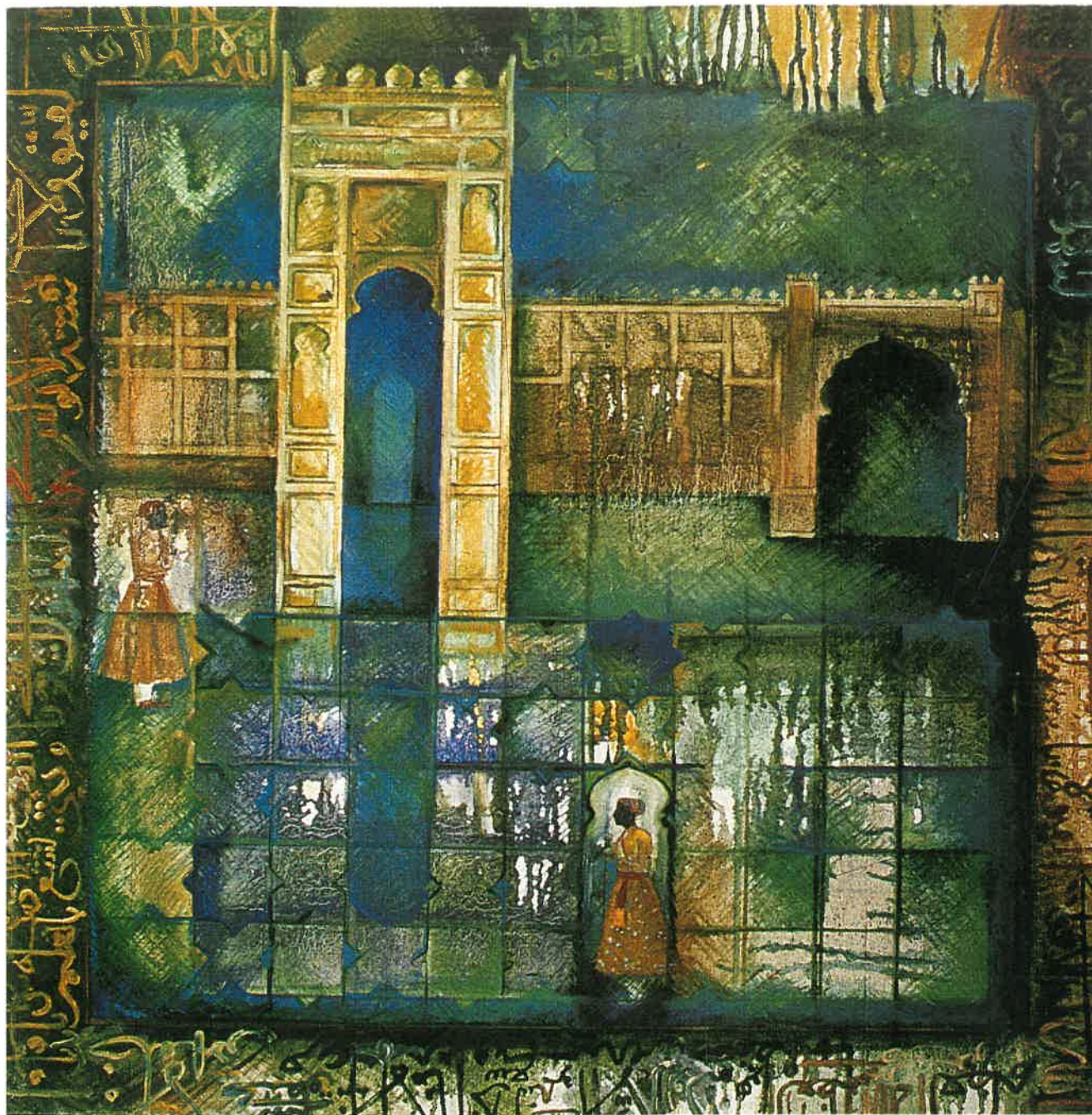
Askari Mian unfolds these talismans, makes them public. Along with other Eastern motifs culled from history, manuscripts and architecture. He uses them as part of the composition of his paintings, cunningly crafted to display the richness of the culture of the East - - particularly that of the Subcontinent.

Glowing with colours, rich with textures, his paintings show a vast variation in the use of Eastern motifs. He plucks them from their traditional context to place them in visually different and exciting ways, making his paintings come alive with a fresh immediacy.

They reach across time and culture, to communicate to viewers on different levels and can be appreciated equally by those for whom the motifs mean something, as well as those for whom they are no more than elements of design used in clever ways.

The journey into our culture with Askari Mian is well worth the trip.





Naqsh-i Panah-I, 1988 • Mixed media • 73.5cm x 73.5cm

ASKARI'S NOVEL BLEND OF DIFFERENT ART FORMS

Nafisa Shah

Pakistani art, confronted with the powerful influence of the West, is increasingly flowing in the Western direction. Abstract forms, realistic subjects and impressionistic ideals are all based on Western standards. So deeply imbued is this influence that some artists consider it synonymous with modern art and pursue it vigorously. Others, however, in their passionate urge to pass on the legacy inherited from the past, rigidly plunge into conservatism and allow no freshness of innovation to help them catch up with modern art.

Between these extremes are a few who adapt the cultural ideas, develop along the path set by modernism and never for once violate unity. Askari, one such artist, serves as the continuum between the two extremes. He believes in promoting Islamic and cultural heritage and what makes this easy to comprehend is the language he uses - - colourful, rich and modern. He skilfully employs the vastness of Islamic art, mixes it with the traditional Mughal miniatures and places them harmoniously in the midst of arches and arcades and finally colours them with antiquity.



The subject of a large number of paintings is the *naqsh* or *ta'viz*. The pious charm is ubiquitous - - sometimes central and enlarged and sometimes peripheral. So realistic is the depiction of the talisman that one begins to shrink in front of its seemingly powerful influence. There is a *naqsh* for every activity and the power comes from Allah.

The *naqsh* is empowered by the stress of *tauhid*, which is in turn strengthened by using arabesque. The disjunct but repetitive design symbolises the continuity and infinitude of God. Arabesque motifs are also created by calligraphic patterns painted sensitively, and repeated tirelessly again to bring out the omnipresence of God.

The power of Allah reverberates in these canvases and is further imposed by introducing Mughal figures and their vulnerability to the



Prince in rahdari, 1989 • Mixed media • 73.5cm x 73.5cm

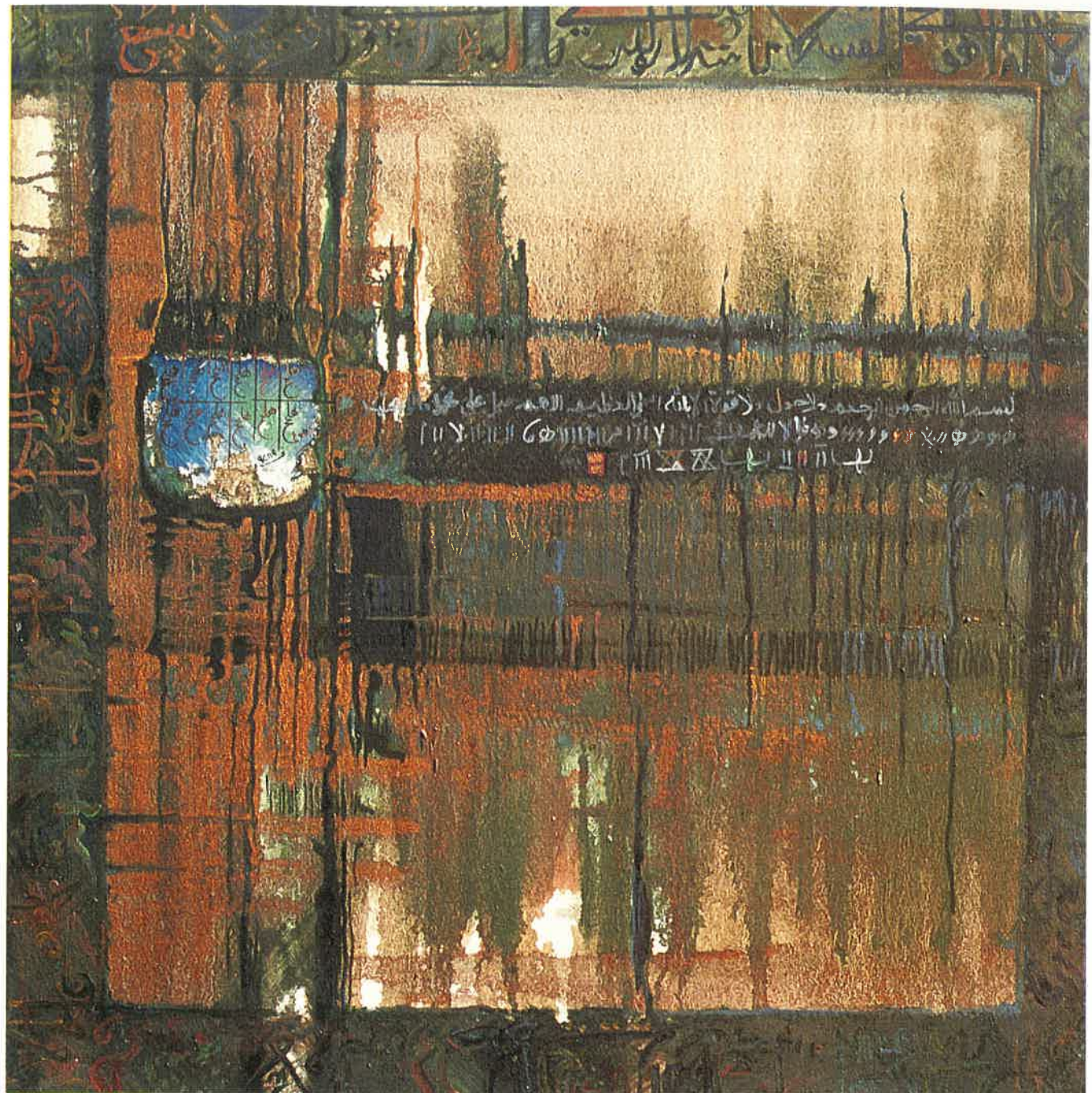
powerful *ta'viz*. The miniatures are placed in a network of design and unity is achieved with the help of architectural motifs made with columns, arches and arcades. Apart from adding to the design and giving harmony to figures and the abstract atmosphere, numerous arches and doors signify exits and entrances into this world. They also symbolise the dilemmas in the face of numerous alternatives. At times they enhance the depth by adding a means of escape into the background.

The figures are treated with meticulous care and attention - - fragile, delicate and yet complete to the slightest microscopic detail. The royal horses are decorated similarly. Majestic and stately, horses symbolise a means to attain freedom. The indomitable hand represents Islam with its five pillars. The same hand poses as the Destiny and one shudders at the thought of being a mere plaything in the hand of fate. The religious spirit is therefore always predominant. Other symbols like the *Kursi*, fortress of refuge (in God) confirm this.

The central theme of *naqsh*, the repetitive calligraphic pattern and the architectural design necessitate splitting up of canvas into numerous squares. Askari says this is concordant with Islamic art, but it also makes his works somewhat cubist in style. The uniform checker-board style is saved from monotony by the interplay of colour and texture. Askari chooses the colours in accordance with the antiquity of his subject. However, not all canvases are dulled with this effect. Many are given the glow of stained glass. Interesting textures are created by releasing thin paint on the canvas and controlling its flow. This creates an interesting batik-like texture.

Askari's art sums up the vastness of Islamic art, complexity and freedom of modern art and richness of our cultural heritage. So many different elements have been laid down one after another that sometimes it locks one up in confusion arising from the search for unity. It is indeed a bold venture to create a blend of entirely discrete forms of art and yet to be able to come up with something highly individual and novel.





Naqsh-i Kohna-III, 1988 • Mixed media • 59cm x 59cm

WORD PICTURES

Gregory Minissale

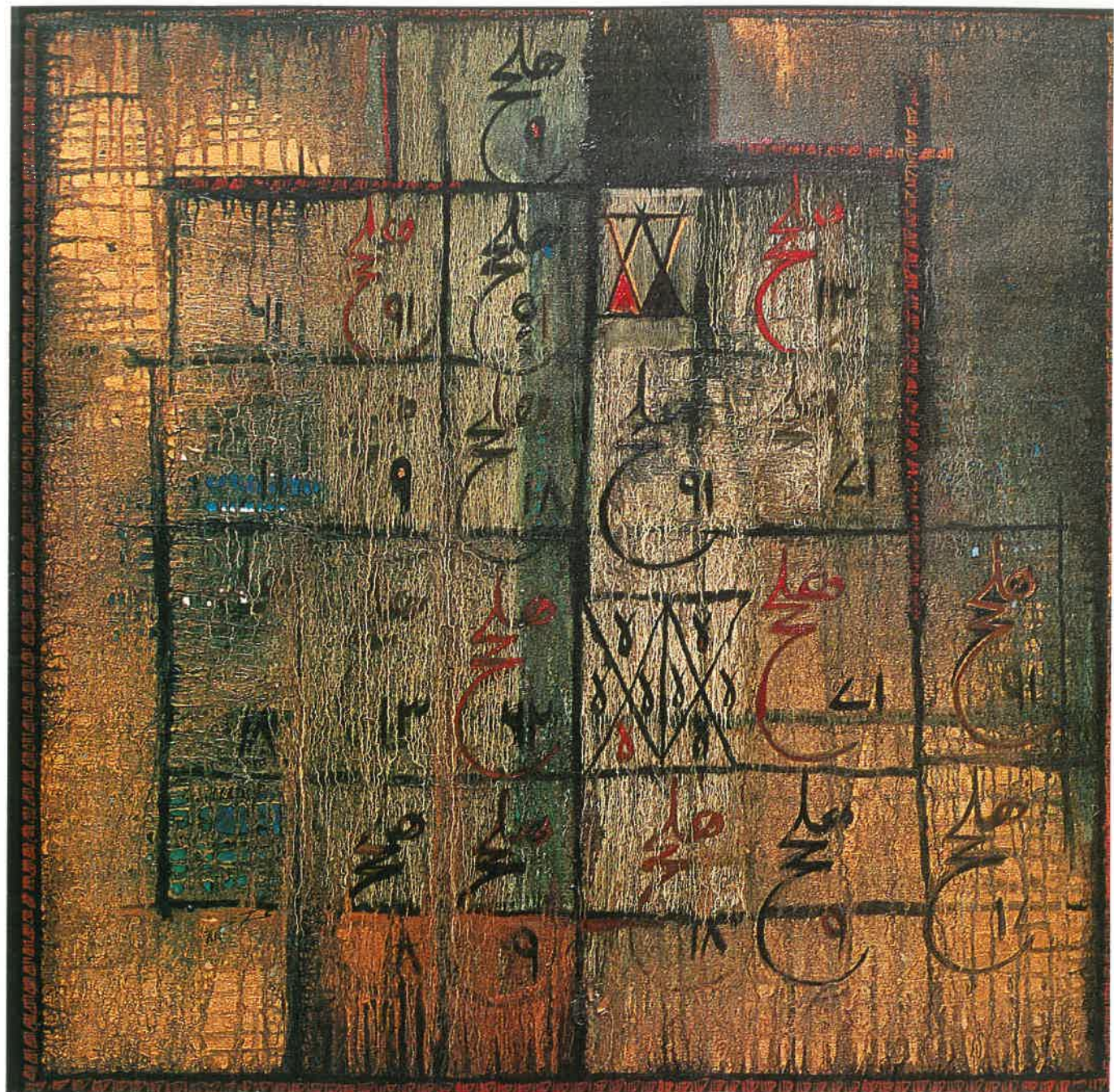
Traditional forms of Islamic art had, long before the West, evolved a highly complex and very abstract visual art, that was not merely decoration. For obvious reasons, Islamic art tended toward the abstract, the non-representational and the non-illusionistic. Complete compositions of line-patterning often used organic, vegetal designs (using vines or leaves or “palmette-like” trees for instance). But often, other means were employed through pure geometric invention. Circles, triangles were interwoven in extraordinarily complex combinations.

Rather than mere decoration, these compositions, which were free from myth-based symbolism, would evoke a sense of eternity, complexity, harmony and an “order in the universe” through their rhythms, repetitions and interrelationships. In this sense, Western art, which became preoccupied with abstract perception only in the twentieth century, lagged way behind Islamic art.



For the devout reader of Arabic, there was calligraphy which found its way not only on walls and buildings, but on doors, tiles, rugs and ornaments. What Askari has done, but in a rather literal and unthinking way, is to rather haphazardly plunder these elements and line compositions from several Islamic cultures.

While it is a pleasure to see that his calligraphy is not hard-edged and rigid but organic and fluent, his concepts have not been very well thought out. Merely incorporating chunks of design in poorly developed compositions, copied from the Shalimar gardens, or taking ‘tughra’ designs from Iran, is rather too literal a way to portray the essence of Islamic art (which is considerably more diverse and heterogenous than Askari assumes). In fact, instead of synthesis and interpretation of the plundered motifs, Askari uses them merely for decoration.



Naqsh-i Sunehti-I, 1988 • Mixed media • 73.5cm x 73.5cm

One wonders whether he is aware of the parallels between Western abstract art and early Islamic art. As he says, he wants to *unite the old with the modern* but often, he merely juxtaposes images that clash. His *Anarkali* is a confusion of style, one a poorly executed naturalist treatment of Anarkali and her parrot, sitting among architectural set-designs which have been painted in a completely different manner.

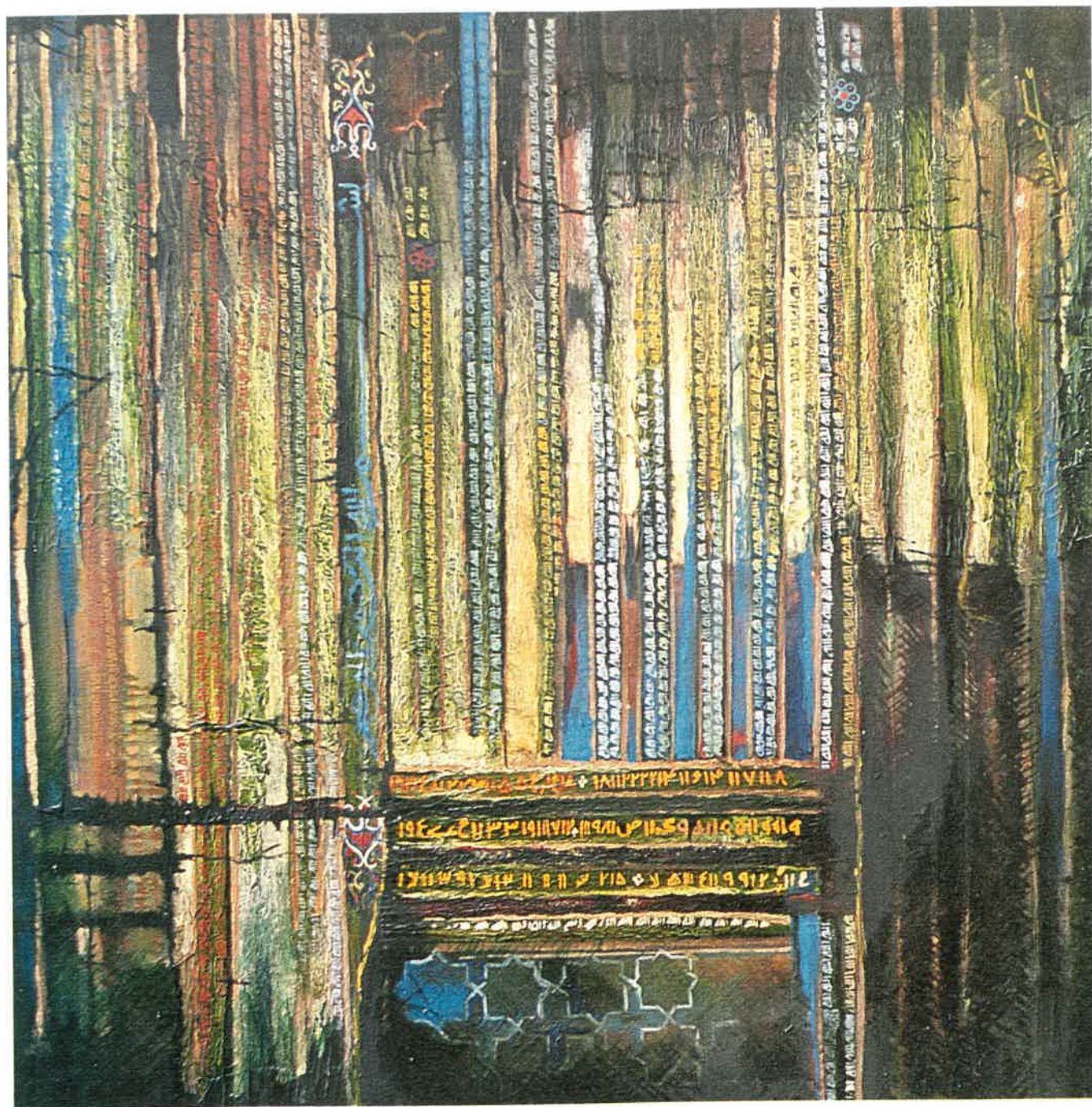
The lack of iconophobia that most dry calligraphists possess, is admirable in Askari's work but often his images are extremely incongruous in his compositions and seem to be there for little reason or purpose. He may also be accused of a rather maudlin romanticism and nostalgia for the Mughal past. Few of his pictures go beyond this, to modern realities. But perhaps that is a rather unreasonable expectation.

The best pictures are more vague, and subtle using *naqash* or an *ayat*, Quranic verse, as a border. A good example is *Naqsh-i Al-hamd* which is particularly beautiful, as he blends his elements together rather impressionistically with a impeccable palette: sepias, burnt siennas, yellow ochres, a touch of vermillion.

The brief glimpses we have of his textures are enthralling *Qila barish ke bad* is exceptional in this respect, with sea-green dripped over yellow ochre in a delicate, refined manner, bringing out a feeling of old age, absorbed into the weave of canvas. The sublimation of forms into evocative moods and atmospheres, is his forte.

Obviously, being an assistant professor of design at the N.C.A., Lahore, has led him to concentrate on formal and decorative aspects. What is lacking, is a profundity of thought in his work. It often boils down to a mere nostalgic appreciation of Islamic line compositions as decoration, when in fact they are much more than that. Askari may be accused of being an Orientalist in this sense, but to be charitable he may well be on the right track. It is about time that Western modern art accepted the significance and complexity of Islamic non-representational art. Miro, Kandinsky, Klee and William Morris, used Islamic composition as decorations. In this sense, Askari has not even begun to go beyond them in saying something new.





Naqsh-i Allah-I, 1988 • Mixed media • 73.5cm x 73.5cm

A SPIRITUAL ODYSSEY

Rafat Hussain

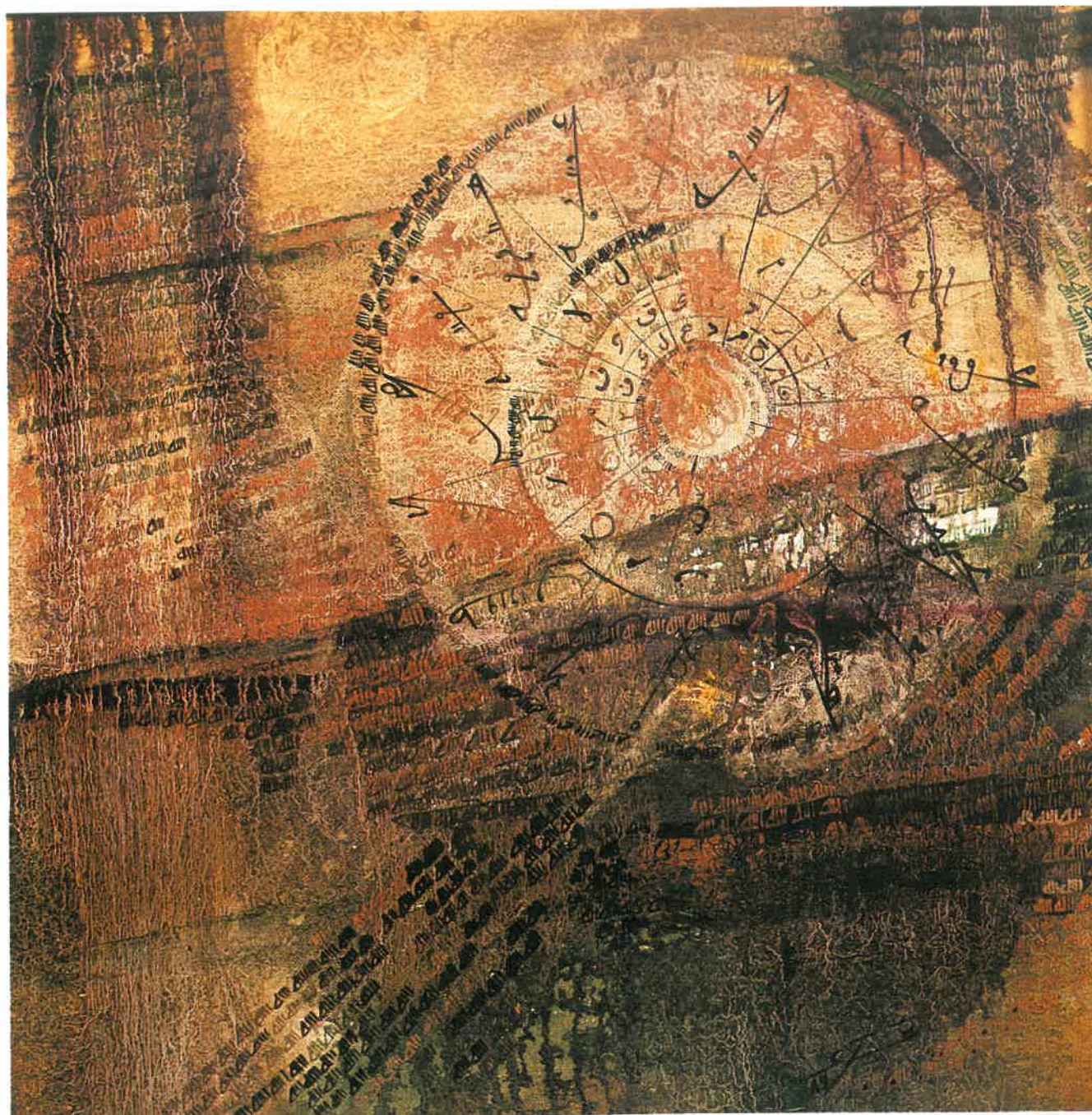
Askari Mian Irani, a designer and calligraphist, is among those handful of Pakistani artists, who have a distinctive style of their own.

His work which is a result of a complex process of production is something quite unique. His themes emerge from by-gone traditions and values which have faded from our minds. As he puts it: *I try to convey a nostalgic feeling endowed with a sense of spirituality to my viewers.*

But how did his imagery evolve? : *At first, I didn't have a style of my own, I painted whatever caught my fancy. Actually an artist in his initial stages only strives to achieve a unique style and that's exactly what I did. But what really inspired me was a film on sufism. In that film different aspects of Islamic culture were shown. It occurred to me to revitalize these forgotten Islamic traditions by portraying them on the canvas. Then I tried to mould my work in the style of the past and became occupied with the images and motifs of that era. But during that phase I faced the problem of how to convey my true feelings and portray the vague images in my mind on the canvas.*



It so happened that one day I was aimlessly leafing through a pictorial book on calligraphy and in it saw pictures or inscriptions engraved on slabs of stones. There were also a few geometrical figures engraved along with the inscriptions and it all looked very symmetrical and pleasing to the eye. So I decided to portray the images in my mind in this form, Mian Irani paused for a moment and pointed to a painting Ghar-i Hira hung on the wall of his studio. In this painting I've conveyed a very strange feeling to the viewer. Actually the elements in my painting act as symbols. Even the colours I use in my paintings depict different moods and atmospheres. I've used the black hue as a backdrop in this painting in order to create a feeling of being present somewhere in a dark place - ~ a cave.



Naqsh-i Nauroz Sunehri, 1989 • Mixed media • 59cm x 59cm

Askari Main Irani tries to create a sense of rhythm and a feeling of continuity in his work and makes use of innovative techniques and methods to make his work visually interesting. One of the techniques he often skillfully employs is the dripping technique. *It is not very easy. You have to control the torrents of colour very skillfully. I usually make use of this technique in order to create a sense of movement in my work.* His paintings provide viewers with a focal point so that the vision is not dispersed. He lulls the viewer by using shades of brown with a touch of gold that seem to lead the viewers somewhere. There is great emphasis on texture in all of his paintings. He applies colour in a way that lends his work a tactile look. His textures look so inviting that one is prompted to touch the surface of his canvases: *I feel ecstatic when people touch my canvases trying to discover how I produced that textural effect.*

Though the elements of Askari's work are few - - geometric figures, Arabic calligraphy, Mughal human figures and Mughal arches - - yet the variety he creates in his work is amazing. *I try to create mystery in my paintings by deliberately pushing a few elements behind a thin layer of the hue and in this way the other elements stand out automatically. So when someone looks at my painting he or she tries to discover the less conspicuous elements and in this way a contact is established between them and my paintings.*



Askari's work reflects his fascination with the different calligraphic forms but he doesn't believe in simply transferring these calligraphic shapes to the canvas. His designing instincts guide him into creating a wonderful imagery, arranging calligraphy between arches and geometrical shape, against a back-drop of exciting, vibrant hues. One can look at his paintings from different angles and each angle has a different story to tell. *I try to create a multi-dimensional feeling in my paintings,* says the artist.

Askari's paintings have a dream-like quality and this effect is enhanced by using only a selective range of colours. But why has the artist chosen only a few colours? *My colours reflect my own state of*



Naqsh-i Taha-II, 1989 • Mixed media • 59cm x 59cm

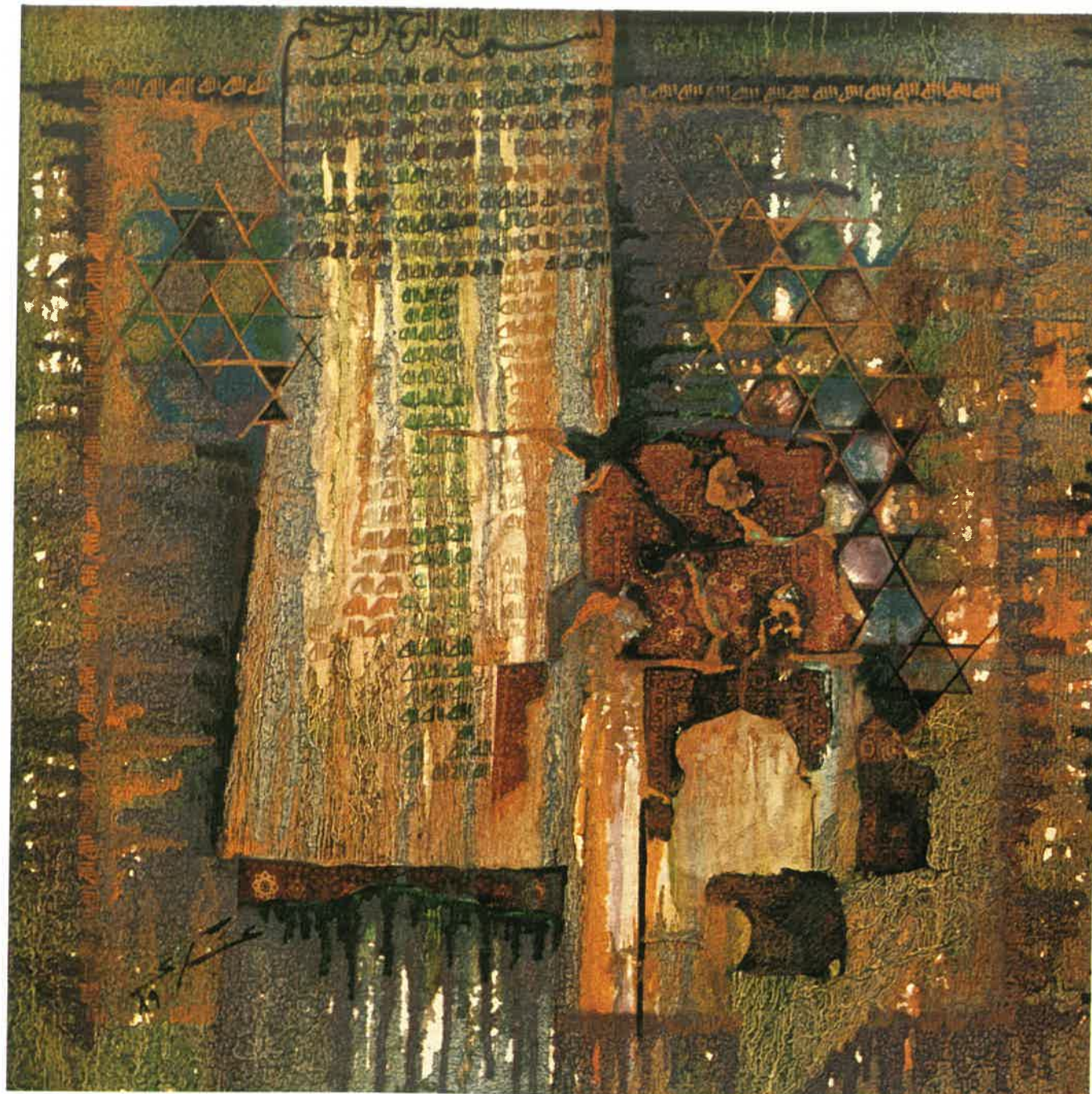
mind. Greens and blues give a very spiritual effect, whereas browns calm and soothe the nerves and the gold pigment used in out-lining the geometrical shapes and arches depict the richness of Islamic culture. Because of these colours, my paintings retain an eastern flavour and exude an aura of holiness.

But Askari Main Irani was first a designer and then a calligraphist, so is there a conflict between the designer and the calligraphist? No there isn't. Designing has helped me in producing very interesting compositions. I mingle geometrical patterns with calligraphy and the results I achieve are aesthetically and visually quite appealing.

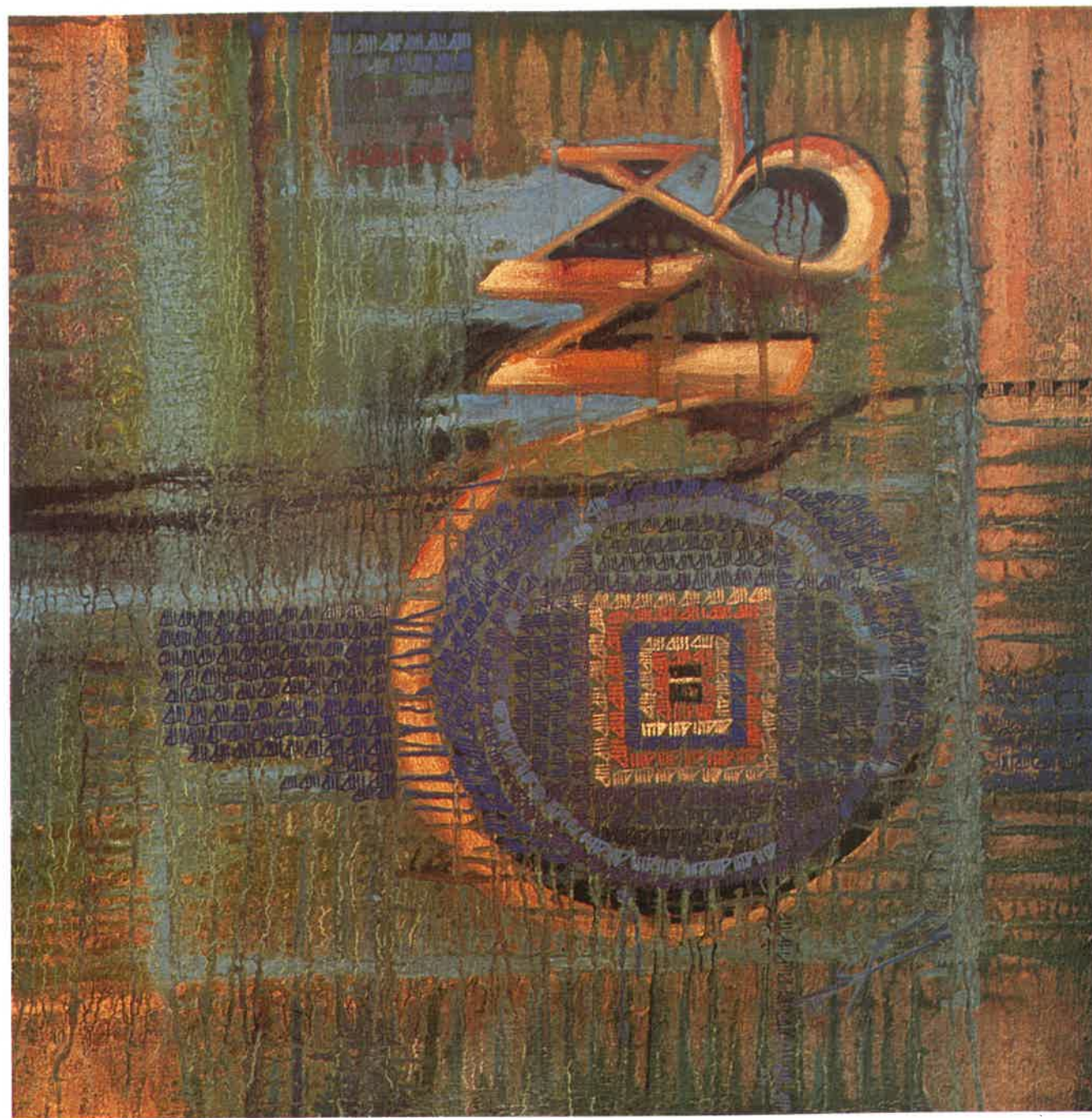




Naqsh-i Sonehri-II, 1989 • Mixed media • 59.5cm x 59.5cm



Naqsh Nauroz-II, 1989 • Mixed media • 59cm x 59cm



Naqsh-i Taha-III, 1989 • Mixed media • 59cm x 59cm

MODERN DAY TIME CAPSULE

Rina Saeed Khan

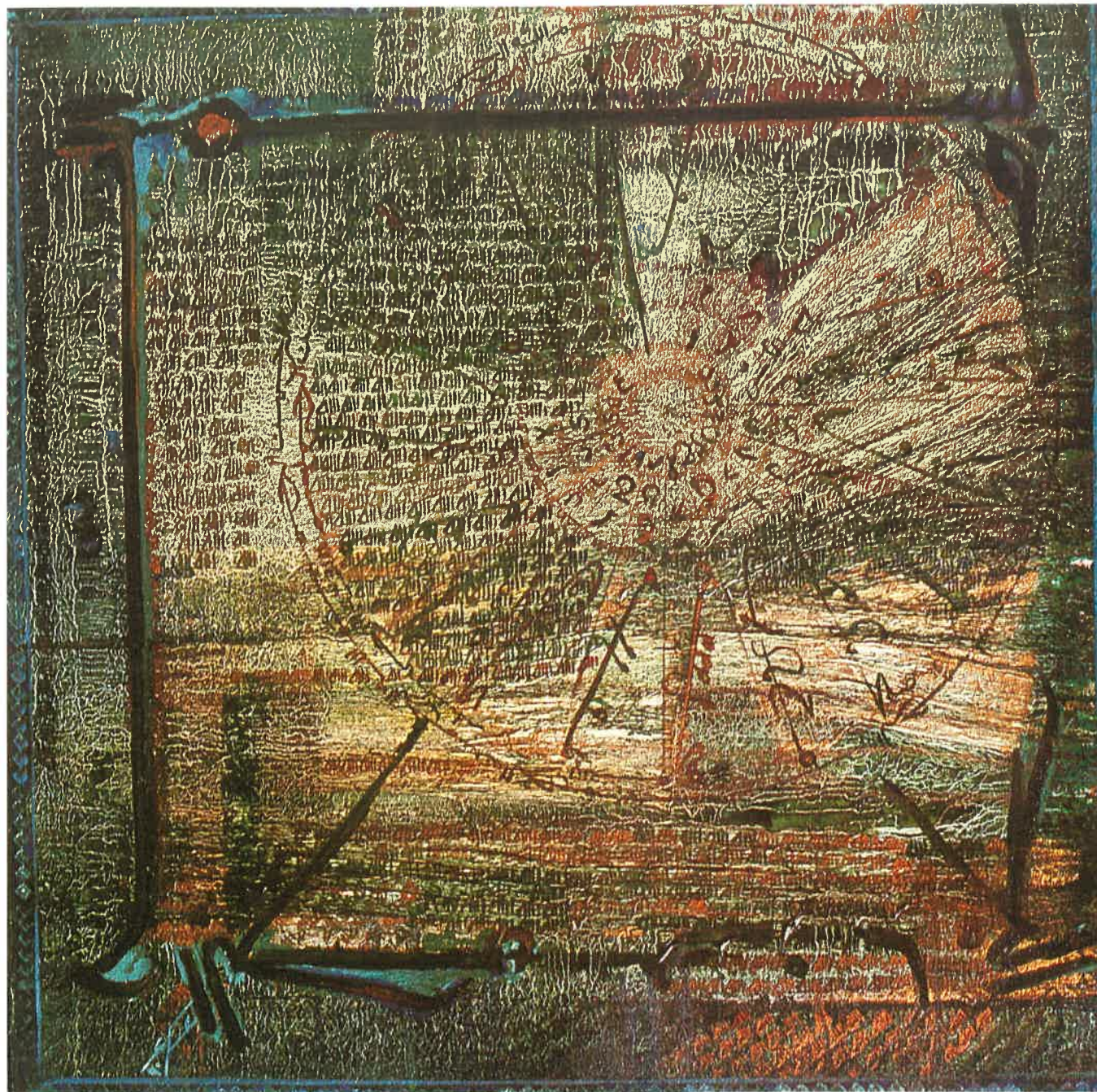
The luxuriant textures, luminous colours and the overall “richness of effect” of Askari Mian Irani’s works are a visual treat. Askari claims to be a pioneer in developing a new aesthetic which he calls a “synthesis of indigenous art”. His synthesis combines elements from Islamic heritage such as Mughal art and architecture and Arabic calligraphy. He says, *We should not feel inferior to the West. We need to see our work and reinterpret it from our own Eastern point of view. Of course, we need to assimilate new ideas, but we have to keep our old traditions alive.*

And it is the faded grandeur of our past that Askari attempts to capture in his enigmatic oil paintings. In his more figurative paintings, domes, minarets and arches from Islamic architecture are incorporated as design elements. From our Mughal past, he borrows the images of nobles in regal attire and uses the decorative floral borders from miniature paintings of the era. His exquisite paintings of Mughal princes surrounded by court regalia manage to achieve a delicate and almost rhythmic balance of colour, texture and shapes.



Similarly, in many of his calligraphic works, Askari attains a harmonious balance of colour and shape. Being a designer, gives him an added advantage. The geometric patterning gives his art movement and the flowing Arabic text is woven into the painting. Says Askari: *Enriching a painting with calligraphy not only makes it more artistic and expressive, but gives it other values of symbolic meaning the inscription carries, spiritual meaning and thought.*

The spiritual aspect of Islam is an important feature in his work and he goes as far as to say: *My work is an externalisation of my inner journey. Unfolded ta'viz, letters from the Prophet (pbuh) and his*



Naqsh-i Nauroz-IV, 1990 • Mixed media • 73.5cm x 73.5cm

unexplained use of arcane numerological symbols, all add a sense of mystery and intrigue to his work.

A sense of the unknown and the unexplained and yet “holy” that is ever present in Askari’s work, is heightened by the antiquated look of his calligraphic works. Blackened and deliberately stained in some places, with the paint allowed to run with the help of a dripping technique, Askari’s paintings are deliberately made to look antiquated. He says, *I like the effect of age. I want my paintings to make you feel as if you’ve pressed a button in a time machine and gone back through the centuries.*

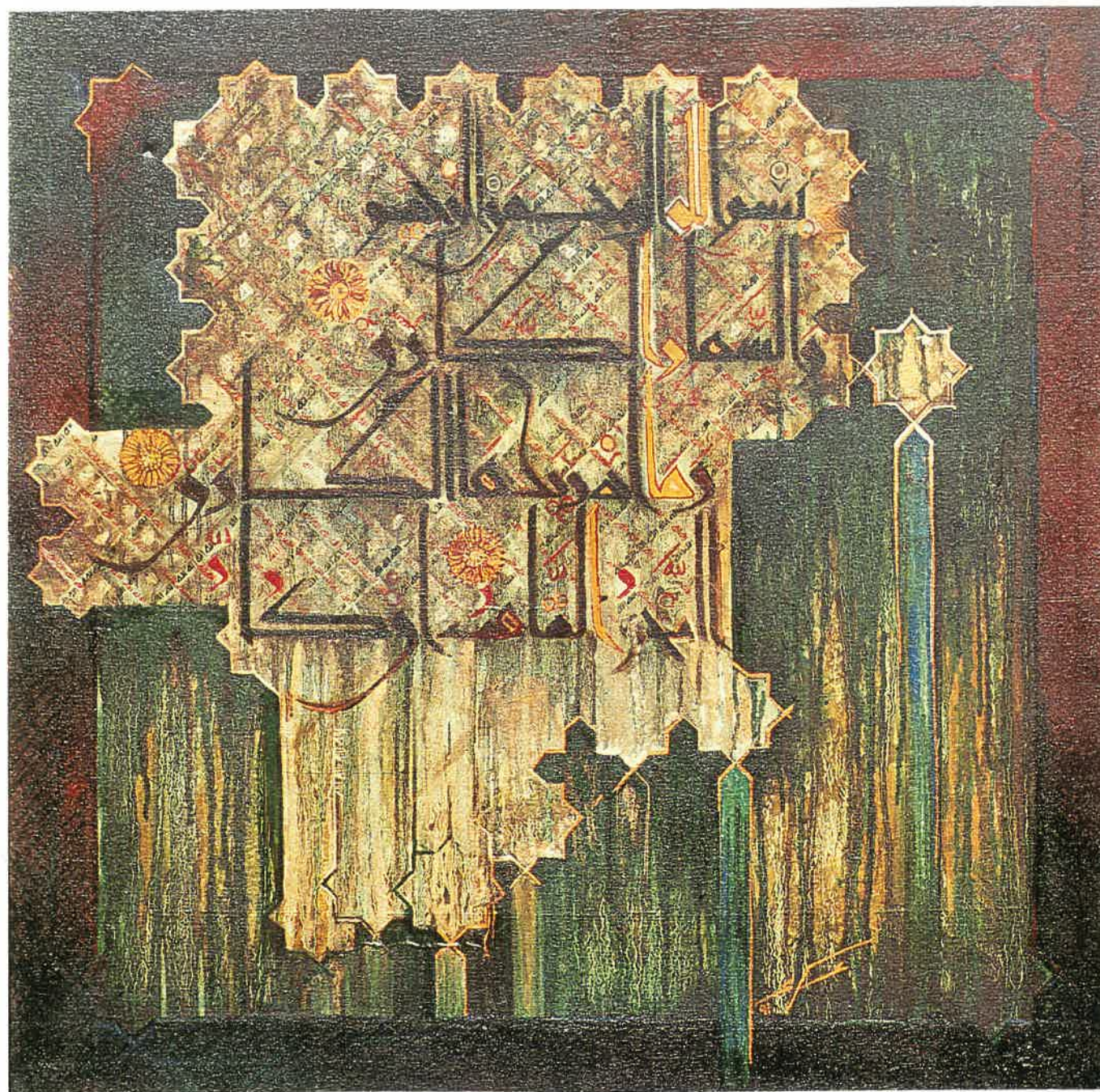
The synthesis of different pictorial elements work together in a more cohesive manner as in his delicate images of the Mughal Empress Nur Jahan and Emperor Jahangir. In these paintings Askari actually noted the red-white stone patterns that are to be found in Jahangir’s tomb and studied the time-worn, blackened stones at Nur Jahan’s tomb at Shahdara. He then employed them as decorative motifs on the two canvases. It is no wonder, then, that many of his paintings take months to complete. He experiments with different effects that can enhance and lend complexity to his paintings.



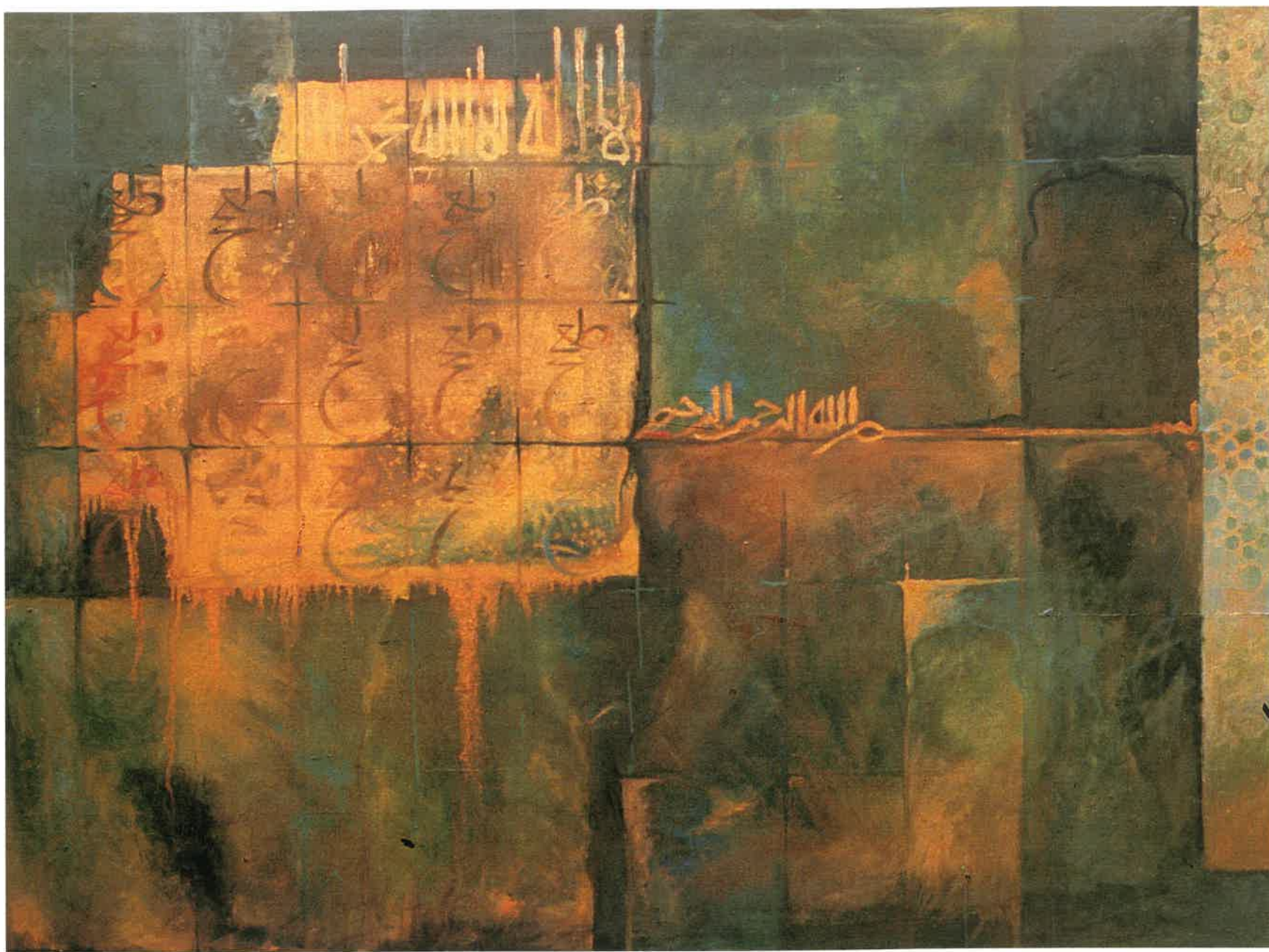
As Askari says, *In each of my paintings, you can discover new things and different elements each time you look at it. Good art is art that lasts - - one can look at it for ages and not get bored.* The richness of his art cannot be denied. His work has a mysterious aura that entices the viewer.



Prince & Shahr-i panah, 1989 • Mixed media • 59cm x 59cm



Naqsh-i Kohna-IV, 1991 • Mixed media • 88cm x 88cm



Naqsh-i Taha-V, 1990 • Mixed media • 88cm x 117cm

ASKARI ~ THE JEWELLER IN PAINT

M. Athar Tahir

The twentieth century has spawned a whole new aesthetic in the Muslim world. In the last few decades a blend of tradition and modernity has come to occupy a unique position in contemporary art. When a modern artist from the Muslim world turns to his great and varied heritage, his challenge begins. He has to reinterpret this rich repertoire in a manner that is at once different and contemporary. Use of calligraphy is the hall mark of this work. Shakir Ali from Pakistan, Ahmad Moustafa from Egypt and Houssein Zenderoudi from Iran were the early exponents of this genre- Calligraphart (from calligraphy and art). In the last few years many have discovered its dazzling possibilities and in Pakistan Askari Mian Irani is creating a new artistic vocabulary.

Calligraphart is distinct from related art forms in which calligraphy is used. Traditional calligraphy is executed in accordance with set principles of the Masters. Paintery calligraphy, a hybrid product, evolved under the superfluous impact of twentieth century Western art techniques, forms, not theories. It is traditional calligraphy merely amplified or placed in larger formats for display. Epigraphic Painting, on the other hand, incorporates abstract calligraphic elements, the form, not the meaning of the element, is important. Ultimately the epigraphic inputs are only secondary.

Calligraphart includes all art where the graphic parameters of contemporary art, the problems of painting and the styles of script combine. The calligraphist (from calligrapher and artist) unlike the others, articulates a wholeness of purpose, of vision, of execution, along modern lines while preserving the readability of the script. In Askari's latest work this is eminently visible. He not only ensures that the aesthetic of design and the problems of painting are addressed, but the script in its labyrinthine flow and geometric assertion remains readable.





Naqsh-i Hilha-III, 1992 • Mixed media • 73.5cm x 147cm

The components of Askari's work are conventional males and females in regal attire and decorative floral borders from Mughal miniatures, structural elements such as domes, minarets, doorways and arches from Muslim architecture, Arabic calligraphy and geometric patterns. All these have in their own right been executed to perfection by past masters. They could hardly be bettered. But Askari employs his imaginative intuition to reshape these motifs that grow out of the collective memory in new and novel combinations. One such variation is regarding architectural elements whose three dimensionality is modified by a planed simplification which contributes to the unity of his work. Askari's is the art of associated ideas and forms. It is here that his originality lies.

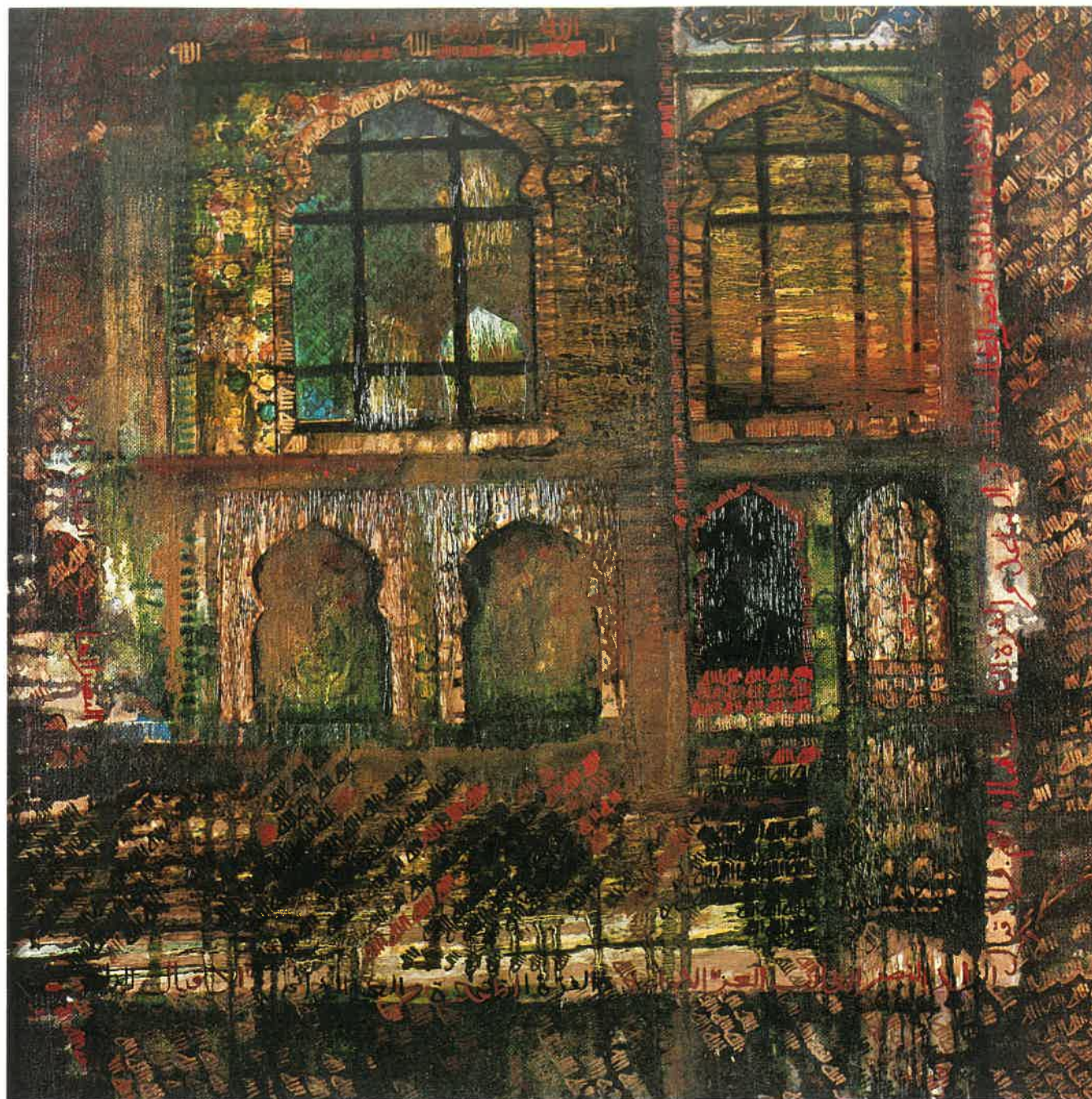
Askari picks and chooses magpie-like. A suggestion from here, an indication from there. The less successful works are cluttered. Colour, composition, form and pattern jostle for attention. the melting mixing, moulding mettle is missing. But where the artistic magic works, the result is stunning.

Being a designer by training his calligraphs continue to be distinguished by meticulous attention to detail and simultaneous evocation of an enveloping mood. The motif of *Allah* in Arabic that runs through his work like embroidery, stitches various elements together. When these strands mingle in various tones, they provide continuity and a pervading rhythm - - the bars rising and falling to a deep calling.

The divisions of the canvas according to ta'viz and planispheric astrolabes, the juxtaposition of the pale sheen of age-old manuscripts, illumination in beaten gold, lapis lazuli and turquoise and verses from the Quran, are brought by dripping colours under their veil. These washes conceal and reveal. They entice and arrest.

The dripping technique is made complex by the controlled direction of the flow, the texture that layer over layer acquires and the interplay of luminosity provided to the colours. This imparts movement to the work. Perhaps movement and dynamism is better captured in the work of other calligraphists. But few if any, surpass Askari in richness of effect. He is a jeweller in paint.





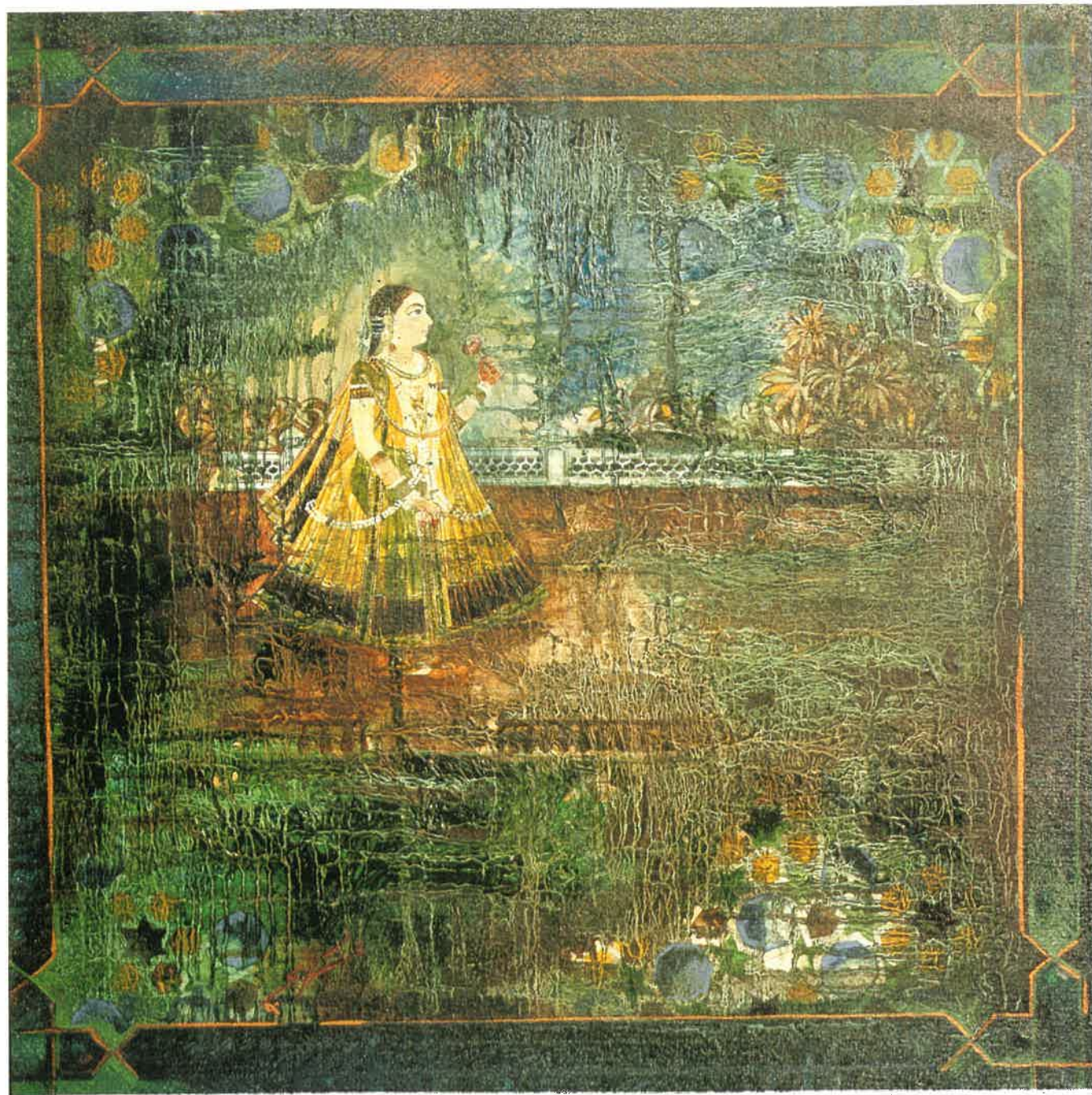
Naqsh-i Daricha-I, 1989 • Mixed media • 59cm x 59cm



Naqsh-i Taha-IV, 1989 • Mixed media • 59cm x 59cm



Naqsh-i Hilha-II, 1989 • Mixed media • 88cm x 88cm



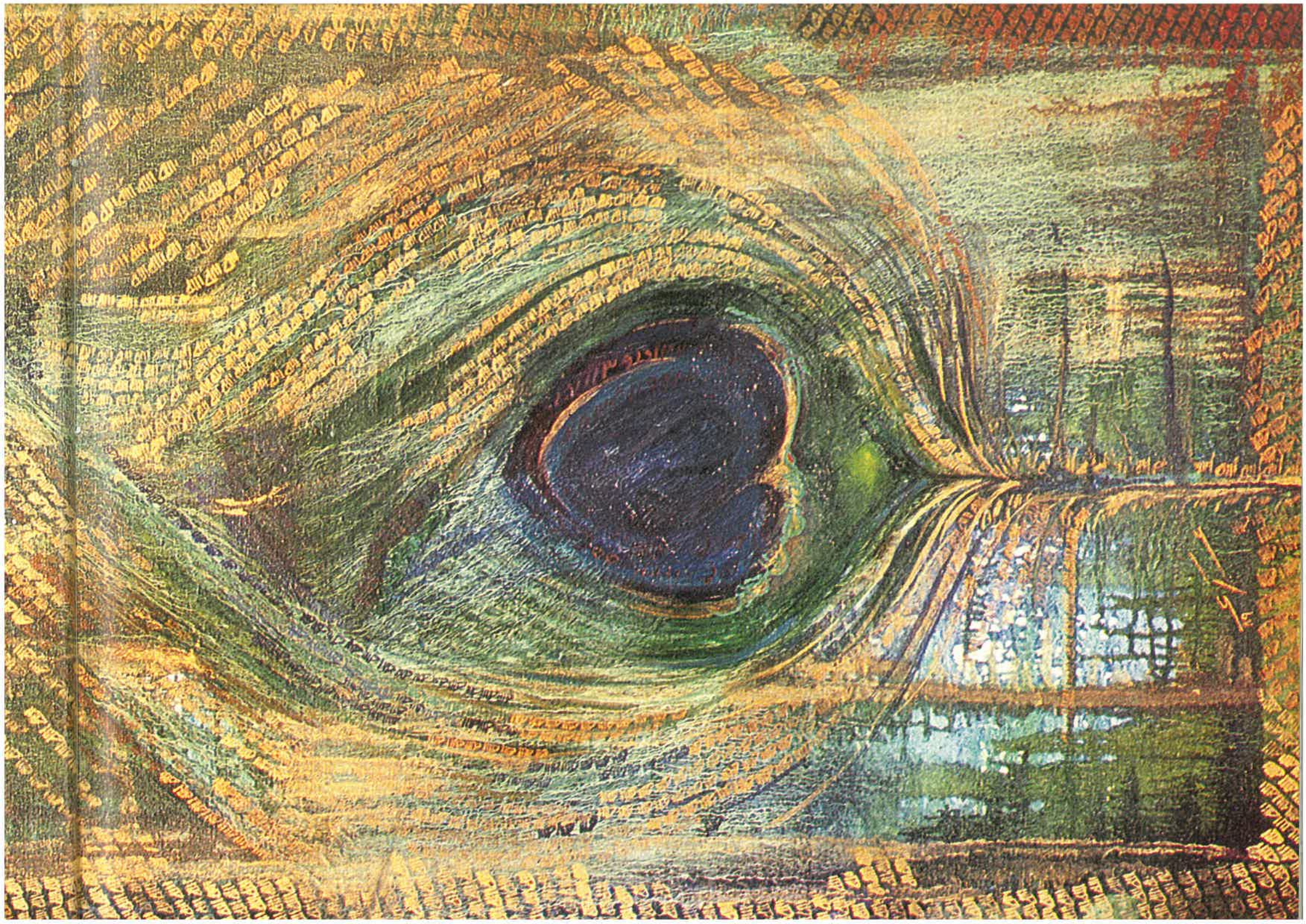
Lonely Princess, 1988 • Mixed media • 73.5cm x 73.5cm



Princess on horse-back, 1991 • Mixed media • 88cm x 44cm

- *Naqsh-i Panah-IV*, 1989
- Mixed media
- 73.5cm x 147cm







Naqsh-i Panah-II, 1989 • Mixed media • 59cm x 59cm



Princess with white peacock, 1992 • Mixed media • 73.5cm x 73.5cm

PRECIOUS LITTLE

Firuzza Pastakia

Askari's non-figurative work seems to transcend all obvious barriers of time. With the learned use of symbolic elements his intelligent compositions are like ancient manuscripts, tampered with and transported to the twentieth century. Although they exude a very real sense of history, various levels of more modern interpretation can be applied to them - - whether or not the viewer is educated. And in that sense, these paintings are successful.

But the figurative work, sadly, has no such evocative power. The people in these paintings have no relevant connection with the pseudo-Islamic backdrop they find themselves in. Transported from the crisp, vivid world of fountains, pavilions and gardens of paradise to the artist's more sombre fields of earthy colour, they are incongruous with their new surroundings; the figures appear to be imposed on these ornate surfaces, not a part of them. And the elaborate Mughal borders that frame these figures fail to add any real meaning to their purely decorative existence.



There is no doubting Askari's technical prowess. A highly skilled graphic designer, his compositions are not only clever but often disturbing as well. His use of Islamic symbols for graphic, rather than representational purposes, lends a sense of mystery to his images; they are unabashedly esoteric, and reveal their full meaning only to the educated.

Askari has endeavoured over the past several years to fuse his classical vision with a desire to be considered modern. These attempts to render traditional calligraphy in a more current idiom are fascinating because of their subtle, reticent nature. But in the search perhaps for clarity, or conceding to the whims of the illiterate, his other images - -



Blue palace, 1992 • Mixed media • 73.5cm x 73.5cm

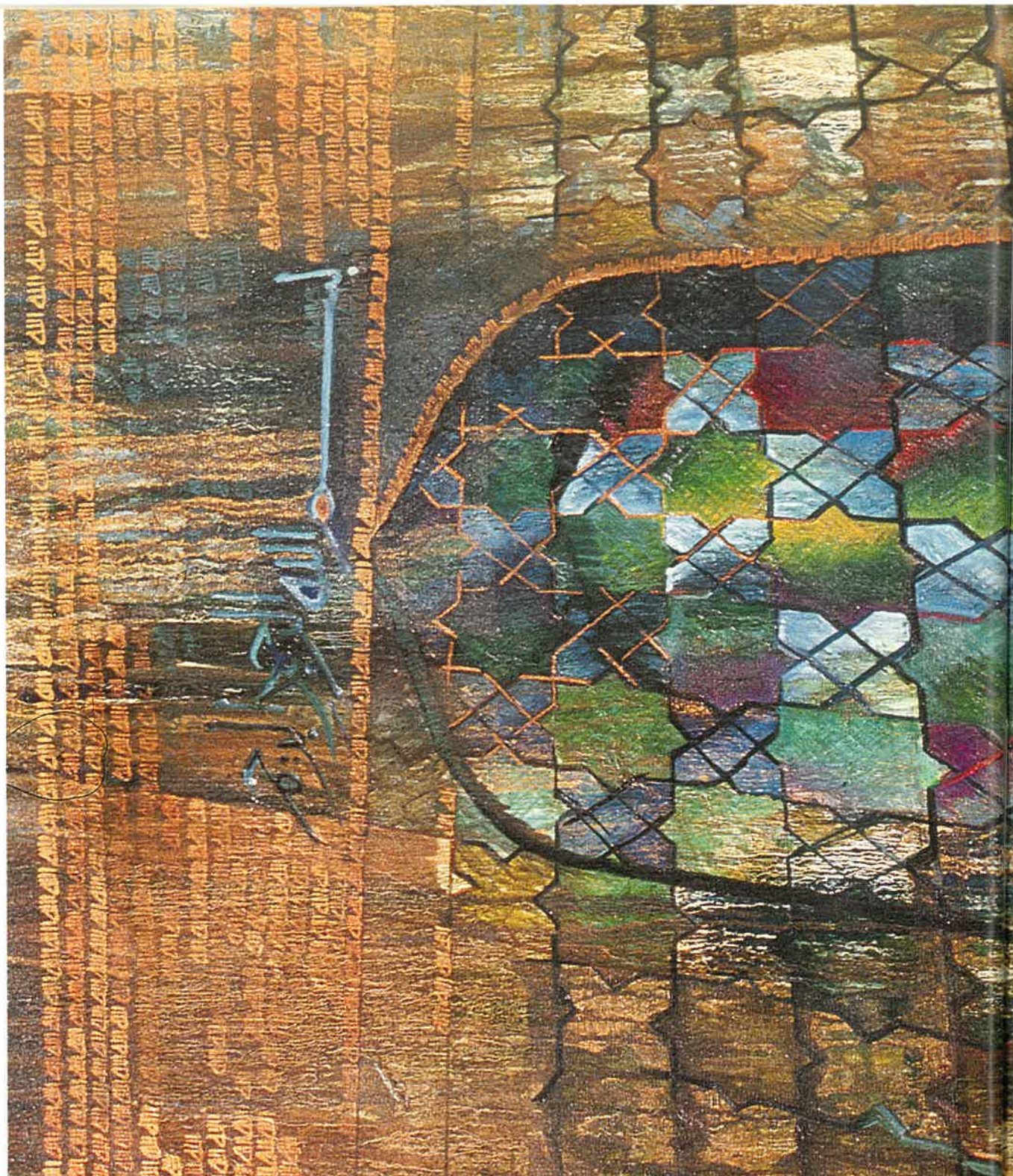
the ones that are surely not his true expression - - have lost their power to inspire.

There must be other solutions, other ways forward, apart from literal representation which only seems contrived. Askari must not alter the dark, ambiguous character of his paintings. For in their obscurity, in fact, lies their greatest power.

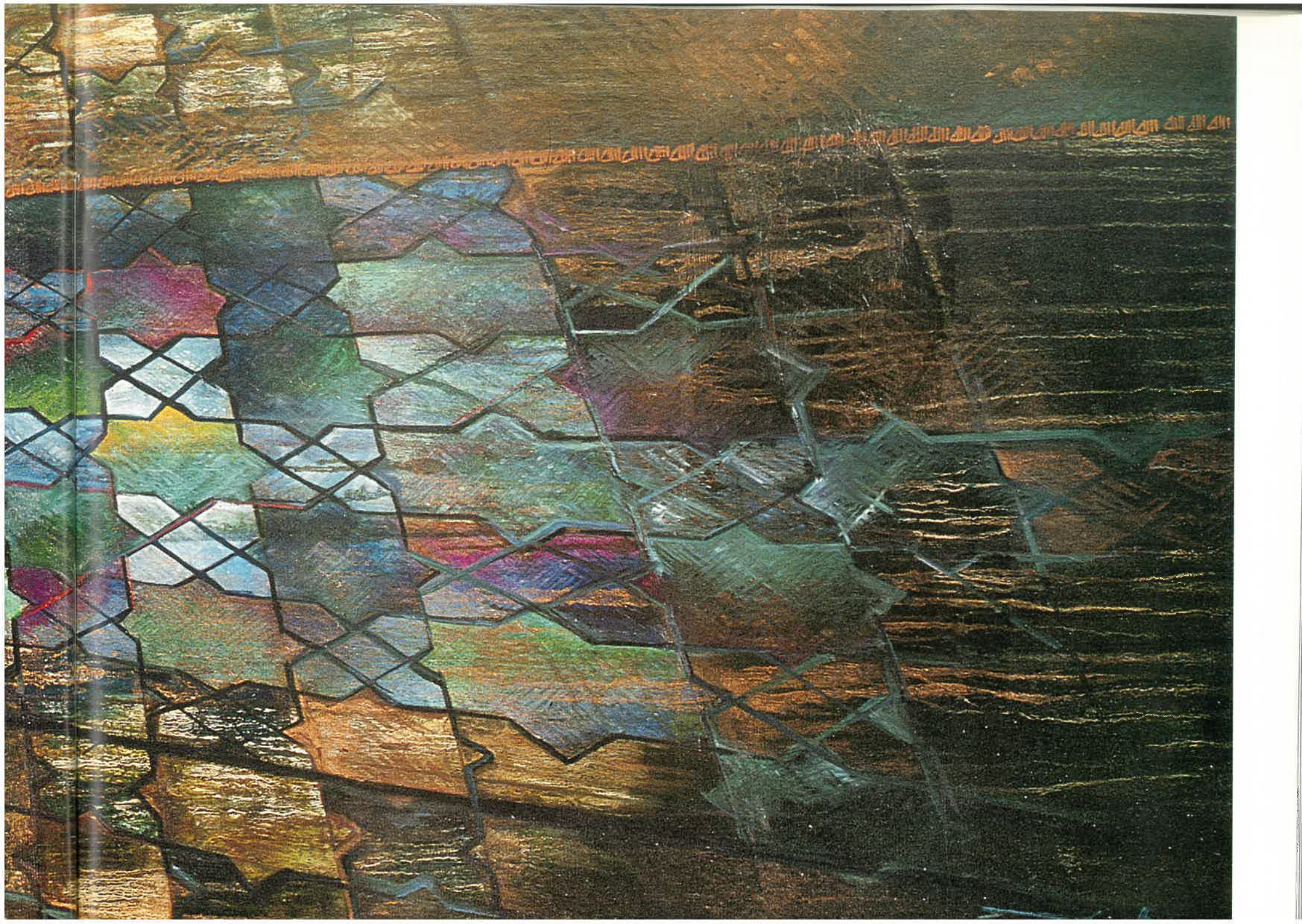




Princess in Shalimar Gardens, 1992 • Mixed media • 73.5cm x 73.5cm

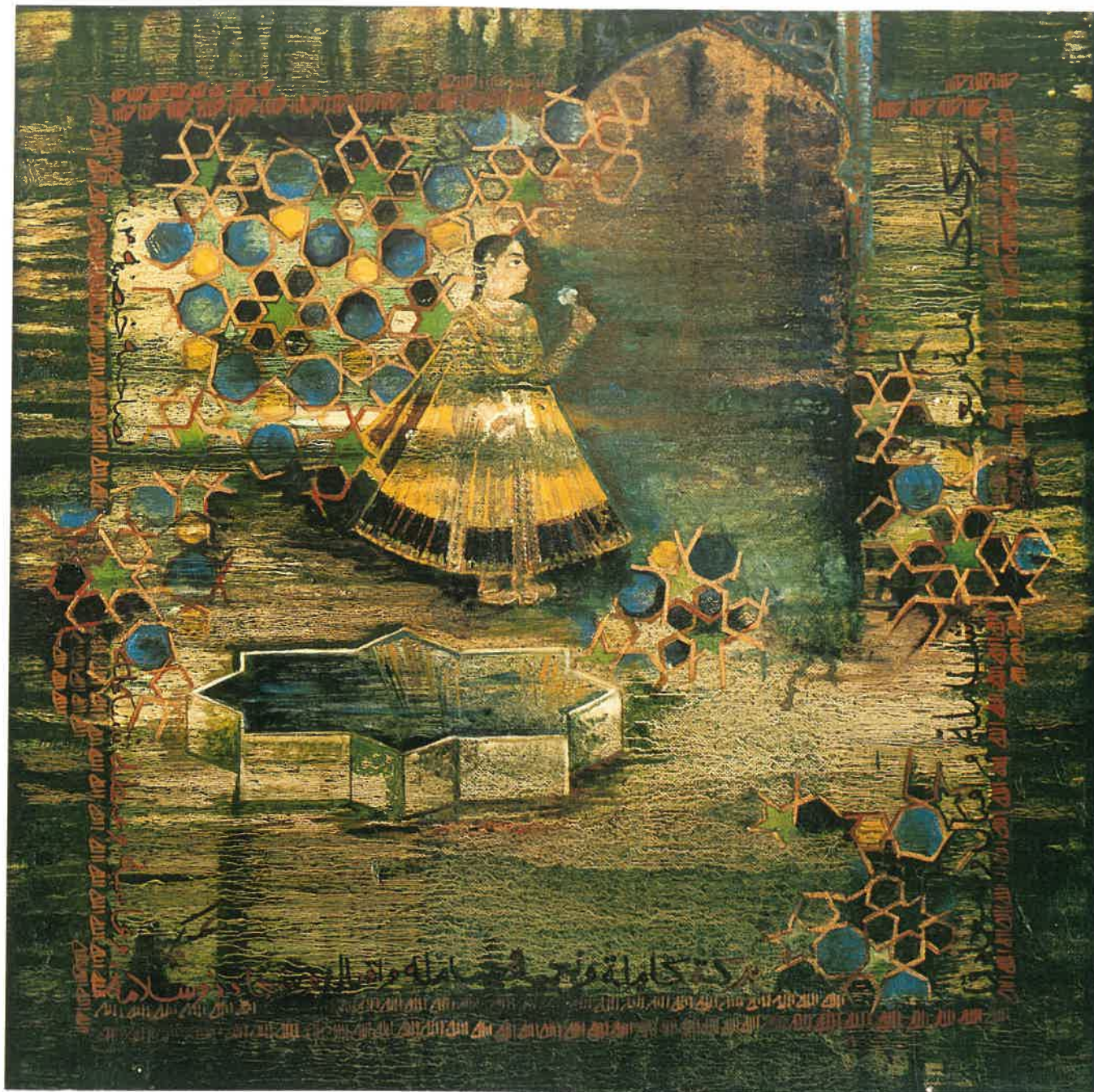


- Holy Arch, 1989
- Mixed media
- 73.5cm x 147cm

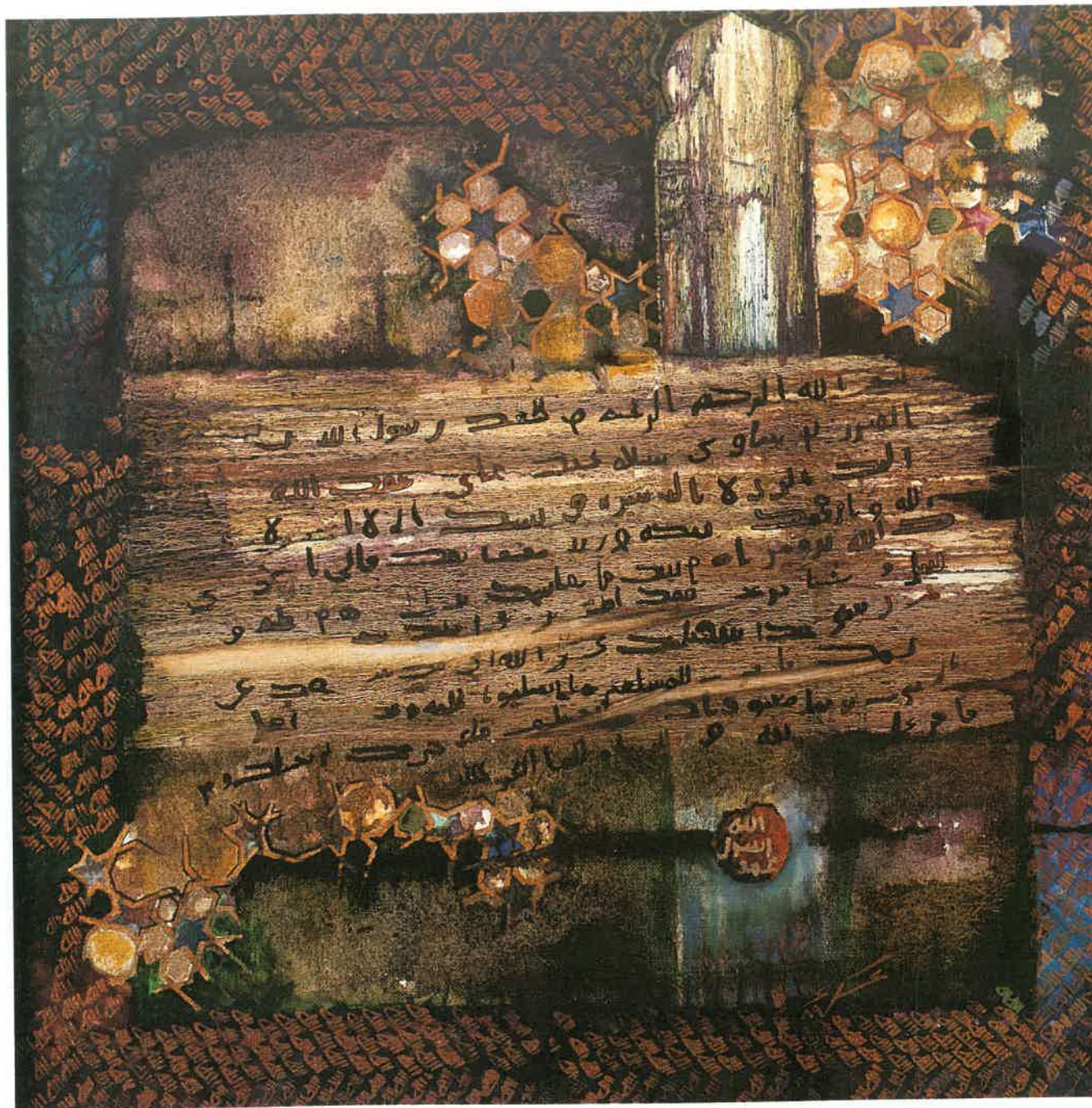




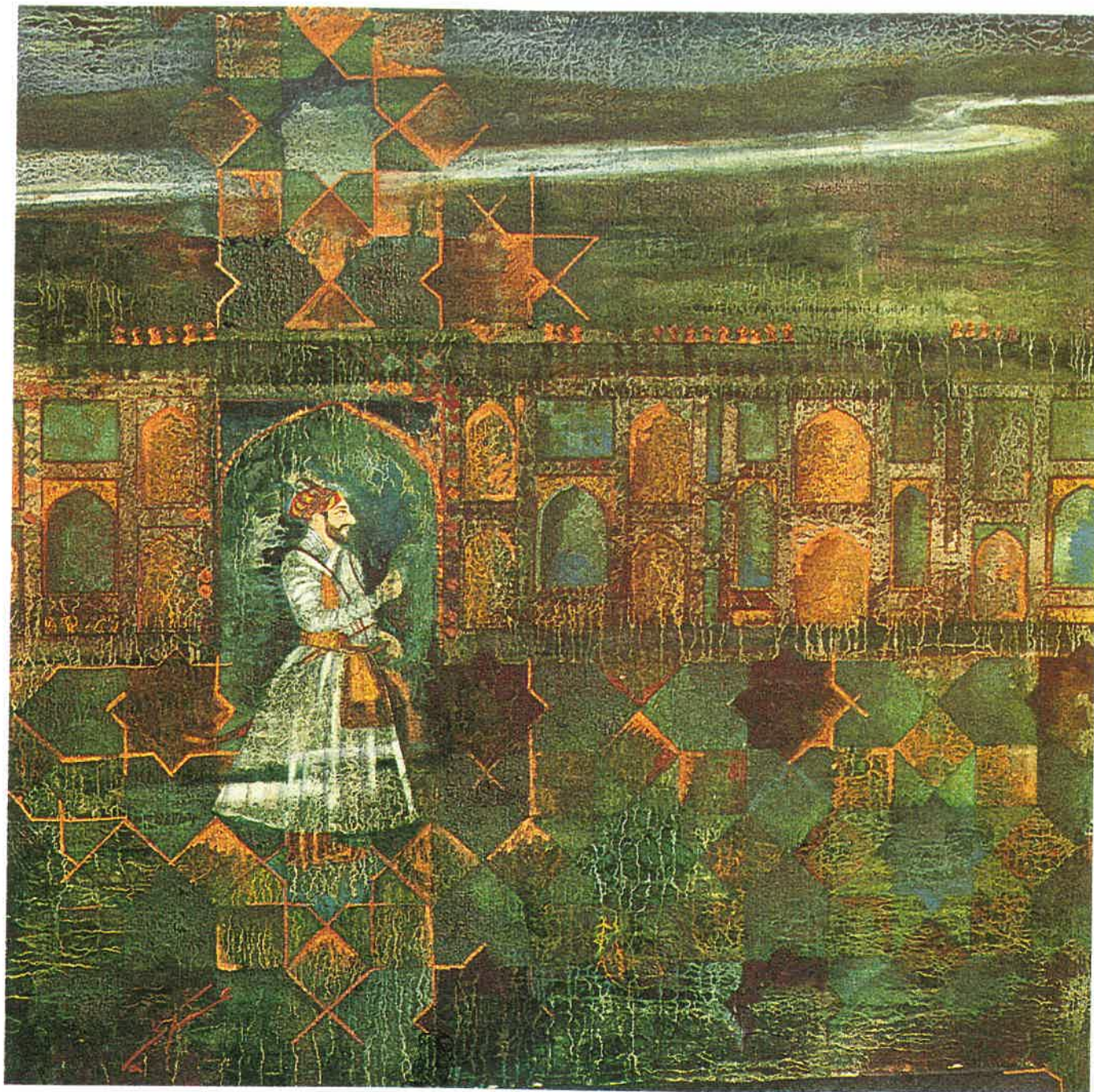
Naqsh-i Taha, 1990 • Mixed media • 59cm x 59cm



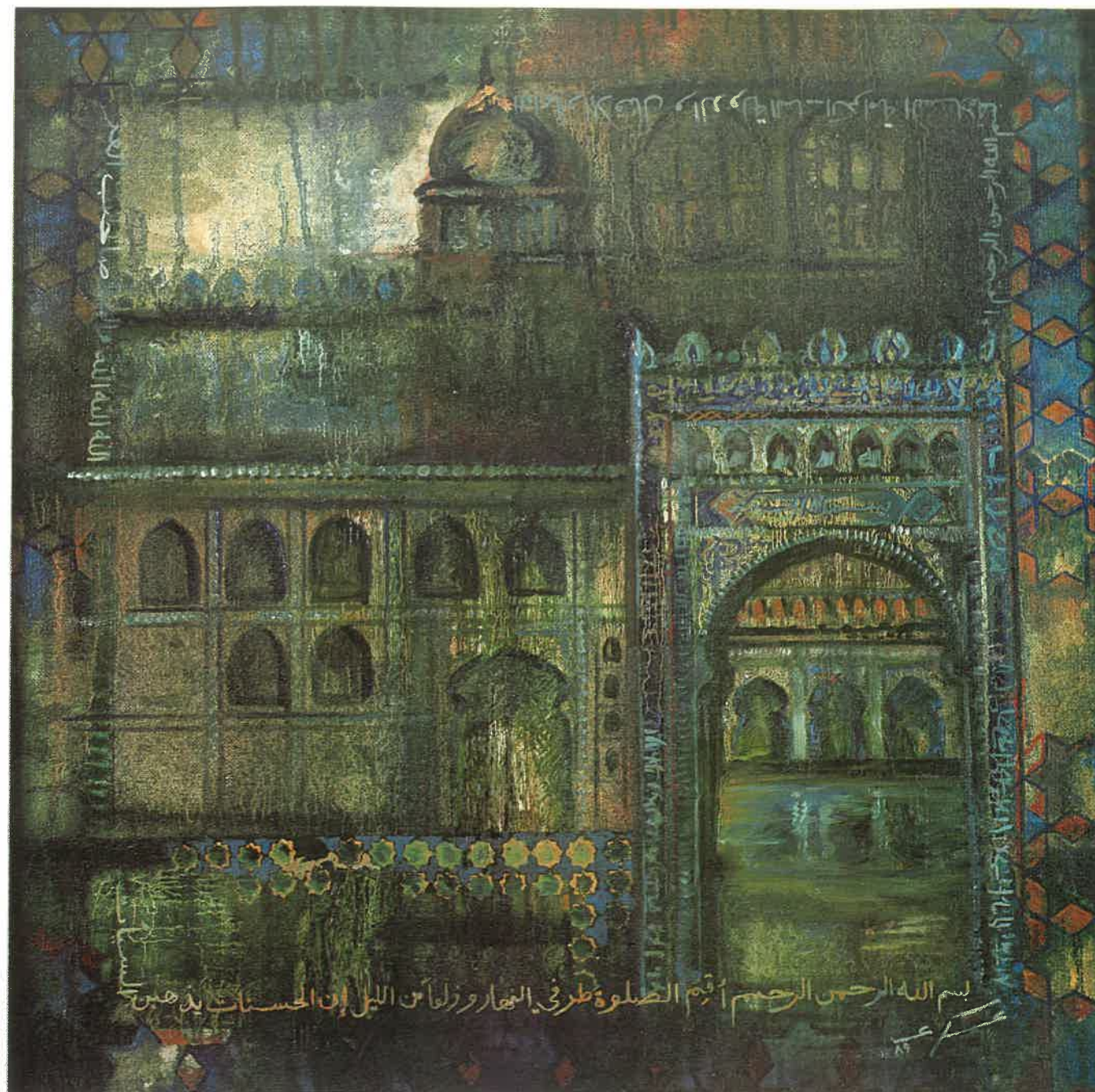
Princess in the courtyard, 1990 • Mixed media • 73.5cm x 73.5 cm



Letter of the Prophet (pbuh)-II, 1989 • Mixed media • 73.5cm x 73.5cm



Prince in the courtyard, 1990 • Mixed media • 88cm x 88cm



Naqsh-i Daricha-II, 1989 • Mixed media • 59cm x 59cm



Prince sitting in the jhoraka, 1991 • Mixed media • 88cm x 88cm

ECHOES FROM THE PAST

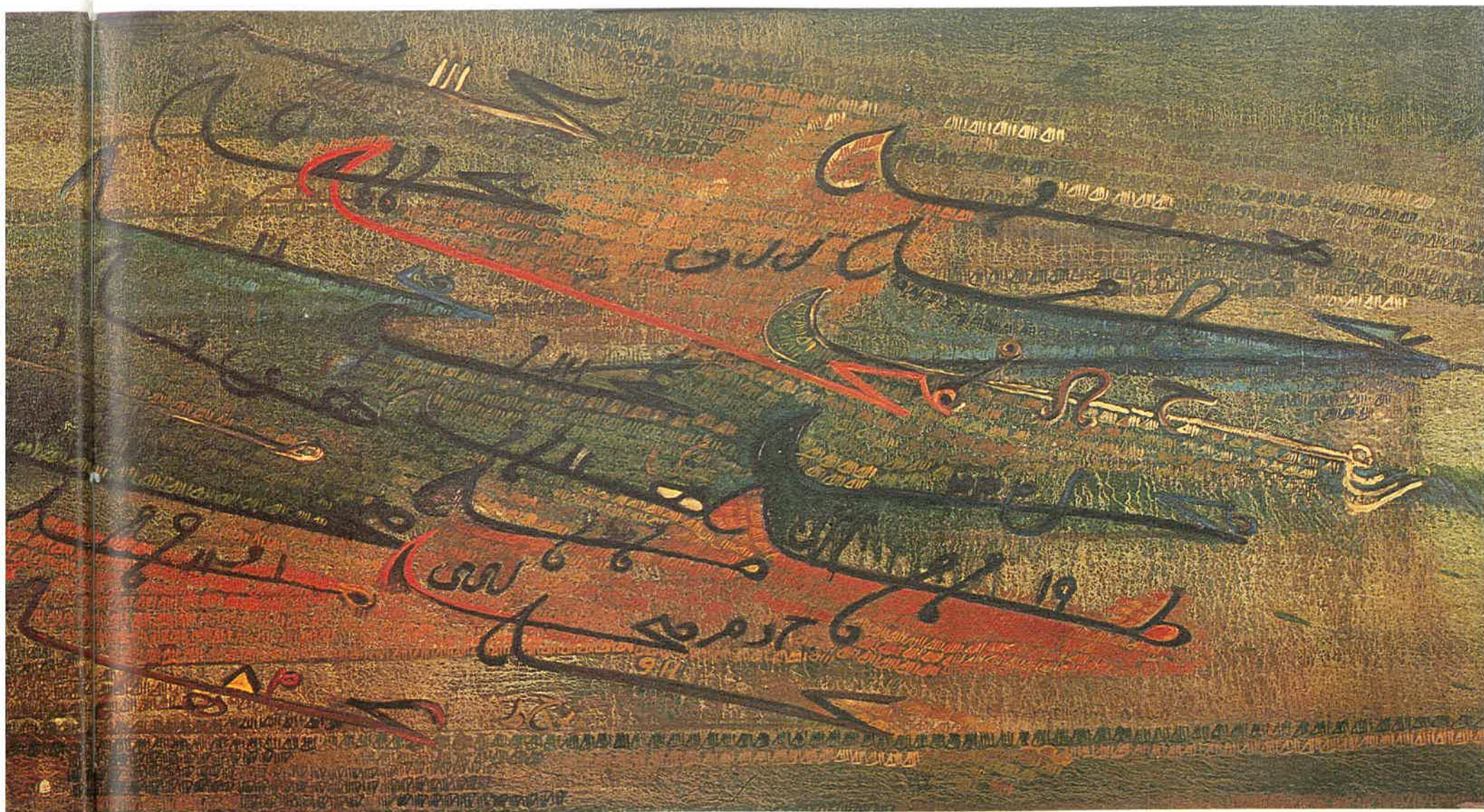
Marjorie Hussain

Perhaps it is a lack of modern day creative stimulation that makes the artists look over their shoulders to a seemingly richer cultural era: the age of the great Mughal Emperor, Akbar. Then royal calligraphers copied books on history, philosophy and religions, as well as works of prose and poetry. Akbar's curiosity, we are told, was infinite and although he was unable to read, books were read to him, leading to lengthy discussions between the ruler and his circle of intellectuals. Artists chronicled court events and often inspired by music and the changing seasons, created romantic cameos in exquisite miniatures. With the important exceptions of painting and architecture, little now survives of the enormous artistic output that Akbar initiated. Yet, even now it appears, the art of the Mughal period remains a major inspiration for contemporary artists.

Askari Mian Irani blends frequent references to the past in his paintings, using motifs and symbols of traditional Muslim arts. Calligraphy and architectural designs are juxtaposed with figures from Mughal paintings. Princes ride ornamented horses and languid beauties idly play with peacocks, or gaze at their reflections in pools. Askari borrows freely from Mughal conventions, the expressionless faces of the figures, the treatment of spatial depth and the arrangement of architectural setting. But the overall colour handling and sense of design is uniquely his own.

The artist dilutes his paint with turpentine and linseed oil and develops his painting using fine, layered areas of paint. Then he turns his canvas around and allows the oil to trickle over the surface of the canvas creating fine lines. In many places the paint is removed exposing the weave of the canvas. The lines are horizontal and vertical as the artist shifts his canvas. The effect is of ancient tapestry and old manuscripts. The structural elements, domes, arches,

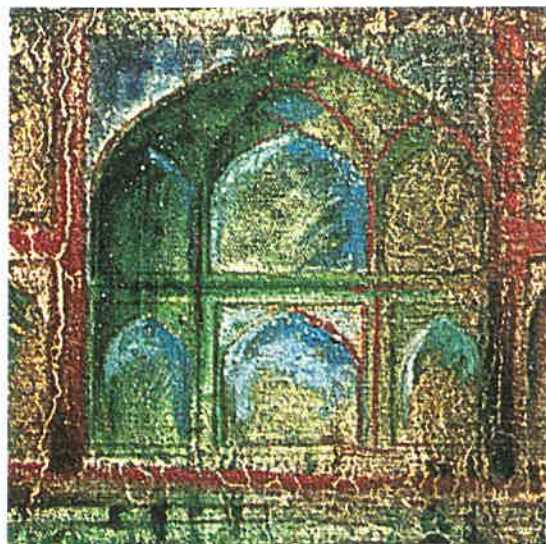




Naqsh-i Nauroz-I, 1989 • Mixed media • 73.5cm x 147cm

minarets and balconies are partially cloaked with paint. Nuances of calligraphy are framed by geometric designs. Askari prefers his paintings to hang in subdued light, avoiding spot light which, he feels disturbs the echoes of the past.

Screened from harsh light, his paintings hold a dreamlike quality. They radiate a subdued lucidity; a reassurance that whatever may be destroyed by mankind, still the primeval need to express and the appreciation of beauty remains.





Warrior near fort, 1990 • Mixed media • 73.5cm x 73.5 cm



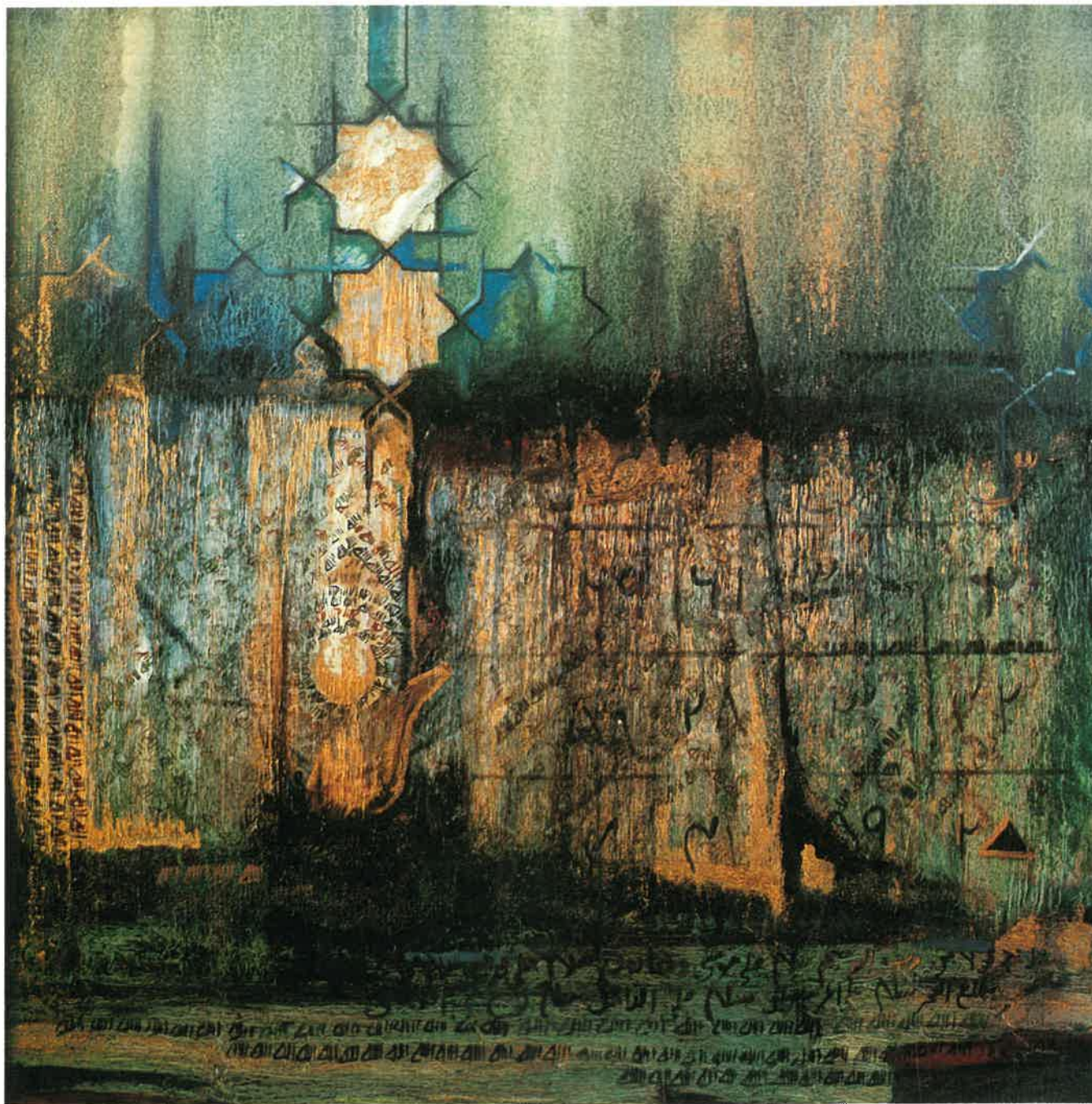
Naqsh-i Aima, 1989 • Mixed media • 73.5cm x 73.5cm



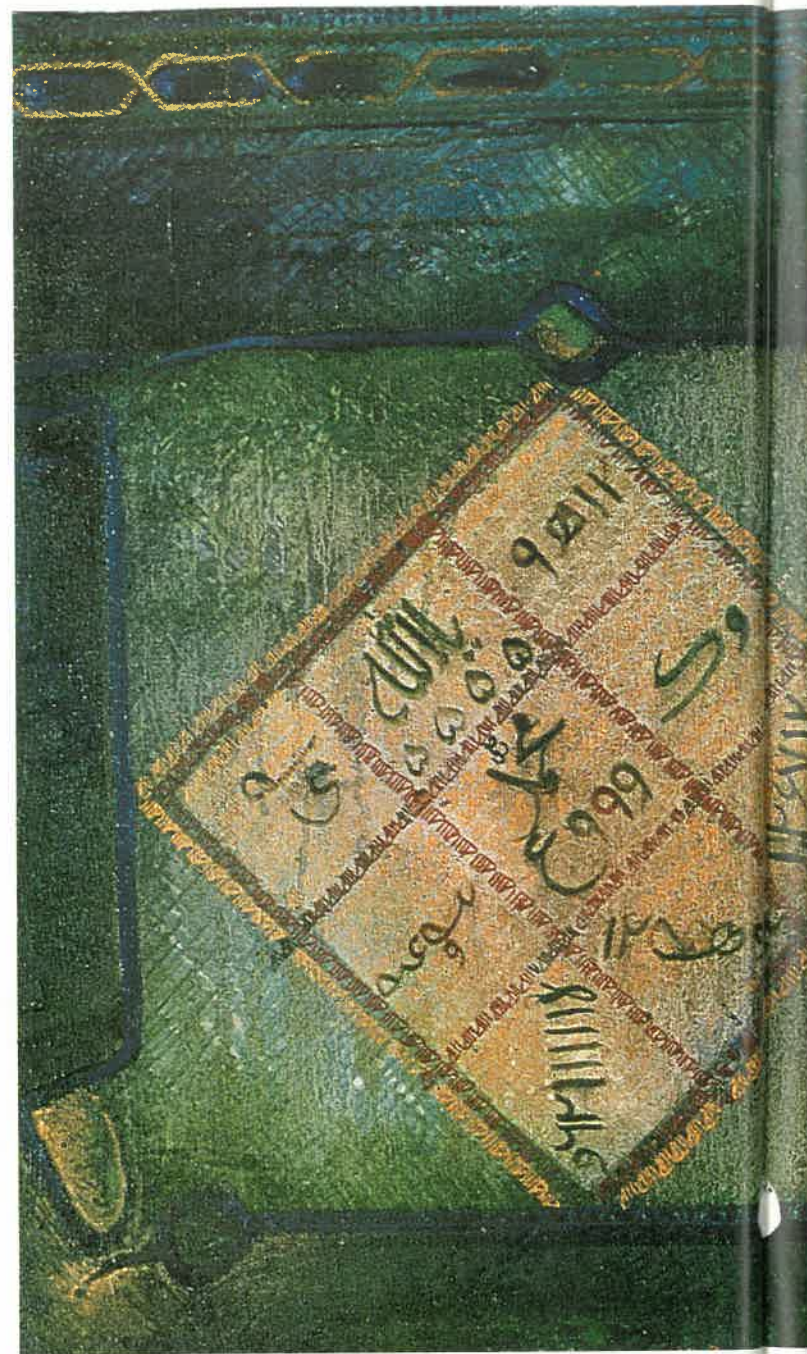
Naqsh-i Taha - VII, 1992 • Mixed media • 44cm x 44cm

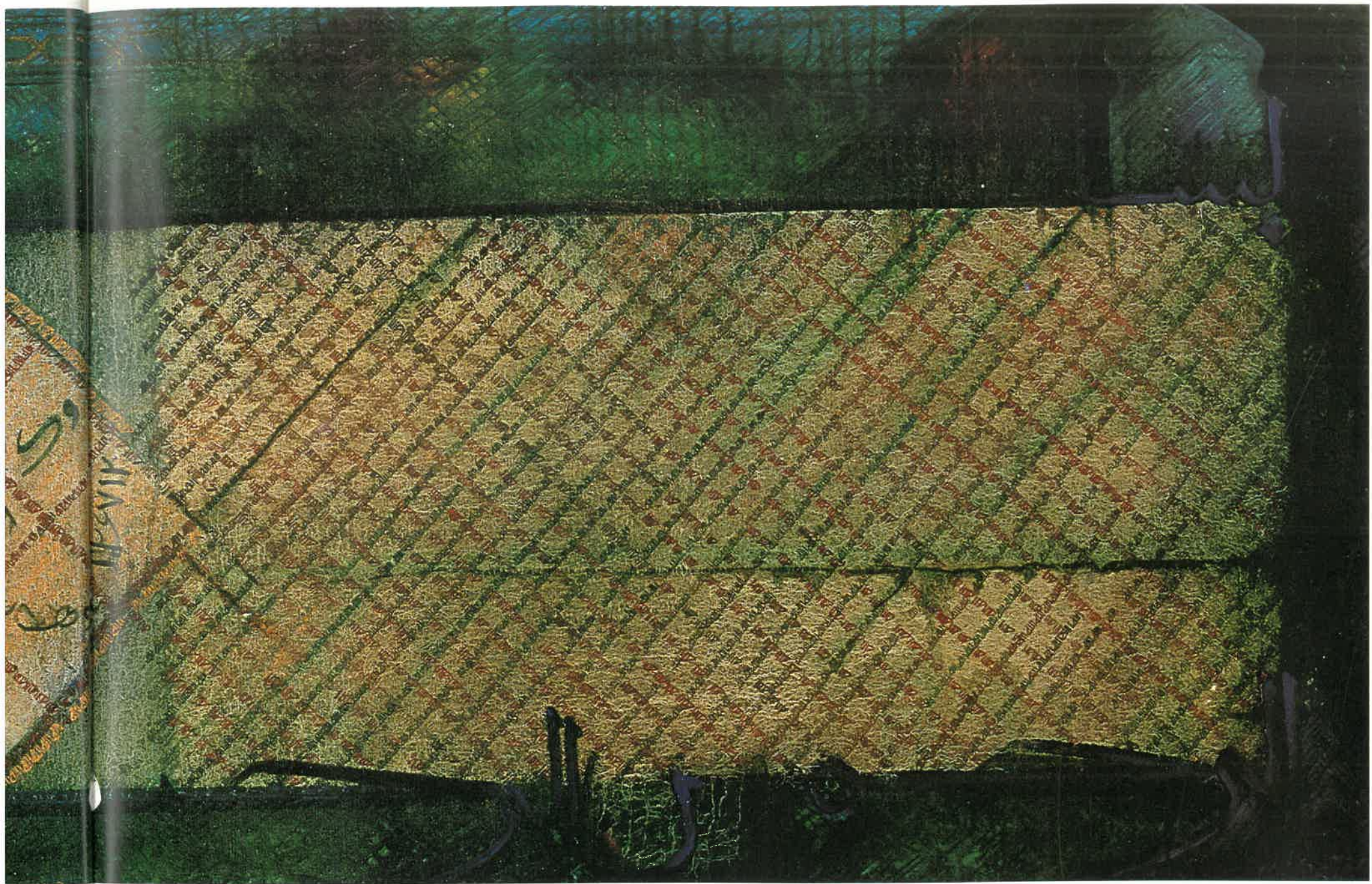


Prince Shah Jahan, 1992 • Mixed media • 44cm x 44cm



Naqsh-i Sitar, 1989 • Mixed media • 59cm x 59cm





EXPRESSION IN GOLD

Nilofur Farrukh

Askari Mian has proved his mastery with colours. His palette is as bright and subtle as the colours of Caucasian carpets. With silken blues and greens, woody browns and parchment yellows he creates rich combinations of calligraphy. Gold is used in abundance and makes the paintings glow under artificial light. However, the canvases are marred by overcrowding of elements. The artist has adopted many elements, motifs and architectural forms but he has been unable to fully integrate them with his theme. Some are over crowded and others are simply over worked. In both cases they lose their usual appeal.

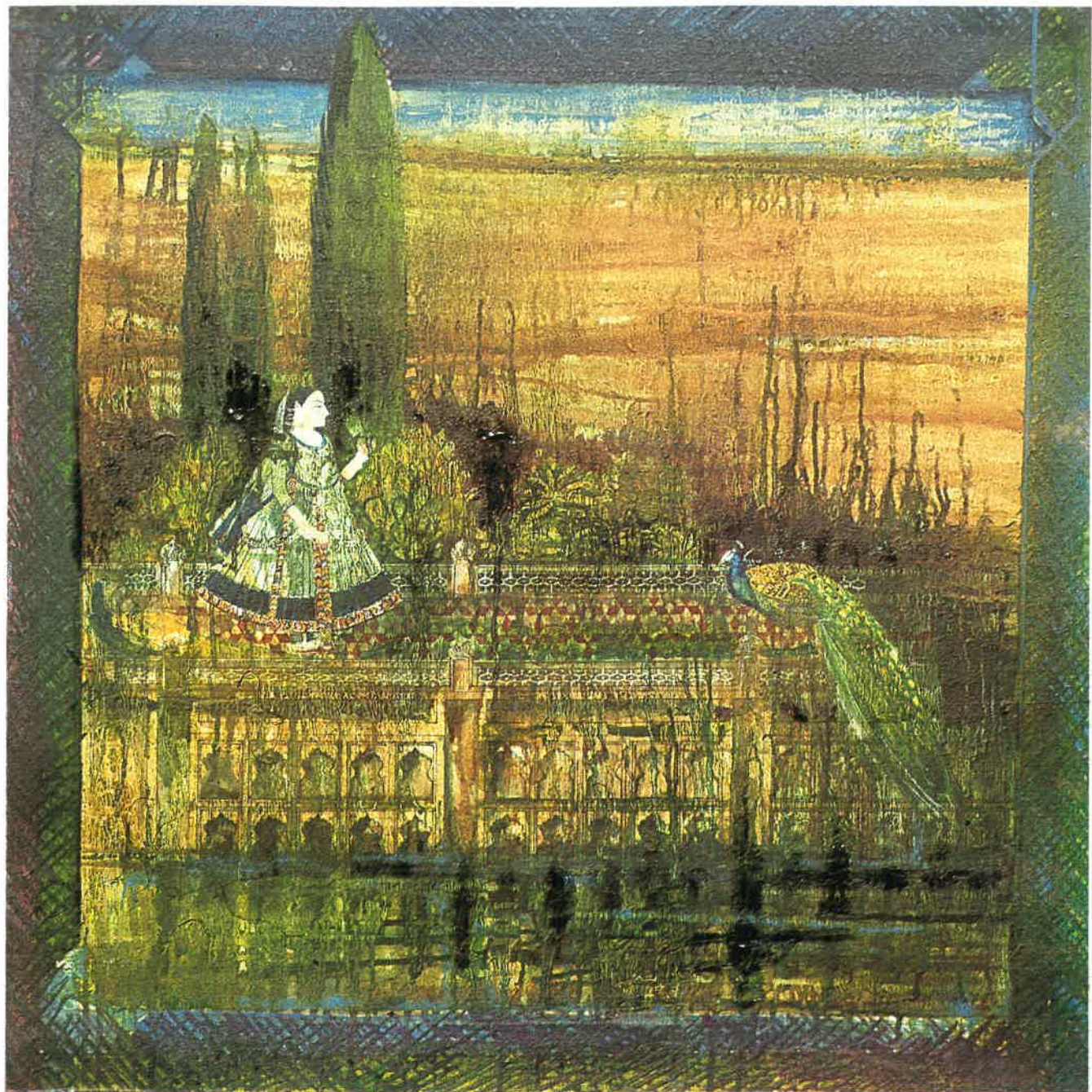
The eight-sided geometric star has been used without restraint - it has been repeated over and over again to fill up empty spaces and sometimes these stars are strung together to form decorative borders.

Whenever visible, Askari Mian's surfaces are sensitive. The subtle colour variation, created by the dripping paint technique that he has mastered, is seen in almost all his work. The fabric on fabric mounting of his smaller paintings show the artist's keen understanding of the treatment of the surface but unfortunately little, of these spaces are left unworked. They are covered by yards and yards of calligraphy which like a marauding army wipes out all open spaces and subjugate sensitive textures.

Two of Askari's most fascinating paintings are the renderings *Naqsh-i Panah*. The larger rectangular canvas has a form that unfolds like a roll of paper. Its wave-like movement encourages the viewer to explore the centre which is a circular design. The colours are muted yellows and greens and the paintings remind one of ancient astrolabes and seafarer maps.

Very different in style and content are Askari's figurative paintings

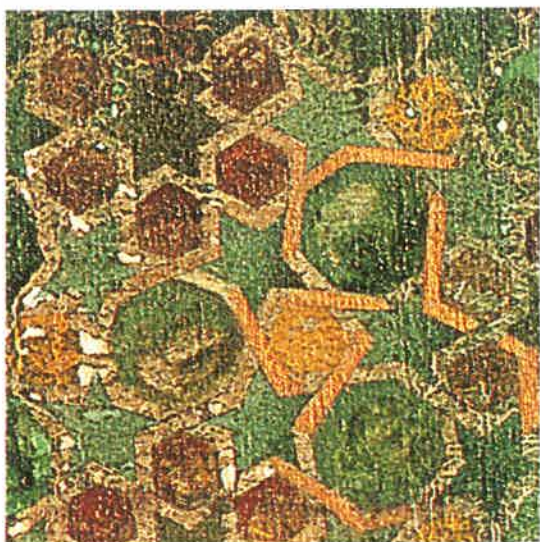




Lady in the garden, 1992 • Mixed media • 73.5cm x 73.5cm

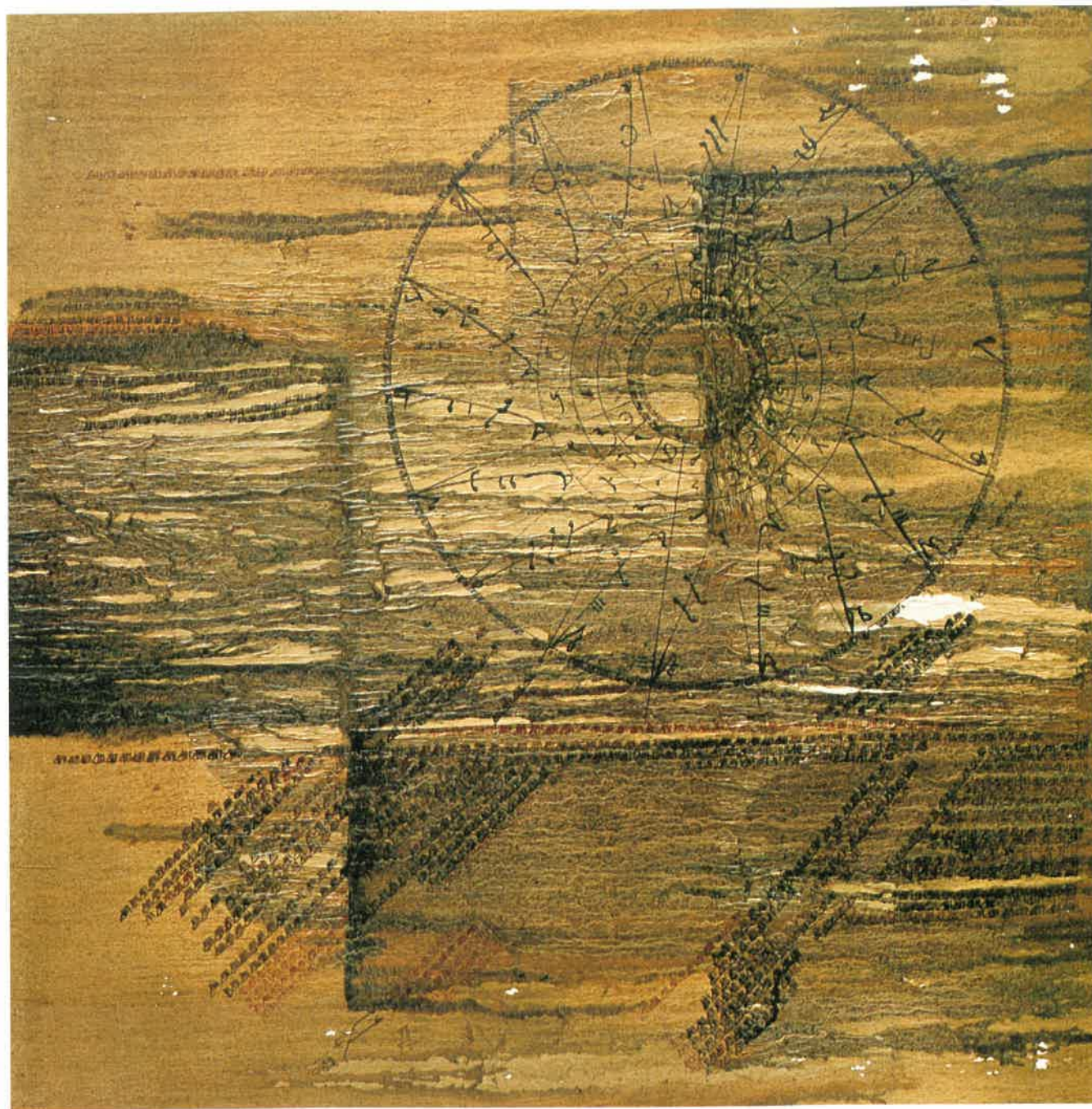
inspired by Mughal miniatures. The compositions bear elements of Mughal architecture and Mughal themes. These contain the colours of Mughal paintings but they lack the understanding and sensitivity with which a Mughal miniature painter rendered his work.

Askari Mian tries to link the background with the figures with 'dripping paint wash but he only succeeds in giving the architectural forms a decaying look ~ ~ against which the intricately worked Mughal prince and princess with their pets stand out like cut-out figures. Particularly the princess in white appears a ghost haunting her royal habitat.

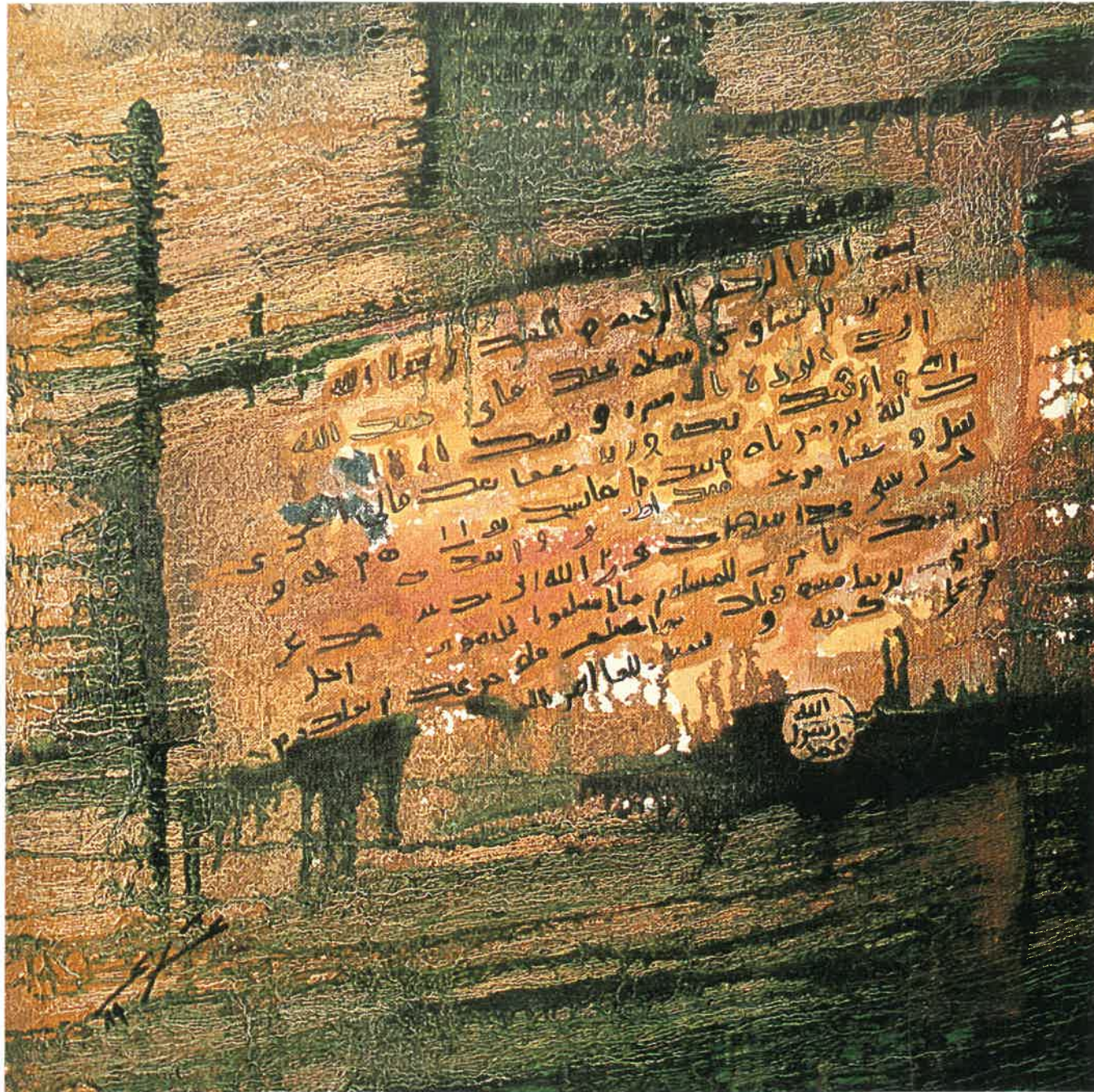




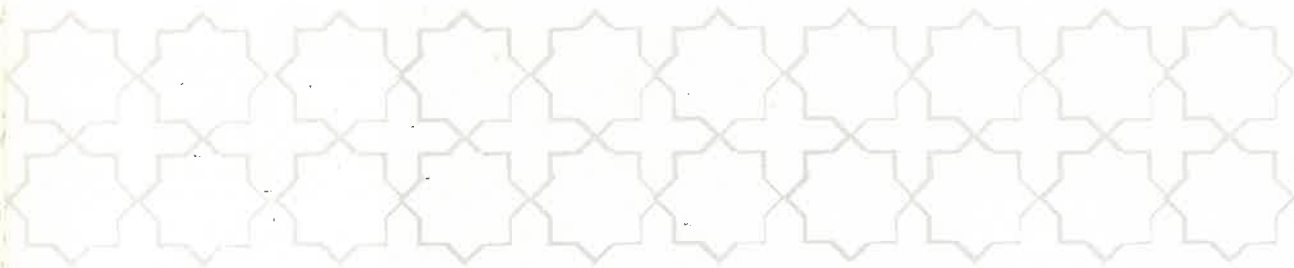
Prince near fort, 1990 • Mixed media • 58.8cm x 58.8cm

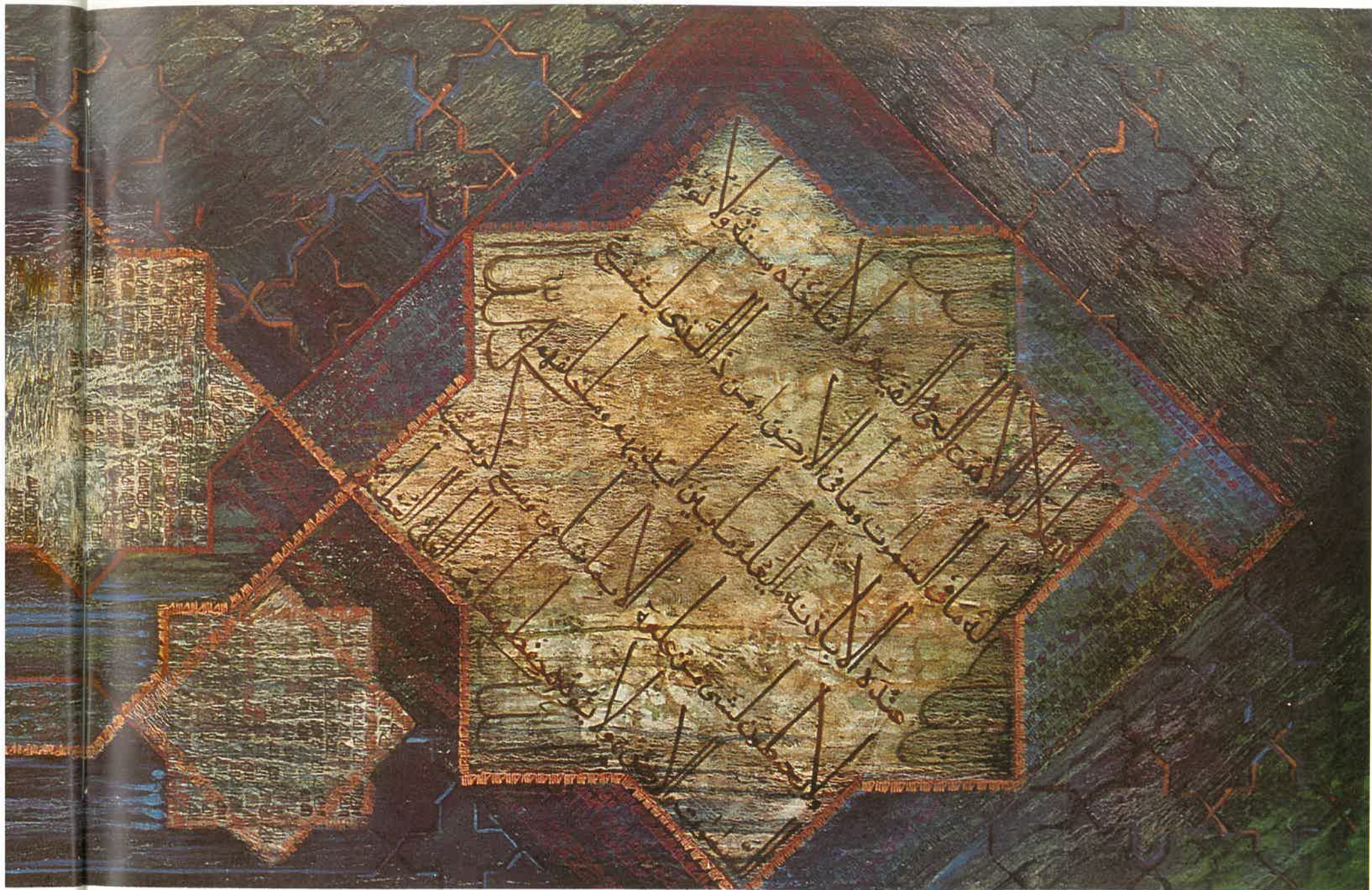


Naqsh-i Nauroz-III, 1989 • Mixed media • 73.5cm x 73.5cm



Letter of the Prophet (pbuh)-I, 1989 • Mixed media • 59cm x 59cm





Ayat al-Kursi, 1990 • Mixed media • 73.5cm x 147cm

AN ARTIST OF TECHNICAL PERFECTION

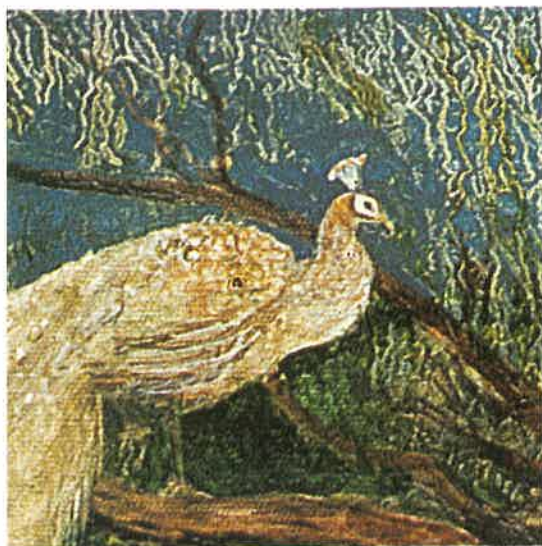
Hameed Zaman

Askari Mian Irani's Mughal portfolio, evoking the splendour of Mughal grandeur, is rich in its lyrical beauty. The decorative masterpieces are made resplendent with gold, silver collage, fabrics, tissue paper, and an endless drip of the colourful waterfall. Here the artist takes liberties with the traditional Mughal miniature in terms of size (over-blown) and medium (oil), and brings in pet white peacocks to entertain the languid damsels and princesses, pining in their solitary confinements. An interesting transposition of the pets, a characteristic of the Kangra school.

Perhaps, after Abdul Rehman Chughtai (18.---- 197), Askari Mian is another artist who uses architectural designs with enthusiasm and finesse, only to enrich the backdrop and the perspective. In fact, his sense of design is so compulsive that most of his canvases are overcrowded with these designs, utilizing the linear curtain like a stage decor. And obviously these moss-covered, emerald-green settings help evoke a nostalgic glimpse of the opulent Mughal past.

He uses the arabesque designs of Mughal buildings and has been inspired by the motifs and planning of small historical monuments like Badshahi Mosque, the Lahore Fort, Shalimar Garden, tombs of Emperor Jahangir and Empress Nur Jahan. He also takes hints from all kinds of Mughal draperies: *khilats* and the aristocratic regalia of the courtiers, preserved in various national museums.

Askari Mian has borrowed to recreate, to reshape them all over again to fit them in his artistic format. His stylized stage settings and masonry structural enrichment, at times, consume a lot of space, reducing the foreground subject to secondary importance, positioned under the growing weight of the rising walls, minarets, haveli gates, parapets and other refinement of the construction scheme. Though





White peacock, 1994 • Mixed media • 59cm x 59cm

numerological digits, combined with the verses from the Holy Quran, make pictographs with spiritual connotations.

It is the sense of design in him which helps him in manipulating his calligraphic form to suit his own sensibilities, knitting them in a cohesive manner. A powerful transcendental quality derived from his immersion in the philosophic and cultural tradition of the society he lives in, particularly his immediate Shia surroundings, is expressed in terms of symbols images and designs.

Those who know *Ilm al-Jaffer*, Knowledge of Numbers, and Askari Mian knows it - - understand abstract concepts of time, space and the nature of the heavenly bodies in terms of mathematical symbols and digits. These numbers, alphabets and squares of *ta'viz* have their mystical power which people use as a charms to attract favourable influences and to dispel the evil.

Obviously, the system is also associated with the science of the luminous bodies. It can, perhaps, also be described as a sophisticated system in which astrology and astronomy is interpreted in terms of numbers. The numbers written in various divisions of the folded paper and reduction of the squares to triangles and circles make the cosmological concepts more understandable. The constellation diagrams of planetary positions and the decorative patterns of *ta'viz* studded with magic numbers - - all go to make Askari's canvases a jigsaw puzzle of faith and destiny.

Apart from the artistic treatment of this unique subject, the artist obviously is reflecting on the spiritual harmony and the process of human psyche. What is remarkable about these paintings is his astute draftsmanship, a sense of symmetry.

He also incorporates calligraphy using mainly the word *Taha* in various shapes and forms creating a canvas in which the Quranic verses are juxtaposed to create geometric images, playing hide and seek in the filigree of light and shade. The intermingling and





Naqsh-i Kohna-III, 1989 • Mixed media • 59cm x 59cm

the human figures (noblemen riding in procession) taken from the pages of Mughal albums, are oversized and are in oil, yet they look subservient, to the highlight: the back-ground.

The human figure, particularly women, are mostly drawn from memory, like Mughal miniatures. That explains the similarity of the female face with gazelle-like eyes straight faces with round chins. Askari builds his architectural edifice *taq* by *taq*, niche by niche, with the help of repetitive and symmetrical designs and never ending patterns.

Askari Mian certainly surpasses many of his contemporaries in conjuring up an atmosphere where incredible becomes credible without much effort. He succeeds in excavating from the collective psyche, ancient memories of Mughal sagas. The artist is very particular about the lighting arrangement. He prefers soft and indirect spot-lighting. The idea is not to destroy the dream sequences which he has translated on the canvas. Harsh light could destroy the hanging mist of past centuries.



The rich emerald-green in his paintings signifies solitude and peace. Brown or sepia is used to import the look of yester-years. His soothing “under-lighted” colours are mixed with varied decorative accessories. In a way the aesthetic quality is self-sufficient and the compositions have a touch of elegance. There is lilting buoyancy in the panorama. There isn’t any nostalgic feeling of sadness instead there is a sense of pride in the past glory which is handled with sentimental sweetness.

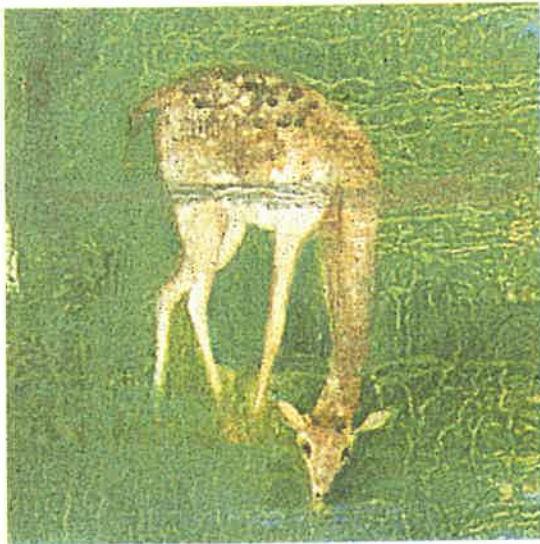
Then there are a large number of paintings in which calligraphy and numerology play a predominant part. Askari Mian is quite unique. He brings mystical intuition and pictorial art in a new relationship. Again he is the first painter to display his uninhibited conviction in *Ilm al-Jaffer* and draws his spiritual inspiration directly from *Tuhfat ul-Imam* a book of metaphysical implication for the Shia sect. The calligraphy, *ta’viz* squares, circles and triangles, which surround the



Prince's courtyard, 1991 • Mixed media • 135cm x 73.5cm

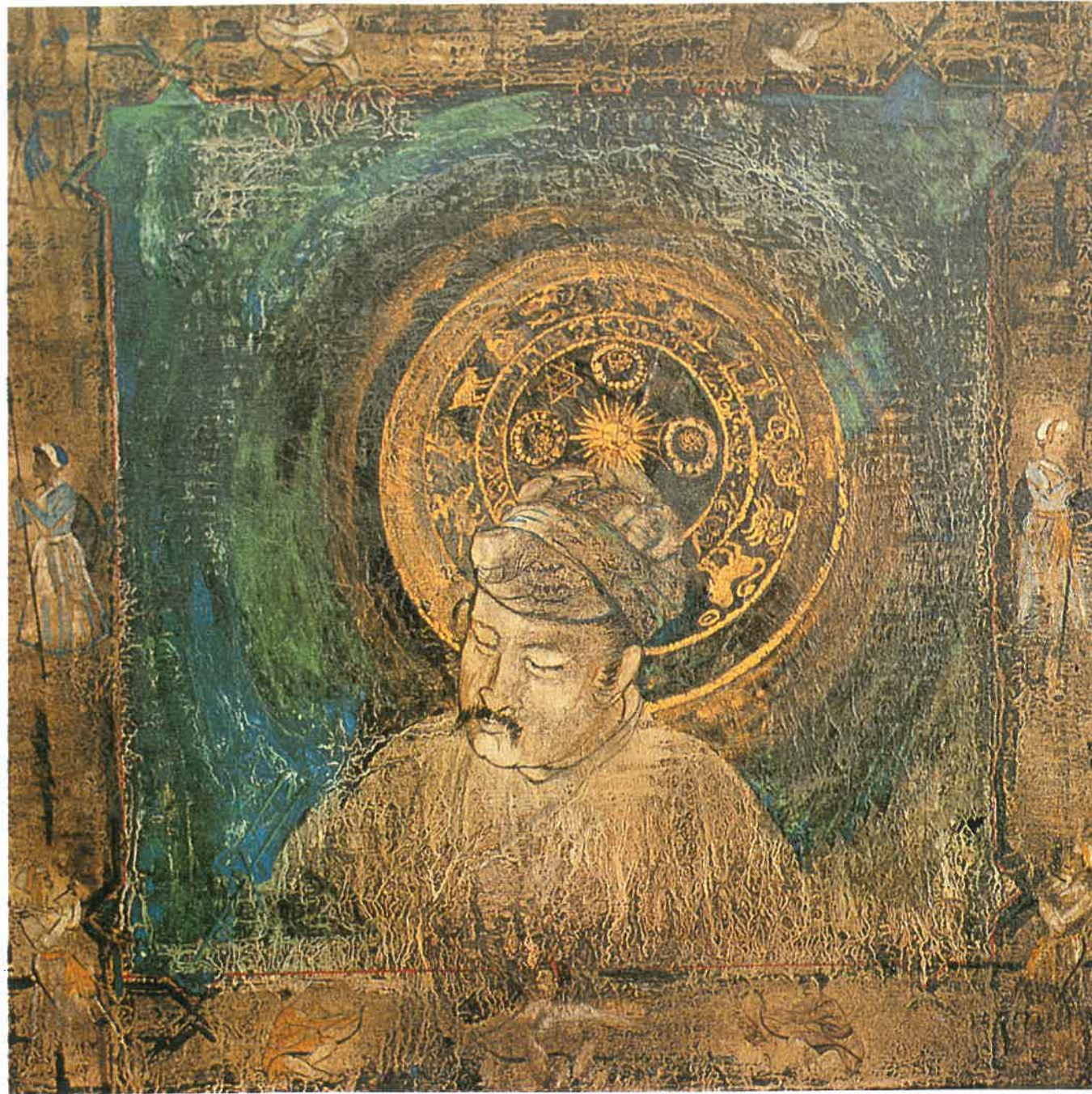
overlapping of alphabets, creates an aura of spiritual awe, particularly in the long string *tasbeeh*, rosary of Allah, the word which runs through many of his canvases to form a life-line to hold other images together.

Askari Mian despite being over-decorative and at times too eloquently dramatic is an artist of technical perfection. He certainly possesses an immaculate sense of design and touches the heart of the colours with free but sure hands. His canvases, at times, are overworked, too deliberate and planned yet they have a magic, casting a spell over the viewer till he is hypnotized. A medieval sense of the past underlines his work showing us our past through a peep-hole of the timeless mist of Mughal history.

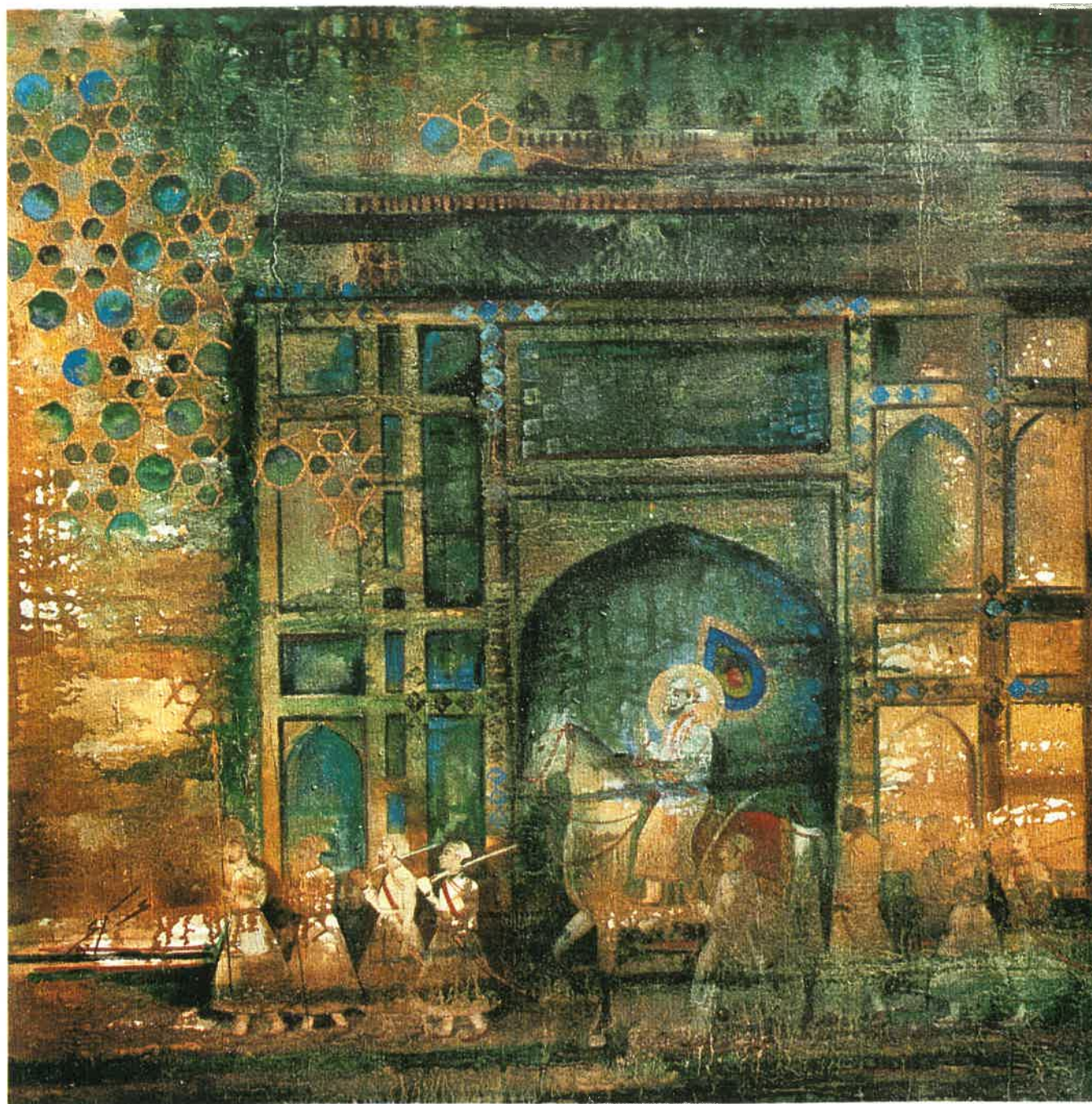




Princess and deer, 1992 • Mixed media • 73.5cm x 73.5cm



Akbar the Great & Shield, 1992 • Mixed media • 59cm x 59cm



Prince near fort, 1990 • Mixed media • 44cm x 44cm

A REINCARNATION OF TRADITION

Dr. Shaukat Mahmood

The belief that Allah was the sole creator, prompted Muslim artists to generally avoid painting large-scale works of modelled figures, especially when dealing with religious subjects or when decorating religious buildings. Instead, they developed intricate floral and geometric decoration in painted tile, mosaic and stained-glass. Figure painting was limited to book illustration and pottery, and the forms generally were flattened and decorative. Because the knowledge of the Quran is considered all important, Muslim art emphasized calligraphy, notably for copying passages from the Holy Book. Such calligraphy was, and is, valued as the supreme form of visual art.

The pictorial traditions of Asia are amongst the oldest and most remarkable in the world. The four major ones are those of the Islamic countries, India, China and Japan. Each has a distinct character, although they all influenced one another. Traditionally, most Asian painters were not interested in depicting objects according to the scientific rules of perspective, light, shade, anatomy, texture, contrast, etc., as developed in the West, particularly during and after the Renaissance. They tended to be more concerned with the essential nature or deeper meaning of an object or with decorative effect. Unlike the other three great painting traditions of Asia, that of Islam is not limited to one country or continent alone, but extends all the way from India in the East through Central Asia, Iran, Mesopotamia, Turkey, Egypt, and North Africa to Muslim Spain in the West. In these areas, the Islamic faith influenced every aspect of human life.

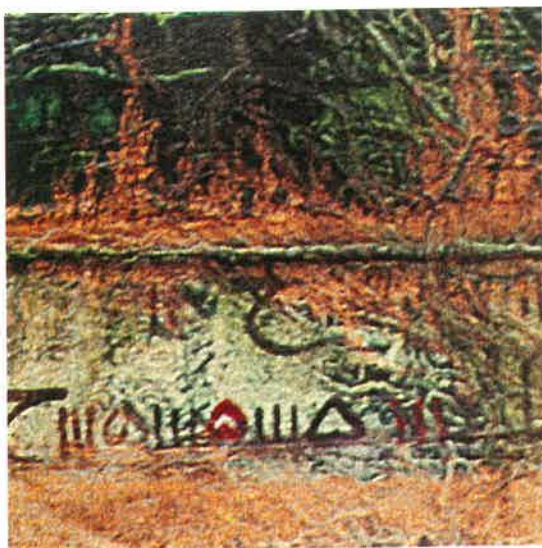


Early Islamic art was very much influenced by the art of the ancient Middle East, especially the classical illusionism of late Byzantine painting and the Sassanian-Iranian tradition of linear murals. Calligraphy was already prominent, however, in the form of painted or carved inscriptions on the walls of mosques and in copies of the



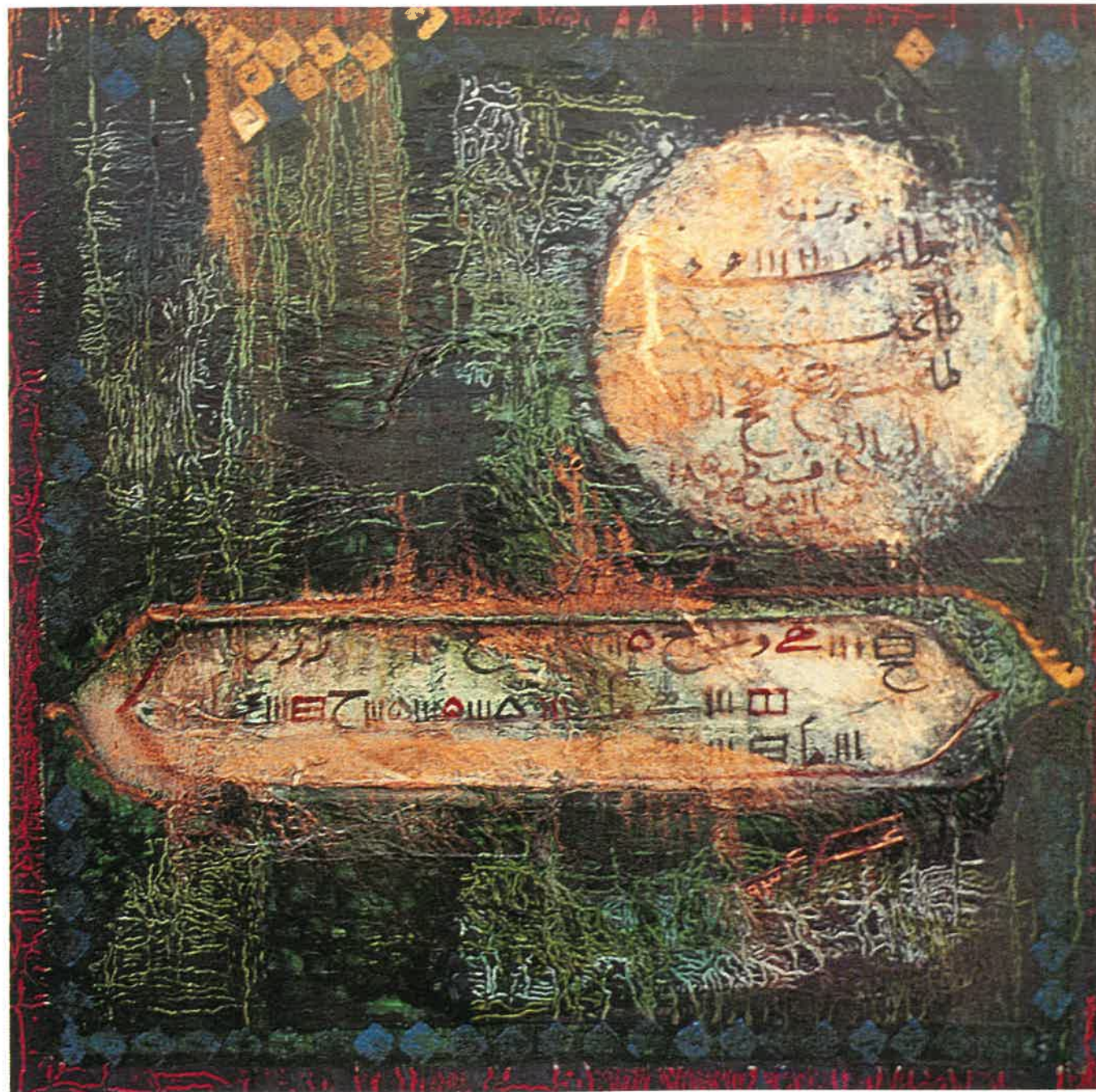
Prince on horse-back, 1993 • Mixed media • 59cm x 59cm

Quran made by scribes using tempera or gouache on parchment and later on paper. The first important school of Islamic miniature painting arose in Baghdad, the capital of the Abbasid caliphs and then of the Saljuk Turks. After the destruction of Baghdad by the invading Mongols in 1258, the centre of Islamic book illustration shifted to Syria and Cairo under the Mamluk dynasty and flourished during the 13th and 14th centuries. This was largely a continuation of the Baghdad school. By far the most productive region of Islamic manuscript painting was Iran. This region had a pre-Islamic tradition of figure painting. Iran was repeatedly conquered by Turk and Mongolian people from Central Asia, whose rulers were enthusiastic patrons of art and were influenced by Chinese representational art. Under Il-Khanids, Timurids and Safavids, Iranian art conquered new horizons. Thus, from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries, Iran saw one of the most prolific periods of miniature painting in the history of art. Parallel to this, Turks produced miniatures from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries. In Muslim India, these traditions were carried out vigorously in the Mughal court. Askari Mian Irani is struggling to revive these traditions, but in a contemporary style.



Askari Mian's earlier work was dominated by browns and sepias. His Lilliputian panels reminded the virtuosos of talismans. But in recent years there has been a conspicuous change in his colour scheme. Most of his paintings are now dominated by greens and blues, and turquoises rule supreme in some. His themes and subjects are strictly those which were once the focus of Mughal court painters. But while the Mughal painter was struggling with the scientific aspects of painting, particularly draughtsmanship, Askari Mian deliberately avoids this in his work.

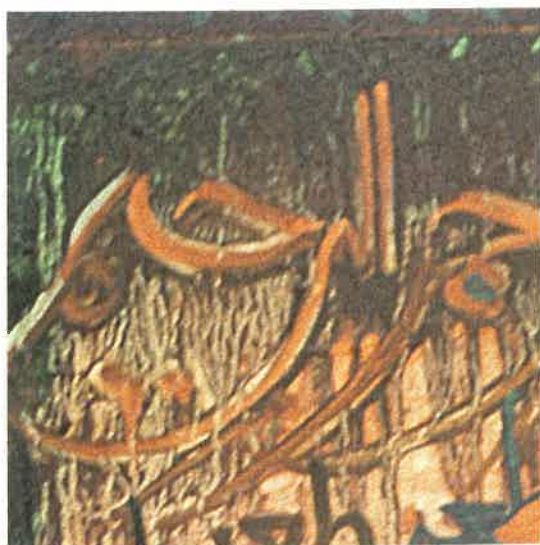
In his paintings titled *Naqsh-i Tauheed I, II, III and IV* there is the formula of *Bismillah* at the top with a chequer-board composition below. Each square contains a holy word. All these compositions are adorned with an alluring use of turquoise and azure tints. The formats represent a combination of bewitching colours, texture and



Naqsh-i Kohna-V, 1993 • Mixed media • 59cm x 59cm

calligraphy. *Naqsh-i Shikar* reminds the viewers of the traditional hunting scenes of Mughal miniatures. The horses are very traditional, but rest of the composition provides a fine combination of various kinds of greens dominated by peacock-green.

Princess in Shalimar Garden is another attractive composition. Its centre of interest is the princess who seems to have received the maximum attention of the painter and contains the minutest details of her accoutrements. Likewise, attention has been paid to the drawing and painting of the peacocks. The plumes exhibit a lot of detail. *Princess with Peacock*, however, deprives the artist of originality, for it reminds the connoisseurs of a well-known painting of the Mughal School, *Princess and the Chinar Tree*. In the seventies, this Mughal miniature appeared on the calendar of a business house. Likewise in another painting, *Princess in Jharoka*, the figure is quite disproportionate. *Rider near the Fort* reminds the viewer of the great mural of the Lahore Fort. Its various horizontal and vertical panels juxtaposed with horse and the rider are interesting. The most amazing painting is the *Two Lovers*. It is in two panels and the two lovers are depicted separately in each. *Letter from the Prophet* is a fine specimen of calligraphy and portrayal of old parchment. *Naqsh-i Sunehri II* is based on the *Muqatta'at* of the Holy Quran and they have been composed into a well-knit composition of calligraphic motifs. Besides depending heavily on horses, peacocks, princesses and geometric motifs, Askari Mian has made good use of stained-glass effect. In *Naqsh-i Daricha* and *Through the Arches* Askari Mian travels to Turkish mosques from the Mughal courts, gardens and belvederes. He excels in applying enchanting colours. His scheme shows a tremendous understanding of harmony and rhythm, a rhythm which exists both in colour schemes, as well as in his objects. Askari Mian has opened new vistas.





Naqsh-i Taha-VI, 1993 • Mixed media • 59cm x 59cm



Naqsh-i Nad-i Ali-I, 1994 • Mixed media • 44cm x 44cm



Prince & Star, 1993 • Mixed media • 44cm x 44cm

A PROLIFIC POPULAR PAINTER

There is a large element of the decorative in Askari's paintings through luscious use of colour. These paintings come across as sensuously eye-catching. The rich backdrop of his heritage underpins his world view. Nearly half of his work is in the tone and temper of the miniatures with legendary or historical figures in an environment of mythological landscapes, comfortable and prosperous in their pursuits of pleasure or love. The largest canvas called the *Shikargah*, is a fine example of a rich and trouble-free life where hunting is the supreme purpose of existence in all its magical beauty. His smaller canvasses, mostly in browns, are adorned with peacocks, horses and hawks in the languorous company of aristocracy.

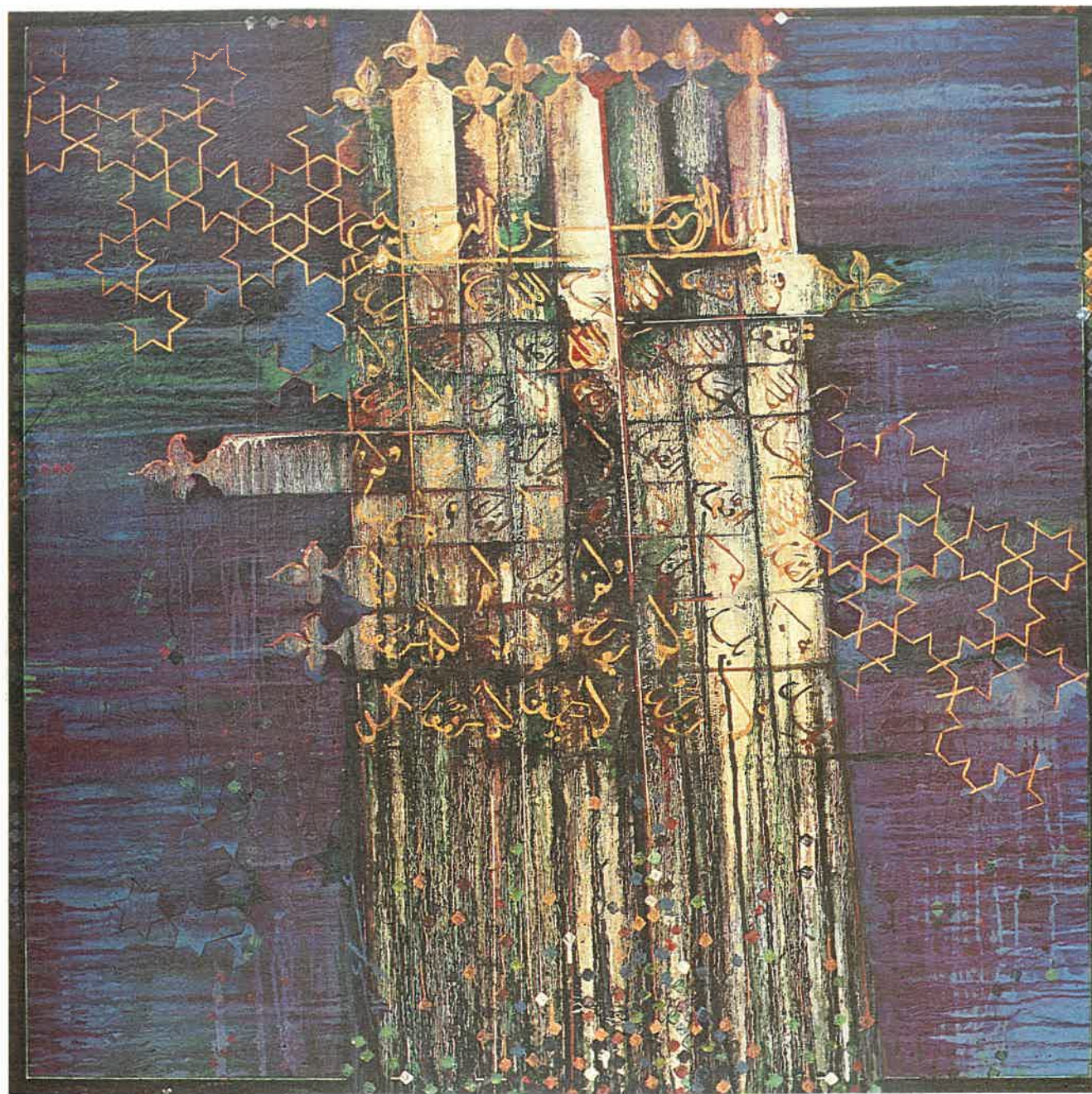
Askari's forte is probably the application of bright colours that are not garish, almost a throwback to the application of colour in the traditional painting of the Subcontinent. Most of the work is two-dimensional and gives the impression of a well-worked out texture. It soothes a wondering mind.



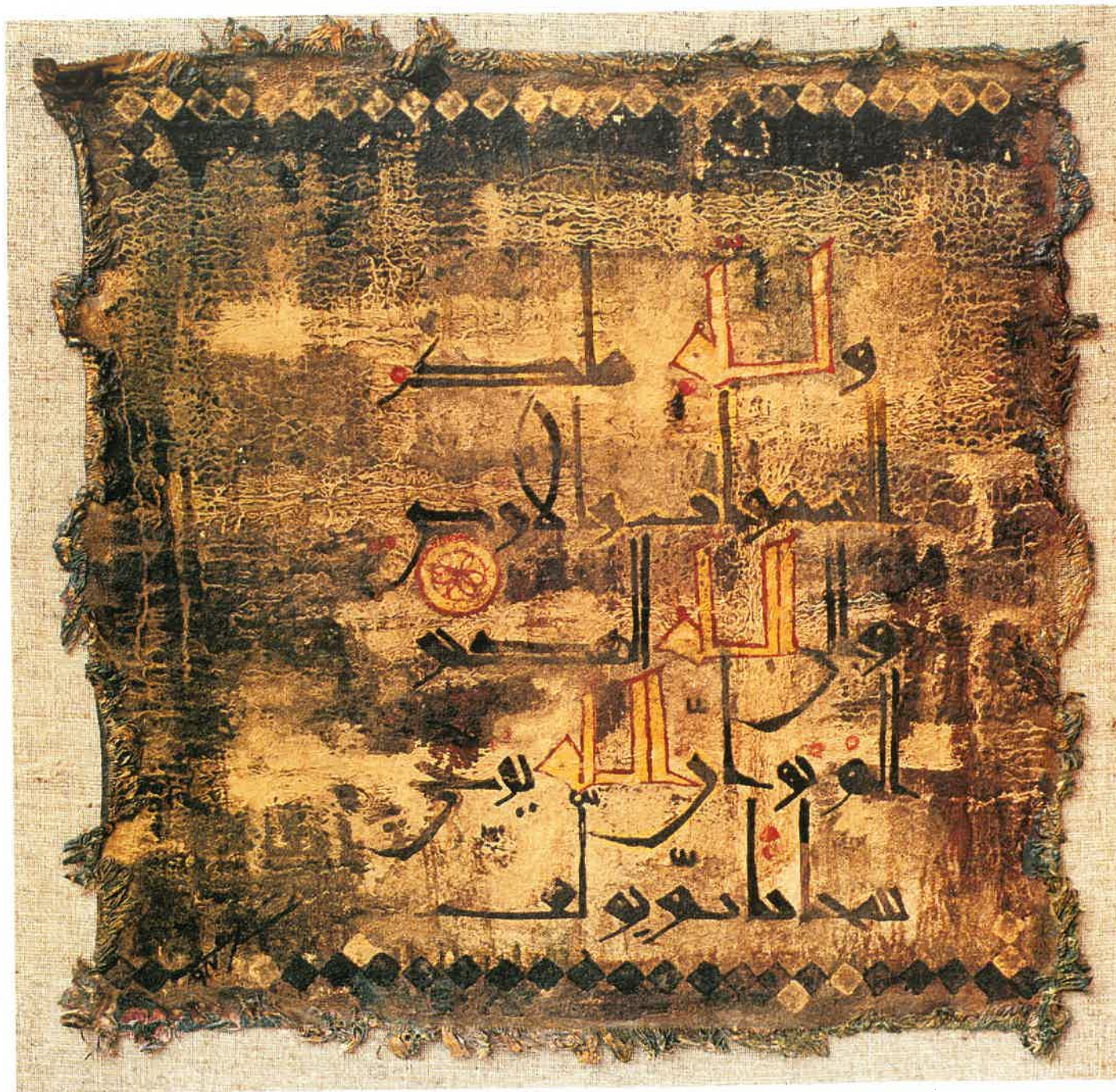
Quite a few Pakistani painters have been drawn to calligraphy. Shakir Ali, Shamza and Sadequain made it, in their own way, the creative expression of their visual abilities. Askari, too, has employed various calligraphic styles to beautify the aspect of *Jamal*.



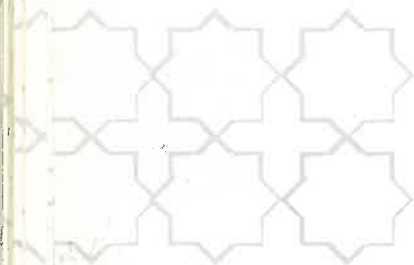
Sura-i Tauhaid, 1994 • Mixed media • 44cm x 44cm



Naqsh-i Ahad, 1994 • Mixed media • 117.5cm x 117.5cm

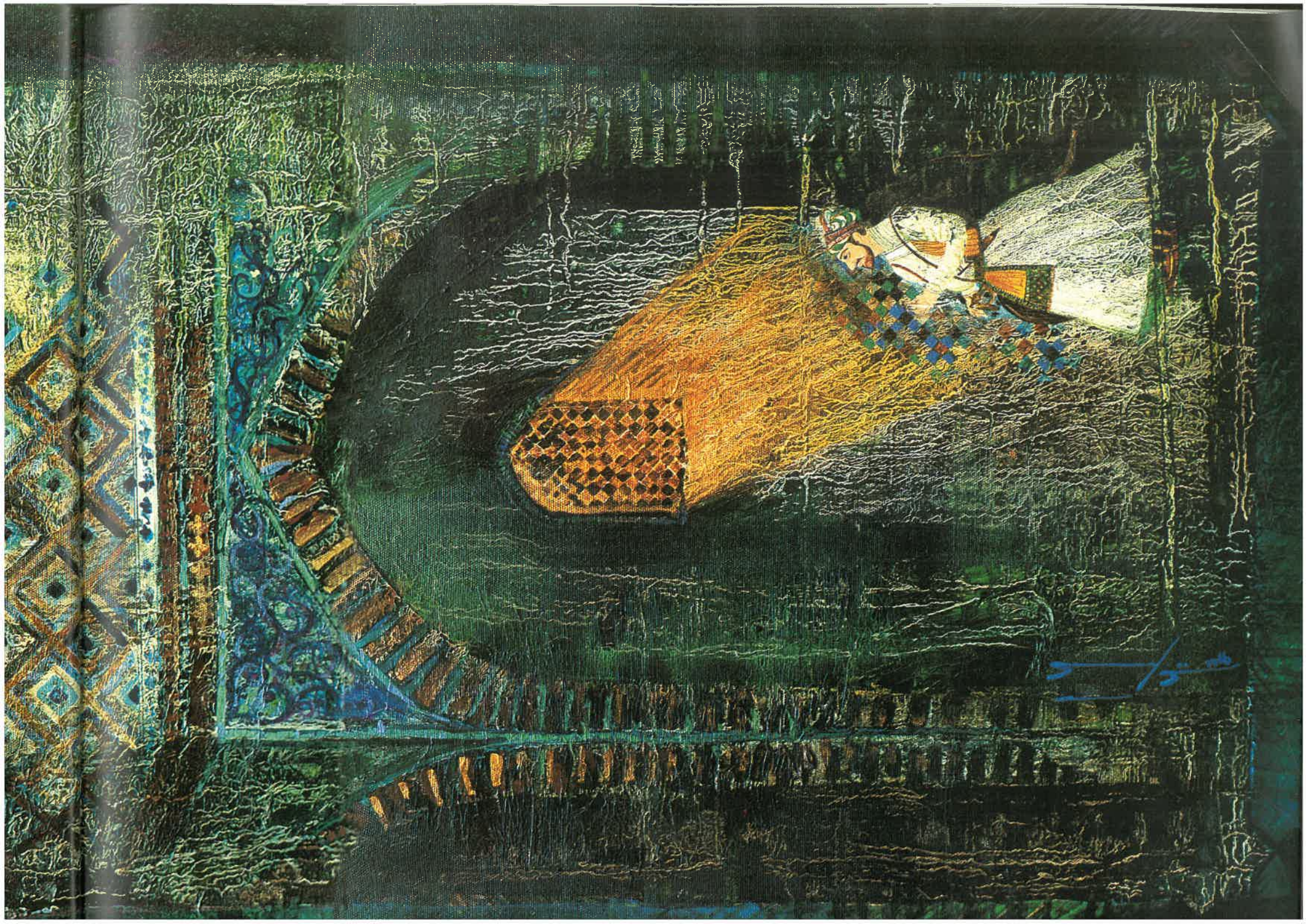


Naqsh-i Kohna-VI, 1994 • Mixed media • 44cm x 44cm



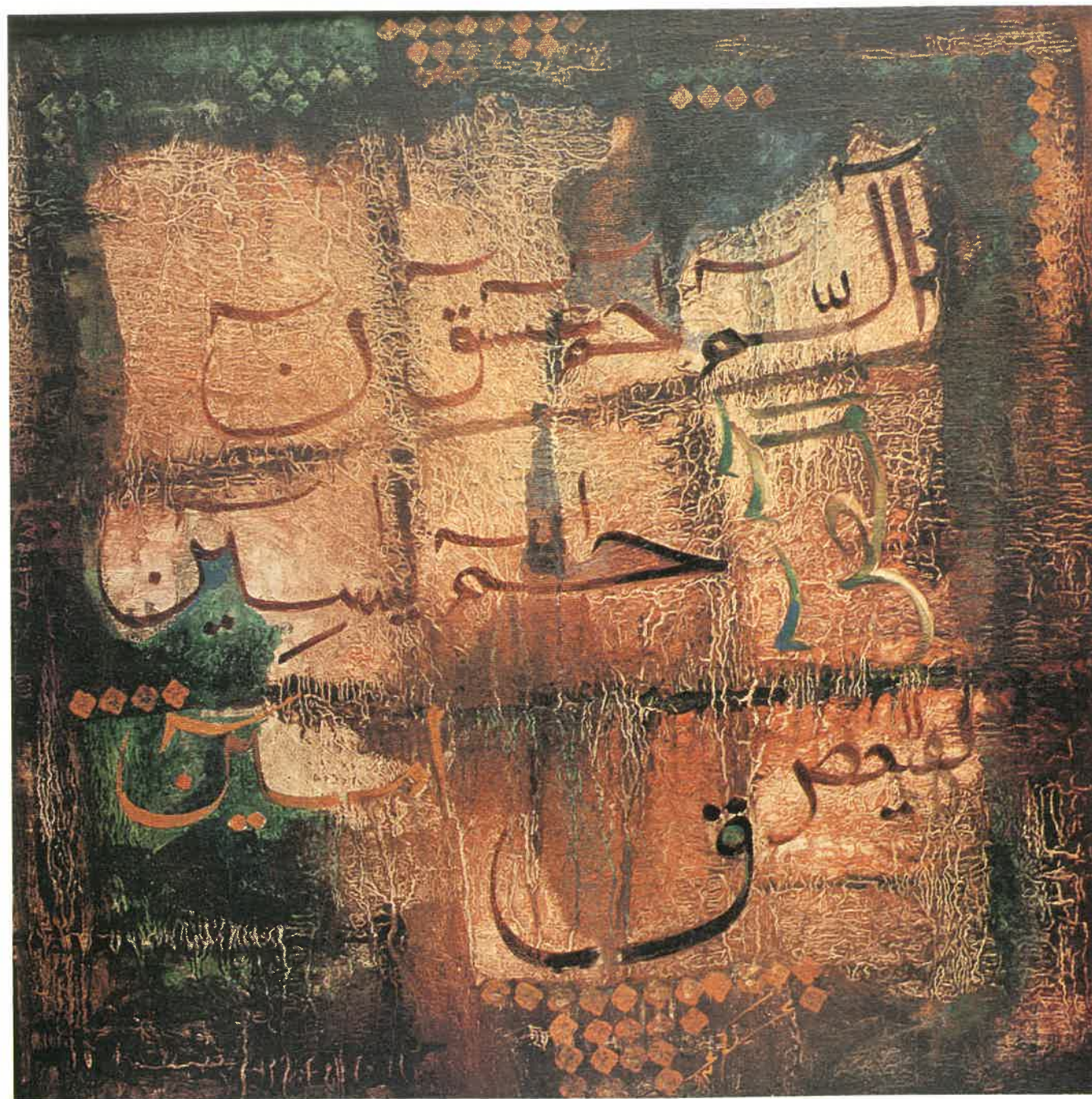
- Shah Jahan in Thatta Mosque, 1993
 - Mixed media
 - 73.5cm x 147cm







Warrior in the forest, 1994 • Mixed media • 44cm x 44cm



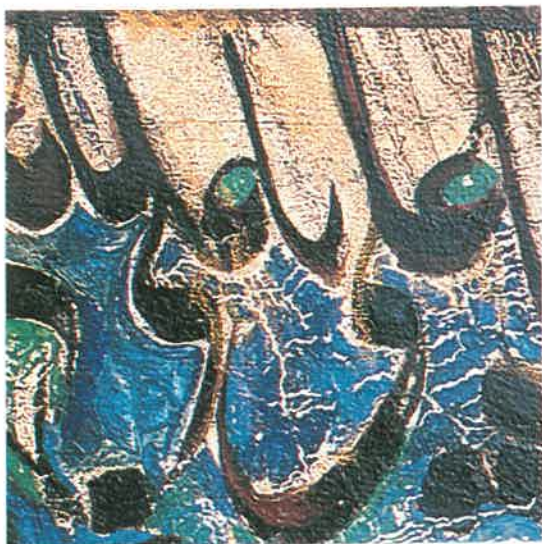
Loh-i Qurani, 1994 • Mixed media • 59cm x 59cm

THE MODERN TRADITIONALIST

Dr. Leena Khaliq

Askari Mian Irani's fluid brushstrokes transport one to vintage destinations. For his art, steeped in history and tradition, speaks of a bygone era. His canvases spill eloquent stories of Mughal emperors, prince and princesses. They bring to life the nooks and crannies of the back streets of Luckhnow and Quranic verses in thickly-layered oils. He is totally consumed by the two dimensional language of painting. His life, passions and commitments, are without question one and the same, since Askari Mian's world revolves exclusively in the realm of his art. However, art is not a vocation that can be traced back to his family history, as his father and forefathers had preferred to be involved in traditional medicine and poetry.

According to Askari Mian: *I was the first in my family to enter the art field. I remember that even in junior school my drawing was very good, and my teacher Mr. David really used to encourage me and appreciate my efforts. My favourite subject for drawing was always nature, the reason being that my father was fond of shikar and I accompanied him very often.*



The next phase in his early life was rather difficult, for the family was caught in the midst of the turmoil and strife that arose during the partition of India and Pakistan. Of those years Askari Mian says, *Things were very bad for my family, as with many other families of that time. We came to Lahore, as my grandfather had lived here before, and also because my father loved the weather which was similar to that in our district of U.P. in India. After that I would say my childhood and schooling was like that of any ordinary child. But what I remember very well is that I used to annoy my father a great deal because instead of concentrating on my studies, I spent all my time drawing. And I was a complete failure when it came to mathematics, a further disappointment to my father.*



Naqsh-i Nad-i Ali-III, 1995 • Mixed media • 147cm x 73cm

Askari Mian used to pass the National College of Arts on his way to school everyday, and dreamed of being a student there one day. To use his words, *There was no boundary wall in those days, so I could see the activity inside. Students gathered in the lawns sketching a bull standing in the middle as the subject matter. I was really fascinated by such scenes and desperately wanted to get admission and become a part of this exciting world.*

His father belonged to a more conservative school of thought and was deeply disappointed with his son's love for art and tried to dissuade him. According to Askari Mian it was a great battle of wills, both of them being equally strong-minded. In fact so insistent was his father that he should take up engineering, that he had to run away from home to Karachi. *For two days I slept on the footpath. Eventually I went home after a few days. My family was very religious and old fashioned, and they could not understand my obsession for painting. But after this episode my father gave in and I joined the National College of Arts. Since I had joined after so much disapproval, I was consumed with the desire to prove my worth.*

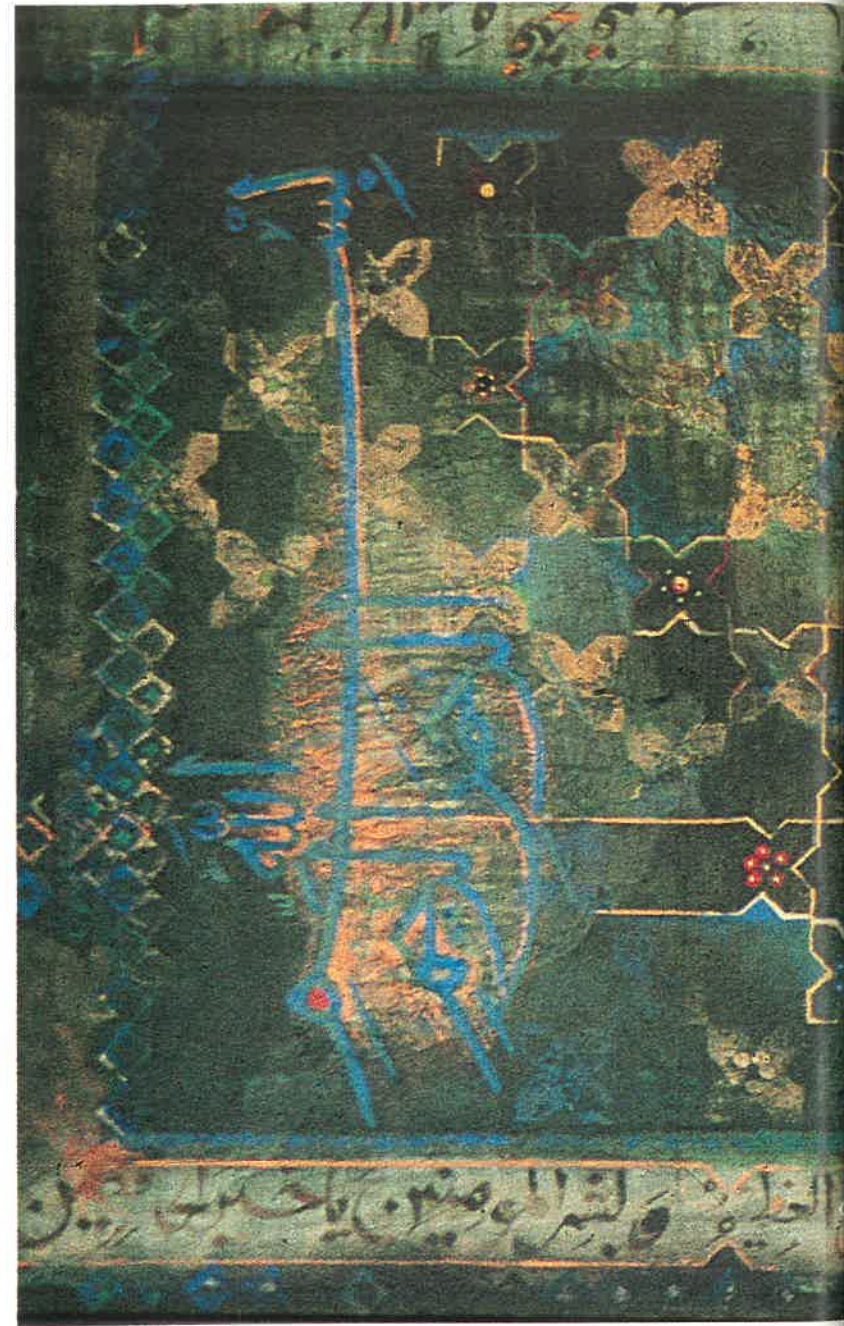
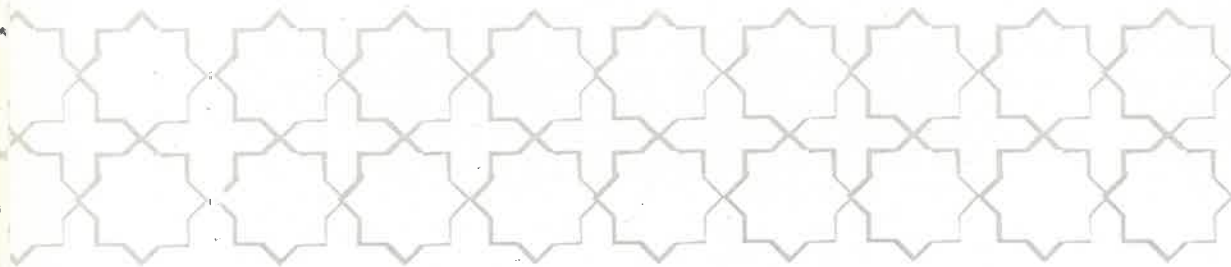


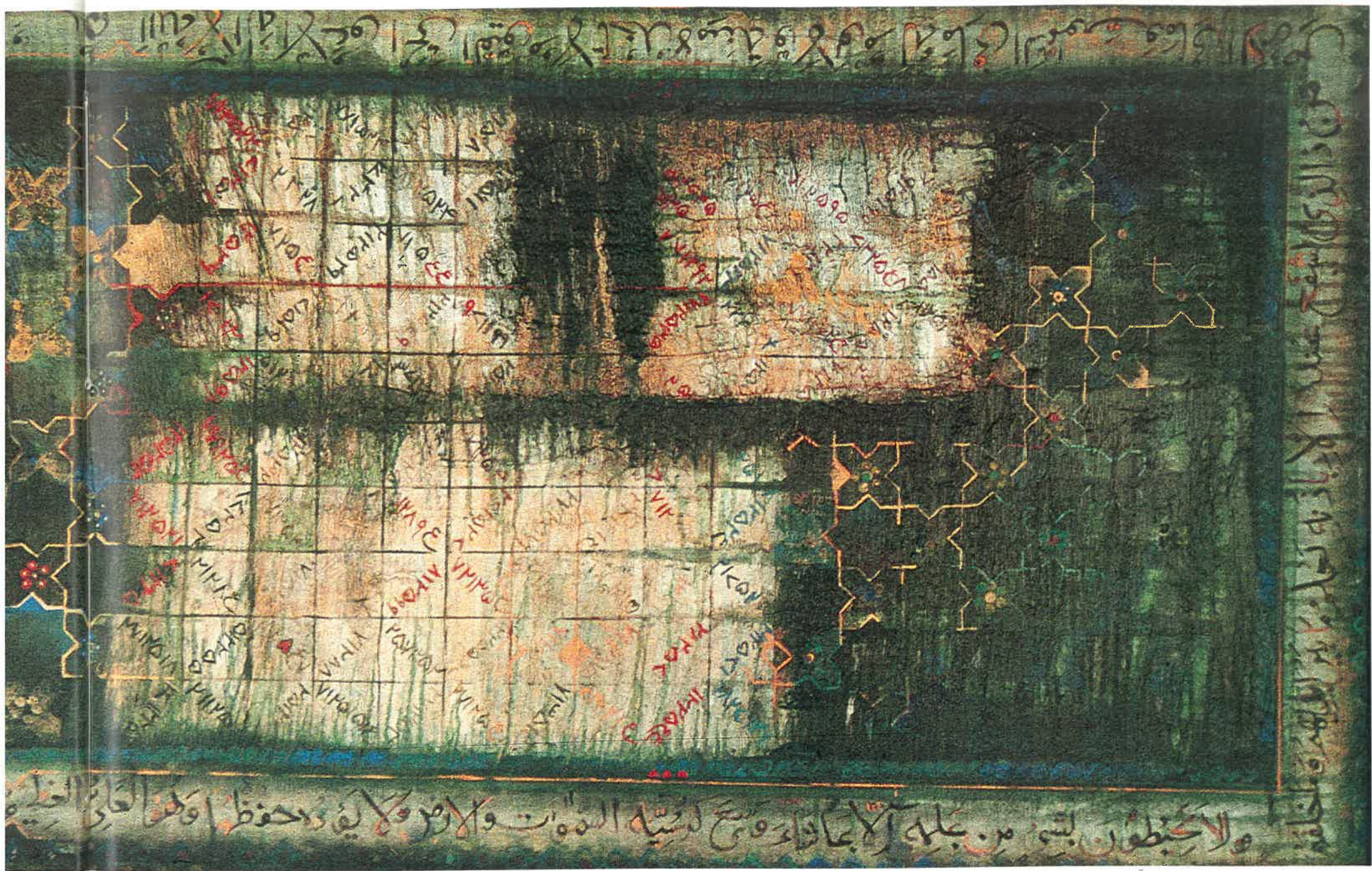
He has very fond memories of his college days: *College for me was a home-coming. I loved the atmosphere and the tutors who were excellent people. There was Ahmed Khan Sahib who used to teach us design in the fourth year. For drawing there was Bashir Sahib and Jamila Zaidi. We used to have really nice functions, like on basant there was the making of the kites, in spring we would arrange flower shows.*

Askari Mian's attitude towards work has never been flippant. *My friends used to make fun of me for completing my work much before the deadline. In fact I even completed my thesis long before the due date and it was much lauded.*



Naqsh-i Nad-i Ali-II, 1994 • Mixed media • 44cm x 44cm





Naqsh-i Qurani, 1994 • Mixed media • 73.5cm x 147cm

Askari Mian graduated in Art and Design from The National College of Arts in 1967. He would have preferred to qualify in painting but settled for commercial design -- a peace treaty with his father.

Entry into the professional world came without any hurdles for Askari Mian. Hasan Ali Effendi of J. Walter Thomson, a leading advertising agency at the time in Karachi, with an eye for talent, immediately noticed his work. Mr. Effendi had come to the College as one of the judges to evaluate the theses, and offered Askari Mian a job in the art department at once. As Askari Mian said, *Even before the results were declared I moved to Karachi to start work with them. I feel this was one of those moments that changed the whole direction of my life. Today I think that if it had not been for this well timed exposure, I might still have been only designing wrappers and biscuit packets. It opened my eyes to the world.*

Next came a move to the Pakistan Tobacco Company, as a visualiser, moving up from a previous salary of Rs 250 a month to Rs 1000. Till 1978 he continued in this vein, but eventually he felt it was time to start concentrating on painting once more. To quote him, *Deep down I was a painter all along, the need to return to my first passion was very strong. I had started feeling as if my potential as an artist was limited in advertising because one becomes bound to use only certain colours and figures. So when a job was advertised in the National College of Arts in the Design Department, I decided to come back to Lahore and take up teaching.*



Askari Mian's first solo exhibition was held as early as August 1969 at the Karachi Arts Council, whilst he was still busy in the advertising field. This had been mainly a collection of land- and sea-scapes in oils. There was never a time when he completely stopped painting. Close proximity with artists like Bashir Mirza (11.07.1922) drew him further into the art world.

Bashir Mirza was not only his confidant but also a great source of inspiration to Askari Mian. He says of him, *Bashir Mirza was a real*

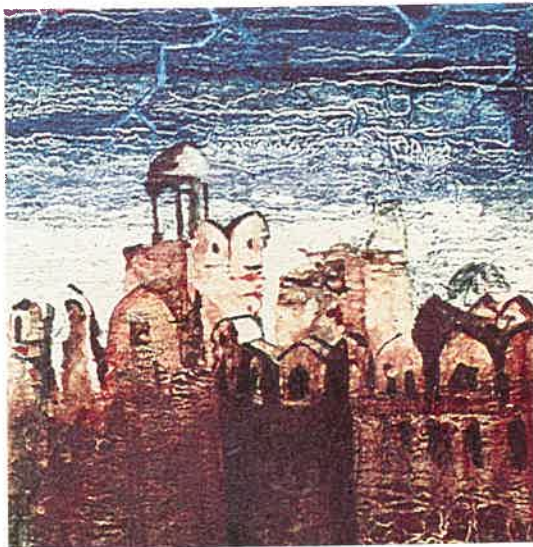


Woman with parrot, 1994 • Mixed media • 44cm x 44cm

buddy and used to drop in all the time. One day he arrived when I was painting and after observing for a few minutes, asked me about the other canvases. I said I'd get some after I'd finished the painting I had been working on. Bashir Mirza was thoroughly amused and said, Askari you can't be an artist. What if your my interest fades in this painting?. I said I would go to Bambino cinema and see a movie. Bashir Mirza's advice was that to become a good painter one must have many canvases around. So that if one canvas bores you, you can move on to another and then another. What you must not do is to put away your paint brushes. So I got into my car and came back loaded with thirty framed canvases.

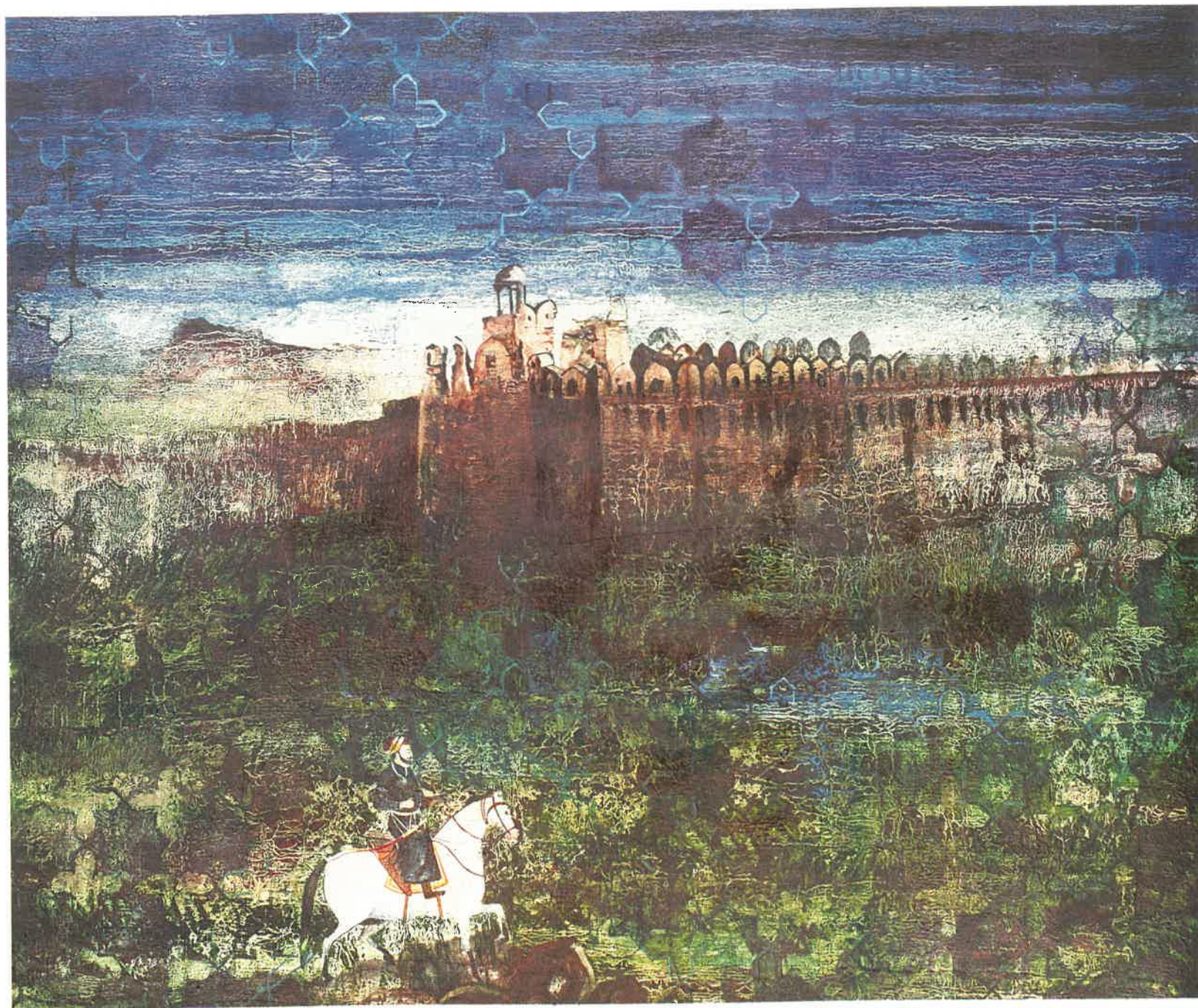
Askari Mian admits that this is a recipe that has continued to work well for him since then, and made him so productive that people often ask him if he paints or just churns out prints!

Bashir Mirza also explained to me that artists by nature are very sensitive. They seem to carry the weight of the world on their shoulders and are not always very practical. I used to have a passion for painting beggars on the street. Bashir Mirza told me that no one would be interested in buying such paintings, and I should make paintings with the commercial aspect in mind, a painting that one will not tire of looking at for years and years to come.



Therefore once back in Lahore as Assistant Professor in the Design Department, Askari Mian consciously set out to evolve a more complex and innovative style of painting. In his words, My style went through many changes to finally arrive at what I do today. I did a lot of semi-abstract work, controlling spaces, experimenting with harmony, balance and movement. Now my main concentration is on textures, as my theme is presenting the work of old masters with a modern, more avant-garde twist. I work in mixed media, a combination of thick, some times heavily diluted oils and inks.

Due to this complex scheme of unusual elements in his work, Askari Mian has often been described as "the jeweller in paint". His choice



Rohtas Fort and Sher Shah, 1996 • Mixed media • 73.5cm x 88cm

of colours has a gem-like quality about it: damask gold, silver, copper, saffron yellow and orange, lightly layered on Persian blue. His work depicts a celebration of the ages, with Islamic calligraphy and numerology to enrich each painting.

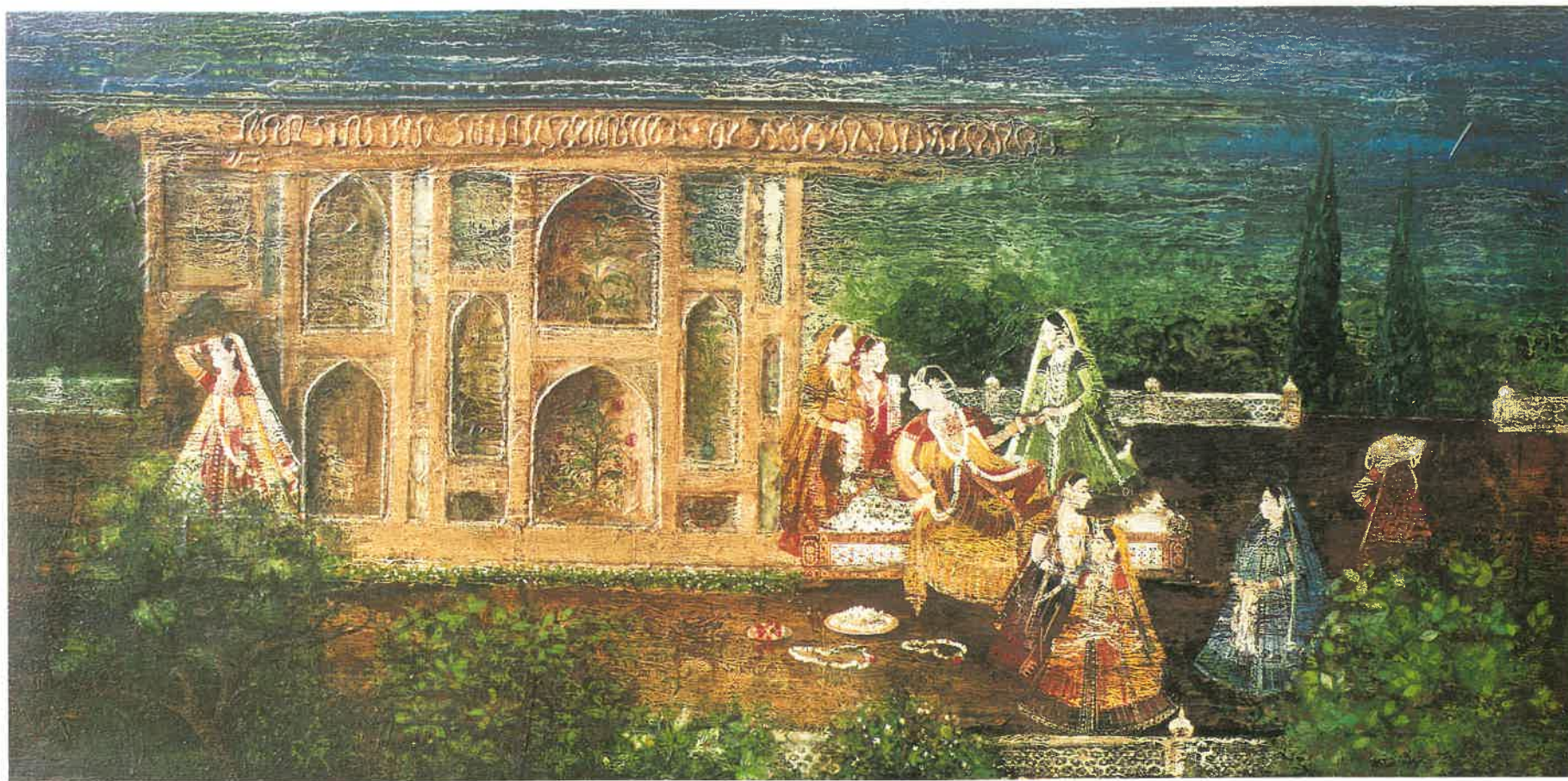
Once in his studio armed with his paints, inks and brushes, Askari Mian has been known to forget the outside world. He says, *In Ramadan I have often worked from the time one gets up for sehri, till it's time for iftar. My wife gets irritated because I usually want to work instead of going out. I suppose all the artists' wives feel like this. When I am engrossed in my painting, I lose all perception and interest in the outside world.*

No doubt it is this deep-seated commitment which has enabled Askari Mian to have an exhibition every year since 1988, in the major cities of the country. In addition, he has also exhibited in group shows abroad and many of his paintings are part of private collections around the globe.

He feels that art is better understood in Pakistan today and therefore valued more. He thinks it is mainly because, *People have more foreign exposure and there is more specialised education. They are also beginning to realise that art is worth paying for.*

By combining visual imagery, Mughal miniatures and Quranic verses, Askari Mian has created a totally unique dimension of art. As he likes to say of his work, *Purana Naqsh Brang-i Askari*, ancient patterns in Askari's colours. Thus across each of his canvases meander many themes, merging smoothly and captivating the viewers' attention. Like richly embroidered tapestries, his paintings are truly timeless in their appeal.



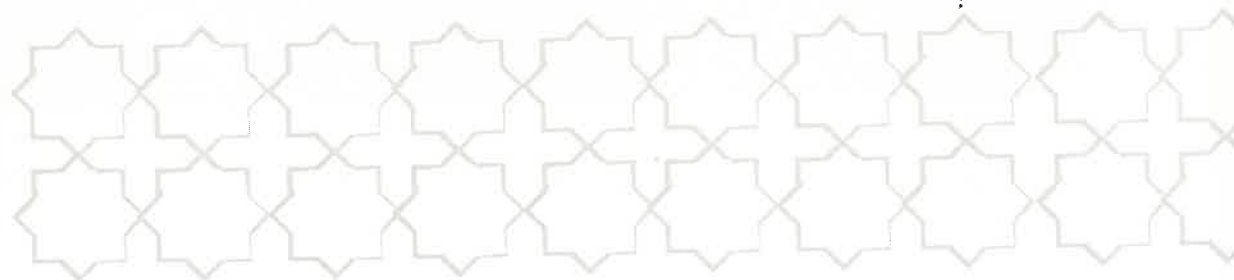
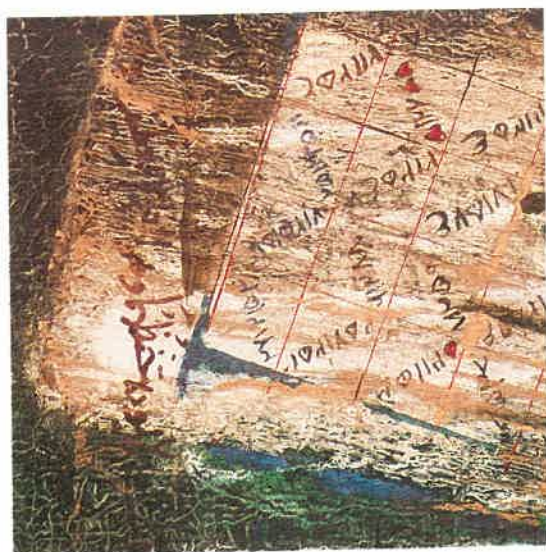


Princess in the fort, 1997 • Mixed media • 73.5cm x 147cm

PATTERNS OF THE PAST

Zofeen T. Ebrahim

Askari Mian Irani borrows an image from here, a motif from there and mixes them well together with his masterful technique of dripping, bleeding and washing many layers of paints over the canvas to achieve a heavy textured effect. And complemented with the colours that he claims are “tranquil”, are antiquated semblance to glorious vistas from an era long gone. *The patterns are not mine. These have been there for thousands of years, he admits, but how I put these to use is entirely my own technique.* His art seems to be influenced by Persian design elements with a remix of Mughal, Turkish and Arab lore, with the use of magical ta’viz, courtly splendour, numerology and calligraphy. *There is so much of our own work to be studied and exposed that even if I were to live twice, it will not be exhausted and therefore I do not feel stagnated,* says Askari Mian Irani.





Naqsh-i Kohna-1989 • Mixed media • 59cm x 59cm



Naqsh-i Fatah, 1997 • Mixed media • 73.5cm x 147cm



Empress Nur Jahan & Emperor Jahangir on the way to Kashmir, 1994 • Mixed media • 117cm x 117cm

ASKARI'S GOLDEN BRUSH

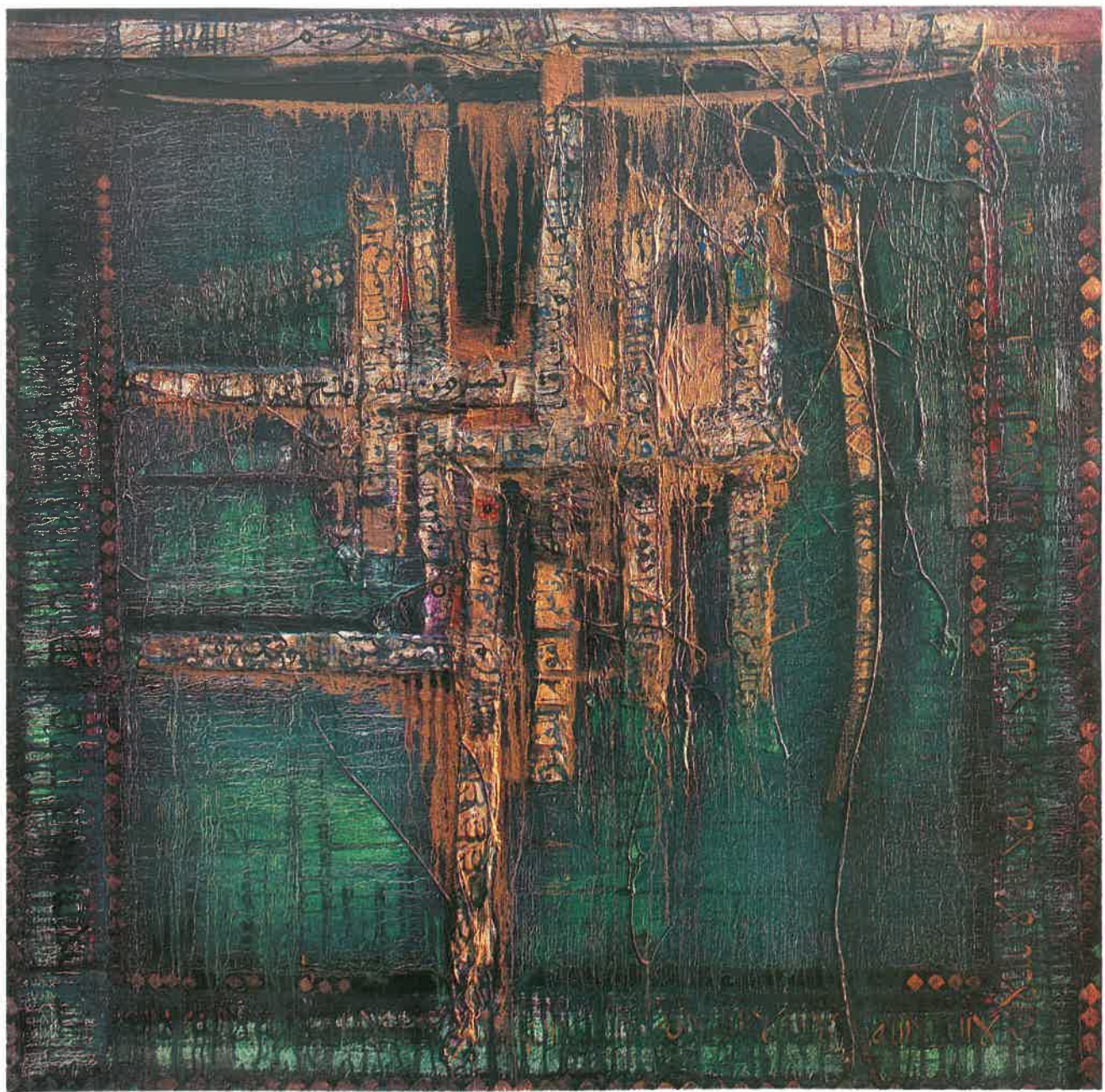
M. Athar Tahir

Askari's recent work was like that of a jeweller. Every space work, beaten and executed to fine finish. The sheen and sparkle of metal shining through the gauze-like curtain after silken curtain of colour. His *ta'viz* with Arabic numerals, his squares within squares, his stars and geometric shapes and diagrams, his arabesque and floral decorations, his filigree work created by the motif of *Allah* in Arabic script are all his stock elements. The drip and trickle and flow of tints impart both a richness and semblance of inter-twined layers. The layers of hues and tones suggest depth but ultimately the result remains two-dimensional. Depth and distance, barely discernible, are the function of the coats of paint. No conscious attempt is made to render either. What is seen on the rich surface is what is seen: jewel-like, scintillating, vibrant play of colours.

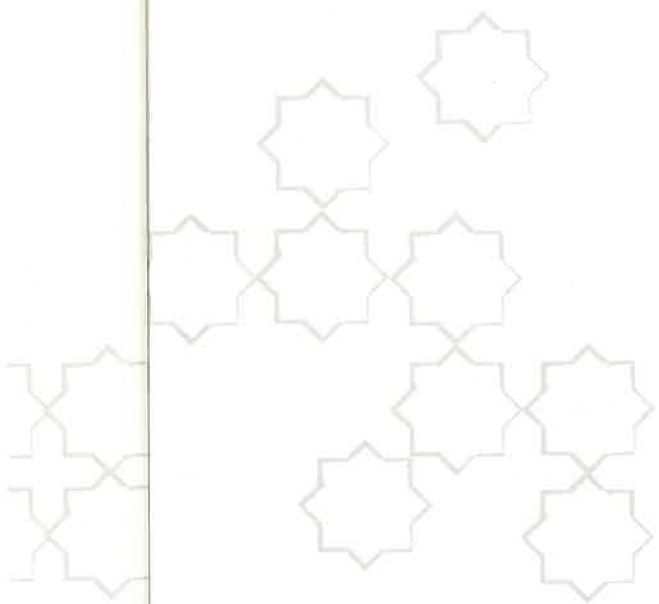


The introduction of figures borrowed from Mughal, Punjab and Rajput miniatures have accorded Askari's work a different dimension. In his earlier work he assiduously avoided the human figure, perhaps in keeping with the Islamic fascination for the remarkable complexity of the geometric, the abstract and the subtly suggestive floral. Any overtures made to the living were in the form of stylized birds or beasts or marine life. The rendering was non-realistic and emblematic.

Now he is shifting from the Islamic to the Muslim. Now he is succumbing to more secular concerns. Figures, though rendered realistically in the tradition of the South Asian Schools, evoke a by-gone era. Males are visualized in rich garmens, women in ornate and elaborate accouterments of several centuries ago. The turban, the scimitar, the horse, the shield, the peacock, the architectural elements, arches and oriel windows, pillars and brackets form the vocabulary to articulate this figurative period of the artist. There is a strong

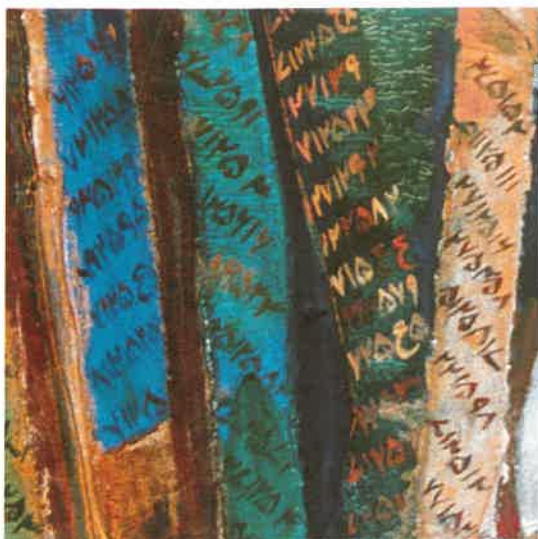


Naqsh-i Fatah-II, 1997 • Mixed media • 117cm x 117cm

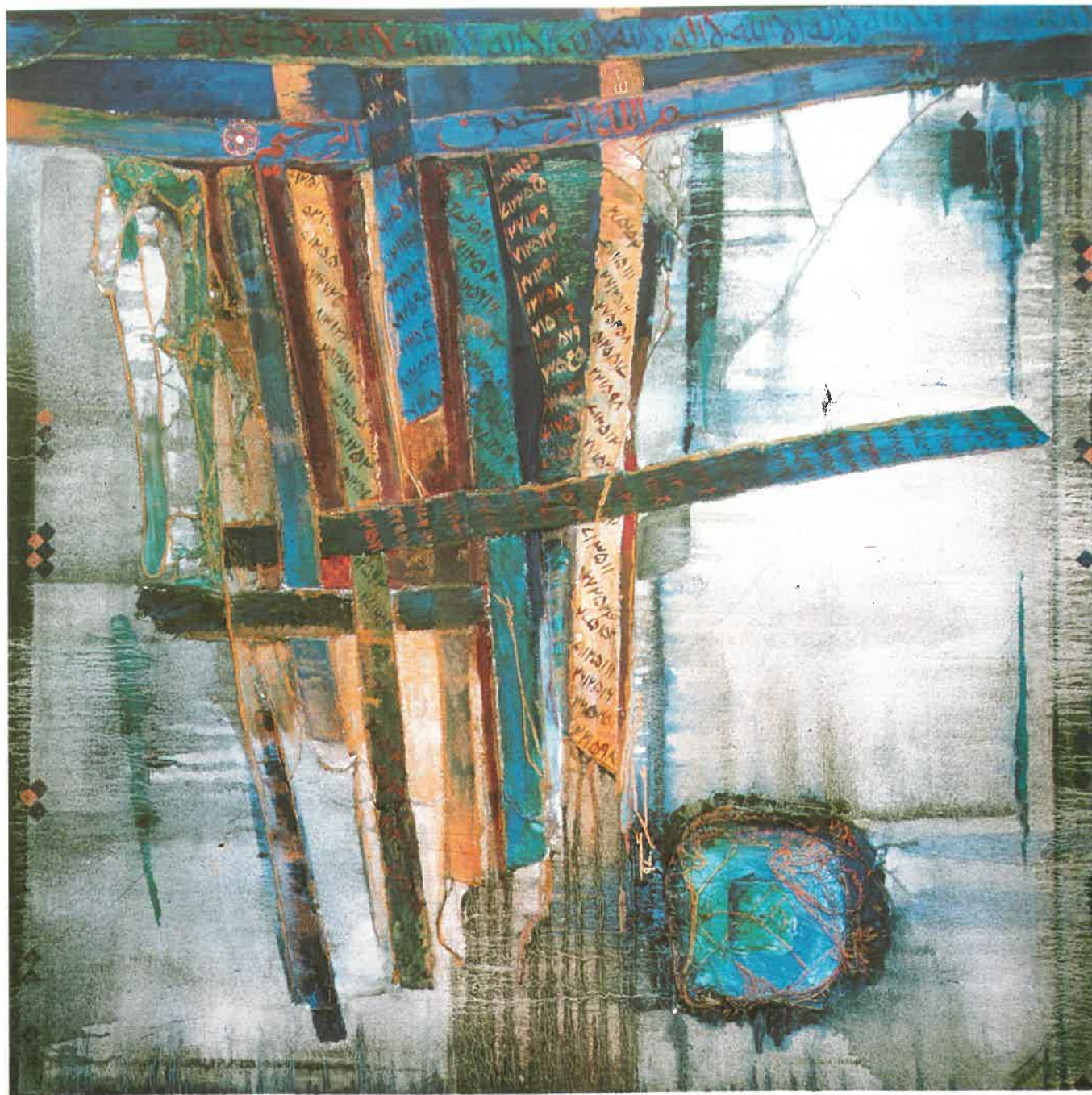


prevalence of nostalgia like the rich fragrance of the *attar* of rose or of jasmine, both so popular with Mughal royalty. Some might find this cloying others winning, in spite of or because of, the lack of the backward glance, the subtle wisdom of hindsight.

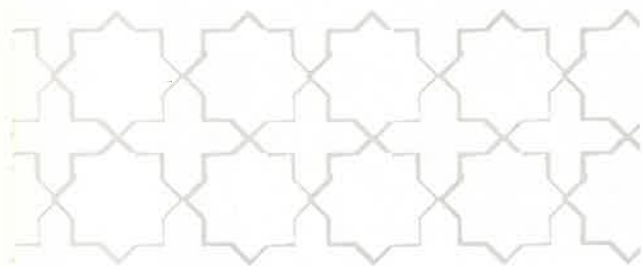
Evocation of that leisurely period, depiction of various activities of that age, harem preoccupations of ladies, military exploits and campaigns of the warriors and noblemen and the pursuits of hunt are not conceived in the narrative or illustrative manner. Instead they are glimpsed in flashes, visualized vignettes. A hand here, a leg there, a face here, a horse there, a peacock here, a maiden in toilet there, are all perceived through the veil of colour as if seen through the colourful mist of history. These visible- invisible conceptions demonstrate visually how history takes its toll, how something is almost forgotten, almost remembered; how like a half- forgotten tune, an era of glory can be evoked, but in catches, in sketches. It is a romantic, poetic evocation.



This manner or style links Askari's work with the mainstream of Muslim painting. Muslim painting was essentially a literary activity. It rose as an elaboration, ornamentation and explication of a historical, medical scientific, anthropological, legendary or poetic work. While these paintings are now viewed as independent works of art worthy of admiration in their own rights, their initial function was as adjunct to the written text. To this traditional relationship the Pakistani Master, Abdur Rahman Chughtai made an overture. Even when conceiving his paintings, largely as independent works, he continued to underline their textual relationship by using verses of Omar Khayyam (1039 - 1131) or Mirza Ghalib (1797 - 1869) or Allama Iqbal (1877 - 1938). Indeed he published them as illustrations of their poetic works. Askari makes a not dissimilar gesture. While he uses no text to emphasize the literary connection, his paintings like Chughtai's and the miniaturists can be, and should be, read. They are paintings without any obvious text. The text has been incorporated into the painting as sub-text.

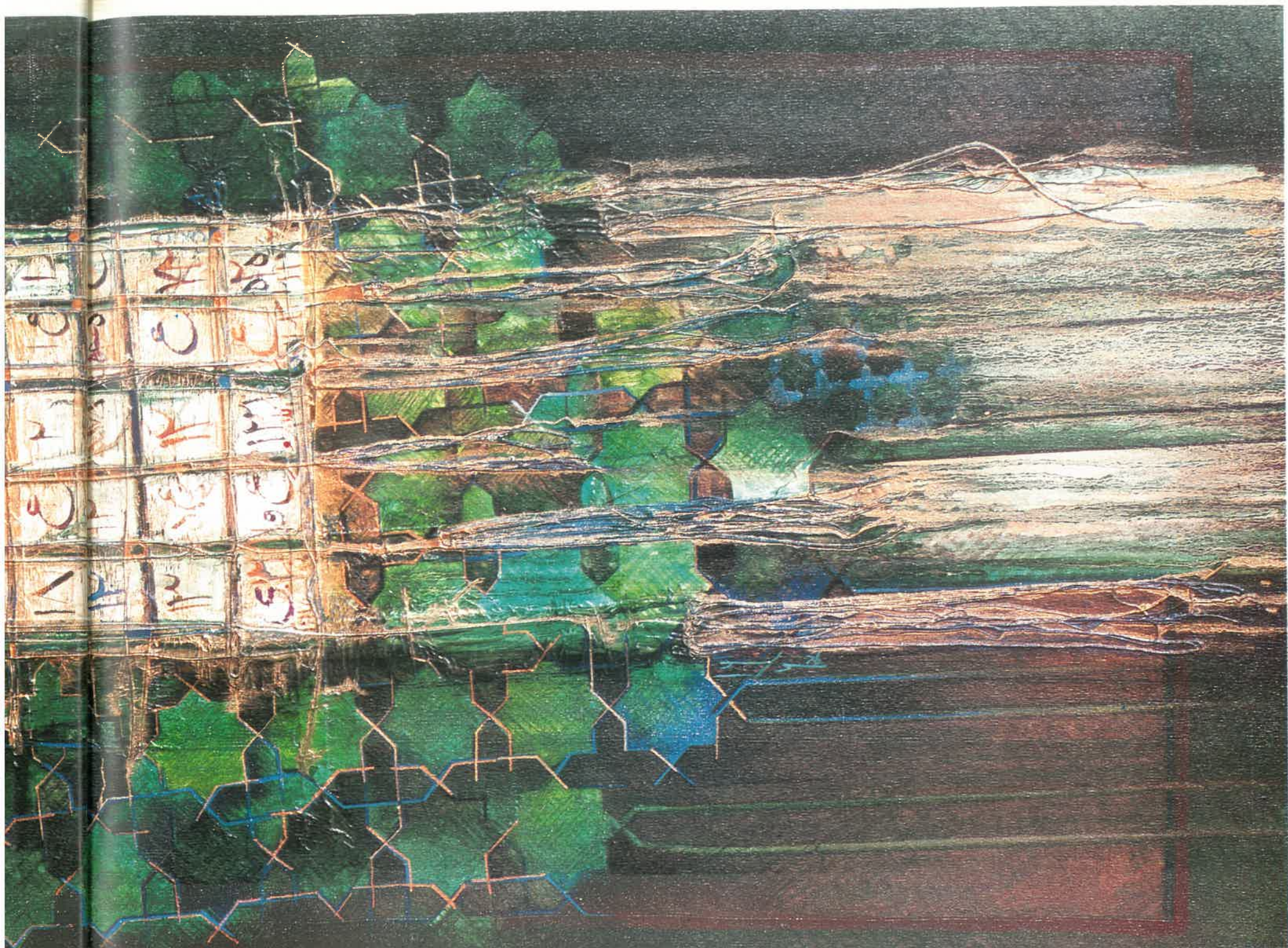


Naqsh-i Firozi, 1997 • Mixed media • 117cm x 117cm

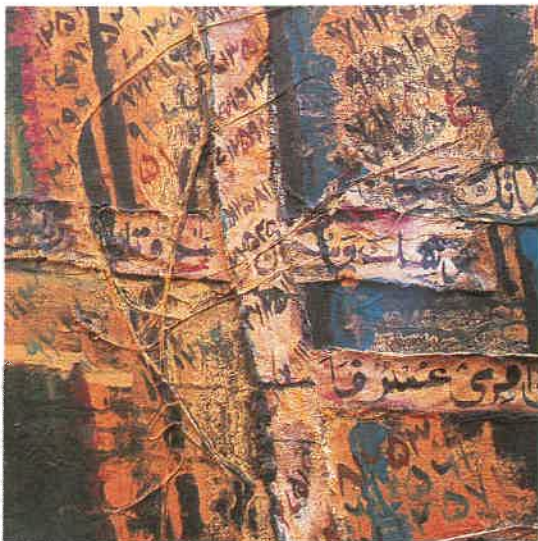


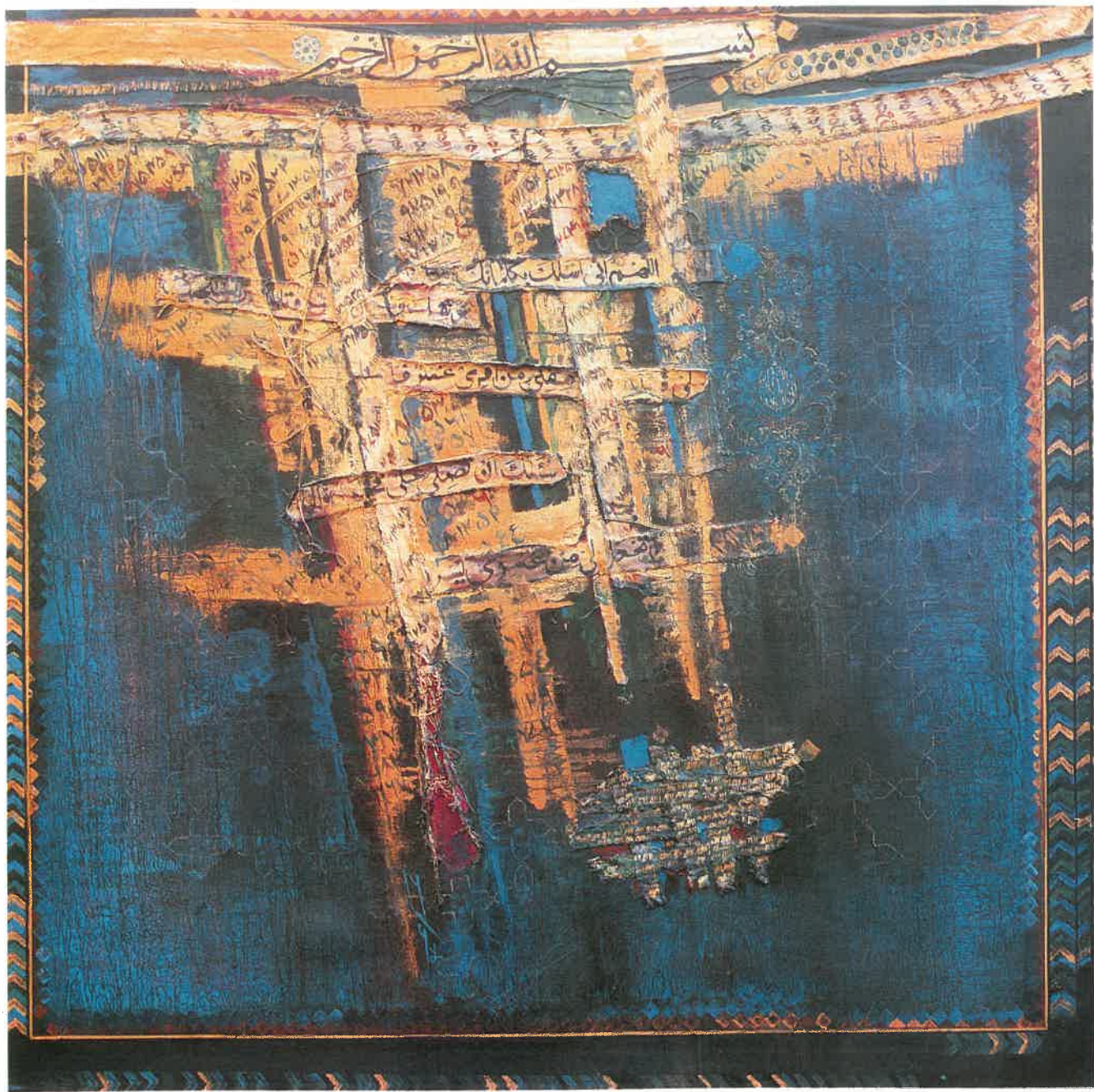
- *Naqsh-i Allah-I*, 1997
- Mixed media
- 73.5cm x 147cm



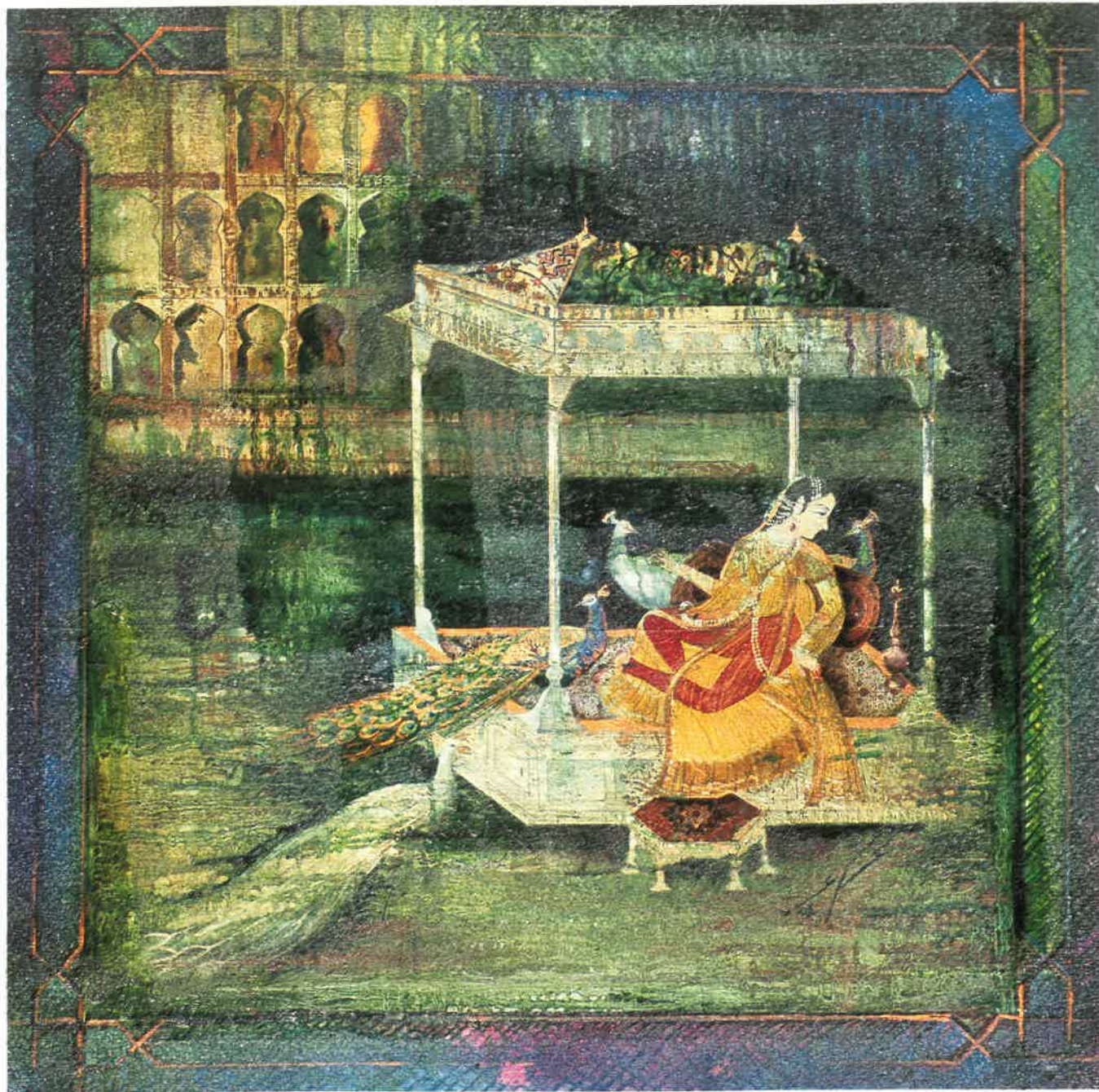


In his later work, textural variety has also been addressed. Earlier, canvas and colour sufficed. Now Askari has introduced fine paper and string to enrich the surface. This tendency towards incorporation of other materials should prompt the artist to take bolder steps and experiment with new textures, weaves and materials. The collage-like effect could tend towards relief-like works which, with Askari's brush of gold dipped in the vibrancy of peacock colours could extend his repertoire.





Naqsh-i Kohna, 1997 • Mixed media • 117.5cm x 117.5cm



Princess and peacock, 1997 • Mixed media • 59cm x 59cm



Three warriors, 1992 • Mixed media • 59cm x 59cm

Askari Mian Irani

(B. 10.03.1940). Spent first five years in acquiring religious education and learning the Holy Quran. Studied at Islamia High School Sahranpur till Grade-III. 1947: came to Pakistan. 1948: admitted to Mozang High School, Lahore. 1952: admitted to Muslim Model School in Class VIII. Matriculated in 1958. F.A. from Diyal Singh College, in 1963 and joined National College of Arts in 1964. Graduated in 1967; joined J. Walter & Thomson Karachi as visualizer in art department; joined Pakistan Tobacco Company Limited as chief visualizer. In November 1975 joined National College of Arts as assistant professor in the design department.

Solo Exhibitions

Karachi Art Council, August 1969; British Council, Karachi, October 1970; Indus Gallery, Karachi, September 1975; The Gallery Karachi, 1975, 1983, August 1986; National College of Arts, December 1984; Nairang Art Gallery, Lahore 1985, 1989 & 1991; Sheraton Art Gallery, January 1987; V.M. Art Gallery, Karachi, August 1988; Danish Art Gallery, Karachi August 1989; Art Gallery, Islamabad, February 1991; Chawkandi Art Gallery, Karachi, January 1992; Pearl Continental Hotel Lahore, 1993; Clifton Art Gallery, Karachi 1997.

Selected Group Shows

National Exhibition, Lahore Museum 1978; Shakir Ali Museum 1978; National Exhibition Islamabad 1981, 1983 & 1995; Faculty Shows at National College of Arts, Lahore, 1982, 1989 & 1997; Fifth National Exhibition; Independence Day Exhibition at Lahore Arts Council, 1985, 1986 & 1987; Calligraphic exhibition in connection with Ramadan, 1985, 1986 & 1987; National Exhibition at Alhamra Art Gallery Lahore 1988; Nairang Art Gallery, Lahore, May 1991; South Pacific Museum America, 1994; Kunj Art Gallery Karachi, 1995; National Golden Jubilee Exhibition, Alhamra Art Gallery, August 1997.





Naqsh-i Shikar, 1997 • Mixed media • 73.5cm x 147cm





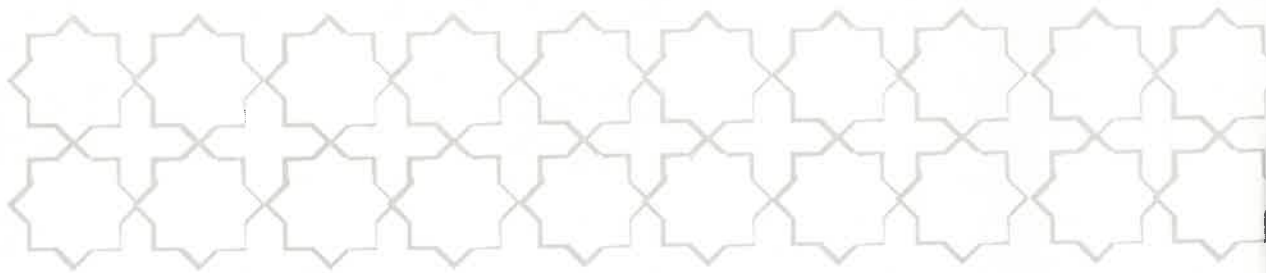
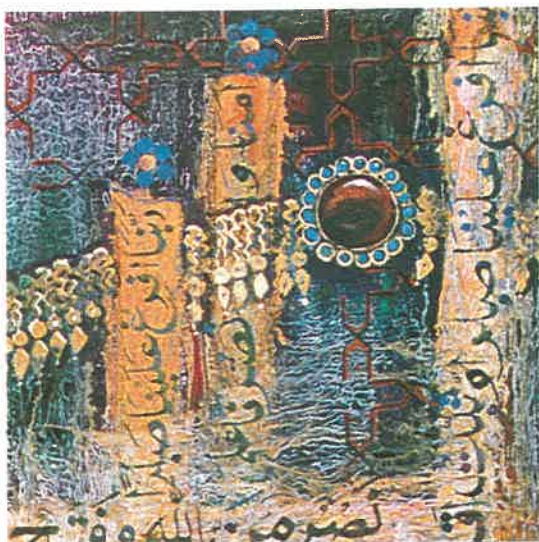
Letter of Prophet (pbuh), 1997 • Mixed media • 73.5cm x 147cm

Awards

Bolan Academy Award 1983; first prize in stamp designing, Second Islamic Conference, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, 1984.

Private Collections

Rockefeller Art Gallery, New York; Modern Museum, Japan; Citi Bank, Lahore; Chase Manhattan Bank, England; Chase Manhattan Bank, Lahore; PIA, Karachi Airport; Air Force Officer Mess, Kohat; Chamba House, Lahore; Crescent Group, Lahore; Citi Bank, Jaddah, Saudi Arabia; Business Centre, Lahore; Siemens Limited Pakistan; Fukuoka Museum, Japan; Deutsche Bank Ag. Central International Department Frankfurt; Newage Cables; Emco Tiles; Prime Minister House; National Assembly; Benazir Bhutto; Sardar Farooq Leghari; Aga Khan; Aftab Sherpao; Iqbal Z. Ahmed; Bishan Singh Bedi; Sehry Saigol; Aitzaz Ahsan; Asif Kamal; Nayyar Ali Dada; Imran Khan; Begum Afshar Raza; Tariq Rahman; Muhammad Tahir Chowdhry; Khurshid M. Kasuri; Khalid Anis; Asif Zaidi; Javed Najam; Syed Imtiaz Ali; Bashir Ahmad; Abbas Mirza; Mullaha; Parvez Chughtai; Famhia Askari; Parvez Hasan; Jamila Habib; Sohail Ahmed.





Naqsh-i Fatah-III, 1997 • Mixed media • 117cm x 117cm



Prayer (pbuh), 1994 • Mixed media • 88cm x 117.5cm



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