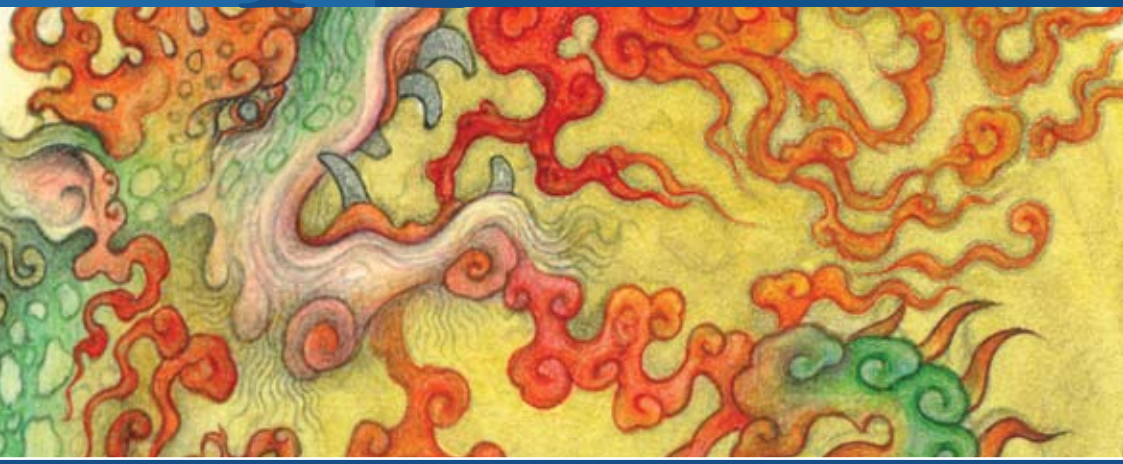
SCHOOL OF ORIENTAL AND AFRICAN STUDIES

SOAS

An exhibition of new work by Anita Chowdry exploring form and structure inspired by Iranian manuscript illumination and fractal geometry

ANITA CHOWDRY



Geometry, Illumination & Beyond

SOAS Brunei Gallery

16th April - 20th June 2009

AlTajir Trust

Anita Chowdry is a painter, researcher and educator. She studied traditional miniature painting techniques under a hereditary master in India in the early 1990s. Since then her research has been centred on the techniques and materials used by painters in 16th and 17th century Mughal ateliers, in which she has run dedicated workshops at major institutions in Britain and abroad.

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The scope of this exhibition is to consider the eclectic nature and universal impact of Islamic manuscript art, the role of mathematics and craftsmanship in its making, and to explore ways of extending its possibilities beyond traditional boundaries by incorporating new media and techniques. The focus is on exploring of the art of manuscript illumination, its underlying geometric structure and repertoire of imagery, and its links with fractal geometry.

The exhibition contains paintings utilizing traditional mineral pigments and techniques of illumination, digital fractal prints and laser-cut steel installations.

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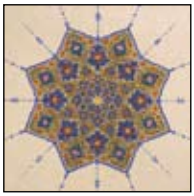

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Group 1 – classic shamsa

The word Shamsa derives from the Arabic word for the sun. By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it became a customary device for the opening pages of royal manuscripts in Safavid Iran and Mughal India. Traditionally the centre is left as a plain gold disc, representing the singularity from which all emerges.
The fully rendered shamsa (1) is painted using pigments ground by hand from metals and minerals. The traditional range of colours used in illumination are made from the most precious substances, which is why there is a preponderance of pure gold, silver, lapis lazuli (blue), cinnabar (red), and malachite (green).
This shamsa is based on an octagonal geometric structure which grows exponentially from the centre, upon which is superimposed a traditional grammar of stylized natural designs repeated on different scales (2). The design can also be based on a hexagon or the particularly beautiful dodecagon, which makes a twelve pointed star (3).

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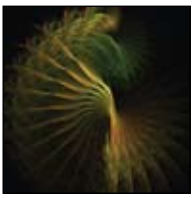
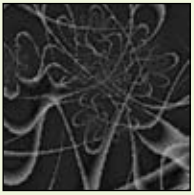


Group 2 – fractal shamsa

The circular or star shape of the shamsa is universal, and mirrored in many natural structures. Fractal geometry is a way of describing naturalistic forms using repetitive mathematical equations, which build up complex images based on iterations of similar elements on different scales. The fractal shamsa drawing (4) was built up using a computer programme called "Apophysis" which uses random iterated functions. The illuminator's craft is replaced with the craft of manipulating coordinates on the complex number plane to create the image. Additional manipulations of colour gradients produce a subtly rendered image. (5).



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Group 3 - nautilus

Traditional design elements and colours of illumination are used over an underlying logarithmic spiral structure reminiscent of the nautilus shell (6). The design on the mount is based on marginal decorations in Safavid and Mughal manuscripts, and contains a repertoire of real and mythical beasts rendered predominantly in gold and black pigments. Sophisticated brush-drawing involves flowing calligraphic lines and subtle shading using minute marks in a technique called "pardaz". In the nautilus drawing (7) the shell structure is built up using the Fibonacci number sequence and drawn with brush and pigment using traditional techniques.

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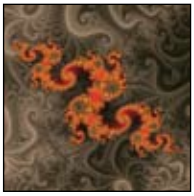

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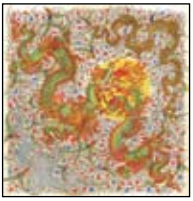

Group 4 – dragons

The sinuous "Azhdeha" or dragon of Iranian literature and the undulating cloud patterns that appear extensively in Safavid illumination and marginal design derive their form from Chinese models. Intriguingly, certain fractal algorithms throw up similar shapes. The Julia dragon was constructed using a computer programme called "Ultra Fractal" (8). The dragon or cloud shape comes from reiterated elements in exponentially growing and receding proportion. The simplified computer generated drawing (9) isolates and clarifies the dragon shape. Elements that derive from classic illumination and fractal images are playfully combined in a contemporary illuminated design using traditional pigments (10)

Group 5 – exploring new ways

As with manuscript illumination, a fractal programme presents a simple repertoire of forms that can be manipulated and combined in infinite variations to produce intriguingly complex designs. On the other hand, reduction to a minimal linear structure distills the intent of a design to its ultimate purity. The fractal tryptich (11) is a representation of the shamsa reduced to an expression of pure energy.

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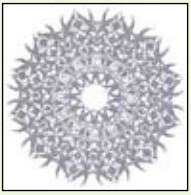
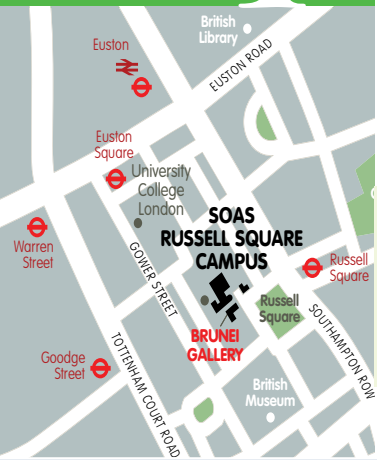


The design and structure of a twelve pointed shamsa is simplified using a palette of flat black with red outlines, offset from its central disc of silver and gold (12).
The silhouette of this design is used for the stairwell installation of large steel structures finished in white and mirror polish (13). The installation is intended to create shadows and reflections in interaction with the ambient natural light in the area.

The Brunei Gallery is part of the School of Oriental and African Studies, a non-commercial exhibition space that presents the art and culture of Asia and Africa to a wider audience.

It comprises three floors of galleries, including the Foyle gallery containing a permanent exhibition of the SOAS collection of manuscripts and artefacts.



Schools education project

Sponsored by the AlTajir Trust

The exhibition will provide the focus for a series of projects with schools from local London boroughs. 8th-20th June 2009, the pupils' work will be on display in the exhibition space.

Artists' presentation and discussion forum

Presenting the working practice of two artists, with an opportunity for discussion.

Wednesday 27th May 2009, 2pm-5pm

Khalili Lecture Theatre, SOAS main building

Daud Sutton: Traditional Islamic art in the digital medium

Daud Sutton directs the Thesaurus Islamicus Foundation's design studio Editio Electrum. The studio's work combines the forms of the medieval Islamic arts of the book with contemporary digital technology to produce illuminated books and fine art prints. Daud specialises in Islamic geometric patterns and is the author of *'Islamic Design: A Genius for Geometry'* published by Wooden Books.

Anita Chowdry: New contexts for manuscript art

Anita Chowdry discusses the rationale behind the exhibition, the traditional and digital media employed, and invites audience discussion about Islamic manuscript art as a creative resource.

Academic seminar

Research Seminar in Islamic Art and Archaeology

Convened by Dr Anna Contadini
Department of Art & Archaeology, SOAS

Thursday 23rd April 2009, 5:30pm-7pm

Brunei Building B104

Geometry, Illumination and Beyond

A presentation by Anita Chowdry

The illuminator's art

2nd-4th June 2009, 10am-4pm,

Room 373, SOAS main building.

Three day intensive practical workshop in design, technique and pigment preparation with reference to Iranian and Mughal manuscripts in the Foyle Special Collections Gallery at the School of Oriental and African Studies.

Cost, inclusive of materials £350

For further information about any of the events contact *gallery@soas.ac.uk*

BRUNEI GALLERY, SOAS, Thornhaugh Street,
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Open Tues – Sat 10.30 – 17.00, admission free - Closed Sun and Mon
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