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QUEST FOR PARADISE: Sameh Khalatbari Soltani practices a traditional art form even as she pursues modern education.

PARADISE ENOW!

Sameh Khalatbari Soltani, an Iranian artist, is a young girl studying for her MBA, but she practices traditional Persian art form, Gol O Morgh, that demands great skill and patience. She is exhibiting her works as part of Art Surprises this DSS.

BY PRATIBHA UMASHANKAR

SHE LOOKS like any other college-going, confident youngster. But Sameh Khalatbari Soltani's art is steeped in the customs, conventions and convictions of an ancient Iranian art form — Gol O Morgh.

Gol O Morgh, the Persian form of painting flourished in the Safavid period and reached the zenith of its glory. They adorned pen-cases, mirror frames, jewel boxes and figured on doors and cupboards, making their way even on lamps, horse carriages and items of furniture. This turned the esoteric art form into a functional one, giving it both aesthetic and utilitarian value.

It is thus a rare combination of the artist's imaginary world that is perfect and the work-a-day world.

During the 11th century, as a result of interaction with and influence of European artists, the art form was diluted in a sense, and came to be called "Farangi Sazi". This evolved as an art form in its own right and has taken different forms and interpretations in India, China Japan and Europe.

"Gol O Morgh literally means flower and bird," informs Sameh, pointing to her delicately executed works, which evoke the joy of love and the quest for the elusive garden of paradise. Sameh's works reflect this ideal world of love. The coming together of the birds and flowers is a metaphor for human love — the joy of union and the anguish of separation.

Here she throws light on the finer points of the highly stylised

art form and her pursuit of perfection.

Your works seem to have several layers or elements — birds and flowers in a garden bordered with highly intricate illuminated art. Could you explain it?

It is part of the Persian traditional art. It includes four aspects or parts — miniature, illumination, carpet design and birds and flowers.

When did you start painting?

I have been painting for the last 15 years. I learnt this art form on my own from tutors. My major at the University has no connection with my art. I am doing my Master of Business Administration. But Art is not a hobby. It is my profession. Though I come from Teheran, the art form I follow flourished in Esfahan — the cultural capital of our country.

When did you start exhibition of your work?

I had my first exhibition in 1998 at the Bahman Cultural centre in Teheran. It was a group exhibition. And then I participated in the Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Traditional Painting Biennials in 2000, 2002 and 2006 in Teheran and had a solo exhibition in 2005 at Seyhoun Art Gallery and a group exhibition this year at Behzad Art Gallery in Teheran.

What brings you to Dubai and the DSS?

I was interested in getting a wider exposure and a more international viewership. I heard that Dubai is becoming the centre of art and many Europeans who come here appreciate traditional art. I hope my work will be appreciated.

The Cultural Council of Dubai saw samples of my work and invited me to take part in the DSS Art Surprises segment. This is my first exhibition outside Iran.

Has your work been appreciated here at Burjuman?

Yes, a lot of people have shown interest and want to know more about this intricate form of art.

Have you sold anything so far? And what is the highest price you hope your painting will fetch?

I have sold a painting of mine in Iran for $1,700. I have not sold anything here as yet, but I hope my black and white painting — "Follow the Brightness" that has taken me a year and a half to finish — will fetch $3,000.

Do this kind of work normally take that long to execute?

The black and white ones normally take over a year because each layer has to be worked separately and with care. It consists of fine dots. One cannot afford to go wrong. Both watercolour and ink are used. It needs a lot of concentration and I have to be alone and undisturbed.

What kind of encouragement do you get for your kind of art back home?

Not much, though, my family has been very supportive, especially my mother.

What do your paintings in particular and the Gol O Morgh form of art in general portray?

As you can see, all the paintings have the element of mythical birds and flowers with highly complicated illuminated borders that look like entwined creepers. They represent the relationship between the lover and the beloved. But it does not end there. It goes to a higher level and symbolises the love between human beings and God.

The art form is symbolic in other ways too. For example, in nature, flowers are usually smaller than birds, but here, flowers are portrayed as larger — it is to show the dominance of the beloved over the lover.

From where do you get your ideas?

They are all from my imagination.

How long do you spend on each work?

I need to spend about five to six hours each day and each work takes about seven to eight months to complete. It needs a lot of skill and patience. The work has to be done only in daylight and with great care. It has very intricate spots. We have to use pen and a special brush made of cat's hair made in Esfahan. The illumination looks as if it is printed at first glance, but it is painted. We first paint the colours and then draw the outlines. And then it is embossed.

In the present day and age, do you think people have time for your kind of art?

Yes, I admit there are not many people who have the time for art. Now a days everything is mass produced and commercial. But there are some people who like traditional art with a history behind it that is individually hand-made.

When I held exhibitions in Iran, I was pleasantly surprised to discover that there are still people who appreciate my kind of art.

There are very special people who like art and appreciate the effort that has gone behind it. They are willing to spend money on art because they understand art. For such people, money is not important.

What are your plans for the future?

I hope to have an exhibition in Europe.

PICTURE PERFECT: Art is a painstaking and patient endeavour that demands concentration.