

**Raqib Shaw: Ballads  
of East and West**  
Large Print Labels

Raqib Shaw envisions a world where art converges across continents and cultures—and where tenderness survives violence and loss. Shaw grew up in Kashmir, which he remembers as a paradise on earth encircled by Himalayan mountains. He left as a teenager when the region erupted in sectarian strife. References to the beauty and trauma of his childhood abound in his work.

Shaw's puzzle-like paintings are deeply self-reflective. In the self-portraits gathered here, he assumes the guise of a joker, a saint, a satyr, a philosopher, and a blue-skinned Hindu deity. Landscapes in peril often symbolize Kashmir as a trampled paradise. Compositions from iconic European paintings fused with motifs from Asian cultures point to his fascination with artistic legacies. Like Isabella Stewart Gardner, Shaw juxtaposes art from different places and times to evoke deeply personal meaning.

This exhibition, co-curated with Dr. Zehra Jumabhoy, unfolds across the Museum in three locations. Paintings in this gallery span the past 12 years of his career. Nearby, in the Historic Building, the Fenway Gallery explores Shaw's process, while the Museum's outdoor Anne H. Fitzpatrick Façade features newly commissioned work.

Raqib Shaw was born in 1974 in Kolkata, India, and grew up in Kashmir, a contested region in South Asia. He was raised in a Muslim family, attended a Catholic school, and benefitted from the teachings of Buddhist and Hindu tutors. The Kashmir that he knew as a child no longer exists, marred by political insurgencies.

Shaw now lives and works in London, a city he first visited in 1992. There, he transformed an old sausage factory into a painting studio and a horticultural utopia. Hidden behind tall walls, Shaw reigns over his astonishing garden—a fantastical landscape constantly shaped and re-shaped by his memories of Kashmir's Himalayan vistas and rushing waterfalls. He draws vital energy from this unique environment.

Mulberry fire must I continue to carry, deep within,  
Let nobody lose themselves so early, when only  
children

— Verse from a song by Habba Khatoon (1554–1609)



Raqib Shaw

## **The Four Seasons**

### **"Autumn"**

2018-2019

Acrylic liner and enamel on  
Birch wood

**Autumn** presents the artist in old age, standing inside a hollow Chenar tree. He observes floating memory bubbles of his childhood. One shows the teenaged Shaw reading peacefully under cherry blossoms, while the other suggests musical chaos.

In the woods beyond, smoke curls from smoldering leaves. For Shaw, the bonfires resonate with the poetry of Habba Khatoon, who compares the sorrow of loss to carrying burning mulberry wood deep within her soul. Khatoon was a sixteenth-century mystic whose poignant Sufi songs earned her the nickname “Nightingale of Kashmir.”

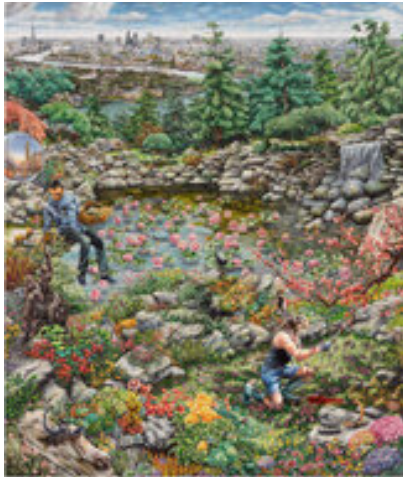


Raqib Shaw  
**The Four Seasons**  
**"Winter"**

2018-2019

Acrylic liner and enamel on  
Birch wood

If **Autumn** (left) is full of foreboding, then **Winter** has the quality of a nightmare. A gnarled black tree trunk slashes across a snowscape, while Shaw himself stands on a spindly branch, clad in an orange-gold cloak. He is attacked by hybrid beasts who attempt to pluck out his left eye. At the bottom of the tree, a heap of ghostly, entangled bodies all share Shaw's facial features. Yet, hope remains. On the far right of the painting, a clump of golden daffodils peeks out from the snow, a reminder that spring will come again.



Raqib Shaw

**Agony in the Garden  
(after Tintoretto) II**

2020-2022

Acrylic liner and enamel on  
aluminium

Shaw portrays himself in jeans and gardening gloves, cutting flowers and placing them neatly in a basket. Inspired by his own garden in South London, this lush environment evokes the landscape of Kashmir in miniature. It features many plants native to that region, including hydrangeas, cherry trees, water lilies, and daffodils. On the left, a memory bubble shows an exploding vehicle—“the burning car in which my sister died,” Shaw explains. Shaw’s image is tinged with foreboding: scorpions run along the edges and, on the right, a muscled man with the head of a rabbit cuts pink-blossomed branches, spattering the grass with crimson blood.



Raqib Shaw

**A Summer of Sombre  
Stirrings in the Garden of  
Blissful Solitude**

2021-2022

Acrylic liner and enamel on  
aluminum

In this work, Shaw depicts himself as a gardener in a lush imaginary landscape. In the far distance, we spy London's skyline and the curving river Thames. At first glance it appears peaceful, a retreat from the bustle of city life. But in Shaw's landscapes, paradise always includes a hint of impending menace. Notice the gnarled tree trunk coiled like a snake, just next to the pensive protagonist gazing at a burning Kashmir reflected in the stream.

Shaw's garden (below) directly inspired this composition.





Raqib Shaw's studio garden. Photograph by  
Graham Duddridge

[Grief] is everything. It is the fabric of selfhood, and beautifully chaotic.

—Max Porter, **Grief Is the Thing with Feathers** (2015)



Raqib Shaw

**When the Thing with Feathers Turned Red (After Tintoretto)**

2021-2022

Acrylic liner and enamel on Birch wood

Flames engulf this composition. Above, the Kashmiri city of Srinagar burns. Below, Shaw's London studio is consumed by fire, recalling a 2017 disaster. While it evokes real events, the painting could also serve as a metaphor: a trial by fire that culminates in artistic and spiritual renewal. In the upper register, a reclining Shaw carefully waters one perfect narcissus. "We shall rise again from the ashes, like the phoenix!" Shaw vowed after the fire in his studio.

Shaw first visited London in 1992 and discovered the National Gallery's collection of European painting. Profoundly moved, he decided to become an artist. Shaw enrolled at Central Saint Martins and completed his master of arts degree in painting in 2002.

In 2014, Shaw had a breakthrough when he started mixing his own paint with a machine, resulting in enameled colors of glossy intensity that he manipulates with porcupine quills. The new paint inspired him to engage directly with Renaissance paintings and their glorious representations of textures, fabric, and stone.



Raqib Shaw  
**That night in Xanadu  
when the birds were set  
free**

2019-2021

Acrylic liner and enamel on  
Birch wood

Xanadu's flowering hills stretch below snow-capped mountains, all drenched in silvery moonlight. Xanadu was the summer capital of Kublai Khan, the first Mongol to rule China in the 1200s. Xanadu has affinities with Kashmir, which similarly became the summer retreat for the Mughals, the most glamorous of South Asia's Muslim dynasties.

Here, Shaw releases caged parakeets into the night. Shaw's wonderland appears to exude eternal peace. Yet, emerging from the front corners of the painting are two rabbits wearing waistcoats and wielding pocket watches. Time is ticking.

I could never return. When I think of Kashmir, I think of what has been lost; the place I once knew is now of the past. The only way I can express my true feelings is through art.

—Raqib Shaw



Raqib Shaw  
**Self Portrait in the Study  
at Peckham (After  
Vincenzo Catena)  
Kashmir version**  
2015-2016

Acrylic liner and enamel on  
Birch wood

Dressed in a kimono embroidered with gold thread, Shaw holds his beloved dog and sits surrounded by material pleasures: a Kashmiri carpet, ornate metalwork, bowls of ripe fruit. But a closer look reveals a darker side. A skeleton army emerges from the woodwork. Worms crawl in the pomegranates, rats make a hearty meal on the priceless carpet. The side windows offer a peaceful view of the Himalayas and Kashmir's Dal Lake, while the central windows reveal a Sufi shrine in flames. Shaw's painting offers a cautionary tale on the fragility of life and the certainty of loss, evoking his own self-imposed exile.



Raqib Shaw

## **Seeking Simurgh**

2018-2019

Acrylic liner and enamel on  
Birch wood

The artist seems at peace sitting on an exquisite Kashmiri carpet practicing ikebana, the Japanese art of flower arranging. Tiny carved elephants march above the window. They reflect Shaw's multi-religious childhood in the valley. In Hinduism elephants represent divine knowledge; in Buddhism they are linked to the Buddha's mother. Here they demarcate a border beyond which Shaw's carefully constructed tranquility crumbles. Kashmir is in flames, warplanes approach — yet the bird perched on the windowsill remains unruffled. Perhaps it symbolizes hope.

The title of this painting references Simurgh, a giant bird from Persian mythology who lives so long that it witnesses the world end three times. The quest for Simurgh is a search for wisdom.

Black on edges of flames,  
it cannot extinguish the neighborhoods,  
the homes set ablaze by midnight soldiers.  
Kashmir is burning.

—Agha Shahid Ali, “I See Kashmir from New Delhi at  
Midnight,” **The Country Without a Post Office** (1997)



Raqib Shaw

**Ode to the country  
without a post office**

2019-2020

Acrylic liner and enamel on  
Birch wood

In this painting, the artist stages a poignant tribute to the land he left behind. Seated on a sumptuously patterned Kashmiri carpet, Shaw orchestrates a fluttering swirl of fireflies. The violence behind him references the sectarian turmoil in Kashmir that continues to devastate his homeland. Srinagar’s hot orange glow contrasts starkly with the fireflies as they ascend into the iridescent sunset to meet the circling warplanes.



Raqib Shaw

**La Tempesta (after  
Giorgione)**

2019-2021

Acrylic liner and enamel on  
Birch wood

At right, the artist blows a fragile memory bubble. Its sun-drenched valley and pink flowering trees contrast with the brutal scene unraveling behind him. Lightning illuminates a stormy sky and frantic figures fill the burning city of Srinagar. At the edge of the painting, a ghostly figure rises from a lily pond, its clawing hands raised in torment. Its blanched, mask-like face resembles that of the artist himself.

Shaw was inspired by *The Tempest* (1508), an enigmatic painting by Renaissance Italian artist Giorgione. Its meaning remains hotly debated, but some interpret it as a story of exile: Adam, Eve, and their son Cain expelled from Eden.





Giorgione. **The Tempest**, about 1508. Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice, Italy. Photo: Stefano Bianchetti/Bridgeman Images.



Raqib Shaw  
**The Retrospective 2002-  
2022**

2015-2022

Acrylic liner, enamel, and  
rhinestones on aluminum

Framed by a series of arches, Shaw wears a red-and-gold Venetian mask and a ceremonial kimono. He stands like an orchestra conductor on stacked packing crates marked with the word “Fragile.” Satirizing the art market, in which Shaw is a celebrity, he waves a toilet plunger instead of a baton.

**The Retrospective** features more than 60 miniature depictions of Shaw’s own paintings and sculptures, including many of the works in this exhibition. In a statement of artistic ambition, Shaw transformed an imagined eighteenth-century picture gallery by Italian artist Giovanni Paolo Panini (below and on view at the MFA Boston) into a venue for his own mid-career retrospective.



Giovanni Paolo Panini. **Picture Gallery with Views of Modern Rome**, 1757. MFA Boston.

[**Retrospective** object key, with only paintings in Hostetter marked]

Let your eye wander through **The Retrospective**. Notice what holds your attention—figures, colors, textures, movement.

Close your eyes and picture those details. Open your eyes and look for them in other paintings around you.

All but three of the objects in this gallery are in The Retrospective. Can you find the ones that are missing?



Raqib Shaw  
**Small Adam**

2011

Shades of sapphires on  
painted bronze

This sculpture seems to tumble out of the corner of the nearby painting, **The Retrospective**. **Small Adam** shows a hybrid animal—the head of a screeching bird joined to a representation of Shaw’s body—ravished by a gem-studded lobster.

Shaw’s jewels symbolize the exploitation of Kashmir’s natural resources. The Kashmir Valley, centrally located on trade routes that connect Asia and Europe, has been mined for its sapphires for centuries.



Raqib Shaw

**The Annunciation - After  
Carlo Crivelli**

2013-2014

Acrylic liner, glitter, enamel,  
and rhinestones on Birch  
wood

Equipped with a new paint-mixing machine that enabled him to create infinite shades and textures, Shaw sought to rival the effects of Renaissance oil paint. To see what he could achieve, he turned to Carlo Crivelli's **The Annunciation with Saint Emidius** (1486, below), with its dizzying juxtaposition of textures.

Blue centaurs and elaborately attired hyena- and bat-headed men vie for our attention with a treasure trove of color and texture including Kashmiri carpets, gold coins, embroidered silks, and glimpses of a peach-stained sky. Shaw casts himself in the role of Crivelli's Virgin Mary, with the blue skin of Hindu gods.



Carlo Crivelli. **The Annunciation with Saint Emidius**, 1486.

National Gallery, London, UK.

Photo: Bridgeman Images

Fun Fact: This painting was on view at the Gardner in 2014 for the exhibition **Ornament &**

**Illusion: Carlo Crivelli of Venice.**



Raqib Shaw  
**The Adoration (After Jan Gossaert)**  
2015-2016  
Acrylic liner and enamel on  
Birch wood

In reimagining Jan Gossaert's **The Adoration of the Kings** (1510-15, below), Shaw holds his dog Mr. C as if cuddling baby Jesus. Figures he calls “art-world nasties” tempt him with material success. But Shaw is not so easily seduced. Green parakeets from his Kashmiri childhood flutter around his head, and the distant fort of Hari Parbat and shrine to Sufi saint Makhdoom Sahib evoke his childhood home in the valley of Srinagar. He holds tightly to his own identity, even as he is courted by the system of the Euro-American art establishment.



Jan Gossaert. **The Adoration of the Kings**, 1510–15. National Gallery, London, UK. Photo: Bridgeman Images



There's something that binds everything together ... beauty. I do believe that it has a soul-cleansing and a calming quality and an uplifting quality that is rather primordial. I don't think that that'll ever change.

—Raqib Shaw



Raqib Shaw  
**Self portrait in the Study  
at Peckham (A reverie  
after Antonello de  
Messina's Saint Jerome)  
II**

2015-2016

Acrylic liner, glitter, enamel,  
and rhinestones on Birch  
wood

“Painting is like knowing a number of languages ... presenting a varied, complex and ultimately multi-layered narrative,” Shaw says. Shaw's fascination with Japanese cultures is present here: Noh theater masks on the arch, a bonsai tree, a Zen Buddhist temple, and more. Shaw's kimono, a gift from a close friend that he wears in many paintings, was historically favored by ladies of the Japanese Samurai elite.

At the center of the painting, the blue-faced artist screams, tormented by skeletons, rotting corpses, and gold coins. A Japanese fighter plane from World War II flies in front of the temple, adding to the sense of unease. Still, Shaw is surrounded by things he loves.



Raqib Shaw

## **Ode to the Valley of Wonderment**

2017-2019

Acrylic liner and enamel on  
Birch wood

This painting evokes the Kashmir of Shaw's childhood, a place of idyll and memory. At the center, Shaw sprawls across a carpet in the company of his beloved dogs, Mr. C and Minty. He seems entranced by his mirrored reflection, reveling in the transitory nature of earthly pleasures. He is surrounded by a collection of creatures sprung from the pages of a fairytale: birdmen playing classical Indian instruments, a mirror-gazing and crown-sporting monkey, and winged creatures riding on giant swans.



Raqib Shaw  
**Last Rites of the Artist's  
Ego at Shankryacharya  
Temple (After Ludivico  
Mazzolino)**

2015-2016

Acrylic liner and enamel on  
Birch wood

The Shankryacharya temple is dedicated to the Hindu god Shiva, the Destroyer. Situated in the mountains of Kashmir, it overlooks the beautiful and ancient city of Srinagar. Once the summer capital of Mughal emperors, Srinagar is now beset by conflict. Yet, in this painting, destruction is interlaced with the hope of resurrection.

In Shaw's work, birds often symbolize the spiritual journey of the self as it struggles toward enlightenment. Frenzied black crows attack tiny figures of Shaw at the top of the gateway. Two contradictory versions of the artist appear at the center of the snowy funeral ceremony: one standing, the other in a coffin. Perhaps the death of the material self, attached to the pains and pleasures of the world, allows the real self to be born.



Raqib Shaw  
**The Purification of the  
Temple (After Venusti)  
II**

2014-2015

Acrylic liner and enamel on  
Birch wood

This painting throbs with frenzied activity. Showers of gold coins rain down from above and skeletons swing like trapeze artists from the ceiling. Lithe, beast-headed creatures disco dance, their contorting bodies echoing the twisting pillars. At the fiery core of the painting, Lord Shiva performs his version of purification: **Rudra Tandava**, the Dance of Destruction that releases anger and destroys the universe with fire to make way for a new cycle of life. The Hindu god has Shaw's face.