# CHAPTER 6

## *Among Several Cultures and Times*

*Gulam Mohammed Sheikh*

Living in India means living simultaneously in several cultures and times. One often walks into "medieval" situations, and runs into "primitive" people. The past exists as a living entity alongside the present, each illuminating and sustaining the other.

As times and cultures converge, the citadels of purism explode. Traditional and modern, private and public, the inside and outside continually telescope and reunite. The kaleidoscopic flux of images engages me to construe structures in the process of being created.

Like the many-eyed and many-armed archetype of an Indian child, soiled with multiple visions, I draw my energy from the source. (Catalog, "Place for People," Bombay and New Delhi, 1981)

This was written in response to a prevalent view of one world–one culture and a singular notion of time taught to us as a philosophy of life. As applied to painting, this view meant working in one mode at a time, figurative or abstract, and one genre, naturalistic or surrealistic, "Indian" or "modern," whichever one to be expressly shorn of stains of other arts or aspects of life that would pollute its purity. In addition, art practice aspired to the ideal of a "masterpiece" fixed in a frame and exclusive of the context to which it belonged. Any combination of alternatives had to be harmonized: that is to say, one diffused in the service of the other to singularize the experience, for otherwise it would

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lead to a schism, a dilemma, split vision, schizophrenia. *Eclectic* was a bad word.

The world as it came to me, however, came almost invariably manifold, plural or at least dual in form. In art, painting came in the company of poetry and images from life lived, from other times, from painting, sometimes from literature, and often from nowhere, emerging together through scribbled drawings and words. The multiplicity and simultaneity of these worlds filled me with a sense of being part of them all. Attempts to define the experience in singular terms have left me uneasy and restless; absence of rejected worlds has haunted me throughout.

In childhood I saw a close convergence of Hindu and Muslim rituals in family customs and ceremonies; indeed names of kin could belong to either tradition. Under the strict gaze of my father, I prayed five times a day in the mosque, but I moved in the company of Jain and Brahman friends, including a priest, the rest of the time. It was a daily routine to recite the Koran in the morning at home and learn Sanskrit at school in the afternoon. My town, Wadhwan Camp (renamed Surendranagar after independence), was a nineteenth-century extension of a far older Wadhwan (believed to be ancient Vardhamanapuri). Frequenting the Birdwood Library[1] and Irish missionary hospital in town was as usual as visiting the twelfth-century Ranakdevi temple, step-wells, or shrine of Gebanshah Pir[2] by tramway in the adjoining Wadhwan. In our lane we faced a massive wall and would have been orphaned without it. It was at once barrier and link—however invisible, the world beyond it was just as much a part of our life—and the communities on either side lived in a dual world of isolation and unison.

The meaning of reality was larger than even these worlds; I believed when my father spoke of white genies springing across the riverbed in a single leap or when friends described stones rolling from one end of the *maidan* (green) to the other on their own in the early hours of the morning. Standing alone on the old iron bridge as the aged clock tower ticked, I visualized angels whirling above trees of the graveyard as Japanese planes flew over them at the end of the Second World War. The vision of the procession of Gebanshah Pir in the backyard of our little house at midnight is as clear and vivid in my mind as the long hours spent in the hot, burning afternoons of summer.

Art that fed my mind was equally polymorphic: The unbelievable scenery and fictitious mansions my brother painted in sweeping strokes on glass were akin to popular pictures from Nathdwara (Figure 6.1)[3]; a wash painting[4] my drawing teacher showed me represented a domestic scene in a romantic style; a staid watercolor landscape in academic mode, made by an English amateur my Anglo-Indian geography teacher



*Figure 6.1. Idyllic landscape, Nathdwara, Rajasthan, contemporary.*

asked me to emulate, came from yet another world. Most powerful in their effect were the large and lurid cinema hoardings (billboards) and dreamy damsels of popular periodicals in which photographic image was recast in various collages with blaring colors. Against these, the practice of drawing an oleander branch in a ceramic vase at school was infinitely dreary (and put me off all oleander branches and vases for the rest of my life), and the matter-of-fact illustrations in school textbooks, which we disfigured with a vengeance at every available opportunity, were equally dreadful. So when I painted landscapes of unvisited sites and seductive belles or picture-stories for a wall journal* I edited with a poet-teacher friend, images from these different worlds tumbled out in one form or another.

I reached Baroda in 1955 for formal education in art. Here works of great artists and epochs traditional and contemporary, Eastern as well as Western, took me by storm, pushing all I had brought from home into a remote private corner of mind. Michelangelos and Picassos in the art history classes (and glimpses of Sienese murals and Indian miniatures) opened hundreds of windows, although our souls and hearts were tied to the abstracts of Soulages, Kline, and others, which jumped out of the pages of international art journals. Indeed, swept up in the

*Hand-drawn, hand-written periodical.

high tide of "modern art," the motto was to be here in the moment of the day; the entire stockpile of earlier traditions was left ashore or in the oblivion of art history. Under the impact of that brief period of unabating excitement when life meant eating and drinking art—even sleeping on it and sparing it for others[5]—I looked for my own personal expression. But it was difficult to find a clear spot in the shadows of "masters" and peers, and the only alternative was to snuff them out. In the search for a singular image, I devised (initially under the influence of M. F. Husain) a whinnying white horse in chase or isolation, perched on the horizon between dark expanses of earth and sky, harnessed to a tonga or, more often, free of associations of specific time and place. I painted these elements over and over again in different combinations (while writing anguished poems with ennui in rambling free verse) until the reductive process led to repetitions as the emotional surge subsided. Most of the paintings seemed to be haunted by images that stood outside the frames.

It was at this stage that I left for an England going through the last lap of the Pop and the heyday of the Minimal at the Royal College of Art in London, the nerve center of the avant-garde in the early- and mid-1960s in England. Much as I remained unconvinced of the surface culture of art and its insinuations, I tried both prevalent modes and effects (complete with photographic collage and color-stripes with masking tape, etc.) to get them out of my system and mixed them with the expressionist simulation of paint I was familiar with. This was my first—albeit unconscious and unsuccessful—attempt to play with multiple imagery and form. In the end, however, the short-term device of the collage formula left me in yet another aimless limbo.

It appeared to many of us then that after the marathon of movements in the arena of art, painting was breathing its last. Curiously enough, the ephemeral form of film seemed to be the most vital creative alternative of the day, and Fellini and Buñuel presided over the eclipse of painting. Perhaps the rootlessness caused by the cult of internationalism coincided with the flickering substance of the film image. Cinema in that period tried to appropriate effects of painting—thus assisting in the process of pushing art into other blind alleys of non-art, anti-art, and similar variations for a decade or so. Disillusioned by the art of the day and with a heart full of void I looked to the Flemish, the early Italians, to Piero della Francesca at the National Gallery, and to the Indian miniatures at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Going back to "moderns" of earlier days, Magritte drew me close for devastating myths of the real and the unreal, much like Fellini in *8 1/2*; Morandi's little drawings and etchings for the love of the unprofound scenery of



his local Bologna; Beckmann for the frightening images of violence and the enigma of the unknown.

A visit to Italy was a revelation of sorts; it unlocked deep and unsatiated reserves of responses to the early Renaissance, especially the Sienese and Piero della Francesca. Looking at the works of Ambrogio Lorenzetti, Sassetta, and Duccio revived faith in painting once again. Painting, for the Sienese, was an act of love offered with tenderness, humility, and passionate conviction. Every surface of paint simmered with a feeling of touch, with the result that walls in paintings smelled of human warmth. I discovered how this came to be in the provincial town of Siena. The city is built on hills; lanes radiating from a piazza each widen and close at intervals like the movements of people using them. The uphill route of streets corresponds to rising breath released as one reaches small open squares on the way, while return downhill is quick and sudden for an ecstatic gasp at the wondrous sight of the shell-like great piazza, large as a lake and touched by the shadowy arm of the Palazzo Pubblico campanile (Plate 1). Lorenzetti's cityscape *Effects of Good Government* (Plate 2) has passages of the experience of walking through Siena. Not painted as a static scene of a city observed from a window, it opens gradually from one end of the wall as one scans the secret nooks and corners, lanes, byroads, rooftops, and the distant cathedral, through the viewer's own movements. Such paintings, done much before the illusionism of the Renaissance overran the intimate realism of this provincial terrain, apparently do not conform to the rationales of Palladian perspective. In Sassetta (Plate 3), color is not tainted by the intervention of cast shadows[6]; its luminosity is heightened by a saturation of hues in the absence of dramatic effects of light and dark. Probably this was a result of color perceived in clear daylight rather than indoors, as seems to have been the convention since the Renaissance, when manipulation of source of light and play of shadows became the nucleus of pictorial form. Duccio was all light. Deeply entrenched in the spirit of the Gospel narrative, scenes of his *Maestà* polyptych run as folios to be read in different orders as golden skies and pink-orange grounds lead across episodic borders of frames (Plate 4). Moreover, Duccio's *Story of the Passion* is set in his hometown Siena, and his Christ may well have been modeled in the likeness of a kinsman.

Much of the Indian painting I saw in the Victoria and Albert Museum (initially through a direct passage from the Painting School of the Royal College to the museum's cafeteria, and later in prolonged savorings in the company of Robert Skelton) and elsewhere was strikingly close to the experiences of looking at early Renaissance pictures. The Jaipur, Bundi, and Kishengarh Krishna images were identifiably set in

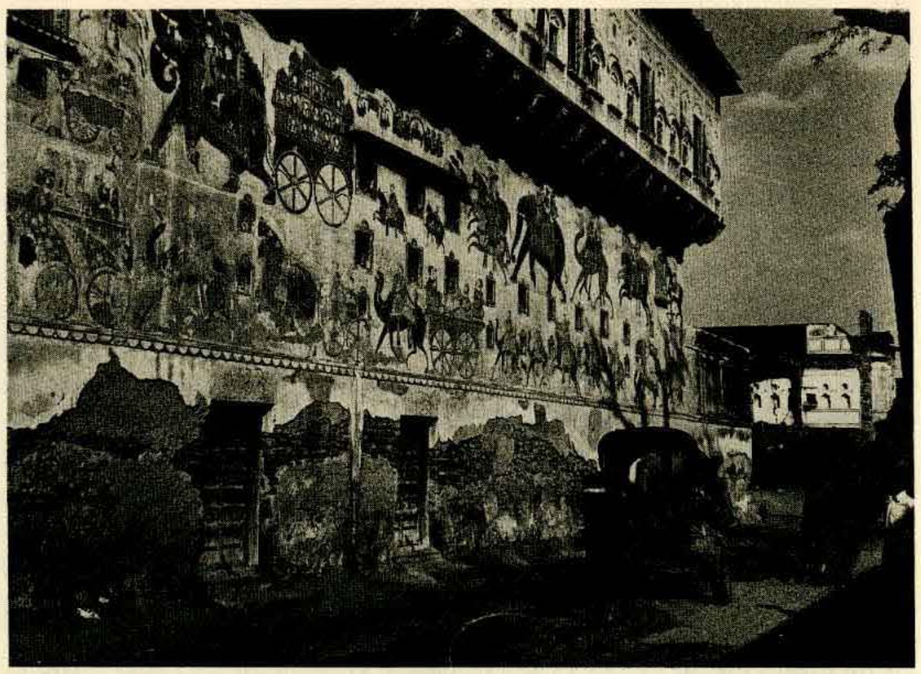

*Figure 6.2. Exterior of the house of Sawantram Chokha, Shekhawati, Rajasthan, nineteenth century.*

specific time and locale in costume, postures, and countenance. The world of Mewar, Malwa, and Basohli was timebound yet timeless. Space was construed as a buoyant expanse of "flat" color rippling with proximate and distant views and images alternating (Plate 5). Color was derived from light and air, aromas and sounds, rather than describing complexions and surface tints of objects. Cast shadows had no place here—even night scenes were "moon-drenched"[7] or full of visibilities. In fact it was rare to find paintings made for sight alone: Each simmered with reference to other senses and arts of literature, music, or drama. Based on music, the Ragamala paintings retained their sparkling visual tenor and flowed with candid, melodious nuances. Indeed there was hardly anything singular in traditional Indian painting. Landscape that the Kota,[8] the Kangra,[9] and the Mughal artists painted was made of the forests and treks they traversed on foot; it opened along the routes following the itinerary of images. Elsewhere images were read like, or in the company of, words in books, in different directions and combinations. Later, when I saw murals in Shekhawati[10] all over the high mansions of a street (Figure 6.2), it became clear that the physical movement of the viewer was essential in grasping their scale and structure. As in



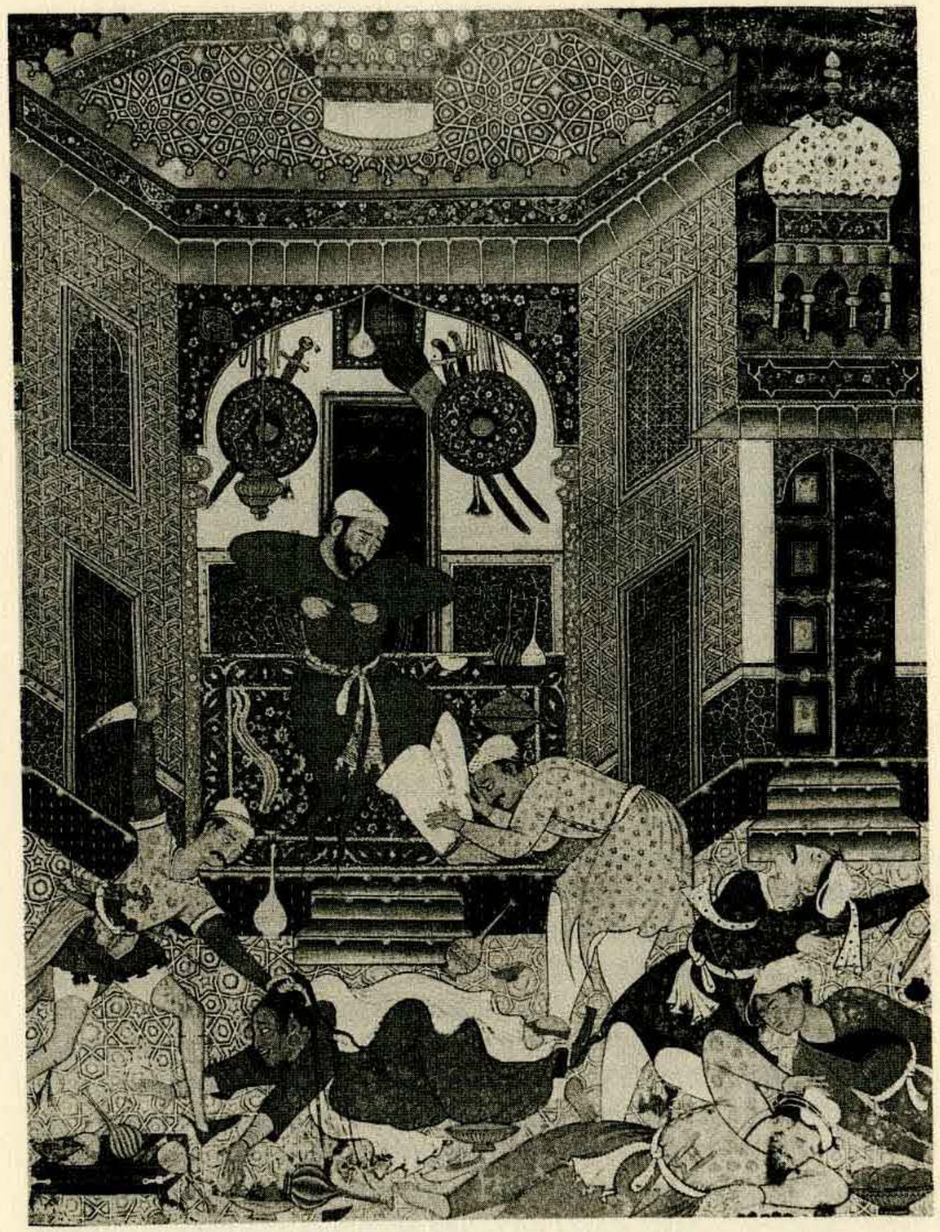

*Figure 6.3.* Amra Killing Traitorous Spy and Freeing Hamza, *folio from the* Hamza Nama, *1562–77.*

many Indian paintings, the rationale for structure did not lie in any principle of enclosure in an outer border or frame. In Shekhawati the painting is revealed in stages as one walks through the street, detail by detail; images grow over windows and doors in an open-ended structure linked by these details. Both painting and its perception required improvisation (as in music) the painter and the viewer effected upon the space. Reading of a picture in time has many equivalents, more prominent among them being scrolls. In Bengal, the *paṭa* (scroll) painter, the Patua, unrolls the highly animated images in succession while reciting the story; in Rajasthan, often a woman performer dances with a lamp lighting the episode sung about by the narrator (Plate 6). The tales of Bengali *paṭa*s belong to different cultures and times: from the traditional Chandimangal[11] and Manasa[12] stories for Hindus to Satta Pir[13] for Muslims and the "creation story" for the tribal Santhals, or stories of the assassination of Indira Gandhi and life in Calcutta for a more "modern" audience (Plates 7 and 8).

For multiplicity of image and form, the *Hamza Nama* has no parallel (Figure 6.3). About a hundred artists (including calligraphers, gilders, and binders) worked over a period of fifteen years (1562–1577) during the reign of Akbar to illustrate Persian tales of a rebel who is often identified with the uncle of the Prophet. Despite their Islamic origin and belonging to a powerful pictorial tradition, Hamza stories are not painted in the Islamic world but are totally set in the Indian context, with local flora and fauna, sultanate architecture, and dramatis personae derived from a variety of racial types. They also hint at the overlapping characters of Hamza and the charismatic emperor Akbar. Painted on cloth lined with paper, the story was read from the back while the picture was held to the audience. The format of the pictures is a category apart; not small enough to be miniatures nor as large as murals, the approximately 2 1/2-by-2-foot pictures cannot be rolled as scrolls either because of their lining. The painters included recruits from various parts of India who worked under the supervision of two Persian masters Akbar's father Humayun had brought to India. Introduced to Flemish prints at a later stage, they used all modes and methods known to them—Persian and a variety of Indian and European—often working collectively on a single folio incorporating vegetation, figures, architecture, even drawing and coloring by different hands.

The collective nature of the work does not result in a cacophonic collage, for each artist consciously shares hand and heart with the other. What emerges in the end is an image of multiple visions, each in relation to as well as independent from the others. For instance, the tenor of loud faience patterns matches the animated intensity of figures, keeping the spatial planes alive with resilient tensions. The boundless



*Figure 6.4.* Crime Passionel, *Gangaram, Bikaner, Rajasthan, c. 1745, opaque watercolor on paper.*

energy of the pictures often explodes through the borders. This reveals in some respects a quality of life—of living together of communities, each with a definite view of the world in dialectic interaction with the other. Difference is not a sign of disorder or disunity. In painting, individual vision is not an exclusive, private preserve; it shines more in sharing than in separation.

*Hamza Nama* also reveals another vital dimension of Indian art, rarely acknowledged: the portrayal of the physical reality of life in India. Along with the archetypal Indian crowds in movement, it uncovers aspects of brutality and violence both latent and explicit, often in vivid, gory details. More evidence is forthcoming of the Indian artist's concern for the sordid realities of the place and time he lived in. The horrific realism of the murder scene by Gangaram (Figure 6.4)[14] shatters the myth of idealism the traditional Indian artist is saddled with.

Returning to India and visiting my hometown, I saw accretions of time past still alive in interaction with elements of change, unharmonized yet vital. Much of what I had left behind came back to me, the childhood strangely in the company of new images. Somewhere the luminosity of Sassetta's interiors overlapped with the procession of

*Figure 6.5*. Returning Home after a Long Absence, *G. M. Sheikh, 1969–73*.

Gebanshah Pir, and moving along the overused streets and repeatedly touched walls brought recollections of the streets of Siena Ambrogio had painted. Painting and life images exchanged places.

My hands and eyes were full of these worlds. It was a *multiverse* of sorts. And I decided to use it all. I felt it would be impoverishing, unreal, and artificial to give up anything—even, out of a sense of guilt, oil painting and the kind of naturalism I was taught at school, for they had now become part of my life experience. I would rather add them to my bag of tricks than discard them. And I have said it all in the first person because I feel that every act of painting or writing is in some respects an attempt in autobiography, revealing you in your past while simultaneously projecting what you are in the present. It allows you to step out of your skin to look at the self and the world you belong to from inside and outside.



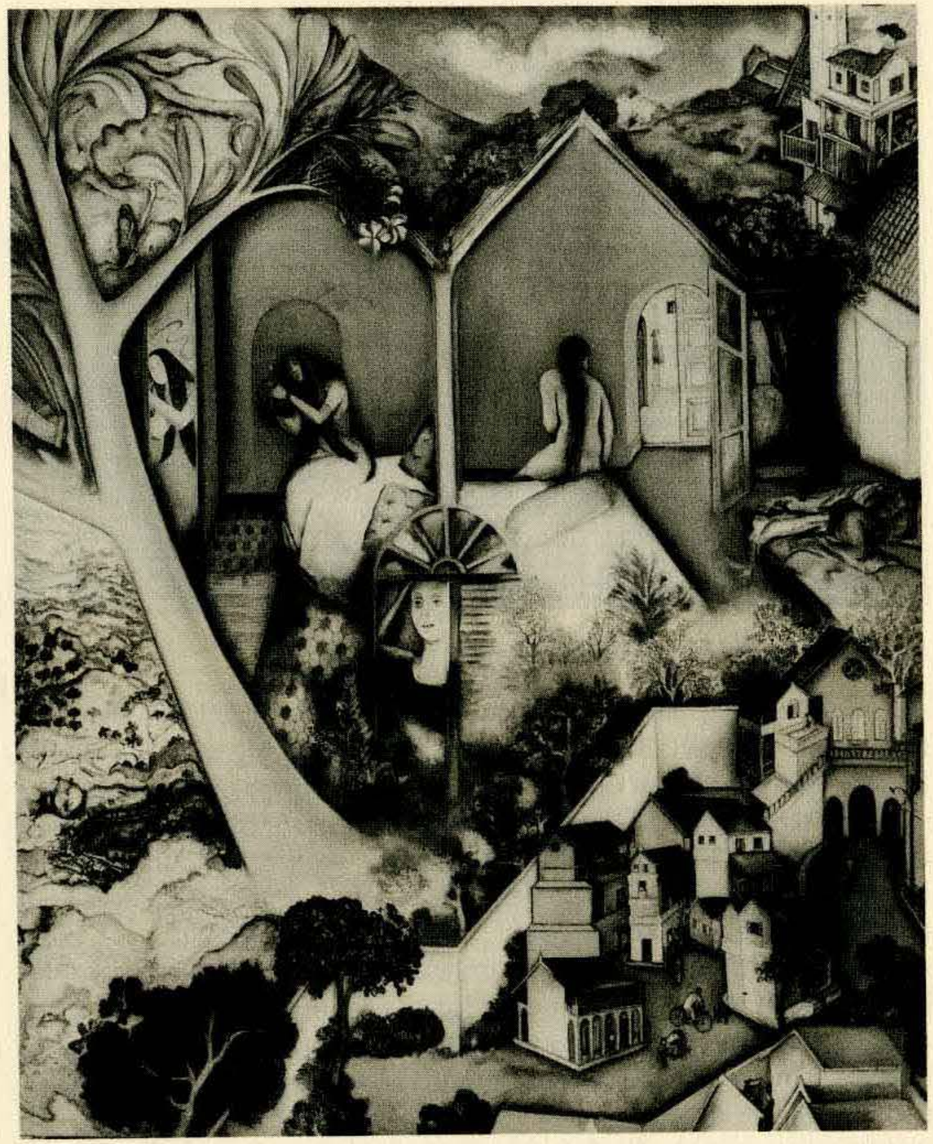

*Figure 6.6*. About Waiting and Wandering, *G. M. Sheikh, 1981*.

In *Returning Home after a Long Absence* (Figure 6.5), I used the community ghetto against a wall tall enough to distance it from the factory that lay beyond, angels and prophet from a famous Persian miniature, mother's portrait from a photograph. This was followed by a series of walls and the redolent vegetation I would see at the edge of town that made me imagine things as a child. Into *Kin* (Plate 9), I brought people related to me and the environment I knew, or created


*Figure 6.7.* City for Sale, *G. M. Sheikh, 1981–84.*

from what I knew. But it was with *About Waiting and Wandering* (Figure 6.6) that I set off on a journey mixing space and time in a spinning structure. *Speaking Street* (Plate 10) has a claustrophobic enclosure relieved by a little window where a woman lies on a charpoy, and it makes allusions to local beliefs that dogs can perceive angels even though they do not cast shadows. In *Revolving Routes* (Plate 11), there are the world of childhood (on the top left) and the Baroda home, part of the British residency (on the top right), and below it the college where I teach, along with "quotes" of images of Brueghel, Balthus, Mughal miniatures, and Baroda street and city images, and on the bottom left a speaking tree with heads of friends and teachers. The largest painting, *City for Sale* (Figure 6.7), is set in Baroda against the backdrop of communal riots, which threaten to rip the city apart. The psychic brutalization manifests itself in violence and absurdities—like the Hindi cinema.

What preoccupies me now is the epic trajectory of time and space. In the *Mahabharata* or *Kathasaritsagara,*[15] stories run within stories at several levels, each connected yet independent. In the most recent series of paintings, images of my worlds, rather than flowing into each other in fluid space, now hop over sectioned areas. The latest deals with horizontal panels on a vertical plane spilling into each other (Plate 12). And where they do not, a man bores a hole to see into the heart of another man in the panel below.



NOTES

1. Named after the British Indologist George Birdwood.

2. Muslim saint whose shrines are all over Gujarat.

3. Center of pilgrimage of Vaishnava sect where idyllic landscapes are sold as souvenirs along with ritual images of the deity Shrinathji.

4. Technique of painting evolved by turn-of-the-century Bengali artists after Japanese ink drawing, using washes of watercolor to create misty effects.

5. Borrowed (with apologies) from the following translation by Arun Kolatkar of the Marathi saint-poet Janabai's poem:

I eat god
I drink god
I sleep on god . . .
God is within
God is without and moreover
There is god to spare.

*Vrishchik* 1 (September–October 1970), ed. Gulam Sheikh and Bhupen Khakhar, Baroda.

6. Timothy Hyman characterizes pre- and post-Renaissance as arts of light and shadow, respectively. Cast shadows did not appeal to most art of the world, including Indian. Having known Europeans through illusionistic pictures, the Chinese expected them to have their bodies divided into dark and light complexions.

7. Phrase borrowed from W. G. Archer, *Rajput Miniatures from the Collection of Edwin Binney, 3d* (Portland, Oregon: Portland Art Museum, 1968), 26.

8. School of painting in Rajasthan known for hunting scenes.

9. School of painting in the Punjab Hills renowned for its delicate sensibility.

10. Part of Rajasthan adjacent to Jaipur where numerous mansions belonging to mercantile communities were painted in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

11. Painted scrolls illustrating stories of the mother goddess Chandi, the snake goddess Manasa, and a Muslim saint, respectively.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. See Stuart Cary Welch, *India: Art and Culture* 1300–1900 (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1985), 252 and 375.

15. Original compiled in Sanskrit by Somadeva in 1063–81, based on traditions dating back to the first century B.C. (Somadeva Bhatta, *The Katha Sarit Sagara: or, Ocean of the Streams of Story*. Translated by C. H. Tawney. 2d ed. 2 vols. [Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1968]. This is an abridged version; the full text in translation is *The Ocean of Story*. [London: C. J. Sawyer Ltd., 1924–28].)

*Plate 1.*

*Plate 1. Aerial view of Piazza Pubblico, Siena.*

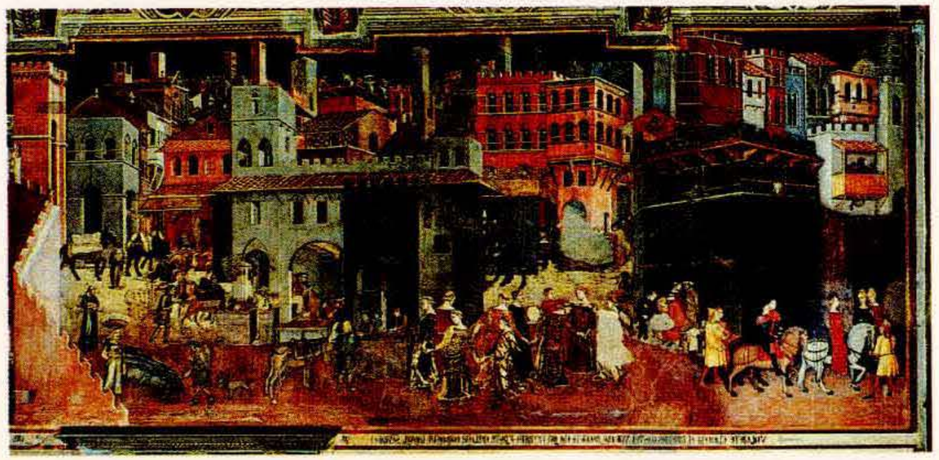

*Plate 2.*

*Plate 4.*

*Plate 2.* Effeti del buon governo in città (Effects of Good Government), *Ambrogio Lorenzetti, 1338–40.*

*Plate 4.* Storie della vita di Cristo (Story of the Passion), *Duccio di Buoninsegna, 1308–11.*

*Plate 3.*

*Plate 3.* St. Francis Bears Witness to the Christian Faith before the Sultan *(panel from an altarpiece), Sassetta (or Stefano di Giovanni), 1437–44, wood. Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees, The National Gallery, London.*

*Plate 5.*

*Plate 6.*

*Plate 5.* Woman at Her Toilet Wringing Water from Her Hair, *Indian (Rajput, Punjab Hills), Basohli, early eighteenth century, watercolor on paper. Ross-Coomaraswamy Collection, 17.2798. Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.*

*Plate 6.* Pabuji ka Phad, *scroll of heroic exploits of Pabuji, with narrator and accompanying performer, Rajasthan, contemporary.*

*Plate 7.* Assassination of Indira Gandhi, *Ajit Chitrakar, 1985, narrative scroll from Midnapur, West Bengal.*

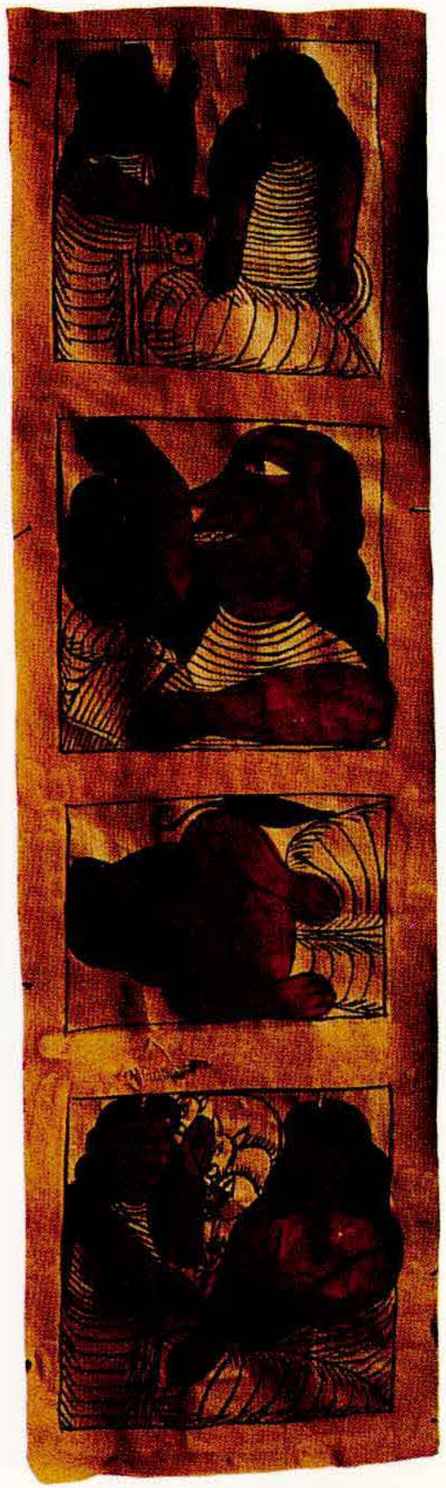

*Plate 8.* Chakshudana Pata, *Dukhushyam Chitrakar, 1985.*

*Plate 9.*

*Plate 9.* Kin, *G. M. Sheikh, 1979.*

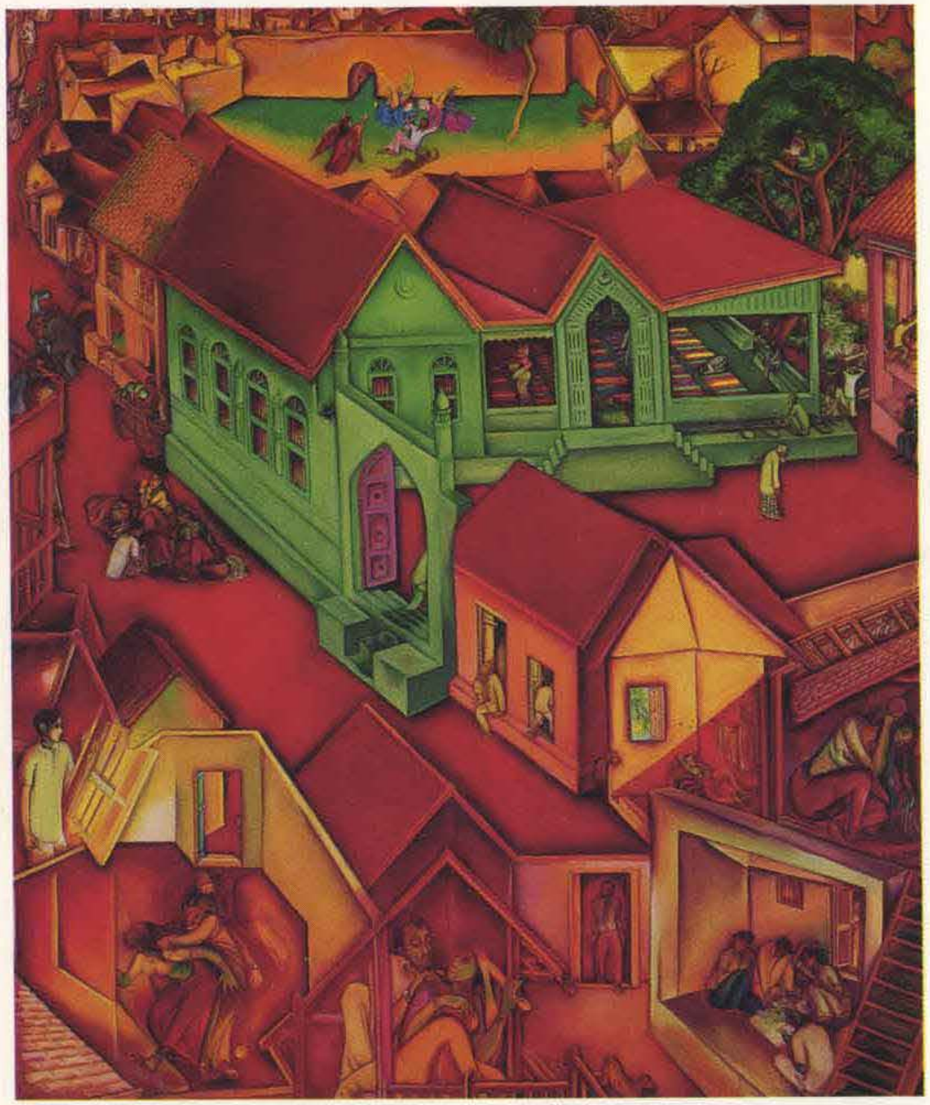

*Plate 10.*

*Plate 10.* Speaking Street, *G. M. Sheikh, 1981.*

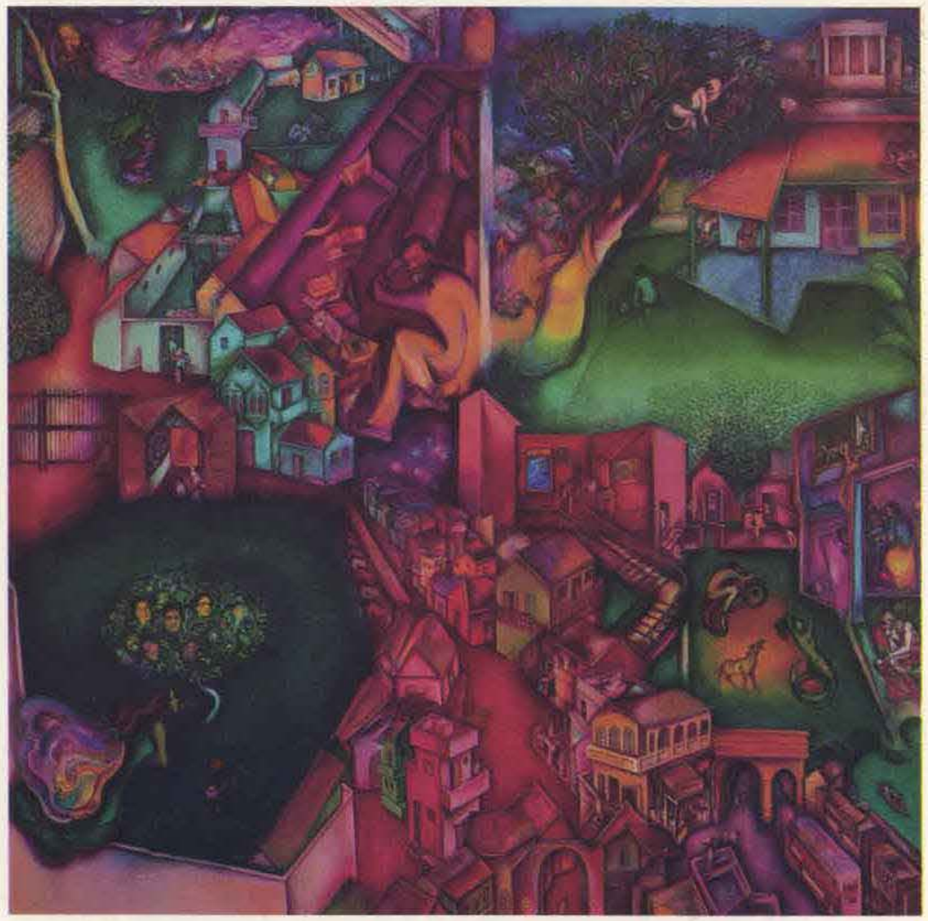

*Plate 11.*

*Plate 11.* Revolving Routes, *G. M. Sheikh, 1981.*

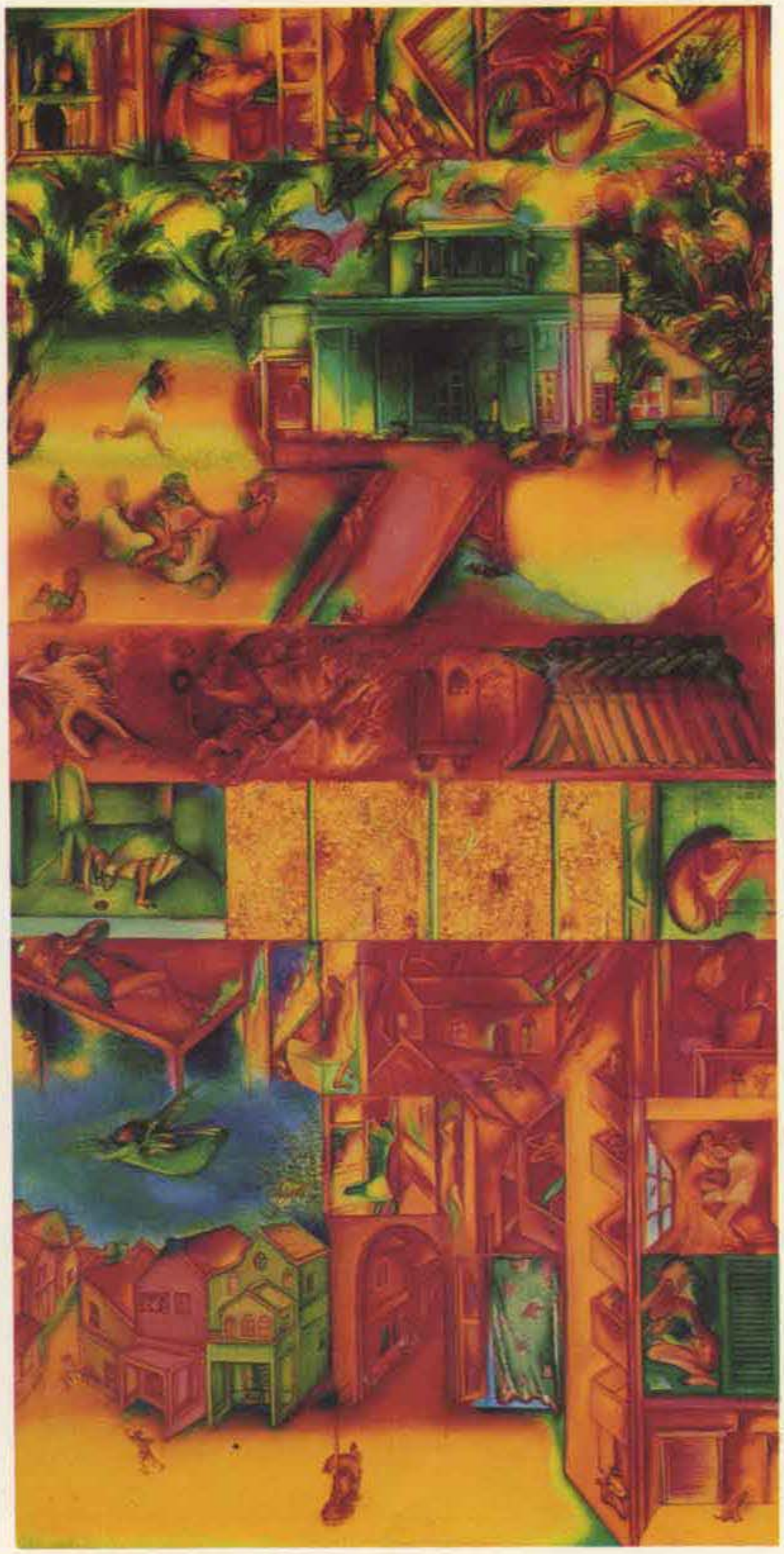

*Plate 12.*

*Plate 12.* Summer Diary, *G. M. Sheikh, 1985.*