

## Can Works of Art Promote Change?

### Core Competency: Social Responsibility and Ethics

*Hunarmand*, which means “one who has a talent” (figure 6.29), is one of a series of ten large-scale works on loose canvas by contemporary Indian artist Nilima Sheikh (neeh-lih-MAH SHAIYKH). The title of the series, “Each night put Kashmir in your dreams,” comes from a line of a poem by Kashmiri poet Agha Shahid Ali. The paintings are meant to be hung from the ceiling rather than placed against walls and recall traditional Asian scroll paintings. In each of the works, Sheikh asked the viewer to remember Kashmir, a disputed region in Southeast Asia, known during the artist’s childhood as an idyllic paradise, but now wracked by conflict.

Sheikh focused on the beauty and talent of Kashmiri craftspeople, some of whom are from historical references and others of whom are people the artist knows. She presented a flattened view in vertical strips of boxes, each containing peaceful views of the people performing different trades. Using tempera’s semitransparent properties, Sheikh built up thin, luminous layers of paint, melding one box into another. Then, she crafted distinct details, employing tempera’s linear qualities. The whole, given the traditional format and translucent nature of the tempera paint, presents us with a seemingly dreamlike view of a world that no longer exists.

Consider these questions:

- Many people would respond to Sheikh’s work aesthetically (see Chapter 2). Does this fact make Sheikh’s message of loss more or less powerful? Why?
- Is art, and the medium of painting in particular, a good forum in which to raise complex social/political/religious/ethnic issues that we face in our world? Why or why not?
- What is the civic responsibility of painters like Sheikh to address such complex issues in their art?
- How much of a personal responsibility do individual viewers have to respond in some tangible way to the issues that artists raise in their art?
- Do you believe that art can promote change? Why or why not?
- The story of *The Great Wall of Los Angeles*, discussed in Chapter 6, showed how murals are often created to provide discourse and communicate to a broad mass of viewers

because they are produced for public spaces that have nothing to do with art like parks, airports, and plazas. Sheikh’s work was shown in a museum. Does this fact—whether a work is displayed in a non-art or museum space—alter how you answered any of the previous questions?



**FIGURE 6.29.** Nilima Sheikh. *Hunarmand (One Who Has a Talent)*. 2014. Casein tempera on canvas, 10' × 6'.