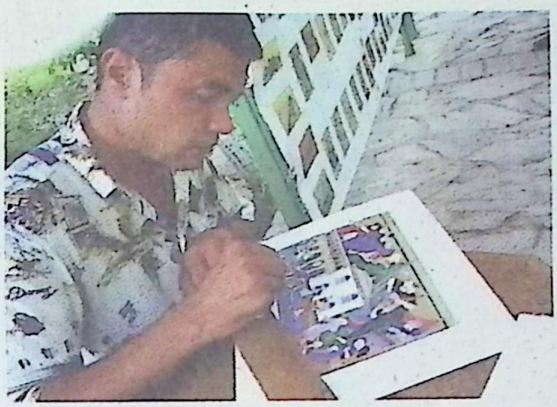
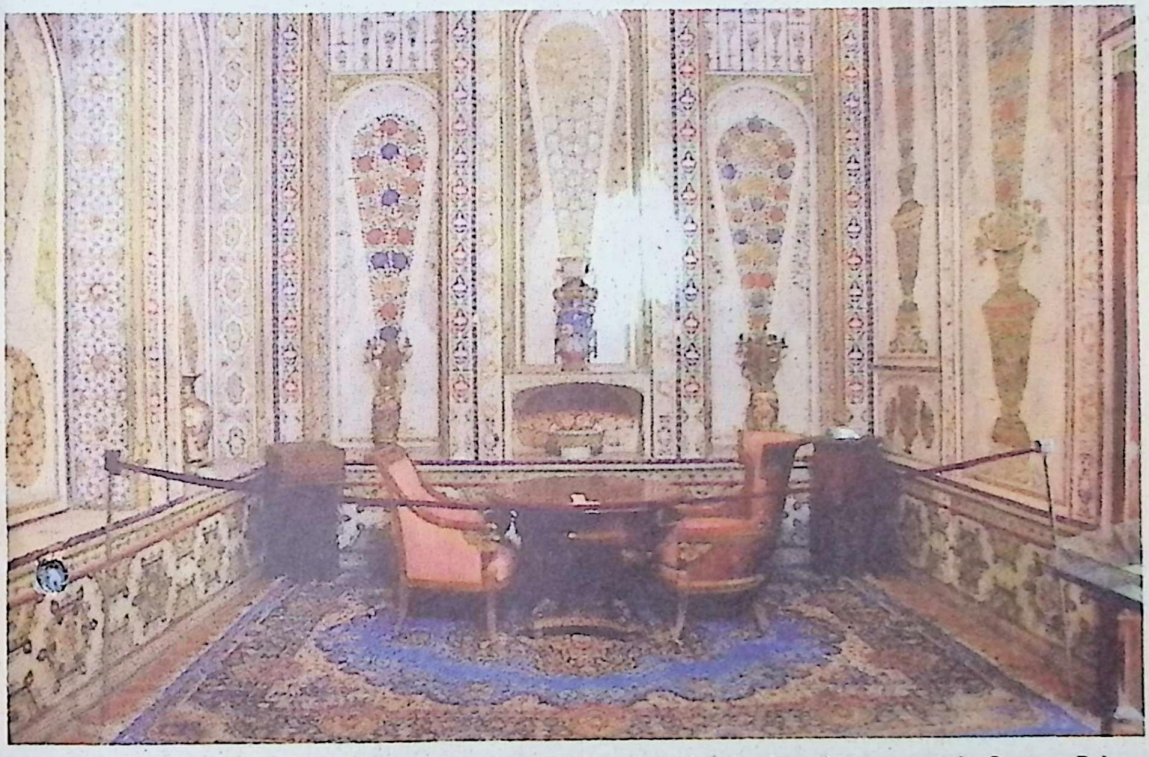
To the south of the palace grounds, strolling through paths edged with roses we come to a high pavilion like structure, the Harem, overlooking a lake. While the official wives remained in the city palace, the Emir used to frolick with his concubines here. After the Bolshevik overthrow, the Emir and his four wives went into exile to Afghanistan under the wings of the King in Kabul (who later would himself seek asylum in Rome!). Presently, the Harem is the Museum of Applied Arts. Here we see colourful examples of the tribal art of silk and cotton embroidered quilts and covers called Suzani, now hanging on the walls.

I am glad that a place of frivolity and excess in the Emir's time is now the people's heritage and form part of Bokhara's History Museum. What made the day complete for me, though, was



Miniature artist at work on Summer Palace grounds.



Embellished walls of a waiting room at the Summer Palace.

encountering, while walking back through the garden, some Miniature painters who had put up outdoor stalls displaying their work as they worked on new ones.

I stood enthralled behind one as his brush stroked to life figures from the past, from mythology, legend and poetry. The rose scented air of the present afternoon and the peacocks cry breaking the silence of the past, all seemed to mingle with the colours on his paper. I bought the painting that he had just finished, an illustration of a verse from Shahnama by the Persian poet Ferdousi. The Book of Kings. The heroic and non-heroic lives of mere rulers immortalised by the godlike gift of poet and artists.

My artist put away his brush, blew his mortal breath over his still wet signature, took a photo of it, and rolled up his immortal work for me with a smile. I was surprised and relieved to hear the price quoted as much less than in Bokhara's inner city shops. However, I indulged myself by thinking that I might have bought it at any price. After all, I was carrying with me not just a freshly painted haiku, but the best of a miniaturist's art: a moment distilled. ■