Learn about some of the many references embedded within Nilima Sheikh's double-sided painting *We Must Bear* (2014).

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A. The title of the work comes from a poem, appearing here at upper left, by the Kashmiri poet Nund Rishi (Nooruddin Noorani, 1377–c. 1438). Nund Rishi has been identified with the Rishi order, a religious tradition shaped by the diverse beliefs and philosophical currents of medieval Kashmir and associated with values of peace, tolerance, and interfaith equality. (Rishi means "sage" in Sanskrit.) Nund Rishi conveyed his teachings through short poems known as *shruks*, which he wrote in Kashmiri so that his work was accessible to local audiences.

Poetry has long been central to Sheikh's practice. Excerpts from poems, as well as texts about poets, appear throughout her interconnected body of work, where they provide another means of shaping and extending the image. On one side of the nearby work *Construction Site*, Sheikh quotes the historian Chitralekha Zutshi's description of Nund Rishi as a "figure central to the memory and meaning of *Kashmiriyat* [the region's traditional cultural ethos]," whose "writings have had a significant impact on the discourse on Kashmiri Muslim identities."

B. The lower-right passage of this scroll references the Kashmiri author Mirza Waheed's debut novel, *The Collaborator* (2011). Living in a village near the contested Line of Control between India and Pakistan, the novel's unnamed protagonist is a young person inducted by the Indian army, and tasked with counting and clearing the bodies of those killed along the border. Among the dead he fears there may be his childhood friends, who had crossed the border into Pakistan to receive military training and join the armed struggle for Kashmiri independence.

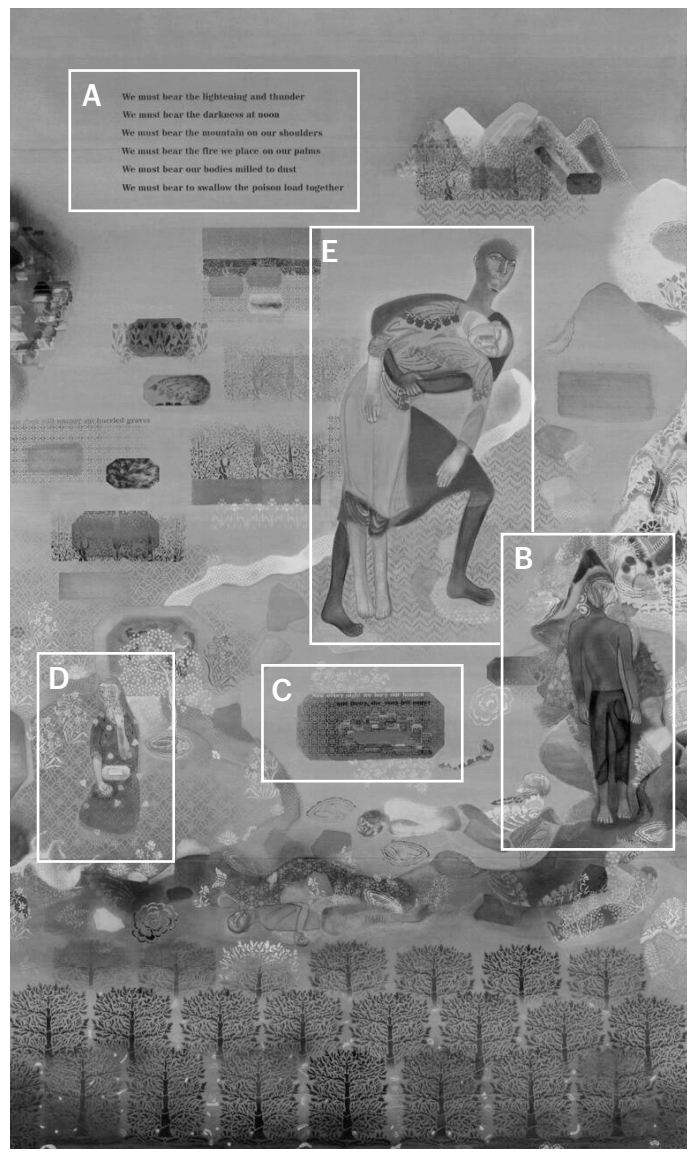
Here, Sheikh depicts him surveying the remains, evoking his horror and guilt as he performs this labor at the behest of the state. On the scroll's other side, the artist includes an excerpt from the novel describing the narrator making a makeshift "martyrs' graveyard."

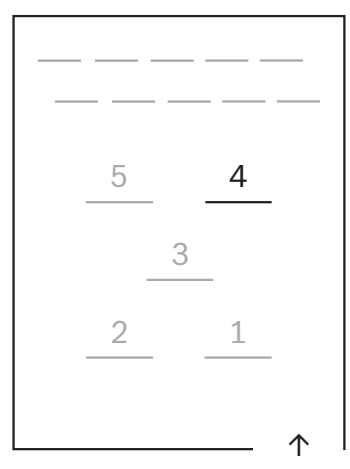
C. Populating this composition are repeating, octagonal lozenge forms that represent the anonymous graves marking the area along the Line of Control. Sheikh has overlaid some with stenciled floral and vegetal motifs, interweaving the natural landscape with these memorial forms. The central lozenge incorporates houses and geometric patterning created through Sheikh's use of Sanjhi, the North Indian tradition of hand-cut paper stencils. The artist developed this technique in collaboration with artisans in Mathura, Uttar Pradesh, and it has become integral to her practice.

Above the central lozenge is a fragment from Agha Shahid Ali's poem "The Country Without a Post Office" (1997): "Now every night we bury our houses / and theirs, the ones left empty." In bringing Ali's poetry of displacement and political violence into dialogue with the words of Nund Rishi from nearly six centuries earlier, Sheikh connects histories of suffering, place, and belonging across Kashmir's past and present.

D. At lower left, amid a patterned landscape of flourishing flora and decaying fauna, a kneeling female figure weeps red tears. A lozenge form rests in her lap; behind her is a child in a cradle, its body delineated by Sheikh's signature stenciling. The weeping woman is one of the many motifs from across art history that Sheikh employs in her practice. Though the figure here symbolizes grief, others signifying hope appear elsewhere—as in a woman lighting a hearth in the nearby *Son et Lumière*.

E. In the center of the composition, a figure appears to struggle uphill under the weight of a seemingly lifeless body. Sheikh's initial depiction was inspired by a painting, made during the Persian Safavid dynasty (1501–1722), of Qabil and Habil, the Islamic counterparts of the brothers Cain and Abel. Though Sheikh did not incorporate this biblical narrative into her own work, she was drawn to the formal and emotive aspects of this art-historical motif. Together with the weeping woman at lower left, these figures extend an enduring visual language of suffering while giving individual form to grief and loss.



Nilima Sheikh. *We Must Bear*. 2014. Casein tempera on canvas. The Art Institute of Chicago, through prior purchase from the Mary and Leigh Block Fund, 2014.636.

1. **Valley** 2003/2010
2. **Construction Site** 2009–10
3. **Son et Lumière** 2006/2010
4. **We Must Bear** 2014
5. **Dying Dreaming** 2007/2010