

Truck Art and Poetry: A Story in Motion

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Introduction

The truck art of Pakistan has received world fame over the last many years. The moving art vehicles with their colorful and flamboyant imagery and poetry fascinate people from all over the world. The decorative motifs and images of birds, mythical creatures and the landscape of snowy mountains with a small cottage in it are some of the few aspects of truck art with which we are now familiar. Each truck carries several kinds of art elements used on its various parts to decorate it and for each element of art a different craftsperson is involved. Hence, a truck has to be decorated by a group of artisans with their own set of skills.

A truck must have all these decorative details at different parts of the truck. On the back of the truck it must have one large image of either a landscape, a known political or film star or a Sufi saint or a mythical or poetic image of a certain kind of philosophy or idea popular among truck drivers, owners or even society. The sides usually have smaller bands of various popular decorative patterns painted in certain rhythmic style with other information written about the truck company. The front of the truck has a lot of jewel like metallic elements and is decorated with scarves with gold edging to make it bridal in its entirety. Also, if there is any religious text or image, it is always on the top front of the truck referred to as *Taj* or crown (Khan and Vandal, p. 9. 2013).¹

The Historical Context of Truck Art and Poetry

The known history of truck art is quite recent but the images tell a different story all together. It is believed that truck art started in the 1900s to replace the art on older horse drawn carriages. The tradition was to decorate these carriages as elaborately as the status of the person. It is assumed that Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) is the birthplace of this elaborate art form. The *ustads* (an expert) and artisans who were the fresco painters of palaces and *havelis* (mansions) of the time started this trend by decorating the trucks (Khan and Vandal, p. 9. 2013).²

The truck designs reflect similarities to various art styles evolving out of the colonial period of India and creating an amalgamation of various ideas and styles of that time. These similarities give us a new way to look and study the patterns of truck art and understand how they may have evolved to be the way they are today. We can see the reflections and glimpses of various art styles in truck art in the form of post-Mughal fresco art, the Company art, ideologies of Swadeshi and Shantiniketan movements in association with Bengal School of Arts, style of Kalighat paintings of the bazaars of Calcutta and last but not the least the distinct resemblance in decorative patterns of folk paintings of various villages with the trucks decorative imagery.



Figure 1a

Patochitra: A Bengali Folk Art. Source: Flickr.com. Retrieved from:

http://farm3.static.flickr.com/2490/4149230921_5d2050b4b4.jpg
Last visited: 30th October 2015.

The 1900's were the time of overall change in the Indian sub-continent. Modern art was taking over the world by storm. It was also the time of the industrial age and its impact was also felt on the arts. The Bengal School of Arts and its ideology associated with movements like Swadeshi and Shantiniketan movements gave its parallels to art of this region. The idea to focus on the poor and downtrodden of the region rather than the rich was a popular subject of the time. The art, which came out at that time, was looking at rural India, its folk art and its rural landscape and create an inspiration for future artistic styles with homegrown modernism (Figures 1a and 1b). Sinha writes:



Figure 1b

Truck art inspired from folk art. Source: THAAP Archives

“In the 1920s, the emergence of Shantiniketan as an idealized, rural Indian Bauhaus validated a number of select strategies. Rabindranath Tagore’s art school foregrounded the idea of the rural over the urban, of art as vocation

as opposed to profession; a depersonalized, 'pure' art as opposed to an image of sensuous gratification; of the artist as witness rather than protagonist. Moreover, the artist's investigations into the human condition, spirituality and the idealized poor, sought to create a new language, one that was inscribed within the specific pictorial notion of a land and its people" (Sinha, p. 3. 2003).³

The art that evolved out of the Shantiniketan movement made way for future art trends in popular art as well. Indian folk art was used as an inspiration to create art that was uniquely Indian and represented the spiritual ideas and values of its people. Art trends set at that time may clearly be seen in the popular truck art produced in Pakistan even after Partition in a form of its own homegrown representation of its people and culture (Figures 2a and 2b)



Figure 2a

Four Mandalas of the Vajravali; Tibet; Sakya School; ca. 1456; Pigments. Source: Rubin Museum. Retrieved from: http://rubinmuseum.org/images/content/Andrea_Mandala.jpg. Last Visited: 30th October 2015

The Kalighat painting, which was in practise at that time, was also based in its style on folk art and its urban transformation in the modern arts of India. The age of mechanical reproduction in the form of litho-prints and wood cuts, brought a change in the way people made art. Integrating folk art in popular genres and mingling it with modern trends of the times balanced the change in the new emerging art (Jain, p. 9. 2003)⁴. As Jain writes:



Figure 2b

Truck art inspired from folk art. Source: THAAP Archives

"The story of Kalighat painting is the story of transformation of a folk art form into a popular genre It absorbed the new manners and customs of the British settlers, the revivalistic exercises of Mughal court culture and the new avatar of Sanskrit drama on the proscenium stage. Kalighat painting which arose out of these composite cultural circumstances grew to be at once urban, uninhibited, innovative and liberal" (Ibid).⁵

The use of folk art was as much a resistance as it was a statement of the people in changing times. The Kalighat paintings were creating waves by making comments on society and its morals, making social critique, bringing in folk art to make an Indian statement about its environs and its changing times. Kalighat brought in its fold different kinds of local genre of arts, popular ideas and political issues, for example; Indian myth, folk tales, national heroes, religious heroes, Indian folk paintings and such others. It is also important to note that Kalighat paintings were very popular among the common people and were bought as souvenirs and gifts from the bazaars of Calcutta by the travellers. As Jain writes:

“It is agreed by most scholars that Kalighat *Pats* (paintings) were among the most favorite mementos carried home by the pilgrims, visitors, traders and tourists who came to Calcutta from within and outside Bengal in the 19th and early 20th centuries” (Jain, p. 47. 1999)⁶

Figure 3a (L)

Kalighat painting style. Source: Mapin Publications. Retrieved from:

http://www.mapinpub.in/book_images/Kalighat-Paintings-04.jpg. Last visited: 29th October 2015

This gives us an idea that this popular art form travelled wide and far throughout India and must have inspired other artists from other parts of India to incorporate the style into their own art as it has an inherent Indian-ness in its imagery that must have appealed to all Indians. We can see the same thing happening in truck art as it also uses all aspects of folk arts and its integration with modern day concerns of our lives on the surface of the truck to express the views of the truck owner or the driver about life. The style of art produced in truck art is very similar to the Kalighat painting style as it is creating a cultural flow or diffusion of sorts among these art forms (Figures 3a, 3b).

Figure 3b (R)

Truck art inspired from Kalighat painting style. Source: THAAP Archives



The fresco painting style and patterns have also had an impact on truck art. As the first truck artists were considered to be fresco painters, they brought in many decorative elements of fresco painting in truck art. We see many similar floral patterns on trucks, which were used in the fresco paintings (Figures 4a, 4b). Earlier trucks were mostly decorated with hand paintings with few other elements in it, which were carved wooden doors, metallic jewelry for the truck interior and exterior in the form of bells and chains.



Figure 4a

Fresco Painting from Mohalla Sethian Peshawar. Source: THAAP Archives



Figure 4b

Inspiration from fresco art on truck art. Source: THAAP Archives

Finally, we see a strong influence of rural folk art painting on truck art. There is an uncanny familiarity between the patterns and style. The birds such as a peacock and fish are painted in various stylistic modes as a decorative pattern. Many floral patterns are almost the same in appearance and style. This cultural fusion of various art forms is conspicuously visible through the art produced on trucks (Figures 5).



Figure 5

Madhubani Folk Painting. Source: Indian Artisan Online. Retrieved from: http://www.indianartisonline.com/asset/cmsimage/product/03_460_432.jpg. Last Visited: 26th October 2015

The Artists

Many people work upon one truck as every inch of it has to be decorated and crafted in various ways. Hence, each kind of decorative element has its own *ustads*. The person responsible for visualizing the whole project of the entire truck is the main *ustad* who works with other artisans and *ustads* under his supervision to produce the final art on the surface of one entire truck. He conceives the entire truck art according to the ideas of the owner of the truck and its driver.

A truck *ustad*, Alif Gul Sarhadi says:

“The masters of this art know that making the trucker happy is of paramount importance. I usually spend a whole day with the driver before developing a plan for decorating the truck. One needs to know the origin of the driver, his religious persuasion, his interests in life, things he enjoys, the colors he likes and any other information telling of his character. A truck needs to reflect not just the wishes but also the personality of its owner. That is what I try to do and that is what I teach my students” (Adnan. 2014)⁷

Truck designing is an expensive business and can take up to Rs. 5 lakh to decorate one truck. As one of the *ustads* explained, “Call it what you will, decorating trucks is big business, haulage firms and lorry owners shell out \$5,000, even \$10,000 a time to have their vehicles adorned” (AFP, 2013).⁸ Hence, an entire bazaar or a *gali* as it is called in the local language is setup, with its *ustads* and artisans catering to various aspects of truck decoration in various cities where truck art is being produced. As time has passed since the independence of Pakistan, truck art has evolved and developed itself into many kinds of art forms. The artists have developed their own niche in the evolving truck art industry. There are artists who paint the truck and then there are artists who make various decorative elements used in decorating the truck. They all work in their own workshops and create various kinds of art for the truck.

As previously mentioned, earlier trucks were mostly hand painted and had very few decorative elements. Now, the trucks have various components such as painting, metallic elements, plastic elements, bulbs,

stickers and such others. For each of these decorative art elements, a separate *ustad* is working with his team of artisans. These *ustads* and artisans have evolved the truck art since 1947 and used popular ideas of the common man of Pakistan and translated them into their own vocabulary of art

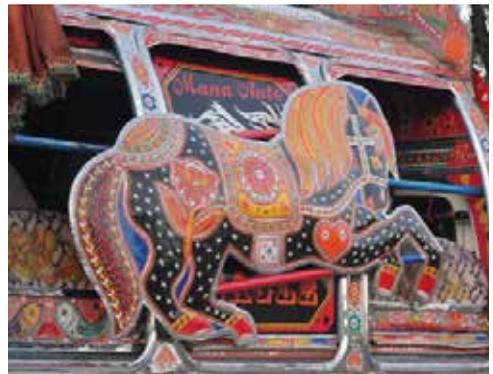


Figure 6

Artistic expression
of popular mindset
of society. Source:
THAAP Archives

and poetry. The artistic expression of the popular mindset of society is the backbone of truck art in Pakistan (Figure 6).

Truck Drivers and Owners

The entire truck is like a decorative bride for the driver as he spends his days and nights with the truck (Figure 7). As Elias writes, "Trucks are seen not just as female, sexual or romantic objects but as partners or wives" (Elias, p. 126. 2011).⁹ Therefore, he decorates it as his home or a bride. Some truckers hang scarves of bright colors on the side mirrors of the truck; they even attach female hair wigs on the side mirrors to make the truck look more feminine. All trucks wear decorative jewelry as proposed by the driver and owner of the truck. The jewelry is in the form of bells and chains that hang from various parts of the truck and jingle as the truck is driven on the road just like a woman walking with an anklet with bells in it.



Figure 7

Truck decorated as a bride. Source: THAAP Archives

Truck Art and Poetic Expression of Common People

The decorative patterns and designs of the trucks are usually according to the area they have been prepared and depict the styles of their regions. The trucks of Rawalpindi have a lot of heavy metallic art on them beside hand painted imagery. The trucks of KPK are different from others as they have heavily carved wooden doors (Figure 8). They look unique and different as the doors with their Swati wooden carvings make them exceptional and one of their kind. The trucks which come from Karachi have one feature unique to them -- they have a very distinctive seascape on their back and many flashing bulbs, glass and mirrors (Figure 9). These trucks travel from Karachi to Khyber and display their unique features and expressions to fellow travellers. The trucks from Quetta usually are very large with heavy and ornate decoration (Adnan, 2014).¹⁰

Figure 8

Carved wooden door
on a truck from KPK.
Source: THAAP
Archives

The poetry on the trucks is also inspired by cultural and popular ideas. Each truck has witty and amusing lines written usually on its back, which a person can read and enjoy while driving behind the truck. The owner or the driver according to their taste usually chooses the poetry. The poetry or the one-liners are part of the entire decoration of the truck art and design. There are artists who sit and design these one-liners or the popular poetry, which is expressing usually a very literal emotion, idea or view to its readers about the truck driver (Figure 10). Adnan explains:

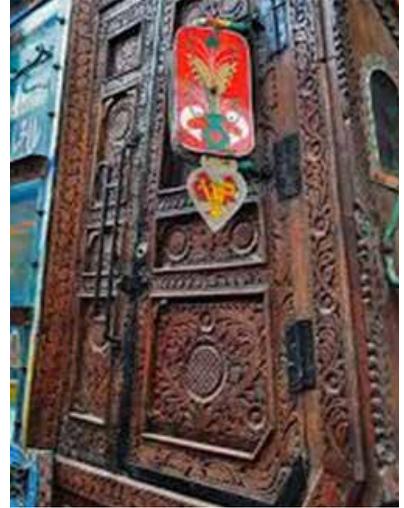


Figure 9

Seascape on a
truck from Karachi.
Source: THAAP
Archives

“Trucks are considered to be female, beautiful and even sensual. It follows naturally that poetry is used to describe the virtues of these treasured vehicles. Obviously, this ‘poetry’ is rarely, if ever, of a high literary quality but its immediacy and sentimentality makes it an enduring part of Pakistani popular culture, cutting across social strata” (Adnan, 2014).¹¹



Conclusion

Truck art has remained uniquely Pakistani even though it is a pre-Partition craft. It is so because it has become the popular expression of the common man of this country. It has taken the shape of art that reflects all that is happening and yet cannot be said openly but can be expressed through art. Pakistani society is based on traditional cultural values where one never openly states one’s opinion but talks in riddles or symbolism to express one self. Hence,

Figure 10

Poetic impression
on trucks. Source:
Batwa Baatein.
Retrieved from:

<https://batwabaatein.files.wordpress.com/2014/08/truck-art-2226496749846.jpg>. Last visited: 30th October 2015



common people of various parts of Pakistan communicate with each other and also discover what is common and what is different among them through this popular genre of art. It is a walking satire on every aspect of our cultural lifestyle just as Kalighat paintings were in the bazaars of Calcutta. It has kept the traditions set by the Shantiniketan movement to uphold the local folk arts and culture intact through its vibrant and lively art. Hence, we see clearly that truck art is a fusion of many different art forms.

Perhaps the most important thing about truck art is that it is still maintains its historical links to popular arts of our land and has played an important part in making those ideas and styles part of our present day art vocabulary. Truck art has also to this day preserved the system of *ustad* and *shagird* (apprentice) from our historical/traditional way of working in arts. The craftsmen or artisans as they are called today were considered the backbone of the art of the masses in colonial times. As Mathur writes: "The leading critic and art reformer E. B. Havell similarly viewed the craftsman as India's most valuable asset, "as essential to the progress of humanity as the development of the mechanical science", and saw the products of his labor, which he called the "art of the masses", as the foundation of good living and a civilized life" (Mathur, p. 46. 2011).¹² This way of working is most probably the reason truck art has survived to this day and has been able to be preserved in the same way as earlier art forms, ideas and philosophies have, as many different *ustads* and *shagird* are putting their heart and soul in its creation and ultimately creating an epic art form that touches the heart of every Pakistani because of its multi-faceted history that is surviving in its colorful and vibrant art. As Mathur writes:

"For them, the craftsman was central to the problem of the creative and intellectual status of the country; his degraded condition reflected not only Britain's political power and material prosperity but also the inability of India to attain its moral vision and spiritual destiny" (Mathur, p. 46. 2011).¹³

Theses *ustads* have been saving the spiritual vision of our eternal arts and are the expression of our culture in this part of the world. They represent the true sentiment of the masses that have been preserved in the visual cultural history of our land through art that is in constant motion.

Endnotes

- 1 Khan, Samra M. and Vandal, Sajida. 2013. p. 9. Truck Art. *Handmade: Introducing the Intricacies of Craft Skills*. UNESCO, Islamabad.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Sinha, Gayatri. 2003. p. 3. *Indian Art: An Overview*. Rupa and Company, New Delhi.
- 4 Jain, Jyotindra. 2003. p. 9. Kalighat Painting: Other Perspectives. *Indian Art: An Overview*. Rupa and Company, New Delhi
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Jain, Jyotindra. 1999. Kalighat Paintings. *Images from a Changing World*. Mapin Publishing Private Limited, Ahmedabad.
- 7 Adnan, Ally. 2014. The Art of Loving. The Friday Times. 12 September 2014. Available at <<http://www.thefridaytimes.com/tft/the-art-of-loving/>> Accessed on 16th October 2015.
- 8 AFP. 2013. Pakistan's Truck Art Masters Fret over NATO Withdrawal. Dawn. December 31st 2013. Available at <<http://www.dawn.com/news/1077507/pakistans-truck-art-masters-fret-over-nato-withdrawal>> Accessed on 25th October 2015.
- 9 Elias, Jamal J. 2011. *On Wings Of Diesel. Trucks, Identity and Culture in Pakistan*. Oneworld Publications, Oxford, England.
- 10 Adnan, Ally. 2014. The Art of Loving. The Friday Times. 12 September 2014. Available at <<http://www.thefridaytimes.com/tft/the-art-of-loving/>> Accessed on 16th October 2015.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Mathur, Saloni. 2011. India by Design. *Colonial History and Cultural Display*. Orient Blackswan. New Delhi.
- 13 Ibid.