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# THE BOLD AND THE BEAUTIFUL: PORTRAITURE IN PAKISTANI TRUCK ART

by

FARAH ALI

Under the Direction of Susan Richmond, PhD

## ABSTRACT

The evolution of portraiture in Pakistani truck painting is indicative of strong global influences and local folk elements coming together. Without much patronage or formal vocational guidance, truck painters have inadvertently created a contemporary pop culture phenomenon internationally recognized today as distinctly Pakistani. Truck art and its artists' role in carving out a national identity for Pakistan is a postmodernist continuation of cultural legacies. I argue that truck art has now transcended into a “glocal” entity, more in terms of subject matter than stylistic representation, mainly due to the relentless underappreciated efforts of its artists and that this fusion of the local and the global is most obvious in the burgeoning of truck portraiture.

INDEX WORDS: Glocal, Contemporary, Folk art, Portraiture, Pakistan, Truck art, Pop, Kitsch

THE BOLD AND THE BEAUTIFUL: PORTRAITURE IN PAKISTANI TRUCK ART

by

FARAH ALI

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of the Arts

Georgia State University

2021

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2021

THE BOLD AND THE BEAUTIFUL: PORTRAITURE IN PAKISTANI TRUCK ART

by

FARAH ALI

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Office of Academic Assistance

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Georgia State University

December 2021

## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to my husband, Syed Ali, and my children, Murad and Zafar, for their continuous support and encouragement. I would also like to dedicate this thesis to Rozina Naz, the first female Pakistani truck artist.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The tradition of decorating public modes of transportation in Pakistan is an ancient practice that prevails today in the form of contemporary truck art, an ever-evolving genre of folk painting. Truck artists' ability to constantly evolve, innovate and absorb global mass media influences manifests their contributions relevant in the context of post modernity. This intriguing example of glocal art in the postmodern era has, since the late 1980s, gradually begun to receive scholarly attention. Through a careful examination of the development of truck art's portraiture and its growing global popularity, I hope to add to the conversation. Portraiture, a well-established, striking feature of this genre, sets it apart from decorative vehicular painting in South America, Africa, and other parts of Asia. As a result of global influences, this genre of folk portraiture has undergone a tremendous transformation and hence is a cogent case study for this thesis.

The concept of “glocalization”, which refers to the fusion of local and global elements, is relatively new.<sup>1</sup> The term first appeared in journalistic discourse in the 1990s.<sup>2</sup> To explain this concept further, an ideal example of glocal is the Chapli Kabab Burger at McDonald's Pakistan, a popular local flavor added to the global franchise menu. Contemporary truck painting similarly exemplifies glocal ideas. Its transition from local to glocal has been an interestingly fortuitous process. Truck artists never intended their art to take this course. Nevertheless, their fearless experimentation and willingness to include various global mass media trends has lent the genre a hybridity that has elevated its popularity locally and globally.

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<sup>1</sup> Victor Roudometof, *Glocalization: A Critical Introduction* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Roudometof, *Glocalization: A Critical Introduction*, 2-3.

Since the 1970s truck art has been impacted by global, cross-cultural influences. The influx of Euro-American tourists, rise of mass media particularly Hollywood films in the 1970s and now more recently the bombardment of social media have all been factors in the glocalization process which has rendered the undeniable kitsch element in truck art even stronger. Kitsch - not as Clement Greenberg's outdated diminishing interpretation but as a Jeff-Koons-like playfulness, is ever present in truck art. Previously devalued by critics as vulgar, crude, garish and overly sentimental, kitsch today is widely accepted as contemporary Popular art. With its bright florescent colors, invasive floral and geometric motifs, shiny metallic embellishments, thick crude brush work and flamboyantly painted portraits, mass produced truck art is the embodiment of kitsch. The blending of traditional local and contemporary global aesthetics is what makes truck art glocal. This glocalization attests to its eclectic, resilient, syncretic nature and valid grounds for this contemporary folk art to earn a place in postmodern art historical discourse.

Here, it would be worthwhile to point out the role age old artistic traditions play in shaping the modern-day cultural fabric of a society. Before the modern Western concept of 'art for art's sake' came into existence and was much later introduced to South Asia, craft and folk-art were considered art in the region. In Nicholas Stone's words, "Art in traditional cultures was always linked to excellence in the design and fabrication of artifacts for practical usage."<sup>3</sup> Ornamentation in the applied arts of textiles, metal work, ceramics and book making provides a foundation for contemporary Islamic arts.<sup>4</sup> This decorative ornamentation and calligraphy is what many contemporary highbrow Pakistani artists draw upon as abstractions in their work. The

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<sup>3</sup> Nicholas Stone, "Preservation of Traditional Arts in Asia," *Asian League of Institutes of the Arts, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*, 2016, 1.

<sup>4</sup> Iftikhar Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 32.

contemporary art scene of the region is a protraction of its ancient folk/craft traditions as well as its political history. That is essentially what Pakistani truck art is and yet it is largely considered lowbrow and nonintellectual among the country's elite.

Since the late 1980s Pakistan's truck art has received a considerable amount of attention and has been extensively written about in the local popular press but surprisingly, scholarly research on the intriguing subject is scarce.<sup>5</sup> Professor Durriya Kazi, Chair department of Visual Arts University of Karachi and Dr. Jamal Elias Professor of Religious/South Asian Studies University of Pennsylvania are the only two scholars who have extensively researched Pakistani truck art.

Kazi was first drawn to truck decoration as a topic of research for her Undergraduate dissertation (1978 – 1981) at Kingston University, London.<sup>6</sup> She has been researching and promoting truck art for over forty years and been influential in initiating several truck artists' exhibitions/projects at home and abroad. Kazi has written numerous research papers on the subject and her well documented oral history accounts of several truck painters from all four provinces of Pakistan is undeniably an important scholarly contribution towards the subject, because of which she has been able to offer a compelling theory of genealogical trajectory and origins of truck decoration in the region. In 2011, Elias published "*On Wings of Diesel*", the first and only book so far written on Pakistani truck art. In his book, Elias discusses every aspect of truck painting in great depth, focusing on truck painting in post-independence Pakistan.

Other earlier pieces of scholarly writing on truck decoration are a 1975 article by Hassan Uddin Khan, a 1976 research by Michelle Centlivres Demont and a 1978 doctoral dissertation by

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<sup>5</sup> Durriya Kazi, "Decorated Trucks of Pakistan," First International Convention of Asia Scholars, Netherlands, June 1998, np.

<sup>6</sup> Durriya Kazi, in discussion with the author, July, 2021.

Marie-Benedicte Dutreux.<sup>7</sup> A few other brief but notable scholarly contributions are a 1980 article by Shahid Khan and George W. Rich, Alain Lefebvre's 1989 paper on semiotics of Pakistani truck art and Anna Schmid's 1999 article on truck art as a contested arena. In Kazi and Elias's researches there appears to be a difference of opinion regarding the origins of truck art and methodology of research – a point I will return to later in Chapter 3. Nevertheless, I have found both scholars' contributions on the subject extremely valuable and my research relies heavily on theirs.

I traveled to Karachi (March-April 2021) and conducted in person interviews, with two truck artists, Haider Ali (41 yrs) and Phool Ji (36 yrs) along with several non-governmental volunteers involved in the promotion of truck art/artists. Follow up interviews took place electronically throughout Summer 2021 which enhanced my research. Born and raised in Pakistan and having witnessed firsthand the fast-growing global appeal of truck art, I hope to offer my personal views alongside my field work, as credible contribution towards the subject.

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<sup>7</sup> Jamal J Elias, *On Wings of Diesel: Trucks, Identity and Culture in Pakistan* (Oxford, Oneworld Publications, 2011), 7.

## 2 ORIGINS OF PAKISTANI TRUCK ART

Decorative painting on vehicles is not unique to Pakistan but the way it has evolved and persevered in the country is an intriguing post-colonial, postmodern, glocal phenomenon. Truck art flourished in Pakistan since the country gained its independence from British India in 1947. This art form has experienced a remarkably successful global reception from the late 1980s onward. A unique feature of this truck art are flamboyant portraits accompanied by the signature traditional patterns (geometric/floral, exotic birds, landscapes, and calligraphy). Not all but most trucks, buses and rickshaws are adorned with portraits of celebrities, politicians, and war heroes. What is the significance of these portraits painted on trucks? Why, when, and exactly how did portraiture become part of truck decoration? In order to answer these questions, it is imperative to first analyze the origins of vehicular art in Pakistan.

Whether it is architecture, textiles or furniture, ornamentation and intricate design is embedded in all forms of primordial arts/crafts of the sub-continent.<sup>8</sup> Modes of transportation in the region, likewise, have also always been adorned. According to Durriya Kazi's research, contemporary truck art is a continuation of this deep-rooted tradition which dates back to the Indus Valley's Bronze Age society (2600 -1700 BCE).<sup>9</sup> Compelling evidence does exist of very minimal adornment on river/seafaring boats, and transportation animals during the Indus Valley Civilization. Very basic colored slip and painted designs have been found on bullock cart wheels from Indus Valley excavation sites and interestingly, carts and boats are still crafted in the same manner in present day Pakistan.<sup>10</sup> Transportation animals' fur decorated with henna tattoos or

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<sup>8</sup> Abigail S McGowan, "All That Is Rare, Characteristic or Beautiful, Design and the Defense of Tradition in Colonial India, 1851-1903," *Journal of Material Culture* 10, no. 3 (November 1, 2005): 264.

<sup>9</sup> Durriya Kazi, in discussion with the author, July, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Mark Kenoyer, "Wheeled Vehicles of the Indus Valley Civilization," 2004.  
<https://www.harappa.com/content/wheeled-vehicles-indus-valley-civilization>.

shaved out patterns is a long held tradition as well.<sup>11</sup> Palanquins (that lasted from medieval India, 6<sup>th</sup> century, till the end of Mogul period, 1857),<sup>12</sup> horse drawn carriages and later 19<sup>th</sup> century manually pulled rickshaws,<sup>13</sup> an invention of the British colonists, are examples of earlier forms of decorative transportation. This tradition of beautifying means of public transport has continued even after the advent of technological advancement. The contemporary genre of truck art refers to a range of vehicles including rickshaws, now auto-rickshaws. Light weight three wheeled scooters covered with a vinyl fabric hood, they are exotic miniature specimens of the popular truck culture. Public transport buses and tanker trucks are painted in the same style as well. However, the contemporary version of this traditional folk art began with trucks, hence the term 'truck art'. Due to their sheer size, the art is most evident on trucks.

Karachi, the metropolitan business hub of the country is considered the seat of all truck art activity. An area called Garden, Karachi was the center for truck painting workshops even before Pakistan's independence.<sup>14</sup> A factory had been established in Garden, Karachi by the British merchants of East India Company in 1799.<sup>15</sup> In 1833 land surrounding the factory area was turned into a botanical garden. This factory, sometimes shut down temporarily, remained in use throughout the British era. At the time of Pakistan's independence in 1947, the area was being used as an automotive body making and painting workshop. Truck painting/decoration has been thriving consistently from Garden Karachi ever since. Truck portrait painters mostly from Lahore, decorative painters, wood/mirror craftsmen from Peshawar and Quetta and metal

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<sup>11</sup> Durriya Kazi, "Decorated Trucks of Pakistan," *First International Convention of Asia Scholars, Netherlands*, June 1998, np.

<sup>12</sup> Soma Ghosh, "Palanquins in art: depictions from India," 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Shireen Hyrapiet and Alyson L. Greiner, "Calcutta's Hand-Pulled Rickshaws: Cultural Politics And Place Making In A Globalizing City," *Geographical Review* 102, no. 4 (2012): 409. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41709204>.

<sup>14</sup> Haider Ali, Truck artist, in discussion with the author, March, 2021.

<sup>15</sup> Sohail Ansari, "How a Raj-era factory garden became Karachi's most famous zoo," *Across the Border*: 2016. <https://scroll.in/article/816313/how-a-raj-era-factory-garden-became-karachis-most-famous-zoo>.



workers from Rawalpindi all flocked to Garden Karachi for work, many of them settling there permanently. While the area no longer exists in its original state, it is still considered the very first unofficial learning institution of truck art.<sup>16</sup>

A limited amount of truck painting gradually started appearing on trucks in British India. The very first Ford and Addison & Co. automobiles were being imported in Madras between 1901 - 1904.<sup>17</sup> By the 1920s trucks and public transport vehicles had been introduced. During the 1930s, shortly before World War II, British Bedford trucks from Vauxhall manufacturers, and American Chevrolet trucks from General Motors arrived in the Indian sub-continent.<sup>18</sup> In line with ancient traditional practices, the local companies gradually began embellishing their trucks with decorative logos at first.<sup>19</sup> With rapid industrialization, these trucks contributed immensely towards both the British economy and the war.

By the 1940s every company had a logo that would be painted onto the trucks it owned. Common working-class painters were hired to do the job. For the illiterate laity and farm/factory laborers the logos were an important new feature as they could easily identify which trucks belonged to which company. Logos for truck companies became highly decorative with the passage of time. “They were badges of competition ... And the more flamboyant the design, the better the businesses became”, explains Durriya Kazi. Initially, artists were only engaged to paint small stencil designs/logos with some calligraphic details as additional information about the company.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Haider Ali, Truck artist, in discussion with the author, March, 2021.

<sup>17</sup> S Muthiah & K N Gopalan, “The first wheels roll into India,” *Business Standard*: 2013. [https://www.business-standard.com/article/management/the-first-wheels-roll-into-india-108122301090\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/management/the-first-wheels-roll-into-india-108122301090_1.html).

<sup>18</sup> Durriya Kazi, “Decorated Trucks of Pakistan,” *First International Convention of Asia Scholars, Netherlands*, June 1998, np.

<sup>19</sup> Kazi, “Decorated Trucks of Pakistan,” np.

<sup>20</sup> Kazi, “Decorated Trucks of Pakistan,” np.

Kazi's research indicates that some of these artists, reduced to taking up menial painting jobs to support themselves, were previously painters in the royal Mogul and Rajasthani courts, who found themselves unemployed and displaced after the British colonization of the sub-continent in 1857. Since most of the artists were Muslim, with the exit of British rule and subsequent independence of Pakistan in 1947, a majority of them migrated to the newly established Islamic nation. An example Kazi gives is Haji Hussain and family.

One of the claimants for establishing the beginnings of truck decoration was Haji Hussain. Haji Hussain came from a long line of Kamangars (bow and arrow makers) turned court painters in Kutch Bujh, Gujrat. At the partition of India he brought his skills in painting murals, decorative ceilings and statuary to Karachi where his father-in-law was already decorating the mansions of Karachi's rich. Haji Hussain was encouraged to turn to decorating trucks by local artist, Ghaffar Sindhi, who decorated horse carriages.<sup>21</sup>

Although this is not the background of all early Pakistani truck painters, it does provide an understanding of how some of the very first truck artists established their craft in the newly independent country. It is also indicative of truck art's link with decorative horse drawn carriages. Today many of Haji Hussain's apprentices, his sons and grandsons are accomplished Ustads (master painters) in the fields of truck art, traditional decorative furniture painting, sign and billboard painting. Truck art was and still is a completely male dominated industry with the

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<sup>21</sup> Durriya Kazi, "Decorated Trucks of Pakistan," *First International Convention of Asia Scholars, Netherlands*, June 1998, np.

exception of perhaps some women from the driver's household, who rarely make small ornaments for their trucks.<sup>22</sup>

In order to contextualize the broader experience of truck artists, more recent narratives need to be explored. Two contemporary truck artists currently active and extremely successful in the field, Haider Ali (Figure 2.1) and Phool Ji (Figure 2.2) serve to address distinctions in training and commissions. Based on the field work I conducted in Karachi, Haider Ali's grandfather Ali Mohammad, migrated to Pakistan from Jalandar, India where he was a traditional crafts painter. He settled in Karachi and taught the craft to his son, Mohammad Sardar. By the time Ali was about 7 years old his father had a well-established truck painting workshop in Garden, Karachi where he became an apprentice at that young age.<sup>23</sup> He got his big break in 1999 when he was discovered by University of Wisconsin-Madison anthropologist Dr. Jonathan Mark Kenoyer, who was conducting research in Pakistan. A truck painted by Ali had been on display at the Karachi Sheraton and when Kenoyer saw it he offered Ali the opportunity of a lifetime - a chance to participate in the 2002 Smithsonian Folk Festival.<sup>24</sup> Ali has since been invited to many other folk festivals around the world.

Phool Ji, the second artist I met and interviewed has no ancestral links to truck painting. He discovered it accidentally when he was 8 years old while walking to the Garden Karachi zoo one day. He came across a truck painting workshop and observed the artists mixing colors which he found fascinating. He started going to that workshop for lessons after school, soon becoming a regular apprentice of Ustad Shahid's. Phool Ji eventually dropped out of college to financially support his single mother when he started earning good money as a truck painter. In 2012 he was

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<sup>22</sup> Phool Ji, Truck artist, in discussion with the author, April, 2021.

<sup>23</sup> Haider Ali, Truck artist, in discussion with the author, March, 2021.

<sup>24</sup> Jonathan Mark Kenoyer, in discussion with the author, July, 2021.

selected by cultural promoter Anjum Rana as part of a truck painting team which traveled to Jordan, Egypt, Turkey, Dubai and India for vehicle painting projects and international cultural exchange programs. He has since then traveled abroad (including Australia and Japan) for several folk-art events to promote Pakistan's truck art.<sup>25</sup> Both Haider Ali and Phool Ji specialize in portraiture and their contributions to the genre and points of view are an important part of this research.

Contemporary Pakistani truck art has fascinating links that date back to antiquity. The tradition appears to have taken many shapes and forms over the centuries but the desire to beautify means of transportation has remained constant. While the colonial link, post-independence migrations and individual artist narratives inform truck art's historical perspective, portraiture is what shows its instantaneous, persistent development at the global front. An analysis and understanding of the global phenomenon truck art has transitioned into requires a thorough study of its portraiture.



Figure 2.1: Haider Ali, 2020, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/>

<sup>25</sup> Phool Ji, Truck artist, in discussion with the author, April, 2021.



*Figure 2.2: Phool Ji, 2021, Photo by the author*

### 3 BEGINNING OF TRUCK PORTRAITURE

According to Kazi, early truck painting during the colonial era, in the form of company logos and some decorative calligraphic elements were usually accompanied by renditions of Hindu gods/goddesses as good luck charms.<sup>26</sup> At that time truck drivers hailing from Punjab's Sikh community also started incorporating portraits of Guru Nanak, their religion's founding father.<sup>27</sup> Subsequently, portraits of Hindu deities and Guru Nanak were replaced by those of local Sufi saints in Muslim majority areas. This was the first instance of portraiture inclusion in truck decoration and the practice continued after Pakistan's independence.

All elements of truck art, including portraiture began proliferating in a post-colonial, postmodern environment and era. In a nation recently freed from the shackles of colonial rule, the effort to carve out a new national identity as a modern, progressive Muslim country came with challenging contemporary anxieties. There was a conscious attempt to move forward towards modernization and at the same time a desire to hold onto traditional values that would form the cultural fabric of a modern, (not British, not Indian/Hindu but a) distinctly Pakistani society. Within the realm of arts and crafts truck artists unwittingly fulfilled both these goals. Unguided by any institution, their constant experimentation with medium, material and imagery gave way to a unique and complex genre of portraiture which was from and for the people. This is an important contribution from the often overlooked and underappreciated lower section of society. It thus becomes imperative to ask how, why and for whom is this truck art and portraiture produced and consumed?

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<sup>26</sup> Durriya Kazi, "Decorated Trucks of Pakistan," *First International Convention of Asia Scholars, Netherlands*, June 1998, np.

<sup>27</sup> Nadeem F Paracha, "The Elusive History and Politics of Pakistan's Truck Art," 2016. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1278386>.

Jamal Elias in his book “*On Wings of Diesel*” notes, interestingly it is not the truck driver but the transportation company that owns the fleet of trucks who pay for the commission.<sup>28</sup> Owners of larger companies are not really involved or even concerned with the decoration. But to smaller fleet owners, decisions regarding selection of motifs, colors and portraits do matter a great deal. They know all of their drivers personally and visit truck painting workshops themselves. These smaller company owners trust the expertise of the artist hired as far as the layout, motifs and colors of the design but portraits and poetic verses are added at owner's request. Sometimes, to keep the drivers happy, their suggestions are also incorporated in the design. In some cases where the driver is the owner of the truck, very little agency is given to the artist – every aspect of the decorative painting is the decision of the owner or driver.<sup>29</sup> The selection of a portrait is rarely the decision of the truck artist. These portraits, almost always painted on the back (Figure 3.1) of a truck, reflect the owner's (and in some cases the driver's) religious, political or cultural views.<sup>30</sup>

Elias does not agree with the theory that contemporary Pakistani truck art or its portraiture stem from decorative religious Hindu art or traditional tattoo designs on transportation animals.<sup>31</sup> He does not believe there are any links with previous royal court painters or traditional furniture painting either. Elias sees all these links as overly romanticized assumptions that lack solid evidence. He feels basing a theory just on oral histories alone is not a reliable methodology of research as truck artists' claims regarding their family backgrounds or their knowledge of the craft's history cannot be regarded as completely authentic.<sup>32</sup> According to

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<sup>28</sup> Jamal J Elias, *On Wings of Diesel: Trucks, Identity and Culture in Pakistan* (Oxford, Oneworld Publications, 2011), 84.

<sup>29</sup> Elias, *On Wings of Diesel: Trucks, Identity and Culture in Pakistan*, 64.

<sup>30</sup> Elias, *On Wings of Diesel: Trucks, Identity and Culture in Pakistan*, 166.

<sup>31</sup> Elias, *On Wings of Diesel: Trucks, Identity and Culture in Pakistan*, 9.

<sup>32</sup> Jamal J Elias, in discussion with the author, July, 2021.

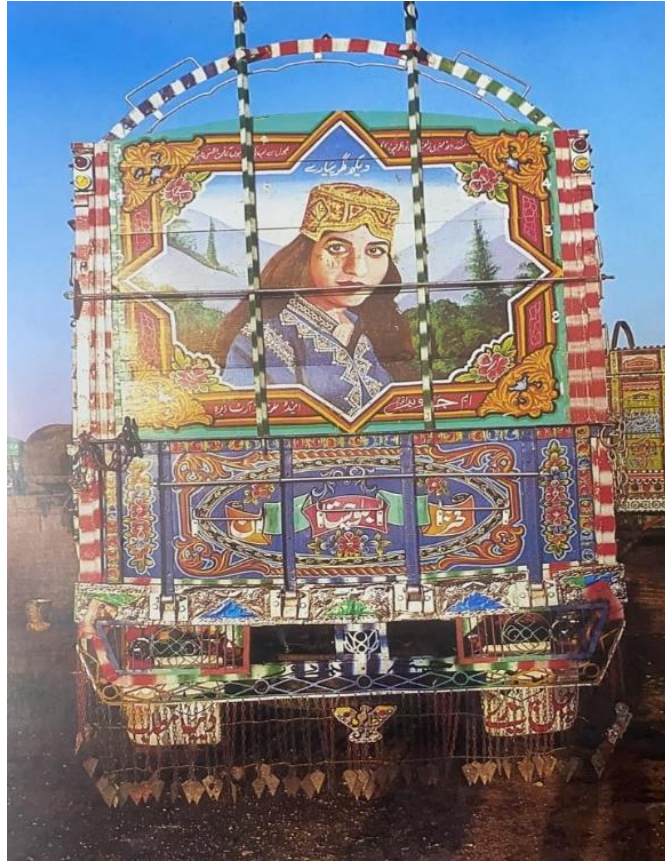
Elias's research truck painting was actually already being practiced as Islamic inspired motifs/calligraphy and later Sufi portraiture, simultaneously in present day Pakistan as well as across the border in Afghanistan. Post-independence Pakistani truck artists were easily able to cross the border between the two countries, which at that time was very peaceful, and work/sell their trade in Afghanistan. By the mid-1960s truck painting and portraiture seem to have picked up momentum in the city of Peshawar and the surrounding northwestern region of Pakistan which is situated along the Afghan border. However, with the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and subsequent civil war, cultural exchanges and artistic trade activity came to an abrupt halt there. From then on, the economy and culture of truck art has remained predominantly in Pakistan.<sup>33</sup>

The limited scholarly research on the subject consists mostly of generalized discussions on truck art in its entirety, without focusing in depth on any one single aspect of this art form. Portrait painting in truck art offers compelling evidence of its persistent growth and is worthy of further research as a separate topic. This genre of portraiture sheds light particularly on global influences truck art has acquired over the decades.

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<sup>33</sup> Jamal J Elias, *On Wings of Diesel: Trucks, Identity and Culture in Pakistan* (Oxford, Oneworld Publications, 2011), 6.





*Figure 3.1: Local Baloch girl, 2012, Photo courtesy: Haider Ali*

## 4 CLASSIFICATION AND PURPOSES OF TRUCK PORTRAITURE

Truck portraiture can be classified into five separate types –

- The Religious
- The Celebrity
- The Political
- The Advertisement
- The Personal

### 4.1 The Religious

Truck painters first turned to colored prints for inspiration and references of Sufi portraiture, a practice that continues to this day. This was early truck art's very first brush with the printed media. Colored printing started in British India between 1919 – 1920.<sup>34</sup> By the late 1930s colored posters were readily available to truck artists for inspiration. Portraits of Sufi saints on trucks were copied from colored posters that were printed and distributed for 'Urs' which are annual regional festivals honoring local sufis. The influence of mass media existed from the very inception of truck portraiture. Interestingly, some Urs poster designers claim to have looked at portraits of Jesus in Christian art as a source of inspiration for mass production of Sufi posters.<sup>35</sup> These Jesus inspired (Figure 4.1) posters in turn became references for truck painters. This fascinating origin can be deciphered through stark similarity of popular truck images of a dancing Sufi (Figure 4.2), arms raised to the sky, to Jesus's crucifixion images. This aspect of truck portraiture sheds light on early examples of the confluence of religious/cultural iconography as well as the strong kitsch element. “The earliest manifestations of kitsch are

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<sup>34</sup> Jurgen Wasim Frembgen, *The Friends of God: Sufi Saints in Islam* (Oxford and Karachi, Oxford University Press, 2006), 129.

<sup>35</sup> Frembgen, *The Friends of God: Sufi Saints in Islam*, 66.

religion: the plaster saints and doe-eyed madonnas ...”<sup>36</sup> and likewise, in Islam where portraits of Prophet Muhammad are prohibited, Sufi saints take center stage as religious kitsch. The sentimentality and reverence attached to Sufi truck portraiture renders it precisely that.

The way most trucks are decorated today with black or green flag-like pieces of fabric, plastic flower garlands, brightly colored rosary beads and metallic medallions is reminiscent of Sufi shrine embellishments (Figure 4.3). Kazi explains that the Sufi element on trucks, whether in the form of a portrait or decoration, is there to protect the trucker and to ward off evil/misfortune.<sup>37</sup> Referred to as “mobile talismans” by Elias, trucks with Sufi imagery come with a variety of signifiers in the form of calligraphic messages and/or symbols of devotion, protection against forces of evil. A popular depiction is the partridge which, according to local Islamic folklore, acts as 'nazar' (shield) to deflect evil glances of the jealous.<sup>38</sup> The names of Allah, the Prophet Muhammad and verses from the holy Quran accompany Sufi portraits for the same purpose. Regarding this aspect of truck decoration Alain Lefebvre writes

... (this) genre of decoration is even more important for the driver.

He finds himself in a dilemma. On the one hand, he must decorate his truck so as to catch the people's attention. But on the other hand, his cosmological view tells that the world is inhabited by invisible beings called jinns, which are attracted by beautiful objects too ...

The driver camouflages beauty with the use of black hanging pieces

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<sup>36</sup> Roger Scruton, “Kitsch and the Modern Predicament,” *City Journal*, New York: 1999. <https://www.city-journal.org/html/kitsch-and-modern-predicament-11726.html>.

<sup>37</sup> Durriya Kazi, “Decorated Trucks of Pakistan,” *First International Convention of Asia Scholars, Netherlands*, June 1998, np.

<sup>38</sup> Jamal J Elias, *On Wings of Diesel: Trucks, Identity and Culture in Pakistan* (Oxford, Oneworld Publications, 2011), 161.

of cloth and different types of amulets, hoping this way to avert the misfortunes of the crew and the goods during the journey.<sup>39</sup>

These visible renditions and their invisible connotations are deeply embedded in age old religious folklore. Sufi shrine decorations are inspirations behind elements that accompany religious portraiture in truck art.

One of the most widely depicted sufi in truck portraiture is Syed Abdul Qadir Jilani, a 12th century Iraqi saint, affectionately referred to as 'Yaari Baba' (Figure 4.4). Contemporary Yaari Baba truck portraits are often created with florescent chamak-patti (glow-in-the-dark tape).<sup>40</sup> This is a relatively new innovation in truck painting techniques and materials. There is of course a practical reason for chamak-patti – at night on desolate highways it makes the whole truck glow in the dark, thus making it visible from miles away, preventing accidents. Another reason is purely aesthetic - a portrait of a sufi glowing in the dark seems to have the same effect as stain glass Christian imagery in Churches. “The loose structure of these saintly narratives also makes them prevalent – if not entirely acceptable – in all parts of the country and among different sections of society.”<sup>41</sup> This aspect demonstrates the easy accessibility of truck art in the public realm. While specimens of high art are only on view in museums and art school curricula for the elite, truck art can be viewed free of charge by a much wider audience coming from all sections of society.

## 4.2 The Celebrity

Another kind of portraiture emerged in the 1960s - portraits of glamorous movie stars and celebrities which were a direct influence of mass production and consumerism. The resultant

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<sup>39</sup> Alain Lefebvre, “The Decorative Truck as a Communicative Device,” *Semiotica*, Volume 75, 1989, 217.

<sup>40</sup> Zehra Nawab, “Seeking Paradise: The image and reality of truck art,” 2017.  
<https://herald.dawn.com/news/1153417>.

<sup>41</sup> Nawab, “Seeking Paradise: The image and reality of truck art”.

glocal, pop and kitsch factors, together formed key components of truck culture. Initially only local film celebrity portraits were incorporated but just a decade later international (particularly Hollywood) movie stars also began appearing.<sup>42</sup> This fusion is clearly indicative of truck art portraiture transitioning into the glocal realm. Local celebrity portraiture, according to Ali, started in the 1950s. His father would paint mostly decorative calligraphic motifs and an occasional portrait commission at the work shop he owned in Garden, Karachi.<sup>43</sup> He claims to have painted portraits of local film stars as early as the 1950s but there is no photographic evidence to support these claims. Popular movie star portraits would either be ravishing, voluptuous beauties of the silver screen (Figure 4.5) or raging, muscular action heroes of the time (Figure 4.6). Demand for truck portraiture has been growing steadily ever since. Contemporary portraiture in truck art has close links with cinema billboard painting. From the 1950s till the mid-2000s movie theater billboards were hand painted by street artists who excelled at commercial portrait and figurative painting.<sup>44</sup> Cinema billboards were commissioned by film distributors mostly from Lahore and their painters were much more skilled in the art of portraiture than truck artists.<sup>45</sup> These cinema painters would often be invited by truck artists to paint commissioned portraits on trucks. Cinema portrait painters would sometimes be involved in either assisting a truck artist with his commission or training truck artists how to paint portraits. It appears that these two genres of portrait painting heavily influenced and benefited from each other for almost half a century. Regarding the influence of cinema billboard painting on truck portraiture, journalist Nadeem Farooq Paracha explains that the pervasive decorative

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<sup>42</sup> Nadeem F Paracha, "The Elusive History and Politics of Pakistan's Truck Art," 2016. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1278386>.

<sup>43</sup> Haider Ali, Truck artist, in discussion with the author, April, 2021.

<sup>44</sup> Jurgen Wasim Frembgen and Asif Jehangir. "Dirty Pictures. Vulgar Street Art in Lahore, Pakistan", 268-269.

<sup>45</sup> Abdul Jabbar Gull, Pakistani artist/sculptor, in discussion with the author, April, 2021.

element from the 1970s onward “... was prompted in the manner in which billboards and hoardings of Pakistani films became louder and more kaleidoscopic in appearance. In turn those painting such billboards were inspired by psychedelic art and Pop art which had begun to mushroom in the West from the late 1960s.”<sup>46</sup> Hence it was inevitable that the loudness of cinema celebrity portraits found its way into mainstream truck painting.

The 70s and 80s also saw a big boom in international celebrity portraiture with strong influences coming from Hollywood. Portraits of action heroes Bruce Lee (Figure 4.7), Chuck Norris, Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger started appearing on trucks, indicative of an undeniable Western mass media impact. Foreign female celebrities popular among truck painters were American singer Madonna (Figure 4.8) and Princess Diana.<sup>47</sup> “Diana” painted by Ali exudes a lyrical charm (Figure 4.9). Her gracefully poised neck and soft, benevolent smile are reminders of her royal status – as are the meticulously painted crown and white lace of her dress. Her shy gaze gives away her vulnerability. The delicate painterly quality of this portrait lends it an ethereal aura. Ali uses soft colors and round, curved decorative details for this portrait. He avoids using hard edge straight lines and shapes. The feathery texture of the hair and royal blue background compliment the smooth freshness of her face. Ali does a phenomenal job at re-creating the lovely 'people's princess'. Towards the top right is a verse that translates “Love everyone, Hate no one” with the artist's signature underneath. This appears to be the work of an accomplished portrait painter carefully capturing the personality of his muse. Stylistically this portrait is still similar to billboard painting, but also demonstrates the artist's individual style and skill thus representing both the formulaic and the individual.

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<sup>46</sup> Nadeem F Paracha, “The Elusive History and Politics of Pakistan's Truck Art,” 2016.  
<https://www.dawn.com/news/1278386>.

<sup>47</sup> Paracha, “The Elusive History and Politics of Pakistan's Truck Art”.

Female celebrity portraits on trucks, inspired by Pakistani cinema billboard paintings, were often voluptuous and sultry. Clearly, they were and still are painted today for the male gaze. It is also quite clear that this attribute is passed down to truck art through the now extinct genre of cinema billboard painting. Such portraits then serve the purpose of, besides indicating the trucker's personal favorite, providing visual pleasure to male viewers (Figure 4.10). Truck artists are requested to paint plenty of cleavage, emphasizing the female body contours for these commissions. In an Islamic society not everyone can appreciate, or for that matter, tolerate vulgar and lewd images of women present in the public space. But the fact that these portraits continue to appear on trucks is an attestation to the popularity, demand and tolerance of female objectification. “This is all the more surprising, considering how the attempt was made to enforce Islamic society during the military rule of General Zia (1977 – 1988); and it shows a certain persistence of secular visual culture in Pakistan.”<sup>48</sup> Painter and writer Farida Batool offers a different explanation as to why the mullahs tend to ignore this aspect of popular art. She argues that Islamic fundamentalists target elite high art for offensive representations of the female figure more often because the social status of street/truck artists is much lower than that of artists belonging to the affluent section of society.<sup>49</sup> There also exists, on the other hand, a societal double standard - female objectification on trucks is offensive and seen as a negative influence from the West by many who might tend to ignore female nudes painted by highbrow artists. I am not at all implying that women painted on trucks as provocative, lewd images should be acceptable under any circumstances but simply pointing out the contrast between the high art/low art binary and a certain degree of hypocrisy in the reception of the female figure, on the part of both the conservative mullahs (as explained by Batool) and the feminist elite.

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<sup>48</sup> Jurgen Wasim Frembgen and Asif Jehangir. “Dirty Pictures. Vulgar Street Art in Lahore, Pakistan”, 276.

<sup>49</sup> Farida Batool. *Figure: The Popular and the Political in Pakistan* (ASR Publications, 2004), 56-57.

Interestingly, while unabashed truck owners/truckers continue to commission such portraits, truck artists who paint them sometimes choose to remain anonymous and do not sign their names underneath to avoid backlash from the local mullah.<sup>50</sup> Inclusion of such portraits is an example of the local and the global enmeshed yet again. In an Islamic society this genre of truck portraiture does appear to be a permissive global influence. The fact that celebrity truck portraiture has been generated by cinema painting also points in the global direction, after exposure to Hollywood. Hand painted Cinema billboards are now a thing of the past and since the advent of digital posters in the mid-2000s, have become extinct.<sup>51</sup> Truck portraiture on the other hand has persisted and continues to thrive today which demonstrates the longevity of this cultural practice.

### 4.3 The Political

A third category of truck portraiture was introduced in the mid-60s which became increasingly popular. During the 1965 election, then Presidential candidate General Ayub Khan (Figure 4.11) cleverly strategized to have his portraits and slogans painted on trucks as part of his political campaign.<sup>52</sup> Ayub Khan was the first Pakistani politician to realize the growing influence and importance of truck culture as means of communication and decided to use it, quite successfully, to his advantage.<sup>53</sup> In some ways this aspect of truck portraiture is similar to 16<sup>th</sup> century Florence's ruling Medici who commissioned their portraits as a political tool to carefully inculcate a powerful image of themselves among the masses. That is exactly why political portraits were initially incorporated in contemporary Pakistani truck art. The trend was picked up

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<sup>50</sup> Phool Ji, Truck artist, in discussion with the author, April, 2021.

<sup>51</sup> Jurgen Wasim Frembgen and Asif Jehangir. "Dirty Pictures. Vulgar Street Art in Lahore, Pakistan", 277.

<sup>52</sup> Nadeem F Paracha, "The Elusive History and Politics of Pakistan's Truck Art," 2016.  
<https://www.dawn.com/news/1278386>.

<sup>53</sup> Wajid Daharkiwala, Art historian/faculty University of Gujrat, in discussion with the author, April, 2021.



by other politicians and has continued to this day. Prime ministers Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in the 1970s, his daughter Benazir Bhutto (Figure 4.13) in the 1990s and several serving Army Generals all have been included in the popular truck art portraiture hall of fame.<sup>54</sup> Iftikhar Dadi describes the presence of political portraits/images in Karachi, a city rife with political tensions as “the visual texture of everyday politics” and “dynamic sites for new forms of text and image based popular politics.”<sup>55</sup> Dadi's descriptions of political posters in the urban space have much in common with political portraits on trucks. Both genres of portraiture are produced to have the same affect and influence on the public.

Pakistan is a country where, after the 1970s, democracy has effectively failed every time it was given a chance. The army, a strong institution in the country, has proved to be a much stabler form of government than democratically elected politicians. Army Generals therefore are a popular theme in truck portraiture (Figure 4.12). Anna Schmid writes,

Pictures of a stereotype soldier, portraits of military personnel entail political statements enforcing the positive attitude towards the military in national politics. This interpretation prevails among some participants in the painting discourse – some truck drivers ask for the depiction of these portraits thus expressing their political views. Other drivers take a more pragmatic stance on their national politicians.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Jamal J Elias. *On Wings of Diesel: Trucks, Identity and Culture in Pakistan* (Oxford, Oneworld Publications, 2011), 173.

<sup>55</sup> Iftikhar Dadi, “Political Posters In Karachi,” *South Asian Popular Culture* 5, no.1 (2007): 11.

<sup>56</sup> Anna Schmid, “Truck Art as Arena of Contest”, *South Asia Institute, Dept. of Anthropology, University of Heidelberg*, 2000, 237.

Portraits of past and current military leaders are sometimes also painted “... as a symbol of strength and power for which the drivers have a strong desire.”<sup>57</sup> Rather than the truckers' political affiliations, most such portraits and the additional calligraphic couplets are there for viewers to draw their own interpretations. For instance, Ayub Khan's truck portraits are commissioned even today – so that (due to Khan's enduring popularity) the truck is not stopped at any highway security check points.<sup>58</sup> Attesting to the powerful influence an army general's portrait on a truck can have, Kenoyer relates an interesting incident in October 1999 when the painted truck he had arranged to be shipped to New York for the Smithsonian Folk Festival was being transported to the seaport in Karachi. The day that truck was scheduled to begin its long journey, General Pervaiz Musharraf's sudden coup against the corrupt ruling government occurred. The whole country was shut down and all of Karachi's highways that led to the seaport were blocked by the army. The drivers of the truck quickly found a solution to the problem. By covering the whole truck with posters of General Musharraf they were easily allowed to pass through all army check points.<sup>59</sup>

An additional category to military/political portraiture is that of war and national heroes. Hugely popular, these portraits feature contemporary martyrs or heroic survivors of war and other national heroes known for outstanding achievements (Figures 4.14 & 4.15). War hero portraits are almost always accompanied by images of fighter jets, tanks, navy ships and serve as proud, patriotic tributes to the nation's valiant.

In stark contrast is a different example of political truck portraiture - that of humorous political satire, thoroughly entertaining other commuters on the road. Here we see another

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<sup>57</sup> Anna Schmid, “Truck Art as Arena of Contest”, *South Asia Institute, Dept. of Anthropology, University of Heidelberg*, 2000, 237.

<sup>58</sup> Schmid, “Truck Art as Arena of Contest”, 238.

<sup>59</sup> Jonathan Mark Kenoyer, in discussion with the author, July, 2021.

purpose of truck portraiture – comical lampoonery. The use of comedy in art and role of artist as clown is largely ignored in art historical discourse.<sup>60</sup> Truck artists often play this role to perfection through satire, pun and bawdy humor. Humorous couplets in combination with portraits can be described as “advertising and the ability of words to have a visual plasticity, ... cliché's, aphorisms and truisms to explore banal and everyday language in new contexts in the public, urban spaces.”<sup>61</sup> Truck portraiture is almost always embellished within a floral/vegetal motif frame and combined with some sort of calligraphic element. The calligraphy can simply be the trucking company's name, the artist's signature or a couplet from a famous Urdu poem. Quite often it is a political statement, a quote by a politician taken out of context and presented in a hilarious manner. An amusing parodic portrait which falls under glocal is that of Abhi Nandan, an Indian Air Force pilot captured on Pakistani soil (Figure 4.16). I had the opportunity to witness this very unusual example at the Skywings Aviation school (Figure 4.17) in Karachi during an interview session and tour of the facility. Abhi Nandan's portrait graces a Cessna plane painted in the truck art style. Nandan had crashed in February 2019, during a skirmish with the Pakistan Air Force. He survived, was captured by villagers and handed over to the authorities. Offered a cup of tea by the Pakistani authorities, he was later released back to India, unharmed. The incident made international headlines, a cause for much entertainment for Pakistanis. Ali was invited by Skywings to paint Nandan's portrait on a plane. This portrait with a slap-stick humorous line, “The tea was fantastic! Need another cup”, is contemporary truck art political humor at its very best.

The category of political truck portraiture has included a variety of global themes - Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Justin Trudeau and Che Guevara to name a few. The motivation behind

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<sup>60</sup> Sheri Klein, *Art And Laughter* (New York, NY: I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd, 2007), 2.

<sup>61</sup> Klein, *Art And Laughter*, 51.

portraits of foreign politicians varies. For instance, in Che Guevara's case, his macho, rebellious image. Balochistan is one of the four provinces of Pakistan and in the following example, the portrait acquires a Balochi identity. “Che Baloch” (Figure 4.18) is the Balochi version painted by Saqib Dost. The artist's brush work is flat and bold, the color palette monochromatic. The hard edge, graphic quality of the portrait and the deep reds and black tones give it a strong, masculine vibe – no soft, colorful flower petals here. The rebel's stare is confidently defiant. The artist has succeeded in capturing the mutinous, angry young man expression. Reflective tape patterns that glow in the dark add to the mystique and charm. The portrait appears to have been copied off of readily available popular Che Guevara images, but the intense face can easily pass as a Balochi man. That seems to have been the goal behind the portrait “Che Baloch” so the local Balochi viewers can identify with it.

#### 4.4 The Advertisement

Advertisement or communicating a social message is one more category of truck portraiture that stands out. As recently as 2019 UNESCO has been utilizing truck art's popularity to advocate education for girls in relatively conservative areas of Pakistan, like Peshawar. As part of the UNESCO “Girl's Right to Education Program” portraits of local school age girls were painted on more than twenty trucks that drive through the Karakoram and Indus highways (Figure 4.19). “This was the first time that images of school going girls with advocacy messages were used that were empowering yet culturally sensitive and widely accepted by the local communities.”<sup>62</sup> Local police, politicians and religious leaders have all taken a keen interest in

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<sup>62</sup> UNESCO. “Truck Art: Advocating girls education in Pakistan through local art”, <https://en.unesco.org/news/truck-art-advocating-girls-education-pakistan-through-local-art>, 2019.

this program.<sup>63</sup> This is another glocal scenario where UNESCO's global presence intertwines with the local.

Another example of social welfare advertisement through truck portraiture is the 'Lost Child Finder Campaign' also initiated in 2019 (Figure 4.20). A collaboration by Berger Paints, NGO Roshni Helpline and Batten, Barton, Durstine and Osborn (BBDO Pakistan, a global advertising/marketing agency founded in New York in 1891), this campaign aims to search for missing children by painting their portraits, names and a helpline phone number on the back of trucks. These trucks travel the length and breadth of the country as well as remote, hard to reach areas which makes them an extremely effective tool in the campaign. In just the first week 313 calls were received and several missing children recovered.<sup>64</sup> Both UNESCO and BBDO are global organizations working in unison with a local community and using a local contemporary folk art as a powerful instrument of communication. This very recent category of truck portraiture is a quintessential example of glocalization.

#### 4.5 The Personal

A fifth category of truck portraiture, which is rather rare, consists of family members of truck drivers or owners. Themes of “romance, fatalism and the mother” usually depicted as calligraphic poetic verses have always been very popular in truck art.<sup>65</sup> While a driver's or owner's mother's portrait is not a common sight, quite recently during the early to mid-2000s truck owners have started commissioning portraits of their loved ones, particularly young sons

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<sup>63</sup> UNESCO. “Truck Art: Advocating girls education in Pakistan through local art”, <https://en.unesco.org/news/truck-art-advocating-girls-education-pakistan-through-local-art>, 2019.

<sup>64</sup> Ravi Balakrishna, “BBDO and Berger create a campaign to find missing children using truck art in Pakistan,” <https://www.mumbrella.asia/>, 2019.

<sup>65</sup> Tariq Rahman, *Language Policy, Identity, and Religion: Aspects of the Civilization of the Muslims of Pakistan and North India* (Islamabad: Quaid-i-Azam University Press, 2010), 195-198.

(Figure 4.21).<sup>66</sup> This popular trend has since shifted to locations other than the truck. No longer just restricted to trucks, there is now a great demand for personalized portraits painted in the truck art style as large murals in upscale private residences, restaurants and local bridges/flyovers.<sup>67</sup> Phool Ji excels at such projects. He also gets commissions to paint personal portraits of clients on smaller surfaces like plates and canvases.<sup>68</sup> I visited him for an onsite interview at a private residence where he showed me portraits he had recently painted for the homeowner. This was not a typical truck painting workshop situation – among the vast array of the homeowner’s portraits were also those of Johnny Cash showing the middle finger and Brian Cranston (Figure 4.22) of “Breaking Bad” fame with pills falling out of his hat. Several of Phool Ji's apprentices were working with him on these portraits. Both portraits are examples of personal preferences displayed in a personal space, not meant for public viewing.

Johnny Cash's middle finger (Figure 4.23) and impolite facial expressions are accentuated by painting them in a cool monochromatic grayish white color pallet against a misty purple background. The only other hints of color are contrasting warm ocher tones at the top corners which along with the yellow guitar, help visually balance the color composition. This marvelous painterly strategy and level of realism are qualities not found in stylized, crudely painted and brightly colored truck portraits. It can easily pass as a portrait painted by an academically trained artist. According to Phool Ji, trends are now changing, and some clients request a high quality of realism in the portraits they commission. “I have a reputation of combining fine arts with truck art. I take elements of both for inspiration and that has become my

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<sup>66</sup> Jamal J Elias. *On Wings of Diesel: Trucks, Identity and Culture in Pakistan* (Oxford, Oneworld Publications, 2011), 124.

<sup>67</sup> Haider Ali, Truck artist, in discussion with the author, April, 2021.

<sup>68</sup> Phool Ji, Truck artist, in discussion with the author, April, 2021.

signature style of painting.”<sup>69</sup> Clearly, truck art has its own unique signature style which is very popular, but it also adapts to and absorbs new global trends and innovations in painting styles and materials. Homeowners ask Phool Ji to paint their family photos on walls (Figure 4.24) at their residences. Restaurant and business owners hire him for portraits of themselves or founding forefathers of the family business.

The genre of Pakistani truck portraiture has come a long way since its beginnings as religious Sufi depictions. The impact of Cinema billboard painting, Hollywood, mass media and local politics over the years have played a vital role in shaping this genre. Increasingly visible in the public realm, truck portraiture reflects local aesthetics and embraces global trends – factors which inform the glocal aspect of truck art.

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<sup>69</sup> Phool Ji, Truck artist, in discussion with the author, April, 2021.

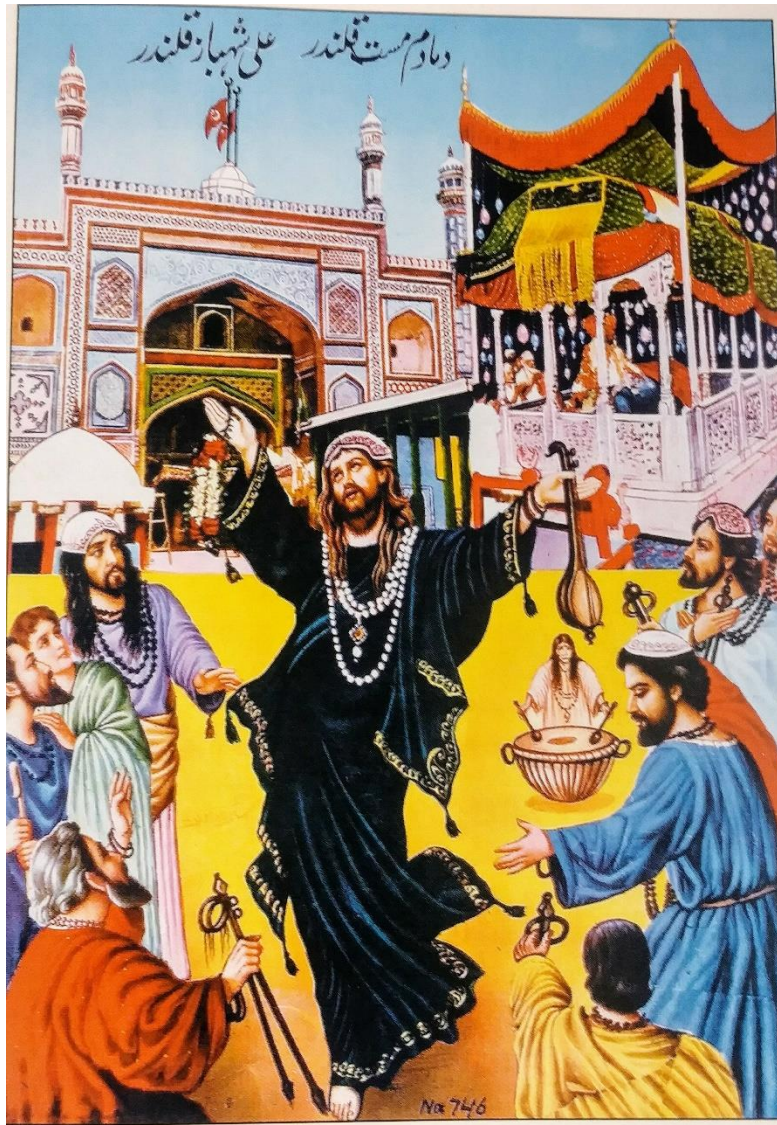
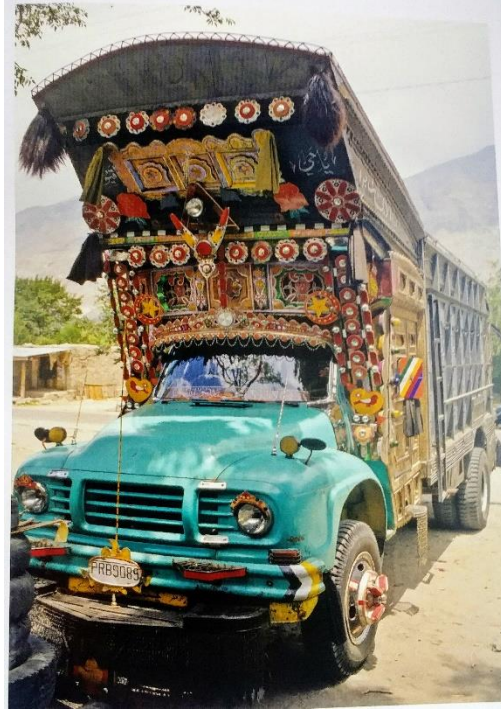


Figure 4.1: Jesus inspired Sufi poster from 1970s-1980s, “The Friends of God” by Jurgen Frembg

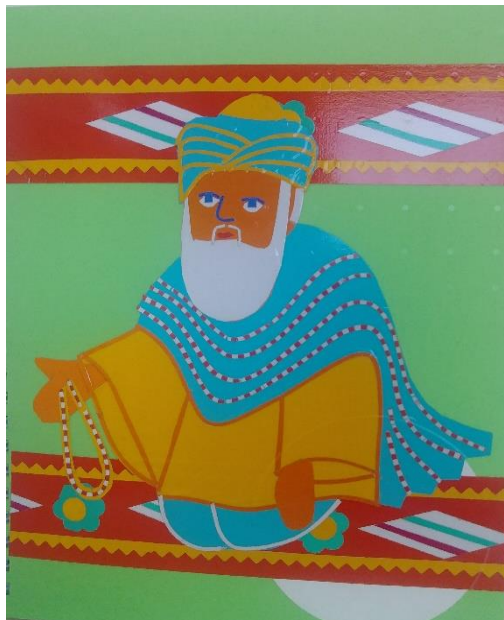




Figure 4.2: Dancing Sufi (Smithsonian truck), Photo courtesy: Dr. Jonathan Mark Kenoyer, 2002



*Figure 4.3: Truck decoration resembling shrine embellishments, 1998, “On Wings of Diesel” by Jamal Elias*



*Figure 4.4: Yaari Baba (chamak-patti) portrait, 2021, Photo by the author*



Figure 4.5: Local film celebrity, 2016, Nadeem Paracha,  
<https://www.dawn.com/news/1278386>



Figure 4.6: Local film celebrity, 2002, Photo courtesy: Dr. Jonathan Mark Kenoyer





*Figure 4.7: Bruce Lee, 2014 – 2018, Photo courtesy: Haider Ali*



*Figure 4.8: Madonna, 2014 – 2018, Photo courtesy: Haider Ali*



Figure 4.9: Princess Diana, 2018, Photo courtesy: Haider Ali

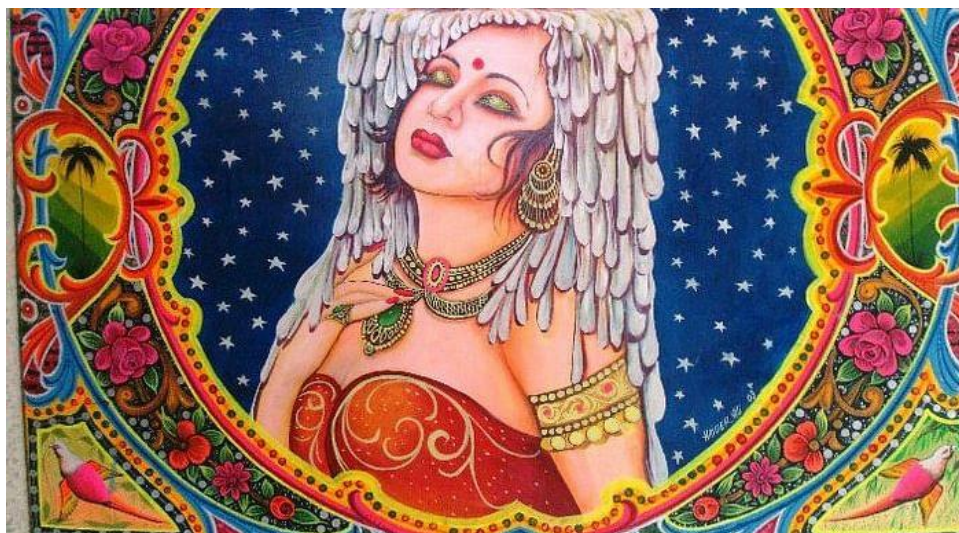


Figure 4.10: Portrait for the male gaze, 2017, Photo courtesy: Haider Ali





Figure 4.11: 1960s portrait of Gen. Ayub Khan, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1278386>



Figure 4.12: General Raheel Sharif, 2015, Photo courtesy: Raza Rumi via Twitter



Figure 4.13: Benazir Bhutto, 2015, Photo courtesy: Haider Ali



Figure 4.14: War hero, 2007, "On Wings of Diesel" by Jamal Elias

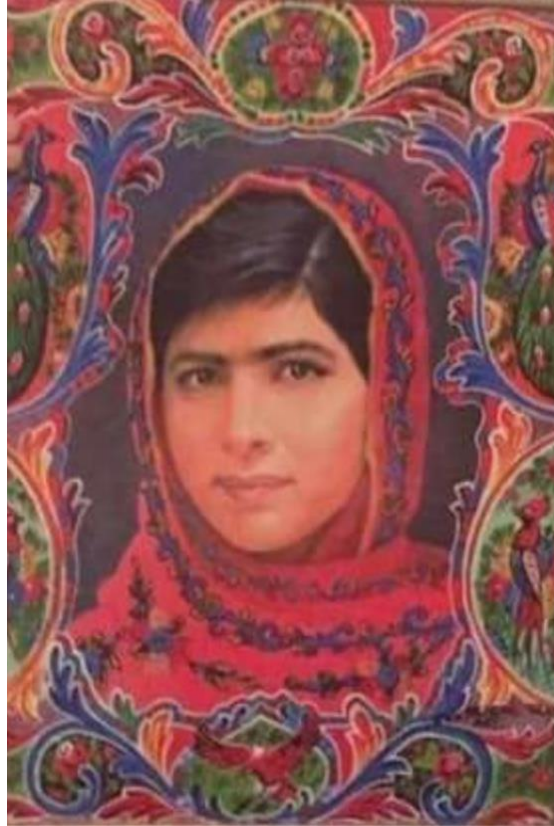


Figure 4.15: Malala Yousafzai, 2016, <http://www.tribaltruckart.net/>



Figure 4.16: Abhi Nandan, 2021, Photo by the author





Figure 4.17: Plane painted in truck art style at Skywings Aviation school, Karachi, 2021, <https://www.gulftoday.ae/culture/2021/01/02/from-the-highways-to-the-skies-pakistan-s-famous-truck-art-will-now-brighten-up-aircraft>



Figure 4.18: Che Baloch, 2013, Nadeem Paracha via Twitter



Figure 4.19: UNESCO campaign for girls' education, 2019, Photo courtesy: Phool Ji

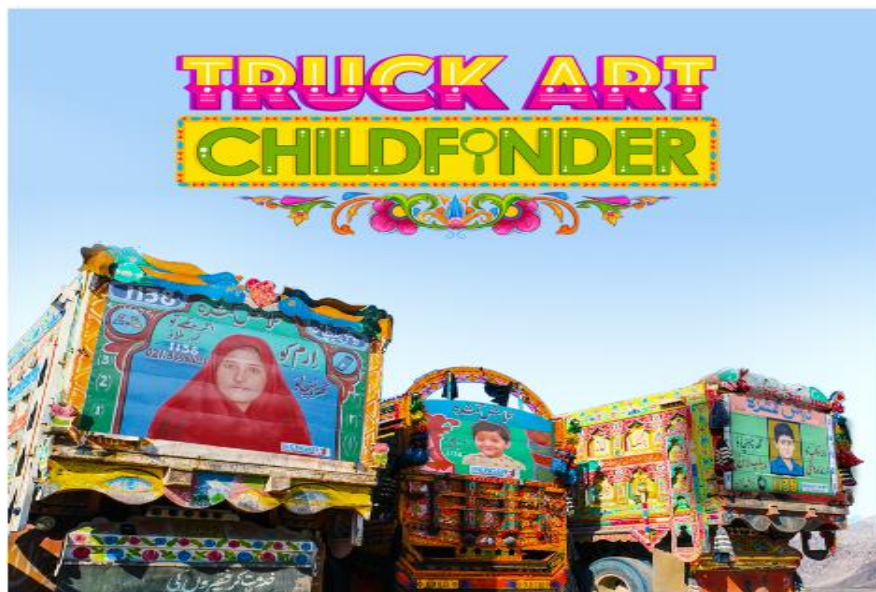


Figure 4.20: Child Finder campaign by Berger Paints, 2019,  
[http://berger.com.pk/truck\\_art\\_child\\_finder/](http://berger.com.pk/truck_art_child_finder/)





*Figure 4.21: Young son portrait, 2020, Photo courtesy: Phool Ji*



*Figure 4.22: Brian Cranston, 2021, Photo by the author*



Figure 4.23: Johnny Cash, 2021, Photo by the author



Figure 4.24: Residential mural with homeowners' portraits, 2020, Photo courtesy: Phool Ji

## 5 THE QUESTION OF AGENCY

Truck painting projects are commissions conducted by painting workshops. Each project is done by a team of artists/apprentices working under the guidance of a senior Ustad who owns the workshop. A single portrait or landscape is usually completed by more than one artist, with final touches by the Ustad.<sup>70</sup> The name of the Ustad or workshop appears under the painting. A junior artist or apprentice gets paid just a fraction of the entire commission but cannot expect to get any credit for his painting contributions. Truck painting workshops have always functioned in this manner. Much before them, so did the sophisticated Mogul ateliers where one tiny miniature painting was done by several artists and at the end signed by the master painter who trained them.<sup>71</sup> Iftikhar Dadi explains this aspect as “the artisanal anonymity assigned to classical Islamic arts-as-craft.”<sup>72</sup> In this system of absence of agency given to younger artists, many talented truck artists remain anonymous. Their lack of education and dependency on a workshop is very often exploited by small business owners, many of whom are “already rich, bored housewives looking to become richer” which has lowered the quality of painting considerably.<sup>73</sup> Marginalized youth, who drop out of school, after receiving little training with an Ustad are picked up by such business owners in hopes of better working conditions and a slightly higher pay.<sup>74</sup>

This practice has undermined the careers of fully trained accomplished truck artists who demand and deserve a higher income. Moreover, no credit is given to artists working for these

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<sup>70</sup> Phool Ji, Truck artist, in discussion with the author, April, 2021.

<sup>71</sup> J. M. Rogers, *Mughal Miniatures* (New York, Thames and Hudson, Inc., 1993), 21.

<sup>72</sup> Iftikhar Dadi, *Modernism and the art of Muslim South Asia* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 39.

<sup>73</sup> R.M. Naeem, Pakistani artist/faculty National College of Arts, in discussion with the author, March, 2019.

<sup>74</sup> Phool Ji, Truck artist, in discussion with the author, April, 2021.

cottage industries. They seldom get to sign their names on items they paint. It is also quite disappointing that when foreign delegates visit, sometimes University art students are asked to represent truck art. These students barely know anything about truck art. They have not learned it the hard way like we have.<sup>75</sup>

What is perhaps even more problematic is the fact that in some cases the elite housewives turned businesswomen are bestowed UNESCO awards for their efforts towards “cultural promotion”, without any mention of the truck artists who actually create the art. For most projects lead by academics too, truck artists are rarely given any artistic freedom. Most patrons are very specific in their commissions and artists are told what to paint or install.

Recently however several truck artists, especially in Karachi, have earned a name for themselves, independent from the workshops where they were formerly employed. This new generation of truck artists are tech savvy, understand their rights and know how to use social media to their advantage.<sup>76</sup> They may not be educated but have Facebook, Instagram accounts and websites through which they are able to promote their art locally and abroad. Truck artists like Haider Ali and Phool Ji work independently and get several lucrative projects yearly, all over Pakistan as well as internationally. University of Karachi art school faculty also keep them in the loop for conducting workshops for students and mural painting public art projects. Both artists praised the efforts of Professor Durriya Kazi and art educator Munawar Ali Syed for periodically organizing truck art related events. By working hard and making the right decisions for their careers these two artists have accomplished great success in their field.

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<sup>75</sup> Haider Ali, Truck artist, in discussion with the author, April, 2021

<sup>76</sup> Haider Ali, Truck artist, in discussion with the author, April, 2021.

At the end of the day, regardless of a certain level of exploitation at the hands of small business owners, their efforts have indeed helped promote truck art globally. I cannot say that has been bad for my career. I do wish, however, that the government of Pakistan would also take an interest in this internationally recognizable art form that has become our national identity.<sup>77</sup>

The government does not seem to be doing enough, other than an occasional project initiated by Pakistani embassies abroad. All projects offered through the University of Karachi and Indus Valley School of Art are funded by private or foreign organizations. Truck artists receive no funding or support from the government for the preservation of this unique contemporary folk-art form which today is proudly presented across the globe as authentically Pakistani.<sup>78</sup> Taking matters into his own hands, Ali has recently opened a space in his humble home where he gives mostly free truck art lessons to young artists. He calls it the “International Truck Art Academy.”

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<sup>77</sup> Phool Ji, Truck artist, in discussion with the author, April, 2021.

<sup>78</sup> Phool Ji, Truck artist, in discussion with the author, April, 2021.

## 6 IN DEFENSE OF TRUCK ART

Popular culture and mass media, whether it is local or Western, have been influential in shaping the progression of truck culture. Western intellectuals and art critics before the 1950s insisted on establishing cultural hierarchies and measuring art by yardsticks of high culture.<sup>79</sup> They deplored the invasiveness of consumer culture, mass media and its derogatory effect on high art, turning it into kitsch. Starting from the 1950s however, Euro-American art critics and writers began to acknowledge and appreciate the growing influence of popular culture and kitsch. “The symbolic processes by which individual groups communicate with each other about their identities were central to how these writers explored the power and richness of consumer culture. ... They looked favorably on working class culture and turned a more skeptical eye on elite sources of creativity.”<sup>80</sup> Perhaps that is why, in the 1970s, while Pakistan's elite had not yet begun to value truck art, visiting tourists, familiar with the acceptance of Pop culture as art, were quite enamored by it. It would take another decade for the local art circles to pay some attention to this fast developing 'art on wheels'. Historically the art of Muslim South Asia, “unlike Western art which has established canons of avant gardism” was more about perfection of ornamentation and calligraphy in the applied arts and did not have a “significant aesthetic theory that might inform the majority of what we consider to be Islamic art.”<sup>81</sup> In the absence of a discursive art historical tradition like that of Western art, contemporary Pakistani artists often draw on rich Persian, Mogul and Islamic calligraphic traditions for inspiration. This “negotiation of the modern with the indigenous” is how a majority of intellectual, educated Pakistani artists navigate

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<sup>79</sup> Daniel Horowitz. *Consuming Pleasures: Intellectuals and Popular Culture in the Postwar World* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 2.

<sup>80</sup> Horowitz. *Consuming Pleasures: Intellectuals and Popular Culture in the Postwar World*, 1.

<sup>81</sup> Iftikhar Dadi, *Modernism and the art of Muslim South Asia* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 32.



their artistic practices.<sup>82</sup> They also turn to Western notions of abstraction for developing their individual styles, which is perfectly acceptable in highbrow artistic circles. Likewise, truck artists have been instrumental in developing their art by turning to global (particularly Western) trends for inspiration.

Some local critics have argued that this influence of mass media and the West has robbed truck art of its authenticity. Formerly a truck artist, Abdul Jabbar Gull is a highly respected well known Pakistani sculptor/portrait painter today. During the early to mid-1980s he worked as a child truck artist apprentice and was later awarded a scholarship to attend the most prestigious art school in Pakistan, the National College of Arts, where he earned a BFA in Sculpture. Gull vehemently objects to the West's interest in and Pakistani elite's exploitation of truck art. He is skeptical of the fact that truck art has become popular globally only after patronage from the West, and that the Pakistani elite had largely ignored this folk art before the West noticed and appreciated it. “Western influences must not be allowed to seep into and taint this precious folk art. It is no longer authentic, and the quality of painting has also gone down considerably since the mid-1980s.”<sup>83</sup>

Gull, believes the sub-standard quality of truck art today is due to mass production and exploitation at the hands of small businesses that are trying to meet growing global demands for this precious folk art. Their goal is to just make more money for themselves – they do not care about truck art or artists. While Ali and Phool Ji both agree with Gull's sentiments regarding small truck art businesses, they also acknowledge the fact that it is these businesses that have actually helped promote the indigenous art around the world. “A growing global demand for

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<sup>82</sup> Iftikhar Dadi, *Modernism and the art of Muslim South Asia* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 2.

<sup>83</sup> Abdul Jabbar Gull, Pakistani artist/sculptor, in discussion with the author, April, 2021.

truck art is undoubtedly good for us.”<sup>84</sup> It is quite clear then, that for working truck artists the advantages of global promotion greatly outweigh the disadvantages of exploitation.

While there is certainly some truth in the belief that already affluent businesses have exploited and cashed in on truck artists' skills, I do not entirely agree. Yes, to some extent it is an exploitation, but these opportunities have also given truck artists a platform to show case their skill sets and promote their art globally besides providing them a means of livelihood under better working conditions. As regards the question of keeping a traditional art form 'authentic', in today's time and age of mass/social media that goal, however well intended, is just not realistic. Traditional art forms are bound to get inspired and impacted by other cultures. And with the resultant hybrid elements it transcends into the global and ultimately the glocal realm. Historically, it has been proven unfeasible to curb traditional folk arts from acquiring global influences. For instance, British colonists tried very hard but failed to keep indigenous Indian arts and crafts “pure”. In 1903, a movement was initiated by the ruling British government to remove every European influence Indian traditional arts had acquired over the years. Abigail S. McGowan writes

European art officials tried to promulgate certain ideas of authenticity in design and tried to shape consumption around these ideas. But in the end they were unsuccessful: artisans and consumers continually strayed into foreign styles and hybrid uses.<sup>85</sup>

In today's age of social and electronic media, it is impossible for any art form to not be influenced. Surely, confining any art form within the trajectory of 'strictly indigenous' cannot be

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<sup>84</sup> Haider Ali, Truck artist, in discussion with the author, April, 2021.

<sup>85</sup> Abigail S McGowan. “All That Is Rare, Characteristic or Beautiful, Design and the Defense of Tradition in Colonial India, 1851-1903,” *Journal of Material Culture* 10, no. 3 (November 1, 2005): 280.

condoned as a progressive approach. If truck art's global/Western influences are so objectionable, why then is it perfectly acceptable for university educated highbrow artists to be inspired by Western concepts of abstraction? Is it because truck artists are uneducated, belong to the lower sections of society and therefore their art must remain in the non-intellectual category with no aspirations of further development?

There is rarely any indigenous cultural practice today that has not been impacted by glocalization. The very real danger of exploitation, capitalism and the ultimate vanishing of such fragile folk arts must not be overlooked but at the same time the positive aspects of emerging hybrid, glocal entities should also be acknowledged. Take for example indigenous Australian aboriginal art. The coveted global appeal contemporary aboriginal art has in the context of post modernity is undeniable.<sup>86</sup> Pakistan's truck art similarly, is a modern/contemporary version of ancient traditions. It has survived colonialism, absorbed global modernism, and morphed into glocal post modernism.

This ability to constantly adapt, transform, innovate and persevere makes truck art and truck artists far more valuable than Pakistani art critics have ever believed them to be. Instrumental in bridging the gap between the upper and lower class, in many ways it overshadows the elitist local contemporary art scene.

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<sup>86</sup> Ingeborg Reichle. "Post-colonial Constellations in Contemporary Art," *AIL Talk*, 2017.

## 7 A PROMISING FUTURE

One of the most unfeigned, selfless promoters of truck art is Munawar Ali Syed who I was able to interview several times during and after my Karachi visit. Syed, a well-known artist and faculty member at both the Indus Valley School of Art and University of Karachi, has helped facilitate the careers of marginalized truck painters and utilize their skills in meaningful public art projects in Karachi and Islamabad. These projects spear headed by Syed, are usually not funded by the government. “I am Karachi” in 2015 was one such project initiated by IVS, with the help of faculty members, students and other non-governmental organizations. The idea was to reclaim the city's walls by painting images/messages of positive social change over ugly hate graffiti and political slogans. Syed deployed several truck artists for part of the project and a commendable outcome was recognition and more job opportunities for truck artists. With this academic patronage, truck art today (directly or indirectly) inspires a new generation of University students whose artwork reflects vibrant pop and kitsch elements reminiscent of truck art (Figure 7.1). “Canvases and materials for truck artists are rapidly changing and adapting to global trends. That, in my opinion, is a very positive development for this genre of painting.”<sup>87</sup>

With the impact of mass and social media, many aspects of truck art which used to be hand painted previously have become digitalized, less time-consuming processes. Easy peel and paste stickers imported from China and Japan have now replaced hand painted motifs.<sup>88</sup> Trucks are no longer the only surface for artists to paint on. Shipping containers, walls in public and residential spaces, even airplanes are some innovative surfaces truck artists now choose to paint on.<sup>89</sup> The Skywings Aviation school (Figure 4.17) mentioned earlier, is also one such

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<sup>87</sup> Munawar Ali Syed, Faculty, Indus Valley School of Art, Karachi, in discussion with the author, April, 2021.

<sup>88</sup> Wajid Daharkiwala, Art historian/faculty University of Gujrat, in discussion with the author, August, 2021.

<sup>89</sup> Haider Ali, Truck artist, in discussion with the author, April, 2021.

organization making efforts to promote truck art today. It has been declared, by owner Imran Aslam, as the future site of the first ever Pakistani truck art museum in the world – an astounding, hopeful development.<sup>90</sup> Despite their ulterior motives, small business owners have undoubtedly been influential in the 'glocalization' process. Household items of utility painted in the truck art style are much appreciated and in high demand across the globe.



*Figure 7.1: Pakistani Marilyn, 2012, by University student Summaiya Jillani (Instagram @summaiyajillani)*

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<sup>90</sup> Tasadduq Hussain, Skywings representative, in discussion with the author, April, 2021.



*Figure 7.2: Rozina Naz, first female truck artist in Pakistan, 2021,  
<https://frontpage.pk/t/rozi-ustad-pakistans-first-female-truck-artist-a-homeless-woman-with-self-perceived-strengths/5528>*

I was pleasantly surprised to find, on a current list of prominent truck artists compiled by Syed, a woman's name. Rozina Naz is the first ever female truck artist acknowledged and admired for her contributions in a previously completely male dominated field (Figure 7.2). The glass ceiling has been shattered, the riot of colors unleashed onto a global canvas. This is indeed a positive change and one cannot help but feel hopeful and excited for Pakistani truck art's future.

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