
MOVING IMAGES

TRUCK ART IN PAKISTAN



Text and Photos: Martin Sökefeld



ABUNDANCE

The categorical imperative of Pakistani truck art seems to be: Decorate everything! Not only are the visible surfaces of trucks adorned; the normally invisible insides of the cargo holds and even the undersides of the bonnets are also painted. Similarly, apart from the surfaces, technical gear like bars, rods, screws, bolts or wing mirrors are also decorated. Even so there are different degrees of decoration, this degree being measurable by how much of the base colour of the truck remains visible. On the most lavishly decorated vehicles, called *disco garis*, no square inch remains unadorned (cover photo; photo 1 and 2).

Yet decoration is not limited to the visual; this is, rather, a kind of synaesthetic art. Verses by poets of local or national fame frequently bedeck part of the front of trucks, including the fender, and metal chains are attached all around the trucks to create a characteristic tinkling sound on the moving vehicle.

SYNTAX

Although at first sight truck art seems to be a kind of aesthetic «anything goes» there are, in fact, a number of rules, a kind of syntax that is followed quite strictly. Within this syntax, however, the variation has few constraints. Essentially three parts of the truck have to be distinguished (the front, the sides and the rear), these three parts then being divided again into different sections. The most prominent part of the front is the *taj*, or crown, a large protruding compartment found above the driving cab (photo 1 and 3). As the highest part of the truck the *taj* is invariably reserved for Islamic symbolism, just as the Quran is kept on the top shelf of a bookcase, above all other books. All trucks carry images of the Kaaba on the right of the *taj* and the mosque of Medina on the left side of the *taj*, these often being accompanied by the invocations «ya Allah!» and «ya Mohammad!». Sometimes these most holy sites of Islam are displayed repeatedly on the *taj*, not only as images but also as small, stylised replicas. Besides these the *taj* generally lacks figurative decorations, except for highly stylised birds or fishes, and tends to be covered by all kinds of ornaments. The section between the *taj* and the windshield is similarly bedecked with ornaments. The outside surface of the bonnet is single-coloured yet the edges as well as the areas around the headlights and other parts of the front are decorated by finely tinselled metal-sheets (photo 4). The sides of the

cab (photo 5), including the doors, are also densely decorated with metal or plastic work. Some older trucks have carved wooden doors.

The sides represent the largest surfaces of the truck. Stabilising rods divide them into small segments, approximately 30 by 40 centimetres in size (cover photo). These segments are the sites for figurative images, most frequently flowers, animals, famous buildings, movie heroes, portraits of women and landscapes. With all these lakes, forests, mountains and small huts the depicted landscapes resemble more an imaginary Switzerland than any Pakistani landscape (photo 6). The other motifs share a similarly imaginary or idealized quality. Beside such «idealized elements of life» (Elias 2003), modern means of transportation like trains and jets may also be displayed on the sides. The name of the transport company to which the truck belongs is written in large letters on the sides, in Urdu on one side and in English on the other. While the decoration of the visible sides is highly segmented, the normally invisible inside may carry large murals, again with floral or animal motifs (photo 7).

A single, large image is invariably painted on the upper part of the rear, on the planks that close the cargo hold. Most popular are images of *burraq*, the mythical human-headed horse that carried the Prophet Mohammad on his nightly journey to Jerusalem, and animals like tigers, horses or eagles. But sometimes famous personalities like former cricket star Imran Khan, Pakistan's first military ruler Ayub Khan, or the national poet Allama Iqbal are also depicted here. The planks are all numbered to ensure that the drivers insert them in the correct position after unloading the truck. The lower, hinged tailgate is decorated with segmented images, similar to the sides of the truck.

WORKSHOPS

A considerable craft economy has evolved around the trucks, a craft economy which to a great extent involves recycling. New trucks leave the factory in the form of a chassis with wheels, engine, steering wheel and the driver's seat only. Everything else is added and assembled by craftsmen in local workshops which are situated in large, open backyards (photo 8). At first sight such workshops or *adde* appear to be quite chaotic. These places are littered with disembowelled trucks and truck parts, with scrap metal and old wood. Men work in all corners and the yard is filled with the banging of sledgehammers and the screeching of saws.

The muddy soil is mostly a deep black colour because it is soaked with diesel and grease. The *adda* is a collection of different workshops that specialize in different crafts. *Badimekerz* build the wooden body, the cargo hold of the trucks; *mistris* work on the engine; *lohars* do the welding; *nikelwale* create the metal ornaments; *saprepenterz* spray-paint the body; and the *likhaiwale*, at the end of the process, paint the ornaments and images. And of course there is also a *chaiwala* who serves strong, sweet tea to the craftsmen.

The *likhaiwale* work in small teams of three or four men (cover photo). The team is headed by the *ustad* (master). He is the eldest and most experienced painter and his role is to supervise the work of his artisans. Besides him, the team consists of one specialist who paints the images and other non-specialists who paint ornaments and other non-figurative parts of the decoration. This is a kind of apprenticeship: after years of painting ornaments one might get the chance to paint images like birds or flowers. A specialist does not require templates or models for his pictures but draws from his memory and imagination. He knows a number of different motifs which he applies in various colours and combinations to the trucks.

It is important to note, however, that not all of the decoration is painted. Many elements are prefabricated from coloured plastic or reflecting tape. The *adde* are surrounded by many small shops in which these plastic and tape works are produced and sold.

In some *adde* the *badimeker* is a kind of general contractor who organizes the services of all the craftsmen and effectively moves the truck through the different workshops. In other *adde* the craftsmen work independently. Most of the trucks in the workshops are not new and therefore undergo various stages of reconstruction. The decoration has to be renewed every five to eight years because images and colours suffer due to the inevitable wear and tear involved in the transport business. The engine and the chassis also often need repair. Less frequently, the whole wooden body is renewed. It is, therefore, impossible to determine the age of the vehicles: perhaps the decoration is new, but the body may be six years old and the chassis may have left the factory more than thirty years ago. Trucks are rarely beyond repair, though, and at least parts of them can always be used on other vehicles in any case.

CHANGE

I first visited an *adda* on the outskirts of Rawalpindi in the early 1990s, while doing fieldwork in Pakistan. When I returned there in the summer of 2007 the old workshops did not exist any more but two new *adde* had opened not far from the old site. I also visited another *adda* closer to the centre of the city. At first sight the decoration seemed to have become even more abundant than fifteen years earlier and on closer inspection I perceived a number of specific changes. Some motifs had become very popular, for instance horses and partridges on the rear of the trucks. On the sides, portraits of women had become very common (photo 10). While they were rather exceptional in the 1990s, such portraits are now seen on almost every *disco gari* that leaves the workshops. Furthermore, a greater part of the decoration now consists of tape and plastic work. Calligraphy apart, the *taj* is now almost exclusively covered with such items whereas before it was mostly painted (photo 3).

The truck brands had also changed. Earlier, the highways were almost exclusively plied by old Bedford trucks produced under license in Pakistan. The production of Bedfords was discontinued fifteen years ago, though, and now more and more Japanese Hino or Isuzu trucks are taking to the roads. Lacking the prominently protruding prow of the Bedfords they look much less splendid, but the decorators do their best to adjust their skills to the new models. And because the old trucks are repaired and renewed time and again the Bedfords will continue to dominate the roads for years to come.

Most significant, perhaps, is a change in styles¹. In the early 1990s the *likhaiwale* in Rawalpindi distinguished two styles only: *disco* and *sada* (simple). Now three different styles are distinguished, all named after cities: *Pindi* (the common short form of Rawalpindi), *Havelian* (sometimes also called *Mansehra* or *Abbottabad*, all three cities being situated in the Hazara region of the North-West Frontier Province) and *Peshawari* style (this being named after the capital of the province). These styles differ radically because of the size and amount of figurative images they include. *Pindi* style is basically the old *disco gari*, and the two designations are used almost interchangeably. *Havelian* style resembles the old *sada gari*. Here, the sides carry one row of figurative paintings above which the name of the transport company is prominently

¹ Elias (2003) distinguishes five different regional styles which do not coincide with the styles distinguished by the artists in Rawalpindi.

























displayed in large letters. These major elements are surrounded by some ornaments but, compared to a *disco gari*, a larger part of the surface remains undecorated. Furthermore, the *Havelian* style never makes use of human portraits. *Peshawari* style is almost minimalist. Here, figurative paintings on the truck sides are reduced to small miniatures framed by ornaments. They are arranged in a row at the centre of the sides, framed by ornamental decoration above and below. *Peshawari* style, also, never makes use of images of humans.

Havelian and especially *Peshawari* styles can be interpreted as a kind of Islamization of truck art. Islam has many faces in Pakistan but since the late 1970s, when General Zia ul Haq enforced a politics of Islamization, a «stricter» version of the faith related to the South Asian

Deobandi school and to Wahhabism from Saudi-Arabia has gained much ground and dominates especially the North-West Frontier Province. The *likhaiwale* in Pindi simply explain that the people of the Frontier – Pashtuns – «do not like images». But Pashtuns whom I met in one *adda* plainly stated that their dislike has a religious basis: paintings of humans are considered *gunah* (sin) as they contravene the Islamic prohibition of creating images of animate beings. Thus truck art with the ornamental minimalism of the *Peshawari* style, on the one hand, and the increased lavishness of *Pindi* style, including the popularity of portraits of unveiled women (photo 10), on the other, can be considered as the site of a struggle between a new Islamic orthodoxy and popular culture. Watching the roads in Pakistan, there is no sign yet that orthodoxy is going to win.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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All photos of this essay were taken in two workshops in Rawalpindi in August and September 2007. Most images show *disco garis* in the making or elements of *disco*-style decoration. Only the truck on photo 6 and 10 is decorated in *Peshawari* style.