

# Art Galleries On Wheels

By Durriya Dohadwala

The front of the truck decorated with pictures of the Holy Mosques in Medina (left) and the Kaaba (right) as well as with some religious text

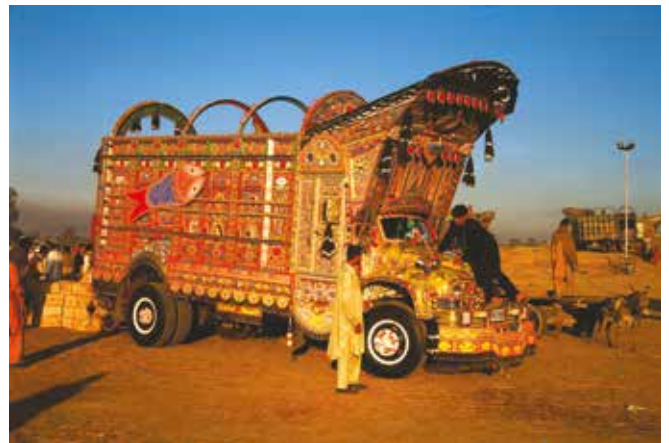
Ask most Pakistanis what they think of the colourful and loudly painted trucks that ply the country's roads and highways and you will almost certainly be met with an expression that says, "What about them"? For most Pakistanis the elaborately decorated vehicles are the only buses, trucks and rickshaws they have ever seen, so there is no novelty about them. But a first-time visitor is almost always struck by the psychedelic colours, detailed work and mind-boggling decorations and accessories on these moving art pieces.

Truck art, as it is known, is found in many other countries – Japan, the Philippines, India and Haiti, but nowhere is it taken as seriously as in Pakistan. The craft traces its roots to the Mughal era when craftsmen decorated palaces and carriages with motifs and designs, but truck



The interior cab is also colourfully decked with artificial flowers, seats upholstered in silks and panelling and paint on the sides and ceiling

art as we know it today started only in the 50s. In order to differentiate themselves to the illiterate masses, truck owners began employing these craftsmen's descendants to paint logos on their buses. As the economy boomed in the '60s and the bus and truck drivers' fortunes improved, the trucks evolved into story-boards of the owner's prosperity and personality. The Bedford truck of the '60s, with a viewing deck



A truck at a rest stop at sundown

above the driver's cab and high panelled sides, was ideal for this art.

Today a truck owner may spend anywhere between US\$2,500 and \$5,000 (a princely sum given that the average annual income of a truck driver is around \$2,000) on painting and decorating his truck. The work can take six to ten weeks and a truck owner will usually redecorate in three or four years. The money is considered well-spent since beautiful trucks get more business.

To the uninitiated, the trucks seem like a hodgepodge of highly exaggerated portraits, flat landscapes and calligraphy. But there is order in this chaos. The work normally follows an unwritten protocol. The front of the cab is decorated with religious texts or paintings of holy sites, like the mosques of Mecca and Medina, to serve as talismans. One favourite, as a symbol of speed and trust, is the *Buraq*, the Prophet Mohammed's winged horse that took him on his journey to the heavens. The sides are covered with pictures of snow-capped mountains, flowing rivers or gushing waterfalls serving as reminders of home for the truck drivers on their long journeys. The sides can also be embellished with motifs made of metal plates or reflective tape whose



use reveals the ingenuity of the craftsmen. Imported in 10 centimetre widths from Japan and Germany to illuminate the poorly lit highways at night, these brightly coloured tapes are cut and layered to produce an amazing array of flowers, birds and geometric patterns that not only work as reflectors, but decorate the trucks beyond the manufacturer's wildest dreams! The lower parts are usually decorated with dangling chains that have balls or leaves made of hammered steel hanging off their ends. These produce a jingling sound when the trucks move. The back panel typically has one or two medallions with a picture of an animal (like a tiger or peacock) or the portrait of a famous movie star or political figure, indicating the political affiliation of the truck owner. The choice is not limited to Pakistani or eastern icons. It is not uncommon to find Princess Diana juxtaposed with a portrait of ex-cricketer-turned-politician Imran Khan, or the former prime minister Benazir Bhutto next to an Indian movie star. All this is done at the owner's and sometimes driver's discretion; they spend weeks hanging around the workshops where the work is done.

The calligraphy on the trucks can range from religious texts to poetry about unrequited love. Sometimes they are words of advice and at others, philosophical comments on the country's socio-political situation. One that is often seen is a pair of large, Kohl-lined eyes on the back of the truck with the words 'Look – but with love' to serve as a talisman to ward off evil eyes on the road. Another favourite couplet is, "A mother's prayer is like the breeze of paradise". My favourite one to date is the cryptic one-liner, "The choice of a woman and a melon is a difficult one."



Painted wooden side panel of a truck



The lower parts of the truck are usually decorated with dangling chains that have balls of hammered steel hanging off their ends, producing a jingling sound when the trucks move

The art does not end on the outside of the trucks. The insides are bedecked with brightly coloured silks and satins, artificial roses and marigolds, pompoms and more motifs made of reflective tape. Mirrors are also very popular as is upholstery in silk and brocade.

The craftsmen who do the painting are different from those who do the woodwork or the upholstery.

Just as in a *karkhana* or workshop, each job has a specialist who comes in and does his piece. The expertise has usually been passed down in families through years of apprenticeship and hard work, although many craftsmen are now encouraging their children to get an education and find newer sources of livelihood. A truck that drives in with just a chassis and plain cab will drive out completely transformed, much like the sub-continent's brides who walk into a beauty salon for a makeover on their wedding day. Drivers and owners refer to their trucks in the feminine and take much pride in and care of their vehicles – understandable since they spend long hours, often days, on the road in them. While there are differences in the art on the trucks from province to province, it is hard for the average person to differentiate amongst them. Sindh is renowned for the camel-bone inlay work that its artisans do, while Punjab is better known for its plastic trimmings and intricate motifs. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan's craftsmen are skilled in woodwork and their trucks

sport more calligraphy than pictures.



The Buraq, a symbol of speed and trust, is on the back of the middle truck

In recent years this folk art has found recognition in the art and craft circles of urban Pakistan as well as overseas. Many souvenir shops in the big cities carry local products such as earthenware pots, plates or wall hangings decorated with truck art. Young Pakistani artists have adopted the craft into their work and there have been exhibitions of the painted trucks in the US, Australia, Canada and Germany – encouraging signs that this unique folk art will not be lost in the mass-production era that we live in today.

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All photographs by Peter Grant