

# TRUCK AS A STORY-TELLING DEVICE: CURRENT TRENDS IN POPULAR PORTRAITURE

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## **Abstract**

This study is based on social anthropological fieldwork conducted on cultural portraiture on the back of the trucks and those who execute these paintings. Because of various limitations this study was conducted only in the Punjab, but it reflects the psyche of all of Pakistan. The purpose was to investigate the ethnic artistic significance of portraiture in “truck art”, a major component of folk art in many countries, such as Afghanistan, India, Indonesia and several others and it reflects their indigenous cultures. The present study highlights the history of portraiture in truck art, the changes that have occurred in it through time and the current trends. Judging from the interviews of numerous interlocutors, I realized that these portraits are regarded not only as an aesthetic part of the overall decoration of the truck, but also as visual depiction of their owners. It is argued that the portraiture leaves a lasting impression in the daily lives of local people. The changes have been selective, not wholesale, in an evolutionary response to new industry demands.

**Key Words:** Anthropological field work, truck portraiture, decoration, aesthetic taste

## **Introduction**

Decoration of possessions and desire to display creation are social instincts. Desire to confirm one's place is a major motivating factor behind attempts to impress the people. In ancient, settled agrarian societies the plastic arts of painting, sculpture and architecture developed whereas in nomadic societies, folk arts like music, dancing and poetry developed, but even these societies liked to decorate their tents, camels and horses. Trucks are the horses, camels, carts and wains of the modern age and the owner values them not only because he has paid a good price for them and they are a source of livelihood but also because they reflect his taste and personal image. Not only trucks but also small vehicles such as minivans, rickshaws and even hand-push carts are decorated.

## **Kitsch or Artistic Expression**

These decorations are means of self-expression. Recently, Pakistani truck decoration – mostly hand-rendered work – has become a celebrated subject not only at an indigenous level but also in the international art scenario. The images are not produced with the uniformity of computer design or lithographic printing, but are individually crafted and painted

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by self-trained artists and artisans in the field. Several painters who previously made cinema hoardings and posters have now turned to doing truck art due to the slump in Lollywood film industry and also because film-makers have now adopted making photographic and digitalized sign-boards and posters. Many of these old cinema hoarding painters were well skilled in their craft and genre, sometimes the profession was handed down in families over generations, as in other crafts. In truck art the aspect requiring the greatest painting skill is the portrait behind the truck. Therefore when these craftsmen from the film industry turned to truck art, better composed and executed portraits began appearing on trucks. For example figure 1 shows a portrait of the film star Mustafa Qureshi, a famous star from the heyday of Punjabi films. Unlike the blank, flat and often somewhat disproportionate portraits of the previous eras, this rendition is convincing; it has a degree of professional shading and there is almost a sensitive expression on the face.

These decorations are done on practically all private and fleet-owned commercial trucks with particular and regional variations in style. Since trucks are always travelling from one place to another and from one province to another in the country, they are transformed into objects of kinetic art, personalized and vibrant in their idiom. Almost every truck is decorated in a naive and non-systematic way, usually reflecting taste and local folk motifs. Such renditions are often referred to as “kitsch”. This term normally refers to cheap and crudely made pictures, paintings and other decorated objects, especially in the west. The kitsch object of art or painting is usually critically regarded for certain formal characteristics such as colour, shape, facture treatment and kind of material used. More specifically kitsch stuff usually features the use of random curved lines instead of more symmetrical straight ones: lack of a sober background, saturation of colour, use of cheap material and no regard for the dimension of the object itself (Moles, 1978, p. 2). Such art is regarded with aesthetic disdain in sophisticated art circles. Therefore, it does not evoke much scholarly interest though it is usually given great importance in archaeological or anthropological studies. However, it should be noted that truck art follows a definite genre in its own perspective with variations according to province or region, different themes and styles of different artisans who make these decorations and the inevitable changing trends in any idiom. In the local context, the decoration and paintings on trucks reflect the taste habits of a specific class identity in the manner as pointed out by Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1984). They

represent a popular culture and are a major arena of public expression. Indeed the public has come to accept and comprehend this genre; they respond to it and would not be able to make head or tail of anything different in formal truck decoration. For example, many owners of large fleets adopt a more commercial image like other big companies and paint their trucks or tank-lorries a uniform colour scheme, with the name of the company painted on it and sometimes they have emblems. To the average truck owner, driver, *cleandar* or the staff at depots this is all well and good, but these vehicles are not decorated.

### **Structure and Themes**

A truck consists of three structural parts: the front (*taj or maatha*) usually reserved for Islamic symbols and motifs: the sides, which are the largest part of the truck, reserved for some religious motifs and a plethora of secular patterned compositions (often the name of the owner or transport company is written here) and the rear, reserved for large paintings especially portraits. Each part is further divided into different sections which are replete with decorative elements, paintings and designs. These elements of design are readily identifiable by the common people and represent a visual language that they appreciate. On the front of the truck sacred themes are represented in the form of small icons and religious posters, calligraphy of short holy inscriptions and prayers, etc. Contrary to the front of the truck where sacred themes are represented, the back of the truck has mostly been reserved for large, secular paintings for a long time. This part consists of 10-12 planks that close the cargo hold. The planks are numbered to ensure that the driver inserts them in the correct position after unloading the truck.

The choice of subject is often made merely according to whatever the current popular trend and topic is. Mostly the owner of the truck decides the themes and decorations for the truck and the subject to be selected for the back of the truck, but in many cases a permanent driver of the truck may be the decision maker in this regard. In both cases the truck becomes a carrier of a message; it tells us something through a pictorial language. Its meaning comes from the trucker's social background, his cultural traditions and his worldview. The theme on the back of the truck may also wholly or partly depict the homeland of the trucker through scenic representation, some landmark, emblematic object or other form of association.

The back of the truck according to Jamal J. Elias is, "the most sociologically undetermined aspect and one where personal expressions

have always played a greater role than on the sides” (Elias 2001, p. 166). Here one may find pithy statements, small verses and jokes. Their messages are always easily understood by on-lookers. While previously these rear boards mainly featured one big portrait or painting, nowadays usually they depict both pictorial and written matter. However, the images and the text always supplement one another perfectly and further heighten the effect.

Full size paintings and portraits are still found on the rear boards or in some cases smaller images surrounded by embellished designs. Though now more rare, the popular image of *buarq* (a mythical human headed, winged horse that is said to have carried the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) to the dome of the rock in Jerusalem and back in a matter of fractions of a second) has been coming down for generations. Currently missiles or F 16s are more often depicted as objects of speed. Other religious themes sometimes found here are mosques and shrines, but these are usually subjects selected by devotees of particular saints. Other common subjects are popular celebrities such as famous singers, dignified portraits of religious figures, political and national leaders, martyred soldiers and live military leaders. There are also icons of Sufi saints, paintings of Bollywood and Lollywood stars, the picture of the owner of the truck may also feature the portrait. From among wild animals, eagle has been a popular image for long. Nowadays a trend of smaller portraits is developing, less stylized, more realistic and better executed, like figures 3 and 6; or they may even be smaller like realistic miniatures. Sometimes these may look almost like photographs, deliberately posed, quarter-length portraits or full-length as if taken in a studio. The painting may be of the owner himself or a member of his family. The selection of these subjects is quite erratic and may represent his tribe, his religious sect, village caste or clan. To understand the relationship between the text and the visual content one should know about the background of the subjects and topics and the significance they hold for the viewer. Of course, this is common knowledge except for those who may be alien to the environment.

The portrait at the back is almost always chosen by the trucker. The fact is that these portraits are not chosen arbitrarily, but from the owner's need to define himself as a member of a particular social or ethnic group. The owner of the truck is identified by these various representations or paintings which hold significance in this respect. He strives to tell something about himself, his sense of identity and relationship with his

region and local culture. Since he and his truck have to travel all over this vast land, he feels the need to proclaim his own place in the general scheme of things. This is not necessarily a parochial tendency; he wants to communicate and be with the world he sees around him.

### **Portraits on Trucks**

Truck portraiture represents refined craftsmanship and often some higher social and less often personal values through icons. For instance, Badshah Khan stands for Pashtun values; Pakistani flag represents patriotism; the image of the trucker's child shows his personal love and care. Can anyone dismiss such creative endeavors as mere kitsch? Thomas Kulka answers this question: one person's kitsch is another person's art, and what is or is not kitsch is determined by individual likes and dislikes (Kulka, 2002, p. 3).

Today, a plentiful supply of articles and books about the truck art of Pakistan is available, but surprisingly, there is very little research on the portraiture in this sphere, although the developing trends in the plurality of subject matter of this aspect and in the aesthetics and taste reflect several new changes in provincial and ethnic thought and rural aesthetic appreciation that should be of particular artistic and sociological interest. Therefore this paper deals exclusively with the current trends of truck portraiture and investigates basically two fundamental approaches to visual analysis of this aspect: iconography, what do the popular icons, places and objects represent and how do we recognize their significances? And, what history and changes in society do these images tell us? These questions will inevitably take us into a maze of cultural, aesthetic and social values that shape the way portraiture functions and sometimes they may unveil a long tale in a semiotic moment. I will attempt to give simple analyses of these questions. I am sanguine this present paper will interest all those who wish to understand truck art from the contemporary perspective of the portraiture it depicts.

### **Popular Portraiture and Current Trends**

The portraits usually represent the ethnic taste and preferences of various provinces or regions. For example former prime ministers of Pakistan Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and his daughter Benazir Bhutto are popular subjects of truck portraiture in Sind province. The portrait of the first military ruler of Pakistan, General Ayub Khan appears on several trucks of the Hazara region. Similarly, the portrait of Allama Iqbal continues to feature somewhat as a national icon associated with the formation of Pakistan along with an eagle which is a famous symbol used in his

poetry. Sometimes some inspiring verse of his is also written. All these are all-time favourites. However, another figure of national significance is the portrait of Muhammad Ali Jinnah that in fact seldom if ever appears on the rear of the truck. Instead, nowadays smaller size photo like paintings of him are sometimes seen on the sides of the trucks (Elias, 2011, p. 172). At one time the image of Badshah Khan, a Pakhtun national hero, was quite common in trucks of the frontier (occasionally this portrait still features). Similarly, G.M. Syed, a Sindi nationalist leader used to appear in Sind, but now its frequency has declined considerably.



*Figure 1. Portrait of a famous film star Mustafa Qureshi, painted on the back of the truck. Sargodha 2016*

Among the stars of Pakistani film industry (Lollywood), the face of Mustafa Qureshi (Figure 1) is now seen on several trucks. The interesting fact is that this actor normally plays the role of a villain. The popularity of this portrait is due to his famous phrase, “*Nawan aaya eien, sooneyan*” (‘Are you new here, dear?’) It is the cowboy movie equivalent, but this Punjabi phrase is more ingratiating in a

sinister manner) from the blockbuster Punjabi movie *Maula Jatt*. This remark has become the hallmark of the movie and is often even written underneath the picture. The addition of text to the visual depiction plays a vital role in understanding the context of the image. In these cases, the impact of the close-up view of the single image of the star, the simplicity of the content engages the gaze of the viewers. It is also interesting to note that previously famous female movie stars of both Bollywood and Lollywood were seen on trucks; however these have vanished as the local film industry slumped and now the portraiture of popular singers has taken their place, especially those who sing folk/rural songs.



Figure 2 . Back of a truck with the portrait of Ataullah Khan Esakhelvi.  
Muzaffargarh, 2016.



Currently there is a trend in truck portraiture that the majority of popular icons are contemporary figures rather than those from the past. They are painted in new forms and styles and people can recognize them immediately. For example Figure 2 portrays the famous folk singer Attaullah Khan Esakhelvi. He is represented in many characteristic iconic styles on trucks. Vehicles carrying his portraits belong to almost every region of Pakistan. The reason is that he sings in several dialects and languages: Seraiki, Punjabi and Urdu as well as in Pashto. Moreover, the drivers carry cassettes and CDs of his folk songs which they listen to during travelling far and wide throughout Pakistan. His images are supported with his name, the driver's name as well as some information about the driver's village, or towns along with contact numbers.

Figure 3 . Portrait of an Ustad (teacher) on rare of the truck. Faisalabad, 2016.



Previously pictures of the owner (or permanent driver) did sometimes appear on the back of trucks. However, another new trend that has become quite common is that apart from the owner, pictures of his family members and other figures connected with his family, clan, tribe or sect are represented rather than choosing images of renowned public figures. These serve as a record to



depict more personal feelings, devotional love, veneration or respect and thereby, occasionally reveal aspects of the cultural background of the people concerned. Pictures of parents and elders not only show love, but also respect for older people which is supposed to be a revered religious and cultural principle in society; pictures of tribal leaders or spiritual guides shows deep tribal affiliation and religious devotion respectively. Figure 3 is that of the rear of a fully decorated truck with a skillfully painted portrait of a teacher (*ustad*). It is unusual that a truck owner should have the portrait of his *ustad* painted instead of some near and dear one or famous personality. When I interviewed the owner he told me that he revered his old mentor; that it was because of his prayers that he had become successful in life and he had taught him truck driving. Respect for a teacher is an important principle in local Pakistani societies. This portrait also gives some information regarding the names and other details of the owner and drivers. In fact the artist, Shabbir, is a well-known truck portrait painter of Chiniot (a tehsil of Sargodha) and almost every third portrait on a truck there is painted by him. Usually a good painter like Shabbir charges almost five thousand rupees (50 dollars) for one portrait. However, this rate may vary from region to region.



Figure 4. A formal portrait of a deceased man. Bahawalpur, 2016.

Many trucks carry portraits of relatives of the trucker. Such portraits evoke personal poignant emotions. Figure 4 shows a portrait of a deceased man, the truck owner's brother who died in a truck accident. According to the interlocutor the portrait kept his memory alive and reminded him of their time together driving on long journeys in their truck. Regarding emotions generated by the pictures of deceased men, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, in their book "The Meaning of Things", write:

In their (photos) ability to arouse emotion there is no other type of [medium] that can surpass them; they are perhaps equalled only by stereo [films]. ... Because photos bear the actual image of a departed kin they can acquire an almost mystical identification with the deceased person. (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981, p. 69)



Figure 5. A pair of toddlers in single image. Jhang, 201

There are of course definite objective and subjective circumstances involved in the display of personal portraits in this social class (middle class). Of course drivers have to spend several days away from their families, thus they need pictures of their loved ones to compensate their emotional loss and these prominent, large portraits become symbols of their love. Portraits of important people and family members are quite common in well-to-do homes. They show the social standing of the family. However, getting a portrait of a family member painted on the rear of their trucks is an extraordinary task for the owner and that shows his superiority within his class. Moreover, this is a way of honouring a family member, especially a deceased one.



There are many mass produced, cheap posters available in the market that middle to lower class people buy to adorn their homes.



A popular theme of these posters is adorable toddlers and innocent babies. They have a wide appeal among the public because of their beauty and innocence. Now another trend that is gaining ground is that these paintings in the style of these mass produced photos of cute babies and toddlers and young boys are being painted on the rear of trucks. Usually the owner has pictures of his own children painted in this manner, though occasionally this may be only a reproduction of some 'toddler poster' that has particularly appealed to him. Often the name of his boy is written with some other text giving information, expressing love, occasionally with a verse. Figure 5 shows two brothers and contains short slogans representing the theme of love between them. The background is like that of a poster. The composition which is tasteful and the figures centrally juxtaposed, reveal the aesthetic taste of the truck



Figure 6. A single portrait of a toddler on the back of the truck. Multan, 2016.

owner. Likewise, figures 6 and 7 of single portraits of toddlers carry a special meaning for the owner of the truck, deep love for his son. These pictures serve as a permanent memento for him and give meaning to his life and work while driving down long, lonely roads. A culturally interesting aspect is the prevalence of pictures of boys, reflecting a mentality that idealizes the birth of boys and is disappointed in getting daughters because they consider them burdens. Also a picture of a daughter, no matter an infant, will seldom or never appear, because of the custom of observing the veil in these classes, and this precludes beloveds and wives also. According to Pierre Bourdieu such photos are real *sociograms* (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 6).



Figure 7. Truck from DG Khan carrying portrait of Usama Bin Laden. DG Khan, 2015.

These paintings on trucks are not permanent; they fade or deteriorate and have to be changed in the course of time or in some cases according to the political or social scenario. For example during the US invasion of Afghanistan back in 2001 after September 11 attacks, the posters of Usama Bin Laden became popular and hit the streets in Pakistan and also in Afghanistan. His portraits in heroic postures still continue to be fairly popular, Figure 8, but has decreased after the initial idealizing surge and disillusionment regarding terrorism. Another example was that during the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, posters of Iraqi President Saddam Hussain kneeling in prayer with symbols of Iraqi military power and the image of Dome of the Rock in the background became prominent throughout the country and adorned the walls of domestic as well as public spaces like trucks. But now with his abject defeat, this theme has gradually disappeared completely. In the modern scenario, the current political leadership is not considered suitable for representations on trucks. Several people I interviewed commented that the reason is that they are not doing wonderful jobs for the development at any level in Pakistan.



Figure 8. . Portrait of a sitting Army Chief General Raheel Sharif on the back of the truck. Lahore, 2016.



Further, there are regional and ethno-communal dimensions to recognizing public figures as heroes. Thus the portraits of army men, especially martyrs and generals of the past and present appear on the rear of the trucks because they are not identified with any particular province and the leaders enjoyed great powers and authority. It may be noted that the transport industry is more prevalent in areas where the tribal system still continues or has great influence (e.g., the frontier regions in the north west); areas that are more feudal and thus feudal clans and castes affect society (rural Sind) or places where the feudal system is breaking down but feudal clannishness maintains a base (Sargodha, Mianwali, parts of the Seraiki belt) and thus these people have a natural tendency to appreciate authoritarian figures like they obey their sardars, chiefs, *vaderras*, Chaudries, etc., and valorous fighters. As mentioned before portraits of the first military ruler of Pakistan, General Ayub Khan, who brought a surge of industrial progress in his time, was very popular once and continued so for a long time and is still relatively common on trucks today especially from his home region in Hazara. The portrait of Major Aziz Bhatti who was martyred in the war with India in 1965 and awarded Nishan-e-Haider, Pakistan's highest medal for bravery, is also common on contemporary truck portraiture. Also truck paintings of the hero of the Kargil conflict in 1997, Captain Karnal Sher Khan (also a recipient of the Nishan-e-Haider) has become popular and appears on most of the trucks from his home district Swabi (in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa). These icons pay homage to these heroes. However, now a new trend that has become noticeable is portraits of the incumbent army chief, General Raheel Shareef, Figure 9. He has caught the people's imagination for his vigorous action against terrorists and efforts to improve the image of the army. He got wide support throughout the nation. Truckers carrying his portrait feel proud. One of the interlocutors said that he would never rub out the picture of General Raheel's on his truck until with time it got completely effaced; and then he would replace it with another portrait of his. Thus, portraiture in truck art with its own repertoire of signals and messages gives to its inceptors an opportunity for idealization of certain public and domestic figures, and shows the

vital relationship between these portraits and the truck owner, directly reflects the social dimension of human life as a field of action of certain sections of the public.

### **Conclusion**

The portraiture that appears on the rear of trucks has aesthetic value. They provide a catalogue of pictures of people, once renowned or currently who have become icons. They present a vibrant, kinetic gallery of portraits reflecting the thoughts, aspirations and feelings of various people from different provinces and sometimes these pictures cannot help but grab the attention of the most blasé motorist on the highways. And for those who might care to take a deeper interest in these works of art; each one evokes visual pleasure, shows unique and different methods of composition and execution of this genre and most important, they usually tell some tale of persons from the various provinces and regions of this country. The subjects, their forms, the colouration, background and the visual impact the artist paints are contrived to evoke distinct memories and deep emotions in the trucker, often at a personal level.

Fundamental to these portraits being a distinct genre in the vast repertoire of artistic representation on all sides of the truck, the meanings such folk and kitschy art exhibit shows that they increase the personal attachment of people with their trucks. Moreover, this truck art is becoming a wider cultural practice and in this idiom the aspect of portraitures is gaining significance and developing new techniques, it reflects the fact that these have an aesthetic attraction for many people and they appreciate the beauty of these representations and consider them beautiful in their own right. Further, artistic scholars, collectors and aficionados are becoming more interested in this ethnic art form.

These portraits provide the viewers with a basic sense of narrative through frozen images, whose forms are derived from different traditions of popular and traditional culture and subsequently they become the story-telling devices. Since the images are seen while travelling, they serve as records of reality, as documentary evidence of the people, places, things, actions and events they depict. Moreover, a beautifully decorated truck with a

fine painting on the rear shows itself clearly superior to other trucks.

I believe that in the future contemporary photography techniques will also start to be used in making these images. Nothing can substitute the personal endeavor or the touch of the craftsman, and of course, these techniques are bound to be expensive. Let us hope they only supplement the artisan's handiwork and not supplant it, as has happened in regard to cinema posters. A portrait is a space of pleasure that holds a recorded moment in stillness, capturing and offering up for contemplation an image of often something lost. In this sense the portraiture reminds viewers of the fleeting nature of the world; of the transience of beauty and mortality of life. Contemporary truck portraiture also tells us about what has been lost or eradicated in contemporary times in various regions of this country. These portraits reinforce what is timeless and highlight the different types of people around us. Thus, they show us what a vast country this is, not only in size but also in cultural diversity.

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