

PAKISTANI TRUCK ART

The road is ours!

by Martin Sökefeld

Pakistan's economy is greatly dependent on truck transport, just as in other South Asian countries. And like in other parts of the region, the trucks in Pakistan too are loaded over the limit as they lumber across the plains or strain over the hills. But there is one big difference: the old Bedfords of Pakistan are part of another economy too, the profits of which are not paid out in rupees but in honour and aesthetics. This is the arena of images, symbols and dreams, expressed in the currency of popular art.

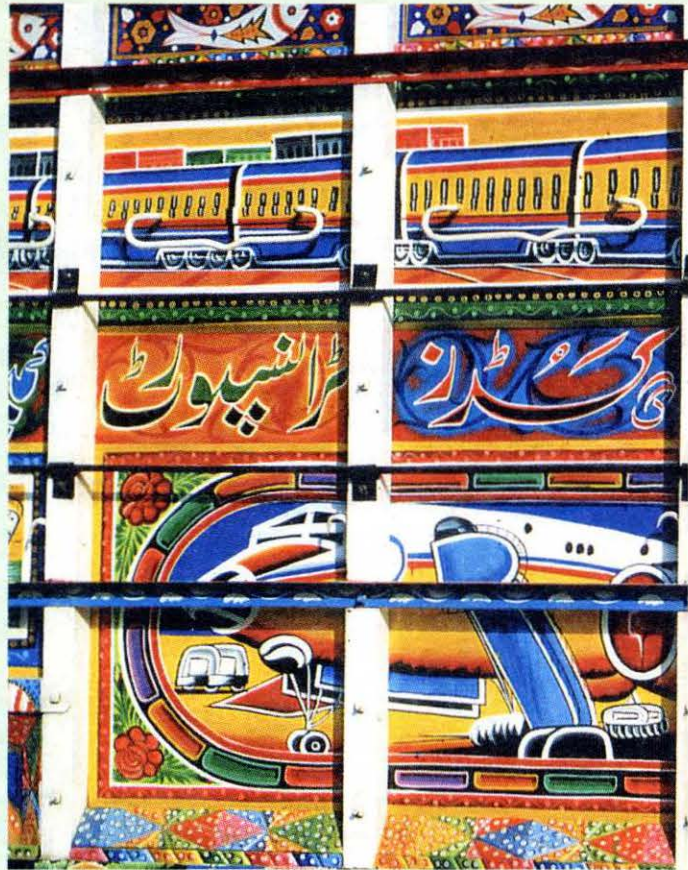
Pakistani trucks are veritable works of art covered as they are completely with paintings, ornaments, reflectors, hammered metal fittings, woodcarvings, and other decorations. On exhibit are portraits of national heroes, beautiful women, imaginary landscapes with wood covered hills and quiet lakes, as well as images that profess a profound regard for Islam. By Islamic standards, it might seem contradic-

tory to show unveiled (or only semi-veiled) females unabashedly, but these images are only as contradictory and multilayered as is the real life of most ordinary people.

There is an explicit order and hierarchy of values expressed in truck paintings, amounting almost to a syntax of truck art. The highest part of a truck is invariably reserved for Islam. Calligraphies reading Aya Allah and Aya Mohammad, along with pictures of the Kaaba at Mecca, are found on what is called *ataj*, the crown, a wooden construction that looms above the driver's cabin. The sides of the cabin are often covered with a kind of mosaic of metal reliefs intersected with small painted ornaments, and sometimes the doors are made of finely carved wood. However, the most important exhibition areas for truck paintings are the sides of the load area. The wooden panels of the sides are divided into small







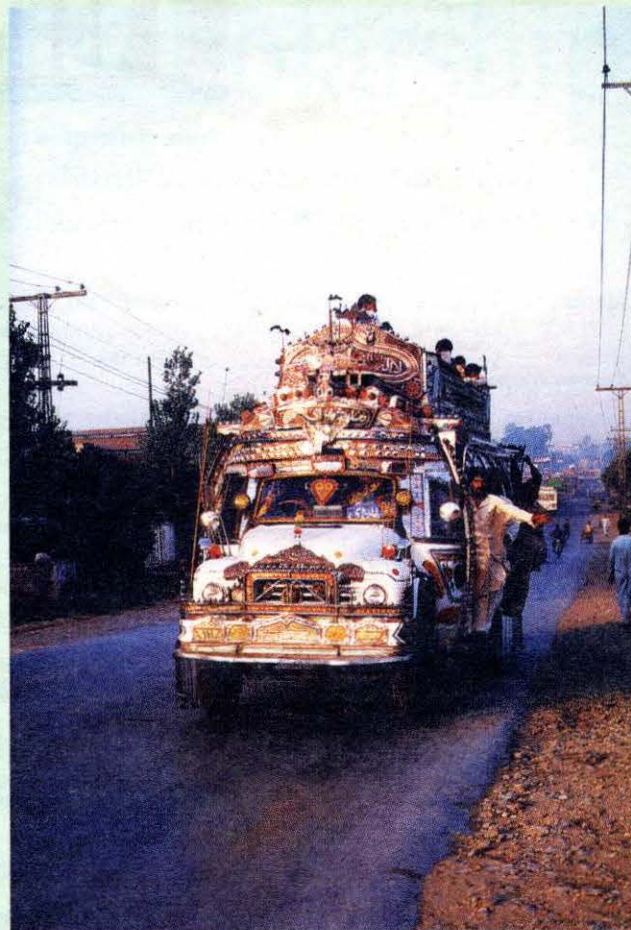
segments by iron struts to frame a number of different pictures. The most common features are landscapes, women's faces, birds, tigers and flowers, but sometimes technological motifs like airports and trains can also be found.

Two basic types of painting can be distinguished in the way the truck sides are done. The first is the 'simple painting', which is basically a picture in each segment on the sides with some additional ornaments. The second type, which leaves no square inch uncovered, is the 'disco painting'. These 'disco-trucks' are the real masterpieces. Every time you take a look at them you discover new images and decorations. But whether 'simple' or 'disco', the paintings on the two sides are never identical, and not only because the name of the owning company is written in Urdu on one side and in Roman on the other.

The back of the trucks invariably exhibits one large motif: a building, an animal, a mythical figure like Buraq (the winged horse of Prophet Mohammad's celestial journey), or a portrait. These images are painted on separate wooden planks that are taken off when loading or unloading the truck. Only when the planks are inserted in the correct order, do the pictures appear properly.

These artworks are produced by clusters of tiny workshops of different kinds of artisans situated mostly





along busy roads on the outskirts of the big cities. In these places, mechanics deal with the machines, welders repair bodyworks, and carpenters construct the wooden bodies of the trucks that are finally painted and decorated with images, little mirrors, ornamental fittings, glittering reflectors and sounding chains. These sites are as much a beauty parlour for trucks as it is a technical workshop.

At a workshop in Rawalpindi, the *ustaad*, the painter-master, works with two of his sons and some assistants, and are aided by an apprentice for the less artful works. For a 'simple painting' they need two days, a 'disco painting' takes longer. They are masters of their art and do not need models for painting. Generally they are given a free hand in what they do. And the motifs being what they are, they are usually accepted by the owners. Nobody objects to beautiful roses and birds or to a portrait of cricket star Imran Khan (at least before he aspired for the prime minister's office).

It is not only new trucks that are painted; many trucks are painted anew if the colours have lost their brilliance or if the truck has changed hands and the new owner now wants to see his name on the sides. When the painter-artists are done, the decorators take over with their accessories such as messages added in the form of little badges with slogans like "The road is ours."

May that be so for all times.

