

An Analytical Study of Design Configurations in Pakistani Paintings

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Abstract. This paper sets forth a scientific and analytical approach for understanding the creative process as manifested in a painting by focusing on design elements and principles. It is argued that an artist knowingly or unknowingly uses certain design configurations, which influences the viewer's interpretation of painting significantly. Firstly, how a painter creates an artwork is defined in terms of the combined activity of his mental processes. These processes range from intuition to the final composition of the artwork and are actualized in different stages of the conception and final composition of an artwork. Secondly, the emotional and intellectual processes of the viewer are also pertinent in critically evaluating the essential message in an artwork. The meaning of this message, therefore, relies as much on the viewer as on the artist. This becomes clear by looking at design configurations as manifested in the works of contemporary Pakistani painters. The paper provides a new way of understanding the work of Pakistani painters from the perspective of design.

Keywords: Contemporary, Contemporary, Pakistani Painter, Design, Painting, Pakistani Painting.

1 Introduction

The kernel of art is the conveyance of ideas and feelings from the artist to the listener or viewer. Art caters to those parts of human thought which cannot be expressed in words only, and therefore demand other mediums of expression. To provide a visual appearance his thoughts an artist employs certain conventions often defined by design elements and principles. This subtlety is primarily expressed in emotional terms and is communicated on an emotive scale through design configurations. Sometimes an artwork depicts reality as it is, which is typical of folk-art traditions. But most of the time, in the case of prominent art movements, artists use their imagination and craft to portray reality in different ways. It is here that the creative process intensifies and extends beyond mere observation. An artist engaged in a creative process abstracts certain aspects of reality and combines them in a completely new way. This capability, and its necessary elements, will be elaborated in the following study.

Apart from the above, the analysis of an artwork involves the viewer's personal preferences and inclinations. Therefore, it clouds the objective investigation of the artist's ideas and emotions which he had intentionally communicated in the artwork. But it is only with an understanding of the viewer's interpretative process that we can separate the artist's viewpoint and look closely at it. The purpose of this study is to substantiate this division and provide a more detailed understanding of the artist's and viewer's inner emotional and intellectual processes. This paper, therefore, inquires into the creative process of painters from a scientific and cognitive standpoint. The mental process of artist engaged in the creative process, as well as of the viewer, is discussed to understand the creative process comprehensively.

For the above purpose, the research draws on the understanding of mental processes which are relevant to the creative process of an artist. To understand this process more deeply, the viewer's emotional and cognitive processes are also considered. Because it is only through the interpretation of the viewer that an artwork acquires its meaning and significance in society. In light of this, various creative techniques used by Pakistani painters are discussed to ground the research in social reality and provide a lens with which to view contemporary art practice.

2 Composition as Design

To understand the emotional and intellectual capabilities involved in the creative process, an outline of the working of mind and brain is essential. For this purpose, the work of *Antonio Damasio* is significant. In his book, *Self Comes to Mind*, he discusses how feelings and emotions construct our basic conscious experience. He also focuses on the cognitive processes of the mind with a detailed focus on mental maps and memory [1]. This gives us the basic framework in which to understand the creative processes of the artist. To understand how a viewer interprets and draws meaning from an artwork, meaning in the Visual Arts, is important. Erwin Panofsky divides the understanding of artwork into three categories focusing on primary, secondary, and tertiary meaning [2]. A focus on the concrete existence of a piece of art, its form, is taken as primary. The inquiry into its subject matter is defined as secondary, and an evaluation of formal elements is the tertiary element of interpreting an artwork.

Creativity is a dynamic process in which not only an artist but also a viewer engages. An artwork passes through different stages with defining elements and layers at each stage, from conception in the mind of an artist to the interpretation in the mind of viewer.

The rudiments of an artwork can be found in the mind of the artist, in the form of certain mental and emotional states which he or she wants to express. The emotional and cognitive capabilities which an artist employs in this pursuit are not only essential for composition but also the aesthetic quality of a finished art piece. According to philosopher R.G Collingwood art originates as an emotional perturbation and ambiguity in the mind of an artist [3]. It is only by undergoing a multi-layered process of expression and comprehension that an artist can clearly understand and articulate his emotions and their associated ideas in the form of composition [4]. When we focus on its origins, we can see composition as primarily a mental process. Whether in pictorial or linguistic terms, it involves the combined activity of different mental and emotional processes of an artist.

Generally, we can say that an artist starts from an idea of a feeling which he wants to express. The second and third step is quite important in the composition of his/her artwork. Firstly, he explores a different set of ideas and emotions with which he can redefine and chisel his original idea or feeling. Through this process, he makes himself more conscious about his original idea or feeling and substantiates his original hunch or intuition. This process takes place primarily on the verbal plane which involves his intelligence and cognition. The more intellectually enabled the artist is the more is facilitated at this stage of the creative process. He also uses his memory and imagination in process of exploration. Then comes his capability to internally vocalize and proclaim his disparate thoughts and emotions. This third stage involves a rigorous self-criticism in which the artist judges and articulates his thought and emotions. He communicates with himself, consciously and unconsciously, to develop his ideas and the composition in which they would be expressed.

There are illuminating parallels between the process of writing and painting. Both are essentially creative processes. The main difference is that the former is primarily verbal while the latter is essentially a nonverbal process. As a writer, or a speaker for that matter, finds different words and joins them in sentences, a painter imagines and combines different lines, shapes, and colors into different correlated forms on a canvas. The mental vocabulary changes from words to images but the essential mental processes of memory, abstraction, and cognition remain the same. Then comes the process of self-appreciation in which the artist or writer tallies his ideas with reality and judges their significance from the standpoint of the reader or viewer. A more eloquent but similar explanation of this process can be found in the work of psychologist Graham Wallas. He models creativity into four overlapped stages, namely preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification [5]. In all these stages feelings play a primary role.

For understanding how they partake in the creative process, we can consult Damasio who proposes that emotions and thoughts affect how a person is feeling. Feelings are cognized when a person senses or becomes aware of a certain emotion. Therefore, emotions are more primary than feelings. However, emotions themselves are the manifestation of the primordial pain and pleasure mechanisms found in all life forms. What we understand as a positive emotion, such as happiness and love, are pleasure responses. In the same manner, negative thoughts or emotions are actuation of our responses towards pain. Hence the basic capability of an artist which gives rise to his feelings and generates multiples ideas is the pain-pleasure mechanism, which is partly genetic and partly influenced by his environment.

The design elements and principles are used when an artist visually arranges his or her subject matter on canvas to convey the idea or feeling. The inclusion of design elements and principles by painters has been explored in detail by Susan Langer. She states:

“The image presented on the canvas is not a new “thing” among the things of the studio. The canvas was there, the paints were there; the painter has not added to them...Something arises from the process of arranging colors on a surface, Something is created, not just gathered and set into a new order; that is the image. It emerges suddenly from the disposition of the pigments, and with its advent, the very existence of the canvas and the paint “arranged” on it seems to be abrogated; those actual objects become difficult to perceive in their own right. A new appearance has superseded their natural aspect”. [6]

The keyword here is arrangement, which refers to the ability of an artist to integrate image and sensibility, or a form and meaning.

3 Interpretation

The discussion about appraising and critically reviewing an art piece often involves the discussion of creating and composing it, but now vice versa. As discussed above, composing an art piece involves a definitive amount of self-appreciation and criticism. It is only by this process that the artwork acquires its social and collective significance. Moreover, an artwork cannot be defined only in physical terms, that is, in terms of what is observable on the canvas. Rather it transcends beyond observation to the realm of imagination, emotions, and intelligence, where its meaning and significance are interpreted by the viewer. A comprehensive account of creating artwork has to encompass how a viewer decodes its message and theme. Therein lies the social influences on the artist as well as the social implications of the artwork.

At some stage of creating an artwork, the painter takes the place of the viewer to judge his product from an objective standpoint. This involves the capabilities of understanding, interpretation, and critical evaluation. It is through the combined activity of a viewer's aesthetic and intellectual capabilities that an art piece is judged and evaluated. If an emotional response to an artwork is not coupled with an intellectual understanding of an artwork, the viewer cannot appreciate a painting in its entirety and will focus on its limited aspects. Furthermore, if that intellectual understanding is from a non-subjective standpoint, then it can potentially reach a true and sublime interpretation of a particular painting. For this purpose, the viewer has to limit his individuality and perform evaluation from the standpoint of the artist. Only then an effective communication between an artist and a viewer take place, and the creative process can blossom to its actual potential.

The commonly held approach in art criticism is based upon a four-step model proposed by Edmund Burke Feldman that suggests a way to understand and evaluate artwork. A critic begins by description, which is about identifying what is visible. Feldman states that "description is a process of taking inventory, of noting what is immediately presented to the viewer" [7]. The critic then moves to analysis, which brings to light the relationship of parts in an artwork forming a whole. This stage involves looking at the principles of design in the work as aesthetic devices. Feldman states, "In this stage, we want to find out what the forms do to each other, how they affect or influence each other" [8]. The third stage is interpretation, which involves the application of the viewer's perspective to discern the intended meaning of the work. Feldman describes this stage in the following words, "Explaining a work of art, which may be understood as interpreting the work, involves discovering its meanings and also stating the relevance of these meanings to our lives and the human situation in general" [7]. The fourth step is evaluation, that is, about passing a judgment on artwork. However, Feldman maintains that if a work is sufficiently interpreted, the judgment stage can be avoided. He states: "Indeed if we have thoroughly interpreted a work, the business of evaluation can often be omitted. Explaining a work of art involves discovering its meanings and also stating the relevance of these meanings to our lives and the human situation in general" [9]. From a viewer's standpoint, the form

becomes more relevant to arrive at the meaning when the work under discussion is abstract. Terry Barret, who has extensively written on interpretation of art, states:

“All art has content, and all content must be interpreted to arrive at meaning. In abstract and Formalist works of art, the form of the work is content to be interpreted and the form conveys its meaning. In the works with the recognizable subject matter, how that subject matter is selected and formed and contextualized constitutes the content of the work and conveys its meaning” [10].

The above process suggests that the interpretation of the viewer is guided by the design configuration of a painting. The way the eye moves is determined by how a thought or feeling is visually expressed on the canvas. The points of emphasis, the movement, the layers, and the forms each convey a part of the meaning. Let us now examine some of the works by Pakistani painters and see how an idea is communicated through design configurations.

4 Design Configurations in Pakistani Paintings

Artist, Rahat Naveed Masud showcases the repression of an individual on account of a sociopolitical paradigm **Figure 1**. In the painting *Dupatta* (veil) is painted as a symbol of the oppression of female members of society. Zia ul Haq’s era saw the most restricted and limited freedom of women in society. They were supposed to cover their bodies according to *Sharia* law, while their basic human rights were curtailed by the religious dogmatic forces in society. Rahat’s eyes convey her anguish and silent protest against the oppressive regime of the time. Her feelings of captivity and limited-expression provoke her to voice her concerns about women’s status in Pakistani society. The bars behind her are a direct expression of her feelings of confinement and incarceration. In such a painting the viewer has enough room for exploring its hidden message if he understands the sociopolitical setting in which it is produced. But at the same time, emphasis has been used as a design element. The composition is pyramidal and it amounts to convey through engaging the viewer into self-reflection. This is achieved by emphasizing the gaze. It is the eye contact with the subject that is the most powerful device of communication used.



Fig 1: Rahat Naveed Masud, Self, Oil on canvas, 1990s.

Thah **Figure 2** by Ijazul Hassan is a clear example of using contrast as a design element. It portrays the film actress *Firdous* in a posture that depicts the female identity usually expressed in Punjabi films of Pakistan. She is a symbolic representation of the rural woman or the *Jatti* of Punjab, who is known for her strength and sex appeal. Her posture is complementing her as an object of male gaze and desire. At the same time, the painter represents another image of a Vietnamese woman, who is holding a rifle in one hand and a child in the other. Her posture shows that she is alert and is protecting her child. There is no glamour that one can associate with the Vietnamese woman. It is the sheer contrast of the two female characters that imparts a distinct identity to both women.



Fig 2. Ijazul Hassan, Thah, Oil on canvas, 1980s

The time when Ijaz-ul Hassan painted coincided with the rise of Punjabi films in Pakistan, wherein, a stereotypical representation of woman was in vogue. The depiction is a bit idealized but it refers to the female image as it was promoted through films. The identity of Pakistani women is regional and depicts the culture of Punjab. She is not a working woman; she is luring a man towards her. The value system associated with Islam in which a woman needs to cover her head is bypassed. She holds her *Dopatta* in her hand. With open arms, she presents herself to the male gaze. The painting expresses the female identity of a Pakistani woman as an object of desire on one hand and a representation of an idealized Punjabi culture. The title 'Thah' is also a satire since it means gunfire. In the case of Vietnamese woman, it can be gunfire, in the case of Pakistani woman is the luring posture. This is not an exact representation of Punjabi woman, but a true expression of how Punjabi woman is portrayed through film. On the other hand, the depiction of Vietnamese woman is quite realistic but limited to what it would have been in times of War. The sheer contrast between the two women informs the design configuration as well as interpretation and meaning.

Many contemporary artists, who chose abstract art to convey their ideas, rely on design configurations. For instance, repetition and convergence are used by Hamra Abbas to communicate a fine idea **Figure 3**.



Fig 3: Hamra Abbas Kaaba Series, 2014

In the painting **[Figure 3]** the essential ideas are that the Kaaba unites all sects into one identity, the Muslim identity. The different colors, magenta, blue, green and yellow, represent sects and when these colors combine, they form the black color. In a similar respect, Kaaba symbolizes unity in diversity. The artist uses repetition and layering as design configurations to communicate an essential idea.

Mehr Afroz uses a minimal design approach see **Figure 4**. Through a pyramidal composition and abstract form, she conveys a feminist standpoint.

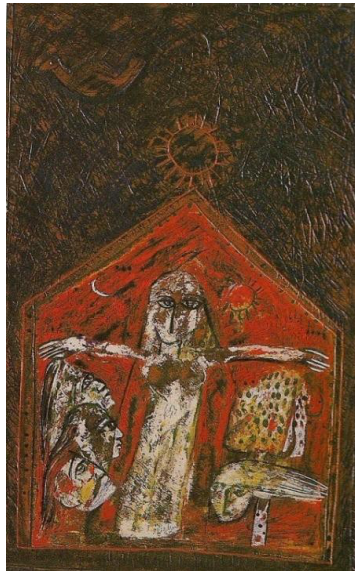


Fig 4: Mehr Afroz, Niche Series, Acrylic on wood, 2010.

Her painting see **Figure 4** from Niche Series (figure 54), has minimal use of form and color. In a Trinity-like setting, she has used the sacred symbol of an arch within which stands the lady of the house with stretched arms protecting all under her. Like the constructivist her ideas are expressed in abstract use of form and color but the mystery lies in its interpretation that varies according to the thought of the onlooker. Surrounded by dark and gloomy colors the arch symbolizes the place of peace, the red symbolizes the warmth, and compassion as well as the expressionist's agitation, showing both extremes in one place, expressing the artist approach to her subject displaying diverse emotions. All these reflect the reactions towards the dual standards of society affecting not only her personality but her art directly.

Another painting **Figure 5** by Shazly Khan is a clear example of using exaggeration to convey meaning. The elongated figures of the female are used to express their significance.



Fig 5: Shazly Khan, City of Dreamers, Acrylic on Canvas, 2013

According to the title “City of Dreamers”, a woman’s dream is shown and the emotions are explained symbolically through colors. Starting from the right-hand side of canvas a girl standing in red color clothes is shown in her youth time, she is standing without any object symbolizing youth which is the most carefree period in our lives. Next is the girl in green and on the bottom of her dress patches of blue, oranges and brown are visible with a handbag on her shoulder, might be her college days, a time when you are exploring new paths and experiencing them. As the journey goes, the next figure is in blue with patches of orange, green, and pink holding a flower bouquet. Flowers in Shazly’s work are a symbol of love; this might be the phase of marriage an important time when a girl will be moving towards her new life. The next three figures are showing her pregnancy time, having kids, and upbringing them.

A figure is shown holding a chakra in her arms with an as stylized flower painted in it. The elongated figures in her work represent freedom and stretch that they can reach to that place which they desire for or are struggling for. Another symbol that is used in her work is the sun.

In this painting, she painted the sun slightly off-center and is going accurately with her idea as Shazly sun symbolizes glory, ambition, and a bright future.



Fig 6: R.M Naeem, Right Path, Oil on canvas, 2010

R. M Naeem has also used design configurations to communicate mystical ideas and critique the social structure formed based on sectarian divide see **Figure 6**.

Titled 'right path' the above painting is a testament to RM Naeem's discontentment with the reigning extremism in Pakistani society. Any sensitive artist like him emotionally responds to the hypocrisy and oppression in his society. He feels pain because of the animosity found in people towards each other and looks for an alternative to these unfortunate conditions. This internal struggle involves pain responses and results in problem-solving cognitive capabilities to address the pain. Therefore, the artist articulates his ideas of righteousness and wrongdoing in society and counterpoises them to society's paradigms and values. In the above painting, Naeem juxtaposes three Muslim appearances in Pakistani society. One on the left is bearded men with covered heads, on the right is shaven men with covered heads and on the right top is a man without a beard and head covering. In the design configuration, the two groups of men face each other and are separated by masts symbolizing the sectarian divide. The horizontal plane divides the single man on the right top, who seems disconnected from the rest. The design configuration helps the viewer to see strict compartmentalization in society in the name of sects. He seems to communicate that the general view of society about religion is fixed on the outward appearance instead of inward essence. There is a fixity of ideas often resulting in rigidity and therefore there is a clear divide in society. We may say that the essential idea is a sectarian division at the level of outward appearance and this meaning is conveyed through and emphasized by the design division in the composition.

5 Conclusion

The creative process of an artist is all about translating an idea into a non-verbal form. In painting, it is the arrangement of visual forms that contributes most to the meaning. The artist expresses his ideas and feelings through an intelligent choice of communication strategy and in line with the strategy he or she configures a visual form. The design configuration remains a guiding device for the composition of the work and its interpretation. The design element is so intertwined with the painting that it becomes difficult to separate the two. In the paintings analyzed in the current study, one can see how socially relevant ideas have been communicated

using design configurations in which design elements and principles such as emphasis, exaggeration, contrast, and repetition have been used. A painter can therefore be seen as a designer both on the canvas and inside the viewer's mind because it is the arrangement of visual elements and the underlying order that provide structure to meaning.

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