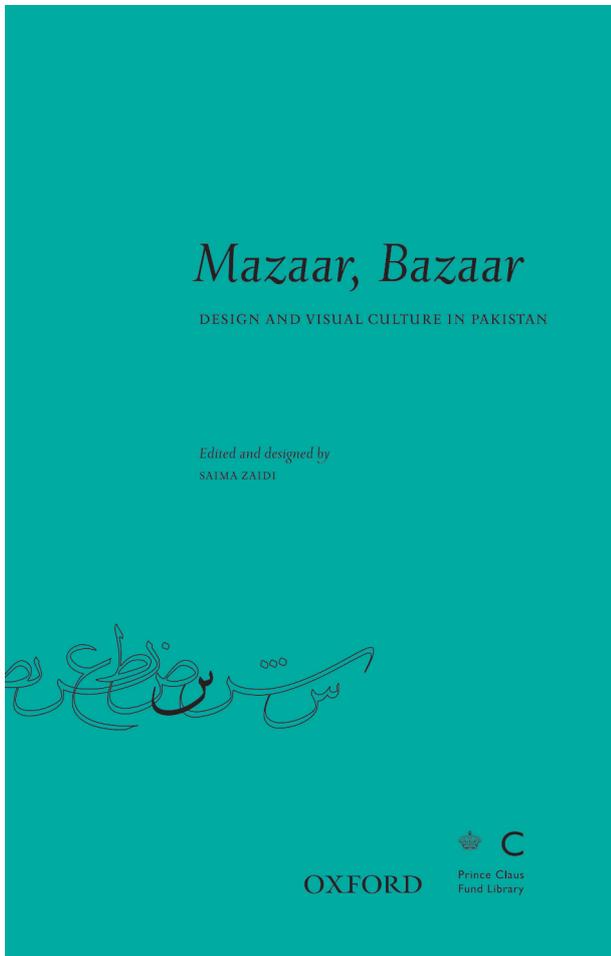


## Book Review



### Mazaar, Bazaar: Design and Visual Culture in Pakistan

Saima Zaidi (ed.), *Oxford University Press*, 2010. 366 pp., cloth, \$147.00. ISBN: 9780195475944

Edited and designed by Saima Zaidi, *Mazaar, Bazaar: Design and Visual Culture in Pakistan* is a collection of thirty-three essays on contemporary Pakistani visual and material culture. Beautifully designed and lush with colour reproductions, this collaborative Karachi-grown production illustrates the nuances in this predominantly Muslim locale's rich visual traditions. *Mazaar, Bazaar* provocatively underscores a view of Pakistani design and visual culture

as a 'coexistence of contradictions' (p. xiii), produced by a diverse society in a region that witnessed varied moments of conflict and exchange—from centuries of imperial rule under the Umayyads, Mongols and Mughals, to partition from India in 1947. In recent years, there have emerged numerous publications on contemporary Pakistani art that highlight the multi-dimensional internal and global tensions, from gender inequality to widespread commercialisation, underpinning the social, political and cultural motivations of local artists. The essays in *Mazaar, Bazaar* explore similar themes from the angle of design and everyday material culture, thus making this publication a much-needed contribution to emergent scholarship on present-day Pakistani visual practices.

In her introduction, Zaidi describes a desire amongst contemporary Pakistani artists and designers to define a cultural identity that maintains distinctly local attributes while being mindful of global and historical inspirations. Indeed, the examples discussed in this book hail from an interdisciplinary view of Pakistani material culture that ranges from Qur'anic calligraphy to soda pop advertisements. This tome's unabashed bringing together of global and local, sacred and profane, and 'high' and 'low' visual productions serves as a testament to its title: *mazaar* (a saint's tomb or shrine) and *bazaar* (a marketplace).

Several essays in *Mazaar, Bazaar* present complexly nuanced, and often conflicting, images of Pakistani and Islamic identity that challenge frequently inaccurate representations of this culture in today's media and political discourse. The commonly held misconception, for instance, that the visual language within Islamic cultures is chiefly made up of calligraphy and arabesques is refuted in articles on figural representations. For example, in 'The Journey: *Buraq, Jhuley Lal* and *Zuljinah*', Durre S. Ahmed explores images of legendary creatures from the Qur'an illustrated within floriated designs on the surfaces of trucks, rickshaws and taxis. Ahmed argues that the function of such illustrations, in combination with ornamental designs, is not only decorative, but also apotropaic—to ward off evil. Modes of figural representations are also fore fronted in Hasan Zaidi's 'Aina Mirror: Publicity Design as a Reflection of Lollywood Film Content', in which he maps out the pictorial and stylistic

symbolism of advertising posters and hoardings (or billboards) used by the Lahore-based film industry [1]. Hasan laments a growing trend within the industry to eschew the 'visual chaos' of vibrantly provocative, hand-painted panels (reflective of the dynamism found in Pakistani flicks) in favour of sleeker and more subdued Hollywood-inspired designs, which the author suggests demonstrate the demise of local cinematic productions.

Articles in Zaidi's book also broach globally relevant concerns regarding design's roles in the manufacture of national identity and historical narrative. For instance, Ayesha Jalal, in 'Beyond the Symbolic to the Significant', describes how the Pakistani flag's visual components and meaning have been open to interpretation since the state's inception. Similarly, Quddus Mirza's 'Currents in Currency: Design of Currency Notes', and Rubina Saigol's 'Signs of the Times: A Pictorial History of Pakistan through Postage Stamps', study design's visual role in rewriting history and promoting nationalist origin-myths, through monetary notes and postal stamps respectively. Contributing a unique study of nationalist ideals via

product branding and packaging, Mariam Ali Baig, in her 'The Pakola Tale', explores the promotional material of a soda first produced in Karachi during the 1950s, a period defined by patriotic rigor. She explains how the brand's name Pakola (from 'Pakistani Cola'), electric green hue and original logo design (which included a star and crescent reminiscent of the Pakistani flag) initially reflected prominent nationalist concerns shortly after the formation of the Pakistani state [2]. By the 1980s, with increased state militarisation and internal conflicts, Baig argues that this beverage's visual attributes came to represent an ideal of 'home' for a growing (and nostalgic) Pakistani diaspora.

*Mazaar, Bazaar's* multifaceted approach to piecing together the history of Pakistani material culture is refreshingly inclusive at a time when the disciplines of design and art seem to be frequently delineated. One caveat to the reader of this book, however, is the vague and interpretive way that its richly illustrated essays are organized, which does little to help guide the (western) reader through the multifarious subject matter. For instance, one could argue that two of the book's sections, 'Be Pakistani, Buy Pakistani' (on consumerism) and 'Pakistani Zindabad, Long Live Pakistan' (on national identity), are not all that distinct since Pakistani identity is discussed in the former and advertising crops up in essays from the latter. Also confusing is the inclusion of a final section, entitled 'Pre-Partition Perspective', on art and visual culture dating from the first centuries BCE (long



**Fig 1.** Film billboards' contrasting designs. Lakshmi Chowk, Lahore, 2006



**Fig 2.** Pakola bottles

before Islam and the birth of the Pakistani identity) to the 1930s. Although Zaidi claims that this section simply aims to help the reader understand the earliest aesthetic influences on Pakistan's contemporary visual culture, the inclusion of art from the Indus Valley region seems a clear attempt at solidifying this Muslim state's narrative of origin, one that remains a strong point of contestation with neighbouring India.

Despite this reviewer's occasional difficulty navigating the book's plethora of information and imagery, *Mazaar, Bazaar* demonstrates the growing importance of globally comparative perspectives in design and visual culture. It is a particularly necessary read during the present

moment in which our daily exposure to imagery from this region often arrives shrouded in religiously and politically driven agendas. In their emphasis on cultural production, valuable design sourcebooks such as Zaidi's help to shift the conversation from the polarizing political arena to more intellectually constructive issues of cross-cultural exchange and global visual and material practices.

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