

Book Review

Tarar, Nadeem Omar. *The Colonial National Formations of the National College of Arts, Lahore circa, 1870s to 1960s*. 250pp. Anthem Press 2022.

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Published: June 2023

Nadeem Omar Tarar's book *The Colonial and National Formations of the National College of Arts, Lahore, C1870-1960: De-scripting the Archive* is a vital contribution to the art history of Pakistan. The National College of Arts Lahore, previously known as the Mayo School of Arts and Crafts (MSA) until 1958, is one of the four colonial art institutes established in British India in 1857, and arguably the most prized art institute which Pakistan inherited at the time of its establishment.

The MSA, which was patterned after the South Kensington School of Design (now recognised as the Royal College of Art, London), presents a compelling case for investigation due to its evolution from a colonial-era arts and crafts school to a modern postcolonial institution rooted in the nationalistic milieu of the newly established state. Despite its rich 150-year history, the institute has received inadequate scholarly attention thus far.

The book provides a treasure trove of information for researchers and students interested in the history of the National College of Arts. It also provides valuable insights about the colonial mechanisms and manipulation of art education in the Indian subcontinent, designed to impart visual literacy rooted in observational drawing skills, replacing the hereditary oral transmission of knowledge to the native artisans. Such dissemination of visual literacy was meant to cultivate designs suitable to European tastes hence to boost the colonial transaction in the international market.

Tarar's scholarly work presents a novel contribution to the field of art history by offering the first comprehensive institutional history of the National College of Arts (NCA) in Lahore from 1870 until 1960. Through an exhaustive analysis of archival records including letters, memorandums, circulars, and meeting minutes, among other primary sources, Tarar conducted meticulous research over a period of two decades. While archives are typically employed to extract descriptive

information about past events such as dates, names, and locations, Tarar's innovative approach goes beyond a mere superficial reading of the textual content. He seamlessly integrates fragmented pieces of information to construct a coherent narrative that sheds light on the ethos and methodologies upon which the NCA archives were grounded. Through a critical examination of the organisational structures that served to promote colonial hegemony in Indian aesthetics, art, and craft education, Tarar deconstructs the archives to offer insights into the historical context of the NCA. Therefore, the aptly sub-titled book, *De-scripting the Archive*, effectively encapsulates the author's methodological approach and the content of the narrative. The author adeptly maintains a balance between a meticulously researched chronological account of historical events at the MSA, and critical analyses of orientalism, colonialism, and nationalism.

The book is divided into four chapters; the first two chapters set out to establish that the hereditary artists were stamped as 'primitive artisans' and not artists based on Denzil Ibbetson's (1847-1908) ethnography of occupational castes. The author provides an extensive depiction of how colonialists perceived Indian artists, casting them as anonymous, reliant on oral transmission of visual knowledge, adherent to repetitive traditional practices, and lacking in individual creativity. These "primitive artisans" were viewed as uneducated and devoid of any critical reflection regarding their work, yet were deemed experts in hereditary crafts limited to select families. Consequently, those deemed deserving of British education not only served as stewards of traditional artisanal skills, but also played a pivotal role in improving, enhancing, and promoting such skills beyond the confines of their familial traditions to serve the colonial interest of more refined and expedient production of Indian goods for the international and elite market.

The colonial era was marked by the creation of a significant divide between educated artists who were part of the modern

western art world and unschooled eastern artists who were labeled as artisans or craftsmen and were never fully integrated into mainstream modern art. This colonial legacy continues to be a relevant discourse in the field of South Asian art. For instance, Tarar provides a comprehensive account of Haji Muhammad Sharif, a renowned court painter from the princely state of Patiala. Despite his significant contributions to the MSA, Sharif was not accorded the status of a lecturer like Abdur Rahman Chughtai, nor was he given a commensurate salary due to his lack of formal art education. Although Sharif joined the MSA in 1944, years before the creation of Pakistan, he only had his first solo show in 1962 at the age of seventy-one, thanks to the efforts of the acclaimed poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz. However, even Sharif's solo show failed to establish him as an artist due to the deeply ingrained colonial construct of the artisan in the postcolonial nation-state. Tarar sheds light on the contributions of a number of other unrecognised instructors, masters and administrators of the MSA (and later NCA) such as Qazi Rafiq Ahmad, Muhammad Akmal, Miran Buksh, Latif Chughti, John Grandison Coweie, Bashir ud Din, Samarendranath Gupta, Lionel Heath, Muhammad Munir, Muhammad Hussain Qadri, Bhubesh Chandra Sanyal, and Sheikh Shujauallah, whose contributions have almost diminished from the art history of Pakistan. Additionally, he also highlights underexplored research areas that, if investigated, could help fill crucial gaps in the art history of Pakistan.

The third chapter of this academic work examines the shifting focus of the MSA in colonial Punjab, from an emphasis on industry to fine arts education, and thus the divergent perspectives and objectives proposed for the institution. The varied titles attributed to it in official correspondence, including the Mayo Memorial School of Industrial Arts, Industrial School of Art and Design, and School of Arts, underscores the conflicting ideas regarding the purpose of arts education in colonial Punjab. The chapter sheds light on the contributions of key figures such as Lionel Heath (Principal), Samarendranath Gupta (Assistant Principal), and John Grandison Cowie (Vice Principal) in shaping the development of fine arts and design education at the MSA. The latter half of the chapter delves into the MSA's production of lithographic posters, book illustrations, and calendars which were created to meet the demands of the growing advertising industry in Punjab. Tarar's analysis provides a quintessential representation of the orientalist mentality adopted by the designers of the posters. The posters, aimed at seeking charity from the Indian public for military hospitals and the International Red Cross during World War I, feature various visual elements that reinforce the heroic and beneficial image of the colonisers as saviors, while simultaneously depicting indigenous Indian people as obedient and inferior. This is achieved through the use of vernacular 'exotic' clothing and the positioning of Indian characters within the confines of their caste system. Tarar's critical analysis of these visual semiotics is reminiscent of the works of western painters such as Jean-Léon Gérôme, Horace Vernet, Antoine-Jean Gros, and Eugène Delacroix, who similarly portrayed the 'Other' in accordance with colonial perceptions. This perspective is often explored in liberal arts critical theory classes through the study of Orientalism.

Chapter four narrates the transition of the MSA into the NCA in 1958, eleven years after the establishment of Pakistan. The transformation of art education in this manner was carried out with the objective of nation-building and modernisation, thereby positioning the NCA as a symbol of progress that was crucial in addressing the national challenges faced by the art and architecture industry of the newly formed country. The impetus provided by the state in the modernisation of the curriculum and elevation of the MSA to a college-level institution facilitated the growth of art councils, galleries, and other art institutions across Pakistan, modeled after the NCA. Tarar further explicates the primary focus of the book in highlighting the colonial pedigree of arts and crafts by referencing the reinvention of miniature painting at the NCA, which in turn illustrates that the traditional art form of a modern nation is still anchored in colonial exoticism.

The colonial administration stressed the importance of drawing-based visual literacy, based on their limited perception of traditional apprenticeship in workshops as unsophisticated, uncreative, and uneducated. Tarar examines the dialectical relationship between binaries such as art and craft, artist and artisan, oral and literate, traditional and modern, and east and west. This binary approach reflects the orientalist colonial discourse, which portrays colonisers as saviours of culture and people. Hence, it can be concluded that art education in Punjab was embedded in the coloniser-colonised relationship, aimed at training educated craftsmen, designers, and artists for a burgeoning consumer society in twentieth-century Punjab.

In addition to providing a comprehensive history of the NCA, Tarar has also unearthed several previously unknown accounts in his book. For instance, Chapter three sheds light on the founding history of the Punjab Fine Arts Society, while Chapter Four details the creation of the flag, first postal stamp, and crest of Pakistan. Furthermore, Tarar has also provided valuable insights into the lesser-known side of Abdur Rahman Chughtai as a lithographer, printmaker of his own paintings like Raja Ravi Varma, the role of Samarendranath Gupta, the assistant principal of MSA, and the status of Haji Sharif as an *ustad* at MSA. However, one notable omission in the book is the absence of any mention of female students at MSA or NCA, except for a brief reference to summer painting classes for English ladies. It is possible that this is because the institute was established solely to train male students in traditional hereditary crafts, and did not admit female students at the time. It is only after the formation of NCA that women began to appear as students as well as teachers. It would have been interesting to learn how the decision to induct female students was made. It is worth noting that contemporary women artists who received their training from NCA are making significant contributions to the art world in Pakistan.

Overall, Tarar's book provides a wealth of information on the history and mechanics of colonial structures, making it a critical contribution to the art history of Pakistan. His insights into the institutional history of NCA stems partly from his own location, he taught at NCA over two decades, and also headed the NCA Rawalpindi campus as the director for five years. It is particularly recommended as a required text for students of the NCA in Lahore in addition to other art colleges in Pakistan.