

The Truck Painters of Pakistan

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Pakistani transport is perhaps the most colourful and energetic looking in the world. I instantly smiled upon hoping on board my first tinsel covered bus from Taftan to Quetta. Bright lights, streamers, metal charms and bright paint decorated it inside and out. Upon seeing a giant MAC trucks hurtling towards us throughout the night, I decided to find out a little more.

On the outskirts of Peshawar city I met Mr. Shirani in a rough mud and oil covered courtyard. He was smiling broadly from behind his large grey bearded man that flowed into a pristine white Shalwar Kameeze. Mr. Shirani was looking on as three workers measured, noted, and prepared a new wooden drivers cabin on monstrous MAC truck. It was his latest purchase.

“Four hundred thousand rupees, and now five hundred thousand more,” he said in a businesslike manner.

He’d bought the ageing truck, for a bargain. Then had a reconditioned engine fitted. But that was just the practical side. With a working truck to transport goods he preferred not to discuss, Mr. Shirani was overseeing the most important element to any Pakistani vehicle. The transformation from metal monster into a rainbow coloured visual highlight of the road.

“It is good luck to decorate out trucks in such a manner,” the big man said as walked over to a row of young men. Each one clipping and beating out bright designs. “And in this country, we need all the luck we can get!”

Flowers, swirls, swoosh’s of white paint and dashes of blue were all cut into strips that would line the trucks long body. Thin metal strips were used for certain parts, but to the read I caught a glimpse of a wood lade.

“He makes the décor.”

I looked on as the man used a chisel to carve out a long flowing pattern, and then with an equal flow another, and another. Each one specific to the owner or decorator’s request. And each one made of wood.

“How much are they paid?” I asked out of curiosity.

Mr. Shirani frowned, then mumbled to his number one aside. “Enough for a day's food I believe.” He replied, “But, what is more important is that they are happy at the fine work they are doing.”

It was an unfair question, Mr. Shirani would have paid a lump sum for the work as a whole. The young men working there were a part of team. I imagined they were just starting off in the trade compared to what I was being brought to next.

We walked back to his truck as an unpainted door to the driver’s cabin was being fitted. I reached out to the intricate carving on the side panel. “It’s made of wood?”

Mr. Shirani laughed at my frown. “Yes of course. It’s easier to carve.”

In my month of Pakistani public transport I had not realised that most of the trucks had had their old rusty doors replaced with wooden ones. I had though the carvings to me manufactured metal moulds. But no, all the doors with their intricate patterns were hand carved. Then hand painted over

in glossy patterns and colours that would make Gaudi smile. Each truck, a personalized work of art.

I looked on at another truck next to use and white coverall painters on makeshift scaffolding worked with perfectionist precision in adding life to an old body. Smiles of pride crept onto their faces as I asked permission to photograph. Graceful nods as I complimented them on their artistry. Each man was given an area to work on, and each man worked as if a surgeon.

It would take a week to outfit Mr. Shirani's truck with its new wooden housing. Another two weeks again for the decorating to finish. Once complete there would be a small ceremony, a feast and a prayer for the trucks safety on the road. Then it would hit the dry rough dusty roads of Pakistan with a heavy payload. A vision unique to Pakistan that prideful driver's beckon with the blast and sound of personalised horns as they pass by. Pakistani vehicular art bringing life, livelihood, pride and smiles for all to enjoy.