

## Book Review

# Modern Art in Pakistan: Place (Visual and Media Histories)

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*Modern Art in Pakistan: History, Tradition, Place (Visual and Media Histories)*

Simone Wille

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The book “Modern art in Pakistan” is a valuable reference to understand artistic practice in Pakistan, after the partition of the subcontinent back in 1947. Its author is Simone Wille, an independent art historian, writer and researcher currently based in Austria, whose research has basically focused on the development of contemporary art in Pakistan.

The book aims to close a gap in a relatively under-researched area of South Asia art, focusing on a small group of largely unstudied artists, key figures of modernist art in Pakistan, like Shakir Ali (1916-1975) and Zahoor ul Akhlaq (1941-1999). The analysis of Pakistani modern art requires the recognition of the distinctive nature of South Asian art in general and the process of transformation during colonialism which leads to important changes experienced by the Indian society. Due to the installation of art schools in the subcontinent by the East India Company (Kolkatta, Chennai, Mumbai and Lahore) new genres emerged, such as naturalistic landscapes and academic nudes.

The book intertwines South East history and history of art in the subcontinent to understand modernity of art in this region. It briefly addresses the establishment of an Indo-Muslim culture and the organizing space in the traditional miniature painting, using as example some works by Zahoor ul Akhlaq like “Shah Jahan Triptych” and “Horse and Riders Series” and his influential mentor and teacher Shakir Ali (1916-1975).

The book focuses especially in the works of Shakir Ali (1916-1975), Zahoor ul Akhlaq (1941-1999) and the legacy of Pakistan’s modernism in contemporary art. It is structured in 3 main chapters. Chapter 1 focuses on Shakir Ali, a key figure in Pakistani modernism, examining his life and works and comparing artistic production with artists outside Pakistan. Chapter 2 explores the profile of the modern conceptual artist Zahoor ul Akhlaq, his fascination with local and regional Islamic traditions, particularly with the geometries in Mughal painting and in Muslim architecture. Finally, Chapter 3

examines Zahoor ul Akhlaq's heritage within and outside Pakistan, for example, the influence on his student, Rashid Rana (Lahore, Pakistan, 1968), interested in understanding Mughal miniature paintings and well known for his grid-like digital photomosaics; and the influence on the German artist Beate Terfloth, fascinated by the system of geometric patterns and how they generate immense space. After the murder of Zahoor ul Akhlaq and his daughter Jahanara in Pakistan in January 1999, Beate Terfloth placed a wall drawing titled "For Jahanara and Zahoor" in the Kunstmuseum (Bonn, Germany) that it is said to represent the void, the silence.

In addition, chapters are illustrated with a wonderful collection of photographs of the artists analyzed in the book to help readers getting a better understanding and knowledge of Pakistani modern art.

In sum this book offers interesting insights on the particularities of modern Pakistani art in relation to different disciplines from history to culture, politics and society. An excellent reading for those fascinated with history of art in general and modernist art in South Asia and in Pakistan in particular.