

Sadequain and Calligraphic Modernism

By Iftikhar Dadi on December 6, 2011

This article examines the career of the immensely productive Sadequain Naqqash (1930-87), Pakistan's most celebrated artist. A self-trained, larger-than-life figure, Sadequain charted a singular trajectory in enacting a paradoxical subjectivity. He remained close to national aesthetic ideologies that promoted calligraphy under the increasing Islamization of the 1970s and 1980s, yet maintained a persona that simultaneously relayed aspects of transgressive Indo-Persian Sufism into a dialogue with transnational modernism during the 1950s and 1960s in order to create a modernist language characterized here as "calligraphic modernism."



Between 1955 and 1975, artists from North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia reworked calligraphic motifs in entirely new ways. Earlier attitudes toward classical calligraphy were not only decisively modified, but genres such as portraiture and still life were also reshaped by a renewed concern with the abstract and expressive possibilities of the Arabic script. Rather than beautifully rendering a religious or poetic verse or endowing it with ornamental form, the script was often imbued with modernist figuration and abstraction to a degree that mitigated against a straightforward literal or narrative meaning. The imbrication of modernist calligraphy with post-cubist art thus represents a broad artistic movement. Sadequain, by referencing Islamic traditions — in parallel with the efforts of artists from West Asia and North Africa who were also developing a similar language of calligraphic modernism during that era— contributed to the development of transnational modernist Muslim aesthetics during the era of nationalism. Calligraphic modernism formed an increasingly influential modality in Pakistani art during the 1960s and 1970s. The artist Hanif Ramay (1930-2006) had pioneered the exploration of calligraphy with reference to modernism during the 1950s. Iqbal Geoffrey (born 1939) developed an expressionist calligraphic practice in the United Kingdom and the United States during the 1960s that was accompanied by a playful Dadaist performative persona. Anwar Jalal Shemza, who was also a noted Urdu writer, moved to the

United Kingdom during the mid-1950s and developed an important body of calligraphic modernist work. Inspired by Paul Klee, calligraphy, and carpet designs—his family had earlier been involved in the carpet business—he worked out the implications of his aesthetic modality over the course of his career, with rigorous and disciplined practice. His *Roots* series, executed in the mid-1980s at the end of his life, relays the anguish of diaspora in a formally restrained language based on calligraphy and ornamental designs of oriental carpets and textiles.

Sadequain, however, became the greatest exponent of calligraphic modernism in Pakistan, continuing the process of appropriation and transformation of Muslim South Asian cultural and artistic practices, which had been worked over already by earlier modernist poets and intellectuals. His extended residence in Paris during the 1960s was also of foundational importance in the development of his modernism. By the late 1960s, his work swerved in the direction of becoming overtly “Islamic,” informed by calligraphy and Urdu poetry. Above all, after the late 1950s, the artist sought to inhabit modernity through the trope of heroic subjectivity, which the poet Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938) had formulated. Iqbal’s activist Islamic trans-nationalism was an indispensable referent for Sadequain’s artistic development. Sadequain’s quest for artistic subjectivity was, however, also articulated in relation to the interplay of larger structural forces of an increasingly rightist nation-state ideology. Nevertheless, in his calligraphic work and his murals, Sadequain effected a new populism in relation to modern art, relaying its importance to audiences far beyond what Shakir Ali and Zubeida Agha had. To understand the scope of Sadequain’s influence, it is necessary to briefly outline the legacy of individuation available to him.

INDIVIDUATION IN MUSLIM SOUTH ASIAN ART

This section explores only some of the cultural developments in which one can trace the emergence of individuation in early modern Muslim South Asian art. Rather than arguing for a causal or one-to-one connection between specific motifs and Sadequain’s articulations, this exploration offers a partial sense of the milieu and provides examples of the kinds of genealogical trajectories the artist might have drawn from.

Later Mughal painting during the seventeenth century had begun to emphasize individualism in portraiture in a double sense, both in the emergence of distinctive personal artistic style and in the realistic depiction of the subject. “Portraiture under the Mughals had become so precise that it is possible to trace the changes in appearance of some courtiers and princes from youth to old age,” a recent study noted. Muraqqa albums composed in both Timurid and Safavid Persia and in Mughal India included esteemed examples of paintings and calligraphy. The development of artistic calligraphy in India was thus closely related to the arts of the book. Usually written by officials/calligraphers, the prefaces to many Timurid, Safavid, and Mughal albums provide an important source of historical information about individual calligraphers, their techniques, and their social status.® Among the Timurid and Safavid albums, the six classical

(pre-nasta'liq) styles of calligraphy are routinely mentioned, along with seven styles of painting/ Timurid Persian culture produced important innovations in calligraphy. The nasta'liq script, called the "bride of the Islamic styles of writing" emerged during the thirteenth century and became the primary vehicle of Persian literary culture, until the rise of printing.⁸ In the case of Urdu, nasta'liq has retained its importance in the age of mechanical and electronic reproduction. Unlike Arabic and Persian, which were adapted for mechanical typesetting, Urdu printing continued to be produced until recently by lithography from a handwritten calligraphed original and, more recently, from electronic typesetting. The arguably more expressive shikasta ("broken script"), which developed after the sixteenth century, was particularly influential for the South Asian context (Figures S2). The idiosyncrasy of this widely used script also invoked an allegory of poetic subjectivity. Historian Annemarie Schimmel notes how shikasta provided a bridge between poetic syntax and the script:

It seems more than an accident that this style developed at exactly the same time when the word shikast (broken) became one of the key words of Persian poetry in India. Pages with shikasta, their lines thrown, as it were, over the page without apparent order, are often reminiscent of modern graphics rather than of legible script, and thus the aesthetic result of the most sacred, hieratic script, the early Koranic Kufi, and that of the extreme profane, poetical script are quite similar: one admires them without trying to decipher them. The poets then would claim that they wrote their letters in khatt-i shikasta [shikasta script] in order to express their broken hearts' hopeless state.

The word shikast carried over to Urdu poetry as well. Discussing the poet Ghalib's (1797-1869) use of the word in Urdu, Aijaz Ahmad states that shikast was "also used for a note of music which does not agree or harmonize with the rest." From the mid-twentieth-century perspective of an artist trained in calligraphy and familiar with post-cubist European art, the shikasta script held the potential to visualize an abstracted individuality. Tracing Sadequain's appropriation of shikasta makes visible another genealogy of individuation from early modern South Asia.

Fig S2: Identical text in Nastaliq (left) and Shikasta (right), in pamphlet What Is Communism?, early twentieth century. (From William L. Hanaway and Brian Spooner, Reading Nastaliq: Persian and Urdu Hands from 1500 to 1995)

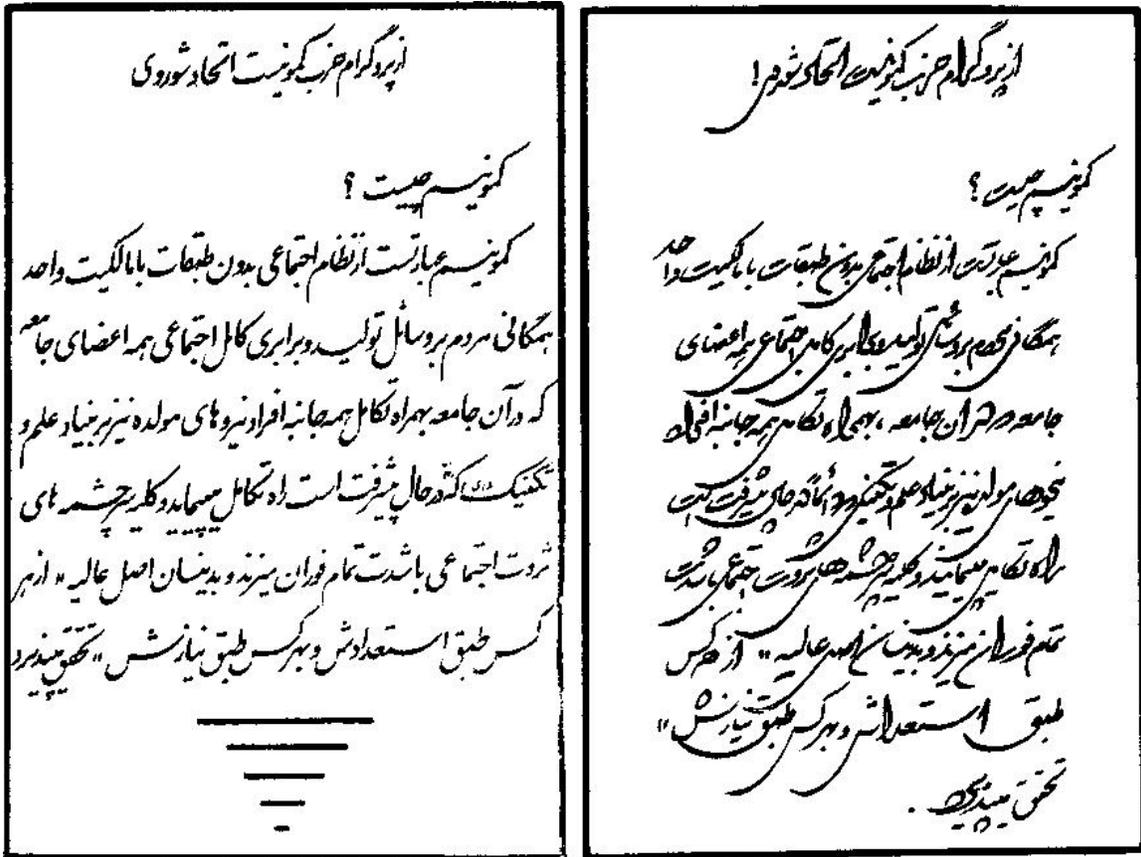


Fig. s3: Annemarie Schimmel, drawing of human face made up of letters according to the usage of Persian poets.

Yet another link between calligraphy and the depiction of a figurative subject appeared in the hilya, or the description of the physical attributes and moral character of the Prophet Muhammad. The standard classical form of the hilya was a written description, without recourse to pictorial depiction. But in later calligraphic experiments in this genre since the eighteenth century in Iran and

Ottoman Turkey, a purely textual description was seen as insufficient. Thus, experiments included drawing indexical markers to the Prophet's personal possessions. A class of Safavid manuscripts called Falnamas (books of divination) also contains images in which calligraphy and ornament gesture toward depiction. Persian poetry deployed tropes of Arabic letters to describe

attributes of the beloved's face (Figure S3). Finally, calligraphy written in zoomorphic and other animate-shaped outlines had gained popularity since the sixteenth century (Figure S4).

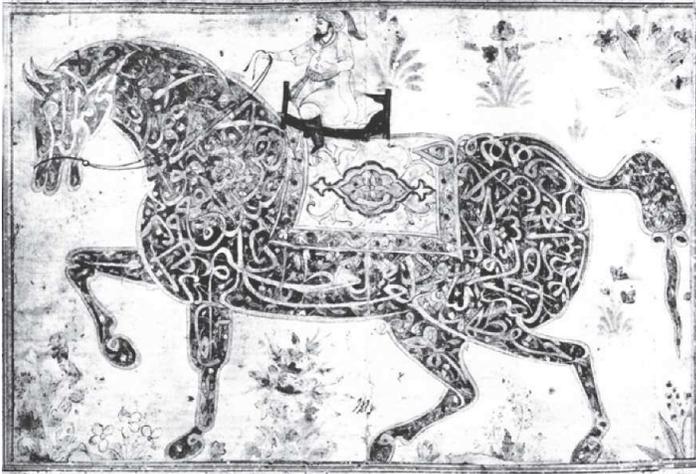


Fig. s4: Rider on an epigraphic horse, India, perhaps Bijapur, late sixteenth century. From Anthony Welch, *Calligraphy in the Arts of the Muslim World* (1979), plate 77.



Fig. s6: Lithographic portrait of Ghalib, probably late nineteenth century. (From Ralph Russell and Khurshidul Islam, trans. and ed., *Ghalib, 1797-1869: Life and Letters*, vol. 1 (1969), frontispiece.)

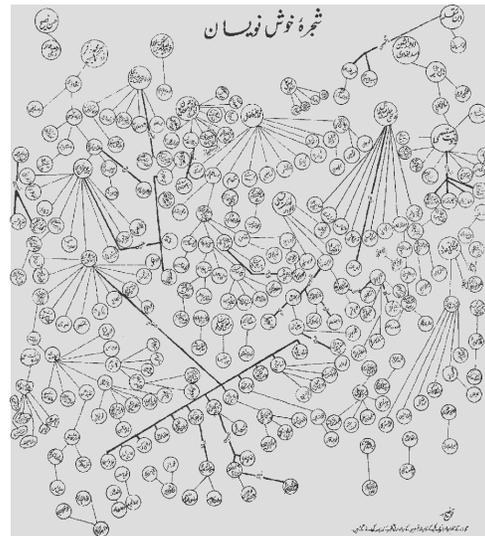
The late nineteenth century witnessed the rise of lithography and the publishing of illustrated newspapers and books in Urdu, leading to a “print revolution” whose impact upon the relationships among illustration, calligraphy, and the reader has yet to be properly analyzed. Nineteenth-century popular Urdu illustrations and calligraphic techniques continued to draw upon the legacy of the pre-colonial era. For example, the lithographic portrayal of Ghalib owes a great deal of its pictorial convention to portraiture of Mughal nobility (Figure S6). Moreover, the cover of the first year (1877) of the satirical Urdu serial *Oudh Punch* (modeled after the influential British publication *Punch*) shows a “hilya” of Mr. Oudh Punch, describing

his “character” in English (“Life Is Pleasure”) and its Arabic equivalent “ya latif”. And, rather than by typesetting, Urdu printing until the 1980s was largely accomplished by lithographing calligraphed originals, which meant that even when reading a prosaic item such as the daily newspaper, one was constantly reminded of the artisanal quality of the modern Urdu text. Traditional

calligraphers also continued their specialized artistic practice, and biographical accounts from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries linked contemporary calligraphers with their illustrious predecessors (Figure S8). Out of all the genres of “Islamic art,” calligraphy ought to have come closest to attaining an individualized “artistic” status in the Western sense, in terms of possessing the sanction of elaborate biographical and authorial genealogy, an exalted social status, and conceptions of aesthetics in technical and transcendental discourses. Ironically, however, because “Islamic art” was fashioned largely as an orientalist project, calligraphy’s importance has not been central to the forging of the category of “Islamic art.”

From these admittedly limited examples, one can nevertheless surmise that the early modern era witnessed a growing emphasis on individualism, both in the sense of a personal subjective expression of the creator and in the sense of the greater possibilities of depicting an individual through representation. This dual emphasis is discernible in a variety of genres, even if this heightened attention to the individual was somewhat restricted by stylistic elaboration of Persianate motifs and although it varied unevenly, modulated as it was by various periods and styles. This fitful process of individuation formed a crucially important genealogy for Sadequain’s emergence as a modernist artist-subject.

Fig. s8: . Genealogical chart of calligraphers. From Ihtiramuddin Shaghil, *Sahifah-yi khushnavisan* (1963), insert.



THE URDU POETIC TRADITION

Sadequain’s career marked a profound engagement with Urdu poetry, especially with the two most influential poets in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Ghalib and Iqbal (whom Chughtai had also engaged with earlier). Sadequain’s illustrations of Ghalib’s poetry, which he painted during 1968 and 1969, are discussed later in this article. Here a brief note on the poet’s career and influence must suffice. Mirza Ghalib, the most philosophical of the classical Urdu poets, deployed the formal imagery of Urdu and Persian poetry in his own verse. Ghalib was associated with the court of the last Mughal emperor, Zafar (reigned 1837-58), whose powers were almost entirely usurped by the British, reduced to a mere figurehead. Ghalib, living in Delhi, experienced the rise of British colonialism in India, interacted with British officials and bureaucracy during his life, and saw firsthand the terrible events during the Mutiny of 1857 that deeply altered the lifestyles of the cultivated [ashraaf] elite with which Ghalib identified himself. His poetry, however, betrays no overt formal or literary reference to the colonial presence but is deeply immersed in the Indo-Persian poetic language, which had developed in

premodern South Asia during the previous centuries. Ghalib was the last classical poet, after whom later Urdu poets could no longer ignore the aesthetic and social rupture introduced by colonialism and modernity. Sadequain's murals and paintings of Ghalib's works instantiate an aesthetic that is influenced by both European post-cubist developments and the idea of subjectivity evoked by Iqbal's poetry. To demonstrate this, it is necessary to briefly sketch Iqbal's ideas regarding the creative individual.

According to an influential history of Urdu literature, "Iqbal is the hierophant of a new order. He made it his business to bring out the dynamic side of Islam just as medieval thinkers . . . stressed its pietistic and otherworldly nature." In his poetry and writings, Iqbal foregrounded a philosophy of activism, developed from his deep engagement with European philosophy and from his own extensive knowledge of Islamic and Persian intellectual and cultural history. In his writings, Iqbal developed an inspirational poetic and philosophical conception of "selfhood" [khudi].

Having studied with leading orientalists in India and with European philosophers at Cambridge and Heidelberg, Iqbal's later poetry addressed leading European intellectual currents of his time, in addition to being profoundly engaged with the legacy of Islamic philosophy and Sufism, which the poet strove to critique and reformulated. The literature on Iqbal is vast; this article outlines only how Nietzsche's and Bergson's ideas shaped Iqbal's conception of intuition in the creative individual.

Iqbal's activist subject, who is charged with revitalizing modern Islam, was arrived at partly by his reading of Nietzsche's superman, in conjunction with the medieval mystic Abd al-Karim al-Jili's conception of the Perfect Man [al-insan al-kamil]. Bergson's conceptions of intuition and evolutionism further provided Iqbal with a powerful aesthetic imagination of agency. But Iqbal's rendition of agency differed from those of Nietzsche and Bergson — articulating this "difference" in the translation of philosophical concepts is a necessary task that occupied Iqbal. Annemarie Schimmel — noting that "Iqbal himself has always maintained that the idea of the Perfect Man was Islamic, not Nietzschean, yet Nietzsche's superman may still have acted as an ingredient in the formation of Iqbal's ideas" — has usefully summarized Iqbal's differences with Nietzsche, especially how the former envisions humanity's potential: "Iqbal's ideal man, the nearer he draws to God the more he surpasses the boundaries of normal — or accustomed to — men and unfolds all his internal powers. . . . Iqbal's Perfect Man is not the man without God, or who replaces a God 'Who has died' . . . but contrariwise the man who has fully realized his personal relation with the God with whom he lives, works, and talks. We are here not in the world of philosophy but in the tradition of the Islamic insan kamil, the Perfect Man of Sufism." Iqbal claims that humanity's future development must encompass its spiritual aspect. This he finds lacking in Nietzsche. Iqbal also rejects the latter's idea of Eternal Recurrence, stating that "life is no repetition of ever the same acts . . . but is fresh and surprising in every moment, creative and not bound by any iteration," an

interpretation he arrived at from his reading of Bergson. As the historian Aziz Ahmad has pointed out, Bergson's philosophy of time and causation and open, dynamic possibilities for evolution in the future greatly appealed to Iqbal: Iqbal's view of evolution is [largely] dominated by an ethical sense of causation and purpose. Bergsonian evolutionism permeates his Saqi Nama³² and other verses. Organic matter is distinguished from inorganic in direct statement and in imagery. Elan vital ascends the evolutionary spiral by progressing from the indetermination of lowly animal life to the status of man, and may evolve further to become the superman of the future or the "Perfect Man" of history. . . . Iqbal agrees with Bergson that life has chosen two different paths of evolution, instinct in animals and reason in man. The superman of the future may choose . . . a third path, that of intuition, which is the essence of instinct and the essence of reason. . . . The actual evolution of the superman outside the rank of the prophets may take some considerable time. But Iqbal's verse often refers to an unspecified "man of faith" (mu'min) who already exists somewhere on the road of moral evolution from man to superman. He is a person with a highly developed personality, or self. He is also described by the romantic, mystical term qalandar (a kind of itinerant monk who abandons everything and wanders in the world), as one of the features of his character is disciplined, but not ascetic faqr (a life of poverty with resignation and content). The qalandar or faqir cannot accept any charity, either spiritual or material. [Sadequain in his later career would refer to himself as a qalandar and a faqir.]

Iqbal's creative individual must ceaselessly master the potentials in space- time through developing selfhood [khudi] and intuition. Aziz Ahmad further explicates the role of intuition, which in Iqbal's thought is a higher faculty than logical reason:

To explain the wisdom of the "man of faith" Iqbal distinguishes between two kinds of reason, dialectical and intuitional. Dialectical reason feeds upon itself; intuitional reason, which is the wisdom of the "man of faith," has angelic insight. With the "anguish of Adam's heart" it can assess the universe. It is not far removed from 'ishq or from intuition itself. Intuitional reason guides the creative faculty of the "man of faith" and posits, in terms of serial time, immortal thought and art. In the act of creation the "man of faith" absorbs time and space unto himself.

Iqbal, however, also critiques Bergson's view of the development of future human possibilities as completely unconstrained and lacking any orientation. Iqbal declares that thought or intelligence leading to the future is impossible "without the presence of ends." But Bergson remains unaware of the potential for the development of "attentive consciousness" and its activity— in apprehending the past, in envisioning the future, and even in perceiving the present itself. The poet thus claims that Bergson outlines only a "partial view of intelligence," which, "as a spatializing activity . . . is shaped on matter alone, and has only mechanical categories at its disposal." Further, Bergson's view that "the forward rush of the vital impulse in its creative freedom is unilluminated by the light of immediate or

remote purpose” denies the “teleological character of Reality” on the grounds that a final purpose would restrict the possibility of creativity and freedom. Instead, for Iqbal, the vector of future realization of greater human possibilities can be apprehended by the inner life of the man of action.

Undoubtedly, Iqbal’s claim for the presence of the “attentive consciousness” reformulates older Sufi ideas. However, if, in emphasizing aspects of consciousness, his formulation here begins to approach the Hegelian emphasis on the dialectic of the ideal with reality, Iqbal seeks to also distinguish himself from Hegel by emphasizing the future as open and progressive: “Mental life is teleological in the sense that, while there is no far off distant goal towards which we are moving, there is a progressive formation of fresh ends, purposes, and ideal scales of value as the process of life grows and expands. . . . To endow the world process with a purpose in [a more determined] sense is to rob it of its originality and its creative character. Its ends are terminations of a career; they are ends to come and not necessarily premeditated.’

Iqbal furnishes his argument with a spatial metaphor: “A time process cannot be conceived as a line already drawn. It is a line in the drawing—an actualization of open possibilities. It is purposive only in the sense that it is selective in character, and brings itself to some sort of present fulfillment by actively preserving and supplementing the past.” Here, Iqbal signifies temporality via a selective process of drawing that includes and subsumes the past and the present. Interpreted literally, Iqbal’s metaphor provides an uncanny insight into Sadequain’s own modernist drawing practice based on Arabic calligraphy, as will be argued later. Iqbal thus sought to effect a far-reaching and decisive influence on twentieth-century South Asian Muslim thought, whose latent and proleptic character critics recognized during Iqbal’s own lifetime. Through an appropriation and reworking of contemporary European philosophical thought and an activist reading of the Islamic past, Iqbal arrived at an aesthetic of a subject-centered Islamic modernity that is synthetic and dynamic in character. Iqbal’s later poetry also persistently criticizes nationalism and cultural expression rooted in a specific space and time and emphasizes instead a nomadic, qalandari cultural dynamism that includes the need for new appropriations and synthesis, as well as an emphasis on movement and change, directed to higher individual and social ends. However, Iqbal’s work has also been interpreted as including currents that run counter to his universalism, by his celebration of aspects of Muslim imperialism, Muslim exclusivity, and particularism. These have later provided ideological ammunition to the Pakistani state, especially during the rightist Islamic regime of General Zia ul-Haq during the late 1970s and 1980s — a time when Sadequain was feted as a state artist.

Iqbal’s influence on Sadequain from the beginning of the latter’s career is evident in Sadequain’s mural *Quest for Knowledge* (1959) for the Services Club in Karachi, which deploys a post-cubist visual language of angularity and the planar fracturing of images (Figure S9). In a horizontal space, riders holding a book, a bow and arrow, and a victory torch are mounted on three distinct horses, which

feature clock faces in the place of their visages. Other animal figures and a long polymerlike molecule on the lower right supplement the composition. This painting is probably an early rendering of a couplet from Iqbal's poem "Qalandar's Character," from Zarb-i kalim (The Rod of Moses), his last collection of Urdu poetry:

*The qalandar rules over [muhasib] the sun, the moon, and the stars.
The qalandar is not the mounted by/ruled by [markab] Time, but rules
over/rides [rakib] Time.*



Fig. s9: . Sadequain, Quest for Knowledge, mural painting, 1959. Oil on canvas. 130 x 356 cm. (Collection of the Services Mess, Karachi. Image courtesy Sadequain Foundation.)

A similar work that Sadequain painted in 1977 as part of a series on Iqbal corroborates this observation and provides an important comparative motif. This painting replaces the molecular structure with stars and planets—which are more faithful to Iqbal's verse — and, more significantly, depicts a single rider whose raised hand and finger sets a planetary system in orbital motion. Furthermore, the later painting is far more dynamic overall, and, significantly, the distinct and separate horses in the earlier painting appear to have morphed into a single horse, whose futurist movement- sequences appear as afterimages. The calligraphic quotation of Iqbal's couplet at the lower left completes the identification with the poet.

The extent of Iqbal's influence on Sadequain is not just limited to thematic illustrations of the poet's verses, however. Arguably, Iqbal made available for Sadequain an aesthetic of modernist subjectivity characterized by restlessness, struggle, and heroism.

Sadequain: early years

Sadequain was born in 1930 in Amroha, located approximately eighty miles east of Delhi, to an educated North Indian Shia family in which calligraphy was a valued skill. Details of his early life are unclear. He was apparently constantly engaged in sketching during his adolescence. He passed his Matric (tenth grade) in Amroha and arrived in Delhi in 1944, where his brother was working for All India Radio. During this time, Air India Radio, under the direction of Ahmad Shah Bukhari Patras, was featuring the work of noted Urdu writers and poets, to the degree that many prominent writers had moved from Lahore to Delhi. Sadequain got a job at All India Radio as a calligrapher-copyist—he demonstrated his skills as a calligrapher by writing out a poem from Iqbal from memory—and he remained employed there until 1946. His job consisted of copying poetic selections for compiling dossiers of Urdu poetry to be used later by singers and other performers. Possessing a keen memory, he became very conversant with much of classical and modern Urdu poetry, memorizing a great deal of what he was copying. He also had the occasion to encounter major writers, such as Miraji, one of the founders of modernist [jadid] poetry in Urdu, whose singular, eccentric persona made an impression on Sadequain⁴⁵ He apparently published his poetry in literary journals. It also seems that he was not wealthy enough to be able to obtain a university education in Calcutta, where he would have been exposed to the strength of Bengali intellectual culture and art.⁴⁶ Instead he graduated from Agra University in 1948, apparently as an external student. Following the partition of British India in 1947, Sadequain moved in 1948 to Pakistan.

The period between 1948 and 1955 is equally ill understood. Sadequain seems to have worked as an art teacher at an agricultural college from 1948 to 1951 and at Radio Pakistan between 1951 and 1952, but he abandoned employment to devote himself to his artwork, from that time on constantly engaged in sketching. From his extant work, it appears that he was quickly making his way through a bewildering array of visual registers—from realism, to late Bengal School, to abstraction, working in a variety of styles that he continued experimenting with until about 1960. Unlike many other Westernized Pakistani artists who formulated their intellectual expression in English and who drew upon European modernism as a key artistic referent, Sadequain expressed himself primarily in Urdu throughout his life. This engagement with the Urdu language, which would become central to his artistic practice by the late 1960s, is already visible in his earlier works, such as *Awara* (ca. 1957), based on a famous poem describing urban alienation by the poet Majaz (1909-55), who had also been associated with All India Radio (Figure S10). Sadequain also befriended the East Pakistani artist S. M. Sultan (1923-94), who had arrived in Karachi in 1951, and the two artists spent much time together. Sultan, who had earlier attended the Calcutta School of Art with the help of Hasan Shahid Suhrawardy, an art critic and member of the school's governing body, led a singular nonconformist life, eventually settling in a village in East Pakistan and adopting the ways of a Shivite ascetic. Sultan's nonconformist life has been a subject of fascination on the part of many

Bangladeshi intellectuals, and it undoubtedly influenced Sadequain’s fashioning of his own social singularity.”

Sadequain’s rise to extraordinary fame in Pakistan began in 1955, when he exhibited his works at the residence of Prime Minister Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, a liberal patron of the arts and the brother of art critic Hasan Shahid Suhrawardy. Sadequain soon received a number of prestigious government mural commissions and also held numerous solo exhibitions of his work. Many of his works from the later 1950s exhibit thematic rivalry with Zubeida Agha and especially with Shakir Ali, whose mythological motifs Sadequain also adopted, along with influences from Matisse, Klee, Alberto Giacometti, Andre Masson, and, above all, Picasso, although he was initially able to see European modernist works only in reproduction. Because Sadequain was introduced to the visual languages of transnational modernism only indirectly—through magazine illustrations, for instance — he shows little fidelity to the distinctions among the various art movements like cubism, futurism, and surrealism. Rather, Sadequain’s work drew freely from all of them, and for this reason the term “post-cubist” best describes the relationship between his work and transnational modernism—but in which the figure of Picasso begins to play a central role.

Fig. s12: Left below, Sadequain, Awara (Vagabond), ca. 1957, after Majaz poem. Media and dimensions n. a. (Courtesy Sadequain Foundation)



Awara (after a poem by Majaz)
51" x 36"



COMPOSITION IN KUFİ. 38" x 24". OIL ON CANVAS

Fig. s13: Right above, Sadequain, Composition in Kufi, ca. 1961. Oil. Dimensions n. a. (Courtesy Sadequain Foundation.)

A decisive development in the artist’s mature imagery was precipitated during his stay at a rest house at Gadani, an arid, remote seaside location some distance from Karachi, where Sadequain recuperated from exhaustion around 1957. At Gadani, Sadequain encountered large, bushy cactus plants [nag phani] that grow in the area, whose long, thin, and prickly branches formed silhouettes suggestive of calligraphic forms (and also of the existential angst reminiscent of Giacometti’s sculptures). Sadequain subsequently moved toward an imagery of exaggerated linearity in his work. The thorny character of the cactus emblemized violence,

negativity, and darkness, which the artist also incorporated into his work. In an interview, he recognized the centrality of these forms to his work: “In the anatomy of these gigantic plants I found the essence of calligraphy. Everything that I have painted since then — a city like Rawalpindi, buildings, a forest, a boat, a table or a chair, a man, a mother and child, or a woman—has been based on calligraphy, which in itself issues from the structure of the cactus.” The transition is evident in works such as *Genesis: Lady amidst Mountain Cacti* (ca. 1957), in which the woman’s face and limbs are painted in a realist manner but the landscape around her and her sari have been fractured into thorny, angular planes. Transformed by his cactus epiphany, Sadequain’s paintings of the late 1950s and early 1960s show his reworking of the modernism of the likes of Picasso and Matisse (*Anticipation*, *Bull in the Studio Mirror* [Figure S12]), Wilfredo Lam and the abstract expressionists like Mark Tobey, who emphasized linear, abstract calligraphy inspired by the Chinese script (*Group of Figures*, *Last Supper*), or a movement toward forms inspired by Arabic script (*Urban Landscape*, *Love Making*, *Composition in Kufi* [Figure S13]). This period also marks the beginning of Sadequain’s exploration of the jagged, elongated figure (*Roots and Branches*, *Reclining Figure*, *A Person at Sandspit*— which always references the artist himself and which becomes Sadequain’s obsession during the later 1960s and 1970s. These self-portraits, along with Sadequain’s murals (*Quest for Knowledge*), begin to explore the imagery of movement and dynamism that marks the works of the later 1960s, including the Ghalib paintings from 1968.

Critics perceived Sadequain’s freedom from adherence to a specific style, ideology, or artistic movement partly because Sadequain had formed his initial impressions of European modern art from magazine reproductions, in which the differences among cubism, fauvism, surrealism, and futurism— differences that were clear in Paris due to the works being placed in their “native” context— became far less significant in Pakistan. In Benjaminian fashion, the magazine layout, which reproduced images serially, helped de-contextualize the works from their adherence to specific schools, and this “mistranslation” freed the works to be perceived in the Pakistani context without their ideological baggage. In any case, Sadequain, looking at these images in Karachi during the 1950s, would have had little concern for the manifestos, ideologies, and stylistic markers associated with the numerous European art movements during the first half of the twentieth century. Consequently, throughout his work from the later 1950s, European modernism appears before our eyes as pulverized and increasingly reconfigured within a calligraphic mold.

The large number of murals Sadequain executed between 1957 and 1961, and the even more monumental series of murals he worked on from 1967 until his death in 1987, reinforced the formation of the mythology of Sadequain as hero-artist. It may be noted that Ayub Khan’s ascent to power in 1958 had brought a renewed importance to the role of national cultural management. Sadequain’s earlier mural activities included the Karachi Airport Terminal (1957), a mural at Gadani

titled *Smuggler* (1958) for the Customs Service, and the *Quest for Knowledge* (1959) mural at the Services Club discussed earlier.



Fig. s14: Sadequain, *Treasures of Time*, mural (detail), State Bank of Pakistan, 1961. 2.4 x 18.6 m. (Collection of the State Bank of Pakistan, Karachi. Image courtesy Sadequain Foundation.)

The State Bank of Pakistan commissioned as many as ten murals from the artist during 1961. One of these is *Treasures of Time* (Figure S14), a long horizontal mural, which depicts the ascent of human intellectual life from earliest times. Divided into three large groups of figures, the mural begins with an unnamed and faceless potter on the extreme left, followed by a group of nine figures consisting of eight Greek philosophers (such as Plato, Euclid, and Herodotus) plus Confucius. This is followed by four figures from the Middle Ages, including Dante, Leonardo da Vinci, and Galileo — and, for some inexplicable reason, the Buddha is also situated at the end of this first group. The second group consists of seventeen poets and intellectuals from the Islamic Middle Ages, such as Firdausi,

Al-Ghazzali, Omar Khayyam, and Rumi, ending with Ibn Khaldun. Sadequain placed his own emaciated form among this group. The third group depicts European thinkers from the early modern and Enlightenment eras, including Shakespeare, Newton, Kant, Goethe, Marx, and Darwin, followed by the Indian poets Ghalib, Tagore, and Iqbal. The mural ends with a depiction of Einstein gazing beyond the confines of the canvas toward the right, accompanied by a clock and a rocket. Apart from the anachronisms of placing the Buddha and Sadequain himself away from their chronological locations, the organization of the last group, which depicts modern Western thinkers with modern South Asian poets, and which ends with the figures of Iqbal and Einstein, emphasizes the Iqbalian ideas regarding the ascent of humanity and the nature of temporality as based on relativity and intuition, beyond strict linear accounting. Based on Iqbal's poetry, the gigantic mural titled *The Saga of Labor*, created in 1967 at Mangla Dam in Pakistan, celebrates the elevation of humanity through labor and tool-making (Figure 3.15).

THE SUPERHUMAN ARTIST

It has become virtually impossible to separate the factual biography of Sadequain from the myth of the detached, ceaselessly creative, Sufi-like persona, which the artist, the press, and the public all cultivated, thus creating an artistic hero for Pakistan. By the early 1960s, the recognition of Sadequain as a superhuman creator was already in place, as is evident from a catalog published in September 1961, after his first visits to London and Paris in 1960-61. The writer and editor of an art journal, Yunus Said—who, according to Naqvi, only two years earlier had been deeply critical of Sadequain—observed in the 1961 catalog Introduction. One can safely say that ever since the inception of Pakistan, there has never been an artist, so keen and so productive as Sadequain. With his indigenous, native cunning, his almost superhuman capacity for work and his compelling ambition, he arrived on the scene, from outside the merry-go-round, entirely on his own. The road to recognition for Sadequain was a very hard one. He had no snob value, because he had not studied in any of those schools in Europe and America where most of his contemporaries had. He had never an opportunity to visit the galleries of Europe and see for himself the original works of masters whose genius he had accepted by proxy. He only saw their reproductions and tried to imagine and feel what the originals were like.

He was caught in a conflict. For Sadequain, the sub-continent, though immensely rich in other fields of creative art, had no tradition in painting. He intuitively declined the miniature, firstly because his talents demanded much bigger

dimensions of space, much bigger brushes and knives and tubes of pigments, and secondly because it was impossible for him to arrest his growth and reduce himself to a mere illustrator. He wanted to create. So this one-man battle went on for a painfully long time. He worked feverishly, never allowing himself to be intimidated, and went the right way about it. He walked around with his sketching pad and pencil and pen and ink, and finished the whole pad, sometimes two, a day.

All this time he was alone. All this time he was being pointed out mockingly as a self-styled genius, as the proverbial frog who could not see beyond the pool that he was in. It was a long and tedious way, no doubt, but it was not submerged in darkness, certainly not for Sadequain because he kept moving in the right direction. He went to Europe on his own wearing his “Sherwani” and baggy trousers, sold paintings and sketches in Paris and yesterday finished a huge mural 10’ x 65’ in the new building of the State Bank of Pakistan. He will do more murals in the same building in October and fly to Paris to attend the Bi-annual and then stay there till he has his one-man show. It would be interesting to watch how Europe takes to him. One thing is certain, they will not ignore him. The expectation that Sadequain would create a memorable presence in the European art world is corroborated by a Paris-based critic, Barnett D. Conlan, who had met Sadequain in Paris earlier in 1961 when the latter had been invited by the French government to participate in the International Exhibition of Plastic Arts—the exhibition was postponed to later that year:

Unlike some of the contemporaries from Pakistan and India, Sadequain does not appear to owe very much to Western art, but stems directly from his own Muslim past and from the natural forms met with in the country around Karachi.

In the last decade or so art appears to have considerably changed in Pakistan. There is little in common between an artist like Chaughtai [Chughtai] who represented the revival of Pakistan art, of the beginning of the century and a young painter like Sadequain. In all his forms he goes back to the native calligraphy. The Kufi character [an Arabic script style] with the [sic] its remarkable beauty of abstract pattern would seem to be at the basis of his art . .

One cannot label his work with any of the usual titles. He is not abstract although some of his large compositions inspired by the Kufi forms, came very near to it. Nor is he a surrealist despite the fantastic nature of many of his paintings. He belongs to no particular trend nor does he adhere to any theory or doctrine. He is a highly original artist who is inspired by the forms of nature which he sees around him. These he transforms into a world of his own by the force of his imagination. He is an excellent draughtsman able to delineate anything he sees and to draw profusely from his own imagination. . . . During the short time he has spent with us here, the directors of the big museums as well as many galleries have taken great interest in his work. It is to

be hoped that, at some future time, he will be able to return to Paris where he is almost certain to make a name.

Clearly, by the early 1960s, critics were already perceiving Sadequain as pursuing a very different artistic project from that of Chughtai. Where the latter's style was seen as illustrative, Sadequain's was seen as painterly and colossal in scale and theme. And, unlike Chughtai, who cemented his status as a Muslim artist through his recourse to Mughal painting, Sadequain established himself as a Muslim artist through his reworking of calligraphic motifs into modernism. Unlike Chughtai, from the beginning of his career Sadequain wholeheartedly embraced transnational modernism, which had become a truly global currency by the mid-twentieth century. A negative "anxiety of influence" produced by Chughtai's presence must also be kept in mind when studying Sadequain's career. Being a generation younger than Chughtai, Sadequain's commitment to modernism corresponded with overall trends in South Asia in the 1950s. By the 1930s, the Bengal School was already being criticized as effete, decadent, and forcibly Indian. Another solution to the problem of being a modern artist was needed, one that would go beyond the alleged superficial illustrative focus of the Bengal School. Moreover, Iqbal's uncertain position on the merits of the works of "today's Bihzads," and thus, by implication, on the art of Chughtai, might well have served as warning. Sadequain thus took up calligraphy in order to sidestep the towering but dated presence of Chughtai, renew a connection with Indo-Muslim heritage, and reckon with the powerful transnational phenomenon of post-cubist modernism. His move toward calligraphy is very evident in his 1966 drawings, produced during his Paris years.

PARIS YEARS, 1961-1967

Sadequain remained in Paris during the 1960s for many years, on occasion traveling back to Pakistan and to other parts of Europe. He initially came as the laureate winner of the Paris Biennial's "artist under 35" category in October 1961. He initially achieved some measure of success in Paris by staying on through a scholarship provided by the Biennial and subsequently traveling within Europe and to the United States during the early and mid- 1960s, amid a busy schedule of exhibitions and commissions. He also continued to visit Pakistan, where, among other works, he executed a series of drawings for a book published in 1966 whose preface was contributed by the renowned Urdu poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz. By 1967 he had returned to settle permanently in Pakistan.

A significant reason for Sadequain's return to Pakistan was his growing difficulty in surviving in Paris as an artist, a fate increasingly shared by other immigrant artists beginning in the later 1960s.⁶⁵ His difficulties are evident from a neglected but important documentary source — Sadequain's letters to his family, written during the period 1961-67, which he published in a small facsimile edition in 1979. Overall, the letters are factual, event-based reports of his activities in Paris. Central threads running through the correspondence include his continued uncertain financial state; his meetings with patrons, dealers, and critics; his

participation in exhibitions in various cities in France; his irregular dining habits; and reminiscences of his mother's cooking. The letters hardly ever articulate intellectual or aesthetic concerns, apart from reporting occasional participation in cultural activities. In their style and content, the letters are sober, prosaic, and unremarkable and are above all concerned with the level of prestige and the financial details of Sadequain's various career opportunities. Sadequain never discusses the imagery of his paintings, for example, but duly records the status of the exhibition site, patronage status, or the commission's symbolic import—especially appreciating support by Jewish patrons. Regarding his commission to illustrate an edition of Camus's *L'Étranger*, a project he considered important for his career and to which he devoted considerable effort and time, he never discusses aesthetic or social ideas from the novel that might have informed his illustrations.

Fig. s16: Sadequain with his father, Sibtain Ahmed Naqvi, in Paris, 1967. (Courtesy Sadequain Foundation.)

It is clear from the letters from 1961 to 1964 that Sadequain achieved a fair degree of success in Paris. He participated in a number of group and solo exhibitions, was represented by a gallery, and found commissions and patrons that he considered significant for his career development. However, despite his bravado in the letters regarding his success in securing opportunities, there are ample glimpses of his difficulties, both financial and cultural, especially after 1963. In May 1964, he reported that he had no exhibition scheduled, which suggests waning interest in his work. In February 1965, Sadequain wrote that his gallery had been sold because of the death of its financier and that the space would likely be converted to a bar. In March 1965, Sadequain complained of exhaustion due to overwork and expressed his desire to visit Karachi, in order to rest and recuperate from the demanding Parisian life. He reported on his daily struggle to learn the French language. In 1964, he mentioned in passing meeting two unidentified patrons and participating in writing ruba'is (quatrains) in shikasta script in their company. And in January 1967, Sadequain, in a rare comment about his artistic and intellectual explorations, remarked that he had been reading a lot lately and that he was feeling a new "inspiration" toward a new, socially progressive artistic form. Unfortunately, he does not flesh out the comment with any details.

In an afterword to the letters in 1979 — more than a decade later than the letters in the collection — Sadequain narrated an account of his permanent return to Pakistan that turned on mere accident. He had executed a mural for the Paris office of Pakistan International Airlines in 1966, for which he was remunerated

partly in the form of airline tickets. He had brought his father for a visit to Paris in 1967 (Figure S16). From Sadequain's description, it appears that on the way back to Karachi his father wished to visit Shi'ite holy shrines in Iraq, and he asked Sadequain to accompany and assist him during this visit. Sadequain's account begins by stating how it was by sheer chance that he returned permanently to Karachi:

“Father was in poor health during his visit to Paris. Still, he insisted that I continue with my plans to travel to another city in France, as I had to deliver a number of heavy portfolios of my work and attend an opening. Upon arriving at the train platform, I found out that the train was delayed. If the train had arrived on time, I would have occupied my seat and proceeded. While waiting, I became restless and decided that while exhibitions will continue to happen in future, it is not right for me to leave my father in ill health alone. I impulsively decided to accompany him to Baghdad. . . . The airline officials had assured me that they would escort my father to his home in Karachi. But the issue of visiting [ziarat] the holy shrines during the return journey from Paris remained unresolved. For this reason, I decided to accompany him through his ziarat, and then return to Paris from Baghdad. . . . On the second day in Baghdad, after being blessed by a ziarat, father was fully recovered. While his seat was being confirmed for his return trip to Karachi, he said, “Son! You have come as far as here [Baghdad], why not come along to Karachi?” and that is how I returned to Karachi with him.”

Sadequain ends the afterword in an exaggerated rhetorical flourish, describing his work upon his return to Pakistan as an artist rooted in his tradition. A simplified translation of the highly metaphorical language employed by Sadequain is offered here:

“The firm rules of my heritage and the natural disposition of this society, of which I am a member, forced a change of the direction of my work. This new direction somehow automatically reflected the hopes, aspirations, and sorrows [shikast] of this society. My work proceeded in new, experimental genres, impelled by new aesthetic criteria produced not by reason, but through a feeling of restless striving. The direction of my experiments led me to calligraphy and to the composing of ruba'is. . . . I transcended beyond considerations of worldly fame and material wealth, and became completely absorbed in a divine quest towards establishing my presence in the realm of Art. . . . I do not regret spurning the [Parisian/internationalist] path. Had I continued traveling on it, I would have been only a short distance away from achieving international fame and great material success. Instead, I am contented to be blessed here with the opportunity to serve my people spiritually, by advancing Art in accordance with their legacy. That is why I believe that it was Divine providence that my father became ill in Paris.”

The above passage from the afterword is significantly and self-consciously more figurative, using allusive metaphors and abstracted self-praise, indicative of the

intensified post-Parisian self-construction of Sadequain, starting from 1967. The passage, which emphasizes his “restless striving” and his Sufilike transcendence of worldly fame, is closer to Iqbal’s formulation of the qalandar figure than to a diaspora artist from the Third World struggling for opportunities in Paris. Clearly, Sadequain, by claiming that abandoning the path of worldly fame was a sacrifice, glosses over the increasing difficulties he faced in Europe in securing opportunities during the later 1960s. Ironically, his growing fame in Pakistan during the 1960s was also due, in part at least, to his perceived success internationally. Sadequain was also deeply impressed by the monumental calligraphy on the Shi’ite shrines of Iraq. In general, Sadequain’s Shi’ite background, infused with the dramatic mythos of Husain’s struggle at Karbala narrated in powerful elegiac Urdu poetic address such as the marsiya, also informs his later art.

Paris during the late 1950s and early 1960s, amid the general atmosphere of decolonization, had become an important meeting center for postcolonial artists and intellectuals. Wilfredo Lam had developed a surrealist synthesis of cubism with Africana religions in Cuba during the 1940s. Other mid- twentieth-century movements had also developed in Paris, such as lettrisme, which emphasized the importance of textuality in painting. In its diasporic and transnational development, calligraphic modernism bears some correspondences with Negritude, a key movement of the transnational Black aesthetic. Zenderoudi, from Iran, a pioneering exponent of calligraphic modernism, began residing primarily in France in 1961. A member of a group of Iraqi impressionist painters that maintained extensive contacts with Western Europe during the 1950s, Shakir Hassan Al Sa’id, had visited Paris in 1956 on a scholarship. The Sudanese modernist Ibrahim El Salahi, whose work was evolving in a direction parallel to that of Sadequain, also exhibited in Paris during the early 1960s at the same gallery that showed Sadequain, although in separate exhibitions. In short, a number of artists from West Asia and North Africa began developing calligraphic paintings in the late 1950s — but not collaboratively or possibly without even knowing much about each other’s work—creating an aesthetic of Muslim cross-national modernism that was larger than the individual iconography of any single nation-state. Indeed, by its referencing of the written word, this aesthetic opened itself to transnational Islamic discursive traditions.

Unfortunately, no adequate records or images of Sadequain’s paintings during his later Paris years have surfaced so far, but it is instructive for comparative purposes to look at the set of sixty pen-and-ink drawings executed and published in 1966 in a small booklet titled *Sadequain: Sketches and Drawings*. Many of the drawings depict the artist and other figures entangled in cobwebs, or with cacti forms sprouting from the artist’s head and body. But the most interesting set consists of the artist depicted with a severed head, with a model in a studio setting. The fragmentation of the figure is clearly tied to Sadequain’s deep fascination with the lives of transgressive Sufis, especially Sarmad, an enigmatic seventeenth-century figure, apparently of Armenian and Jewish background, who was associated with the Mughal prince Dara Shikoh/⁶ He is reputed to have

composed transgressive ruba'is (quatrains), to have wandered around completely naked, and to have possessed miraculous powers. Upon Aurangzeb's ascension to the Mughal throne after defeating Dara Shikoh, Emperor Aurangzeb is alleged to have found pretexts to execute Sarmad, which he was finally able to do on a charge of heresy. Upon his beheading in 1661, Sarmad's extraordinary spiritual power exhibited itself when the headless body began walking, carrying its severed head in its hands, until other Sufis begged the decapitated Sarmad to refrain from openly displaying such power.⁷ Sadequain's subjectivity is enacted in these drawings via complex condensation of references to the transgressive subjectivity embodied by Sarmad, along with the mythos of Picasso, and, as Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar has observed, might also have been charged by the release of feature films glorifying artistic genius—Van Gogh in the film *Lust for Life* (1956) and Michelangelo in *The Agony and The Ecstasy* (1965).

But, above all, the work engages with the body of Picasso's drawings and prints of the artist and the model, for example, in his illustrations of Honore de Balzac's story, *The Unknown Masterpiece*, the Volland suite, a series of 100 etchings commissioned by Picasso's dealer Ambroise Vollard and his later drawings. Sadequain's sketches clearly refer to Picasso but translate the artist-and-model genre into a calligraphic rendering. For example, in a characteristic self-portrait drawing from 1966, his contorted fingers spell the word "Allah," a gesture Sadequain also performed in his photographic portraits. By engaging in a "unidirectional" dialogue, Sadequain claims the pedigree of European modernity to create for himself the subject position of a modern artist; and to stake this claim, who would be more appropriate to assume the role of the dialogic partner than the master of modernism, Picasso himself? Moreover, the artist-and-model genre foregrounds the nature of the self-reflexive question incessantly asked by the quintessential modern artist: What to paint and how? These questions were immeasurably more difficult for a modernist artist from the periphery to answer. The subject that Sadequain locates in his own portraits is consequently both whole and split, created ex nihilo but immediately fragmented. The authentic modern artist, inserted within the mainstream of art history, finds himself always already dislocated. It is precisely this staging of the modern, as pointed out by Timothy Mitchell, "displayed and replayed through the time lag of representation," that affirms the importance of post-cubist modern art yet relays it in unexpected directions. In the case of Sadequain, it leads back to calligraphy and Urdu poetry via European modernity. Sadequain's prodigious output during the 1960s reveals a calligraphic language of figuration and abstraction that is as reminiscent of post-cubist European modernism as of an expressive stylization of the Arabic script. From the late 1960s onward, Sadequain stayed mostly in Pakistan, where, as a celebrity, he was patronized by the state and by the public. He continued to paint murals in government buildings all over Pakistan and some in India as well. Although the focus of this section is on Sadequain's Ghalib paintings, as will be discussed shortly, Sadequain also painted Iqbal's verses during the 1970s in a style similar to his murals.

NIAGARA OF PAINTING, 1967-1970

Upon returning to Pakistan, Sadequain immersed himself in a burst of frenzied activity that extended over a period of several years. The journalist S. Amjad Ali's report, in the journal *Artistic Pakistan*, vividly conveys the impression Sadequain had produced upon the Pakistani art world during only a twelve-month period in 1968-69:

This "year" has proved to be unusually productive in the life of Sadequain, even remembering that he is and has been for a long time one of the most prolific painters of Pakistan.

He has always been obsessed with the idea of coming as close to the people as possible, and he has used every opportunity of bringing his art right where the people are — in exhibition grounds, in libraries, at airports, and at great engineering works like the Mangla Dam, which constantly attract visitors. In the Panjab University he painted a large mural free just because he did not want to miss the opportunity of gaining intimate access to the life of the young folk and was prepared to overlook the fact that the University did not have the resources to commission him for the work.

It was this same desire that led him to set up a private art gallery of his own on Strachen Road in Karachi. He wanted a place where he could place his offerings before the public as often as he liked and for as long as he liked — or the public wanted. Having acquired the place, he set to work with demoniac energy, and early in August put on display the work done by him in July. From then on a Niagara of paintings continued to flow from his studio situated upstairs, almost at the rate of a painting a day, and every month he held an exhibition of new work that dazzled and dazed the art lovers of the country. There were those who doubted if he could keep it up for long but he did it for five months at a stretch and then withdrew from the public eye for a while to undertake the stupendous task of painting more than a score of new paintings for exhibition during Ghalib week in Karachi. The last exhibition happened to coincide with Ramazan or the month of fasts and it was presumed that this would mean an inevitable break in his artistic activity[,] for display of mundane paintings during the holy month would have been frowned upon. . . . This however was just the opportunity that Sadequain was looking for to prove that art was a part of life and [that] there was a sacred side of it as well as a profane. He produced something for the occasion that proved to be a historic departure in the art of Pakistan — namely large oil paintings exploiting only the beauty of Quranic verses written in Arabic calligraphy. . . .

After this came a brief lull — for the public but not for the artist—and then he went into hibernation to perform another tremendous feat by painting large canvases to illustrate Ghalib's verses, and to donate half of them all to the sponsoring institution. . . .

Thus ended this most eventful and fertile period of twelve months in the artistic life of Sadequain—surely a most impressive and dazzling display of creative power ever seen in this country.

Sadequain's relentless productivity continued through the early 1970s. He published a volume of over a thousand ruba'is (quatrains) of his own composition in two editions, written in the short period between September 1969 and January 1970, according to his note on the title page. He himself calligraphed the ruba'is and illustrated one edition of the ruba'is to produce a printed version of a type of muraqqa' album, one in which image and text forge an integral connection.

Ghalib's poetry is notable for its distinctive and pronounced use of metaphors deploying calligraphy, writing, and depiction, beginning with his divan's celebrated first verse and worked out in a variety of sophisticated metaphors throughout his poetry. Turning now to the Ghalib paintings, this section argues that Sadequain executed them in a visual style that acknowledges the force of Iqbalian subjectivity. The comparison with Chughtai's Muraqqa'-i Chughta'i, was evident to critics at the time the work was first exhibited, as is seen in critic S. Amjad Ali's report:

Abdur Rahman Chughtai's charming water colour studies in the miniature style were done in the 1920's and when they were published in book-form in 1929 [refers to the Muraqqa'-i Chughta'i, published in 1928], they were a major event in our world of art and culture. . . . Now after 40 years another artist has come forward to match his imagination with that of the great old master. What a world of difference between the old artist and the new! Chughtai was working like a jeweller, meticulous in detail, exquisite in workmanship. His temper was sweetly romantic, colourful and poetic. Sadequain was working on a quite different plane and in a different technique. He was more like an iron-smith, and his thick black line was like an iron bar that was powerfully turned and twisted by the artist into gigantic shapes and forms, some familiar, some strange and mystical and awe-inspiring. The technique is crude and vigorous. The atmosphere is heavy with tragedy and the air of doom. The overall impression is that of something dark and dramatic, colourless and sombre. The sweetness of old has given way to the bitterness of a troubled soul, the assurance of familiar things is replaced by vague premonitions and apperceptions of cosmic realities. Instead of rendering the images of the ghazal literally, the artist translates and projects it on the cosmic planed.

The imagery of many of these paintings, which depicts temporality and process by foregrounding the brush, the pen, the act of writing and painting or the circular movement of objects and time by cyclical lines, differs greatly from Sadequain's earlier paintings, which were marked by a relative stasis. For example, consider the painting depicting the following couplet from Ghalib's divan:

*dard-i dil likhun kab tak janun un ko dikhla dun ungliyan figar apni khama
khun-chakan apna
How long would I write the pain of the heart? I might as well go and
show her instead My wounded fingers, my blood-dripping reed-pen.*

Sadequain renders this as a self-portrait similar to the 1966 drawing, but here the hands of the artist write/paint the text/painting by using the blood emerging from the bloodied fingers of the subject itself, creating an autonomous and self-referential image of tortured subjectivity. Throughout the series, Sadequain plays out Iqbal's characterization of the qalandar as a restless, superhuman creator, with the artist himself exemplifying this character. Another verse by Ghalib suggests that art itself, and especially painting, is merely an excuse for a meeting with the beloved.

*sikhay hain mah-rukhn ke liye ham musavviri taqrib kuchh to bahr-i mulaqat
chahiye*

For the moon-faced ones, we've learned painting Some pretext for the sake of a meeting is needed.

Sadequain interprets this verse by not simply showing "moon-faced" beauties alone. Rather, a group of three graceful women attend to a central, grotesque, bestial female figure, which the artist is engaged in painting instead of the beauties. If one understands the ghazal's beloved here as a complex metaphor of longing, Sadequain suggests that his art seeks an encounter with society, even when the social field itself consists of unspeakably ugly elements.

Sadequain's Poetry

Sadequain wrote a large number of ruba'is in a burst of activity during a few months during 1969-70. These were issued in a calligraphed edition in May 1970 and then reissued in a rearranged and revised edition framed by drawings in September 1971. A new set of ruba'is titled *Biyaz-i Sadiquaini* was also issued in September 1971, which contained a long preface explaining the genesis of his poetic compositions and addressing controversies surrounding the other two editions. All these volumes were self-published. Well aware of the difficulty in writing ruba'is, which had challenged even the most accomplished poets, Sadequain was nevertheless impressed primarily by the examples of Omar Khayyam and also by the ruba'is of Sarmad. Acknowledging his narcissism, Sadequain insisted that the ruba'i form is essentially autobiographical, which was precisely its appeal for him.

Sadequain begins both editions of the ruba'is with a verse from Iqbal and then addresses various subjects organized in ten sections. One key subject is his repeated focus upon what the object of painting might be and how visual representation remains inadequate to the task of depiction. Another theme is his anxiety-filled attempt to situate himself in a distinguished lineage of Indo-

Persian culture. Acknowledging his lack of skill and training in the poetic tradition, Sadequain sees himself as a modern intruder in the universe of poetry:

*He is disruptive, why has he come here?
He is restless, why has he come here?
Khayyam asked Sarmad
Why has Sadequain come to our neighborhood?*

By foregrounding his presence in the poetic-artistic-Sufi tradition by the emblematic citation of the mythical painter Mani Omar Khayyam, the poet Urfi, the calligrapher Yaqut (al-Mutasimi [died 1293]), the mystic Sarmad,⁹⁴ and the painter Bihzad, Sadequain self-consciously addresses the existential problem of how to include his own persona as a co-contributor to classical Indo-Persian intellectual history, while straining toward a modern subjectivity enacted by visual art. On the one hand, Sadequain's ruba'is are deeply learned in the sense of being aware of the rubai tradition and its criticism in Urdu.⁹⁵ On the other hand, unlike the refined elegance of Khayyam's skeptical verse, the mood of Sadequain's ruba'is is informal, even base:

Again you admitted your love, your desires
Your lips a flower, your cheek a
mirror
Before all else on your arm I kissed the scars left by a hypodermic needle.
The morbidity and directness of much of this poetry recalls the mood of Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* (The Flowers of Evil) and his foundational essay on modernity's aesthetic, "The Painter of Modern Life," which evokes the transient beauty of modernity. Sadequain's decadence was, however, also mobilized by the transgressive Sufi tradition of nonconformism:

*o [outwardly respectable and conformist] folk who are clothed, among you
I am utterly [and publicly] naked, like the letter alif*

By the early 1970s, the artist had exhausted his imagination, and figurative works done since that time basically repeat the motifs he had developed earlier. As curator Salima Hashmi has observed, "The agitated pace at which he worked throughout his life, left little time to look back critically at what he was doing." Many critics evaluated Sadequain's turn to Qur'anic calligraphy negatively in relation to his earlier work, and for the same reason the 2003 Sadequain retrospective in Karachi significantly omitted all of his Quranic calligraphies."

Sadequain and Modernism

"Modern art acquired, so to speak, a characteristic grammar. This 'grammar' had to be used, or at least in some way evoked or nodded towards; otherwise whatever you tried to say would not be in the forefront. . . . Paris had a trump card. Paris was where the dictionary was written. More particularly, as far as developments in the early twentieth century are concerned, Paris was where Cubism emerged." In this quotation, art historian Paul Wood outlines the reasons

why early twentieth-century European movements have continued to be understood in the context of what is alleged to be a “cubocentric” art history. If all the other early twentieth-century European avant-garde movements—which arguably had a much stronger relationship to various regional and national artistic modernities—were compelled to settle their accounts with cubism, surely one should expect nothing less in the postcolonial environment of the newly independent state of Pakistan, which at that time had a far more tenuous relationship to industrial modernity and very weak institutional support for art. We have seen how Sadequain’s work translates the classical, the poetic, and the textual into the visual. The Indo-Muslim cultural milieu with which Sadequain identified himself had traditionally privileged language and poetry and did not accord the visual artist the elevated, sophisticated, and complex role available to the poet. The poet of the classical Indo-Islamic culture was able to draw upon a highly refined symbolic vocabulary capable of expressing the experiences of private doubt, skepticism, and desire in linguistic and imagistic tropes. The poet was a “subject,” unlike the producer of craft or even architecture. The calligrapher, however, enjoyed a more elevated role.

Sadequain relays this textual and discursive legacy into the visual by his own poetic compositions, discussed above, and also by renderings of Ghalib’s poetry. This open experimental phase of Sadequain lasted until the early 1970s, after which he was increasingly seen as the national artist par excellence, primarily on the basis of his calligraphy and the consciously “Islamic” character of his work. Sadequain as a modernist artist-subject was now situated on a national platform, rather than on the Parisian/international circuit or even as a private individual artist. His predicament between assuming the role of an artist-creator on a universal plane and an artist engaged with national specificity and cultural particularity mirrors the impasse Iqbal faced earlier in his conception of the qalandar-creator as a universal or pan-Islamic figure and the practical necessity of embedding the South Asian Muslim community in the framework of national boundaries. Although Iqbal was scathing in his criticism of the nation-state formation, he suggested the idea of political autonomy for Muslims as a necessary safeguard for their interests, as a people who were economically backward and in a minority. This contradiction parallels the more powerful, if invisible, contradiction implicit in modernism as well—that is, modernism is characterized by universal claims, yet its most authentic expression is allegedly found in its most advanced and particular form across the North Atlantic. Nevertheless, even if not fully universal, calligraphic modernism draws new links among the shared conceptions of a large region. By virtue of the Arabic script, calligraphic painting generates a reference to textuality that acknowledges the force of discursive and institutional authority. Unquestionably, this past does undergo a discursive rupture under the force of colonialism and modernity, but its partial recovery and its genealogical relay into the present is enacted here through artistic practice: calligraphic experimentation with modernism acknowledges the persistence of the textual past, but this is now abstracted, opened to a dialogue with metropolitan artistic languages, and thereby becoming more global in scope.

Starting in the late 1960s, Sadequain increasingly turned to pure Quranic calligraphy, a direction that received great impetus in the mid-1970s, beginning with the “Islamic socialism” of Z. A. Bhutto and continuing on in the regime of General Zia ul-Haq, which promoted the works of others such as Ibn-i Kalim, a Multan-based calligrapher who has documented the lives of recent practitioners of calligraphy in Pakistan and who has claimed to have developed a new style of calligraphy. The 1971 dismemberment of Pakistan seems to have caused no overt response in Sadequain’s work. But the artist’s turn to Qur’anic calligraphy and the increasing aggrandizement of his national persona in the 1970s may well have functioned as a compensation against the severe damage done to the idea of the Pakistani nation-state entailed in the loss of East Pakistan. In any case, the subjectivity of Sadequain as a heroic artist was now increasingly predicated upon the nation-state. His later work, as exemplary of an overtly “Islamic” art, was pressed into ideological service of Bhutto’s government and the regime of General Zia ul-Haq, the promoter of Islamization in Pakistan at the state level since the late 1970s. Sadequain’s later work greatly suffered from repetition and careless execution.

Along with his murals, Sadequain’s popular calligraphic exercises may also be seen as an attempt to create an art form with broader appeal. He was chosen for numerous grandiose state commissions, and the singularity of his persona intersected oddly with the state and the public. Since he was allied with no other artist or social or political movement, bureaucrats and officials in the evenings could safely bring him gifts of alcohol in exchange for spontaneously executed drawings, which included scandalous figurative work, including nudes. The very singularity of Sadequain, which allowed the artist to break norms, also limited him, as these transgressions could be largely confined to his own persona by an increasingly conservative and rightist state ideology. A tense, yet productive, relationship ensued between Sadequain’s status as a socially transgressive figure and his calligraphy deployed in relation to Islam as state ideology. This tension finally exploded into the open during 1976, when the artist’s exhibition of figurative work was subject to heated dispute in the Punjab Parliament; several works were eventually destroyed in a bomb attack on the show. Yet the very same Islamic political groups leading the charge against Sadequain had earlier printed Sadequain’s calligraphic works in their newspapers as a model to be followed, exemplifying the liminal inside-outside status of Sadequain in relation to statist Islamic ideology.

But even the 1976 events led to no sustained changes in the artist’s work. The focus of Sadequain’s works remained his own subjectivity, increasingly realized at the cost of repetition and indifferent execution¹ Sadequain’s self-assessments betray a sarcastic awareness of his own compromises. For example, in a grandiose but deeply ironic anti-Sufi statement at the end of his life, he proclaimed, “By the grace of Allah . . . [I have] . . . a glorified, gratified ego, well-massaged with the oil of praise. When the ego is glorified, you are at peace psychologically. The oil of praise was used liberally by the state during the late

1970s and 1980s, continuing up until his death in 1987. But it may be noted that even in his later years Sadequain never created works that function as instruments of propaganda for Islamization, and, in this sense, it would be misleading to view him as an artist merely working on behalf of the state. Instead, his singular persona continued to serve as a reminder of the personal and Sufistic surplus that could not be contained in Zia's coercive and austere Islamization project. "Politics proper," observes philosopher Slavoj Žižek, "always involves a kind of short-circuit between the Universal and the Particular: the paradox of a singular which appears as a stand-in for the Universal, destabilizing the 'natural' functional order of relations in the social body." The scandal that Sadequain embodied was not simply due to public exhibition of his transgressive persona, but it occurred precisely because his singularity became representative of the nation itself, immanently threatening to unravel official Islamization from within.

Sadequain was innovative and indeed highly successful in expanding the audience for his work, a task he was engaged in until the end of his life. He had executed a few murals before his return to Pakistan from Paris in 1967, but the gigantic Mangla Dam mural, which he painted in 1967, was the beginning of an intensified period of mural-painting activity at prestigious public sites all over the country. He pursued this work until his death. As early as 1969, Sadequain, stating that his work was meant for "the people," declared that he would no longer sell his paintings to individual patrons: "My paintings are not meant to be kept in the houses of some rich social snobs and be seen by only a few persons who may know nothing about art. I do not want somebody just to boast that I have a Sadequain. I want, instead, that my paintings should be seen by the largest number of people," a policy he managed to sustain for some two decades. A much larger audience than the usual gallery visitors began to view his paintings of Quranic passages. Sadequain also experimented with showing his work in unusual venues, including exhibiting his Quranic verses on sidewalks and displaying his paintings in an industrial area in Karachi, with the intent that they would be viewed by poor laborers.

The shift from gallery representation during his Paris years to his status as a national artist with state patronage might have been detrimental to Sadequain's artistic integrity, yet it also allowed him to create a wider addressee, one that was not previously invested in the visual arts. The unsettled and shifting status of patronage and addressee so evident in Sadequain's career also marks key facets of his modernity. Sadequain's public interventions are more conservative than those made by Zainul Abedin. The latter, who organized participatory exhibitions and artistic projects during the late 1960s and early 1970s, offers a pointed contrast with the absolute control Sadequain's "genius" exercised over his public work. Nevertheless, the socially committed landscape and pop artist Ijaz ul Hassan (born 1940) has aptly noted: "Sadequain usually refrained from clearly identifying himself with any political ideology or movement. . . . As an artist, however, he never hesitated to glorify the inherent strength and creative spirit of man, and his ability to build a better world. . . . As a painter, Sadequain was the

first to have liberated painting from private homes and transformed it into a public art.”

This article has traced Sadequain’s subject formation as an artist and its relationship to a longer historical process in which Muslim intellectuals attempted to produce an aesthetic and a practice of Islamic modernity by selective appropriation of the past and the present. Sadequain’s reworking of the classical Indo-Persian discursive and calligraphic legacy is exemplary of a larger movement toward the rearticulation of a transnational modernist art since 1955 by artists from various locations in the Muslim world. However, his work also reveals the impasses both “Islamic art” and modernism face, a complex and problematic relationship to gender and an avoidance of social address — a limitation that Sadequain sincerely attempted to face.