

The Significance of Mobility and the Artistic Practice of Zahoor ul Akhlaq*

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Different kinds of mobility, such as travel, flight, and migration, characterize the trajectories of many of the South Asian artists whose careers unfolded during the postcolonial era, when international travel, exhibition, and study opportunities increased extensively due to a general shift in power relations, which made possible new cultural and political connections and alliances. These artists include Maqbool Fida Husain (1915–2011) and Akbar Padamsee (1928–2020) from India; Zubeida Agha (1922–1997) and Shakir Ali (1916–1975) from West Pakistan; Zainul Abedin (1917–1976) from East Pakistan; and Lain Singh Bangdel (1919–2002) from Nepal. Through cultural mobility between South Asia and regions stretching from East Central, South East and Western Europe, through Central and West Asia, to North and South America, they developed complex relationships between their respective nations and the global art world, which are reflected in their artistic practices.¹

Mobility also informs the work of the Pakistani artist and teacher Zahoor ul Akhlaq (1941–1999), who developed an aesthetic that is marked above all by his endless explorations of space as an abstract system. Through study visits to London and Yale, along with exploratory travel in South, Central, and West Asia, the artist developed a visual language based on the spatial and structural division of a Mughal miniature painting and a traditional manuscript page, the foundation of which is a gridded pictorial ground and a rectangular frame.² An example of how Akhlaq transformed pictorial notions of space is

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1 For selected South Asian artists' engagement with modernism, the nation, and the global art world, see Ifikhar Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Sonal Khullar, *Worldly Affiliations: Artistic Practice, National Identity, and Modernism in India, 1930–1990* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015); Atreyee Gupta, "After Bandung: Transacting the Nation in a Postcolonial World," in *Postwar: Art Between the Pacific and the Atlantic 1945–1965*, ed. Okwui Enwezor, Katy Siegel, and Ulrich Wilmes (Munich: Haus der Kunst Munich and Prestel, 2016), 632–637.

2 The term "album painting" is the preferred term used by historians of Islamic art, replacing the term "miniature painting." Ebba Koch has discussed this in one of her recent studies on the visual

shown in the juxtaposition of an early work and one of his iconic late works (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2).



Fig. 1. Zahoor ul Akhlaq, *Untitled (Butoh series)*, 1994. *Acrylic on canvas*, 152.4 x 101.6 cm. *Courtesy of the artist's estate. Photo: Vipul Sangoi.*

strategies worked out and applied by Mughal rulers in both painting and architecture. See Ebba Koch, “Visual Strategies of Imperial Self-Representation: The Windsor Pādshāhnāma Revisited,” *The Art Bulletin* 99, no. 3 (October 2017): 93–124; 94 fn. 9, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043079.2017.1292871>. Koch describes the work of artists associated with contemporary miniature painting from Lahore and how they deliberately retain the term “miniature.” I will therefore use both terms, “Mughal miniature painting” and “album painting.” On a broader and more conceptual level, I will be referring to the traditional miniature painting as a manuscript page.

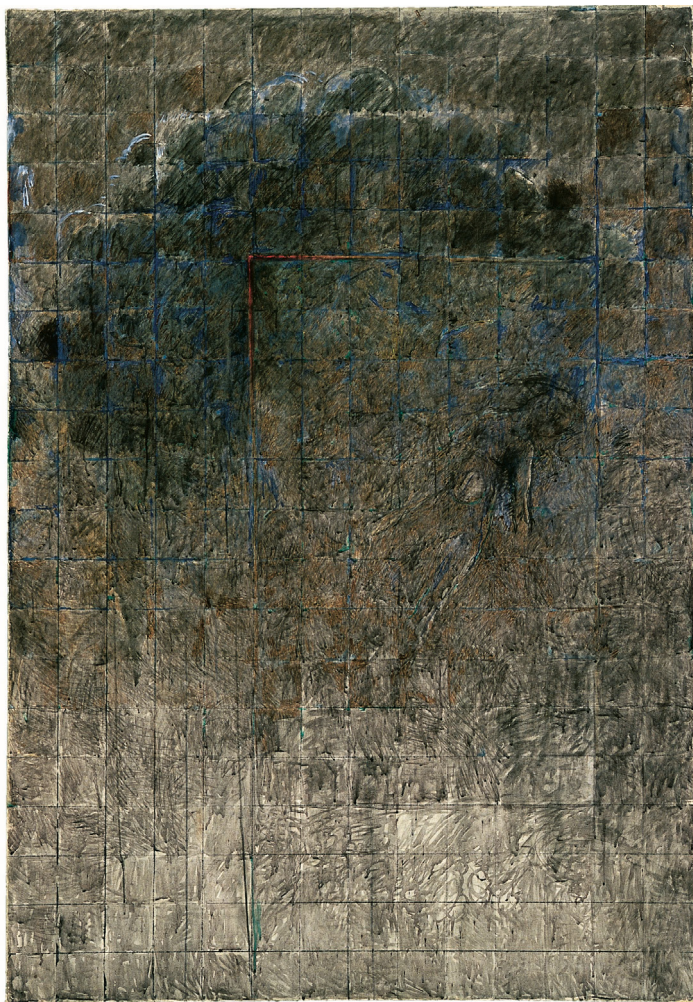


Fig. 2. *Zahoor ul Akhlaq*, View from the Tropic of Illegitimate Reality, between 1975 and 1978. Acrylic on canvas, 142.24 x 205.74 cm. Image courtesy of the artist's estate.

Photo: Vipul Sangoi.

While a detailed discussion of these works will follow later, for now it can be noted that the spatial relationship between the gridded surface and the delineated inner space—barely discernible in the early work (Fig. 2), but clearly visible in the latter (Fig. 1)—became the formalist properties and the pillars of his work, whose formal rudiments undergird his artistic practice

from early on in his career. The genealogy of this visual concept is located at the intersection of the visual cultures of Asian, South Asian, and Islamic traditions. The artist connected these with selected forms of Western postwar modernism. This article is an exploration of the links Akhlaq forged through physical and intellectual mobility between his own location, Pakistan, and the various cultural frameworks, which he then translated into his visual concepts. It thus elaborates on the transcultural significance of encounter, movement, and displacement that are responsible for producing, making, remaking, and ultimately constituting visual culture.³

Akhlaq's artistic concerns are informed by different kinds of mobility. He responded to this condition creatively with aesthetic innovations in a variety of media and forms such as painting, printmaking, and sculpture. A selected number of works, spanning the duration of the artist's career will be examined here by interweaving a transcultural analysis of form with biographical research.⁴ The processes that unfold through mobility to important places and regions the artist visited, during exploratory travel or study trips, will allow us to consider transculturality as a cultural phenomenon, which points to "concrete modalities of processes and the dynamics inherent to [them]."⁵ Following this, the artist's career and work can be located in the field of cultural mobility⁶ situating his artistic production in an oscillating sphere between "persistence and change."⁷ In contrast to the one-sided appropriation or imitation of cultural achievements, as was often practiced by European artists *en route* to the colonies in an exploratory quest,⁸ especially in the first

3 On the centrality of mobility for aesthetic productions, see Nikos Papastergiadis, *Modernity as Exile: The Stranger in John Berger's Writing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993); Nikos Papastergiadis, ed., *Complex Entanglements: Art, Globalisation, and Cultural Difference* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 2003).

4 The artistic oeuvre of Zahoor ul Akhlaq includes works on paper, board, and canvas, three-dimensional works, and works in mixed media. However, rather than survey the full range of his work, I will focus here on a detailed analysis of his formal pictorial language, especially his two-dimensional works.

5 Pauline Bachmann, Melanie Klein, Tomoko Mamine, and Georg Vasold, ed., *Art / Histories in Transcultural Dynamics: Narratives, Concepts, and Practices at Work, 20th and 21st Centuries* (Paderborn: Fink, 2017), 15.

6 Stephen Greenblatt, Ines G. Županov, Reinhard Meyer-Kalkus, Heike Paul, Pál Nyíri, and Friederike Pannewick, *Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

7 Stephen Greenblatt, "Cultural Mobility: An Introduction," in *Cultural Mobility*, 1–23; 2.

8 Christian Kravagna, "The Artist as Traveller: Aus den Reisealben der (Post-)Moderne," in *The Artist as ...*, ed. Matthias Michalka and Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien (Nuremberg: Verlag für moderne Kunst, 2006), 111–136; see also Alexandra Karentzos, Alma-Elisa Kittner, and Julia Reuter, ed., *Topologies of Travel: Tourism – Imagination – Migration* (Trier: Trier University Library, 2010), accessed September 2, 2022, <https://ubt.opus.hbz-nrw.de/frontdoor/index/index/docId/357>.

half of the twentieth century, the kinds of mobility that Akhlaq engaged in were characterized by exploration and interaction that inform his transcultural artistic practice.

In this article, one of my aims is to differentiate and situate the mobility of the artist Akhlaq between Lahore, the neighboring region of Pakistan, as well as London, Ankara, and Yale. I will do so by showing that the context of this mobility, a notion described by Tim Cresswell and further elaborated by Peter Adey,⁹ led to the construction of a transculturally informed visual concept. The guiding argument of this article contends that mobility informed Akhlaq's artistic processes and, as a result, his vision of modernism. As an artist whose career unfolded through and relied on mobility, his ideas and understanding of modernism, I shall argue, were not informed by one single place or nation but instead by the relationships that he was able to establish visually between these places. This allows us to tease out Cresswell's argument that the context and meaning of mobility distinguish it from simple movement.¹⁰ An important idea articulated by Lotte Hoek and Sanjukta Sunderason is that mobility is the notion of moving through rather than to modernism and place. It also captures the significance of how such movement entails critical engagement,¹¹ which can be understood as a transcultural artistic engagement that needs to be evaluated in terms of the processes and multi-sited artistic interactions responsible for it.

I will therefore discuss how mobility inscribed itself onto Akhlaq's works by viewing it in terms of its processual, dynamic, transgressive, and transcultural qualities. Given the diversity of the cultural and historic background that informs Akhlaq's art practice and his conceptual approach to art making, this paper will show that his use of the grid and frame can be seen as the formal properties that transcend national confines and the then prevalent ideas of a self-contained culture.

Considering Akhlaq's aesthetic achievements as inextricably interconnected with his experiences of mobility, his artistic practice can be seen as a critical alternative position to Western modernism, but also to the globalism of the post-1989 era. By working out a nuanced understanding of Akhlaq's artistic achievements through the significance of mobility, this article will contribute to an "expanded notion of modernism," thus enhancing the

9 Tim Cresswell, "The Production of Mobilities," *New Formations* 43 (2001): 11–25; Tim Cresswell, *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World* (London: Routledge, 2006); Peter Adey, *Mobility* (London: Routledge, 2010), 33–82.

10 Cresswell, "The Production of Mobilities," 11–25.

11 About two East Pakistani artists' institutional journeys, see Lotte Hoek and Sanjukta Sunderason, "Journeying through Modernism: Travels and Transits of East Pakistani Artists in Post-Imperial London," *British Art Studies* 13 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-13/hoek-sunderason>.

possibilities for defining it by incorporating critical discourses on South Asian art history and connecting with Rosalind Krauss's use of the term as applied to the field of sculpture.¹² The notion of an "expanded modernism" aligns with Andreas Huyssen's widely cited formulation of the "alternative geographies of modernism"¹³ and hence relates to surging art historical scholarship on South Asia, which has critiqued Eurocentric art histories.¹⁴

In a set of interventions in *The Art Bulletin* in 2008, for instance, Partha Mitter wrote about the "pathology of influence" that "ignores significant aspects of cultural encounters, especially the enriching value of the cross-fertilization of cultures,"¹⁵ which is seen in this article as a phenomenon of transculturation. Mitter has further argued in favor of moving toward "a more heterogeneous definition of global modernism,"¹⁶ which is a route into Huyssen's concept and thus towards an expanded modernism. Recent scholarship in South Asian art history has built on an understanding of the transnational, with a nuanced understanding of the nation. For instance, in his study of modernist art in Muslim South Asia, Iftikhar Dadi addresses the complex relationships between nationalism and cosmopolitanism in an art world that operated on a global scale by locating the "specific intellectual and processual trajectories"¹⁷ of the artists he chose to discuss. Furthermore, the nuancing of the nation as a category in Sonal Khullar's *Worldly Affiliations* from 2015 is relevant here because it analyzes modernism "as a practice of affiliation between artists in East and West [and] a system of transnational exchange and critique"¹⁸ in an attempt to transcend nationalist parochialism.

This essay is structured according to the artist's geographical mobility throughout his life and is divided into five sections. The first section provides

12 Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *October* 8 (Spring 1979): 30–44, <https://doi.org/10.2307/778224>.

13 Andreas Huyssen, "Geographies of Modernism in a Globalizing World," *New German Critique* 100 (Winter 2007): 189–207.

14 About the absence of non-European artists in global exhibition circuits and art histories see Rasheed Araeen, *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-war Britain* (London: Hayward Gallery and South Bank Centre, 1989). For early critiques about the neglect of South Asian, although primarily Indian artists from art historical narratives and arguments for an expanded definition of modernist art that would include artistic experiments and modernist artists from South Asia, see the important collection of essays by Geeta Kapur, *When was Modernism? Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India* (New Delhi: Tulika, 2001); Partha Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism: India's Artists and the Avant-garde 1922–1947* (London: Reaktion, 2007).

15 Partha Mitter, "Decentering Modernism: Art History and Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery," *The Art Bulletin* 90, no. 4 (December 2008): 531–548; 538.

16 Mitter, "Decentering Modernism," 544.

17 Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia*, 4–10.

18 Khullar, *Worldly Affiliations*, 14.

a brief introduction to the manifestations of early modernism in Pakistan in the context of institutional infrastructure and Akhlaq's early experiences during study tours in the region. The sections that follow link the particularities and context of Akhlaq's mobility—from London to Lahore and its neighboring region, and from Yale to Ankara—to the work of the artist and its underlying visual concept.

Mobility and early aesthetic propositions

As an artist, Akhlaq entered the art world in Pakistan in the late 1950s during a time of awakening and euphoria when artists across the two wings of the country—West and East Pakistan (Bangladesh, post-1971)—worked towards a modernism wherein the visual arts were connected to the experience of decolonization. A modest number of essays and books has been written about the development of art in Pakistan, in general, and on artistic modernism, in particular.¹⁹ The artistic modernism that defined Pakistan's art circles during the 1950s was not characterized by formal or stylistic agreement among its practitioners, but rather by a commitment to an aesthetic practice that interpolated Islamic, South Asian, and Western expressions in order to achieve a modernism that was at once transnational and emblematic of local specificity. Across the western and eastern wings of the country, artists such as Abedin in Dhaka, Agha in Rawalpindi, and Ali in Lahore, were involved in building new institutions or refurbishing the few existing ones, which became the main sites for artistic negotiations to take place. What connects these artists beyond their national affiliation is a similar path, the context of their mobility, and the fact that study and exploration led to transcultural experiences, which informed their pedagogy and their artworks. In fact, as mentioned above, other South Asian artists' careers are also characterized by mobility which is central to my

19 For an early account on art in Pakistan, see Jalal Uddin Ahmed, *Contemporary Painters of Pakistan* (Karachi: Arts Council of Pakistan, 1958). For a detailed account on the development of the early Muslim South Asian painter Abdur Rahman Chughtai, see Marcella Nesom, "Abdur Rahman Chughtai: A Modern South Asian Artist" (PhD diss., Ohio State University, 1984). For extended reading on many Pakistani artists, see Akbar Naqvi, *Image and Identity: Fifty Years of Painting and Sculpture in Pakistan* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1998). On the importance of feminism for developments in art during the 1980s, see Salima Hashmi, *Unveiling the Visible: Lives and Works of Women Artists of Pakistan* (Islamabad: ActionAid Pakistan, 2002). For an anthropological account of the new miniature movement in Lahore, see Virginia Whiles, *Art and Polemic in Pakistan: Cultural Politics and Tradition in Contemporary Miniature Painting* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2010). For a recent study of Rasheed Araeen, see Amra Ali, ed., *Rasheed Araeen: Homecoming* (Karachi: VM Art Gallery, 2014). For the defining capacity of formalist analysis in works of modern art, see Simone Wille, *Modern Art in Pakistan: History, Tradition, Place* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2015). For a detailed analysis of the artist Anwar Jalal Shemza, see Iftikhar Dadi, ed., *Anwar Jalal Shemza* (London: Ridinghouse, 2015). On Shakir Ali's influence on the Lahore Art Circle, see Salima Hashmi and Samina Iqbal, ed., *Naya Daur: Shakir Ali and Lahore Art Circle* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2017).

long-term research on artists from Pakistan, India, and Sri Lanka and their mobility towards Central Europe.²⁰

In Lahore, the Mayo School of Arts, founded in 1875 as a colonial art school with a focus on teaching local art and craft industries and renamed the National College of Arts (NCA) in 1958, became the central hub for artistic and pedagogical exploration.²¹ The arrival of Ali in 1951 made an impact on artists situated in Lahore.²² His modernist approach, formed through his experiences at the Sir J. J. School of Art in Bombay (1938–1946), the Slade School of Art in London (1947–1949), André Lhote’s field academy in the South of France (1948),²³ and the Academy of Arts, Architecture, and Design (UMPRUM) in Prague (1949–1950),²⁴ contributed to the local art circle in a significant way. This included his initiative to re-orient the curriculum of the NCA away from a design-oriented model towards one that reflected his experiences with modernism, as encountered through mobility. The 1960s, with Ali becoming principal of the NCA in 1961,²⁵ were therefore oriented towards a variety of European art forms and methods. Akhlaq was personally very close to Ali; at some stage he even lived and worked in Ali’s house in Lahore. Akhlaq’s early career was influenced by the elder artist’s transnational exposure and itinerary to the point that he incorporated his techniques—brushstrokes, mark making, material, and form in general—into his own work (Fig. 3).

20 For more information on “South Asia in Central Europe: The Mobility of Artists and Artworks between 1947 and 1989” (V880-G) and the previous project “Patterns of Trans-regional Trails: The Materiality of Art Works and Their Place in the Modern Era. Bombay, Paris, Prague, Lahore, ca. 1920s to early 1950s” (P29536-G26), both funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF), see <https://www.uibk.ac.at/kunstgeschichte/forschung/>; <https://www.uibk.ac.at/en/projects/south-asia-in-central-europe/>; <https://www.uibk.ac.at/kunstgeschichte/forschung/abgeschlossene-projekte.html>.

21 The Mayo School of Arts was one of four art schools established by the British across important colonial cities to control the educational system. Nadeem Omar Tarar, *The Colonial and National Formations of the National College of Arts, Lahore, circa 1870s to 1960s: De-scripting the Archive* (London and New York: Anthem Press, 2022)

22 Shakir Ali’s influential role as an artist with an early transculturally and transnationally informed understanding of modernist art has been elaborated on in detail. See Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia*, 120–131. See also Wille, *Modern Art in Pakistan*, 17–39.

23 See Simone Wille, “South Asian Artists at the Académie André Lhote,” in *André Lhote and His International Students*, ed. Zeynep Kuban and Simone Wille (Innsbruck: Innsbruck University Press, 2020), 189–207.

24 See Simone Wille, “The Lidice Collection of Postwar Modernist Art: An Art History Informed by Engagement and Circulation,” in *Come Closer: The Biennale Reader*, ed. Vít Havránek and Tereza Stejskalová (Prague: Sternberg, 2020), 51–72.

25 Nadeem Omar Tarar, “Aesthetic Modernism in the Post-Colony: The Making of a National College of Art in Pakistan (1950s–1960s),” *The International Journal of Art & Design Education* 27, no. 3 (2008): 332–345; 334, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1476-8070.2008.00587.x>.



Fig. 3. Zahoor ul Akhlaq, Composition, 1964. Oil on Masonite, 60.7 x 91.4 cm. Image courtesy of the artist's estate. Photo: Richard Seck.

In this early experimental period, the artist painted different flat, geometric structures with oil on a wooden board. Some of these forms, such as the rectangle, play a central role in his later works. What is more striking, however, is the way in which he probed brushstrokes, thus creating different textures but also demarcating passages between neighboring forms. The technique with which the painting surface is worked seems to be derived from Ali, whose training with Lhote in France, in particular, filters through here.²⁶ The proximity of the two artists can explain a certain conceptual instability in the painting but not its compositional principles. Instead, they must be linked to the NCA's pedagogical position in the 1960s, which was enthusiastic about formal modernism but also encouraged exploratory trips to the northern parts of Pakistan—the Northwest Frontier and the Swat Valley. These trips were organized to motivate artists and students to engage with folk art, regional architecture, and local crafts. The American artist Mark Ritter Sponenburgh (1918–2012), who was hired to become the first principal in 1958, after the NCA was renamed, initiated this form of study trip. Under his principalship (1957–1961), which preceded Ali's, Sponenburgh steered the NCA towards a model that resembled the Bauhaus. Sponenburgh's personal interest in the folk arts from the Swat Valley resulted in a crafts exhibition at the NCA in 1961.²⁷

26 Wille, "South Asian Artists at the Académie André Lhote," 195–200.

27 Tarar, *The Colonial and National Formations of the National College of Arts*, 166–171. See also Mark Sponenburgh, "Folk Arts of Swat Valley," *Contemporary Arts in Pakistan* 2, no. 2 (Summer 1961): 34–37; Liz Bruchet and Ming Tiampo, "Slade, London, Asia: Contrapuntal Histories between

Subsequently, Akhlaq became involved in organizing and leading at least one study tour to Swat and the northern parts of the country in the mid-1960s. This is how some of the styles of the decorative arts from the Swat region found their way into Akhlaq's artistic language (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Zahoor ul Akhlaq, Untitled, 1964. Oil on Masonite, dimensions unknown. Image courtesy of the artist's estate. Photo: Richard Seck.

Not unlike Fig. 3, this work (Fig. 4) is dominated by brushstrokes that build different forms and relationships between each other. However, these forms become more pronounced shapes that allow us to make connections with designs and motifs that woodcarvers from Swat so skillfully apply to their objects. Furthermore, these forms, in their rhythmic quality and in the way they are set against the light-colored patches, enable us to move back in time and make a connection with Akhlaq's early childhood experience of having studied with a master calligrapher in Karachi (Fig. 5). In both of these works (Fig. 4 and Fig. 5), the artist interchangeably used the rhythmic quality inherent to Islamic calligraphy and the sweeping motion that characterizes

much of the traditional wood carvings of the Swat region. He positions these forms in rhythmic arrangements across the picture surface in an attempt to remove signs of a pictorial space.



Fig. 5. Zahoor ul Akhlaq, Untitled, 1963. Oil on board, dimensions unknown. Image courtesy of the artist's estate. Photo: Richard Seck.

Although these early works can certainly be read as painterly experiments, they are above all an exercise and exploration of transforming aesthetic experiences gained through mobility into aesthetic propositions for a transculturally informed modernist language. Its transculturality derives from a critical connection between cultures—the regional aesthetics of craftsmanship and calligraphy, and the formal principles of European modernism. This can be viewed as an artistic approach established to overcome monolithic conceptions of art making where one cultural practice is given priority at the expense of another. It can further be seen as an attempt to decolonize art education—the colonial art pedagogy of separation between art and craft, as practiced at the Mayo School of Arts in Lahore.²⁸ The painterly terrain that Akhlaq succeeded in establishing through these early study tours became the foundation for his landscape of aesthetic innovation and the framework on which he continued to build his spatial explorations.

The context of Akhlaq's sojourn in London

In 1966, Akhlaq moved to London for two years after receiving a British Council scholarship for postgraduate study.²⁹ His educational experiences in Pakistan had equipped him with a sense of what art making meant under modern and postcolonial conditions in a new nation. During his first year in

²⁸ About the creation of two separate realms in art education, see Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India: 1850–1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 29–62.

²⁹ For a detailed discussion of the role played by the British Council in granting scholarships and promoting British interests, see Bruchet and Tiampo, “Slade, London, Asia.” See also Frances Donaldson, *The British Council: The First Fifty Years* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1984), 1–2.

London, he studied printmaking at the Hornsey College of Art, and in the second year at the Royal College of Art. While the experience of studying in the former imperial capital may have been received with mixed feelings by some, for many artists from the former colonies it was an opportunity to travel, to engage with an international community, and to learn a skill which, in turn, was useful for teaching others back home. The London sojourn consisted of exchanges, meetings, discoveries, encounters, and interactions—processes, which signal, in Greenblatt’s conception of culture, key aspects of cultural mobility.³⁰ In her article on the manifold trajectories of theatrical traditions from the Islamic world of the Middle East, Friederike Pannewick has shown how, as cultural acts, these arts “cannot be viewed in isolation,” but rather have to be viewed through the “complex process of transcultural interaction.”³¹ Following this, the artistic practice of Akhlaq, as is increasingly the case with mobility in art history, has to be located along processes of encounter and interaction.

Here, it is interesting to note that, not unlike other artists from the former colonies who found themselves studying in the imperial capital, Akhlaq decided to work with printing techniques rather than with painting.³² This gave him an opportunity to try out the technical possibilities that he would not have had access to in Pakistan. But printmaking was also open to experimentation, and Akhlaq made use of it to work at the intersections of abstraction and etching, ink painting, dry point, and lithography.

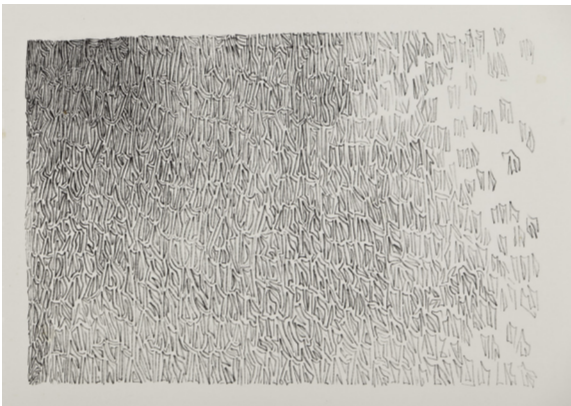


Fig. 6. Zahoor ul Akhlaq, *Landscape 5*, 1966. Lithography, 45.72 x 55.88 cm. Image courtesy of the artist’s estate. Photo: Richard Seck.

30 Stephen Greenblatt, “Culture,” in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 225–232.

31 Friederike Pannewick, “Performativity and Mobility: Middle Eastern Traditions on the Move,” in *Cultural Mobility*, 215–249; 246.

32 See also Bruchet and Tiampo, “Slade, London, Asia.”

In this lithograph (Fig. 6), the artist almost playfully transforms line drawings into a rhythmic composition. From the densely populated upper left side of the paper, the composition spreads across the surface to gradually loosen up as individual forms start moving towards the edge of the visual space on the right side. While one could suggest the artist's experience of mobility as one possible frame of interpretation, it is interesting to take a closer look at the forms and shapes that are the central components of this work. The curved lines are reminiscent of curved shapes in his earlier work (Fig. 4 and Fig. 5), both in terms of rhythm and of design. They thus hark back to his practice in calligraphy and his study of regional architecture and local crafts. But, unlike the oil paintings, here (Fig. 6) he is only interested in the lines and forgoes the spatiality and the fields in between. We can conclude that this reduction is due to the technique of lithography.

Work such as this (Fig. 6) engages playfully and cross-culturally with what Akhlaq had probed in Pakistan and with the technology available in London. During his stay in London, he visited the city's museums, where he discovered Mughal miniature paintings in the collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum and the British Museum. He was so fascinated by their quality that he started to study these collections intensively. Akhlaq regarded the tradition of Mughal miniature paintings as cultural heritage at a time when it became increasingly politicized in Pakistan as both Islamic and national. At that time, there was no clear strategy in Pakistan on how to revitalize the miniature tradition but, as Virginia Whiles states, "it was officially promoted, in a restricted but symbolic sense, as an ideal gift for foreign visitors, employing a rhetoric which emphasized its courtly origins."³³ Whiles further claims that it was the commercial visibility of the Mughal miniatures that prompted Akhlaq to study them in London.³⁴ The politicization of the Mughal miniature tradition brings to mind the colonial period, when it was a contested terrain, at times exemplarily regarded as high art and then again dismissed as handicraft.³⁵ Against the imperial exclusivity of the Western cultural model, which fostered academic painting across colonial art schools in India, miniature painting from the Mughal and the Pahari schools was increasingly used for the emulation and formation of an anticolonial, Indian style by proponents of the Bengal School in the first two decades of the twentieth century.³⁶ Artists like Abanindranath

33 Whiles, *Art and Polemic*, 55.

34 Whiles, *Art and Polemic*, 55.

35 This has been addressed by several writers. See Virginia Whiles, "Karkhana: Revival or Re-Invention?," in *Karkhana: A Contemporary Collaboration*, ed. Hammad Nasar with Anita Dawood-Nasar (Ridgefield: The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum and Green Cardamom, 2005), 26–33; 28. Whiles, *Art and Polemic*, 102.

36 Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New "Indian" Art: Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism*

Tagore (1871–1951) and Abdur Rahman Chughtai (1897–1975) turned to this art, the latter as a Muslim and the former as a Hindu artist. However, with an increasing tendency to marginalize Muslims and Mughal art by the nationalist Swadeshi movement,³⁷ the historical discursive framework and evaluation of Mughal miniature painting changed. Ananda Coomaraswamy regarded Mughal art—including architecture—in general, as not being part of the Indian “local condition” and therefore viewed it as secular and not truly national.³⁸ Dadi contends that in asserting the difference between the formal language of the Bengal School painters such as Abanindranath Tagore and his own location at the Lahore School, Chughtai began to “ground his work as an authentic modern re-creation of Mughal painting.”³⁹ The different historical trajectories that these artists envisioned for the Mughal miniature, along the lines of the discursive reading of Muslim art, can be seen as the source of its politicization, which was carried into the postcolonial era, especially in Pakistan. In the 1950s and 1960s it was taught at the NCA but marginalized as insignificant, until, as mentioned above, it came to be recognized and patronized by Pakistani politicians.⁴⁰ These politicians referred to the Muslim courtly lineage of Mughal painting and therefore considered it, along with calligraphy, a suitable national representational art, while the rhetoric of the Bengal School had marginalized Mughal painting precisely because of these historical realities.

In Akhlaq’s view, however, the potential of Mughal art lay closer to Chughtai’s stance than to that of the official Pakistani government. Not unlike Chughtai, he recognized conceptual qualities in Mughal painting, which he used as a framework for his artistic practice. The way Akhlaq employed formal and structural rudiments of the miniature painting and the manuscript page, especially his recourse to the frame and later the grid as a form of intervention in the miniature, can be seen as an artistic process, rooted less in a national than in a regional discourse, which goes back to pre-colonial times and to colonial era discussions. The fact that he developed an artistic interest in Mughal

in Bengal, c. 1850–1920 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 293. The Bengal School of Painting emerged in 1900, assimilating Indian painting styles such as Mughal miniature painting, pan-Asian ideals, and Japanese wash techniques as opposed to European/British academic painting styles. The Bengal School adhered to spiritualism, idealism, and nationalism and has been discussed in two detailed studies. See Guha-Thakurta, *Making of a New “Indian” Art*, 117–145; and Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India*, 234–266.

37 Swadeshi refers to indigenous or indigeneness respectively, see Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India*, 235–236.

38 Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *The Arts and Crafts of India and Ceylon* (London: T. N. Foulis, 1913), 221–223.

39 Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia*, 42.

40 See Whiles, “Karkhana,” 28 fn. 12.

miniature painting in London subsequently promotes the region as a framework of reference more than the nation. Akhlaq's mobility led to an awareness of the regional context, which he saw as a dynamic and contingent entity.



Fig. 7. Zahoor ul Akhlaq, Untitled, 1968. Etching, 40.6 x 58.4 cm. Image courtesy of the artist's estate. Photo: Richard Seck.

In Fig. 7, we see how the artist transfers the formal structures of a traditional manuscript page to the format of the printing plate. He focuses on the rectangular format, which is a key organizational structure of a traditional miniature painting or an album page. The rectangular frame creates a demarcated space within the picture area, thus achieving a division between the inside and the outside of the frame. The space inside the frame traditionally accommodates an individual composition, semantically and aesthetically set apart from that which surrounds it. Akhlaq uses this formal division in Fig. 7 as the inner demarcation of the space of the printing plate, within which he applies abstract patterns reminiscent of calligraphic strokes. However, by applying inkblots that exceed and intervene into the liminal space of the frame, he shows disrespect for it. In doing so, he draws attention to the use of ink, the body of the line, the tactility of the paper, and the technical possibilities of the printing process. The relationship between the border areas and the frame in Mughal painting allows us to understand “the way in which artists interacted with the world in which they lived.”⁴¹ Ebba Koch suggests thinking

41 Milo C. Beach, “Muraqqa’-e Gulshan: The Artists of the Marginal Figures,” in *Adle Nāmeḥ: Studies in Memory of Chahriyyar Adle*, ed. Alireza Anisi (Tehran: Research Institute for Cultural Heritage and Tourism, 2018), 133–166; 146.

of the border areas as the space in which the Mughals critically “negotiated” the role that European art came to play in their visual strategies.⁴² Paul Duro problematizes the use of the frame in Western art history, noting, in reference to Wolfgang Kemp, that “beyond its primary function as marker of limits,” the frame has the quality of connecting and interrupting, enclosing and transcending.⁴³ Deepak Ananth’s study of Henri Matisse’s oriental paintings relegates the function of the frame with the space outside it to a similar level as Koch does when he sees it as a site for the production of difference.⁴⁴

The Indian artist Gulammohammed Sheikh (born 1937) who, like Akhlaq, rediscovered Mughal miniature paintings in the museum collections of London while studying at the Royal College of Art from 1963 to 1969, has referred to the borderland space in a Mughal miniature painting as “hardly a frame” and emphasized the mobility between what is seen as the inner and the outer frame.⁴⁵ Akhlaq’s articulation of the fluid character between the inner and the outer frame as exemplified in Fig. 7 can thus almost be seen as a response to Sheikh. The rediscovery of and the attraction to traditional miniature painting led both artists to an ongoing engagement with the genre which contrasts with the prevalent political attitudes. Sheikh made connections between Mughal miniature paintings, murals that he saw in Siena, and wall paintings from Ajanta by way of narrative and figurative compositions, and in response, as he stated, to his mobility.⁴⁶ Akhlaq worked towards a geometrically constructed format and thereby succeeded in establishing a link between stylistic developments of global modernism and the spatial composition of Mughal miniature painting. His employment of both the unifying and limiting qualities⁴⁷ of the frame thus articulates its “cultural metonymy” situated at the intersection of different visual traditions whose vibrant encounter it frames.⁴⁸

For Sheikh, an Indian Muslim artist, the Mughal miniature tradition was part of the rich and diverse cultural fabric of India. As such, in his work he

42 Koch, “Visual Strategies,” 102.

43 Paul Duro, “Introduction,” in *The Rhetoric of the Frame: Essays on the Boundaries of the Artwork*, ed. Paul Duro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1–10; 3.

44 Deepak Ananth, “Frames within Frames: On Matisse and the Orient,” in *The Rhetoric of the Frame: Essays on the Boundaries of the Artwork*, ed. Paul Duro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 153–177; 177.

45 Gulammohammed Sheikh, “Making of a Visual Language: Thoughts on Mughal Painting,” *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, no. 30–31 (December 1997): 7–32; 22.

46 Suman Gopinath, “In Conversation with Gulammohammed Sheikh,” in *Horn Please: Erzählen in der zeitgenössischen indischen Kunst*, ed. Parul Dave Mukherji and Anita Dube (Bern: Kunstmuseum Bern and Hatje Cantz, 2008), 45–49; 48.

47 Duro, “Introduction,” 1–10.

48 Ananth, “Frames within Frames,” 158.

treated it on an equal footing with paintings from Ajanta or Rajasthan and thereby seemingly liberated it from the stigma that had marginalized it in the early twentieth century. Given the diverse heritage of the miniature in twentieth-century South Asia, it is hard to argue that the Muslim Pakistani artist Akhlaq viewed the trajectory of the miniature in a way that is completely divorced from the specific geopolitics of his subjectivity. The answer to how Akhlaq viewed the trajectory of the miniature is, not least, informed by the cultural process of mobility that led to reflections on belonging and thus a desire for continuity instead of a sudden break.⁴⁹

The simultaneous respect and disregard for the format of a traditional Mughal painting in Fig. 7 can be connected to an observation made by Saloni Mathur, who notes that in the work of migrant artists such as Zarina Hashmi (1973–2020) the national and geopolitical frame is both emphasized and erased.⁵⁰ In Akhlaq’s case, the impact of mobility transformed his work, producing a complex relationship with the nation and a sense of belonging that allows us to agree with Khullar’s proposal of modernism as an expanded “practice of affiliation.”⁵¹

Akhlaq’s move to London is thus characterized by processes of interaction that led to a recognizable transcultural appropriation of culturally specific artistic practices and traditions. The transcultural dimension is primarily grounded in the contrast of simple adoption or transfer of artistic concepts versus processes of interaction and the artist’s critical engagement with prevailing models of artistic modernism as well as tradition.⁵² This engendered a notion of a broader aesthetic that allows us to locate Akhlaq’s art, along with those of other itinerant artists, at the intersection of dynamic exchanges produced through mobility.⁵³ Artistic contexts such as these inform an expanded notion of modernism.

For Akhlaq, the sojourn in London brought an awareness of how regionally located artistic means can build the framework for an abstraction far beyond Eurocentric models. His exploration of various media, both as support for images and as objects for three-dimensional and mixed media works (Fig. 8),

49 See Ranajit Guha, “The Migrant’s Time,” in *The Migrant’s Time: Rethinking Art History and Diaspora*, ed. Saloni Mathur (Williamstown: Clark Art Institute, 2008), 3–9.

50 Saloni Mathur, “Introduction,” in *The Migrant’s Time*, vii–xix; xvi.

51 See Khullar, *Worldly Affiliations*, 15.

52 Christian Kravagna, *Transmoderne: Eine Kunstgeschichte des Kontakts* (Berlin: b_books, 2017), 10–11. See also Christian Kravagna, *Transmodern: An Art History of Contact, 1920–60* (Manchester: Manchester University Press: 2022), 3–4.

53 About varied mobilities and artistic production, see Mathur, *The Migrant’s Time*. See also Burcu Dogramaci and Birgit Mersmann, ed., *Handbook of Art and Global Migration: Theories, Practices, and Challenges* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2019).

also dates back to his time in London. According to Whiles, the fascination with mixed media dominated the London art schools of the 1960s in a unified “conflict with authoritarian structures.”⁵⁴ As exemplified in Fig. 8, Akhlaq made use of polyvinyl (PVC) pipes as found objects that he cut into short pieces of about ten centimeters each. He then placed them in five rows of five, glued them to a fiberboard, and painted the entire composition in white.



Fig. 8. Zahoor ul Akhlaq, *Untitled, c. 1969. PVC pipe on medium-density fiberboard (MDF), 91 x 91 x 10 cm. Image courtesy of the artist's estate. Photo: Richard Seck.*

The layout of the work is based on a grid format, which became another important structural element that dominated Akhlaq's works over the years. The grid even became his trademark, so to speak, which developed an afterlife through its reinterpretation by artists such as Rashid Rana (born 1968), Shahzia Sikander (born 1969), and Beate Terfloth (born 1958).⁵⁵ The intense engagement of these artists with the work of Akhlaq was characterized by a practice that aimed at unraveling the relationship between geometric form and the architectural as well as pictorial space that animated Mughal miniatures and regionally built environments such as Mughal architecture.

The choice of material in Fig. 8 is pertinent, for PVC has become one of the most commonly used plastics in the world. It gradually came to replace metal piping and was subsequently produced around the globe. Akhlaq's use of

54 Whiles, *Art and Polemic*, 55.

55 On the relationship between Akhlaq and the works of German artist Beate Terfloth and Pakistani artist Rashid Rana, see Wille, *Modern Art in Pakistan*, 83–109. On the Pakistani American artist Shahzia Sikander and her engagement with Akhlaq, see Vishakha N. Desai, *Conversation with Traditions: Nilima Sheikh and Shahzia Sikander* (New York: Asia Society, 2001), 69.

polyvinyl pipes as found objects and the way he places them—linearly arranged so that they form a square shape, yet playful in the way they are unevenly cut and positioned so that they pipe out in different directions—can be read as a response to the institutional hierarchies, as experienced in London. There is, however, a discernible transcultural appropriation in place here, in which the transformative potential of both the material and the artistic strategy is brought to bear. It can be said that the dynamics of the artist’s mobility led to an awareness of hierarchies of genres, canons, and institutional structures, which he challenged through the use of materials such as prints and found objects such as PVC. His interventions in miniature painting can also be regarded, as Whiles put it, as “reactionary,” challenging institutional and artistic hierarchies.⁵⁶

In contrast to those who devoted themselves exclusively to miniature painting, Akhlaq developed a process of critical engagement and interaction with artistic concepts that are part of an expanded notion of modernism. What followed was a series of regionally situated touristic and exploratory travels. Sheherezade Alam, Akhlaq’s widow, a potter, and Nurjahan Akhlaq, his daughter, a multidisciplinary artist, both remembered that extensive exposure through mobility left a deep mark on Akhlaq’s work.

In ’72 and ’73, we made these extraordinary trips to Kabul and Tehran and [Zahoor] explained Persian and Turkic influences on the subcontinent. I didn’t know they existed, frankly, but at these places I looked at architecture and paintings and color schemes and designs—this influence entered both my work and his.⁵⁷

Road trips on the hippie trail: towards a regional aesthetic

In 1968, when Akhlaq returned to Lahore from London, he traveled by land via Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan, exploring West, Central, and South Asia. His road trips and the kind of mobility they entailed were an important part of overcoming the boundedness of the nation, thus leading to an understanding of the composition of the region and its dynamics. As such, they are comparable to his excursions within London, which led to discovering the rich museum collections of South Asian art. Akhlaq’s road trips consequently engendered a visual cultural understanding of a regional aesthetic.

These road trips and journeys were also a way for Akhlaq to establish a connection with the wider Muslim world, not least through the recognition

56 Whiles, “Karkhana,” 31. In her book-length study about contemporary miniature practice in Lahore, Whiles discusses in detail the recoveries of a traditional art form and the paradoxical aspects this entails, see Whiles, *Art and Polemic*, 99–115.

57 Sheherezade Alam in dialog with Nurjahan Akhlaq, “Setting a Frame,” *The Aleph Review* 5 (2021): 22–35; 33–34.

of an intertwined cultural heritage. On a broader level, the trips into these regions were not isolated phenomena but in keeping with artists, hippies, and other Western expatriates who, mostly on their way to India, passed through and stayed at these places on what was popularly called the hippie trail. The most prominent artist, who even settled in Afghanistan, though temporarily, was Alighiero Boetti (alias Alighiero e Boetti, 1940–1994).⁵⁸ Boetti arrived in Kabul in the spring of 1971 and in the same year opened his famous One Hotel, from which he conceived and conceptualized his most celebrated and emblematic artworks, the *Mappa*, a series of embroidered maps of the world.⁵⁹ However, the engagement with and the interest in the region varied considerably between the Italian and the Pakistani artists, for Boetti, Afghanistan was a “world away,”⁶⁰ while for Akhlaq, it was a world to which he felt intimately connected.

Akhlaq’s spatial explorations through regional travels thus contributed to the works in which he continued to shape the formal artistic foundations that he had developed in response to his interactions in London. The frame, as a principle of pictorial organization, featured prominently in his works from the 1970s onwards and remained—often in altered ways—a structural device, even when ostensibly absent. Intellectually, the frame can also be seen as a space or territory from which historic connections can be drawn in multiple directions, thereby connecting with the proposition made by Duro about the frame and its ability to link and disrupt.⁶¹ In the work *View from the Tropic of Illegitimate Reality* (Fig. 2) discussed at the beginning, the frame is subjected to the densely painted pictorial organization of the modular grid. The grid squares are filled with rough brushstrokes that add texture to the canvas and support division between the surface’s inner and outer frames. Within the space of the barely visible frame, the fragmentary silhouette of a human figure

58 Apart from Boetti there was also Sigmar Polke (1941–2010), who traveled via Turkey and Iran to Afghanistan and Pakistan in 1974. This led to a series of grainy black-and-white photographic works known as the Quetta works, some of which he later reworked, treating them with chemicals and applying colors. While they have been celebrated as rare photographic works in the German artist’s oeuvre, they reflect an Orientalist approach, celebrating a mystic world and a temporary escape from a petty bourgeois reality.

59 For a personal account about Boetti’s One Hotel in Kabul, see Annemarie Sauzeau, “Alighiero Boetti’s One Hotel,” in *The Book of Books*, ed. Documenta (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2012), 194–195. On the recovery of the hotel thought to be destroyed, see the personal narrative of Tom Francis, “One Star is Enough to Make a Cosmos: Alighiero e Boetti and the One Hotel,” *Bidoun*, no. 19 (Winter 2009/2010), accessed February 4, 2023, <https://www.bidoun.org/articles/one-star-is-enough-to-make-a-cosmos>. His collaborative works—outsourced to Afghan weaving families, who, after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, continued to work with Boetti from Peshawar—quickly caught the attention of the international art world through the curator Harald Szeemann in 1971.

60 Francis, “One Star is Enough to Make a Cosmos.”

61 Duro, “Introduction,” 3.

appears. We know that the artist introduced the human figure as more or less recognizably female with the birth of his first daughter in 1974. It reappeared over the years, inhabiting or about to leave the space within which the artist captures it. The figure very often appeared as a reference to personal, political, social, and historical circumstances. Here (Fig. 2), the theme is humanity as an endangered species due to nuclear threat as indicated by the cloud-like formation in the upper, slightly reddish left corner of the frame.

However, by painting the inner space and the outer boundary lines of the frame, Akhlaq creates a connection between the two territories utilizing one of the grid's main functions—that of transfer. As if describing Akhlaq's work (Fig. 2), John Elderfield elaborates on the grid's transfer function, especially when it "contains," as he holds, "any added imagery."⁶² What has been called disrespect for the frame in relation to the work in Fig. 7, or what the artist Sheikh has called "mobility between inner and outer frame" takes a personal, political position here. The silhouette of a cloud formation—a recurring motif in Akhlaq's work from that time—can be read as a universal condition of nuclear weaponization. In the regional context, however, it recalls the 1965 border war with India and the subsequent nuclear policies that developed on both sides of the border.⁶³ The abstracted presence of the figure in the painting thereby speaks of the troubled post-partition human condition that mediates between the global postwar world and the regional post-partition one. As such, it can be seen as a link with a transfer function between the conceptual character of space in painting and the artist's connection with wider, global concerns.

The basic structure of Akhlaq's work was defined in the early 1970s through his use of the grid and the frame as principles. He thus created a formal artistic space characterized by flexibility and the possibility of articulating mobility within it. While both the grid and frame can be derived from Mughal painting, these are also structures that link his works with modernism and art history on a broader scale that transcends both the nation and the region. Here we are reminded of Elderfield again, who spoke about the grid and frame as a structure that dominated much of twentieth century modernism, pointing to connections with fifteenth century art.⁶⁴ We are equally drawn to scholars on Mughal painting who have highlighted in detail the grid's purpose of giving structure to the paper's space.⁶⁵

62 John Elderfield, "Grids," *Artforum* 10, no. 9 (May 1972): 52–59; 54.

63 See Sampooran Singh, *India and the Nuclear Bomb* (New Delhi: S. Chand, 1971).

64 Elderfield, "Grids," 54.

65 On the function of the grid structure in traditional Mughal painting, see Milo Cleveland Beach, Ebba Koch, and Wheeler Thackston, ed., *King of the World: The Padshahnama: An Imperial Mughal Manuscript from the Royal Library, Windsor Castle* (London: Azimuth Editions, 1997), 159.

While some of these connections were discussed at length elsewhere,⁶⁶ I would like to note here that Akhlaq's use of the grid emerged from a transculturally informed awareness of the grid's capacity to transcend and overcome the past, the natural, the historical, the real,⁶⁷ but also oppositions such as East and West. He therefore invoked the grid as a structural phenomenon, which allowed him to transcend geographical and historical borders between cultures. His experiences of mobility allowed him to move beyond comparisons between West and East, center and periphery, global and local, old and new, to arrive, as Huyssen stated, "at new kinds of comparisons"⁶⁸ concerned with the significance of mobility and the way it co-produced a postwar modernism informed, above all, by processes of interaction. By emphasizing the grid as the basis of Mughal painting, Akhlaq thus maintained critical distance from metropolitan modernism, even as he associated with it. This approach can be described as transcultural because it creates a critical articulation between the dominant and the marginalized culture.⁶⁹

A good example of how Akhlaq used the grid to critically connect modernism and tradition is his well-known Shah Jahan triptych, of which he painted at least three versions in different scales and at different times in his career. These works are a direct result of his many visits to the London museums, where he studied the components of selected Mughal miniature paintings.



Fig. 9. Zahoor ul Akhlaq, Shah Jahan Triptych, 1981. Acrylic on wood, 121.92 x 91.44 cm. Image courtesy of the artist's estate. Photo: Richard Seck.

66 See Wille, *Modern Art in Pakistan*, 40–82.

67 Rosalind E. Krauss, "Grids," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), 9–22; 9.

68 Huyssen, "Geographies of Modernism," 200.

69 Kravagna, *Transmoderne*, 13.



Fig. 10. Balchand, The Three Younger Sons of Shah Jahan (Shah Shuja, Aurangzeb, and Murad Bakhsh), ca. 1635. Watercolor and gold on paper. Museum number: IM.13-1925, © Victoria and Albert Museum.

The starting point for this work is the seventeenth-century painting *The Three Younger Sons of Shah Jahan* by Balchand (Fig. 10), which is part of the Victoria and Albert Museum's collection. In it, we see the three sons of the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan, each riding a horse. The three horse riders appear within the inner frame, where they are placed on a narrowly painted path in the foreground. The remaining scene is a landscape. Shah Jahan's sons appear varied in scale according to their official rank. The eldest brother is the largest figure, yet he is placed farthest away. The three horses similarly differ in size, the largest belonging to the eldest brother at the rear. The painting is surrounded by a frame and a border; it is further mounted on an album page with a decorative floral border. Akhlaq's focus is on the three horse riders. He positions them centrally in each wooden panel (Fig. 9). The grid serves as structural support. The colors and variations of the landscape and border decorations in the seventeenth century painting are reduced to brushstrokes that he applied to the grid structure across the picture. The artist alternated different color accentuations on the horse riders so that they appear either on or within the grid. This allowed him to make a statement on a fundamental component of a Mughal painting—the handling of space. As opposed to European naturalism/illusionism/realism, the artist emphasized the conceptual

character of space as understood in Mughal painting, much in the way that Gregory Minissale has argued in an analysis of the Euro-American tradition of illusionism and the depicted space in the Mughal and Persian context.⁷⁰ Akhlaq centralizes the way in which visual culture is anchored locally/regionally but is capable of transcending it. In doing so, he challenges not only geographical boundaries but also the boundaries between the disciplines of Islamic, South Asian, and Asian art, as well as those of Western art. As an implicitly Western form, the grid can be interpreted as a link to maps, which use it to represent space, due to the grid's expansive and "bivalent structure" that, according to Krauss, extends beyond imposed boundaries.⁷¹ Krauss's outward and inward reading of the grid thus opens it "in all directions," allowing us to view a work of art as a "fragment" of something larger and at the same time "a representation of everything that separates the work of art from the world."⁷² Borders and maps are also of concern to Burcu Dogramaci, who relates their polysemantic character to artistic aesthetics and points to the possibility of thereby mapping art history not linearly but diachronically and anti-hierarchically.⁷³ In this sense, the polysemantic quality of the map, together with the multidirectional quality of the grid, captures the notion of expanded modernism or "alternative geographies of modernism."⁷⁴ It thereby allows us to tease out, in Huyssen's view, affiliations and interactions as experienced through mobility. Akhlaq's grid can therefore be seen as both an aesthetic form and a subjective mapping,⁷⁵ whose transcultural dimension is constituted through processes of mobility and interaction in the region and beyond.

Connecting geographical and cultural spaces

During the 1970s and the early 1980s, Akhlaq was mostly based in Lahore. He taught at the NCA, where he became an associate professor in 1975 and head of fine arts in 1979. Politically, Pakistan experienced a series of transitions and the climate in the country and region was turbulent at that time. In 1971, East Pakistan was lost following a traumatic and shameful war. Silenced to this day in Pakistan's official history, this rupture decreased the country's ethnic and

70 Gregory Minissale, *Images of Thought: Visuality in Islamic India 1550–1750* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2006).

71 Krauss, "Grids," 18.

72 Krauss, "Grids," 18–19.

73 Burcu Dogramaci, "Toward a Migratory Turn: Art History and the Meaning of Flight, Migration and Exile," in Dogramaci and Mersmann, *Handbook of Art and Global Migration*, 17–37; 24.

74 Huyssen, "Geographies of Modernism," 193.

75 Dogramaci, "Toward a Migratory Turn," 24.

religious diversity.⁷⁶ Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's (1928–1979, r. 1971–1973/1973–1977) promise of reforms to support the underprivileged turned out to be empty slogans and, instead, he set out to wield state authority. His ousting from power came through his army chief of staff, General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq (1924–1988, r. 1978–1988), who became the third military ruler of the country. Zia promised elections within ninety days, but this promise was consistently broken over the next nine years. During this time, Islamic social order was introduced, in which women became the focal point of his program.⁷⁷

The imposed restrictions in Pakistan and its contradictory narratives prompted the artist to find a way to leave the country with his family. In 1987, he thus applied for a Fulbright Fellowship with a proposal titled “Muslim Art and Image Making.” He was accepted at Yale University in New Haven, United States, where he remained until 1989. Escaping Zia's restrictions in Pakistan in a move akin to flight in order to study Muslim cultures in Connecticut seems paradoxical, but his association with the Institute of Sacred Music, Religion, and the Arts, and the Yale School of Art, led to a discursive engagement with his work that marked the last decade of his creative life.

The transcontinental move to Yale, not unlike the move to London many years earlier, triggered a connection with the past. At Yale, he attended reading programs on religion, ethics, aesthetics, and philosophy in an atmosphere of highly politicized art and culture.⁷⁸ Notes preserved in the artist's archive from his time at Yale attest to his participation in such courses (Fig. 11).

Post
Schools =
Art Institutions
Post second world war
Destructured/dilapidated Euro(u)pe
Shift of world art capital to New York
Emergence of Abstract Expressionists
The new York School and East Coasts
West Coasts – trends and scope.
Faithless and faithful
Nineteenth century painting
Tradition of painting and sculpture in Euro(u)pe
Sup(pler) Realists
Home for displaced
Nation of Immigrants

Fig. 11. Zahoor ul Akhlaq, text fragment, archived text from the artist's estate.

76 See Kamran Asdar Ali, *Communism in Pakistan: Politics and Class Activism 1947–1972* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2015), 204.

77 See Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal, *Modern South Asia: History, Culture, Political Economy* (New York: Routledge, 2011 [1997]), 184–204.

78 For a detailed reading of the artist's time at Yale, see Roger Connah, *The Rest Is Silence: Zahoor ul Akhlaq: Art and Society in Pakistan* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2011), 260–266.

It is difficult to conjecture what he made of these lectures. Roger Connah, who sees Akhlaq's stay at Yale as coinciding with a time when "theories about the end of reason and the end of history were being put forward,"⁷⁹ considers it less relevant to judge whether or not the artist encountered these theories. Rather, Connah sees it important to acknowledge that the artist was part of a "community of ideas."⁸⁰ While we can only speculate about the ideas that Akhlaq developed in Yale, some archived, transcribed notes help us form a partial picture. Most of the entries listed below each other in Fig. 11 suggest that he attended a course on art history. The last two entries, "Home for displaced" and "Nation of Immigrants," can indeed be linked to a Western art historical narrative that refers to the relocation of postwar art centers from Paris to New York.⁸¹ However, these two entries allow for interpretations that relate to Akhlaq's own experiences with movement and flight, not least because of the contexts that had determined his mobility thus far. In sum, these entries, albeit sketchy and experimental, are a reminder of the linear and mono-perspectival canonization of art history in which the transformative power of cultural mobility, such as displacement, flight, and migration, that underlies Akhlaq's itinerary, had not yet been explored to the extent that it could meaningfully accommodate non-Western artists and their practice.

Important members of the "community of ideas" at Yale were Peter Hawkins and John Cook, both from the Yale Institute of Sacred Music and whom he had met at a conference in Thailand in 1987, as well as the family friend Sara Suleri (1953–2022), who taught English at Yale University at the time. In her memoir *Meatless Days*, published in 1989, Suleri intertwines the turbulence and violence of Pakistan's independence with her intimate memoirs of her family and her own journey to the West. She wrote a synopsis for an exhibition of Akhlaq's work at the Yale Institute of Sacred Music in 1988, in which she reflected on the "aesthetic dialog" that the artist continuously established "between Eastern and Western cultural traditions."⁸² Suleri emphasized that this dialogue involved a "resuscitation of the two-dimensionality of the Eastern tradition."⁸³ She saw this achieved by the artist in his geometrically structured works that "accommodate both post-modern

79 Connah, *The Rest Is Silence*, 263.

80 Connah, *The Rest Is Silence*, 263.

81 Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983).

82 Sara Suleri, "Zahoor ul Akhlaq," paper with Yale University letterhead, Estate of Zahoor ul Akhlaq, 1989.

83 Suleri, "Zahoor ul Akhlaq."

visions of spatial surface and the strict geometry that gave exquisite elegance to the Mughal tradition of Islamic art”⁸⁴ (Fig. 12).



Fig. 12. *Zahoor ul Akhlaq*. A series of works created while at Yale. *Courtesy of the artist's estate.*

As Suleri noted, the paintings created during Akhlaq’s studies at Yale demonstrate his ongoing preoccupation with space and confirm once again his ability to connect the visual traditions of South Asian Muslim culture with modernist aesthetics. But these works also emerged as a reaction to seeing Josef Albers’s series *Homage to the Square*, particularly in combinations of linear and flat-illusionist elements. Albers’s relativity of perception found resonance in Akhlaq’s aesthetic interpretation of emotional freedom, which he frequently referred to in his works. His speaking of the need for dialogue “between the painting and the viewer”⁸⁵ was thus reminiscent of Albers, who, through his adherence to the formula of the square, challenged the viewer’s visual perception.⁸⁶ In this sense, Akhlaq recognized and took forward Albers’s approach to form and perception.

When Suleri summed up her introduction to Akhlaq’s Yale exhibition, she stated that the works were “luminous evidence” of his contribution to

84 Suleri, “Zahoor ul Akhlaq.”

85 From an interview between Gregory Minissale and Zahoor ul Akhlaq, “Black is the Beginning,” *The Herald*, May 1991, 151.

86 See Josef Albers, “Op Art and/or Perceptual Effects,” *Yale Scientific Magazine* (November 1965), quoted in Margit Staber, “Die Farbe verhält sich wie der Mensch: Zum Kunstkonzept von Josef Albers,” *Schweizer Monatshefte* 56, no. 2 (May 1976): 133–140, <http://doi.org/10.5169/seals-163187>.

“the heterogeneity of contemporary post-modernism.”⁸⁷ Suleri’s text is an important document based on a discursive reading of Akhlaq’s work, especially because, until then, he had not received valid critical attention. Her reference to heterogeneity implies one of the complications relating to global artistic modernism, namely attributions of linear causality and temporality. It therefore reflects Mitter’s quest for a discourse that takes into account the heterogeneous character of modernism⁸⁸ and expands the concept.

Shortly after Akhlaq’s return to Pakistan, the artist prepared for an exhibition in a newly opened Ziggurat Gallery in Karachi. He included works that had been created partly during his time in Yale and partly after his return. This exhibition therefore echoes some of Akhlaq’s Yale experiences, starting with the exhibition title *Luminous Evidence*, borrowed from Suleri’s text for his Yale show. This allows us to contextualize his mobility⁸⁹ and unravel how it inscribes itself onto the artistic process. Overall, many of the large acrylic works on canvas and the smaller works on wood and board (Fig. 13, Fig. 14) that made up the exhibition, are dominated by a rectangular structure that determined much of his work in the 1970s.



Fig. 13. Zahoor ul Akhlaq, Untitled, ca. 1991. Acrylic on board, approx. 3.18 x 2.26 cm. Courtesy of the artist's estate. Photo: Richard Seck.

87 Suleri, “Zahoor ul Akhlaq.”

88 Mitter, “Decentering Modernism,” 544.

89 Cresswell, “The Production of Mobilities,” 11–25.

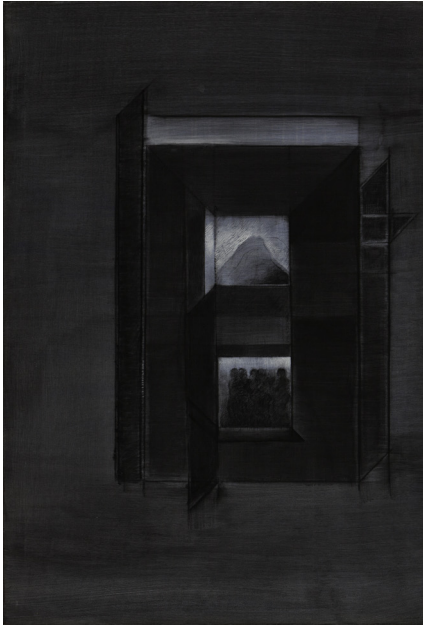


Fig. 14. *Zahoor ul Akhlaq, Untitled, 1991. Acrylic on canvas, 91.44 x 134.62 cm. Courtesy of the artist's estate. Photo: Richard Seck.*

However, the rectangular frame has now been modified to two central squares that appear like windows. The window character is particularly clear in Fig. 14, where the window doors have been visibly left open to reveal what is inside. The geometric areas that surround the window squares in Fig. 14 are reminiscent of the unfolded way in which architecture and space are constructed in Persian miniature paintings and in miniature paintings from the early Mughal period. Mohammad Jami, who reviewed the exhibition, pointed to the “window variations”⁹⁰ in these works, and Minissale, who also wrote about the exhibition, saw the quality of the windows, which reveal miniature-like details up close and larger formations with light from a distance.⁹¹ Akhlaq played with the flat, two-dimensional character of the picture surface and contrasted this with a suggested view into the window. In the upper window in Fig. 14, there is a triangular shape almost entirely illuminated, and in the lower window, a group of figures, lit from behind. Due to the uniform color accentuation of the surface, the light spreads over the entire canvas. The transverse bright stripe at the top of the rectangular structure flattens the supposed point of incidence of the

90 Mohammad Jami, “Zahoor-ul-Akhlaq Show: Window Variations,” *The Star*, April 25, 1991, 4.

91 Gregory Minissale, “Keeping an Open Mind,” newspaper article, date and name not indicated, estate of Zahoor ul Akhlaq.

light, reinforcing the two-dimensional character of the image. In Fig. 13, the geometric structures are clearly tied to the flatness of the board, which is reinforced through the balanced distribution of light and dark color. The balance also results from the mirrored reproduction of the triangle in the center. In an interview about his exhibition, Akhlaq spoke not only of the recurring symbol of light in Western philosophy, but also about the First Book of Moses, Genesis, in which light is associated with the positive.⁹² Light plays a fundamental role, not only in Christianity but also in Islam. Titus Burckhardt discussed cosmological symbols as foundational of Islamic art by referring to the divine light, curtains, and screens,⁹³ which can be connected with windows and optics. Analyzing the structural quality of the grid in modernist art and looking for “incipient versions of the grids,” Krauss sees it in nineteenth-century “symbolist art in the form of windows,” where it “is turned in an explicitly modernist direction.”⁹⁴ On a formal level and in connection with Krauss’s reading, Akhlaq’s windows form the grid that is temporarily absent. The two-dimensionality, as well as the shapes that emerged in the central squares (Fig. 13, Fig. 14), are the compositional link for the works that follow. However, these formal architectonics are also a link to his earlier work. In that sense, the artist’s style, informed as it is within the context of mobility, transculturally mediates formal principles of Western modernism and the visual cultures of Asian, South Asian, and Islamic traditions.

For Akhlaq, the transatlantic flight and the engagement with ideas discussed at Yale in the context of religion and art consolidated his artistic position of interactive cross-cultural borrowing. Moreover, this led to what Kobena Mercer called a “migrant perspective” capable of connecting “two or more disparate cultural and geographical spaces.”⁹⁵

Locating the expanded field of modernism

If mobility is one of the basic conditions of artistic modernism,⁹⁶ then its significance can best be analyzed in the way it shaped Akhlaq’s work in the last decade of his life as a kind of precondition for his artistic work. His increased mobility during these years affected the format of his works.

92 See Minissale, “Black is the Beginning,” 152.

93 See Titus Burckhardt, “Grundlagen der Islamischen Kunst,” in *Vom Wesen Heiliger Kunst in den Weltreligionen* (Zurich: Orio, 1955), 143–171; 158.

94 Krauss, “Grids,” 16.

95 Kobena Mercer, “Introduction,” in *Cosmopolitan Modernisms*, ed. Kobena Mercer (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 6–23; 21.

96 Kobena Mercer, ed., *Cosmopolitan Modernisms* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

Shortly after his Karachi exhibition *Luminous Evidence*, in 1992 he accepted an invitation as a visiting professor to Bilkent University in Ankara, where he remained until 1993. In the period that followed, from 1993 to 1997, he spent most of his time in Canada, with some trips to Pakistan.

Akhlaq moved to Ankara together with his family. Nurjahan Akhlaq remembers that they traveled extensively while living in Ankara. Her father, she recalls, was particularly interested in the landscape, the mountain formations, and Konya, where they saw the dancing dervishes, which left a lasting impression on the artist.⁹⁷ Another site of exposure was the Archaeological Museum in Ankara—the Museum of Anatolian Civilizations—that keeps an important collection of artifacts from the Hittite and the Phrygian periods, exemplified by a statue of the mother goddess Kybele from approximately 6000 BCE. Sketches that survive at the artist's estate in Lahore show how he studied forms seen while in Turkey, thus comprising an iconography that filtered into his work (Fig. 15).



Fig. 15. Zahoor ul Akhlaq, Untitled, pencil on paper, dimensions not available. Courtesy of the artist's estate.

97 From a personal WhatsApp conversation with Nurjahan Akhlaq, April 14, 2021. Dervishes are holy men in Islam and are members of a Sufi brotherhood. Ritual recitation is expressed through physical efforts such as twirling and dancing.

The white parts in the sketch look like figures inspired by dancing dervishes or by ancient figures, as encountered at the museum in Ankara. The green part, which points upwards, can be associated with triangles from his window works (Fig. 13), but now the dividing line is vertical. And so, above and below becomes left and right. The green rectangular block at the bottom of the sheet stabilizes the study. In the following step, we witness how the drawing becomes part of a larger composition. In a painting from 1993, acquired from Akhlaq by Bilkent University, we see the new forms comfortably amalgamating with existing ones (Fig. 16).



Fig. 16. Zahoor ul Akhlaq, Untitled, 1993. Acrylic on canvas, 160 x 110 cm. Photo: Aydin Ramazanoglu

The square-shaped windows from two years earlier are reused here, painted in acrylic on a dark grey canvas. What framed the earlier works is now clearly delineated from the central squares, which flattens the composition. The two corners at the bottom are triangular and at the top of the image, we see a trapezoidal area. While this suggests a kind of pictorial depth, it is immediately countered by the strictly two-dimensional forms in the squares below it. Here we see shapes, as developed in the sketch (Fig. 15), transferred

directly to the canvas and distributed over the geometric surfaces. Detached from the structure of the study and painted in tones from brown to dark gray with a touch of light in one place, these look like mountain formations. The figurative forms in the lower part are rendered in a mixture of red and brown on an orange background with turquoise-colored spots, and complement the upper composition by their division into two parts. Here, space, figure, and form are bound to the surface in their geometrical representability, balanced through a conceptual treatment of landscape. This work has been hanging in the dean's office at Bilkent University since 1993. It is part of an extensive collection of international art assembled by the founder of the university, İhsan Doğramacı (1915–2010).

Bülent Özgüç, who was dean when Akhlaq was at Bilkent University, told me in a series of personal conversations that he remembers the Akhlaq family well. He referred to Akhlaq as a kind person to whom he offered a longer stay at the university. Unfortunately, Özgüç said, Akhlaq had to leave.⁹⁸ Because of Bilkent's global educational orientation, Özgüç remembers that Akhlaq's stay overlapped with the artists Mürşide İçmeli's (1930–2014) and Jerzy Z Zabłocki's (1927–1993). He also referred to Erol Akyavaş (1932–1999), who joined as a visiting professor.⁹⁹ The concerns of these artists were similar to those of Akhlaq, and their careers followed a similar transnational and transcultural path. It was therefore the similar itinerant experiences and the "migrant perspective" of the artists Akhlaq, İçmeli, and Akyavaş, rather than the Muslim background that connected them.¹⁰⁰

Their works were characterized by an engagement with modernism and formal investigations of different traditions. In Ankara, they were part of a community of artists and educators whose collective experience with mobility led to their understanding of art as global and therefore connected.¹⁰¹ This resonated with the inclusive pedagogical approach that Bilkent University practiced as a *leitmotif*, which can best be described as transcultural in that it fostered an environment where culture was not understood as exclusive, and origin and attribution were not institutionally and discursively demarcated. Akhlaq's Ankara experience can be said to have reinforced a critical understanding of artistic modernism as encountered through mobility and linked to questions about historical perspectives, folk culture, and Muslim

98 From a personal WhatsApp conversation with Bülent Özgüç, December 10, 2021.

99 From a personal WhatsApp conversation with Bülent Özgüç, December 10, 2021.

100 Mercer, "Introduction," 21.

101 In several personal conversations with Bülent Özgüç, he told me that Bilkent University was founded on the principle that education should be inclusive and global, represented by an international faculty and by international students. From personal WhatsApp conversations with Bülent Özgüç, December 10 and 11, 2021.

cultures, but also about the artistic heterogeneity which Suleri has already insightfully introduced into the discourse on Akhlaq's works. The different spaces and places that he engaged and connected with are thus the foundation of his transculturally informed visual language, for which he developed the syncretic connection between the spatial principle of a Mughal miniature painting and that of modernist painting. The fact that his pictorial concept found resonance in other cultural spaces fundamentally suggests that Akhlaq's visual achievements are to be located within an expanded field of modernist practices, which includes the critical engagement with the nation through "practice[s] of affiliation" that emerge from connections.¹⁰²

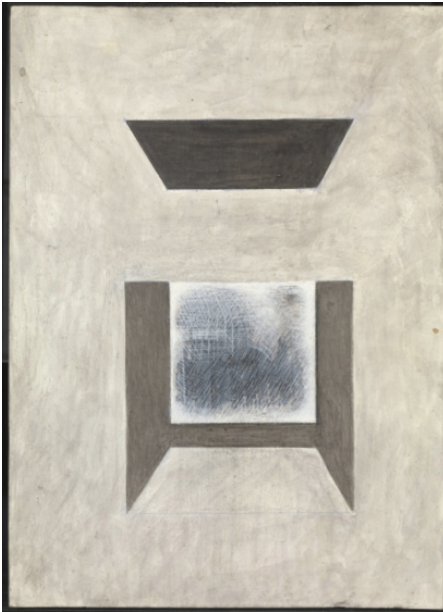


Fig. 17. Zahoor ul Akhlaq, *Untitled*, 1993/97. *Acrylic on wood*, 318 x 226 mm. © Estate of Zahoor ul Akhlaq. Photo: Tate.

Ankara was one of a series of interconnected places through which Akhlaq moved as a postcolonial artist. This period of intensified mobility—after Ankara, Akhlaq moved with his family to Toronto, Canada and until 1997 worked between places and improvised studios in Toronto, Montreal, Karachi, and Lahore—led the artist to develop a series of small-scale works. Some of these were executed on a board based on the format of the *takhti*, a wooden slate still used in rural schools in Pakistan for children to write on. These works remain true to the original function of the slate as a medium for exercise and training, and feature

102 Khullar, *Worldly Affiliations*.

shapes and forms from Akhlaq's broader visual vocabulary, collected *en route*.¹⁰³ These *takhtis* (Fig. 17) show some of his key artistic concepts, particularly the form of the frame as he applied it in his works for the exhibition *Luminous Evidence* (Fig. 13, Fig. 14) in Karachi, and in works he produced while in Ankara (Fig. 16). The much smaller format, however, takes us back to the point where he began his painterly exploration of space as an abstract system, as well as to the miniature in terms of format and as a source for cultural and formal inquiries. By transferring his key concepts to different scales and media—from the printing plate (Fig. 7) to mixed media (Fig. 8), to canvas, board, and wood—he responded creatively and actively to the different kinds of mobility and the circumstances that this entailed. On both a formal and an intellectual level, he succeeded in establishing a modernist artistic language primarily based on his relationship with the tradition of South Asian Mughal miniature painting. Through his analytical exploration, he created a formal premise for his works that strategically placed the frame, and later the grid, at the center of his aesthetic explorations. In the work *Untitled (Butoh Series)* (Fig. 1), we see these two formal concepts applied to canvas. The overall structure follows the layout of a manuscript page, with the inner and outer spaces clearly demarcated. The grid squares are filled with rough brushstrokes, which gives the canvas a certain division. The masked figure of the dancer remains in a directionless position. By highlighting certain parts of the dancer's body, the artist recalls the equestrian figures of the Shah Jahan triptych (Fig. 9). Not unlike this earlier work, the static figure (Fig. 1) is arrested in geometric space, partially connected to the grid, but mostly set off from it. The different light accents on the figure are just as reminiscent of his earlier work, but also recall his window series (Fig. 14), where he applied lighting and color effects to create inner and outer spatial tensions. The finely drafted figure in Fig. 1, which occupies an important position in space, can be traced back to his own work, where, from early on, it expressed spatial, personal, cultural, and political tensions. Here, I am thinking of the pregnant woman and of his concern for the devastating possibility of a nuclear holocaust (Fig. 2). However, the figure can also be traced back to his experience of studying the dancing dervishes in Konya (Fig. 15 and Fig. 16), or, more recently, dance performances by his daughter Jahanara Akhlaq and the abstract movement of Butoh dancers as experienced in a performance in Toronto.

By way of conclusion, I would like to return to Fig. 1 to summarize those “transformatory processes”¹⁰⁴ that Akhlaq negotiated through the experiences

103 A series of five small paintings on *takhti* by Akhlaq are in the Tate collection. See Nada Raza, “Summary,” accessed December 17, 2021, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/akhlaq-untitled-t14309>.

104 Monica Juneja, “Global Art History and the ‘Burden of Representation,’” in *Global Studies: Mapping Contemporary Art and Culture*, ed. Hans Belting, Jacob Birken, Andrea Buddensieg, and Peter Weibel (Osterfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2011), 274–297; 281.

of different kinds of mobility that defined his lifelong journey. There is the modernist brushstroke he learned from Ali in Lahore, the formal rudiments that he studied in London but that tie back to Lahore and South Asia, the grid as an implicitly Western but also universal form, and the figure that emerged in the context of family and dance performances in Anatolia and Canada. Together with the flexibility of the frame and the grid, these are the components that allow us to situate his aesthetic and practice within an expanded field of modernism. Mobility significantly affected the way they unfolded. Akhlaq's case demonstrates that mobility is the "enabling condition" of culture and moves the transcultural nature of mobility to the fore.¹⁰⁵

105 Stephen Greenblatt, "A Mobility Studies Manifesto," in *Cultural Mobility*, 250–253; 252.