

Sign-painting and Font-Making in a Digital Era: The Story of Painter Kafeel

Keywords: Sign Painting, Functional Art, Urdu, Fonts, 3D, Painting, Digitization

Based in the narrow streets that surround Jama Masjid in old Delhi's Chandni Chowk, Kafeel explains to me that he works out of relatively a small workspace. "There's not a lot to see here, but you can come by in the afternoon."

I have wanted to buy an artwork from him ever since I discovered his work, but I do not know if he has retired. "It will be a distance for me to commute to, as I am based on the peripheries of the national capital region. Its also so cold these days," I tell him. So we decide to communicate over the phone – a way for me to both commission a work and conduct a brief interview with him.

A visit to see examples of his sign-painted works is impossible, as they are usually done on site, or will leave his space as soon as they are created. Many examples appear to exist indefinitely online, and his font-design work is among the highlights of a digitization project called Hand-painted Type.

"Usually," he explains, "my works are made and then immediately sent to the buyers—who are increasingly from abroad; that is more lucrative to make a livelihood."

Kafeel doesn't come from an artist family or a creative background, which is unusual in a culture where ancestral work can typically dictate what one's occupation will be. His father was a devout Muslim who later became a businessman and ran a general store.¹ His works appear to be influenced by this exposure; they are reminiscent of the kinds of calligraphy that adorn Islamic shrines and *masjids* across the Indian subcontinent. His calligraphic artworks are an amalgamate that appear to be inspired by a street art aesthetic form unique to the Indian subcontinent:

decorative hand-painted billboards, signs as well as the truck art, which includes motifs, symbols and stylized text. They are so fantastic stylized and ultra-beautiful in ways that only hand-written and handmade things can be: imperfect, but expressive.

It would seem that this artist's work has been elevated by tech-savvy people who have helped to construct demand that transforms his job from being a simple sign-painter to a colorful, decorative font-making artist whose functional works beautify the public realm. "I now tend to sell my work to foreigners; they commission and pay me in dollars. It is a livelihood for me, and my fonts get the most interest. To make it a living, I am willing to try and make different forms of art, but I usually stick to writing words in English, Urdu and Hindi." Knowledge of three varied scripts is no joke—it indicates a deep connection to the culture of the place in which he lives.

The Challenge of Technology to Handmade Art and Aesthetics

Kafeel represents an increasingly rare aesthetic form in the era of digitization: that of the handmade font. Across Indian cities and villages, formerly ubiquitous hand-painted signs and billboards are becoming rare, almost relics because of mass-printing possibilities at an exceedingly low-cost. Once upon a time, however, they were an advertising norm: Coca-Cola and Pepsi logos which were painted across any and all publically visible surfaces; phone numbers were written to function like latent marketing of crafted goods; and larger-than-life ads that announced upcoming Bollywood films, announced by artists who painstakingly replicated posters on to extra large hoardings.

1 - Nisha K. Sethi, "Painter Kafeel: Keeping it Hand-Painted in India," *BLAG*, October 27, 2022, URL < <https://bl.ag/painter-kafeel-keeping-it-hand-painted-in-india> >

Signboard and billboard painting comprise a unique street art tradition in the subcontinent, similar to truck art – and works by these artists resist the standard digitization of awnings and boards seen in markets across the city (and country). Handmade or calligraphic font designs are incorporated into these works of a beautiful and functional craft tradition in a historic part of the city, an area representative of the spatialised economic production of Delhi. All of this is changing as a result of time, technology and capitalism—logos are increasingly the everyday imagery of our lives.

Decorative and functional hand-painted signs and billboards in India are becoming increasingly standardized, homogenous, neon and sterile feeling—replaced by digital boards, or boring, easily replicable printouts. “I can paint text. I can paint flowers,” he continues, “I can paint slogans against the evil eye—protection from *nazar*. Whatever you ask me to. But, I have mostly painted signs on plywood.”

It is sad that Indians tend to have little value for the everyday handiworks that exist in our own backyard. This is, however, seemingly a reality of the digital age and form of development that we so hurriedly seek to embrace. In the meantime, the beautiful and stylized hand-painted font tradition is giving way to a form of Microsoft word aesthetics. There are now entire markets in Delhi whose storefronts are adorned not by beautiful hand-painted signs, but by sterile and seemingly identical light-boxes that are void of the vibrancy and human errors of the handmade. This transformation reflects both an economy and an aesthetic in transition.

According to an interview from several years ago, Kafeel had “an existential crisis when vinyl (flex) signs came onto market. This new technology threatened the future of all ‘analog’ sign painters, and Kafeel felt it inevitable that he too would have to put down his brushes to avoid

becoming obsolete.”² In a time where artificial intelligence and ChatGPT appear to be replacing many functions by people, this concern is all too relatable. But the persistence of this art form is perhaps therefore a tribute to the craft of making things and decorating by hand.

On Hand-made Art, Aesthetics and Cultural Identity

Kafeel's style is rooted in his identity. He was born in the city of Azamgarh, Uttar Pradesh, where Urdu is historically widespread. He moved to Delhi in the 1980s and while searching for a job decided to become a sign-painter. His distinct, boldly colored, 3D lettering has relegated the practice of sign-painting as an art form, which in itself seems to be an act of preservation.

Kafeel learned by observing another sign painter named Raza, who approached him for an apprenticeship after seeing his interest.³ Raza also noticed his handwriting and since he was keen to learn the art of signboard writing, decided to teach Kafeel how to paint calligraphy with a brush: “(Raza) gave me two bottles of black and white paint with two brushes and taught me how to create paint layers.”⁴ He then started to paint local signboards after a series of apprenticeships, which taught him new decorative techniques.

Through his work, he represents the often-resisted identity of South Asia: the complex *mélange* of culturally-constructed identities rooted in a diversity of religion, language and art forms that are celebrated through craft and handmade aesthetics. Hand-lettering is very important for Urdu fonts and typefaces, which cannot be easily digitally standardized without causing a lot of confusion. This form of calligraphy is traditionally at its best when hand-painted.

Kafeel's hand-painted and stylized calligraphy may be partially-situated in a form of Islamic decorative art as well

2 - Nisha K. Sethi, “Painter Kafeel: Keeping it Hand-Painted in India,” *BLAG*, October 27, 2022, URL < <https://bl.ag/painter-kafeel-keeping-it-hand-painted-in-india> >

3 - “Portrait of an Artist,” <https://thepatriot.in/culture/portrait-of-an-artist-41532>

4 - “Portrait of an Artist,” <https://thepatriot.in/culture/portrait-of-an-artist-41532>

as a historic form of outreach, unique to the subcontinent but widely used in marketing and advertising. He started out by decorating metal containers in street-side *paan*-shops, making labels for street vendors' in both Urdu and in Hindi. In this way, his work is a reflection of a plural Indian identity, with many aesthetic influences in dialogue: that of the urban environment, the past, and personal identity.

When he moved to Delhi, following his marriage and the death of his father, he was desperate for meaningful work: "I loved the letters in Hindi and English, but was quite disappointed by how they wrote in Urdu," he has said.⁵ This is interesting given that due to the digitization of most official street signage, formerly Urdu names are now seemingly and rather confusingly in the *naksh* script, which is used for Arabic; a slight but important variant from Urdu. In terms of contemporary research, the *nastaliq* script for Urdu is particularly challenging to digitize, which is why many news papers in Urdu-speaking cities have been hand-carved and then block-printed.⁶ This tedious and laborious project, which has yet to be properly transformed due to technology.⁷ A niche space which Kafeel fits perfectly.

When he started out as a street sign painter, nobody would employ him because he had no prior experience. Undeterred, he bought himself a cycle, some brushes and paint. "I decorated (the bicycle) with tassels, and cut and mounted two plates on which I wrote 'Painter... Artist... Hindi... Urdu... English...'" I started making rounds of the city. People used to laugh at me and wonder what I was up to. But then, some of them became my clients, asking me to paint their shop's boards. Every day, I used to find a new customer."⁸ Through this increasingly rare and unique

form of outreach, he was able to self-advertise with the language of hand-made advertising—appealing for work by showcasing his skill and the potential of aesthetically pleasing artistic marketing.

"There has been no looking back since."⁹ After creating a few examples, people lauded his work and soon, he was able to earning a living by painting. "I generally use enamel paints, because watercolors look dull and weak, so they can only be used in the background." This materiality is also reflective of the context in which Kafeel works: one in which art making is a workplace hazard, toxic art materials are for who make as a work mens of survival. Countries of the global south have never had disposable incomes or access to the same materials as in the West, and yet surprisingly, while health risks rooted in access are overlooked comparisons are still made.

The colors that Kafeel chooses to use are vibrant, inspired by the other street art forms visible and familiar to him like truck art — and convey a dimensional sense of the calligraphic lettering such that they appear to jump out at you from their surface. I half-jokingly ask if I could become his apprentice in an attempt to preserve this dying form of hand-painted type, which although exists with digitization suffers the loss of being out in the open, on the streets and visible to the appreciation of all. Learning would be an act of preservation. The commodification of aesthetic and labor due to technological advancements is difficult to ignore in a country where people and their work are taken for granted due to labor surplus resulting in intense competition that is often a disservice to quality.

5 - Nisha K. Sethi, "Painter Kafeel: Keeping it Hand-Painted in India," BLAG, October 27, 2022, URL < <https://bl.ag/painter-kafeel-keeping-it-hand-painted-in-india> >

6 - A point brought up during an urdu language class I attempted, taught by Sukaina Hussain, held at Zabaan in New Delhi, 2018. During the class she emphasized how the urdu script differs greatly from that of Arabic.

7 - Abeera Kamran, "Nasta'liq typography on the web, one glitch at a time," Granshan Conference 2022, available online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jSwOzfNtYrM>

8 - Nisha K. Sethi, "Painter Kafeel: Keeping it Hand-Painted in India," BLAG, October 27, 2022, URL < <https://bl.ag/painter-kafeel-keeping-it-hand-painted-in-india> >

9 - "Portrait of an Artist," The Patriot, available online: <https://thepatriot.in/culture/portrait-of-an-artist-41532>

Hand-painted Calligraphy and the Preservation of Scripts

Speaking to Kafeel feels like speaking to someone from the past. His font-based works span nastaliq, latin and devanagari scripts which are stylized in the same manner of the decorative art seen on the trucks across India and Pakistan. He still uses a paint-brush as it is requisite to the kind of work he does, and works primarily with enamel paints, which are thinned using solvents like turpentine. And unlike most artists these days, he did not enter his field as a hobby through the privileges of time, status or money: "I start out each work using a pencil, sketching out what I wish to create. Then, I fill it in with the paint I have available!"

This discussion of using solvent based paints brings up many worries of toxicity in the arts and how a lack of awareness of such exposure can often compound and compromise individual health. But this is India, where daily risk is a part of surviving everyday urban life. Public health education about work and environment related-risks remains an area that would benefit significantly from practicing artists like Kafeel—creating an education loop rooted in care. I just can't imagine where to begin when one's livelihood and source of income is so exceedingly beautiful and yet toxic. While talking to him about the work he is making me—a welcome sign—he offers to write in Hindi and in English. I request that he also write in Urdu, and to stick to his existing style rather than asking me to direct or design figures and forms for him. The freedom to choose what you express or design is significant — it occurs to me that in India, arts are an everyday practice and less an opportunity of expression and imagination particularly when related to livelihood. This is perhaps a limitation, but an important aspect of the distinction.

From the Mughal-era to present day, the Urdu language has played a central role in shaping the cultural, literary, and societal fabric of India. It was once considered a literary language, used by India's elite — offering a range of possible and deeply emotional expressions through

stories, *ghazals* and *nazms*. Its inclusion on official signboards is testament to its historic roots around Delhi, in spite of also being the official language of Pakistan. Sign-painting shifts from advertising and labeling to a decorative aesthetic that's easily reproducible. Unlike the digital and downloadable fonts that are common in our increasingly technology-mediated experience of life, people like Kafeel are practicing a dying and undervalued craft of hand-painting calligraphy and embellishing signs.

For people like Kafeel, his unique form of street art is not a hobby or an extra curricular activity. It is a livelihood endeavor and a daily practice of aesthetics rooted in the complexities of calligraphy. "He is aware of his unique artistic style...(and) often spends his time browsing artwork of other signboard artists around the world."¹⁰

With regards to the challenges posed by technology and standardized digital aesthetic, Kafeel has expressed: "The future was uncertain but I was determined to fight. As the world leapt towards computers, I could see people leaving sign painting behind due to their uncertainty about the future. But, I thought to myself, I shouldn't be pessimistic; I need to challenge this. My teacher taught me that one shouldn't be frightened of adversity."¹¹

The works he makes are both functional and aesthetically beautiful, celebrating a form of plurality that the city will always retain. A part of me wishes as an act of preservation, the city hired him to repaint all the digital vinyl signs in multiple languages. It would be an act of social justice in so many ways.

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for commissions at: kafeelart.in@gmail.com*

10- <https://thepatriot.in/culture/portrait-of-an-artist-41532>

11- Nisha K. Sethi, "Painter Kafeel: Keeping it Hand-Painted in India," *BLAG*, October 27, 2022, URL < <https://bl.ag/painter-kafeel-keeping-it-hand-painted-in-india> >



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