

Report on American Institute of Pakistan Studies Grant

Project title: "The Art of Muharram in South Asia"

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Grant Period: September 1-December 1, 2007

Sites of research: London and Oxford, UK

Purpose: to locate images (paintings and photographs) of Muharram objects in UK collections, and to purchase reproductions of those images where necessary

This fellowship from the American Institute of Pakistan Studies permitted me to conduct archival investigations at various libraries and museums in the UK. The research I was able to carry out has been a valuable adjunct to my continuing ethnographic work on Muharram art in Pakistan, Bangladesh and India (which began in 2003).

As an art historian, I am particularly interested in the reasons for making objects like *ta`ziyahs* (usually referred to as "model tombs"). The structures serve as multivalent foci of devotion, at times seeming to replace the human image, generally discouraged in Islam. By examining paintings and photographs of *ta`ziyahs* and other processional objects from earlier times, I hope to arrive at a better understanding of the various meanings with which their makers, patrons and the general public have invested them. For example, it was formerly common to construct images of the *buraq* to carry the tomb in procession. What meanings are intended and conveyed when the model tomb as stand-in for a martyr is carried upon a figure symbolizing transcendence? And when that *buraq* is depicted as a beautiful female, what additional significance is added by the craftsman or understood by onlookers? These are the sorts of queries to which I am trying to tease out the answers from the historical evidence (both visual and written).

The Muharram ritual, with its impressive array of visual props and its processional complexity, has been widely adopted by South Asian Sunni Muslims. This pervasive appropriation of its customs by a rival sect may not always strike Shi`as as a friendly gesture. When the co-opting group also imbues the sacred object with variant mythological or soteriological import, conflict can result. The contested space and time of Muharram form a part of its meaning, and render even more precious and vulnerable the physical objects of veneration used in its ceremonies. The South Asian *ta`ziah* is burdened with concepts like fair play and injustice, mortality and transcendence, and beauty and brutality. However, its aniconic form tends to evade narrow or obvious denotation. I aim to understand and elucidate some of the aesthetic puzzles posed by these devotional objects.

While in the UK this summer, I consulted records in the following institutions:

The British Library

The British Museum

Victoria and Albert Museum

Horniman Museum

Wellcome Institute/Library

Ashmolean Museum

SOAS Library/Rare Books Room

I discovered a group of important 18th and 19th-century paintings of Muharram, as well as a few old photographs. The photographs are particularly valuable as historical records. I have ordered reproductions of some of these paintings and photographs from the institutions where they are held.

I would like to thank the trustees of the AIPS for affording me the opportunity to consult the British visual records. The images I have located are an invaluable asset for constructing an historical framework for Muharram art in South Asia. I plan to complete my research on this topic and to bring it to publication in a timely fashion.