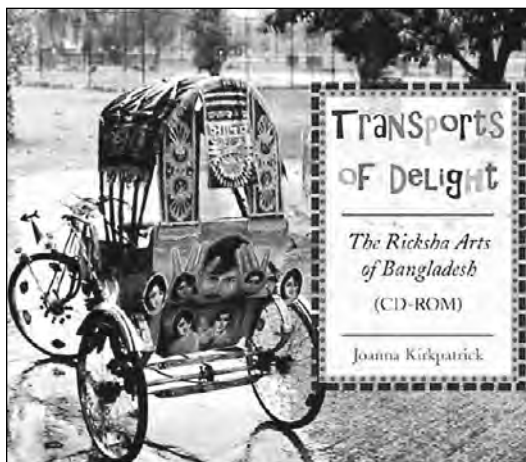


Transports of Delight The Ricksha Arts of Bangladesh

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A ricksha, often called a cycle ricksha, is a three-wheeled, pedal-powered vehicle widely used to transport people and goods from place to place in many countries of monsoon Asia. It is the most popular and common transport vehicle in Bangladesh—both in urban and rural areas. Rickshas have collapsible, colorfully decorated plastic ‘baby-buggy’ hoods that provide relief to passengers from sun and rain as they ride behind the driver. Rickshas typically carry two passengers but may carry up to three or four. Everywhere on the rickshas one can see elaborate paintings, which is the topic of this CD-ROM, *Transports of Delight: the Ricksha Arts of Bangladesh*. The author was attracted to this form of folk art more than twenty years ago and since then has been cataloging the styles and motifs of ricksha art in Bangladesh.

In this CD-ROM, the author included more than 1,000 brilliantly colored photographs with video clips of urban streets and country roads, music, natural sound, and text to document this distinctive folk art. Also included are interviews and ethnographic descriptions of everyday life and livelihood of ricksha artists. Four sections are presented on the main menu: Ricksha Arts: A General Introduction; Ricksha Art Images: Thematic Discussions and Galleries; Streets and Views: Video from the Streets and Outskirts of Dhaka; and Readings: Articles, Selected Bibliography, and Glossary. A map, credits, and acknowledgments are included.

The first section provides an excellent introduction to ricksha art and the ricksha as a vehicle of transport in Bangladesh. It begins with a picture of a movie banner artist finishing his masterpiece—the lush, enticing, gigantic face of a beautiful female film star. Shadowed in blue, the wide huge eyes of this heroine penetrate the hearts of many men in the streets. In the background plays a modern Bengali song sung by Dhaka pop singer Suvro Dev: “How beautiful, how beautiful are your two eyes. . . . Just as the ocean is blue, bearing the hunger of a thirsty heart, indifferent as the sky. . . .” Although the song is relevant to the subject matter of the painting, since ricksha art is for the “ordinary people,” a folk song that cele-

brates womens’ eyes would be more appropriate. It perhaps would have been more appropriate to see a ricksha artist painting his vehicle rather than a movie banner artist.

The order of the materials presented in this section might also best be reversed; the author could introduce the ricksha followed by ricksha art. The author may have wanted at the outset to communicate to her readers/viewers that Bangladesh is a male-dominated country. Rickshas belong to the venue of the streets, and streets in Bangladesh are mostly the domain of males. The author, introducing her CD-ROM with the image of a beautiful woman’s face, says that “both the eyes of the male world looking at or for her, gazing at her representations in ricksha and other popular arts,” and her pictured eyes “seem to look back at her admirers with the promise of fulfillment.” The second section is the core of this CD-ROM and contains many thematic categories. Each thematic category has two subsections: Discussions and Galleries. The Discussions subsection provides an overview of each theme with a selection of sample images, but the majority of images are to be found in the Galleries subsection. The Discussions subsection highlights important features of each theme. Images are displayed as small thumbnails with title, date, and location near the top of the screen. It is also possible to compare and view multiple images side by side.

In addition to geometric motifs, the colorful ricksha paintings incorporate imagery such as animals, birds, flowers, airplanes, ships and boats along with popular movie stars, especially actresses of Bengali and Hindi movies. Religious beliefs of the majority population of Bangladesh are often reflected in ricksha paintings. Favorite religious images include a mosque with its ablution pool, the image of the holy Ka’bah with a little boy praying before a Quran stand, or a blessing written in Arabic. Other themes include depictions of historical buildings such as the Taj Mahal, village scenes with thatched huts near a river, city scenes with criss-crossing aerial roadways, or huge animals in combat, such as an elephant and a tiger wrapped in a lethal embrace. These renderings are generally placed on aluminum sheeting on the back of the ricksha. Ricksha artists usually paint images requested by the owner, but are occasionally allowed to represent their own ideas.

All available space of the vehicle is colorfully decorated; even the ribs of the hood or the shiny, tin-covered footboard are no exception. The ribs are generally covered with a sheet of fitted plastic applied with cutouts of colored, gold, or silver plastic medallions, some of which contain at the center a beautiful peacock, a rose, or a burning candle. Golden butterflies or stars and crescents may surround each medallion. A crown (*mukut*) is often placed at the top of the ricksha hood.

Ricksha art flows with the times, and what one sees on many rickshas often reflects past or current political passions or conflicts. Immediately following Bangladesh independence, many rickshas portrayed battle scenes or freedom fighters in action. Others simply showed scenes of air or sea combat, or the new Bangladeshi flag. With a rise in Islamic fundamentalism in the country, religious themes are becoming more popular than secular themes. In the mid-1990s, roughly one-fourth of the rickshas were decorated with Islamic themes (see Kirkpatrick, 1994). Now, the proportion is probably close to one-half. However, three classic images remain perennially interesting to both ricksha painters and owners: jungle

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combat, peaceful farm animals, and birds—especially the peacock.

Ricksha art also has a spatial dimension. The author identified three regional styles and two sub-styles, all named after major cities in Bangladesh. Among the three regional design styles, the Dhaka style has emerged as the dominant design mode in the country. Ricksha art of Dhaka tends to feature a broader variety of thematic and aesthetic effects than what is found in the other two major cities, Chittagong and Rajshahi. The Dhaka style is the most elaborate and expensive and generally finer in overall appearance.

Most ricksha arts are realistic and are not generally appreciated by the elite class who often consider the art vulgar and/or lacking true worth. But ricksha art is truly popular in the broadest sense of the term. Ricksha drivers, passengers, and bystanders alike find their dreams of love, wealth, power, sex, their delight in animals, their nostalgia for the village scenes, or their love of religion all expressed in this colorful art form. It offers a window on Bangladeshi culture and contributes to our understanding of the wealth of Bangladeshi folk art.

The third section of the CD-ROM contains video imagery from the streets and outskirts of Dhaka. This medium offers visual and sound content in such a way that viewers can more richly experience the ricksha scene in a street environment via natural sounds and dubbed songs. The author deviates in this section from the core theme of the CD-ROM by emphasizing the streets and roads rather than ricksha art. Additionally, it appears that the video was not taken properly and lacks a variety of angles.

The last section contains five articles, a bibliography, and a glossary. One of the five articles is not written by the author and the

last one is a Bengali translation of one of the author's articles on ricksha art. It is surprising that the author did not provide justification for the inclusion of an article written by others. Although valuable and relevant material is provided in this section, a majority of it could be accommodated in section two. By total number of pages, section two is the longest section and most diversified.

Transports of Delight is easy to use. All directions are clearly written. Most navigation is performed via point-and-click, and most operations are straightforward. For optimal viewing, a computer running Windows with the following minimum specifications is required: Intel Pentium II or higher; quad-speed CD-ROM drive (6x for video segments); Windows 98 or higher; 800 X 600 screen resolution; 16-bit color display; 32 MB RAM; Apple Quick Time 4.0 or higher; Internet Explorer 5.0 or higher; AC 97 Sound Card. One may be able to view the videos without the required specifications, but may encounter reduced frame-rates or other problems.

Although this CD-ROM is about ricksha art and decoration, the history of ricksha as a transport vehicle and Bangladeshi ricksha painters is well-covered. Using a comparative approach, the author has also provided an excellent overview of folk art used in other forms of transport vehicles such as buses, trucks, and baby taxis in different countries of the world.

This is a noble and timely effort on the part of the author to catalogue ricksha art in Bangladesh. There is a constant threat of banning ricksha from the streets entirely, because they cause traffic jams and slow motor traffic, which has been growing at an exponential rate since the late 1990s. This threat is intense in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, with a population of over twelve million, home to almost one million ricksha pullers. City authorities are increasingly advocating phasing out rickshas from the major roads of Dhaka and have a plan to reduce the existing number of rickshas to one-third. Above all, ricksha artists are facing competition from the increasing use of commercially-produced photoprints as ricksha decoration. Many suspect ricksha may disappear just like the ancient palanquin (*palki* in Bengali), the historical precedent for the art-decorated ricksha. Even immediately prior to independence, *palkis* were used to transport elite women in rural Bangladesh.

Given the circumstances just described, this CD-ROM provides a wealth of information and is an excellent collection of beautiful and intriguing images and sounds to the people of the present as well as future generations about a vernacular art of Bangladesh. I strongly recommend this CD-ROM for Bangladeshis in all walks of life as well as others interested in South Asian folk art. ■

REFERENCE

Kirkpatrick, J. "Transports of Delight: The Ricksha Art of Bangladesh." *ARAMCO World*, 45, 1 (1994): 33-5.

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