

Visual Culture, Folk Aesthetics, and Cultural Identity in Contemporary Rickshaw Art of Dhaka

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Abstract

Dhaka's rickshaw art is one of the most distinctive urban folk art forms in Bangladesh. It transforms an ordinary vehicle into a moving work of art. This art form makes visible the culture, aesthetics, collective memory and social identity of the city's common people. This study analyses how folk beauty and cultural identity are represented in contemporary Dhaka's rickshaw art. The study uses a qualitative research methodology. Data were collected through field observation, photographic documentation and informal conversations with rickshaw artists, drivers and garage owners. A total of 485 rickshaws were documented and 324 selected photographs were reviewed through thematic analysis. The study identified eight main visual themes: movie posters, fictional birds and animals, Alpona, rural scenes, domed buildings, written texts, advertisements and blank boards. These motifs highlight the multifaceted expression of Bengali aesthetic taste, religious symbols and popular culture. The uniqueness of this study is that it evaluates the contemporary rickshaw art through a combination of extensive field data and visual analysis, which provides a new perspective to understand the changing character of urban folk art. This study makes an important contribution to the discussion on visual culture, folk aesthetics and cultural identity in Dhaka. The results of the study provide an important foundation for future research on urban folk art conservation, cultural heritage protection and related issues.

Keywords: Rickshaw Art, Visual Culture, Folk Aesthetics, Cultural Identity, Urban Folk Art, Bangladesh.

1. Background Studies

Rickshaws have been a common means of transport in various Asian countries for decades. They originated in Japan and are still used there as human-powered vehicles. Rickshaws are also found in India, Indonesia, China, and Bangladesh (Kirkpatrick, 1997). However, Bangladeshi rickshaws differ from those in these countries in one particular respect: their entire bodies

are often covered with colourful paintings and decorations. Because of this distinctive decoration, the pedal rickshaw has established itself as a distinct form of urban folk art in Bangladesh. Through brightly painted panels, ornate designs, and symbolic images, rickshaw art transforms an ordinary vehicle into a moving canvas (Lahiri-Dutt & Williams, 2010). These painted surfaces reveal various aspects of the lives and cultures of the people of Dhaka, including their religious beliefs, social values, everyday experiences, and popular cultural practices. As one of the most visible forms of indigenous artistic expression, rickshaw art reflects rural life, religious beliefs, popular culture, and collective memory.

Rickshaw art occupies a unique place in contemporary visual culture because it is not taught in academic institutions or by professional teachers; rather, ordinary people learn the art from their gurus through Gurumukhi education and become artists while working on the roadside or in rickshaw garages. Unlike conventional paintings, which are often created for exhibition or display in galleries and museums, rickshaw art is neither gallery- nor museum-centered. Instead, it is used to attract passengers to ride rickshaws and to engage the attention of people throughout the city. As a result, rickshaw art appeals to pedestrians' aesthetic senses. The paintings on rickshaw panels depict stories, values, desires, and identities that bring familiar elements of everyday life to the fore. For example, they may feature movie posters, mosque-shaped buildings representing religious beliefs, or beautiful messages written in Bengali script. Therefore, rickshaw art is seen not only as a form of decoration but also as a reflection of society and everyday life.

There have been many previous studies on rickshaw art both at home and abroad. However, foreigners were the first to take an interest in rickshaw art. Kirkpatrick's (1997) work on rickshaw art in Bangladesh has emphasized regional diversity and artistic creativity. Her research shows how artists from different parts of the country have used distinctive visual styles to depict religious images, historical monuments, popular culture, and everyday life. In line with this, Mahmud (2013) has divided the visual content of Dhaka's rickshaw art into several main categories, including movie posters, cityscapes, floral designs, written art, and decorative forms. His work has demonstrated the thematic richness of rickshaw painting and highlighted its importance as a

distinct visual language. Similarly, Kirkpatrick (1997) has shown that rickshaw painting provides valuable insights into the social and cultural imagination of ordinary people and is an important medium of popular artistic expression. Highlighting the importance of rickshaw art, Mahmud (2010) describes rickshaw art as one of the most significant examples of transportation art in the world. He identifies recurring themes such as movie stars, animals, rural landscapes, religious symbols, historical events, and urban scenes. According to him, these visual motifs function as narratives, expressing cultural values and social experiences.

Lahiri-Datta and Williams (2010) have highlighted the socio-cultural aspects of rickshaw art. According to them, this art emerged through the interaction of Bengali folk traditions, Islamic cultural influences, and the creative practices of local artists. Islam (2015) has worked on the history of this emergence. He has shown that rickshaw art has evolved historically across different political periods in Bangladesh. He has also shown how social and political transformations have influenced artistic content and visual presentation. However, Lahiri-Dutta & Williams (2010) have shown that this historical art has a stronger connection with the public and has presented itself as distinct from elite and institutional art. As a result, the values of the elite class have not taken root here; rather, the cultural essence and alternative perspectives of urban working people have emerged. Islam's (2015) research highlights that rickshaw painting has long reflected changing historical realities while maintaining a strong connection to local cultural traditions.

More recently, Zaman (2022) has studied the visual culture of rickshaws and trucks, two art forms associated with urban life in South Asia. The study has shown that the vehicle art captures the complexities, conflicts, and aspirations of urban society while simultaneously preserving elements of regional culture. In this view, rickshaw paintings constitute an important repository of everyday visual experience and social imagination.

Although existing studies have examined the history, symbolism, regional variations, and artistic characteristics of rickshaw art, relatively little attention has been paid to how contemporary rickshaw paintings engage with folk aesthetics and cultural identity in the context of modern urban life. Most

previous studies have focused on the history, artistic styles, and visual themes of rickshaw art. However, less attention has been paid to the cultural meanings of contemporary visual motifs. In particular, their role in expressing collective memory, religious identity, and local culture remains to be explored. As a result, this study attempts to understand rickshaw art as a means of everyday visual communication from the perspective of visual culture studies. It examines how cultural meanings are expressed and communicated through the images and symbols painted on rickshaws. Therefore, this study explores the cinematic depiction of the rickshaw motif, birds and animals, landscapes, rural scenes, architectural symbols, and textual inscriptions. It seeks to show how this important form of folk art reflects folk aesthetics and cultural identity.

This study explains visual culture as the everyday use of images to create and share meanings in society. Folk aesthetics refers to the traditional artistic practices and visual expressions that are found in the daily lives of ordinary people. Cultural identity is understood as the shared beliefs, values, and traditions that people express through these visual symbols. By connecting these three ideas, this study shows how contemporary rickshaw art reflects cultural memory, folk traditions, and the changing identity of urban Bangladesh.

Research Questions

RQ-1: How are folk aesthetics represented in contemporary rickshaw art in Dhaka?

RQ-2: How does contemporary rickshaw art express cultural identity through visual representation?

This study examines the visual and cultural meanings of contemporary rickshaw art. It explores how everyday artistic practices reflect and preserve cultural identity in urban Bangladesh.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

As a research methodology, this study adopted a qualitative research approach. This approach was considered appropriate because it provides an in-depth analysis of the motifs of rickshaw art. The study employed visual and thematic analysis to examine the cultural meanings, folk aesthetics, and identities represented in contemporary rickshaw art in Dhaka. These aspects cannot be adequately explained through numerical data (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

This study was conducted from the perspective of visual culture studies. It does not view rickshaw art merely as decorative imagery but rather as a form of everyday visual expression. Rickshaw art reflects cultural values, collective memories, religious beliefs, and social identities. Therefore, the study examines these visual motifs and their cultural meanings within the context of urban Bangladesh.

2.2. Study Area

The research was conducted in multiple locations across Dhaka and its surrounding areas where decorated pedal rickshaws are commonly found. Data were collected from Mirpur, Kamrangirchar, Bangshal, Lalbagh, Bakshibazar, Bangabazar, Nilkhet, Gabtali, Cantonment, Lalmatia, the Dhaka University area, Uttara, Savar, and Tongi (Cherag Ali Road). These sites were purposefully selected because they are important centers of rickshaw operation, decoration, repair, and painting. These sites provide an opportunity to explore different artistic styles and visual traditions. The sites were selected for their relevance to the research objectives and their connection to the creation and dissemination of rickshaw art.

2.3 Data Collection

Photographs of pedal rickshaws were collected as primary data in various locations in Dhaka city. In addition, an attempt was made to understand different aspects of this art through interviews with rickshaw artists, drivers, and rickshaw owners. Visual data collection is widely used in qualitative

research to examine material culture, artistic practices, and everyday visual expressions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Mobile phones were used to photograph rickshaw art. The number of mobile phone photographs taken from various locations was approximately 485. The photographs primarily focused on the design board attached to the back of the rickshaw. The photographs highlighted the painted panels on the back of the rickshaw, decorative designs, symbolic images, written text, and other visual elements relevant to the research. Field notes were also taken to record observations of the artwork's artistic style, visual characteristics, and context. After data collection, all images were carefully reviewed for clarity, relevance, and visibility. Images with poor framing, repetition, or poor visual quality were excluded. As a result, a final dataset of 324 images was selected for detailed analysis.

2.4 Data Sampling

This study employed purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling method particularly suited to qualitative research, in which rich data are required to meet research objectives (Patton, 2015). Rather than focusing on quantitative measures, the study analyzed photographs of rickshaw art featuring a variety of motifs. There are different motifs, artistic styles, and symbolic and visual variations. The selected photographs included traditional folk motifs, religious imagery, rural landscapes, decorative patterns, and textual inscriptions. This variety allowed for a deeper understanding of the cultural meanings expressed through this vernacular art form.

2.6 Data Analysis

In this study, thematic analysis of rickshaw art obtained from field data has been conducted. This method has helped clarify the recurring themes and patterns found in rickshaw art images. As a result, it has become easier to construct cultural meanings of images under the same theme.

First, all the images have been separated by repeatedly looking at them. For example, mosque- or minaret-like art was grouped into a single category; rural scenes, urban life, movie posters, myths, and Alpona were included; some

were ads for different companies, and some were blank. We did not decide on these themes in advance; they emerged from the images in the field data. Later, these themes were analyzed to understand why rickshaw art centers on them. The historical reasons behind this have been known from previous studies and are analyzed in this study. The connections between these motifs in rickshaw art and everyday social life, religious identity, cultural memory, and folk aesthetics have been highlighted. This approach allowed the study to go beyond merely describing the images and explain how they express broader cultural values and shared meanings.

Two rounds of coding were conducted during the thematic analysis. In the first round, visual motifs were identified inductively from the field data without using predetermined categories. In the second round, similar motifs were grouped into broader thematic categories based on their shared visual and cultural characteristics. This process helped improve the consistency of the thematic interpretation. To enhance analytical reliability, all visual data were reviewed repeatedly, and the coding categories were refined through iterative comparison of photographs and field notes until thematic consistency was achieved.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were maintained throughout the research. Verbal informed consent was obtained from interview participants before conducting informal conversations. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, and no personally identifiable information was disclosed. Photographs were taken only in public spaces where visual documentation was appropriate.

3. Results and Findings

By analyzing the rickshaw art of contemporary Dhaka, this research focused on how folk aesthetics is present in it. At the same time, it examines how contemporary rickshaw art highlights cultural identity. To analyze these two issues, the study used thematic analysis. Through thematic analysis, eight themes were found from the field data. Cinema Posters, Imaginary Animals

and Birds, Alpona, Scenery, Dome-Based Buildings, Ads, Written Text, and Blank Boards. Here is an analysis of these pictures.

3.1 Cinema Poster

The most striking motif seen in rickshaw art is the cinema poster. Over the past few decades, these posters have become somewhat associated with the rickshaw's identity. Several types of cinema posters have been found on the design boards attached to the back of rickshaws. Notable among them are a



Figure 1: Hand-painted Cinema Poster Motif on Rickshaw, Photograph by the, 2024

heroine in the middle and two heroes on either side of her, or a hero in the middle and two heroines on either side of her. Again, in some design boards, the three characters of the hero, heroine, and villain are also seen. However, all the naksha boards always have three characters in the back of the rickshaw.

Furthermore, these heroes and heroines are modeled on those of the 1980s and 90s. Because movie posters were introduced into rickshaw art at that time. As a result, the heroes and heroines of the nineties are still in the design boards behind the current rickshaw art. The visual style of these artworks is characterized by bright colors, dramatic facial expressions, and simplified

narrative scenes. In many cases, the original hand-painted designs have been replaced by digitally printed reproductions while maintaining the same basic composition.

Rickshaw art can be understood from the perspective of media-verified identity and collective visual memory. This research seeks to explain rickshaw art through visual cultural theory. As Mirzoeff (1999) has said, visual culture does not only refer to seeing but also to how the meaning of an image is created through that seeing. The movie poster here becomes a ‘vernacular visibility’, where popular film imagery becomes part of everyday life. The repetition of traditional elements of film stars and cinema, for example, evokes gendered narratives and can also create a kind of memory among rickshaw riders.



Figure 2: Hand-painted Cinema Poster Motif on Rickshaw 2024

Moreover, this visual tradition transforms rickshaws into an ongoing exhibition of Bangladeshi popular culture. As a result, from the perspective of visibility, the heroes and heroines of the nineties occupy a nostalgic position that suggests what a golden past our cinema had; at the same time, it also highlights the public imagination and the politics of visibility.

3. 2 Imaginary Birds and Animals

Another important category of rickshaw art is the depiction of animals. However, some common themes or images have repeatedly emerged among these animals, such as two hummingbirds on a tree branch, the love story of a pair of parrots, a tiger chasing a deer, the vibrant display of a peafowl, ducks gliding across a village river, birds soaring in the sky, and two roosters in a backyard scene. Furthermore, through these, the artists have sought to tell a moral story while also using these animals as symbols of beauty. These artworks delicately portray the subtleties of animal and bird life with the artist's expressive touch.



Figure 3: Pair of Peacocks Painted on Rickshaw Hood, Photograph by the author, 2025



Figure 4: Tiger hunting a deer, Photograph by the author, 2024

Such representations are not merely decorative but carry deeper cultural meanings. Birds and animals evoke rural nostalgia and are often symbolic of values like beauty, love, struggle, and natural harmony ((Glassie, 1997; Lahiri-Dutt & Williams, 2010). The tiger, for instance, may represent power and danger, while parrots often symbolize romance. Moreover, these natural motifs resonate with the urban poor's memory of village life, offering a sense of rootedness and emotional connection to their cultural identity (Islam, 2015).

3.2 Alpona

Alpona floral and geometric designs are aesthetic elements rooted in Bengali folk ritual and domestic decoration. Traditionally associated with auspicious



Figure 5: Traditional Alpona Motif. Photograph by the author, 2024

occasions and rural cultural practices, these motifs are incorporated into rickshaw art, illustrating how vernacular visual traditions are recontextualized on urban and mobile platforms.

In contemporary rickshaw painting, Alpona motifs featuring colorful floral patterns in red, white, yellow, and green are often spread across panels in vibrant compositions that delight passengers and catch the eye of passersby. These designs are not only visually pleasing but also symbolically rich, embodying a sense of cultural continuity and artistic familiarity within a rapidly modernizing cityscape.



Figure 6: Traditional Alpona Motif on Auto Rickshaw, By Author.

Alpona designs, including many kinds of flower patterns, are painted with different colors. The Alpona is aesthetically presented with red, white, and other colorful designs all over the rickshaw, capturing passenger's hearts. This kind of design is very easy and less time-consuming for any artist. For this reason, Alpona designs on rickshaws have taken a new place in the rickshaw art industry. As Bourdieu (1984) suggests, aesthetic choices are often shaped by social and economic conditions. In this context, Alpona emerges as a form of accessible visual culture that adapts to both the aesthetic expectations of urban consumers. It also shows the material constraints faced by rickshaw painters.

Alpona patterns act as a mobile canvas of folk identity. It bridges rural traditions and contemporary urban visibility. As a result, these Alpona

artworks demonstrate how cultural symbols endure by evolving within new forms of production and display.

3.3 Scenery

All the landscapes depicted in rickshaw art showcase the beauty of our country's nature. The Scenery includes a river, palm trees, various plants, a boat on the river, ducks, houses, and more. The life of rural people and the village environment are presented to city people through these folk artists, where rural life becomes urban art.



Figure 7: Natural Rural Scenery in Rickshaw Art, Photograph by the author, 2024

For urban viewers, such images function as a visual bridge to their rural roots. These pastoral scenes evoke nostalgia, offering a sense of continuity with the countryside's natural and cultural heritage. The rickshaw thus becomes a moving canvas where rural memories are preserved and reimagined within the cityscape.

These paintings show a kind of spiritual exchange between place and image. So when a commoner from the village sits on the side of the road and draws a rickshaw, his painting evokes rural life and place as a kind of lament. Glassey (1997) describes it as folk art that actually plays a role in the construction of

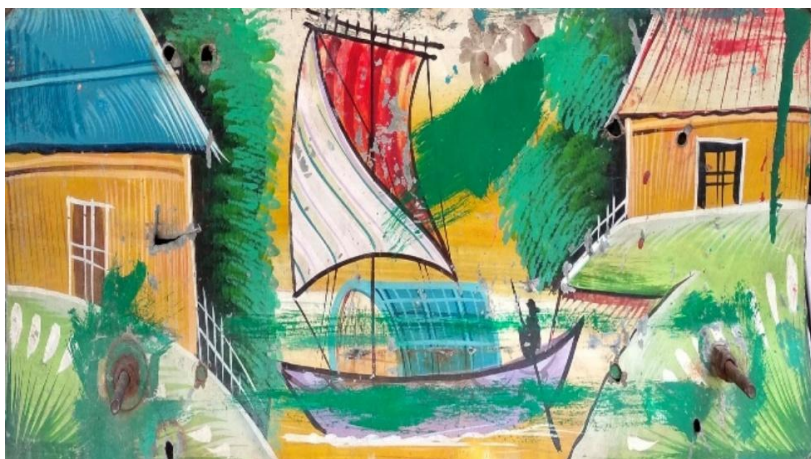


Figure 8: Natural Rural Scenery Motif, Photograph by the author, 2024

collective memory and identity. Therefore, in everyday city life, the rural scenes behind the rickshaw are not only decorative but also express cultural involvement, memory, and national identity.

3.4 Dome-Based Buildings

The most well-known art theme among the rickshaws of Dhaka at present is architectural-style designs, as shown in Figures 9 and 10. Previously, famous architectural landmarks like the Taj Mahal were hand-painted by artists. Sometimes it looks like a mosque, and sometimes it looks like the Taj Mahal, but every design features some pillar-like dome. Although the earlier rickshaw art seen on the streets was handmade, nowadays many computer-printed artworks are on the streets. Most of them are dome-based buildings. Since they are cheap, most of the foot-drawn rickshaws now have these computer-printed designs. However, whether handmade or computer-printed, this building, which resembles a minaret, is seen as an Islamic symbol in both places, with stars and moons in the background.

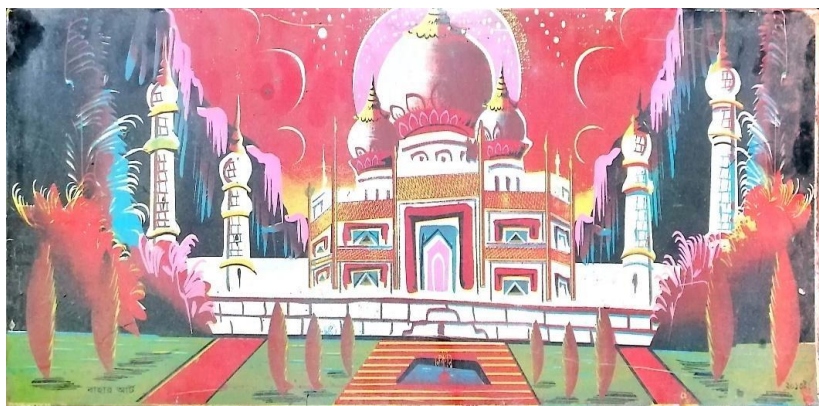


Figure 9: Islamic Architectural Motifs, Photograph by the author, 2024

In the mid-1960s, the Pakistani government, in response to Muslim sentiment, imposed restrictions on depicting human figures on rickshaw backplates. Following this directive, rickshaw artists began emphasizing religious and symbolic imagery, including flowers, mosques, and above all, the Taj Mahal, a subject that has since become the most enduring motif in rickshaw painting (Kirkpatrick, 1984).

Among rickshaw artists and pullers, the Taj Mahal remains one of the most beloved visual icons. While some viewers identify it as a famous tomb in India, many perceive it simply as a mosque or a generic symbol of Islamic sanctity, sometimes even associating it with specific mosques in Dhaka. On the rickshaw panels, the Taj Mahal often emerges from a bed of vibrant colors, occasionally from a blooming lotus, forming a composition that reflects the syncretic visual culture of Bangladesh (Glassie, 1997).

The interpretation of such images is primarily symbolic rather than literal. Domes, minarets, and arches function as visual signifiers of religious piety and cultural pride. As Glassie and Mahmud (2000) note, these depictions constitute Traditional Cultural Expressions (TCEs) that communicate shared memory and spiritual belonging.



Figure 10: Taj Mahal Motif, Photograph by the author, 2024

From a visual culture theory perspective, these dome-based motifs also reflect Mirzoeff’s (2011) “politics of visibility”—how religious identity becomes publicly legible and aesthetically celebrated through visual forms. In this sense, architectural imagery on rickshaws is not merely decorative, but a mobile assertion of faith, belonging, and cultural continuity in the urban landscape.

3.5 Written Texts

In contemporary rickshaw art, written texts have become an important visual element. Common inscriptions include religious phrases such as Bismillah Hir



Figure 11: Written Text Motif, Photograph by the author, 2024

Rahmanir Rahim and moral messages like Atithi Pakhi Mara Nisheedh (“No killing of guest birds”). The names of art houses or individual artists, such as Hima Art, Nazrul Art, and Bahar Art, are often printed, along with the rickshaw owner’s name and phone number displayed prominently in large Bengali letters.

Historical observations from 2006 by Glassie and Mahmud revealed that simple, emotionally resonant words frequently appeared on rickshaws—terms like Ma (Mother), Mayer Doa (Blessing from Mother), Allah Bharasa (Have faith in God), and Namaj Kayem Karun (Perform your prayer). The words ‘Ma’ or ‘Mayer Doa’ were almost ubiquitous, sometimes accompanied by decorative motifs, such as a peacock flanked by ‘Ma’. Another common message urged environmental care: “Plant trees, save the country.” Recent



Figure 12: Written Text Motif, Photograph by the author, 2024

findings from 2025 confirm the continued presence of these texts, now often paired with the owner’s contact information.

From a visual culture perspective, these written texts function as a key part of a multimodal visual discourse, in which language and image interact to produce layered meanings. According to Rogoff (1998), such inscriptions do more than decorate. They co-construct public expressions of religious devotion, ethical values, and social identity within a vernacular visual culture. This interplay of text and image creates a rich communicative space that

reflects the everyday spirituality and social aspirations of rickshaw pullers and their communities (Glassie & Mahmud, 2006).

3.6 Adverts

Historically, advertisements on rickshaw backboards were remarkably rare. Gallagher (1992) notes that even in 1989-90, only a UNICEF immunization campaign (featuring a child with text) and a few adverts for bidis (poor man's cigarettes) were observed in Dhaka; beyond these, commercial adverts were very uncommon.



Figure 13: Advertisement Motif, Photograph by the author, 2024

In stark contrast, the photos we have gathered now illustrate PVC banners for various contemporary businesses, including Bikash, Nagad, and Duolingo, prominently displayed on many rickshaws. These banners serve as mobile advertisements, transforming rickshaws into moving billboards that circulate commercial messages throughout the city. From a visual culture perspective, these commercial banners represent the commodification and integration of globalized market culture into local visual forms. Advertisements on rickshaws signify the deep penetration of consumer capitalism into everyday life, positioning the rickshaw as a dynamic site where visual culture intersects with economic imperatives.



Figure 14: Advertisement Motif, Photograph by the author, 2024

This blending of traditional folk art with contemporary commercial imagery highlights the growing hybridization of visual culture, embodying the tensions between maintaining aesthetic traditions and adapting to market-driven production.

6.2.8 Blank Board

In our study, we encountered a notable number of rickshaws with undecorated *naksha boards*, especially among older rickshaws. These boards were either painted over in plain colors or left entirely blank. The absence of decoration raises questions about the meanings behind visual omission in a tradition historically known for its vibrant aesthetic.



Figure 15: Blank Board. Photograph by the author, 2024

Kirkpatrick (1984) observed that around thirty percent of rickshaws in large towns remained quite plain, suggesting that cost was a major reason why many rickshaws were left undecorated. He also pointed out that decisions around decoration were sometimes “caught up in the crossfires of tension between political factions of secularists and Islamists.” While this may have been more relevant in the socio-political climate of the 1980s, the current situation reveals different dynamics.

Today, the cost barrier has significantly decreased. Pre-designed, computer-printed *naksha boards* are widely available in local markets for only 30 to 50 taka, making decorative options accessible to most rickshaw owners. Despite this, we still observed numerous blank boards, particularly on older rickshaws. According to our interviews and field notes, this often occurs when the original board wears out, and the owner does not replace it; due to neglect, indifference, or shifting priorities.

In this context, blank boards may no longer signify economic limitation alone



but could also reflect a decline in the cultural centrality of rickshaw art. As

Figure 16: Blank Board, Photograph by the author, 2024

some owners have reported, there is “no point” in replacing the board if the rickshaw itself is nearing the end of its usable life. In other cases, the plainness may reflect a functional attitude toward the rickshaw as a tool for survival rather than a canvas for self-expression. This shift in visual culture, where absence speaks as loudly as presence, demands attention within the broader narrative of rickshaw art’s transformation.

4. Discussion

This study highlights folk aesthetics through rickshaw art in contemporary Dhaka city. At the same time, it examines how cultural identity is created through this visual representation. The study finds that rickshaw art has shifted from handmade to computer printing. As a result, the subject matter of folk aesthetics has changed somewhat. Because the artistic touch of human hands is not in it, this art has survived through the new battery-powered rickshaw art. This study also identifies eight themes in rickshaw art through which folk aesthetic representation is achieved. Moreover, this representation highlights cultural identity. As a result, their continued presence highlights the lasting influence of Bengali folk aesthetics and cultural memory in everyday urban life.

The eight themes found in the analysis of rickshaw art show that the frequent presence of animals, rivers, nature, boats, village houses, flocks of birds flying in the sky, and farmland indicate that rickshaw art continues to preserve collective memory and rural imagination. Another thing that comes to mind when analyzing rickshaw art is that the rural scenes depicted are idealized. The ideal house or village for which city people keep yearning. Therefore, a kind of nostalgia for the rural environment is created through these images. Due to rapid urbanization, people have moved from villages to cities, but this rickshaw art, with its rural roots, connects them. As Glassey (1997) says, folk art preserves and promotes shared cultural experiences. This preservation is evident in rickshaw art. On the other hand, Lahiri-Dutta and Williams (2010) believe that rickshaw art reflects the memories, aspirations, and identities of ordinary people. As a result, the analysis of both shows that rickshaw art helps maintain cultural connections even in the rapidly changing urban environment.

An art associated with Bengali folk art is Alpona. Especially during various pujas and ceremonies, and in many places in Bengal, Alpona is made to decorate the walls outside the house and the courtyard. Alpona is commonly seen in the homes of both Hindus and Muslims and is considered a form of floral art. This Alpona occupies a large place in rickshaw art. As a result,

Alpona further highlights the enduring importance of Bengali folk art. Where Alpona was earlier an element of beauty in the rural domestic environment, it has become a part of urban art through rickshaw art. Through this transformation, it is evident that folk tradition can adapt to the new environment while preserving its cultural significance. As a result, these folk arts, rather than disappearing with modernity, have developed new forms and perspectives, proving the adaptive capacity of indigenous cultural practices.

The research findings show that rickshaw art plays an important role in expressing cultural and religious identity. These dome-based structures, resembling the Taj Mahal or mosques, are a very common form of contemporary rickshaw art. Although these images are artistically depicted, they also represent spirituality, cultural pride, and religious identity. In addition, religious inscriptions, moral messages, and devotional sayings show that these objects function as public expressions of identity. In this way, rickshaws are not only a means of transportation; they also become a means of cultural communication (Mirzoev, 2011; Afrin, 2023). As Mirzoev (2011) has shown, visual art actually makes cultural and religious identity visible in everyday urban life. Rickshaw art actually expresses the politics of visibility here. Furthermore, as these images travel through the city, they reinforce a sense of shared identity, belief, and belonging.

The imagery of movie posters is another important feature of contemporary rickshaw art. The presence of dramatic scenes of heroes and heroines highlights the long-lasting influence of popular culture on rickshaw art. However, the depictions of heroes and heroines seen in rickshaws plying the streets are not those of the current generation, but rather various movie posters or images of heroes and heroines from the eighties and nineties. As a result, local artistic traditions in popular culture adapt to everyday life. Rickshaw artists do not just copy movie posters but also use movie motifs to express aspirations, imagination, and social ideals. This creates a connection between popular culture and everyday urban life. Beyond its symbolic and artistic value, rickshaw art occupies a unique place in urban folk culture. It is not just art displayed in galleries or museums; it is a moving canvas and part of everyday life, visible to people of different social classes. Therefore, the pedal

rickshaws operating in the city bring folk traditions into public spaces and help meet peoples cultural needs. As a result, rickshaw art appears to us as an important element of Dhaka's public culture.

At the same time, the results of this study reveal another important change in the production and use of rickshaw art. The biggest change is the use of digital printing instead of hand-drawn designs. Some computer-generated designs are now being created, like the old hand-drawn motifs. Since hand-drawn designs are expensive and time-consuming, most of the design boards on the back of rickshaws are now computer-printed (Lime & Stevan, 2025). This has raised concerns about the creativity and originality of folk art. As a result, the city's rickshaws are covered in similar computer-printed design boards. Whereas artists used to have their own unique style, printed design boards do not. Mahmud (2005) and Ilma (2024) have expressed similar concerns that technological change helps to preserve visual identity, but at the same time weakens the traditional skills behind it. In the case of rickshaw art, too, this technology has taken away the work of many older artists. However, the good news is that new battery-powered auto-rickshaws are once again showing hand-painted designs. Rickshaw art has once again found a new way to survive. However, technological change does not always mean the extinction of culture. In the case of rickshaw art, this sentence seems to be true. Despite various changes and risks, rickshaw art is continually evolving, finding new means of survival.

Contemporary rickshaw art in Bangladesh can also be understood within the broader tradition of mobile folk art in South Asia (Kazmi & Ghani-ur-Rahman, 2024). Similar artistic practices can be found in Pakistani truck art, where vehicles are transformed into moving canvases that express cultural identity, religious beliefs, and everyday experiences through colorful designs and symbolic imagery (Ansari & Nawaz, 2024; Kazmi & Ghani-ur-Rahman, 2024; Wheeler & l'Anson, 1998). Both traditions use bright colours, floral patterns, religious symbols, and popular visual themes to communicate cultural meanings (Afridi & Saleem, 2025). However, Bangladeshi rickshaw art remains distinctive because it combines Bengali folk aesthetics, rural landscapes, Alpona, cinematic imagery, and everyday urban experiences

within a unique vernacular visual tradition. Although both art forms continue to adapt to commercialization and contemporary design trends, rickshaw art plays a particularly important role in preserving Bengali cultural memory and visual identity in the everyday urban landscape (Islam, 2015; Ansari & Nawaz, 2024).

Another influence on rickshaw art is advertising. We can see it at various places in Dhaka city, at street corners. We can also see these advertisements on rickshaw design boards. Since rickshaws ply in the alleys of Dhaka and cover a vast area and diverse people, rickshaw design boards are a very appropriate place for advertising. Rickshaw design boards were once a symbol of beauty, but with the growing influence of consumer culture in daily life, advertisements now appear on them. Arnold and Thompson (2005) argue that local cultural practices often become linked to commercial interests and market demands. Although advertising can be a new source of income for rickshaw owners and artists, it raises concerns about the commercialization of cultural heritage and the degradation of traditional designs. Another thing that can be observed in rickshaw design boards is that many rickshaws have blank or painted design boards in a specific color. This is especially common in old rickshaws. When the rickshaw boards are damaged, many people do not want to spend a lot of money installing new colorful design boards for the second time; instead, they install ordinary blank boards. As a result, while the rickshaw's design board has art, when the rickshaw starts to get old, the design board may be missing, or a blank board may take its place.

Overall, the findings show that contemporary rickshaw art continues to balance tradition and change. Traditional motifs related to folk culture, cultural memory, and religious identity coexist with digital printing, and new artistic practices. Rather than showing the decline of this art form, these changes demonstrate its ability to adapt to new social, economic, and technological conditions. Its continued importance lies in its ability to evolve while preserving its cultural values and identity.

5. Conclusion

This study explores how folk aesthetics and cultural identity are represented through contemporary rickshaw art. The study shows that rickshaw art is a vibrant form of urban folk culture. This art continues to transmit cultural meanings, collective memories, and social values in everyday public spaces. Through its content of movie posters, fictional animals, Alpona, rural scenes, domed buildings, and written texts, it reveals the enduring influence of Bengali folk traditions, religious symbols, and popular culture. As a result, rickshaw art is not only the subject of rickshaw decorative practice, but also highlights and promotes various aspects of the cultural identity of the city of Dhaka. Through these paintings, a kind of connection between rural traditions and urban culture is maintained. This connection highlights the religious and cultural experiences of the common people.

Despite ongoing social and technological changes, contemporary rickshaw art continues to adapt while retaining important elements of its indigenous character. Rickshaw art's ability to adapt to change with tradition has sustained it. As a result, this study analyzes rickshaw art from the perspective of visual culture and folk aesthetics to show how rickshaw art constructs cultural identity through visibility. Future research could explore the perspectives of artists and viewers in more depth to better understand the evolving meanings of this important form of urban folk art.

The findings of this study also have important implications for cultural heritage preservation and public policy. As hand-painted rickshaw art continues to decline because of digital printing and commercialization, greater efforts are needed to document and preserve this unique form of vernacular art. Museums, cultural organizations, policymakers, and creative industries can work together to support traditional rickshaw artists and promote this cultural practice to wider audiences. Such initiatives may help safeguard rickshaw art as an important part of Bangladesh's cultural heritage for future generations.

6. Reference

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