

Popular Modern Devotional Prints: The Construction of Identity between the Visual and Viewer in Public Interaction Spaces

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Abstract : Despite the general belief in Islam that figural representations should be avoided, particularly propagated by the Deobandis, a religious group influenced by Salafi and Wahhabi ideas, nevertheless the public interaction spaces such as Shops and offices are decorated with popular, mass-produced, modern devotional prints. This study seeks to focus on popular visual culture, its display in public interaction places such as shops and discusses how people establish relationships with images. The method adopted was basically ethnographic: to describe as precisely and completely as possible the phenomena to be studied, using the language and conceptual categories of the interlocutors themselves. This study has been enriched by ethnographic field research conducted during the months from October to December 2015 in the major cities of Punjab and their brief forays and surroundings where we explored how seeing upon images performs religious identity within the public space. The study examines the pattern of aesthetics and taste in the shops of especially common people whose sensibilities have not been refined or influenced by being exposed to any narrative or fine arts. Furthermore, it is our intention to question the general beliefs and opinions in the context of popular practices, the way in which people relate to these prints. The interpretations and analyses presented in this study illuminate how people create meaning through the display of such items of material culture in the immediate settings of their spaces. This study also seeks to demonstrate how popular Islam is practiced, transformed and understood through the display of popular representations of popular figures of piety like Sufi saints or their shrines are important to many believers and thus occupy important places in their shops. The findings are supported with empirical evidence and based on interviews with the shopkeepers, owners and office employees. Looking upon those popular modern devotional prints keeps people's reverence of the personages alive. Because of their sacred themes they affect a relationship between the saint and the beholders as well as serve to symbolize and reinforce their belief since they become powerful loci of emotional attachment. Collectively such devotional prints satisfy a local taste to help people establish contact with God through the saints' intercession in order to receive protection and benediction, and help in spiritual, mental and material problems. By putting all these facets of belief together we gain an insight into both the subjective and cognizant role that icons' of saints play in the lives of believers. Their veneration through ingeniously contrived modern means of production makes a significant contribution to an understanding of how such imagery promotes a powerful belief in Sufi saints, which ultimately gives indications of how popular Islam is practiced and understood at its gross roots level.

Keywords : ethnographic field research, popular visual culture, protected space, religious identity

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