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Showcase for Pakistani art

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The Mohatta Palace Museum in Karachi has hosted some of the finest art exhibitions.

Cities are like people - each with its own character and idiosyncrasies. The port city of Karachi is like a youngster bursting with energy and life, with mood swings tempered by the ocean that washes its shores. Wild and passionate, grey and foaming or calm turquoise glass, the ocean defines the city's outer limit, while culture and history defines its centre - embodied in one of the city's major attractions, the Mohatta Palace.

The founder of the nation Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah, upon his death, left most of his assets to the government. He did, however, leave one of the residences to his younger sister Fatima Jinnah. Her twilight years were spent in this palatial red brick building. After her death, the mansion fell into disarray until a few philanthropists restored it to its present glory. The Mohatta Palace could have become just another museum. Instead, it is now a spectacular venue for some of the country's most interesting exhibitions.

A craftsman's dedication to his work is always reflected in his creations. This is certainly true with the Mohatta Palace Museum. Surrounded by large lawns, the contrast of red brick and green plants is refreshing. The building has large halls and rooms and a gallery upstairs. Many famous personalities have visited the museum, including the popular Indian writer Arundhati Roy.

Several exhibitions have been held at the museum. However, the most well-received and the one that went on for the longest was the display of the works of Sadequain (1930-1987), one of Pakistan's most prominent artists. The exhibition was a four-stage project. The first stage was the actual exhibition. It was followed by a black and white catalogue of the artist's works. Next was a book titled *The Holy Sinner: Sadequain* that contains reproductions of about 400 artists' creations along with commentaries compiled by both critics and journalists. The last project consisted of four bilingual documentaries along with a special feature film about the life and work of the internationally renowned artist.

This was possibly the largest art project to be executed in the sub-continent. The beautifully displayed works that were arranged aesthetically in the various rooms documented different facets of the artist's work. The walls were painted aqua, purple and orange, the curators' reasoning being that a white wall would make the artist's works look dull. The exhibition was a fusion of art along with poetry of greats such as Faiz, Ghalib and Iqbal. The exhibition displayed about 200 non-calligraphic, rare works of Sadequain that were enjoyed by more than 900,000 art lovers.

Sadequain was a non-traditional, self-taught artist who created his unique style that came to be known as Khat-e-Sadequain-e. This style had its genesis during

Sadequain's stay at a seaside desert close to the main city of Karachi named Gadani. It was here that the Amroha-born artist observed the wild growth of cacti, which he used in many of his works to symbolise man's struggle against odds and his ultimate victory. For him the cacti was also symbolic of the moral decadence of human society, which became a more prominent theme in his later works.

One of the highlights of the exhibition was the artist's most famous work that was commissioned by the State Bank of Pakistan named 'The treasures of time.' This massive mural depicts the intellectual evolution of mankind and traces the history of great scholars, philosophers, mathematicians, poets and writers. Some critics note that it was from this point onward that Sadequain's intellectual growth changed direction and entered the Amroha-hued tales of ancient worlds, leading to a unique blending point in Pakistan's art history.

The museum has also hosted an exhibition of Gandharan art. Gandhara was a seat of Buddhist culture from the 1st century BC to the 5th century AD, which left a lasting impression on Asian art. The exhibition was called 'Visions of divinity' and included displays in two galleries. The main gallery contained images of Buddha sculptures in relief that depict the different stages in Buddha's life. The second gallery contained coins, jewellery, vessels and other objects from that era.

Another first for Pakistan's art scene was the 'Jamil Naqsh Retrospective' at the Mohatta Palace Museum that encapsulated an aesthetic odyssey spanning five long decades. Pigeons are a distinct theme in Jamil Naqsh's works. About 600 works were painstakingly gathered from various private collections for the event, some of which had never been exhibited in public before. For the 'Jamil Naqsh Retrospective' the museum dedicated an entire wall in one of the galleries to display more than two dozen of the artist's pieces.

The museum also played hosted an exhibition called 'Threads of time' that highlight the different types of textiles in use in the Indus Valley civilisation.

The latest exhibition to be hosted by the museum was called 'Jewel in the crown: Karachi under the Raj 1843-1947.' One of the pavilions in the exhibition was titled 'The sole spokesman - rare glimpses of Mr Mohammad Ali Jinnah' and contained a large number of photographs of the Quaid-i-Azam.