

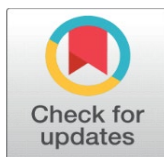
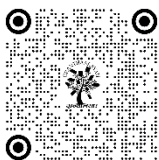


SOHAN QADRI- A PAINTER IN SEARCH OF SEED OF SPIRITUALITY

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ABSTRACT

Through this sincere endeavour, an effort has been made to represent in a proper perspective and systematic manner, the perceptions, concepts, and motivation behind the artistic journey of internationally renowned painter of Neo-Tantric art- Sohan Qadri. It also traces the development of Neo-Tantric art movement which started in 1960s, there by explaining the origin and socio-political environment involved in formulation of this genre. Due emphasis has been laid on tracing the journey of Sohan Qadri's early initiation into Tantra, yoga and meditation under enlightened yogis, Gurus, and Sufis along with his life-long quest to savour the infinite expanse of mystic spiritualism. It also focuses on decoding the essence, symbolism and metaphors used in the creation of his works.

Keywords: Neo-Tantric Art, Mandalas, Sohan Qadri, Guru Bhikham Giri, Yoga, Yantras, Chandogya Upanishad, Chitakash, Kundalini, Bija, Yoga Nidra, Param Atman, Yin/Yang, Lingam, Yoni, Abstraction

1. INTRODUCTION

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.

William Blake
(Auguries of Innocence, 1863)

These lines by the great poet William Blake may provide a cue to the art of Sohan Qadri, one of the foremost exponents of Neo-Tantric art- a movement, which was started in late 1950s, gained momentum after Ajit Mookerjee's exhaustive

research compiled in a book titled: 'Tantra Art- its Philosophy and Physics' (1966). Amongst the several theories and perceptions to unravel its genesis is one explained by art critic and author Rupika Chawla, which provides a comprehensive and in-depth insight into the so called Neo-Tantric art movement. After the horrific Vietnam war, American youth were disillusioned with the violent political system and found their emotions crumpled and bruised. There was a great urge to find peace and tranquillity in Asian sojourns where *yogis* and *sadhus* through their meditative sessions preached how to attain peace, love, and harmony amongst the human beings. Escapism then became a reality, rather than the actual reality of life. The Flower Children of the 1960s (a hippie cult started by Dr. Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert) flocked to India, Tibet, and Nepal, to seek solace for the tormented psyche through traditional Indian music and art. A fascination amongst them grew for *yoga* (practice/exercises to achieve union of body and mind) and *mandalas* (a geometric design used as a spiritual guidance tool for concentration in meditative sessions), *sadhus* (ascetics) and the Vedanta (ideas and philosophies contained in the Upanishads pertaining to liberation of the Self), Tantra (a system or practice defining the discovery and location of the centres of energy in human body) and other esoteric magic and mystery cults. The enigmatic and mystic motifs, symbols and drawings found in Tantric practices were freely used on fabrics and in jewellery designs they wore. Artists from Europe and America were naturally affected by this cross-cultural networking. Frank Stella (an American painter) adopted concentric lines and circles while Jasper Johns (an American artist) in his vibrant paintings used form of *mandalas* for constructing his compositions. Interestingly, these works were very much liked by Indian artists, as these opened a new window to look at our traditional symbols in yet another engaging form; rather it was a movement of the moment, without the eternity and timelessness of Indian folk, tribal and classical art. Neo-Tantric art was not part of actual Tantra art or its *yantras* (geometric designs used as meditation symbols) or *mandalas*, which are essential for religious ritualistic manifestations. Chawla (1998) Artist J. Swaminathan clarifies that Neo-Tantra was merely reduced to a mannerism because there was insufficient enquiry into the meaning of these forms. Adaptation of Neo-Tantric symbols undoubtedly produced some fine works of art and had a certain impact on the art world of that period. Caught with the fascination of the movement- P.T. Reddy, Dhanraj Bhagat, Piraji Sagara, Dharmanarain Dasgupta, Prabhakar Barwe, Satish Gujral, Sohan Qadri and Sunil Madhav Sen experimented and tested its visual appeal through Abstract stylization. Some other artists like Biren De, K.C.S Paniker, Gulam Rasool Santosh and Sayed Haider Raza infused some energy into the diffusing movement and simultaneously developed similar stylizations and genres.

2. SOHAN QADRI- INITIATION INTO TANTRA AND YOGA

Sohan Qadri originally Sohan Singh was born in village Chachoki, Kagwada, Punjab in 1932 in the house of Sardar Jagat Singh and Dhan Kaur who possessed substantial land holdings. His father wanted him to carve out a successful career in farming, but from the very early childhood, he had an inclination to seek spiritualism. As the time passed, he started frequenting *deras* (type of a monastery) of *yogis* (practitioners of yoga) and *Sufi* (a practitioner of mystical thought in Islamic faith) *fakirs* (Muslim *Sufi* ascetic). Ultimately, he became the disciple of Guru Bhikham Giri and was initiated to yoga, Tantra, dance, and music in 1946. He often visited the *dera* of another *Sufi* faqir - Ahmed Ali Shah Qadri, in whose influence he developed an insight into the *Sufi* philosophy. Guru Bhikham Giri taught him *Kundalini* and *Vajrayana yoga* (an esoteric sect and mystical practices in Buddhism).

Noticing that he was good in drawing, his Guru encouraged him to draw images of gods, goddesses and motifs related to *yantras* on the walls of his *ashram* (hermitage). [Jain \(2010\)](#) Under Ahmed Ali Shah Qadri, he understood the essence of Sufism which revolves around love and harmony amongst human beings and a way to union with the Eternal One. His quest for decoding the essence of mysticism of the Eternal Creator did not end here and in 1953, he undertook pilgrimage to Kangra hills and practiced long silence and meditation sessions in remote temples in Himalayas and Tibet. His mother implored him to come back and complete his schooling. Thus, he passed matriculation examination from his village school. He came in contact with a renowned photographer- Sir Pyara Singh who had established a studio in Jalandhar (Punjab) and exposed himself to the fine nuances of photography, so that he could express in other mediums and genres. Sir Pyara Singh was also a friend and admirer of Sardar Sobha Singh- a doyen of Sikh religious art (a style of art related to the philosophies and ethos of Sikh religion). [Kapoor \(2017\)](#) After Sir Piraya Singh migrated to England in 1952, Sohan Qadri established a photography studio in Andheri, Bombay. To quench his thirst for acquiring deeper artistic sensibilities and aesthetics, he often visited the famous J.J. School of art, Bombay (1952). He felt that training in art is also essential for him, to develop certain artistic capabilities, which will felicitate his talent to nurture and express his visions properly. In 1955, he joined Government College of Art and Craft, Simla. [Chopra \(2002, November 26\)](#) In Delhi, he met several artists and frequented art galleries to learn about new art trends and styles. He had long interactive sessions with renowned painters in Delhi, to comprehend the essence of their creative impulses and expressions (1963). Internationally acclaimed writer and art critic- Mulk Raj Anand had a chance to view his exhibition and became his first patron of art. In the year 1965, he left India and travelled to East Africa, Europe, and North America to savour the glimpses of the world art. Dr. M.S. Randhawa (ICS) and eminent art historian was instrumental in prodding him to seek new vistas and avenues in other countries. [Marathe \(1996\)](#) His inner circle comprised of sensitive poets and artists like Shiv Singh, S.S. Misha and Hardev. [Chandan \(2011\)](#) He established his studio in Zurich, Switzerland and then shifted to Copenhagen, Denmark where he remained for four decades. But due to his ill health, he again migrated to Canada and on 2nd March 2011, he passed away there; survived by his only daughter Purvi Qadri who has floated a scholarship for young Punjabi artists in his memory. [Nair \(2011, April 5\)](#)

3. DISCOVERING THE MYSTERIES OF CREATION

Long sessions of interaction with renowned painters did not in any way satisfy Sohan Qadri's consciousness and urge, to peep into the realms of divinity and eternity, which was his mission right from childhood. He wanted to explore the *Chitakash*- the vast expanse of stillness, peace and eternal bliss which resides in one's own being. He felt that he will be able to realise his goals through Tantric symbols and forms and proceeded to paint in his own inimitable style, which he had developed over the years, that is to unravel the power of seed of creation or *Bija* of divinity. In the Chandogya Upanishad it is repeatedly stated that 'Tat Tvam Asi' which means 'You are That', which suggests that the Supreme Lord, the Higher Power, is right there in the innermost recesses of our Being. A farmer plants a seed, waters it, takes good care of it and ensures that the little plant blossoms into a big tree, we too can realise our full spiritual potential, by leading a pure life and performing regular meditation over a period of time. The Divine thus is the essence of every person in the universe, even though God is one, yet He lives in every one of

us; it is for this reason, He manifests in all living beings. Knowing it is a reality that God, despite manifesting Himself as the colourful universe with myriad diversities, remains immaculately pure and untainted. [Taneja \(2022, June 27\)](#) In the final stages of meditation, when all selfishness that separates us from the Supreme is eradicated, we discover this Self in the depths of our consciousness. Thus, the seeker attains the power to soar high in the realm of Pure Consciousness. This results in attaining supreme bliss.

4. PHILOSOPHY AND ESSENCE OF SOHAN QADRI'S ART

It is a pointless exercise to try and fit Indian Contemporary art into the strait jacket of its western counterpart, as there gapes a void in defining the aesthetic values of figurative and abstract art. The figurative, the abstract, the iconic and aniconic, have always existed in our Indian art and fine examples of co-existence of abstract and figurative art are found in the caves of Ellora. Flavours of dialectic styles in our art also offer conceptual and minimalistic genres, as there is unity in diversity in the process of creation. Sohan Qadri is one of the more conscious and conceptual abstract artists. The texture of Sohan Qadri's work is integrative, but it is unity of opposites, as the pigment colours filter from behind the thick paper, he works on. There are some sharp incisions to negate the flow of energy and channel it towards the intended space. The pinnacle of emotions or *bhava* remains on the surface created by many other *Neo-Tantric* abstractionists. [Chopra \(1999\)](#) This superfluous aspect is experienced in early canvases by Sohan Qadri too. But in the later works, subtle treatment of colour is heightened by the process of over-flowing pigments and incisions, allowing a clear distinction of opposite elements, colour, and texture. The *yin* (dark and feminine energy) and *yang* (bright and masculine energy) diagrams of Buddhist ritual art have a special inner meaning. Colours and textures in his works have an inherent lack of symbolic quality of ritual art (art forms created on the basis of rituals followed by religious and social beliefs). These are best described as traces and signs, which artists have to create, after diving deep into the perceptions of essence. These symbols and signs invented by him are employed in compositional features. Here we witness signs like the void (emptiness) or the dot, put together with squares, rectangles, triangles, inverted or otherwise, organising their visual impact in two-dimensional space. At this level of understanding, they are merely arrangements in space, brought together in relations of proportion to each other. Merging of these symbols and metaphors in the seepage of colour definitely helps in creating formlessness and spontaneity in sharp contrast. This offers its own form of tension and its own form of motion. There is a presence of waves in other linear trajectories and yet there certainly is the throbbing of the flow of energy from the different parts of two-dimensional space, merging into a single point.

Some works project horizontal and vertical compositions suggesting the presence of *lingam* (presentation of Shiva's generative power) and *yoni* (related to the feminine generative power of Goddess Shakti- the consort of Lord Shiva) interpretations. But that would draw the viewer towards erotic, something that is not intrinsic to contemplative art. Eminent poet and art scholar Keshav Malik writes, "In order to appreciate the significance of Sohan Qadri's genre of art, it must be realised that this has been arrived at by a kind of personal death, as well as rebirth. The 'death' in question is one of the outward self, and the embracing of the 'I' with timeless being. Needless to say, all such is metaphorical. But what is art, if not the expression of imaginatively-not literally- realised states of consciousness. And there are of course many states of consciousness, from the simple to the most complex. Only

occasionally we are unable to partake of them all. The one that this painter has chosen to expose is expressive of supreme detachment- a removal from the plane of time and history, that maelstrom of events and subordinate- minor accretions- within this wildest known of possible cosmic contexts. Here we remember only what is abiding and permanent and well beyond the excitements, the sound and fury, of duration." In such works of art, one comes across juxtaposition and arrangements of different forms and patterns in preferred engagement with the space, to enhance structural elements in a composition. Malik (1999) But after repelling the layers of objective sensibility, one discovers there is a sincere effort to silence the unruly emotions and ego. It is a kind of self killing in the sense that the journey of this artist is to purify the disturbed perceptions, coming in the way of reaching a point, where all existence ceases to shackle the soul and spirit. This point towards an intense inner discipline. And this is what the painter has been pursuing for some few decades. To put it, straight lines, colours, geometry have become the vehicle to achieve higher aspiration and Sohan Qadri is assertive on this, as he has himself experienced this state of mind.

Sohan Qadri's other mode of expression is through poems rather couplets on 'I am dot': I am a dot/born out of the dot/passing by the dots/dying into the dot or again: I am a dot/on the tip/one of the creator's pens. These simple poems are profound and meditative. They are valuable more for their content than for their form and style. His paintings moved from the abstract renditions of music to depicting what may be best defined as potent silence. He defines his 'yoga nidra' (a yogic practice guiding the practitioner to reach one's true self) through Tantra and yoga. When he expresses ecstasy of the ultimate union with the Supreme- 'Param Atman': 'I am in union- or I am not' or 'the wind and cloud-in the ecstasy of their orgasm-cease to be-the wind and the cloud'. Having a vast experience of yogi sensibilities and meditative stances, he is an unambitious artist not out to assert himself or his art. No doubt his compositions are thought provoking even for the ignorant and who have little clue to such art. In true sense, Sohan Qadri lives what he proclaims through his art with the aid of the palette, knife/brush/paint/or words- says writer S.L. Clerk.

Lars Foxe- an eminent writer who minutely examined Sohan Qadri's perceptions and works concludes that the word enigmatic remains central in the art of Sohan Qadri as well as life and the oriental view of life and philosophy. In a similar vein, yet another philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein has written, "*When we have become part of the silence of 'the fourth'- we begin to understand...*" Words can only give directions towards certain thought processes, and it should best be left to the viewer to interpret and share the journey of the artist.

5. JOURNEY AS POET AND TANTRIC YOGA PRACTITIONER

Besides writing and publishing several books like 'Bond Samandar' in Punjabi published in Amritsar in 1990, yet another publication titled- '*Forismer*' which is a Danish translation of his poems in English published in Denmark by Omens Forlag (1995) and 'Antarjyoti' written in Punjabi published by Nav Yug, New Delhi (1995). Sohan Qadri also conducted intensive courses in advanced meditations from Tantras. He has been also conducting international workshops and symposiums on Aesthetics and Metaphysics in Denmark and Sweden. In 1972, he organised an art event in the plaza of sector-17, Chandigarh, India called 'Damru', where about hundred artists created their works of art. After the sunset he played the *Damru* (musical instrument associated to Lord Shiva) and all the artworks were burnt in a

bonfire. It was in league with an art movement called Zero art started in Europe in 1950s and believed that 'There is new end and a new beginning- Death and Rebirth'.

6. DECODING THE SYMBOLISM AND METAPHORS

From his several artworks on 'Dot' which he often mentions that it is the simplest form of understanding the Whole and the Infinite. In this work, from the chaos of tiny specs there appears a purified enlightened spot or the light which illuminates the inner consciousness of the viewer. It can have many interpretations and meaning for different viewers. The artist leaves it to that and has not titled his work, which he feels limits the expanse of the vision, he has experienced. [Figure 1](#)

Figure 1

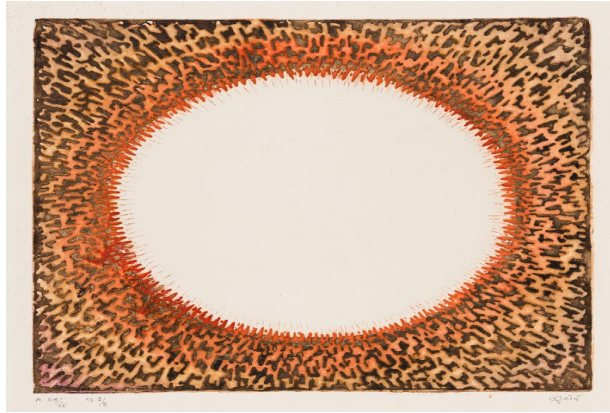


Figure 1 Untitled No. 41/87, Ink and Dyes on paper, 1987

Source <https://catalogue.swanngalleries.com/Lots/auction-lot/SOHAN-QADRI-Untitled-No-4187?saleno=2552&lotNo=89&refNo=775692>

'Untitled (Yellow)' is a brilliant work, which represents rising layers of consciousness one upon the other, like a stair to reach the ultimate goal of a mystic void, or a black hole in the universe, which is the source of creation, energy and light. It also projects the iconic *lingam* attributed to Shiva, which is considered as the source of creation. [Figure 2](#)

Figure 2

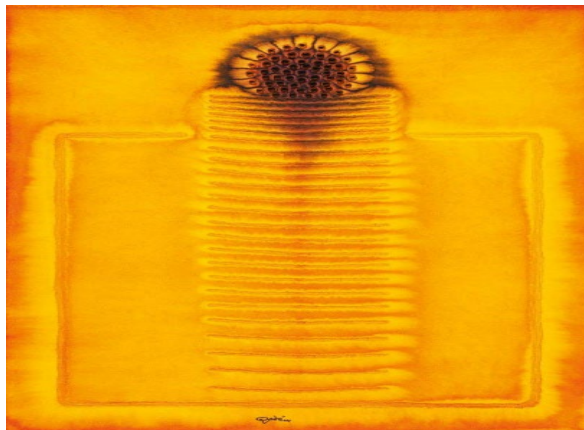


Figure 2 Untitled (Yellow), Ink and water colours on paper, 2004

Source <https://www.invaluable.com/auction-lot/sohan-qadri-untitled-yellow-69-c-60d4443af3#>

DNA is the blueprint of life in all living beings. So is the genesis of thoughts and emotions. The structure of a form is inherent in mystic elements embedded in our consciousness as well as in our physiology. Each living being carries a certain DNA, inherited from its parentage, which gives shape and characteristics to a living being and is comprised of *tatvas* (elements). Exploring this idea, Qadri experimented with it in many works in different colours and textures. It shows his search was for decoding the mysticism behind the composition of living and non-living forms, through meditative exercises and yoga sessions in pictorial versions. [Figure 3](#)

Figure 3



Figure 3 Untitled, Ink and dye on paper pasted on board, 2005

Source <https://www.storyltd.com/auction/item.aspx?eid=4340&lotno=4>

It was always a fascination for the artist to unveil the power of *Kundalini*- the *stree* or *Prakriti*- the energy which runs this universe through his engaging works, derived from Tantric forms, symbols, lines, circles, and triangles. Though they might have a special meaning for the artist, yet painting after painting, one comes across myriad manifestations of discovering the ultimate sublime bliss or the *Brahmanand* in this search of deciphering the genesis of thoughts, which lead to any action and creative exercise. [Figure 4](#)

Figure 4

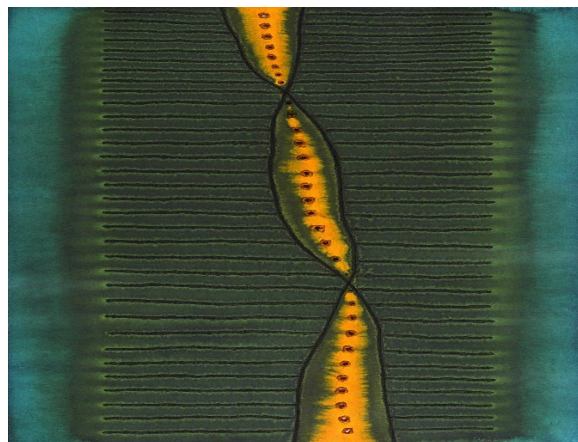


Figure 4 Untitled, Ink and dye on paper, 2002

Source <https://artandbeyond.gallery/artists/73-sohan-qadri/works/11741-sohan-qadri-untitled-2002/>

Awakening the inner self and raising it to touch the pinnacle of sublimity, where ego ceases to exist, and one is surrounded by infinite and boundless calm. All fears of life and death disappear and the soul merges with the Supreme Power. One feels the aura of the enlightenment and an exuberance of bliss. [Figure 5](#)

Figure 5

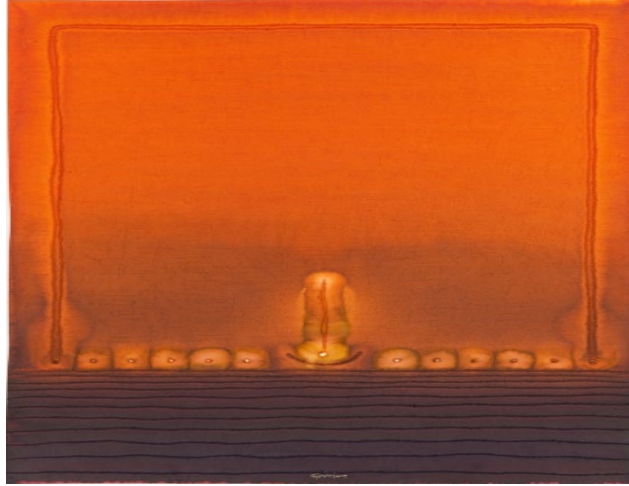


Figure 5 Bhakti, Ink, and dye on paper, 2009

Source <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/sohan-qadri-bhakti>

The literal meaning of the Sanskrit word *Amala* is 'one who is pure and spotless'. In the surging wave of thoughts and emotions, rising from the deep crevasses of the ocean, is the chord of consciousness, which penetrates the emotions like a flower of purity. This enables the spirit to savour the boundless bounties of peace, love, joy, and harmony. The colours of this painting are very soothing and mesmerising. [Figure 6](#)

Figure 6



Figure 6 Amala VII, Ink, and dye on paper, 2008

Source <https://www.sundaramtagore.com/artists/sohan-qadri/featured-works#7>

7. CONCLUSION

Looking at the body of work of this very sensitive and enlightened artist, whose encounters with self-discovery and self-realisation based on Indian philosophy and Tantric traditions, has placed this genre of art at the pristine heights of mysticism. One finds that Neo-Tantric art started with superficial understanding of Tantric art motifs and patterns, as the western artists adopted it, merely for creating new versions of geometrical compositions, without bothering to go into the unfathomed depths, hidden behind the formation of these forms. Some of the other artists in India may have also taken fancy to these western creations on so called Neo-Tantric art. One should appreciate the immense resolve of Sohan Qadri and his life-long dedication to unravel the mysteries of the Supreme Power through years of meditation and thorough understanding of yogic practices from the enlightened Gurus like Bhikham Giri, before taking up painting. This indeed is Sohan Qadri's quest for decoding the seed of spiritualism. Though he is considered as one of the prominent practitioners of Neo-Tantric art, but he is more of a contemplative artist. His art is embedded in the bedrock of Indian philosophy and the tantric ethos which were instrumental in aiding his search for Supreme Bliss.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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