



SADEQUAIN

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Grosvenor
Gallery



Sadequain photographed at the Lahore Museum in front of the 2nd Century Gandhara sculpture, *The Fasting Buddha*

“*The multiplicity of his gifts is reminiscent of Picasso*” wrote Bengali writer and diplomat Syed Waliullah of Sadequain Naqvi’s (1930–1987) paintings in April 1964.¹ Waliullah’s praise is often re-quoted in celebration of Sadequain’s career which, like Picasso’s, is characterized by a restless formal energy; by a multiplicity of gifts. As Sadequain himself put it, along with, “*making paintings and drawing caricatures, I write poetry in Urdu and also texts on philosophical and social questions... My choice of surface is not limited by temerity, for I have used paper, canvas, hard-board, Rexine, wood, leather and metal plates. I will use any kind of paint I can get my hands on.*”² Waliullah’s comparison is therefore apt but its repetition over the decades has too often reduced Sadequain’s myriad influences into a straight visual comparison with Picasso, to the detriment of a more complex understanding of his career and especially his years in Paris. By the time Sadequain first arrived in France in January 1961, Picasso was eighty-two years old and a full five decades from the invention of cubism, collage, and the assemblage. The Paris that Sadequain entered had long since moved on.

Sadequain first arrived in the city as a representative of Pakistan at the *Jeunes Peintures du Monde à Paris* (Young Painters of the World in Paris) conference, an international gathering of artists hosted by the UNESCO-affiliated International Association of Plastic Arts. Sadequain’s connection likely came via Pakistan’s branch of the International Association of Art Critics, which counted several of his supporters on its board and was then headquartered at the Arts Council in Karachi where he had recently held a solo exhibition and won the national prize for his painting *Man at Sandspit* (1960) at the third Pakistan National Exhibition. Unfortunately, when Sadequain arrived for the conference, he was shattered to learn that the event had been postponed, leaving him stranded in Paris with only a vague promise that it would take place at “some point” within the year. The prohibitive cost of flights would have made returning to Pakistan only to come back to France again impossible, and in a February letter home to Karachi, Sadequain wrote of his stress at the cost



Sadequain, *Man at Sandspit*, 1960

of food and struggle to obtain help from the Pakistan Embassy while he waited in Paris.³ Korean abstractionist Park Seo-Bo found himself in the same predicament and resorted to skipping meals and traveling only on foot until the conference finally took place in October 1961.⁴ Sadequain was not in attendance, having returned home to Karachi with a heavy heart at some point in the spring.

Fortunately, the second *Biennale de Paris* would provide him with another opportunity. The biennale was first launched in 1959 by writer and French Minister of Cultural Affairs, André Malraux, to provide a vehicle for French cultural diplomacy in the wake of WWII and its ongoing colonial wars, most notably in Algeria.⁵ In order to reinforce France’s image as the birthplace of modernism – a mantle increasingly being “stolen” by New York – the biennale set an age limit of 35 years to emphasize new and avant garde artistic practices. It was ironic, then, that the first few iterations turned into a national embarrassment when the invited guests including from dozens of countries across the decolonizing and postcolonial world showed up strongly in favor of new experiments in abstraction, making the more evenly spread French exhibition look shockingly out of date. For the second biennale in 1961, the French committee overcorrected and emphasized abstraction over figuration, setting off howls of distress from the French press at the biennale’s apparent surrender to “American” painterly trends.



Sadequain, *The Last Supper*, 1960

It was into this controversial atmosphere that Sadequain won the “Laureate” award for his painting, *The Last Supper*. The small Pakistan display was selected by Syed Waliullah, then-Commissioner General at the Pakistan Embassy in Paris, and included a figurative sculpture by Towfeek Aijaz and a (likely abstract) painting by Rashid Choudhury from what was then East Pakistan.⁶ As one of six Laureate winners in the painting category, Sadequain received a six-month stay in France supported by a bourse or stipend of 800 francs, and proceeds from the purchase of selected works by the French state along

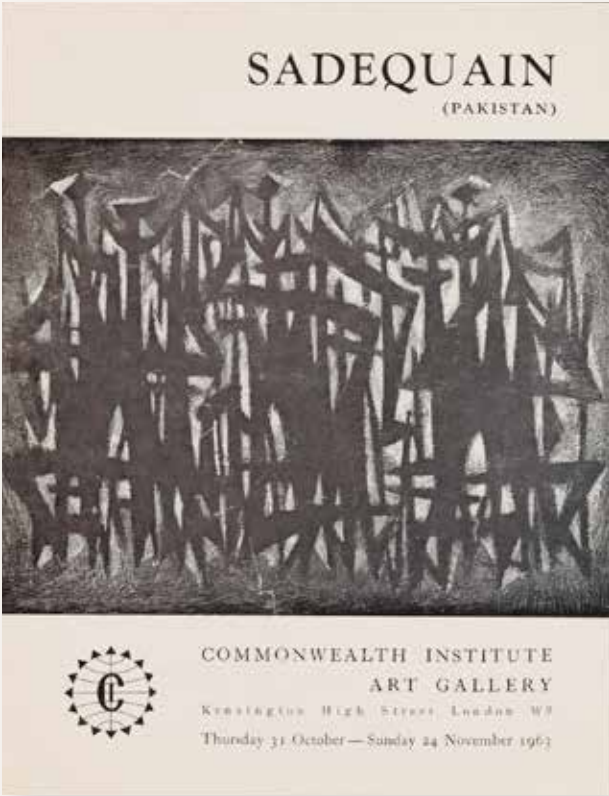
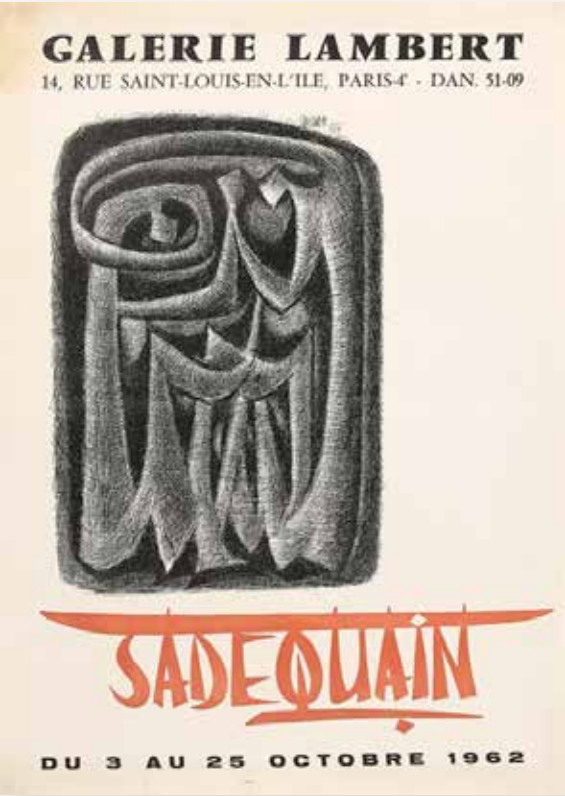


Le Monde et La Vie, April 1964

with exhibition opportunities in French municipal museums. His painting was in every way an ecumenical choice for the jury. Rendered in the spiky shapes of the cactus motif that Sadequain first discovered on a beach outside Karachi in 1958, it continues his long investigation into the formal potential of sacred calligraphy. His calligraphic abstraction found company within a global turn towards calligraphic mark-making in the 1950s and 1960s that included European painters like Georges Mathieu and Pierre Soulages, Muslim artists turning to the Arabic alphabet as a fertile source of aesthetic experimentation, and movements including the Tansaekhwa (monochrome painting) group in Korea and Bokujinkai (People of the Ink) collective in Japan that mined affinities between Zen calligraphy, pictographic script traditions, and modernist abstraction.

At the same time, Sadequain’s biennale entry was emphatically figurative, presenting the calligraphic glyph as both figure and body. *The Last Supper* evokes the “New Images of Man” genre of postwar figurative painting that explored a degraded, traumatized vision of humanity in the wake of WWII, while his spiky reprisal of Leonardo da Vinci’s masterpiece may have reminded the jury of figurative stalwart Bernard Buffet, a darling of the French art market and prominent representative of figuration at the 1961 biennale. Like Sadequain, Buffet had a penchant for stringy, linear silhouettes and historicist themes including Christian iconography. Today, however, Buffet’s fame has mostly been forgotten, disfiguring our ability to understand the full context of the French postwar art world and how artists like Sadequain moved through and found their own opportunities within it.

Sadequain’s exhibitions at Galerie Lambert, Paris, 1962, and at the Commonwealth Institute Art Gallery, London, 1963



Thus straddling a fraught line between abstraction and figuration, Sadequain found considerable success in Paris. He remained in the city for several years after his Laureate fellowship, finally leaving in early 1967. Letters home alternate between excitement about possible and upcoming gallery opportunities and expressions of struggle with money, finding places to live, and missing home and family. In late 1962, Sadequain held a solo exhibition at Galerie Lambert, and found assistance from a Pakistani army Major Iqbal M. Shah, who accommodated him in his home in Paris. In summer 1963, Sadequain left for a three-month State Department fellowship in the United States where he visited San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York, and Washington, D.C., and held a well-reviewed solo exhibition at the Henri Gallery.⁷ Later in the summer, he decamped to Gloucester in Massachusetts to work on paintings for an October exhibition at the Commonwealth Institute in London, for which he set sail along with his paintings in September that year.⁸ In December he returned to Paris where he was soon met with news that an “accredited and elite” jury had selected him to illustrate Albert Camus’ 1942 novel *L’Étranger* or *The Stranger* on behalf of the “bibliophile club” of the ritzy Automobile-Club de France, founded in 1895 and situated on the Place de la Concorde in central Paris.



The Stranger tells the story of Meursault, a French *pied noir* settler in colonial Algeria who shoots an Algerian acquaintance for no other reason than the sun being in his eyes. For his crime, Meursault is tried and eventually executed by guillotine. For postcolonial theorist Edward Said, the novel is a prime example of colonial whitewashing that naturalizes Meursault’s colonial agency through its dedicated focus on his individual point of view.⁹ Scholars like Alice Kaplan suggest a more ambivalent reading of the novel via Camus’ own loathing of the French colonial state growing up in Algeria as a young writer and journalist.¹⁰ The timing of Sadequain’s commission is particularly notable given that it fell just two years after Algerian independence in 1962 and four years after Camus’ death in a car crash. As historian Matthew Connelly lays out, however, President Charles de Gaulle was already at work in the early 1960s recasting Algeria’s brutal struggle for liberation as a testament to French magnanimity; that France had *given* Algeria its independence as an extreme though belated act of generosity.¹¹

Sadequain’s illustrations provide the best and only indication of his own reaction to the novel and its colonial implications. His response to the book is also a full-circle moment visually. The frontispiece and *cul-de-lampe* or tailpiece illustrations recall the twisted, calligraphic shapes of paintings like *The Last Supper* that Sadequain pursued with remarkable consistency through his years in Paris, while the full-color lithographic illustrations are entirely narrative and return him to the figurative style of his paintings and murals of the 1950s. In the color illustrations, Sadequain frequently departs from Meursault’s virulent impiety, adding monsters and even a Christ-like figure to scenes in which Meursault disavows the possibility of salvation. Curiously, Sadequain also used his own image to depict Meursault, whose straight nose and long frame and fingers are strikingly similar to Sadequain’s many self-portraits.

A mistake during the early publishing process meant that the first English translations of the novel came out with two different titles, *The Outsider* in the UK and *The Stranger* in the United States.¹² Sadequain knew the novel as *The Outsider* and perhaps this identification resonated with him after four years away from home. He likely knew that possible translations of the French word “étranger” also include “alien” and “foreigner.” Famously, the first translation of *The Stranger*, by English translator Stuart Gilbert was wildly problematic, transforming the terse detachment of Camus’ original prose into decorated, over-wrought sentences that turned Meursault into a much more sympathetic (and even pathetic) figure than Camus would have ever intended.

Perhaps Sadequain was seduced by Gilbert’s conciliatory rendering of Meursault. Several of his illustrations spring directly from Gilbert’s visual additions. The red horizon and toothy monster of Sadequain’s dramatic final illustration, for example, are hinted at in Gilbert’s prose but nowhere to be found in the original text. With this in mind, Sadequain’s response to *The Stranger* could easily be read as a mistranslation of a mistranslation. A kinder assessment is that his illustrations provide a powerfully dualistic reading of a novel that is divided against itself. Sadequain depicts Meursault as both antagonist and victim, impassioned and apathetic, and as murderer

and someone murdered. With his calligraphic abstractions and curious self-presentation as Meursault, Sadequain also brings a distinctly Muslim subjectivity into a text that controversially excludes all but the colonizer’s point of view. Finally, the Camus project allowed Sadequain to aggregate the latent diversity of his own visual language into one remarkable object, holding abstraction and figuration together but also separately in an art world that still internally contested the validity of both. In the shape of the book, Sadequain discovered a visual receptacle that could fully accommodate his restless, itinerant sense of style. Or as one critic once fondly described it, as the “multiplicity of his gifts.”

Gemma Sharpe

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Cleveland Institute of Art

Notes

1. Syed Waliullah, “Un Peintre Pakistanais: Sadequain,” *Le Monde et La Vie*, Paris, April 1964: 68.
2. S. M. Sadequain and W. K. Bhatti, “On My Work as a Painter in Pakistan,” *Leonardo* 7, no. 4 (1974): 345.
3. Letter dated February 17th, 1961. Sadequain, *Ruq’at-i Sadiqaini* (Matbu’at-i Irfani, 1979), np.
4. Kate Lim, *Park Seo-Bo: From Avant-Garde to Ecriture* (Books Actually, 2014), 101–22.
5. Herman Lebovics, *Mona Lisa’s Escort: Andre Malraux and the Reinvention of French Culture*, (Cornell University Press, 1999), 88–89.
6. Bangladesh after 1971.
7. “Pakistani Artist Visiting U.S.,” *Pakistan Affairs* v.16–17 (1964 1963): 56.
8. Letters dated August 15, 20, and September 9, 1963. Sadequain, *Ruq’at-i Sadiqaini*, np.
9. Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (Knopf, 1993), 59–60, 204–24.
10. Alice Kaplan, *Looking for The Stranger: Albert Camus and the Life of a Literary Classic* (University of Chicago Press, 2018).
11. Matthew Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria’s Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era* (Oxford University Press, 2003), 271.
12. Kaplan, *Looking for The Stranger*, 178–79.

Syed Sadequain

Overleaf:
Untitled (The Angel of Serenity)
Circa 1963

Signed ‘SADEQUAIN’ lower right
Oil on canvas
75 x 100 cm
29 1/2 x 39 3/8 in



Untitled (Figure with Hands), 1962



Syed Waliullah (1922-1971) was a Bengali novelist, short-story writer and playwright, from East Pakistan, now Bangladesh. Born in Chittagong in British India, Waliullah emerged as one of the most significant Bengali literary figures of the mid-twentieth century. Following Partition in 1947, Waliullah moved from Calcutta to Dhaka and worked for Radio Pakistan, before transferring to Karachi in 1949. He then joined the civil service and served as press attaché in New Delhi from 1951-52. Over the next decade he served in Australia, Indonesia, Pakistan and Europe, finally settling in Paris in 1961 as the First Secretary to the Embassy of Pakistan. Waliullah also wrote several articles on contemporary artists for Pakistani and French journals, including texts on Zubeida Agha, Zainul Abedin and Sadequain, amongst others.

Alongside his diplomatic work, Waliullah was also Pakistan’s Commissioner-General for the 1961 Paris Biennale. Due to the submission of too many works to the 1961 biennale committee, it was his responsibility to select those to represent Pakistan. For Sadequain, he chose his monumental painting *The Last Supper*. For this work, Sadequain was declared a Laureate in the under-35 category. Part of the prize was a six-month residency grant, worth 800 francs a month, which enabled him to remain and work in France, marking the beginning of an important period in his career in Paris. As a prize winner, his paintings and drawings were exhibited at the Maison de Culture du Havre in 1962 alongside Flavio Shiro and Kuzgun Acar.

French archives also show that three of Sadequain’s works were bought for the French state by the art critic and general delegate of the Paris Biennale, Raymond Cogniat. He selected two drawings, *Towards Light* and *Judgement in Paris*, and an oil painting, *Mother and Child*, for a total of 1,150 francs.

Syed Waliullah was also a patron of Sadequain’s and owned several works by the artist. *Untitled (The Angel of Serenity)* was painted around 1963 and appears in several dated sketches from that period. The heavily textured background is made up entirely of his sgraffito technique of layering paint, then scratching it off again to reveal form and depth – something also seen in *A Group of Standing Figures*, and *Teaching in Paris*.

The imagery corresponds to a couplet written by Sadequain where he tells of his desire to have the Angel of Serenity by his side when death came to him. In this painting, the artist’s hands reach out of the abyss, grasping for the divine figure floating above him. In 1963, journalist Thomas Dowling wrote of Sadequain’s obsession with his hands in an article for the journal Panorama:

“...he is nonetheless a man of prodigious energy. The summary of this energy is in his long thin hands, which are constantly in motion. Artists are often obsessed with their own faces and revel in self-portraiture; Sadequain is obsessed with his hands. He has painted these hands with their hooked knuckles and distended, clutching fingers over and over again until his hands have become a second signature in his paintings.” Thomas Dowling, ‘Pakistan’s Prolific Painter’, Panorama, September 1963



Untitled (Hands), 1963

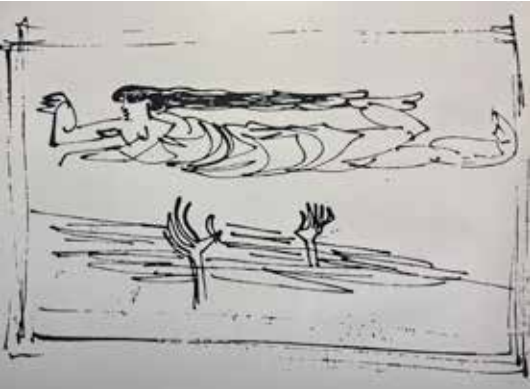
Elements of the finished painting appear in several sketches and preparatory works, created in 1962 and ‘63. As was often seen in his work, Sadequain would revisit the image of the Angel of Serenity several times over the next 25 years of his life.

Syed Sadequain

Untitled (The Angel of Serenity)
Circa 1963

Signed ‘SADEQUAIN’ lower right

Oil on canvas
75 x 100 cm
29 1/2 x 39 3/8 in



Untitled (Study), Circa 1963

Provenance

The Artist;
The collection of Syed Waliullah, Paris;
By descent;

*No visions, no voices will herald my death
O Angel of Serenity
Be at my side
Restlessness springs from the core of my being
Ah, Peace! Come to me the day
Death does arrive*

Rubaiyat of Sadequain, published in 1970,
translated by Mahmoud Jamal,
Sadequain, The Holy Sinner, Karachi, 2003



02

Syed Sadequain

Untitled (Figures)
1961

Signed and dated 'SADEQUAIN 2.4.61'
lower right

Marker on card
77 x 57.5 cm
30 5/16 x 22 5/8 in

Provenance

The Artist;
The collection of Syed Waliullah, Paris;
By descent;



03

Syed Sadequain

Untitled
1961

Signed and dated 'SADEQUAIN 31.3.61'
lower right

Marker on card
77 x 57.5 cm
30 5/16 x 22 5/8 in

Provenance

Private collection



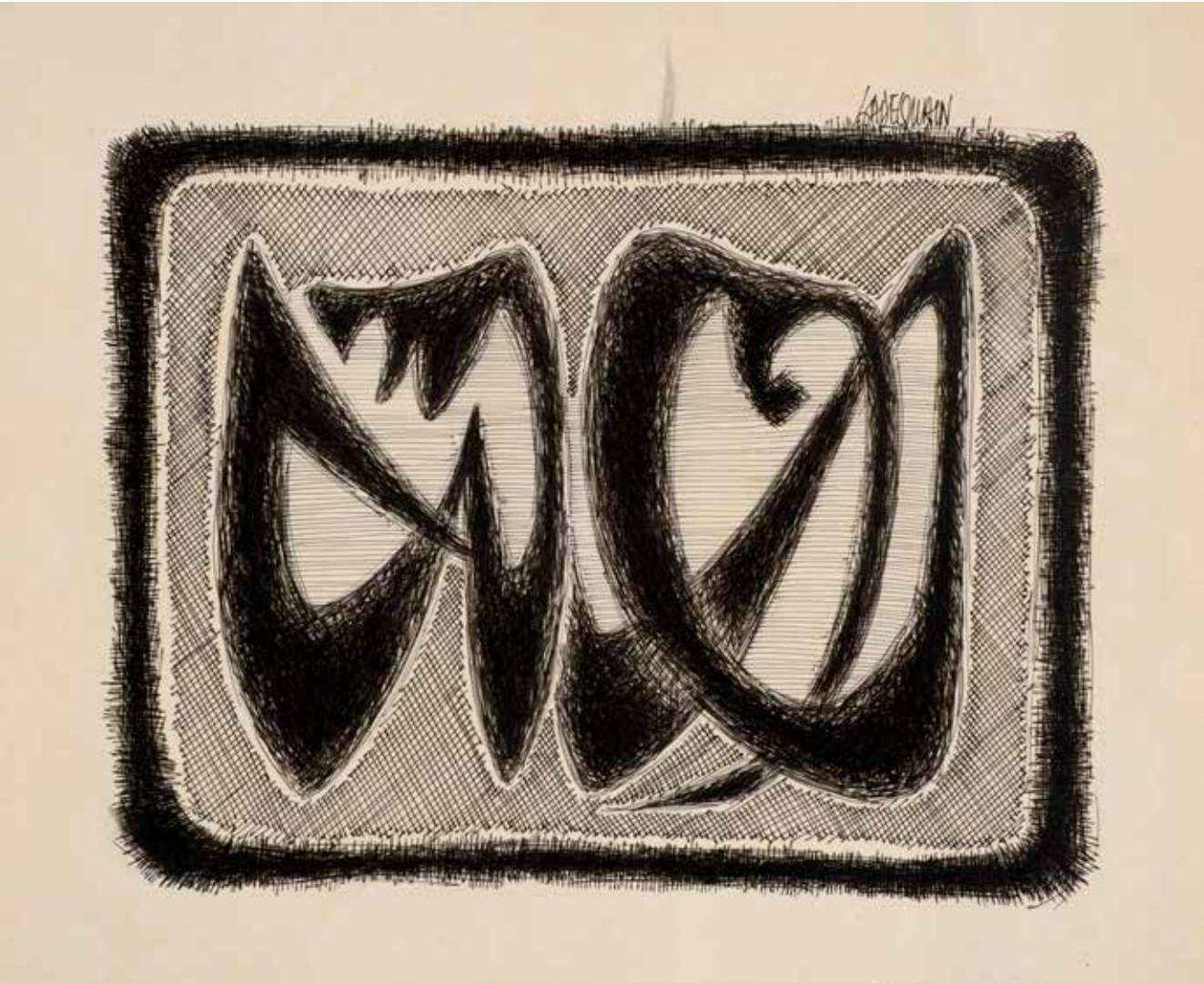
04

Syed Sadequain

Untitled (Two Figures)
1962

Signed and dated 'SADEQUAIN 16/5/62'
upper right

Pen and ink on paper
27 x 32 cm
10 5/8 x 12 5/8 in

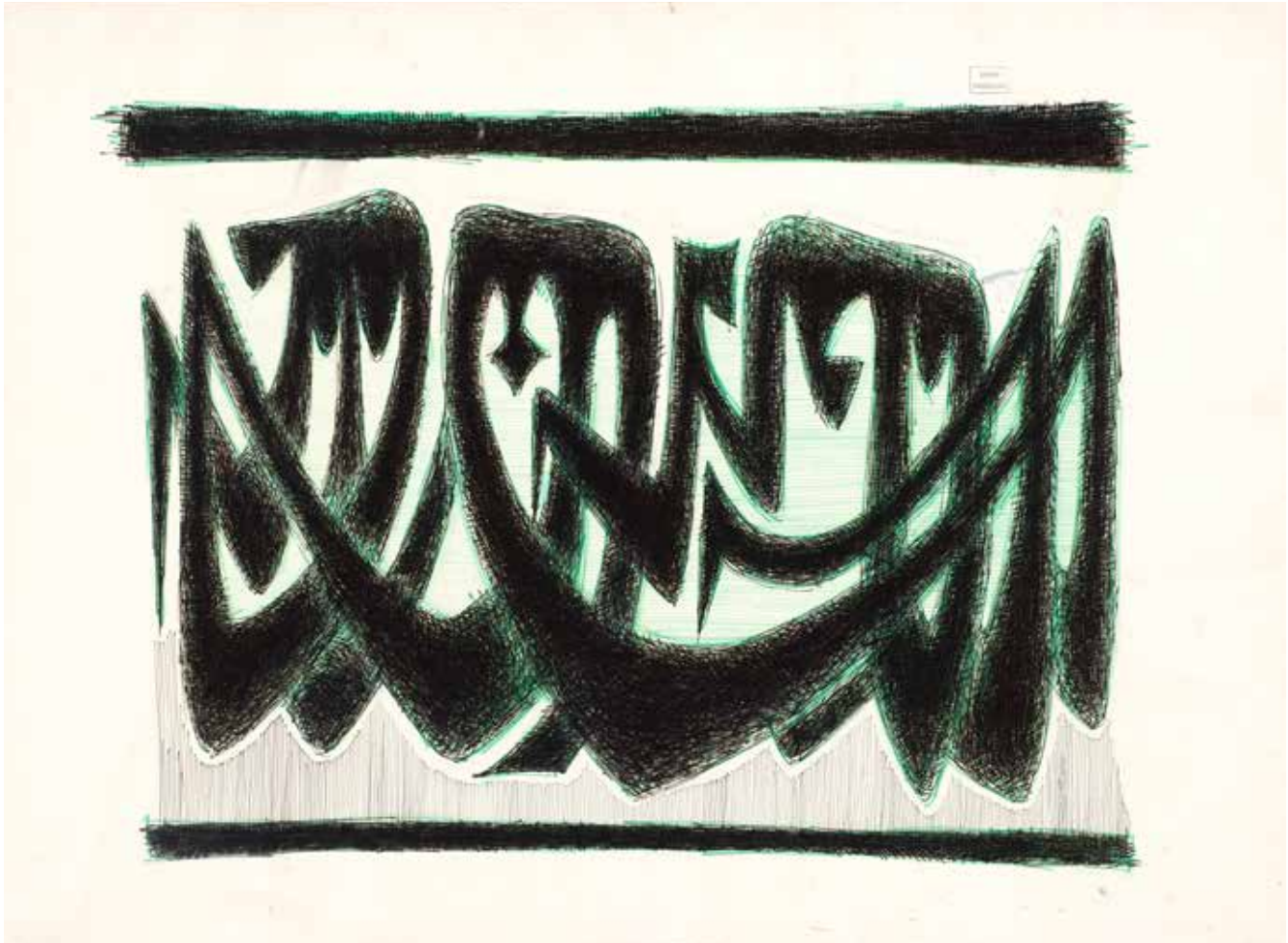


05

Syed Sadequain

Untitled (Line of Figures)
Circa 1962

Stamped 'Atelier Sadequain' upper right
Pen and ink and marker on paper
55 x 75 cm
21 5/8 x 29 1/2 in



Provenance

Collection of Francois Forges, Paris;
Private German collection;
Thence by descent

Exhibitions

London, Grosvenor Gallery,
South Asian Modern Art 2024,
13 June–5 July 2024, no. 25,
illustrated in exhibition catalogue pg. 67

Syed Sadequain

A Group of Standing Figures
1963

Signed and dated ‘Sadequain 1963’
upper centre

Oil on canvas
120.1 x 88.4 cm
47 1/4 x 34 3/4 in



Image from Sadequain’s illustrations
for *L’Étranger*.

Provenance

Collection of Abu Shamim Arif, Pakistan;
Private collection

Exhibitions

Karachi, Mohatta Palace Museum, *Sadequain: The Holy Sinner*,
1 February–5 August 2003, no. 45

Literature

Fellowship, Monthly Journal of Karachi Central Lions Club,
unpaginated, 1966
Abdul Hamid Akhund et al, *Sadequain: The Holy Sinner*,
Karachi, Mohatta Palace Museum in collaboration with
Unilever Pakistan, 2003, pg. 198, plate no. 150

A Group of Standing Figures depicts elongated figures tightly
grouped together, their angular heads referencing diacritic marks in
Urdu script. Painted in July 1963, the same month as his exhibition
at Henri Gallery in Washington DC, and shortly before his
exhibition at the Commonwealth Institute Art Gallery in London
in October–November that year. There is a painting listed in the
London exhibition catalogue with the same title as this, so it may
well have appeared in that exhibition, alongside seminal works
such as *The Last Supper*, *Judgement in Paris* and *The Three Graces*.

This painting, along with *Imagination*, was exhibited and published
in the catalogue for the 2003 exhibition *Sadequain, The Holy Sinner*,
held at Mohatta Palace Museum in Karachi. These two paintings
were both previously in the collection of Abu Shamim Arif, an
eminent Pakistani civil servant and patron of the arts, who was a
close friend of Sadequain’s. He was one of the speakers at the first
anniversary of the artist’s death in February 1988.

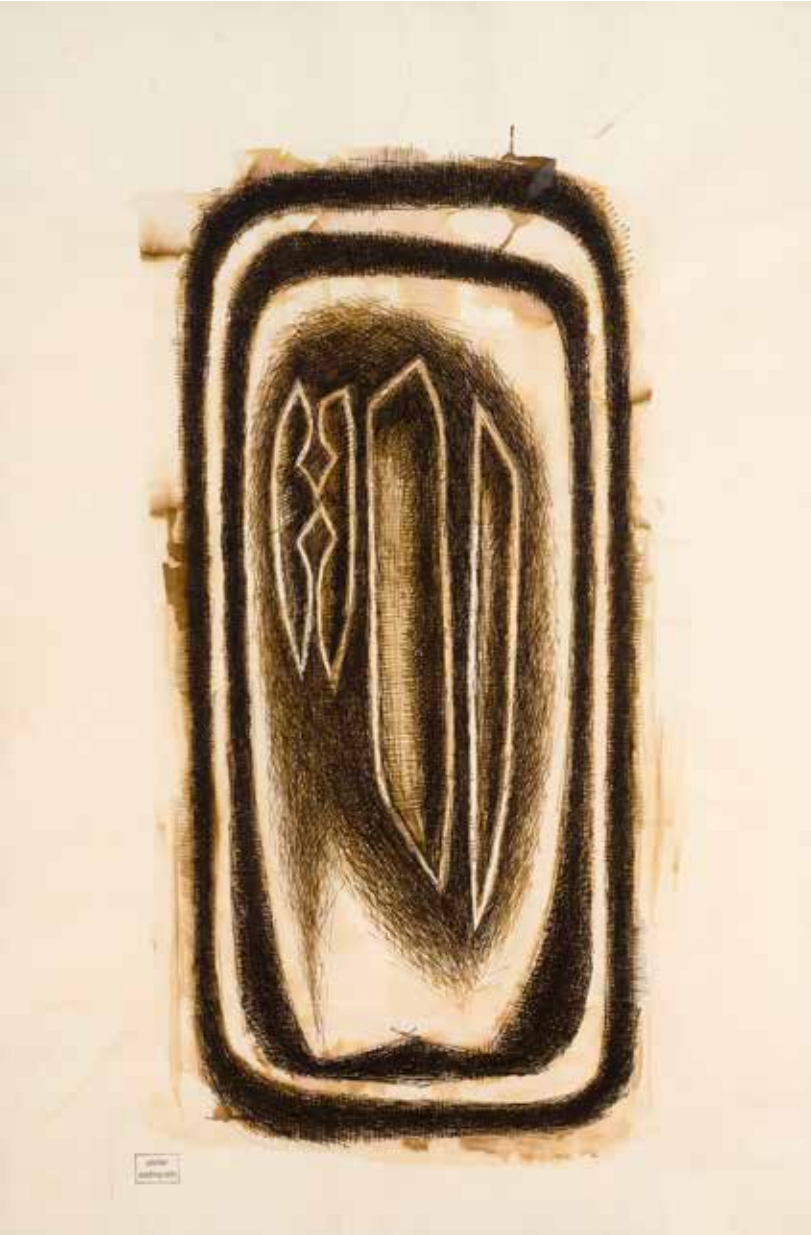


Syed Sadequain

Untitled (Two Entwined Figures)
Circa 1962

‘Atelier Sadequain’ stamped lower left

Pen and ink and wash on paper
75 x 54 cm
29 1/2 x 21 1/4 in



Provenance

M. Jean Forges, Paris;
Thence by descent;
Grosvenor Gallery, London

Syed Sadequain

Untitled (Entwined Figures)
1963

Inscribed ‘A flowmaster by SADEQUAIN
1963/ Presented as an humble gift
to Dr. and Mrs. Ehsan Rashid with
Best Regards/ Karachi. June 1982’

Marker on paper
65 x 50 cm
25 5/8 x 19 3/4 in



Provenance

Private Collection, Pakistan,
(acquired directly from the Artist);
Private Collection, Lahore, (gifted by the above)

Exhibitions

South Asian Modern Art 2023,
Grosvenor Gallery, London, 8-30 June, No.19,
(illustrated in the exhibition catalogue)

Syed Sadequain

Teaching in Paris
1967
Signed and dated ‘Sadequain/ 13.1.’67’
lower right; further signed, dated,
titled and inscribed on the reverse

Oil on canvas
211.5 x 150.5 cm
83 1/4 x 59 1/4 in

Provenance
The Dutilleul family collection, Paris

Before Sadequain left Paris in 1967, he painted a suite of works in late 1966 and early 1967 depicting characteristic Parisian scenes: dancers, acrobats, figures in the street and the artist at work, recalling Léger’s *Cirque series*, or Picasso and Matisse’s *Dancer series*.

The palette of greys and blues, as well as the application of paint combined with the scratching away of the surface are a continuation of Sadequain’s technique from the late 1950s and early 1960s.

However, these works mark a departure to a more fluid and abstract style, nevertheless determined by human scale and figurative elements. This looseness is the result of Sadequain living and working in Paris and the rubbing of shoulders with artists of the École de Paris, such as Atlan, Soulages, Poliakoff, Michaux etc.

A similar painting was displayed at Tate Modern, London, as part of the exhibition, *The Shape of Words*, alongside work by Etel Adnan, Parviz Tanavoli, Paul Klee, Ibrahim Salahi amongst others.



Syed Sadequain

Circus Acrobats
1966

Signed, dated, titled and inscribed
‘Painted at Paris’ verso

Oil on canvas
115 x 90 cm
45 1/4 x 35 3/8 in

Provenance

The Dutilleul family collection, Paris

“[These works] connects to the transnational development of calligraphic abstraction – both the historical tradition it hinges on and in which Sadequain was trained, and its twentieth-century reinterpretation – as well as to the art of other key contributors of the international art scene of postwar Paris.

‘Stylistically, the broad sweeping lines and semi-abstract figures of the painting prefigure Sadequain’s later calligraphic works as well as the impressive murals he would accomplish on his return to Pakistan. These include commissions for the entrance hall of the Lahore Museum; Punjab University, Lahore; the ceiling of Frere Hall, Karachi and the Powerhouse of the Mangla Dam.’

Devika Singh, May 2021



Syed Sadequain

Dancing Figures
1966

Signed, dated, titled, and inscribed
‘DANCING FIGURES/ Painted
at Paris/ Sadequain/ 19/9/66’ on
the reverse

Oil on canvas
90 x 115 cm
35 3/8 x 45 1/4 in



Provenance

The Dutilleul family collection, Paris

Publications

Sadequain, The Stranger in Paris, Grosvenor Gallery,
London, 2021, pg. 9

*‘My primary concern is humanity, its
tragedies and its struggles to rise above
the privations of physical existence.’*

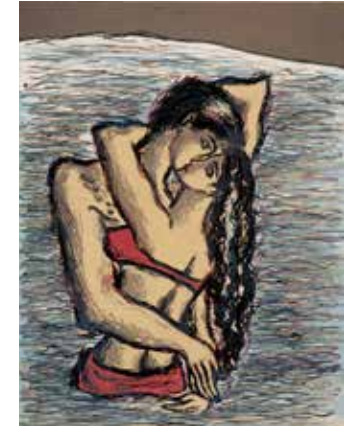
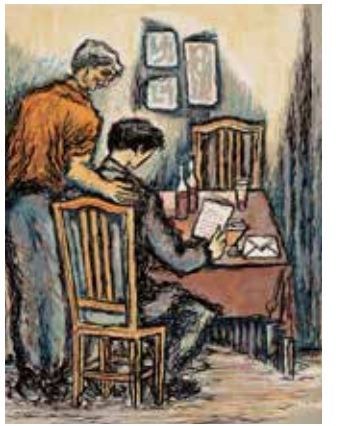
Sadequain, 1974

Syed Sadequain’s illustrations for Albert Camus’ *L’Étranger*,
published by Les Bibliophiles de l’Automobile Club de France,
1966

Text by Albert Camus (1942), original lithographs by Syed
Sadequain, published by Les Bibliophiles de l’Automobile-Club
de France, printed on ‘vélín de Rives’ with deckled edges and
issued loose in green cloth portfolio with gilt title on spine and
contained in a matching cloth box, pp. 146 with 35 original
lithographs, 22 of which are in colour and 3 are double-page,
each edition numbered and dedicated to a member of l’A.C.F.,
from an edition of 150

Folio: 35 x 5.5 x 27 cm, 13 3/4 x 2 1/8 x 10 5/8 in





*Why did I strangle my own self?
Why did I make my own arms bleed?
Why, on hearing my own rumblings,
did I wonder:
Who is this in the wilderness?*

The rubaiyat of Sadequain, 1970

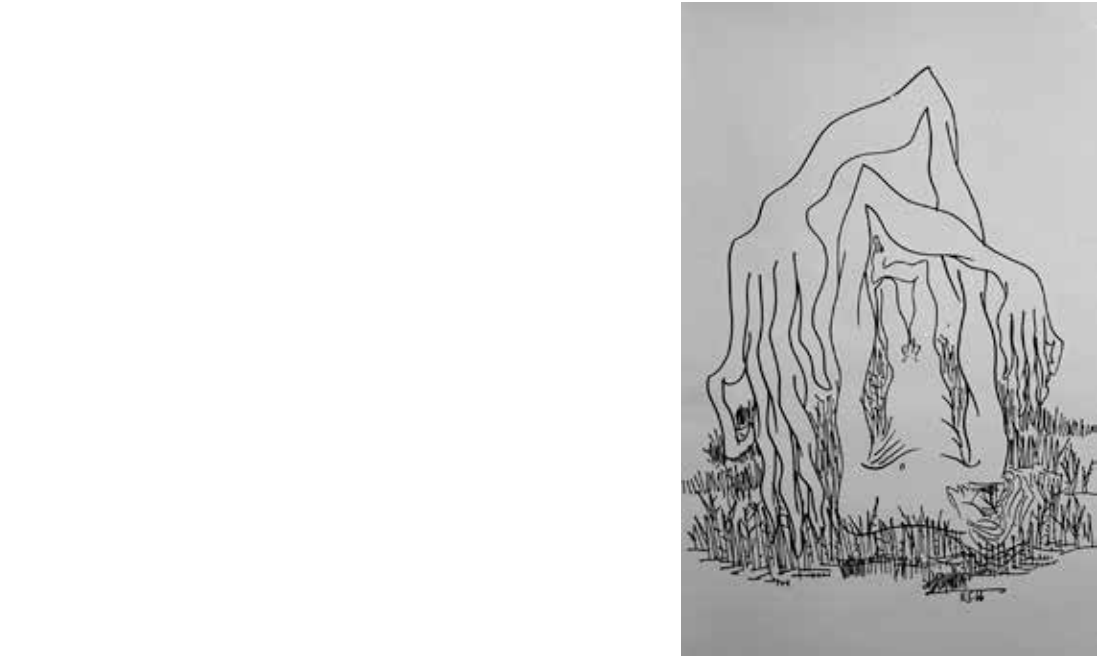


Syed Sadequain

Imagination, (The Webbed)
1968

Signed and dated ‘SADEQUAIN Dec 1968’
lower left

Oil on board
120.6 x 88.2 cm
47 1/2 x 34 3/4 in



Provenance

Collection of Abu Shamim Arif, Pakistan;
Private collection, Pakistan;
Private collection

Exhibitions

Karachi, Mohatta Palace Museum, *Sadequain: The Holy Sinner*,
1 February–5 August 2003, no. 44

Publications

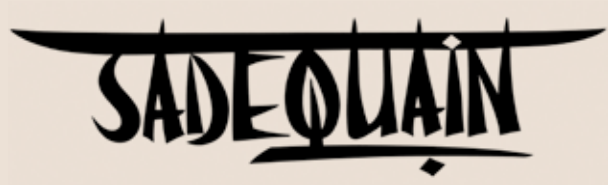
Abdul Hamid Akhund et al., *Sadequain: The Holy Sinner*,
Mohatta Palace Museum, Karachi, 2002, pg. 299, plate 151

In this self-portrait Sadequain is shown with his arms and legs contorted around his body, his characteristically long fingers draping down towards the ground like the boughs of a tree. The image was much adapted by Sadequain, mainly as drawings, and appeared several times in his illustrations for *L'Étranger* (see previous page). A line drawing of this composition was published in the 1966 book *Sadequain, Sketches and Drawings*; Editions Mystique, under the title *The Webbed*.

Formerly in the collection of the Artist’s friend Abu Shamim Arif, this painting was exhibited at the 2003 exhibition *Sadequain: The Holy Sinner* and published in the monumental exhibition catalogue.



**Grosvenor
Gallery**



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