

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

The David Booth Department of Conservation

TITLE: *Meem*

MUSEUM No.: 83.2024

ARTIST: Anwar Jalal Shemza

DATE: 1965

MEDIUM: Oil on canvas

DIMENSIONS: 36 x 36 in.

SIGNATURE: Recto: Signed and dated in Urdu, lower left, in black paint; verso: Signed and dated "Shemza 1964" in upper center with an arrow pointing up, in black paint

CONSERVATORS: Laura Richter Le and Michael Duffy

DATE OF EXAMINATION: February 28, 2024

PROVENANCE

GM. Butcher, The Butcher Family Collection

EXHIBITION HISTORY

Postwar: Art Between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945-1965, Haus Der Kunst, Munich, Germany (2016-2017)

A J Shemza and R Silvester, Paintings, Prints, Enamels and Reliefs, Commonwealth Institute, Edinburgh (1969)

ART HISTORICAL INFORMATION

This work is one of several that the artist made based off of the letter *meem* – as the first letter of the prophet Muhammad's name, as well as his wife Mary's. It takes a hard, geometrical approach to the normally sinuous lines of the Urdu script and represents the first time the artist directly engages with script in the oeuvre.¹

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Dadi, Iftikhar. 2015. *Anwar Jalal Shemza*. London: Ridinghouse.

Dadi, Iftikhar. 2009. "Shemza and Calligraphic Abstraction." London: Green Cardamom.

Shemza, Aphra. "Anwar Jalal Shemza: A Talk with Aphra Shemza." Filmed 22 July, 2021.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BvfisK2v-5I>.

¹ Dadi, 2015, 183.

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DESCRIPTION

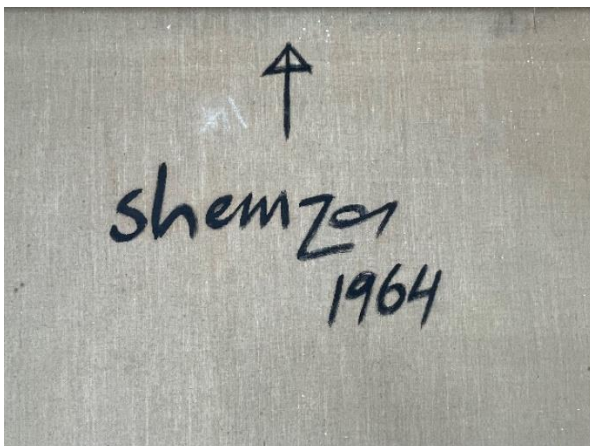
The painting is stretched on a four-member stretcher with 8 keys. The canvas is attached to the stretcher with nails on the verso. There are additionally staples through the verso that were added for wrapping. There are two very small D-rings.

There is an artist applied ground that extends around the tacking edges. The paint is thinly and evenly applied, also extending around the tacking edges. Across the painting, there are two paint layers, with the lower layer showing through the color above according the brush pattern. In the red background, there are only faint traces of the blue paint below. In the central design, the yellow lower layer is visible in larger scattered patches.

There is a gray wooden strip frame around the edges, attaches with thin nails through the tacking edges. It is presumed to be an artist's frame, as it is present in a photograph of Shemza with the painting in 1969 (see below).



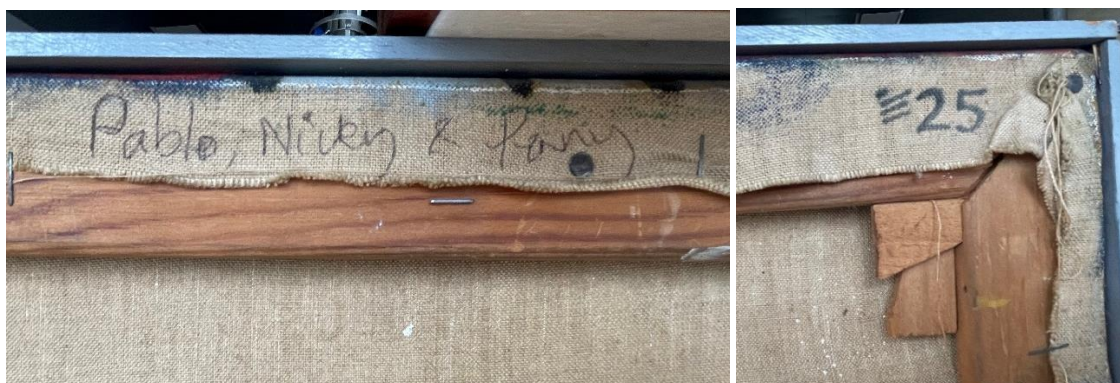
Shemza at Commonwealth Institute, Edinburgh, 1969



Signature in black paint on upper center of canvas verso

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Inscriptions along upper turnover edge of canvas verso

CONDITION

There are drip lines along the right edge of the painting, leaving the surface matte and slightly blanching in portions. There are abrasions around the turnover edge, slightly darkening the paint surface.

There are two small punctures through the canvas in the bottom center, potentially caused by debris between the canvas and stretcher bar. There is another puncture along the right edge, just above the center.

There are scattered cracks, some of which are slightly raised, found across the paint surface. See transmitted light photograph for crack location. There are some thin lines of inpainting covering some cracks (see condition map) that are slightly mismatched – more pink in hue. Additionally, there is adhesive along the inpainting/cracks that is glossier than the original paint (most noticeably over the matte black paint).

The canvas has a draw in the upper left corner, along with a small dent to the right. There are faint crack lines corresponding with the upper and lower stretcher bars.

The verso is dirty, with larger pieces of dust and debris on the lower stretcher bar. Around the edges of the canvas, there are loose threads, up to 10 in long, found especially on the back, right side.

The frame is dirty around the edges, with a larger stain on the top right (see condition images).

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■ Drips

■ Inpainting

■ Cracks

■ Losses

■ Scratches

■ Surface distortion

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Drips down the right side



Surface distortion,
upper left



Punctures through the canvas,
lower center



Inpainting, lower center



Cracks, center left



Stain on frame, upper right



Dirt and debris on verso

TESTING

The paint is soluble in: water, saliva,
Insoluble in: isopropanol, petroleum benzine, toluene, xylene

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TREATMENT

- 1) The verso was dusted with a vacuum and brush, followed by soot sponges. Additionally, grime stuck behind the stretcher bars was removed with masking tape attached to a cardstock strip.
- 2) The frame was cleaned with cosmetic sponges and saliva to remove stains and accretions. Losses were inpainted with Qor colors.
- 3) Punctures through the canvas were consolidated with Aquazol 200 10% in isopropanol, filled with Modostuc, and inpainted with Qor colors in isopropanol.
- 4) Loose threads on the verso were held in place with a dot of 50:50 Lascaux 303 HV:498 HV.
- 5) Mismatched retouching was adjusted with Qor colors in isopropanol.
- 6) Glossy areas in the black paint, distracting tide lines from the drips, and the darkest abrasions were toned back with Gouache paint in matte areas and Qor colors for glossier areas. The adhesive and drip marks were both generally left intact and adjusted with small points of inpainting given that the original paint is water sensitive and would risk damage with cleaning.
- 7) A coroplast backing board was added, and the D-rings were replaced with slightly larger and stronger ones.



During Treatment: Saliva cleaning of the frame



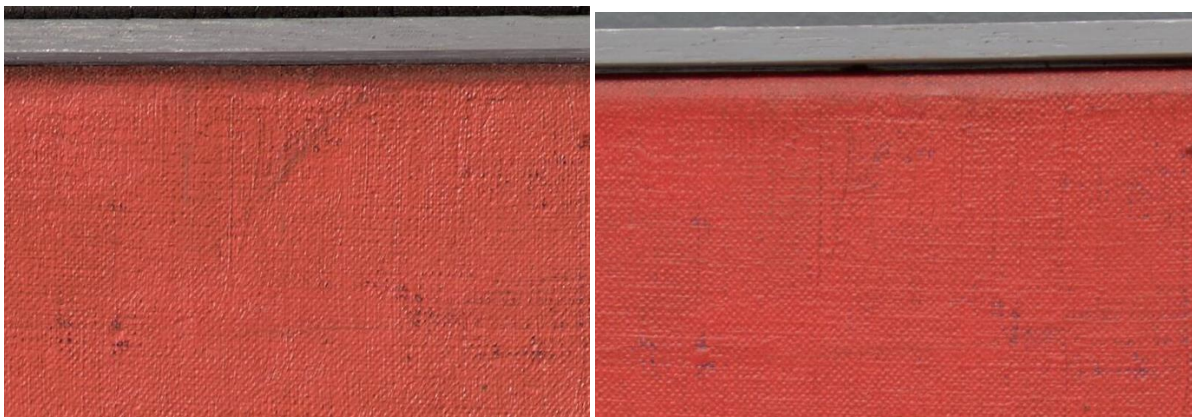
Before (Left) and After (Right) Treatment: Filling and inpainting punctures through lower, center edge of canvas

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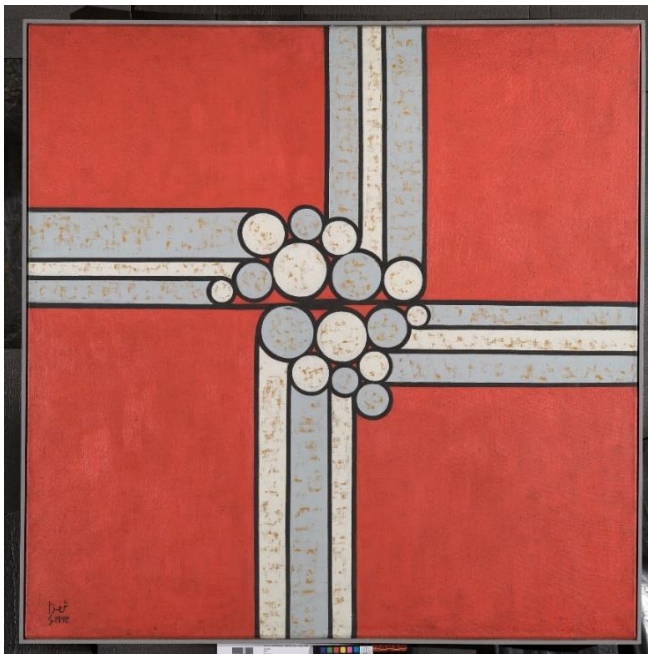


Before (Left) and After (Right) Treatment: Adjusting gloss from past consolidation adhesive/inpainting using gouache



Before (Left) and After (Right) Treatment: Inpainting abrasion on upper right edge

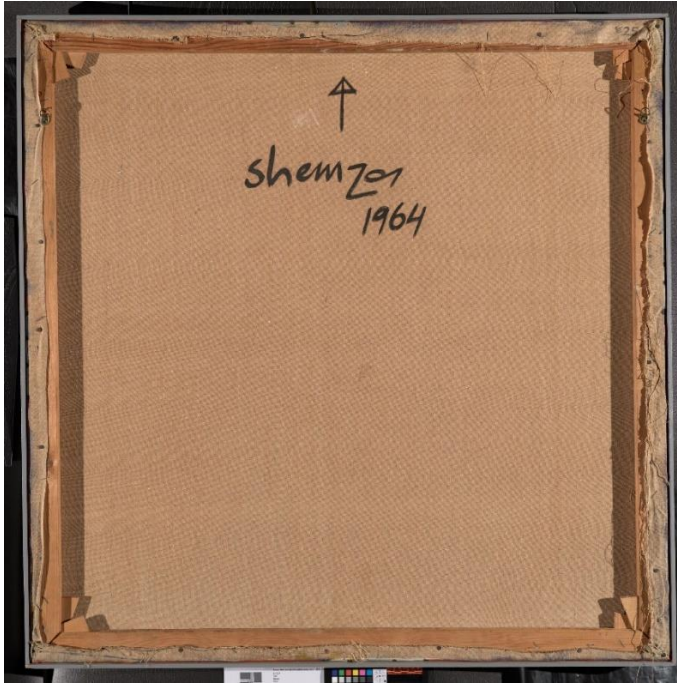
IMAGES



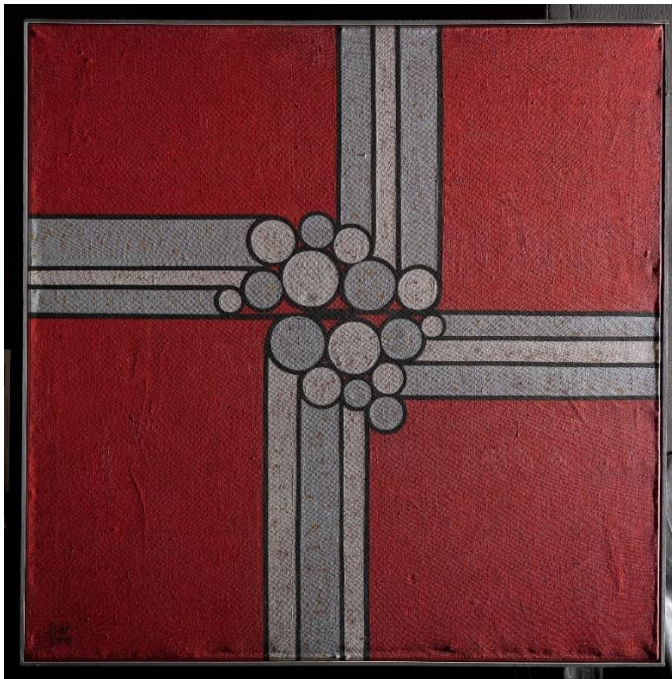
Before Treatment, Recto

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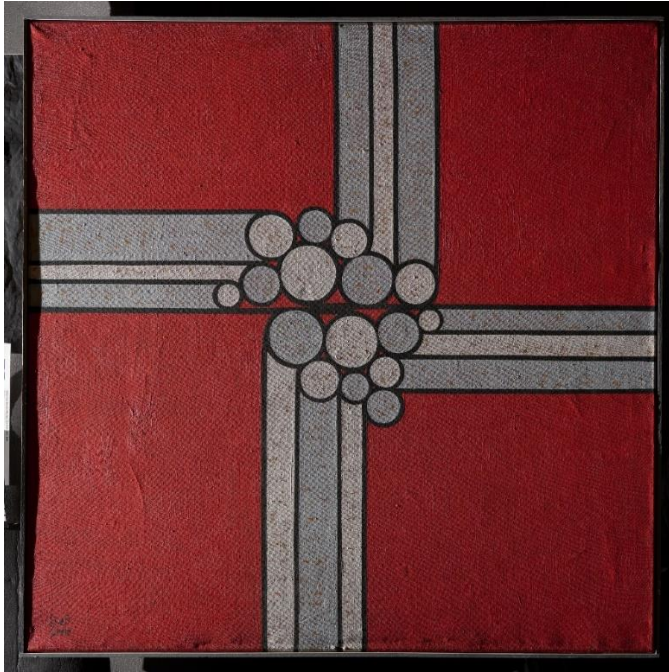
Before Treatment, Verso



Before Treatment, Raking Light

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Before Treatment, Raking Light



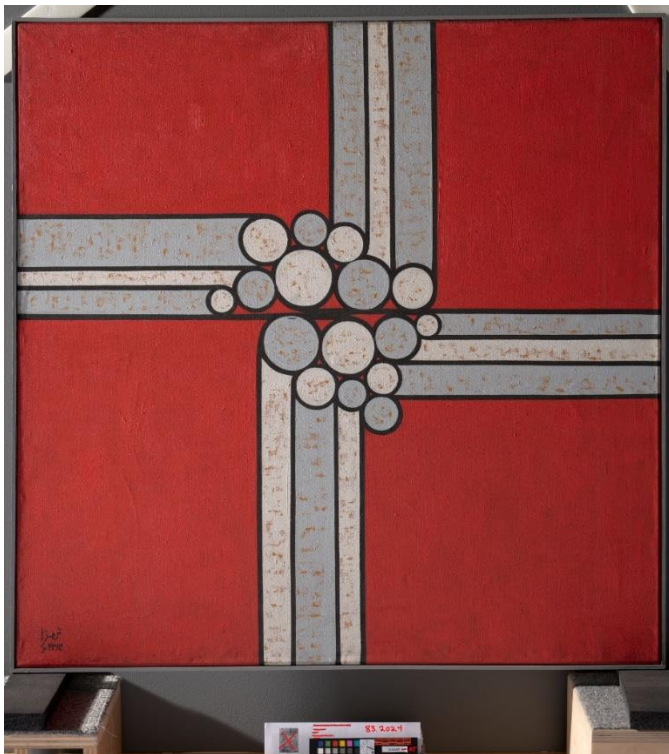
Before Treatment, Transmitted Light

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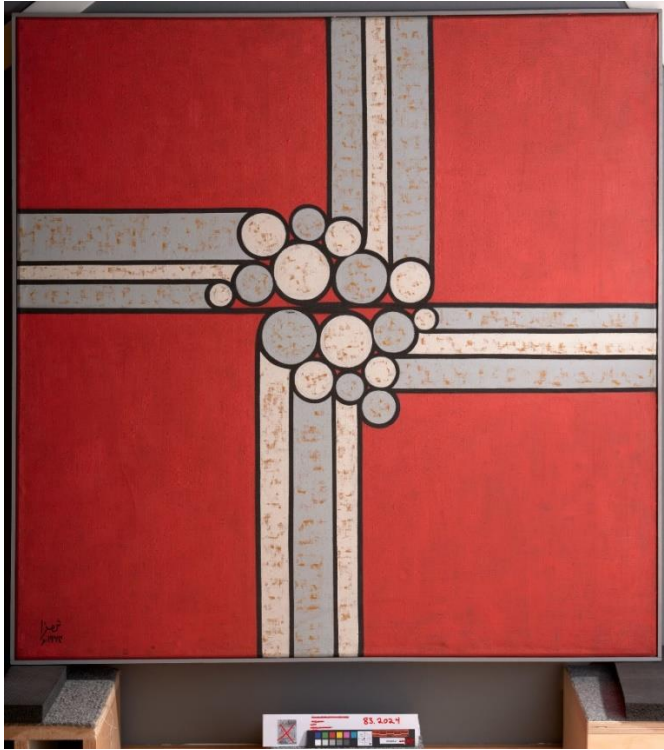
After Treatment, Recto



After Treatment, Raking Light

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After Treatment, Oblique Specular