

Syed Saleem Arif Quadri Itinerary: Homage To The City Of Birmingham

A SADAA Teaching Resource - KS3

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Artworks and artists' lives are valuable ways of understanding the past. This teaching guide supports students to engage them in the history classroom. It focuses on the history and work of Syed Saleem Arif Quadri and was designed by the South Asian Diaspora Arts Archive (SADAA). It is structured as a local history study of postwar Birmingham and can supplement KS3 topics including migration, postwar British history, and migration; as well as art and design. It is equally adaptable to GCSE History: Migration, Empires and the People or GCSE Art and Design. This booklet offers resources to support lesson planning and activities, for use alongside the accompanying slides.

ABOUT SADAA

SADAA is a national archive that conserves, digitises, shares, and advances the work of first generation British South Asian artists, including Syed Saleem Arif Quadri. Currently housed at the Birmingham Museum Collection Centre, SADAA formed in 1999 in response to a growing concern that vital works by South Asian writers and artists were disappearing or becoming inaccessible. Our collection is a rich and irreplaceable resource for anyone studying a seminal chapter of British history.

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QUESTIONS

What does Syed Saleem Arif Quadri's work and history tell us about changes in Birmingham after WWII?

What does the artist's work and history tell us about the ways migration has shaped Birmingham?

ABOUT THE WORK

Syed Saleem Arif Quadri's work *Itinerary: Homage to Birmingham* presents a panorama of Birmingham's cityscape. Made in 1972 while the artist was a student at the Birmingham School of Art, it captures Quadri's view from the fourth-floor window of his bedsit in the neighbourhood of Ladywood. A jumble of buildings span across seven panels, with structures designed in classical pre-war styles abutting the clean lines of modern developments. The buildings' light blue, green, and pink shades are striated with closely drawn parallel lines, contrasting starkly with the inky and irregular shadows cast by these structures. Where the buildings' roofs and towers stretch towards the sky at the top of the cityscape, the lower section extends downwards into magnified and misshapen feet, winding around structures and roads. The scene is ambiguous, even surreal, possibly evoking a strange dream.

ABOUT THE ARTIST: SALEEM ARIF QUADRI

Arif was born in Hyderabad, India and emigrated to Britain in 1966, at seventeen years old. He first settled in the Warwickshire town of Nuneaton with his family – his mother, an amateur painter, and father, a surgeon. After attending the Manor Park Grammar School, Arif enrolled in the Birmingham College of Art and studied sculpture between 1969 and 1972. He gained early recognition by winning the 'Young Sculptor of the Year' Award for his piece *Space Lattice* in 1971. He then moved to London to continue his studies at the Royal College of Art, graduating in 1975.

During his studies, Arif became curious about India, where he had spent his childhood years. He also became engrossed in the work of thirteenth-century Italian poet Dante Alighieri, best known for his epic poem *The Divine Comedy*. Arif was particularly interested in the deep debt that Dante's work paid to important Islamic stories such as the Prophet Muhammad's night journey and ascension to heaven (in Arabic: الإسراء والمعراج; al-Isrā' wal-Mi'rāj). After graduating from the Royal College of Art, Arif's interests motivated him to travel extensively through India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, with a brief stop in Egypt. Over the next ten years, he travelled to Italy and Dante's birthplace, Florence; then Tunisia, the United States, and other areas of East and South Asia.

Arif's travels generated deeper familiarity with the histories and visual cultures of the places he visited – in particular, of India, where he was born. He channelled these new insights into continuing a series of works based on the 'Inferno' section of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, which he had begun at the Royal College of Art. This series expanded into a collection of over 500 drawings by 1981. Arif's subsequent works expanded into large-scale works in non-traditional formats and uneven shapes; and later into works projected slightly off the wall, suspended between two and three-dimensional space. At the turn of the century, Arif shifted his practice to smaller works on paper and artist books.

In 1989–90, Arif's work was featured in the landmark exhibition 'The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Postwar Britain' at London's Hayward Gallery, curated by fellow artist Rasheed Araeen. This exhibition aimed to show a story of modern art obscured by the mainstream view, which typically understood modern art as something produced solely in North Atlantic cities such as Paris, London, and New York, and whose main protagonists were overwhelmingly white men. Araeen – himself an artist who emigrated from the South Asian city of Karachi to London in 1964 – was committed to showing a different vision of modernism: the vital innovations made by artists who moved from African, Asian, and Caribbean countries to live and work in North Atlantic cities.

Arif's work appeared in a section of the exhibition titled 'Recovering Cultural Metaphors', which explored how artists responded to complex questions of cultural identity and difference. Mainstream modern art had historically excluded markers of identity through the use of abstraction and geometry, idealistically pursuing a 'universal language'. Yet this claim to be 'universal' also obscured mainstream modernism's own particular historical roots in the North Atlantic. In doing so, mainstream modernism also obscured its complex connections to histories of transatlantic slavery and empire – processes that enabled North Atlantic countries to accumulate the resources necessary to build institutions of art.

In response, as Araeen's exhibition showed, artists from African, Asian, and Caribbean diasporas engaged visual forms and ideas rooted in these contexts to reflect on their own position in the world, as well as to question, challenge, and critique the mainstream.



Image: Saleem Arif Quadri, Itinerary: Homage to Birmingham, 1972. Black ink with coloured inks and applied coloured crayons. © Syed Saleem Arif Quadri. All rights reserved, DACS 2022.

BIRMINGHAM: MIGRATION AND URBAN CHANGE

Arif's work Itinerary is a significant document of Birmingham in the postwar period. Reflecting Arif's view from his bedsit in Ladywood, the work surveys an area entirely reshaped by intensive urban development and change between the 1950s and 1970s. These transformations were both spatial – written into the city's roads and architecture – and social.

Moving To The Postwar City

Birmingham has persistently been a city of migration. Throughout the twentieth century, the city's highly productive and diversified industrial sector drew in large numbers of people worldwide. After WWII, the need for labour to drive reconstruction and industrial production grew.

The wave of postwar migration to the city primarily comprised people from Ireland and other European countries. In the 1950s and 1960s, Birmingham saw increasing immigration from Commonwealth countries in Africa, the Caribbean, and South Asia, which had recently achieved political independence from British colonial rule. The 1948 British Nationality Act had established a common UK citizenship for people born or naturalised in the UK and its former colonies. This new form of citizenship was created after Britain began to formally relinquish its political control of colonies across the world, and the British empire was reshaped under the idea of the Commonwealth association of independent nation-states. British citizens under the 1948 Act had the right of free movement and employment in the UK, and many people in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean travelled to the UK for work, often as a result of recruitment campaigns run by British companies facing high demand for labour.

When people from the Commonwealth arrived in Birmingham, they found a city with high demand for workers. Unemployment was extremely low and wages relatively high due to Birmingham's prosperous economy. There were also widespread housing shortages as the city sought to rebuild homes demolished during the war and others that were unfit for habitation. During this period, many Birmingham-born people left the city and relocated in the surrounding suburbs. As a result, despite migration

to the city, Birmingham's overall population shrunk in the 1950–1960s. People who arrived in Birmingham from African, Asian, and Caribbean countries often expected new opportunities and commonalities as a result of ties to the British Empire: many had been educated in British school systems and used the English language for regular communication. Yet racism was widespread. There were a number of high-profile flash points around Birmingham: during the 1964 election in Smethwick, Conservative candidate Peter Griffiths ran an explicitly racist campaign to end immigration by black and brown people to Britain. In 1968, Birmingham was the site of Conservative MP Enoch Powell's infamous 'Rivers of Blood' speech, which also stoked racist fears of immigration in violent and incendiary language.

Alongside this political rhetoric, discrimination was also a pervasive and everyday phenomenon. People of African, Asian, and Caribbean descent were frequently excluded from housing and often struggled to secure anything aside from low-level employment. In one discriminatory measure, council houses were restricted to residents who had lived in the UK for at least five years, excluding recent immigrants. Immigration was also frequently blamed for housing shortages, even though the overall population of the city decreased between the 1950 and 1970s. These everyday exclusions amounted to a 'colour bar' – a barrier separating black and brown people from the infrastructure, services, and employment necessary for basic subsistence on the basis of racism.

Within these hostile conditions, people who immigrated from African, Asian, and Caribbean countries generated inventive and resourceful strategies for sustaining lives and communities in Birmingham. Families worked together to secure housing, share resources, and develop support structures. Political organisations also emerged, such as the Indian Workers Association, which fought for better employment conditions. There were also numerous individuals and families who established middle class and professional occupations – such as Arif's father, a surgeon, and Arif himself, an artist who trained at two prestigious UK art institutions.

Developing The Postwar City

People who arrived in Birmingham after WWII found a city in the process of rapid transformation and struggling with a persistent shortage of housing. For those who arrived from African, Caribbean, and Asian countries, as well as Ireland, housing shortages were acute because they excluded from many rental properties due to pervasive discrimination.

Housing shortages partially resulted from WWII bombings which had damaged much of the city's housing, although Birmingham was not as severely blighted as other areas of the UK. Housing was also scarce as many of the surviving homes were poor quality. Birmingham's working class people lived in over-crowded and hazardous conditions and by the mid-1950s, approximately one fifth of Birmingham homes were deemed unfit for habitation. After WWII, Birmingham's Ladywood neighbourhood was one of five central areas designated for redevelopment.

The demands of postwar reconstruction and need for better housing created an opening for planners to reshape the city according to modern ideals of rational efficiency and production. Birmingham's redevelopment was architected and implemented by Herbert Manzoni, who served as the city's Chief Engineer between the 1940s and 1960s. Manzoni reshaped Birmingham as a 'motor city', instituting a new ring road around the urban centre to control traffic flows. In redevelopment zones such as Ladywood, Manzoni's plans saw the destruction of unplanned, dense neighbourhoods layered with terrace houses, industry, shops, pubs, and schools. In their place were erected high rise tower blocks surrounded by open green spaces, with shops, industry, and pubs moved out to non-residential areas.

Manzoni's approach reflected wider ideals of modernist planning: that architects and engineers could resolve social problems through functional and efficient standardised designs. The outcomes proved different: the neighborhoods lost spaces for community and informal gathering, producing social isolation. The densely packed tower blocks led to difficult, often hostile living conditions. The top-down vision of modernist planning, it proved, struggled to account for local conditions and the various ways people actually used the spaces they lived in. As construction rapidly accelerated throughout the 1960s – coming to a halt just around the time Arif left for further study in London – his experience of the city coincided with this process of intensive and disorienting urban upheaval.



Tower blocks in Nechells, 1963. © Birmingham Mail.



Ladywood, 1977. © Birmingham Mail.

ENQUIRIES FOR THE CLASSROOM

Arif's work tells a story about intertwined changes in Birmingham after WWII, both social and spatial. These two enquiries use Arif's artwork *Itinerary: Homage to Birmingham* as a starting-point to highlight these processes. By engaging students with Arif's artwork and related materials, they prompt students to ask: how and why did the city's urban landscape change between the 1950s and 1970s, and what were the effects? Who called Birmingham home in this period? What were their experiences, and how did they shape Birmingham – and Britain more widely?

Enquiry 1:

What does Syed Saleem Arif Quadri's work and history tell us about changes in Birmingham after WWII?

Activity 1: Syed Saleem Arif Quadri's *Itinerary*

A) Looking at the work:

Show students Arif's work *Itinerary: Homage to Birmingham*. You may wish to project it on a screen and zoom into specific sections to highlight the detail, and zoom out to show students how long the work is. Without telling students the work's title or location, ask students to write down what city they think the work depicts and why.

Next, prompt students to examine the work's formal features by inviting them to consider: why are the buildings shaped and angled the way they are? What do the buildings and shapes make you think of? What does the work's textures and colours bring to mind? Students can write out their answers or share them in discussion.

B) Contextualizing the work:

Provide students further context about the artwork by sharing the following description:

'This drawing was made from the window of Arif Quadri's fourth-floor college bedsit in Ladywood. He moved to Birmingham from Hyderabad, India in 1966 and studied at Birmingham School of Art. Quadri saw the period of change happening below and, in response to these redevelopments and relocations of homes and businesses, he created a warped, jumbled landscape of buildings. The cityscape is populated by misshapen human figures with enlarged feet, representing the human impact of urban planning.'

– Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery

Ask students to reflect on *Itinerary* in light of this new information: what might the work tell us about changes in Birmingham when Arif was a student there? What does it tell us about the artist's experience in the city? Why do you think Arif titled the work *Itinerary: Homage to Birmingham*?

C) Drawing your own 'itinerary'

Ask students to reflect on their experiences of their surroundings by drawing their own 'itinerary'. Provide students with paper, markers, crayons, etc. Prompt students to think about their experiences of the place they live, and how it may have changed in recent years; they could brainstorm ideas by free-writing or in small group discussions. Then ask students to make a drawing that reflects their experience of the place they live. Ask them to give their drawing a title.

After students have made their drawings, invite them to share their work. Students could tape their artworks around the classroom with a label stating their work's title. Ask students to walk around the classroom gallery and discuss the works in pairs or small groups. Students can reflect on the same questions they discussed when looking at Arif's *Itinerary*: what does the work bring to mind? What do the shapes and colours convey? Why is it titled the way it is? What does the work say about the experience of change in the student artist's surroundings? Ask students to take notes. Re-group as a class and invite the pairs/groups to share their reflections on one or two works each. Invite the student who drew each work to respond to the group's reflections.

Activity 2: The Footprint of the City

Ask students to reflect on the changes in Birmingham in the postwar period. You could share information from:

- The section 'Developing the Postwar City' above
- ['Post-war High Rise in Birmingham I: "Saucer City"'](#) [1]
- ['Post-war High Rise in Birmingham II: "Get these people out of the slums!"](#) [2]
- ['Post-war High Rise in Birmingham III: the blocks come down'](#) [3]

Show students clips of the following videos:

- [1959 BBC documentary 'Who Cares: A New Way Home'](#) (6:05–8:45; 16:25–19:00) [4]
- [1964 film 'Breathing Space'](#) (1:20–3:05) [5]

In groups or individual free writing, ask students: why were central areas in Birmingham redeveloped after WWII? What were some aspirations that people had for the new building plans? What were some of the realities and problems? How does Arif's work Itinerary reflect the lived experience of the redeveloped city?

Enquiry 2:

What does Arif's work and history tell us about the ways migration has shaped Birmingham and Britain?

Activity 1: Migration in Birmingham

A) Arif's Story

Provide students with some information about Arif's history. You can share:

- The 'About the Artist' section above
- [Arif's biography on SADAA's website](#) [6]
- [Arif's biography on his website](#) [7]

Working in pairs or small groups, ask students to write down notes in response to the questions: why might Arif's family have moved to Birmingham? What is the historical relationship between Britain and India that could have influenced their decision to move? What could Arif's story tell us about migration to Birmingham?

B) Migration in the Midlands

Ask students to consider the wider context of migration at the time that Arif moved to Birmingham. Inform students about people who moved to Birmingham after WWII and the factors influencing their move. You could share:

- The section 'Moving to the Postwar City' above
- Information on postwar migration from [Our Migration Story](#) [8]

You could also share other examples of people who migrated to Birmingham during the same period, such as:

- [The Indian Workers' Association on Our Migration Story](#) [9]
- [Various 'Birmingham Stories' on Connecting Histories](#) [10]
- People listed in the [Open University's 'Making Britain'](#) database [11]

Discuss some of the barriers and prejudices that immigrants faced in postwar Birmingham. You could introduce the term 'the colour bar', defining everyday racism and segregation that frequently prevented black and brown people from accessing housing and basic services. Students could read about these topics on [Connecting Histories](#). [12]

In pairs or small groups, ask students to return to their notes about Arif and expand on their initial responses. Next, ask them to consider how Arif's story might compare with, and differ from, the motivations and experiences of other people who immigrated to Birmingham at the same time. How could Arif's story show the diversity of experiences of migration?

Activity 2: Reshaping Birmingham, and Britain

A) The Other Story

In 1989, Arif's work was shown in the large-scale group exhibition 'The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Postwar Britain', curated by the artist Rasheed Araeen. In 1993, Arif's work *Itinerary* was purchased for the collection of the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. Ask students to consider what this history says about the ways that migration has shaped postwar Britain.

Introduce students to 'The Other Story' by exploring the [microsite documenting the exhibition \(made by the magazine Afterall\)](#). [13] Share the introductory exhibition text written by the exhibition curator, Rasheed Araeen:

'The end of World War II represents a historical watershed: with decolonisation, the wall which separated the peoples of the metropolis and the colonies began to come down. The subsequent movement of people from the impoverished part of the world to the metropolis changed the demographic and cultural map of Europe.

The arrival here of artists from Asia, Africa or the Caribbean in the post-war period was part of this movement. But, in many cases, it was also the result of the individual artist's desire to realise their artistic ambitions internationally. Inspired by the modern art movements of the twentieth

century and wishing to participate in their development, it was necessary for these artists to be in the metropolis.

'The Other Story' is the story of their engagement with Modernism, their problematic relationship with its philosophical assumption, and their exclusion from official histories on the basis that the place of Afro-Asian artists was somewhere else, outside the evolutionary paradigm of Modernism. It is the story of their struggles and their achievements, their successes and their failures. It is not a story of so-called 'black art' or 'ethnic minority arts'. The Other Story is a recognition of Afro-Asian contributions to post-war British Art.'

Ask students to closely read the exhibition text, underlining important points.

Next, working in pairs or small groups, ask students to write notes in response to the questions: what was the main objective of 'The Other Story'? How can artworks and exhibitions help us understand the ways migration has shaped postwar Britain?

B) Changing the Collection

Inform students that the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery purchased Arif's work *Itinerary* in 1993 – three years after 'The Other Story'.

Spend a few minutes discussing: what is a museum? What do museums do, and why? Who are museums for? If students have personal experiences of visiting a museum, invite them to share these.

Next, ask students to return to their pairs/small groups. Ask them to discuss: why is it important that Arif's work was purchased for the collection of the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery? What does it say about the ways migration has shaped postwar Britain?

Finally, invite students to create their own museum in the classroom. This could include images, objects, and stories in a gallery. It could also include projects, discussions, theatre sketches, or events. Ask students to reflect as a group about their museum: how do they define a museum, based on what they have created? Does their museum convey anything unexpected or new about themselves, what they have learned, and/or their histories?

Endnotes:

- [1] John Boughton, 'Post-war High Rise in Birmingham I: "Saucer City"', Municipal Dreams, 19 May 2015. <https://municipaldreams.wordpress.com/2015/05/19/saucer-city/>
- [2] John Boughton, 'Post-war High Rise in Birmingham II: "Get these people out of the slums!"', Municipal Dreams, 26 May 2015. <https://municipaldreams.wordpress.com/2015/05/26/post-war-high-rise-in-birmingham-ii-get-these-people-out-of-the-slums/>
- [3] John Boughton, 'Post-war High Rise in Birmingham II: the blocks come down', Municipal Dreams, 2 June 2015. <https://municipaldreams.wordpress.com/2015/06/02/post-war-high-rise-in-birmingham-iii-the-blocks-come-down/>
- [4] 'Who Cares: A New Way Home', BBC TV, 1959. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=St34bfnaxmA>
- [5] 'Breathing Space', The Public Works Department Birmingham, 1964. <https://www.macearchive.org/films/breathing-space>
- [6] Syed Saleem Arif Quadri MBE, SADAA. <https://sadaa.co.uk/archive/art/saleem-arif-quadri>
- [7] Saleem Arif Quadri. <http://saleemquadri.co.uk/>
- [8] '21st & 21st Century Migrations', Our Migration Story. <https://www.ourmigrationstory.org.uk/oms/by-era/1900%E2%80%932000>
- [9] 'Communities in Action: the Indian Workers' Association', Our Migration Story. <https://www.ourmigrationstory.org.uk/oms/communities-in-action-the-indian-workers-association-in-southall>
- [10] 'Birmingham Stories: Faces & Places', Connecting Histories. <http://www.connectinghistories.org.uk/birmingham-stories/birmingham-stories-faces-places/>
- [11] 'Making Britain: Discover how South Asians shaped the Nation, 1870–1950', The Open University. <https://www.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/makingbritain/>
- [12] Sarah Dar, 'The Enigma of Arrival', Connecting Histories. <http://www.connectinghistories.org.uk/learning/migration-settlement/late-20th-century-birmingham/the-enigma-of-arrival/>
- [13] 'The Other Story', 1989: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain, Hayward Gallery, London, 1989–90', Afterall. <https://www.afterall.org/exhibition/the-other-story/hayward-gallery-1989/#view-13323>

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CREDITS

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