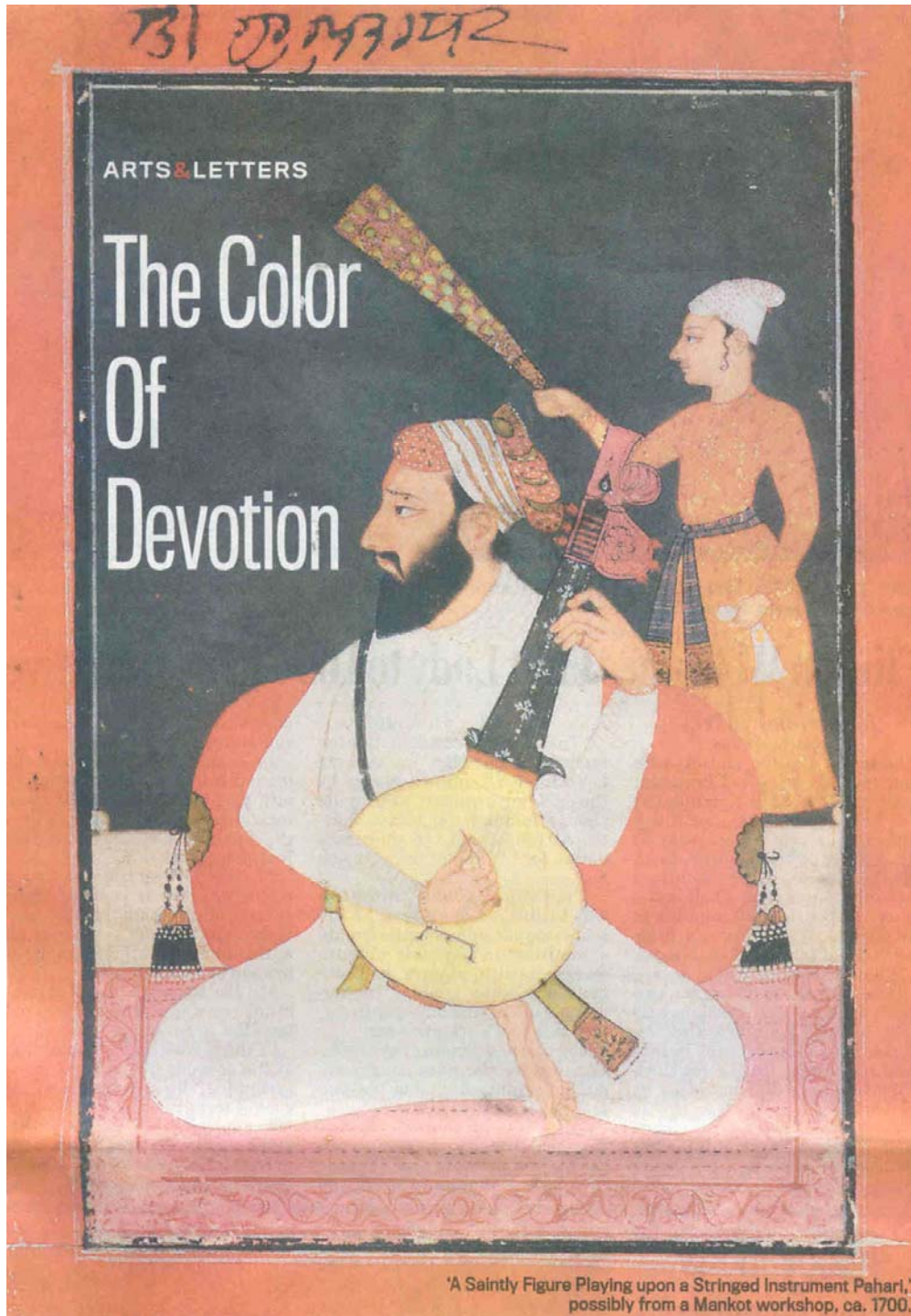


The Sun

September 21, 2006



A new exhibit at the Rubin Museum of Art is a beautifully concentrated look at Sikhism, Lance Esplund writes.

If the Rubin Museum of Art has ever produced a sub-par exhibition, I have yet to see it, and I have been frequenting the museum since it opened two years ago. Housed in the former Barneys department store at the corner of 17th Street and Seventh Avenue, the RMA is one of New York's latest treasures. From its central spiral staircase to its impeccably installed exhibitions and its mandala-inspired logo designed by Milton Glaser, the museum is a gem among gems.

Devoted to Himalayan art from the 12th century onward, the RMA has brought us colorfully lush, culturally rich, and scholarly exhibitions such as "Holy Madness: Portraits of Tantric Siddhas," "Paradise and Plumage: Chinese Connections in Tibetan Arhat Painting," and (one of my favorites) "Demonic Divine." Now it has mounted the beautiful show, "I See No Stranger: Early Sikh Art and Devotion."

A one-floor gathering of approximately 100 artworks from the 16th through the 19th centuries, "I See No Stranger" is dense, spare, and heady. Comprising dozens of illuminated manuscript leaves, silk and cotton embroidered textiles, a pair of wood sandals, copper water pots (including one in the form of Shiva's running mount: the bull Nandi), a gold token, and an ornate, Y-shaped brass arm-rest, the varied exhibition is as luxurious as a hothouse and as delicate as a morning breeze.

Not as large or elaborate as some previous exhibitions at the museum, "I See No Stranger," organized by B.N. Goswamy and Caron Smith, is a concentrated look at the art of Sikhism, the world's fifth-largest organized religion. Sikhism was founded in northern India at the end of the 15th century by a Hindu named Nanak. Though rooted in Indian thought and history — much of the show's manuscript leaves are in the style of Indian and Islamic figurative miniatures — Sikhism is a pluralist, multicultural religion that is distinct from Hinduism and Islam. The radical, fundamental tenets of Sikhism, a religion that was conceived originally as open to everyone, are: "God is One," "No one is a Hindu, no one a Muslim," and "No one is a stranger."

Guru Nanak (1469–1539), as he came to be known, is the mystical ascetic, philosopher, and miracle worker who wandered the Mughal Empire from Mecca to Baghdad to Kabul to Delhi to Dhubri to Sri Lanka accompanied by a musician, spreading Sikhism, or what he thought of as "a light moving across time." In Sikhism, the "light" is the spiritual message that "there is but One God, and by the Guru's grace he is obtained." Therefore, mankind's divisions — faith, caste, gender, race, and station — were all meaningless.

Divided into five sections, "I See No Stranger" centers on the life, teachings, travels, and miraculous deeds of Guru Nanak; but his nine successors,

Please see SIKH, page 17

MUSEUMS

The Color of Devotion

SIKH continued from page 1
or vessels of the “light” — the last of which was Guru Gobind Singh — also figure prominently in the exhibition. Guru Singh (d. 1708) decreed that no individual would succeed him as guru. Instead, the “Adi Granth” (Primal Text), a compilation of sacred writings and teachings of the Sikh gurus and poets, and known as “Guru Granth Sahib,” would be regarded hence as the last and

I SEE NO STRANGER: EARLY SIKH ART AND DEVOTION

Rubin Museum of Art

eternal living guru. The “Guru Granth Sahib,” a text so sacred that to exhibit it in a museum would be sacrilegious, is not on view in the exhibition, although a video screen displays pages from the book. However, an elaborate stack of silken fabrics and cushions, the throne on which the text would rest in a temple, has been reconstructed in the show.

The high points of “I See No Stranger” are in the small illuminated manuscript leaves, which, painted with opaque watercolor, are often filled with a warm, tender light; and in the textiles, which fill the gallery with large abstract swaths of patterned lozenges, diamonds, and stylized animals in vibrant pinks, oranges, hot reds, and lime greens.

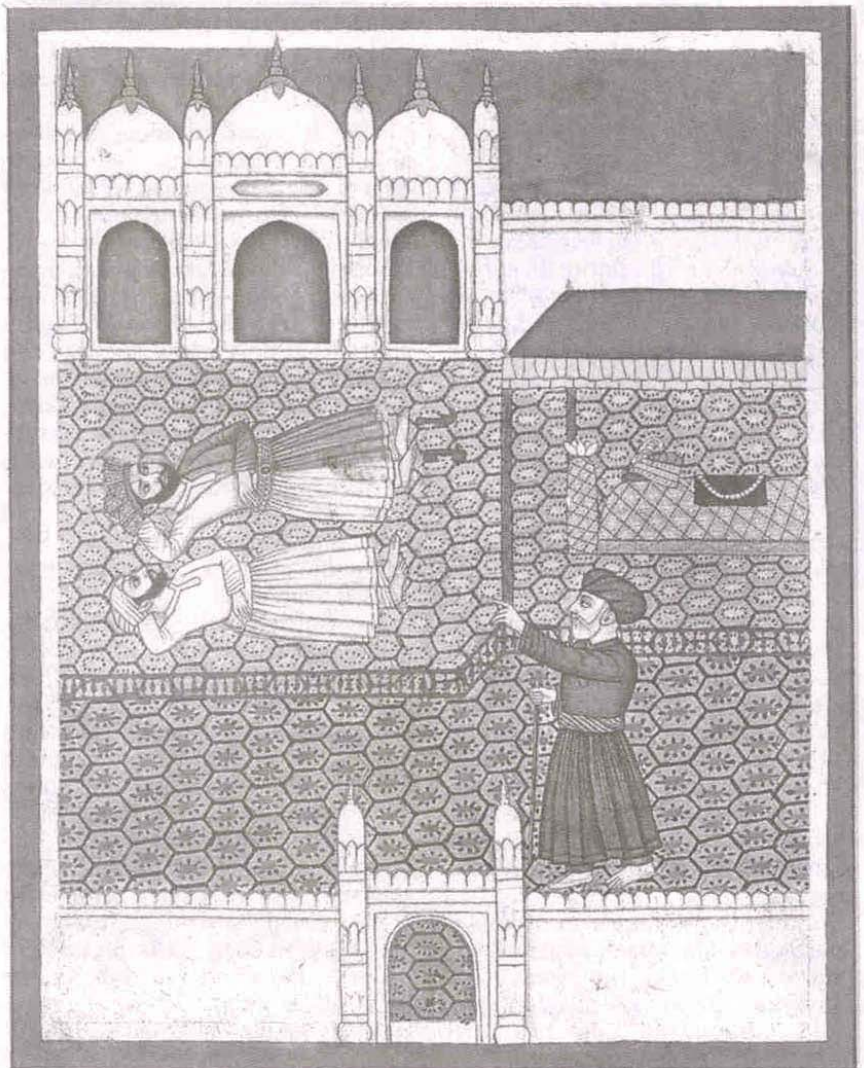
Some of the manuscript illustrations combine illusionistic Western space with flat, active, decorative pattern; yet, like the poetry, songs, and beliefs of Sikhism itself, most of the images are fluid, airy, and open. Subtle and simply stated, they allow for easy entrance and movement. The exhibition also includes, paired with the watercolors, gorgeous workshop line drawings that acted as templates for the fully worked out paintings. Some of these (or, often, individual elements — trees, figures, horses) actually outshine the finished works.

A few of the manuscripts illustrate the lineage from guru to guru. Others are portraits of Nanak or of his nine successors, spreading the word. Guru Gobind Singh, seen largely as a warrior, is often depicted on a dignified black-and-white horse, whose full, swelling curves give volume to pattern or to the

barren landscape. “Guru Nanak With a Group of Sadhua (Hindu Holy Men)” (late 18th century), is soft and dreamy. Divided into distinct levels, from river to landscape to figures to trees to sky, the picture shows Nanak seated and teaching the Sadhua, while monkeys, rocks, and trees worthy of Henri Rousseau punctuate the landscape. “Guru Nanak With the Other Nine Gurus” (1882) depicts Nanak, slightly larger than the others, seated on a red field at the top center of the oval grouping. Here, as in most of the other pictures, he is old and rotund, seemingly filled

with the spirit.

In one beautiful picture from the late 19th century, Guru Nanak is dressed in a robe that is inscribed in Arabic characters with verses from the Koran, and with Nanak’s own teachings. Literally “wrapped” in holy text from different faiths, Nanak is an amalgam of religions. He is older, wiser, and easily recognizable by his signature fluffy white beard. Sitting on a rug, meditating on the “Formless One,” Nanak is a serene, haloed balloon, lifting off, but halfheartedly attempting to keep himself grounded. The sacred calligraphy rac-



ASIAN ART MUSEUM, SAN FRANCISCO

Indian watercolor, ‘Guru Nanak Sleeping in the Mosque at Mecca’ (c. 1800-50).

ing across his robe runs into, and merges with, the pattern on an oblong pillow, which seems to bisect Nanak's body. The pillow, rather than offer support to the Guru, like everything else in the painting, only helps him to ascend. Nanak, floating on spirituality — his hand and foot grasping at the rug for grounding — cannot keep himself from levitating on his own thoughts. Nanak is drifting on his faith; he is taken — as was I by much of the art in "I See No Stranger" — higher and higher.

Until January 29 (150 W. 17th St. at Seventh Avenue, 212-620-5000).