

NEWSDAY

REVIEW

The world of the Sikh, explored - just a little

BY ARIELLA BUDICK
Newsday Staff Writer

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Photo



Opaque watercolor on paper
(Government museum and
art gallery, Chandgarh
Photo)

Sikhism is the world's fifth-largest organized religion, with more than 20 million adherents, yet few Americans are even glancingly familiar with its tenets. They may recognize Sikhs by the signs they wear - the turbans covering hair that's never cut, the circular steel bracelets and small, sheathed dagger - but remain ignorant of their meaning. Born more than 500 years ago in the Punjab region of what is now northern India, Sikhism insists upon the equality of all creation and recognizes no class distinctions.

The Rubin Museum exhibition "I See No Stranger" wants at once to broaden and flesh out the picture for a non-Sikh audience, arranging paintings, manuscripts and tapestries for our education and delectation. On the whole, the exhibit satisfied my eyes more than it did my curiosity. It left me wondering what makes Sikhism "strikingly modern," as a text panel asserts - and what, besides monotheism, constitutes its core.

Sikhism began with Guru Nanak ('9-1539), who roamed the far reaches of Asia sharing his revelation that "there is but ONE GOD and by the Guru's grace he is obtained." Nanak's insight led to the corollary that hierarchies of caste, gender and station had no justification.

Watercolors in the styles of Indian and Mughal miniatures depict Nanak as a bearded patriarch who grows increasingly rotund with age. The delicate narratives of Nanak's life, mostly dating from the 18th century, contain abstract, opaque blocks of pigment. If you let your eyes go out of focus, you see bold patterns of gemlike color with an abstract beauty independent of their sacred content.

Three white ovals signify stones; a beige mound gently outlined in black is a mountain; a gray amoeboid shape stands in for a flowing river. Nanak stands out against these graceful forms in his brilliant robes. Here, he is decked out in sunflower yellow, lecturing to disciples; there, he hikes along the riverbank in a magenta gown and blood-red hat.

A long line of gurus succeeded Nanak. The 10th, Gobind Singh (d. 1708), decreed that he would be the last. Sikhs would subsequently follow the "Adi Granth" (Primal Text) in lieu of a human leader, and those written teachings, also known as "Guru Granth Sahib" would become the eternal guru.

The Rubin Museum decided that displaying sacred words would be inappropriate, so, instead, it erected a shrine of the sort where the faithful keep the text. Above is a canopy, below an altar made of cushions, but the "Guru Granth Sahib" itself is absent.

In keeping with the Sikh belief in gender equality, both men and women read the text aloud during ceremonies. Yet virtually all the paintings in the exhibit feature men - working, meditating and philosophizing. Why such an egalitarian religion would so consistently exclude females from its imagery is a puzzle that the show does not address.

I SEE NO STRANGER: EARLY SIKH ART AND DEVOTION. Through Jan. 29 at the Rubin Museum of Art, 150 W. 17th St. at Seventh Avenue, Manhattan. For exhibition hours and admission prices, call 212-620-5000 or visit rmanyc.org.

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