

New York's Rubin Museum of Art: A Journey into Sikh Art

The Rubin Museum of Art (RMA) in New York has been putting together rare and insightful exhibitions on Himalayan Art since it opened to the public in 2004. From September 18, 2006 – January 29, 2007, the RMA is showcasing works of art from the 16th century through the 19th century that identify core Sikh beliefs and reflect the socio-cultural structure of its times. Aptly titled – *I See No Stranger: Early Sikh Art and Devotion*, the 100 works include paintings, drawings, metalwork, textiles and photographs.

Whether the exhibition is an aesthetic experience or a spiritual one for the individual, its impact is undeniable. It places Sikh history, its religion, its culture and people in a broader context – compelling the West to look at what lies beneath the turban, focusing on the ‘Saint’ within the ‘Soldier.’ The effort is the first of its kind in New York, the cultural capital of and home to the most polyglot society in the United States.

The RMA has also provided a platform for Sikhs to be involved in many unusual ways. The Third Annual *Spinning Wheel Film Festival* of New York,



Sardar Ishar Singh Bindra with Ambassador Ronen Sen, Member of Parliament Sardar Tarlochan Singh and Consul General Neelam Deo at the inauguration of the exhibition



Gracing majestically in the centre of the museum lobby

celebrating Sikh films was held at the museum where 25 films on Sikh themes were shown during a two-week period. The museum is hosting special Saturday family programs such as a turban tying demonstration, Punjabi wedding songs, a Diwali celebration with saakhis of Guru Hargobind and decoration of diyas, and many more workshops are in the pipeline as well.

The exhibition is supported by the *Sikh Art & Film Foundation* and the *Sikh Foundation*. It was inaugurated on 16 September 2006 by Indian Ambassador Ronen Sen, Member of Parliament,



Sardar Tarlochan Singh and Congressman Gregory Meeks, and was followed by a gala reception attended by over 800 guests.

Inni Kaur of the *Sikh Art & Film Foundation* (and *Nishaan USA*) talks about the exhibition, its magic, the saakhis it gives form to, the poetry embedded in its hues and as she says, "the fragrance of Guru Nanak's message that the paintings carry."

Q How did the Sikh Art & Film Foundation collaborate with the Rubin Museum of Art on this project?

A The Sikh Art & Film Foundation came into being because of this exhibition. Dr. Narinder Singh Kapany and Tejinder Singh Bindra decided to take up the offer of the Rubin Museum to sponsor the exhibition. Tejinder made a few persuasive phone calls to Sikhs in the Tri-state area (Connecticut, New Jersey and New York). Funds were raised in record time; the enthusiasm of the sangat was admirable. I too called on many Sikhs for guidance and

support, and they gave so generously. I was taken aback by their generosity of heart and spirit. At every step I felt the energy of 25 million standing alongside me...this energy of the Khalsa Panth, how does one put that into words?

Q How did you get involved in this exhibition? Has helping put together this exhibit influenced you/ your perceptions?

A I was intrigued from the moment I heard the title – *I See No Stranger: Early Sikh Art & Devotion*. I see no stranger, a tuk from Guru Arjan Dev ji's bani, 'Na ko beri, na ko begana,' and then the devotional side of this exhibit was the hook that pulled me straight in. I went through moments of doubt initially for I am no art historian or critic but somewhere along the line my role developed into coordinator and liaison with the museum. Working on this exhibition has been a soul-searching emotional roller-coaster ride. I have always

believed that the Guru chisels and believe me there was a lot of chiselling going on and it was painful. But the end result is a greater understanding of Sikhi in its purest form and for that I am extremely grateful. Yes, I went through internal turmoil and worked long hours but what I received in return is immeasurable.



Ardaas being recited before the opening



Drums of the Punjab welcoming the guests.



Dr. Caron Smith joins in the dancing.



The Singh Twins with a guest at the gala event..

Q Can you give us an example of what constituted a part of this “chiselling” process?

A The image ingrained in me of Guru Nanak is the one done by the popular artist Sardar Sobha Singh. To see Guru Nanak with Muslim and Hindu overtures was a bit disconcerting. While I understood these paintings intellectually, the heart was slow to follow. Why was the image so important? That was something I had to wrestle with; after all in Sikhi it is always the message that is of paramount importance. Was I stuck in a time frame where I still wanted to put a face to ‘The Shabad?’ You know, the hardest battles are not fought with swords on battlefields, but they are fought in everyday routine within us. ‘Sabh may jot, jot hay soin’ sounds wonderful, but to put it into daily practice is a monumental task and yet that is what is required to walk this path.

Q What is the role of Art in a religion like Sikhism?

A Take this particular form of art for instance; one is intrigued as to how it came into being. The palette that was created for the ‘janamsakhis’ by the existing workshops must have its own story. Who commissioned these paintings – was it to appease the Sikhs or were they done for and by the Sikhs? The cultural drama of the early days of Sikhism is definitely seen through this art. The influence of the two dominant religions - Hinduism and Islam - comes out loud and clear. Yet, Sikhism survived and flourished. I feel its toughest detractors were not only in times of war but also in times of peace. Superstition, age-old stubborn rituals, habitual customs, distorted perceptions of Sikhism based on ignorance, Sikhism and Sikhs have survived them all and continue to do so. These paintings are a reminder of that fact.

Q How is early Sikh Art and specifically this exhibition, relevant for modern-day Sikhs?

A These paintings, though done in the 18th century have a unique place in Sikh cultural history. Not only are they an indication of the socio-economic environment of their times but the message of Guru Nanak comes out loud and clear through the janamsakhis. When I see the painting of Guru Nanak at Achal Batala, I connect immediately to the place; it is where I believe the dialogue between Guru ji and the Siddhas took place.

I too was searching and hungry for answers; I too, had the same questions. Does it matter which school or style they are painted in? Not to me. These paintings have connected me to our past, educated me on the principles of Sikhi and touched my inner core in ways I never imagined. To me both, this connection and education are vitally important because it is only when you have a clear idea where you come from that you know where you are going – as an individual and as a community.



Dean of the Liberal Arts School at Hofstra University, Dr. Bernard Firestone with his wife and Gurpreet Singh.

Q In your opinion what challenges do the Sikhs face in representing themselves well and accurately to the public?

A The challenge lies within oneself. The more comfortable you are with yourself and your faith, the easier it gets to represent it. Recently, the backlash we Sikhs suffered post 9/11 occurred due to misconception and ignorance. That we have not been able to be correctly portrayed in American society is something we too must take responsibility for. Art is a wonderful medium; this seems to me

an apt opportunity to educate ourselves and the public about Sikhi and Sikhs. I think if we all can learn to see the world according to the Guru there is no challenge, until then there are many and each one will deal with them in his/her way.

Q Earlier, you mentioned the spirit of the Khalsa Panth... Can you give us an example?

A The enthusiasm and success of our volunteer guide programme caught me by surprise. The younger generation of Sikhs have risen



Dr. & Mrs. Narinder Singh Kapany with Dr. Caron Smith.



Tejinder Singh Bindra introducing Didar Singh Bains to Don and Shelly Rubin.

to the challenge and are doing an outstanding job. In response to the museum's request, we now have Sikh volunteers on the exhibition floor ready to answer any questions related to Sikhi – they are there on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays. They wear Guide buttons and interact with the public. They tell me that answering the public's questions on Sikhism has made them more aware of the principles of the faith. Apart from undergoing training, they have been doing a lot of independent reading as well. To experience their enthusiasm is wonderful.

Q Most of the paintings that are close to your heart are picked from the first section "Searching for answers." What is the reason for such a deep connection with this part of the exhibition?

A At some point in my life, I was told that you only start to live when you begin 'to search the meaning of life;' till then you just exist. I didn't quite know the depth of what was being said. It was when my inner restlessness took over that I fully appreciated and realised what I had been told. Section One reminds me of my own search except, Guru

Nanak had the answers and was sharing them while I was searching for mine.

Q How do you view this exhibition?

A Well, the only way I know how to describe this exhibition is, I look upon each painting as a Haiku. Now a Haiku not everyone understands or appreciates but for me the exhibition is a collection of Haikus; each image stands on its own and as a collection, it is a meditation. While on the surface it says

one thing, but if you dig deeper the message of Sikhi comes out loud and clear. It is as if a veil has been removed and you leap into the world of Guru Nanak.

For more and current information on the exhibition, log on to www.sikharts.com

**Sanmeet Kaur Kirat,
Toronto.**

