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Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh
A king pays homage to Guru Nanek in an exhibition of early Sikh art at the Rubin Museum.

Art & Design

Wonders of Sikh Spirituality Come Alive

By [HOLLAND COTTER](#)

Sikhism, the world's fifth-largest organized religion, has more than 20 million followers. Many thousands live in New York City. We can spot Sikh men on the street by their turbans and upswept whiskers. And many of us will recall that two decades ago Sikhs were at the center of the news when the Indian Army stormed the Golden Temple at Amritsar, killing hundreds of Sikh separatists, and, soon after, Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her two Sikh bodyguards.

But what about Sikhism itself? Few Westerners have even basic information.

How many people are aware that it was conceived as a universalist, open-door religion?

Or that its view of society was radically egalitarian? Or that its holy book, the *Adi Granth*, far from being a catalog of sectarian dos and don'ts, is a bouquet of poetic songs, blending the fragrances of Hindu ragas, Muslim hymns and Punjabi folk tunes into a music of spiritual astonishment?

This is precisely the information delivered by the small and absolutely beautiful show titled "I See No Stranger: Early Sikh Art and Devotion" at the Rubin Museum of Art in Chelsea. Vivid but concentrated, it presents, mostly through paintings, a culture's version of its own origins, the image of history shaped far more by hard work, pluralistic politics and mysticism than by militancy.

Sikhism was founded at the end of the 15th century in northern India, when a young, high-caste Punjabi Hindu named Nanak had a revelation. It led him to believe that God was a formless spiritual force shared by all religions, and that social ranks based on faith, class, caste, gender or race were illusory. Unity was reality. The Other was just another. "I see no stranger, I see no enemy, I look upon all with good will," is how Sikh scripture phrases it.

Eager to share his vision, Nanak took to the road, accompanied by a Muslim musician named Mardana, who played the stringed instrument called a rabab. Together they traveled, according to official accounts of Nanak's life, from Sri Lanka to Afghanistan, and west to Baghdad and Mecca, composing and singing devotional songs as they went.

They lived at a high devotional moment. The mystical brand of Islam called Sufism was in full flower, as was the corresponding Hindu movement called Bhakti. Saints of all sorts and sects wandered northern India, bumping into and bouncing off one another, turning a subcontinent into a kind of giant love-in. Orthodox thinking was turned inside out. Hierarchies were up-ended. Students taught and teachers learned. The name Sikh — pronounced sick with an enunciated H at the end — comes from a Sanskrit word for disciple.

The exhibition, organized by the art historian B. N. Goswamy of Panjab University, and Caron Smith, chief curator of the Rubin Museum, conveys something of the flavor of all this through dozens of miniature paintings in Hindu and Mughal court styles illustrating the life of Nanak, or Guru Nanak as he came to be called. In them he emerges as a figure of commonsensical wit, unassuming piety, superhuman power and increasing physical bulk.

He's a trim, soft-faced schoolboy in one 18th-century painting, standing in class and holding out a writing board — it looks like a boxy camera — to a teacher. Already by this time Nanak has been lecturing his parents on the *Bhagavad-Gita* and writing metaphysical verse. Some of these poems, we are meant to assume, are on the writing board. And we know his confounded teacher will give him an A for Amazing.

Another picture shows the adult Nanak asleep on the floor of a mosque in Mecca, with his feet pointed, in a scandalous breach of religious etiquette, toward the Kaaba, God's

house, the holy of holies. When an outraged mullah tries to drag him around into reverse position, the Kaaba turns too. The lesson: no direction is unhallowed, because God is everywhere.

In a third painting, Nanak, now in stout middle age and wearing a sort of zany aviator's cap, sits with his book of hymns under a tree. Mardana, tuning up nearby, stares blankly off into space. From the left a princely figure, stiff-backed and poker-faced, approaches on horseback to pay homage. Clearly the meeting is a significant one, but nobody seems very into it, or even aware that anyone else is there.

The painting is paired in the show with the workshop drawing, produced by a master artist, that served as its model. The contrast is striking. In the drawing the prince, far from being restrained, practically levitates from his saddle with ardor and leans toward Nanak as if drawn to a magnet. Mardana plays and sings with fervor of a contemporary bhangra star. It is in the drawing, rather than in the painting, that the Nanak Effect, so evident in poems and songs, comes through.

Guru Nanak had nine successors, and each built on what he had begun. The fourth guru, Ram Das, established Amritsar as the pre-eminent Sikh pilgrimage site. The next, Guru Arjan Dev, completed the Golden Temple there, built on a platform in the center of an excavated lake. He also assembled Nanak's poems, along with others by Hindu and Muslim saints, to create the holy book.

Up to this point, at the very beginning of the 17th century, Sikh history had been peaceful enough despite internal frictions. The site of Amritsar was a gift outright from the Mughal emperor, Akbar, a spiritual seeker and social philosopher who ruled much of India and was admiring of Sikhism's multicultural character. But after Akbar's death, rapport with the Mughals disintegrated.

In 1606 his son, Jahangir, an observant Muslim, imprisoned and killed Arjan Dev. When the next guru was also jailed, the Sikhs adopted a stance of defensive militarism and a new social ideal: the soldier-saint. The 10th guru, Govind Singh, formalized this collective identity in 1699 when he established a ritual of Sikh initiation and codified a set of communal symbols that included, for men, leaving their hair uncut, wearing a turban and assuming the surname Singh ("lion"), and for women, using the surname Kaur ("princess").

Govind Singh also took the crucial step of designating the Adi Granth, the holy book, as the next, last, and eternal guru, under the honorific title of Guru Granth Sahib. The book became and remains an object of incalculable charisma, almost a sentient being, enthroned on cushions, swathed in rich fabrics, and handled with tender, punctilious deference. Reciting or singing from it is the defining act of the Sikh worship. So intense is its sanctity that, while a throne has been prepared for it in the show, the Guru Granth itself is physically absent.

Absence can of course have a presence of its own, as modern Sikh history does in this exhibition. An earlier show, “The Arts of the Sikh Kingdoms,” organized in London in 1999, focused on Sikhism from the British colonial period onward, tracing the entwined political and religious developments that led to, among other things, the calamities of 1984 in India.

The Rubin Museum has late material too, including a splendid set of British-influenced 19th-century drawings of craftsmen at work, and a series of formal portraits of Sikh warrior-chiefs. Unlike Nanak these leaders carry weapons rather than hymnals, which points to reconceived ideals of spiritual and temporal power, though these ideals and how they came about are only suggested here.

All-apparent, however, are the poetry and music that pervade and orchestrate the Sikh view of the world. Traditional hymns play softly in the gallery. A rabab is on display. Certain paintings have the gentle, doleful lilt of evening ragas; others jump and twitch with a bhangra beat. And running through everything, like the harmonium’s beginningless-endless voice, are the words of the holy book:

Wonderful is sound
Wonderful is wisdom
Wonderful is life
Wonderful its distinctions
Wonderful is praise
Wonderful is eulogy
Wonderful the Presence
One sees in the present
O wonder-struck am I to see wonder upon wonder.

“I See No Stranger: Early Sikh Art and Devotion” remains at the Rubin Museum of Art, 150 West 17th Street, Chelsea, (212) 620-5000, through Jan. 29.