ISSN 2771-3520

Sikh Research Journal

Vol. 1 No. 1
This article is from *Sikh Research Journal*, the online peer-reviewed journal of Sikh and Punjabi Studies

Sikh Research Journal *Vol. 1 No. 1 Published: Spring/Summer 2016.

http://sikhresearchjournal.org

http://sikhfoundation.org

Sikh Material Heritage and Sikh Social Practice in a Museum-Community Partnership: The Smithsonian's Sikh Heritage Project

By Paul Michael Taylor
Dept. of Anthropology, Smithsonian Institution

Abstract. *Focusing on aspects of community involvement in the Smithsonian's Sikh Heritage Project, which since its founding in 2000 has included an exhibition and many other public activities, this paper considers some differences in the conceptualization of what constitutes "heritage" as perceived by Sikh community members, museum staff, and the broader museum public. It also considers the negotiations that took place about how Sikh heritage should be represented, because at each venue, the exhibition provided an important space for local Sikh communities to debate and celebrate their traditions, and to introduce a broad non-Sikh public to a culture that many perceived as exotic and little-known. In this interaction, Sikh communities actively tried to learn from the "culture" of museums as well, especially in two areas: The first is finding effective methods for helping a broad public better understand the Sikhs who live among them. The second is the growing acceptance of museum approaches to care of valued objects. For this, communities helped send museum staff and conservators to India and into Sikh communities, advising on the many differences between traditional Sikh social practice in treatment of "heritage" objects, and museum methods that would ensure their physical survival for much longer.*

> *A work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded… A beholder who lacks the specific code feels lost in a chaos of sounds and rhythms, colors and lines, without rhyme or reason…*
>
> - Pierre Bourdieu (1984:2-3)

Much of contemporary ethnographic museum exhibition-making requires an attempt to convey some of the "cultural competence" or "codes" needed to render unfamiliar objects of material culture intelligible and meaningful to new audiences. However aesthetically pleasing or visually compelling objects may be, conveying their meaningfulness and cultural contexts to a broad public remains a fundamental museum challenge.

This paper[1] describes aspects of community involvement in the Smithsonian's Sikh Heritage Project, which includes an exhibition and many other public activities. Within the long-term, evolving set of activities that has taken place since the founding of the Project in 2000, this paper briefly summarizes differences between conceptualizations of "heritage" considered worthy of museum exhibition for Sikh community members, museum staff, and the broader museum public; and it describes some of the negotiations that took place about how Sikh "heritage" came to be represented. Sikhs in the U.S.A. as elsewhere bear a rich cultural capital allowing them to recognize the meaningfulness of Sikh artworks and material objects, in a way that needed to be decoded for non-Sikh museum visitors to attain the broader public understanding which was our shared goal.

The Sikh Heritage Project has always sought to integrate community involvement in novel ways, both to effectively inform the general public about a culture and religion they may be unfamiliar with, as well as to involve Sikhs in decisions about how their heritage can be meaningfully and productively represented. The Project's flagship exhibition, called *Sikhs: Legacy of the Punjab*, was initially on long-term display at the National Museum of Natural History from 2004-2007, and since that time has evolved and expanded as it travelled to other venues (Santa Barbara, California, in 2009; Fresno, California, in 2012; San Antonio, Texas, in 2015-2016), largely through the continued efforts of many members of the Sikh community (Taylor and Pontsioen 2014).

Even though, as noted below, this Project has produced many other positive outcomes besides that exhibition, *Sikhs: Legacy of the Punjab* is surely the most visible of them. The mode in which this exhibition was developed, within a larger framework of community involvement, reflects a changing view of the nature of museum curatorship as a social practice. Building on Christina Kreps's (2003) understanding of curatorship as a social practice, the Sikh Heritage Project is overall a powerful example of how heritage projects can be carried out as museum-community partnerships to provide a space for communities to debate and celebrate their shared heritage. At the same time, these projects provide museum professionals with the opportunity to draw on research and collaboration with source communities to more accurately interpret and present objects in exhibitions and in other media.

Figure 1. A panoramic view of the main hall of the exhibition Sikhs: Legacy of the Punjab at the Fresno Art Museum in Fresno, California. Photo by Jasper Waugh-Quasebarth.

In general, museums have emerged as one space within which heritage and identity are not only reified and exhibited, but also explored and contested, and the model of co-curatorship adopted during the earliest

[1] Drawing partly on Taylor 2004, and Taylor and Pontsioen 2014, for its description of the Sikh Heritage project and exhibition content, this paper presents new examples of museum-community partnership from the subsequent venue in San Antonio, Texas, and more importantly explores for the first time aspects of the partners' differing conceptualizations of what constitutes "heritage" and how Sikh materiality in relation to historic objects is being transformed by the importation of museum conservation concepts.

stages of this project allowed Sikh-Americans to participate in the development of the exhibition in ways that departed significantly from traditional museum development practices. This view places museum exhibitions within a more holistic, integrated, and culturally relative approach to curatorial work that explores and includes the relationships among museum objects, people, and society in social and cultural contexts beyond the museum collection or exhibition.

The place of an exhibition within a range of Sikh heritage activities

At its founding in 2000, the Smithsonian's Sikh Heritage Project was defined in its founding document as an "integrated program of exhibitions, research, collection improvement, and public programs"; thus any exhibition envisioned was only one component of the Project's potential scope. In fact, the first community donations to establish this locus of Sikh heritage activities were for a broad range of activities and did not require any resulting exhibition. Yet by 2004, the very effective series of lectures, performances, and targeted research trips had grown into a successful new exhibition which benefitted from the involvement and suggestions of many participants who had watched the project grow from its inception. Stepping back from the process to observe it, the frequent successful events, and highly visible public activities, served as a good example of how museums (like universities and other components of contemporary public culture) do produce events that are "rituals" in the anthropological sense. That is, they serve to assert the importance of the shared values of a community that gathers for these events. However, the goals of these events and of this exhibition included a strong component of educational outreach to the large non-Sikh population, who would come to understand Sikh identity better through a prominent and visually compelling, highly public exhibition about Sikh heritage.

The activities of this project show how a very active South Asian American community became involved in a unique collaboration that produced several positive results (including this exhibition) at relatively modest cost and within a comparatively short period of time. In this case, museum and other institutional goals came over time to coincide in part with community goals, and with the research interests of scholars based at the Museum and elsewhere. In this way, the exhibition described here has integrated community involvement in ways well beyond the norm in contemporary museum work. For example, an active group of community members became involved even in the early decision of whether to focus our collective effort toward exhibition or toward other potential goals of the Project. Since the exhibition closed at the Smithsonian, the further travel, development, substitute object selections, and associated outreach programs have been community efforts, working with the Smithsonian curator but in the absence of any professional traveling exhibition service.

Yet at the outset, that decision to focus a "heritage" project on an exhibition was far from unanimous. Some felt that the Smithsonian should prioritize other goals such as preservation of artifacts that were already on exhibition or in museum collections in India, but which badly needed specialized conservation work for their preservation. Others pointed to the potential for new publications, or assistance with other forms of education such as public lectures. Indeed through the years since its founding in 2000, the Sikh Heritage Project has addressed in part all these goals, through a series of annual lectures and through efforts to assist conservation of artifacts as well as major structures such as the Qila Mubarak in Patiala, India. In 2006 the Sikh Heritage Project cohosted, in conjunction with the Anandpur Sahib Foundation and the government of the Punjab, a conference on the application of new technologies in the field of cultural heritage preservation for the Punjab. Supported in part by the Indo-US Science and Technology Commission, our conference was memorable partly for bringing together scholars from both Pakistan and India, from Western and Eastern Punjab, to jointly address issues of heritage preservation. More recently, the Sikh Heritage Project and the (independent) Sikh Heritage Foundation (based in Weirton, West Virginia) contributed toward the production of *Sikh Heritage: Ethos & Relics* (Sikhandar Singh and Roopinder Singh 2012), a uniquely important volume of perspectives on the material heritage of the Sikhs in the Punjab today (cf. Taylor 2012). So undoubtedly there was much else to do in the name of Sikh Heritage, besides an exhibition.

Many community members also suggested recording key aspects of the exhibition *Sikhs: Legacy of the Punjab* within a book which included information about the first three venues (Smithsonian, Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History, and Fresna Art Museum), and that book (Taylor and Pontsioen 2014) became available in time for the fourth venue (University of Texas - San Antonio), with financial support for its design and printing in India, from many Sikh supporters of this Project.

At this writing (2015), the Smithsonian's Sikh Heritage Project is working with the Sikh Foundation (Palo Alto, California) to prepare a major edited volume about the Kapany Collection of Sikh Art, which was a lender to the Smithsonian's exhibition at every venue, and to many other exhibitions at other museums. So a broad range of activities has been undertaken under this rubric.

However, considering that the broad Sikh Heritage Project was first founded in February 2000, it seems that a very public direction for its activities coalesced quickly after the events of September 11, 2001, when misunderstanding and mis-identification was rife in America, and the need for greater awareness and understanding about Sikhs became much more acute than previously (Alag 2005; Yeager 2007). This was also recognized by the Sikh community, which threw its support behind the idea of a major exhibition on the Sikhs at the Smithsonian; and recognized also within the Smithsonian, which moved the production of this exhibition onto a fast track (by the normal standards of exhibition production). The misunderstanding that followed "9/11" resulted in many forms of discrimination against or targeting of Sikhs in the U.S.A., and undoubtedly also contributed to the interest on the part of Sikh communities in reaching out for new methods of gaining public understanding and acceptance. The newly founded Smithsonian Sikh Heritage Project effectively provided a means to accomplish that for many Sikh community members; while the partnership assisted the museum's mission (within its Department of Anthropology) of more inclusively representing the world's cultures.

When one considers the wide range of standard curatorial tasks and responsibilities, including such didactic or educational functions of curatorial work as the selection of themes and objects, or the choice of appropriate modes of interpretation, this project encompassed many examples of co-curatorship with a large community that arrived at and presented decisions in a process quite separate from a traditional museum-based development process. This involvement of an active Sikh community of supporters, scholars, and interested observers has, somewhat inadvertently, helped to turn a Museum space into a public, multi-generational gathering space for a broad and diverse Sikh or Punjabi-American community.

Each museum hosting this exhibition became a place where inspiring Sikh events also regularly occurred, and a place of national public recognition for Sikhs at a time of perceived threats and hardship resulting from public misunderstanding in the post-September 11th period.

Differing conceptualizations of Sikh "heritage"

Murphy's (2012) excellent study of Sikh materiality of the past was unavailable when the Sikh Heritage Project first began attempting to develop an exhibition about the Sikhs, but its description of the importance of "relics" or materials associated with the original ten Sikh Gurus was quite well foreseen from the earliest attempts to develop the idea of a Smithsonian exhibition. As recounted by Taylor (2004), a single vitrine (glass display case) in the Hall of Asian Peoples became available in mid-2000 when it was determined that the objects in a vitrine about Tibetan culture were too fragile and light-sensitive to continue to be displayed.

In October 2000, organized a first, informal Sikh Heritage Advisory Group meeting of Smithsonian staff, Sikh scholars, and Sikh Heritage Fund donors and supporters. The group of about 50 people walked together to view the empty display case, then covered with brown paper, whose glass front measured 71 3/8 inches high and 77 ½ inches wide, which would be seen by many millions of visitors each year.

Figure 2. Left to right: Smithsonian museum staff Hanna Szczepanowska (conservator), Paul Michael Taylor (curator), and Sarah Grusin (scriptwriter) work with Mirin Kaur Poole (right), one of the leaders of the Sikh "Kaur Foundation," as clothing loaned by local Sikh community members is examined and selected to dress manikins in the section of the exhibition about Sikh celebrations, including weddings. Photo courtesy of Smithsonian Institution, Asian Cultural History Program.

It was very revealing to listen to ideas proffered at this Advisory Group meeting about how "Sikh heritage" might be represented to both a Sikh and non-Sikh audience, in a space of that size – a task made more difficult by the fact that we would still need to locate collections. It is interesting that a consensus emerged that the most important "heritage" objects must be obtained from India. Consistent with Murphy's observations about materiality and its associations in Sikh history, particular sought-after were any objects associated with the Sikh Gurus, which might be available for loan through the help of appropriate government officials in India. There was, at this stage, little interest in exhibiting everyday objects or even contemporary artworks by Sikh artists – none of which seemed to have the high iconic value of objects associated with the Gurus that might be borrowed from India. In fact, a trip to the Punjab was soon organized for the purpose of surveying collections that might be available for loan. In December 2000 a delegation from the Smithsonian along with supporters and donors to the Sikh Heritage Fund, who by then had separately organized their own Foundation, traveled to New Delhi and Chandigarh, where we assembled a list of proposed objects for loan, to use in the proposed vitrine.

A portion of the Punjab government loan was approved in late 2001, but for only two years and with many stipulations on the loan. Almost all the objects approved for loan were in fact weapons, from the Arms and Armour Gallery at Qila Mubarak, Patiala. The preponderance of metal objects among the items approved, rather than fragile manuscripts, textiles, or paintings, may largely reflect the sturdiness or durability of the medium, since these might well be considered more able to travel. However, this also undoubtedly reflected an

"indigenous" concept of iconicity and value as well as curation, since historic weapons are often treasured Sikh artifacts. Working with what was available and approved for loan (that is, entirely weapons), the Smithsonian team proceeded to develop a theme for the vitrine, whose goal was to introduce Sikhs and Sikhism to the museum's visitors, and also to recognize the importance of heritage preservation by highlighting on-going preservation work at Qila Mubarak, which in turn provided another connection to the weapons seen on display. The main title proposed was: "Armed with Tradition: The Heritage of the Sikhs"

The exhibition provided an important social space for Sikhs themselves, who could take pride in seeing their traditions among those represented at America's "national museum." Museum staff members found themselves "translating" Sikh self-representations for a wider audience and, like all translators, modifying the content in the process. Sikh meta-narratives of Sikh history became incorporated into the exhibition; but so did other aspects of Sikh "heritage," including everyday secular music and contemporary celebrations.

Thus for Sikh-Americans participating in the process, this led to a transformation or expansion of the range of objects thought to represent Sikh "heritage," as it became clear that – in contravention of their conceptualization of this term -- even family albums, mementos, and everyday household objects might be included. By 2002, though the original "vitrine" plan had been approved inside the Smithsonian, several events led to its cancellation and the substitution of a completely different plan. Most importantly, in the difficult post-September 11th environment, it was inappropriate that the actual objects used to represent Sikh heritage were almost entirely weapons, which were so important to community members because of their association with localities in the Punjab of importance to Sikh Gurus and to their faith. No matter how much this might be softened with explanatory text and photographs or images of the Guru and of Punjab, this could still leave an audience unfamiliar with the topic with an impression that associates Sikhism with religiously motivated violence (weapons). The importance of the Gurus, the Punjab, and the martial tradition within Sikhism would be maintained; but the exhibition needed more context.

In the post-"9/11" environment, both the Museum administration and the Sikh community agreed to allow the preparation of an expanded exhibition, and support within the Sikh community for the Sikh Heritage Project grew rapidly. A series of annual Sikh Heritage Lectures, and many other events, not only helped to build community support but also elicited many suggestions about how Sikh heritage should be represented, including by objects in everyday use in Sikh households today. This process, and the resulting exhibition, are described in Taylor and Pontsioen's (2014) catalog of the exhibition, which also includes objects that were shown only at subsequent venues in California, where community members again worked with museum staff to make local substitutions.

Prior to the opening of the first venue in Washington, exhibition staff suggested including some welcoming images of local Sikhs at one entrance to the exhibition. The result, from a Smithsonian trip to a local Gurdwara, was a composite photo montage at the entrance (Figure 3), very well-received by visitors, Sikh and non-Sikh, though perhaps the furthest idea from any set out at initial community meetings regarding what kinds of Sikh "heritage" should be included in a display. The exhibition text associated with these photo panels has the title: "The Sikhs: A People of Today and Tomorrow" The label asks and answers a question: "Who are the modern Sikhs? Once it was easy to describe Sikhs as a people primarily from the Punjab region. As Sikhs emigrated around the world and Sikhism continued to attract new followers, Sikhs became an increasingly diverse group." This idea of using imges of local Sikhs in the exhibition was adapted at each venue. For example, community members and museum staff at the Fresno Art Museum developed and placed at the museum's main entrance a comparable panel (Figure 4) featuring portraits of Sikhs from the Fresno area, with a simple welcoming message encouraging visitors to view this exhibition about their Sikh friends and neighbors.

Figure 3. North entrance to the exhibition Sikhs: Legacy of the Punjab *at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History, Washington, D.C. (2004), with a photo montage of life-size images of local Sikhs. Photo by Chip Clark.*

Modifications of museum practice to accommodate Sikh values and cultural practices

From the perspective of museum practice, it is interesting to note the extent to which Sikh community values affected normal museum practices. For example, the idea of organizing anything like a "V.I.P. reception" in conjunction with the Washington opening for this exhibition seems to have clashed with the strong Sikh ethos of egalitarianism. In addition, though there were individual Sikh donors who may have been financially able to support the entire exhibition, or its catalog, or other entire components of the Sikh Heritage Project's activities, this was never the preferred method of funding any such activity. Such tasks were always best accomplished through bringing together a larger number of people who would function like a community, all willingly and jointly contributing to the same cause, in a way consistent with each person's abilities.

Thus through the numerous gatherings and meetings for the development of this exhibition and all its associated lectures, events, or performances, we have observed the Sikh community's frequently expressed attempts to make sure that everyone who wished to do so could find a way to contribute something. As museum or exhibition curators we also observed that many of the best ideas for potential exhibit themes, or for the objects and images that could illustrate such themes, came from these meetings. In this way the story this exhibition and book tells to introduce the Sikhs emerges out of the collaborative effort of many narrators working together.

Figure 4. Panel at the entrance to the Fresno Art Museum, with images of local Sikhs and a welcoming message for visitors. Photo by Jasper Waugh-Quasebarth.

There were many examples of museum practice accommodating Sikh traditions. The section describing the sacred book of Sikhism, the Guru Granth Sahib, provides one example. It was important for visitors to understand the book's importance in Sikh life, and there are many beautifully illustrated examples of this book which might have been put on exhibition. However in accordance with Sikh practice, visitors would have had to take off their shoes and cover their heads, as a sign of respect for the sacred book, if they were in the same room. After much discussion, a prop was used in place of the sacred book, complete covered with a *rumala* (the cloth that covers this book when not in use), with the same cushions, *chouri* (fly-whisk), and tables that would normally be near it, under a canopy as would have graced the real book. A disclaimer label at that part of the exhibition reads "Sikh tradition requires covering the head and removing shoes when in the company of the holy book. Because it is not possible to comply with these practices in a Museum environment, this display substitutes a prop for the holy book."

Another example is that while for non-Sikhs it may well make sense to have a section of the exhibition about "music," Sikhs themselves felt it completely inappropriate to mix secular and sacred sound forms, so what is considered sacred "music" could be heard with a speaker system having a restricted projection, in the section of the exhibition about how Sikhs practice their faith; meanwhile in a very different part of the exhibition there was a large graphic panel with push-button options to play various kinds of secular music in a different space.

This subject-matter of sacred and secular music were also treated separately in other examples of public outreach, performances of bhangra at opening events, as well as detailed treatment of topics of Sikh and Punjabi music within the annual Sikh Heritage Lectures, including a presentation by Alka Pande, discussing her research on musical instruments in the Punjab (Pande 1999). As commonly occurs in museum exhibitions provided another area for museum-community partnerships.

Figure 5. The Guru Granth Sahib display from the exhibition Sikhs: Legacy of the Punjab*, at the Institute of Texan Cultures in San Antonio (February 2015). The label explains that a prop is used, instead of the actual Guru Granth Sahib, for the exhibition. (Photo courtesy of UTSA Institute of Texan Cultures)*

Figure 6. Portable palki*, displayed in Washington at the exhibition* Sikhs: Legacy of the Punjab. *(Silver, 13.3 x 6.4 x 6.7 cm., c. 1914-18) Courtesy of the Kapany Collection of Sikh Art.* Palki *are used to "house" the Guru Granth Sahib. This portable* palki *normally contains a miniature holy book and was carried by a soldier during World War I. In the museum environment, the book was removed. Photo by Chip Clark.*

Figure 7. A Sikh dance ensemble demonstrates the Bhangra dance at the Institute of Texan Cultures in San Antonio, at the opening event for the exhibition Sikhs: Legacy of the Punjab *(February 2015). (Photo courtesy of UTSA Institute of Texan Cultures)*

Objects, Outreach, and Sikh Social Practice: Introducing Museum Practices in Sikh Communities

There are two areas in which Sikh community members have actively sought from the Sikh Heritage Project (of which this exhibition was only one part) a much better introduction to the "culture" (or even "heritage") of American museums. The first of these is the manner in which museums are effective methods for "public outreach" -- helping a broad public better understand the Sikhs who live among them. As mentioned above, this involved for some community members an expansion of their conceptualization of Sikh "heritage." As Sikhs worked closely with museum staff to develop the exhibition and its associated public programs, they increasingly recognized that many of their everyday objects and activities also serve well for introducing Sikhs and Sikhism to a broad public. The second area in which Sikhs actively sought assistance from museums is the more complex area of museum practice vs. Sikh social practice in handling objects.

The experience and abilities of Sikh community groups to develop their own public outreach programs, and "staff" them as volunteers for the host museums, grew at each subsequent venue. Examples seen in the illustrations here include bhangra dancing classes (Figure 8), a demonstration for a local girl scoute troupe on how to find Punjab on a map and how to identify Punjabi images (Figure 9), and the very popular turban-tying workshop offered to visitors (Figure 10) – all examples from the Institute of Texan Cultures, a museum of Texas history and culture at the University of Texas – San Antonio.

Figure 8. Sikhs in traditional dress provide a tutorial on Bhangra dancing for visitors to the Institute of Texan Cultures in San Antonio as one aspect of public engagement enacted at the museum following the opening of Sikhs: Legacy of the Punjab *in February 2015. (Photo courtesy of UTSA Institute of Texan Cultures)*

Figure 9. Sikh volunteers teaching Girl Scouts at the Institute of Texan Cultures, San Antonio, how to find Punjab on a map. (Photo courtesy of UTSA Institute of Texan Cultures)

Figure 10. This turban-tying demonstration at the Institute of Texan Cultures in San Antonio was one of many ways in which volunteers from the local Sikh community engaged with museum visitors. (Photo courtesy of UTSA Institute of Texan Cultures)

These are examples of museum activities of the kind educational outreach offices frequently try to do, and the Sikh community enthusiastically embraced these. These fit well within the Sikh ideal of sewa, or service to community, one of the key components of Sikh social practice.

However there is another area of "museum culture" which often seemed directly at variance with Sikh social practice, and the Sikh Heritage Project fundamentally represents a case in which Sikh community has sought out museum expertise in changing some aspects of Sikh practice, frequently requesting that museum staff provide lectures on museum conservation and "proper" care of objects at Gurdwaras and Sikh community events. Each of the annual Sikh Heritage lectures included this topic, from the founding of the project to the exhibition's opening events. In 2006, largely with the support of Sikh community members (along with major support from the Indo-US Science and Technology Forum), the Smithsonian co-organized, with the Andandpur Sahib Foundation (Chandigarh, Punjab) an international conference on applications of new technologies for preservation and documentation of museums and historic sites. Overall, this is an area in which museum practice has directly confronted Sikh social practice in many areas, just as traditional European and American methods of storing and handling and displaying objects often caused some deterioration. These include traditional methods of displaying portraits on ivory, which were glued to velvet though that practice causes long-term damage (examples in the exhibition were treated to remove adhesive, see Taylor and Pontsioen 2014:52-53); or old methods of drilling into armor to hang it on walls for display (vs. today's museum mounts); and other practices which have simply needed to be updated as a result of new information showing that there are now much better methods of caring for the physical care and preservation of these objects.

A very different kind of example is the treatment of old manuscripts, especially pages (often beautifully illuminated) of the sacred book, the Guru Granth Sahib, which as Myrvold (2010) notes are sometimes burned, as a form of devotion, once they are no longer used for reading and religious worship. Sikh practice essentially treats the book "Guru" as if it were a human Guru (though of course not alive in any biological sense, but treated as if it were an exalted person). Polishing the throne on which the Guru (book) "sits," organizing the

processions that carry it, and other forms of "service to the Guru" can be "transformed into religious acts by means of the actor's subjective experience of devotion and surrender." Unlike the examples above, this is not an arena into which one can simply introduce a method of handling objects that will preserve them longer, but in fact the Sikh Heritage Project has had the effect of increasingly offering conservation as a new and alternative mode of "service."

We have witnessed much Sikh community support for our museum conservation lectures, including paper conservation, at Gurdwaras and in India. One reason for this is that contemporary Sikhs, aware of the potential for paper conservation and preservation, have sought out Smithsonian and other museum professionals to raise awareness of this alternative means of service to the book "Guru" (i.e. conservation of the old and worn pages, rather than their cremation), as well as other texts on religious topics, such as the *Janamsakhi* or stories of the life of the first Guru, often having old painted illustrations. They essentially hope to revise the conceptualization of service to the Guru such that paper conservation is an alternative to "cremation" of old manuscripts. (See Figure11.)

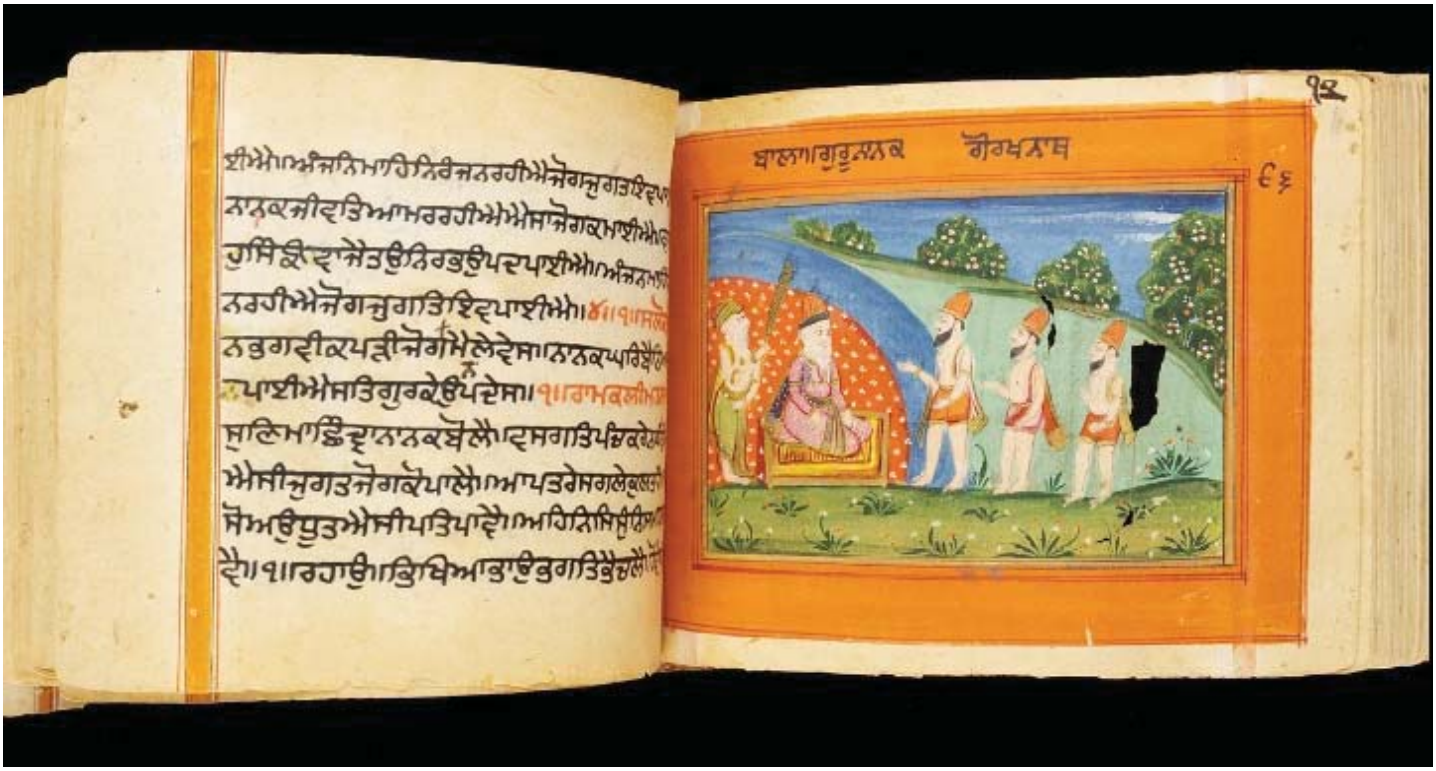

Figure 11.
This beautiful illustrated Janamsakhi, *or book that describes the life of the first Sikh Guru, is from the Kapany Collection of Sikh Art. It probably dates from the mid-19th century. The painters chose verdigris to produce a bright green color, without realizing that the pigment chosen would progressively damage the substrate paper, causing the old gap seen in the paiting, which required stabilization to preserve it. Museum-quality object conservation is increasingly supported as a form of* sewa, *or "service to community," or even* Gursewa *or "service to the Guru," thus increasingly an alternative to more traditional forms of Sikh social practice toward objects. Photo by John Steiner.*

In conclusion, the Sikh Heritage Project and its flagship exhibition, *Sikhs: Legacy of the Punjab*, presented an opportunity for museum-community partnership that is well beyond the norm in museum work. Community members were even involved in the initial decision whether the project should include an exhibition as part of its activities. Museums modified their practices to accommodate Sikh values and cultural traditions. Sikh community members actively sought out museum assistance in making their community better understood by a broad public, and in introducing alternatives (e.g. paper conservation) to some widespread Sikh practices toward objects (including burning of old manuscripts), by encouraging the reconceptualization of museum conservation methods as a form of Sikh *sewa* or service.

PAUL MICHAEL TAYLOR, a research anthropologist at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History, is Director of that museum's Asian Cultural History Program, and serves as Curator of Asian, European, and Middle Eastern Ethnology. He has written or edited twelve books and numerous scholarly articles on the ethnography, ethnobiology, languages, and art (or material culture) of Asia, especially Indonesia. He has also curated twenty-one museum exhibitions (including five on-line virtual exhibitions), and served as the Director of Ethnographic Film Development for Essential TV (Overseas) Ltd to develop twelve documentary anthropological films. During his studies of rural social, ecological, and poverty-alleviation issues, and his work on documentary films, he lived for over four years in small tribal or rural villages of Southeast Asia. The recipient of numerous international grants and awards, he has served on the Board of Directors of the Association for Asian Studies, and has been a longtime member of the Smithsonian's Asian-Pacific American Heritage Committee. He has worked closely with many individuals and community organizations to establish "Heritage" projects at the Smithsonian, including the Smithsonian's Sikh Heritage project, founded in February 2000, which has hosted numerous conferences since 2001 (including the 2006 Sikh Heritage Lectures held in Chandigarh, India, co-organized with the Anandpur Sahib Foundation). Its flagship exhibition, "Sikhs: Legacy of the Punjab," first opened at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History on July 24, 2004.

References Cited

Alag, Sarup Singh
2005. *Mistaken Identity of the Sikhs*. Ludhiana, India: Alag Shabad Yug Charitable Trust.

Bourdieu, Pierre
1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Kreps, Christina
2003 Curatorship as Social Practice. *Curator: The Museum Journal* 46(3):311-324 (July 2003).

Mann, Gurinder Singh
2004 *Sikhism*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Myrvold, Kristina.
2010. "Making Scripture a Person: Reinventing Death Rituals of Guru Granth Sahib in Sikhism." In *The Death of Sacred Texts: Ritual Disposal and Renovation of Texts in World Religions*. Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate.

Murphy, Anne.
2012. *The Materiality of the Past: History and Representation in Sikh Tradition*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Murphy, Anne.

2014. "Sikh Material Culture." In *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Pande, Alka
1999 *From Mustard Fields to Disco Lights: Folk Music & Musical Instruments of Punjab*. Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing.

Singh, Sikandar and Roopinder Singh
2012l *Sikh Heritage: Ethos and Relics*. New Delhi: Rupa Publications India.

Taylor, Paul Michael
2004 Sikh Heritage at the Smithsonian. *Journal of Punjab Studies* 11(2):221-236. (Special issue: "Culture of Punjab.")

2012. Introduction: Perspectives on the Punjab's Most Meaningful Heirlooms. Pp. viii-xi in: *Sikh Heritage: Ethos and Relics* by Bhayee Sikandar Singh and Roopinder Singh. New Delhi: Rupa.

Taylor, Paul Michael, and Robert Pontsioen
2014 *Sikhs: Legacy of the Punjab*. Washington, D.C.: Asian Cultural History Program, Smithsonian Institution; in association with: Sikh Heritage Foundation (Weirton, West Virginia), Fresno Art Museum (Fresno, California), and The Sikh Foundation (Palo Alto, California).

Yeager, Tami R.
2007. *A Dream in Doubt*. (Motion Picture. Length: 56 minutes.) TRY Productions and Independent Television Service (ITVS), in association with Center for Asian-American Media (CAAM). [Republished in DVD format, 2008, San Francisco: Center for Asian American Media.]