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Sikh-Period Architectural Ornament in Punjab: A Synthesis of Tradition & Innovation

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Abstract

Architecture commissioned by the Lahore Darbār during the first half of the nineteenth century is generally dismissed as imitative and derivative of earlier practices by colonial and later historians. This article introduces three salient features of Sikh-period architectural ornament: repoussé work, carved-brickwork and ornamental brackets, that highlight the aesthetic culture they were produced and received in, challenging this unfounded censure. A study of creative use of each technique on selected buildings in Lahore and Amritsar offers evidence of carefully planned embellishment programs that were not only original but were also meaningful as they effectively convey the spirit of the buildings they adorn.

Keywords: Lahore Darbār, Sikh-period architecture, repoussé work, carved-brickwork, ornamental brackets, Golden Temple, Naunehal Singh's *haveli*.

Introduction

The Sikh Maharaja Ranjit Singh ruled the Punjab for forty years and the city of Lahore that not too long ago served as the provincial capital or *dār-ul khilāfa* of the Mughals became his Lahore Darbār (1799–1839). Having enjoyed attention of several Mughal princes, emperors and nobles between the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, the city was home to a large number of monuments as well as craftsmen responsible for their construction and embellishment. Following the hereditary nature of occupational castes and the *karkhāna* or “royal departments under the Mughal courts” setup in urban north India,¹ architectural and related craft practices flowed into the Sikh-period without radical changes in the visual vocabulary, materials or techniques. Each patron, nevertheless, whether Mughal or Sikh, introduced new concepts while adapting earlier modes to suit current needs giving the new creations distinct characters. This continuation of artistic tradition across Mughal and Sikh periods, however, has been addressed in scholarship on unequal terms. While discussing successive phases of Mughal material culture where the past informs the future borrowing from earlier practices is justified as a natural process where traditional practices are propelled into the future with a few changes organically instituted in later renditions. While the same trajectory ought to have been applicable to the nineteenth century art and architecture in the Punjab as older

¹ Tirthankar Roy, *Traditional Industry in the Economy of Colonial India* (UK: Cambridge Uni Press, 1999), 38.

traditions continued to flourish alongside some new vocabularies, the narrative describing them has been dismissive.

This discourse started with publications during early years of the colonial rule that rated Sikh-period architecture as an imitative style of Mughal patterns and criticized it for its lack of vigor and innovation. Many twentieth-century historians followed suit giving little thought to a fresh and rational analysis of this significant chapter of Punjab's architectural history.² It is only a small number of publications that have broken the spell drawing attention to monuments erected during the Sikh supremacy in the nineteenth-century across Pakistan. This body of work has laid a foundation upon which forthcoming scholarship on this period shall be raised.³ Taking this forward, the following pages draw attention to three innovative features of Sikh-period buildings commissioned by the Lahore Darbār in Amritsar and Lahore. Since these two cities were the heart of the Sikh kingdom, each received significant commissions by the court. The application of techniques employed here thus offers an overview of the general practices of builders and craftsmen active in this period. The expertise each example showcases, and the material fashioned for every artistic display in these buildings reflect the aesthetic culture of the nineteenth-century Punjab and the vibrant visual environment that fostered these activities.

Only three embellishment techniques, out of many more, that were advanced and improved during the Sikh-period are discussed here. These are: repoussé work, carved brickwork, and ornamental brackets. Each example demonstrates ingenuity of craftsmanship and novelties introduced at the time of its creation giving it individual features different from earlier renditions. To highlight the synthesis of tradition and innovation, repoussé work practiced during the Sikh-period is discussed against the background of its antecedents under Mughal patronage. This is to emphasize, on the one hand, the shape and style of traditional practices mastered over centuries and on the other, their smooth and transition into the first half of the nineteenth-century.

² For details see, Nadhra Shahbaz Khan, *Maharaja Ranjit Singh's Samādhi in Lahore: A Summation of Sikh Architectural and Decorative Practice* (Berlin: EB-Verlag, 2018), 18–24.

³ These include Khan Muhammad Waliullah Khan's *Lahore and its Important Monuments* (1961), and *Sikh Shrines in West Pakistan* (1962), Iqbal Qaiser's *Historical Sikh Shrines in Pakistan* (1998), Nadhra Shahbaz Khan's *Maharaja Ranjit Singh's Samādhi in Lahore: A Summation of Sikh Architectural and Decorative Practices*, PhD thesis (2009) and book published in 2018, two volumes of Amardeep Singh's *Lost Heritage: The Sikh Legacy in Pakistan* (2015 & 2017), Samia Karamat's *Architecture of Sikh Shrines and Gurdwaras in Pakistan* (2019), and Dalvir S. Pannu's *The Sikh Heritage: Beyond Borders* (2019).

Repoussé Work

“The *Durbar Sahib*, or Golden Temple of the Sikhs, is the artistic centre of Amritsar, not only because it is the most beautiful object in the town, but also because alterations and additions are continually being made to it.⁴ This is what John Lockwood Kipling, the Principal of the Mayo School of Art and Curator of the Lahore Museum (1876–1893), said in 1888. This continuing practice of adding new material with new donations has not only prevailed at the Golden Temple but at several other historical *gurdwāras* in the Punjab (both sides), making it difficult to read the dates of these ornamental features. There are, however, some elements that offer an unchanged visual vocabulary since their rendition in the first half of the nineteenth-century such as most repoussé-work panels. Whether covering the exterior and interior walls, ceilings or door panels or placed in an oblong niche in the wall, these are sheets of different metals such as copper, brass or silver carrying a variety of floral motifs or figurative compositions in chased work. This ornamental metalwork not only offers a glittering finish to the monument but also lavishes the building with the value and might of metal promising perpetuity and grandeur of both the building and the mission.

Metalwork has been known to the Indian craftsmen since ancient times. The most favored methods used for metalware including coins, arms and armors, salvers, vessels or other objects of utility have been “stamping, engraving, inlay, enameling, piercing, chasing, gems encrustations, wrapped wires, or plating”.⁵ Hans E. Wulff offering a clear description of this technique in *The Traditional Crafts of Persia*, introduces it in the following words:

Decorative work on metal objects, mainly of gold, silver, and brass, but sometimes of copper and white nickel alloys, is executed in several techniques for which the general public uses the term *qalamzanī*, i.e., chisel work. In the south, e.g., Šīrāz, this means an embossing or chasing technique, referred to in Western books on art as repoussé. The specific term the Persian craftsmen use for this kind of work is *monabbat*, *monabbat-kārī*, or *barjesteh-kār*; the embosser is called *monabbat-kār*. It is a plastic deformation of the metal with non-cutting, round-edged punches, hammered-in from the front of the workpiece or from the rear.⁶

⁴ John Lockwood Kipling, “The Industries of the Punjab: Amritsar District,” in *The Journal of Indian Art*, vol. II, No. 20 (October, 1888): 62.

⁵ Ana M. Lopez, *Metalworking Through History: An Encyclopedia* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2009), 81.

⁶ Hans E. Wulff, *The Traditional Crafts of Persia: Their Development, Technology, and Influence on Eastern and Western Civilizations* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1966), 35–36.

While we have seventeenth- and eighteenth-century examples of repoussé work featuring floral designs and geometric patterns, the introduction of iconic images or figurative narratives is unique to the Sikh period. This innovative use of an old decorative technique and the ingenuity of its execution under the Lahore Darbār patronage is a solid proof of this period's aesthetic strength and an effective argument against pejorative assertions dismissing it for lack of creative imagination. After examining the Golden Temple in some detail as it is the ultimate example of this technique, we will briefly look at the panels of a few other *gurdwāras* such as the Baba Atal at Amritsar, Janamasthān at Nankana Sahib, and Dera Sahib at Lahore.

The Golden Temple at Amritsar is the finest specimen of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's patronage of art and architecture and of nineteenth century craftsmanship grounded in traditional practices catering to new aesthetics and expectations. It features embellishment techniques mastered in previous eras that on the one hand express the long-established hereditary craft practices, and on the other, innovations peculiar to their own time. Called the Golden Temple or the *Svarṇ Mandir*,⁷ due to the gilded copper plates covering its outer upper body and several sections in the interior, it is the workmanship of these metal sheets that demonstrates a novel approach and qualifies as one of the unique features of Sikh-period architecture (Figs. 1-2).



Fig. 1—Golden Temple, Amritsar (Photo by Jasprit, 2011)

⁷ *Svarṇ* is gold in Sanskrit and *mandir* is a dwelling, palace or temple. See Platts 697 and 1073 respectively.



Fig. 2—Golden Temple, Amritsar (Photo by Jasprit, 2011)

Keeping the magnificent court culture and the circulation of costly objects in Maharaja Ranjit Singh's reign in view, the use of gold on the temple's exterior reflects his desire and endeavors at making this religious sanctuary a glowing symbol of Sikh power. While there are several theories about the Maharaja's decision of applying these gilded sheets, there is no historical account explaining the reasons or the exact date of commencement of this project. What we do have historical evidence of are the Maharaja's efforts towards providing gold for this project towards the end of his life noted by his court chronicler Sohan Lal Suri, the author of *Umdat-ut Tawarikh*. One is where the Maharaja visited the Golden Temple early in the morning on the 1st of Magh (January 11, 1838), to listen to the Holy Granth. Here he performed "Sankalap"⁸ making charitable donation of, among other things, "11 gold pitchers to be utilised in gold plating of the *Darbar Sahib*,..."⁹ A few months later, on the Sankrānt¹⁰ of Baisakh (April 11, 1838), the Maharaja offered another eleven gold pitchers along with several other costly items to the Golden Temple and "talked about the construction of the floor and the gold plating of the *Darbar Sahib*."¹¹ Shortly afterwards, on April 22nd, Suri records another visit of the Maharaja to the Temple where Frederick Mackeson, the British Political Agent, accompanied

⁸ Unlike V. S. Suri, Platts spells it as "saṅkalpnā," a Hindi word that means "To vow; to dedicate, make a grant of; to give alms to (in fulfilment of a religious vow); to bequeath." See John T. Platts, *A Dictionary of Urdu, Classical Hindi, and English* (London: W. H. Allen & Co., 1884), 685.

⁹ Sohan Lal Suri, *An Outstanding Original Source of Punjab History, Umdat-ut-Tawarikh: Chronicle of the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh*, tr. V. S. Suri (Delhi: S. Chand & Co., 1961), 3: 397.

¹⁰ A Sanskrit/Hindi term that refers to the "...passage of the sun or planetary bodies from one sign into another; name of a Hindū festival". Platts, 685.

¹¹ Suri, 3: 419.

him.¹² After paying his respects, the Sikh ruler “fully inspected the gold-plating inside and outside and the respectable Sahib [Mackeson] felt greatly pleased to see that work of gold and highly praised it.”¹³ Suri also notes that this gold-plating attracted the attention of Emily Eden who visited the Temple with her brother Lord Auckland and the Maharaja during her visit to Punjab at the occasion of Naunehal Singh’s wedding in 1837.¹⁴ By the end of the nineteenth century, what circulated in the general public about the holy site’s embellishment scheme is noted by John Lockwood Kipling:

It is a Sikh tradition that at the consultations held before beginning the Golden Temple, it was proposed to make the building gorgeous with pearls, jewels and gold, but that for fear of robbery, plates of gilded metal and slabs of inlaid marble were eventually adopted.¹⁵

Repoussé work in Punjab during the first half of the nineteenth century was built on earlier practices but was developed to attain its own aesthetically admirable characteristic features. A study of Mughal use of beaten metal sheets for architectural decoration close to the Sikh examples is important to understand both stylistic and thematic nuances of the two periods that are comparable at some levels but quite different at others. For this, some Mughal-period examples are discussed below before examining a few *gurdwāras* in Lahore and Amritsar embellished with repoussé work.

Among the most prominent of the seventeenth century examples where exterior surfaces of a building’s crowning components are covered with gilded copper are: the cupolas of the Musamman Burj *chhatrīs* at both Delhi and Agra forts (Shah Jahan, r. 1628–1658), and the three domes of the Pearl or Moti Mosque in the Delhi Fort built by Aurangzeb in 1659, that were, according to Syed Ahmad Khan, originally gilded and the mosque was, therefore, known as the golden or *sonahrī* mosque.¹⁶ Following this, another golden mosque with three

¹² Frederick Mackeson (1807–1853) was Lieutenant-Colonel in the Bengal Army, Companion of The Bath, and Commissioner of Peshawar at the time of his death. He was appointed as the British Political Agent at Peshawar during the Sikh rule.

¹³ Suri, 3: 429.

¹⁴ Suri, 3:591. We must also remember Maharaja Ranjit Singh’s generous contributions for gold plating the dome of the Hindu temple Jwalamukhi (34 km from Kangra). Conforming with the Maharaja’s earlier practices, Kharak Singh, Ranjit Singh’s eldest son and heir, suggested that some gold may be sent to the Jwalamukhi Temple for its gold-plating as a supplication for the Maharaja’s ill health during his last days. Suri reports that the ailing monarch readily agreed and “gold ducats upto the value of Rs. 5,000” were taken from Mirs Beli Ram, the treasurer, and were immediately sent off (Suri, 3: 687–688).

¹⁵ John Lockwood Kipling, “The Industries of the Punjab: Amritsar District (*continued*),” in *The Journal of Indian Art*, vol. II, no. 24 (October, 1888): 65.

¹⁶ Syed Ahmad Khan, *Āsār-ūṣ Ṣanādīd* (Cawnpore: Nami Press, 1904), 73; Catherine B. Asher, *Architecture of Mughal India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 256.

gilded domes is in Lahore built by Bukhari Khan in 1753, called the Sonahrī Masjid. These too are flat sheets covering the segmented domes and used for the finial (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3— Sonahrī Masjid, Lahore (Photo 2012)

A more intricately decorative technique of using thin metal sheets to cover wooden door panels appears to have gained popularity with imperial architectural projects by Aurangzeb in the seventeenth century. Two significant examples of these are his Delhi Fort Moti Masjid and the tomb he built for his wife Rabi'a Durrani at Aurangabad. The Moti Masjid main door leaf is covered with metal sheets, fitted in a white marble frame. While the domes of this mosque and other *chhatrīs* were originally covered with plain copper sheets, the door is embellished with delicate floral patterns in repoussé work. This “bronze door of remarkable beauty”¹⁷ of the Pearl or Moti Mosque is repeatedly mentioned by several Europeans in their travelogues. For example, Herbert Charles Fanshawe in his *Delhi: Past and Present* noted that “The bronze door of the gateway is a handsome piece of work and looks as if it might be the handicraft of some Italian artificer.”¹⁸ These, according to the *Inventory of Monuments and Sites of National Importance: Delhi Circle*, are actually “copper-plated leaves” of its eastern door.¹⁹

Also written as *sunehri*, (s. f.) Platts however spells it as *sonahrā*, (s.m.) translating it as “gilding, gilt” or “of gold”. See John T. Platts, *A Dictionary of Urdu, Classical Hindi, and English* (London: W. H. Allen & Co., 1884), 703.

¹⁷ W. S. Caine, *Picturesque India: A Handbook of European Travellers* (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1891), 124.

¹⁸ Herbert Charles Fanshawe, *Delhi: Past and Present* (London: John Murray, 1902), 39; Also see Carr Stephen, *The Archaeology and Monumental Remains of Delhi* (Simla: Civil and Military Gazette and Station Press, 1876), 233.

¹⁹ Jagat Pati Joshi, Krishna Deva, et. al., *Inventory of Monuments and Sites of National Importance: Delhi Circle, Part III* (New Delhi: DG Archaeological Survey of India, 2004), 1: 13.

More elaborately decorated than the Moti Mosque Delhi Fort's door panels are those of the Aurangabad tomb. Ebba Koch describes one of these in the following words: "Of high artistic quality is the door in the podium of the tomb, which is covered by *munabbat-kārī* in embossed brass-sheets showing naturalistic flowery plants surrounded by arabesques."²⁰ These are only two examples of the use of repoussé work for decorating door panels of monuments of great significance to the emperor during Aurangzeb's reign, an area that is requires more research for a better understanding of its use as an ornamental medium in the seventeenth century.

The use of this mode of decoration in *gurdwāras* in the nineteenth century Punjab is evidence of its significance as a favored decorative technique in religious projects commissioned by wealthy patrons. Although the practice of continuous renovations makes dating difficult in *gurdwāras*, most repoussé panels in these religious monuments do appear to have been commissioned during Ranjit Singh's rule. Kanwarjit Singh Kang, an authority on Sikh-period paintings explains this in the following words:

During the 19th century, brass plates embossed with figures recounting Sikh and Hindu themes were affixed on the walls of several religious edifices of Punjab, particularly of Amritsar where most typical and best specimens of the art of embossing on brass thrived in the hands of craftsmen of Kucha Fakirkhana. The best surviving work of this kind is to be seen on the walls of the Golden Temple and the shrine of Baba Atal at Amritsar.²¹

The Golden Temple has its entire upper exterior section covered with gilded sheets exquisitely decorated with a wide variety with two panels featuring the first and the last Gurus on the temple's entrance connected to the Darshani Deorhi. Further east is the nine-storied octagonal building of Gurdwāra Baba Atal. The ground floor of each alternate side has a doorway crowned with an oblong copper panel flanked by one on each side of a slightly lesser width. Each panel carries a figurative composition featuring Hindu and Sikh religious themes (Fig. 4). What we have at the Janamasthān Gurdwāra, Nankana Sahib, is a singular copper panel carrying a composition with Guru Nanak, Bhai Mardana and Bhai Bala as well as the pair of door leaves of the main sanctuary covered with silver sheets worked in repoussé (Figs. 5-7). The central section of each leaf carries a composition showing the first Guru (right leaf) and the distribution of langar (left leaf) while the rest of the space is embellished with a

²⁰ Ebba Koch, *Mughal Architecture: An Outline of Its History and Development (1526–1858)* (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1991), 127. Koch refers to repoussé work as *munabbat kari* or relief work.

²¹ Kanwarjit Singh Kang, *Wall Paintings of Punjab and Haryana* (Delhi: Atma Ram & Sons, 1985), color plate iv.

combination of floral designs and arabesque-like scrolls. Another example of the dexterity of nineteenth century craftsmen in working on sheets of different metals is Maharaja Ranjit Singh's throne in the Victoria & Albert Museum, London. Every inch of the thick gold sheets of this chair-like throne is meticulously decorated with naturalistic and abstract floral motifs, covering a wood and resin core.



Fig. 4—Gurdwāra Baba Atal, Amritsar (Photo 2007)



Fig. 5—Gurdwāra Janam Asthan, Nankana Sahib (Photo 2018)



Fig. 6—Gurdwāra Janam Asthan, Nankana Sahib (Photo by Tahir Nawaz, 2022)



Fig. 7—Gurdwāra Janam Asthan, Nankana Sahib (Photo by Tahir Nawaz, 2022)

Not restricted to *gurdwāras*, this decorative technique was popular with other religious communities as well and we have several shrines such as the tomb of Khwaja Ghulam Farid at Kot Mithan and of Mian Mir at Lahore, where the doors are covered with metal sheets decorated with floral and geometric motifs in repoussé work.²² The use of ornamented metal plates covering door leaves or other objects continued across religious communities and beyond the Mughal and Sikh periods. By the second half of the nineteenth century, instead of the earlier costly materials used by the elite, a cheaper version of this technique is noted by John Lockwood Kipling. This was “*punnah* or tin foil” which appears to have gained popularity among the masses. Kipling describes its uses in his article of “The Industries of the Punjab” describing their manufacture in the Delhi district:

²² For the Kot Mithan shrine, see Talib Hussain, *Traditional Architectural Crafts of Pakistan: History & Techniques* (Islamabad: Lok Virsa, 2011), 231.

Tin Foil. —*Punnah* or tin foil is made here [Delhi] and tinted sometimes with coloured varnish; it serves as gold tinsel. A surface of wood covered with this material and then painted on in foliated patterns used to be a favorite form of decoration for doors, some of which are to be found in fine old mansions in the older parts of the city.”²³

The continuity of tradition and technique from the Mughal to the Sikh period, given the hereditary nature of transmission of knowledge systems in India, was only natural. The assimilation and absorption of ideas practiced by one religious’ community of the other was equally normal. Commenting on this and the gradual blossoming of new characteristics during the Sikh-period while discussing “Architecture and Architectural Decoration” of the Amritsar district, this is what Kipling posits:

Although they [the Sikhs] were content to borrow the inspiration as well as frequently to plunder the actual materials of Musalmán buildings, they had some progress towards the development of style of art which eventually would have presented interesting characteristics. There is, perhaps, more in the Sikh treatment of Muhammadan architecture than strikes an ordinary eye; for, like the Jain adaptation of similar elements, it promised to lead through a natural sequence of changeful growth to new and probably attractive forms.”²⁴

Summing it up, he states that, “If the inlaid marble was due to plunder, the *repoussé* metal work is believed to be fairly come by, and has a sufficiently distinctive character.”²⁵ Drawing attention to the difference between earlier Mughal technique Kipling noted that “The beaten work of the Sikhs differs from such Muhammadan examples as the domes of the *Soneri* Mosque in Lahore, in being covered with an arabesque of raised work.”²⁶ Repoussé work executed in the first half of the nineteenth century in the Punjab, as explained by Kipling, not only offered an impetus to the earlier traditional craft but also added a new dimension in its use it had never enjoyed earlier.

Carved Brickwork

The innovative use of bricks where they were the chief building material is traceable to very early times in the subcontinent. Some of the basic methods used for preparing such bricks were cutting, carving or molding them.

²³ John Lockwood Kipling, “The Industries of the Punjab: Delhi District,” in *The Journal of Indian Art*, vol. II, no. 20 (October, 1888): 28.

²⁴ John Lockwood Kipling, “The Industries of the Punjab: Amritsar District,” in *The Journal of Indian Art*, vol. II, no. 23 (October, 1888): 62.

²⁵ John Lockwood Kipling, “The Industries of the Punjab: Amritsar District,” in *The Journal of Indian Art*, vol. II, no. 24 (October, 1888): 65.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

Alexander Cunningham (1814–1893) was a British army officer who became the first Archaeological Surveyor for the Government of India and later served as the Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India. Cunningham excavated a large number of important sites in northern India and produced detailed survey reports of these monuments. His statement on the use of carved brickwork in Punjab and other neighboring areas provides a historical context of the use of this technique and connects its practice during the Sikh period to a long unbroken tradition. Cunningham explains the use of carved brickwork in his late nineteenth century report in the following words:

I have found moulded and carved bricks of similar designs all over the Panjâb and North-Western Provinces, from Shâhdheri, or Taxila, and Multân on the west, to Srâvasti and Garhwâ on the east. At every old site these carved and moulded bricks are found in abundance, and I have now ascertained that many of the most famous buildings in Northern India at the time of the Muhammadan invasion must have been built entirely of brick, and were decorated with terracotta ornaments and alto-relievos.²⁷

Holly Edwards further elucidates this in her 2015 publication titled, *Of Brick and Myth: The Genesis of Islamic Architecture in the Indus Valley* by providing several examples of carved brickwork found on a variety of structures such as stupas that go as far back as the second century CE and temples and tombs in subsequent eras. Among these is the Guldara Stupa in Logar province, eastern Afghanistan, fort and temples of Bilot, Derajat, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and tombs of Muhammad bin Harun in Bela, Balochistan and of Duagan and Suhagan in Aror, Sindh.²⁸

Moving to Lahore we find Kipling noting in the *Journal of Indian Art and Industries* while discussing “Brick and Tile Making” in the Lahore district that “There is not a stone to be found within many miles of Lahore, and brick-making has been practiced from time immemorial.”²⁹ Having been a recipient of countless imperial architectural projects for centuries, the presence of numerous kilns in and around Lahore are a testament to their active role in the city’s architectural landscape. As Catherine Asher explains, “Unlike the Agra and Allahabad forts, whose outer walls are made of red stone, the Lahore fort’s walls are brick, a traditional building material of the northwestern area of

²⁷ Alexander Cunningham, *Archaeological Survey of India: Report of the Tours in the Gangetic Provinces from Badaon to Bihar, in 1875–76 and 1877–78*, Vol. xi (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1880), 42.

²⁸ Holly Edwards, *Of Brick and Myth: The Genesis of Islamic Architecture in the Indus Valley* (Karachi: OUP, 2015).

²⁹ John Lockwood Kipling, “The Industries of the Punjab: Lahore District,” in *The Journal of Indian Art*, vol. II, no. 23 (October, 1888): 59.

subcontinent”.³⁰ While bricks were used as the core building material, façades of most imperial and sub-imperial Mughal buildings dateable to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in and around Lahore were embellished with either red sandstone, white marble, glazed tiles or in some cases carved brickwork with stucco finish. A few examples of the latter can be seen at the Akbari Mahal in the Lahore Fort where we have faceted engaged column and brackets, all in carved bricks. The use of carved brickwork is also the base of extant *chhatrīs* encircling the dome of Ali Mardan Khan’s tomb, once covered with stucco plaster. The scarcity of stone in the nineteenth century, however, appears to have given this ancient technique a new life and the stimulus to thrive in the hands of craftsmen serving the Lahore Darbār. Thus, we find excellent examples of carved brickwork without stucco-covering explored and polished as a façade decoration medium on several Sikh-period buildings. Two prominent illustrations of this ornamental technique are the western boundary wall of Maharaja Ranjit Singh’s *samādhi* or funerary monument and the eastern façade of Naunehal Singh’s *havelī* or mansion.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh’s *samādhi* was commenced shortly after his death in June 1839 but it stood in an incomplete state at the time of Punjab’s annexation in 1849. As discussed in detail elsewhere, Major Napier, the British civil engineer, prepared a cost estimate for completing it at the behest of Henry Lawrence, one of the three members appointed as the Board of Administrators of the Punjab after annexation.³¹ At the top of the list he prepared of the *samādhi*’s unfinished areas is “The roofing and outer cornice and parapet of the west gateway,” and the amount he asked for its completion was Rs. 1,200.³² Although it is difficult to ascertain the extent of attention this gateway received in 1850s when work commenced on the building under British supervision as it still stands in half-finished state. Its fine brickwork patterns nevertheless do speak of their Lahore Darbār patronage presenting an admirable example of the development of this technique during this period.

Similar to its eastern counterpart, this main doorway in the western wall of the *samādhi* enclosure or Dera Sahib Complex has a large arched entrance that would have originally stood in the center of the wall (Fig. 8). Maulvi Zafar-ur-Rahman in his 1939 *Glossary of Technical Terms Used in Indian Arts & Crafts*

³⁰ Asher, *Architecture of Mughal India*, 115.

³¹ For details see, Nadhra Shahbaz Khan, *Maharaja Ranjit Singh’s Samādhi in Lahore*, 69–73.

³² Foreign Department (Political), 4th August 1849 (84–86), National Archives of India, New Delhi.

calls it a *tājdār darwāza*.³³ This centrality has been compromised with the recently constructed wall to its right as it now marks an abrupt termination of the original nineteenth century construction of the *samādhi*'s west boundary wall. Another important element now missing on the right side is the engaged tower topped by a *chhatrī* of which only one on its southern corner survives. This fort-like feature echoes the profile of the Lahore Fort's Alamgiri Gateway that stands a few paces away, not only in its shape but also in its ornamental details. This extant engaged tower and the parapet with arched merlons offer interesting synergies between architectural styles of two successive periods expressing similar yet distinctive visual vocabularies.



Fig. 8—Western entrance of the Samādhi or Dera Sahib Complex (Photo 2008)

The majesty of this west wall is apparent from the fine brickwork that boldly differs in quality of material and workmanship from the cornice and parapet, added to it during the British rule. The large arched gateway has all the elements, from bottom to top, to make it comparable to its eastern counterpart including the seats or a platform-like space on each side called *shāgirdīs* in the 1939 glossary. These are an important and integral feature of majestic entrances in the subcontinent meant as seats for the guards or doorkeepers. The red sandstone finish given to the edges of these seats with the usual *dāsah* or *ponchī* pattern featuring petals carved in low relief suspended with a string, gives us reasons to believe that there may have been more red sandstone in other sections of this construction.³⁴ The present low elevation of these seats is indicative of the risen level of the passage in front of this over the years. The cusped arch

³³ Maulvi Zafar-ur-Rahman, *A Glossary of Technical Terms Used in Indian Arts & Crafts in Farhang-e Iştilāḥāt-e Peshawarān: Hindustān ke Mukhtalif Funūn aur Şan'aton ke Iştilāḥī Alfāz-o Maḥāvarāt kā Jāmē' Majmū'a* (Anjuman-e-Taraqqi-e-Urdu, 1939), 1:70.

³⁴ For more on *dāsah* and *ponchī* patterns, see Nadhra Khan (2018), 86–89.

above these presents delicately rendered projecting curls marking a set of three subtle cusps, embellished with a band in relief upon which some small leaf motifs delicately bend over while a few are carved against the wall creating a playful balance between fluidity and fixity. The central upward curve of this large arch is crowned with an exquisitely carved flower that appears to have never received its final finishing touches.

Naunehal Singh, also spelt as Nau Nihal, was Ranjit Singh's eldest grandson and Kharak Singh and Chand Kaur's only son or probably the only child as we do not know if the couple had any daughters. The *haveli* is situated "a furlong north of the Mori Gate,"³⁵ in an area called Maidān Bhāiyān,³⁶ almost a kilometer away from the Lahore Fort. It was built shortly before Naunehal Singh's wedding in 1837. Kanhaya Lal writes that land for this *haveli* was appropriated by pulling down several houses belonging to ordinary people but the owner sadly died at a very young age.³⁷ Writing in 1884, Lal states that it was government property at the time and Latif adds in 1892 that this was being "used as the *zenana*, or female school."³⁸ Thus ever since late nineteenth century, Naunehal Singh's exquisitely designed and decorated *haveli* houses the Government Victoria Girls High School and has faced several interventions through which much of its original fabric has been compromised (Fig. 9).



Fig. 9—Naunehal Singh's Haveli, western facade, Lahore (Photo 2007)

³⁵ Masood-ul-Hasan Khokhar, "Haveli Nau Nihal Singh," in *Lahore Museum Bulletin*, Vol. XII: 2 (July–December 1999): 77.

³⁶ *Maidān* is a plain or an open field and *bhāiyān* is brothers.

³⁷ Kanhaya Lal, *Tarikh-e Lahore* (Lahore: Book Talk, 2006 [1884]), 306.

³⁸ Syad Muhammad Latif, *Lahore: Its History, Architectural Remains and Antiquities, with an Account of Its Modern Institutions, Inhabitants, Their Trade, Customs, &c.* (Lahore: The New Imperial Press, 1892), 233.

The building's eastern and western facades are highly ornamented but in completely different techniques. While the east side features terracotta figures and carved brickwork, the west side is decorated with painted sculptures. Several eminent historians such as Kanhaya Lal (1884), Syad Muhammad Latif (1892) and M. Baqir (1952) unanimously declare it as the "most magnificent buildings of the city of Lahore".³⁹ Lieut. William Barr, of the Bengal Horse Artillery, visited Lahore as part of the British mission in February 1839. His impression of the *havelī*, though he probably did not get a chance of visiting it during his short stay in the city, is recorded in his journal:

The buildings in Lahore most conspicuous for their size were pointed out as the residences of Koi-now-nihal [Kunwar Naunehal] Singh, the Maharaja's grandson, and of Raja Dhian Singh, his prime minister; but there are many large edifices, though totally void of any pretentions to taste in their architecture.⁴⁰

The carved brickwork and terracotta relief ornament on the eastern façade of Naunehal Singh's *havelī* is significant in more than one way. It not only joyfully flaunts the power and magnificence of the master of the house at the happy occasion of his wedding but also provides an excellent example of the capacity and range of the craftsmen active under the Lahore Darbār's patronage.

The ground floor carries the usual arched blind niches breaking the monotony of the wall arranged along the vertical and horizontal axis around the fenestration. The original carved wooden doorframe of the entrance (half of which is now bricked up thus restricting entrance into the *havelī* from the west side) is set in a deep niche with a cusped arch. This arch is decorated with cord-and-leaf carvings on its edges and a flower at its upward turning apex. Maulvi Zafar-ur-Rahman in his 1939 *Glossary of Technical Terms Used in Indian Arts & Crafts* calls such an entrance the *tājdār darwāza*.⁴¹ On each side of the entrance is a platform-like space called *chaukī* or *shāgirdī* in this glossary.⁴² These are an important and integral feature of majestic entrances in the subcontinent meant as seats for the guards or doorkeepers. This arched entrance is flanked by sunken niches now fitted with the pointed hood-mold popular in

³⁹ Kanhaya Lal, 306; Latif, 233; M. Baqir, *Lahore: Past and Present* (Delhi: Low Price Publications, 1993 [1952]), 442.

⁴⁰ William Barr, *Journal of a March from Delhi to Peshāwur, and from Thence to Cābul, with the Mission of Lieut.-Colonel Sir C. M. Wade, KT. C.B., Including Travels in the Punjab, A Visit to the City of Lahore, and a Narrative of Operations in the Khyber Pass, Undertaken in 1839* (London: James Madden & Co., 1844), 97.

⁴¹ Maulvi Zafar-ur-Rahman, 1:70

⁴² *Ibid.*, 1:114, 123.

Gothic architecture, a result of British interventions. Compared to the section above it, this part of the façade appears to have lost much of its decorative elements and shows obvious signs of decay, especially around the dado level. It is the first-floor section of this east façade of Naunehal Singh's *havelī* that exhibits carefully crafted carved brickwork and terracotta trimmings, both unique in character and exquisite in rendition (Fig. 10).

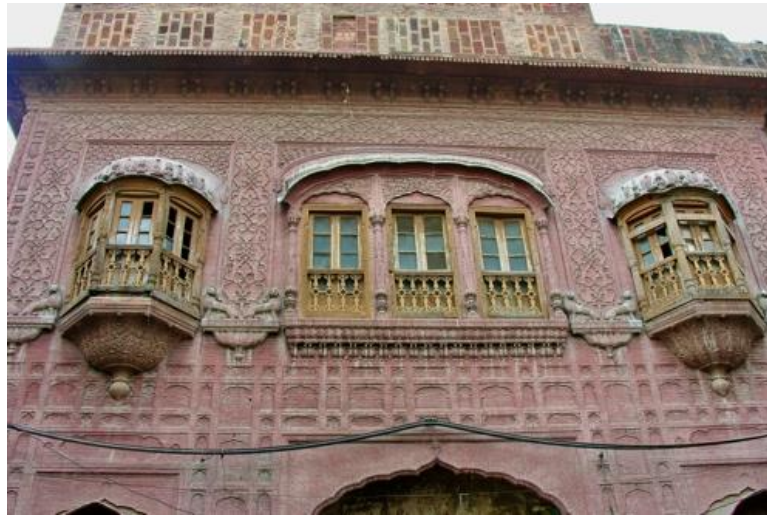


Fig. 10—Eastern façade of Naunehal Singh's *Havelī*, Lahore (Photo 2007)

Placed above the *tājdār darwāza* is an arrangement of two types of fenestrations, a practice we find across Sikh-period buildings. The central one is flat with its base or *pāindī* and crowning elements slightly projecting from the wall while the side ones are designed as *bukhārchas* (also called *jharokas*) or oriel windows,⁴³ with half domes supported by fully formed bases or *pāindīs* decorated with fine relief work ending in a lotus bulb-like form. The central window has three arched openings supported on carved engaged columns resting on a horizontally aligned base resting on pairs of small bracket-like elements, carrying delicately carved patterns. The spandrel of the central arched opening is embellished with a combination of large and small flowers in rinceaux while the side spandrels have a *parī* or winged figure flying in opposite directions. This tripartite central window is flanked by tri-faceted *bukhārchas* on either side hoisted on *pāindīs*, capped with half-domes with a projecting eaves divided into three sections. Perched on these eaves are pigeons sculpted in a variety of sizes and poses. A broad band carrying an intricate geometric strapwork with delicate curls and twists in relief runs along the sides and the top of the central large window and the two *bukhārchas*. Intersecting the tripartite

⁴³ For a detailed discussion of *bukhārchas* and *jharokas* see, Nadhra Khan, *The Samādhi of Maharaja Ranjit Singh*, 119–124.

central window and the two *bukhārchas*, this band culminates parallel to the edge of their bases (*paindī*), slightly projecting from the wall. On each *paindī* is a pair of crouching addorsed lions positioned with their heads turned and slightly titled forward to look down at the viewers. Above the heads of the lions at both ends of the façade are square and oblong niches carrying a variety of vessels also in carved brickwork. Flowers, fairies, pigeons and lions placed against an intricate web of strapwork with vessels large and small, all in exquisitely rendered carved brickwork with terracotta trimmings offer a vibrant picture of artistic skills fostered under the patronage of the Lahore Darbār. The freedom to use animate imagery and the expertise to render geometric and floral patterns created new combinations widening the scope and broadening the range of artistic endeavors of the nineteenth century *mistrī* who was both an artist and a craftsman!

Ornamental Brackets

Brackets in all important Sikh-period buildings attract special attention as their decorative role outshines their function as loadbearing devices. Mostly crafted in plaster or carved brickwork, they are shaped in a variety of floral and animate forms. Although distantly comparable to the red sandstone zoomorphic brackets in the Lahore Fort's Jahangiri Quadrangle, the ones molded by nineteenth century craftsmen carry individual characteristics unique to their time. Most buildings boast novel shapes that sometimes appear to carry symbolic designs befitting their character. One such example are the horse-like brackets at Maharaja Ranjit Singh's *havelī* at Gujranwala and his *samādhi* in Lahore that seemingly allude to his "legendary passion for well-bred horses".⁴⁴ Another noticeable example are the elegantly modelled bird-shaped brackets with bunches of grapes next to them on the exterior wall of the Gurdwara Janamasthān, Nankana Sahib.

Yet another excellent example of Sikh-period bracket designs can be seen on the western façade of Naunehal Singh's *havelī*. At present, the façade has an asymmetrical composition as the *tājdār darwaza* is pushed to the left edge instead of occupying the center of the western wall. The large arch of this main entrance is placed in a slightly projecting rectangular frame. Right above this large arch is the *bukhārcha*,⁴⁵ with ornamental brackets at its base. These brackets are the most attractive aspect of the western façade that attract immediate attention and command appreciation (Fig. 11). Molded as composite

⁴⁴ Nadhra Khan, 124–125.

⁴⁵ Generally called a *jharoka*. For a detailed discussion on the use of these two terms for oriel windows in Punjab, see Nadhra Khan, 119–124.

creatures, these delicately painted brackets are placed as pairs in frontal poses in the central section of the oriel window's base while one each is positioned at both ends against the wall. Where this delightful composition present the zenith of craftsmanship of this period, these brackets are also an exquisite example of original thought going into architectural planning and a unique execution of its design. Placed in-between each pair are sculpted and painted parrots perched on a half-hexagonal *bukhārcha*-like projection complete with its *paindī* or base. These projections have three arched window-like alcoves, each featuring a singular flower plant.



Fig. 11—Western façade of Naunehal Singh's Havelī, Lahore (Photo 2007)

The placement of this animate composition, at the base of the central large *bukhārcha* on the first floor and right above the main arch that towers above the main entrance, was meant to attract attention and perpetually communicate an important message to everyone making a visual contact with it. A study of this iconography reveals that the choice was deliberate as it perfectly matched occasion of this *havelī*'s construction shortly before Naunehal Singh's wedding. Discussed below are the two narrators of this pictorial message—the parrot and the composite creature that features the head of a horse and the body of a winged anthropomorphic figure—a *Kinnāra*. John Dowson, in his *A Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology and Religion, Geography, History, and Literature* gives *Kinnāra* as “Kin-naras,” which literally means “What men?”. He describes *Kinnāra* as follows:

Mythical beings with the form of a man and the head of a horse. They are celestial choristers and musicians, dwelling in the paradise of Kuvera on Kailāsa. They sprang from the toe of Brahmā with the Yakshas, but according to others, they are sons of

Kasyapa. They are also called Aswa-mukhas Turanga-vaktras, ‘horse-faced,’ and Mayus.”⁴⁶

Not restricted to Hindu mythology, *Kinnaras* also occupy an important position in Buddhist iconography. They are shown holding garlands or trays with flowers or holding each in one of their hands. Buddhist *Jatakas* refer to them as “fairies and are shown as going in pairs noted for mutual love and devotion...[and] are noted for their long life.”⁴⁷ In both traditions the *Kinnaras* are known to have musical talents and “they always roam as gay, love couples”. Some of their habits mentioned in classical literature in Krishna Murthy’s words are: “bathing in streams, swinging in creepers, sleeping on flowerbeds.”⁴⁸ Murthy also states that:

...[B]oth Buddhist and Hindu literature attribute musical talents to the *Kinnaras*. Again, that they always roam as gay, love couples is the picture that is common to both Buddhist and Hindu literature.⁴⁹

Stating that the *Kinnara* is represented in Indian art and literature in three forms, N. G. Tavakar explains these as follows:

- 1- The *Man-Horse* form in which the head is that of a horse and the body os that of a human being;
- 2- the *Man-Horse* form in which the head is that of a human being and the body is that of a horse; and
- 3- the Man-Bird form in which the bust is that of a human being, but has feathered wings of a bird, and has legs of an eagle.⁵⁰

As stated above, in-between the *Kinnara* couples, are a compendium of four parrots. The presence of parrots in this narrative adds another interesting angle to the theme of the western façade of Naunehal Singh’s *haveli* in Lahore. In Praveen Chopra’s words:

They [parrots] have enjoyed a very visible presence through time immemorial in Indian fables, folklore, jataka and Panchatantra stories and are depicted as agents of love, erotica, deception and even wisdom. In Indian mythology, the Rose-ringed parakeet is depicted as the mount or vahana of the Hindu god of carnal love, Kamdev.”⁵¹

⁴⁶ Dowson, 158. Mayus is explained as “Bleater, bellower” on page 207.

⁴⁷ K. Krishna Murthy, *Mythical Animals in Indian Art* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1985), 14–15.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ N. G. Tavakar, *The Essay Throwing New Light On: The Gandharvas, The Apsarases, The Yakshas and The Kinnaras* (Bombay: Tavkar Prakashan, 1971), 79.

⁵¹ Praveen Chopra, *Vishnu’s Mount: Birds in Indian Mythology and Folklore* (Chennai: Notion Press, 2017). There is a *Śukasapati* (Seventy-Two Tales of a Parrot) manuscript in the British Library in Sanskrit composed in 1581 CE. The Mughal Emperor Akbar commissioned

Kāma, in John Dowson's dictionary is described as follows:

He is lord of the Apsarases or heavenly nymphs. He is armed with a bow and arrows; the bow is of sugar-cane, the bowstring a line of bees, and each arrow is tipped with a distinct flower. He is usually represented as a handsome youth riding on a parrot and attended by nymphs, one of whom bears his banner displaying the Makara, or a fish on a red ground."⁵²

Kāmadeva, in W. J. Wilkins's words, "is worshipped at the time of marriage, and happiness in the married state, and offspring, are sought from him."⁵³ Wilkins also states that "According to one hymn in the "Rig-Veda," Kāma is worshipped and said to be unequalled by the gods; according to another, he is the god of sexual love, like Eros of the Greeks, and Cupid of the Latins. In the latter aspect he is thus addressed: 'May Kāma, having well directed the arrow, which is winged with pain, barbed with longing, and has desire for its shaft, pierce thee in the heart.' It is in this character that he appears in the Purānas."⁵⁴

Created for the happy occasion of the prince's wedding, every inch of this *haveli*'s original plan and ornamental program was created in the nineteenth century and qualifies it as one of the best examples of Sikh-period architecture. This thoughtfully designed, gayly painted and strategically placed figural composition surrounded with floral motifs, geometric patterns and strapwork (that recalls the soffit of Asif Khan's tomb at Shahdara) is an excellent example of an amalgam of tradition and modernity, of a respect for continuity and a zeal for innovation. It also poses many questions to those who echoed the colonial narrative and never raised their heads (literally and metaphorically) to notice this burst of creativity and to admire the spirit of tradition it so proudly presents.

Conclusion

The enumeration of three modes of architectural decoration in this essay—repoussé work, carved brickwork and ornamental brackets, rendered on buildings commissioned by the Lahore Darbār in Lahore and Amritsar is an attempt at introducing a few highpoints of Sikh-period artistic ouvres. Carrying a natural connection with earlier visual vocabularies and practices due to the hereditary nature of the social milieu, art and architecture created during the

an illustrated manuscript of a similar collection of fifty-two short stories in Persian called the *Tutinama*.

⁵² John Dowson, *A Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology and Religion, Geography, History, and Literature* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1913), 146.

⁵³ W. J. Wilkins, *Hindu Mythology: Vedic and Purānic* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co., 1913), 267–268.

⁵⁴ Wilkins, 263.

Sikh period not only kept the tradition alive but added a new vigor to them—a contribution it is seldom acknowledged for. Each technique has thus been presented in the context of similar earlier practices with an aim to challenge and dispel the general discourse accusing it to be derivative or imitative of the Mughal tradition. This perspective not only highlights the natural development of these modes of aesthetic and material culture over time but also draws attention to how they take a new and meaningful form in the hands of the *mistrīs* commissioned by the Lahore Darbār. The examples discussed here reflect an environment where creative sensibilities were given the impetus they needed to flourish and the free hand to express themselves imaginatively. This burst of creativity that had all the promise and potential to flower into a strong style of its own commenced and ended within a short period of slightly more than four decades. Artistic endeavors created in the nineteenth century Punjab should thus be approached and studied with this context in view and conserved for future generations as the last and significant chapter of indigenous aesthetic practices before they changed forever under the colonial rule.