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**Then and Now:
On Activating Sikh Visual and Material Culture at the Montreal
Museum of Fine Arts (MMFA)**

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Abstract

A museum's relevance must lie in its ability to inspire reflections on the works it contains, fostering and cherishing a plurality of interpretations. The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts has been exploring new avenues of interpretation, rejecting the idea of an exhaustive overview of the arts of the world's various regions in the manner of the so-called universal museums of the nineteenth century. From the multitude of realities its art collections embody and the histories they index, nodes of encounter and entanglement emerge, the so-called space "in between," from which new visions arise. Within this new epistemic framework, the museum recently welcomed The Kapany Collection of Sikh Art, a new gallery dedicated to historical and contemporary Sikh Art, part of a commitment to render the museum into a space receptive to the shifting plurality of voices that comprise our ever-changing Canadian society. The Kapany Collection presented a timely opportunity to re-think conventional museological approaches and offer new perspectives to Sikh art and art in general, incorporating Sikhi as a meaningful curatorial praxis and prompting contemporary diasporic artists to weave new histories from within.

Keywords: Sikh Art, Museum Studies, Contemporary Diasporic Art

Decolonising the Gaze

Located on unceded indigenous lands of the Kanien'kehá:ka nation and at the center of Montreal historical Golden Square Mile, the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, with its five pavilions and over 44,000 works of art, is one of the oldest (once-called) "encyclopedic museums" in Canada.¹ Built originally around a colonial pedagogy that posited the museum as "a window to the world," the MMFA's collection grew at the beginning of the 20th century when over 6000 Asian artifacts were donated to the museum by local benefactors from the rich anglophone elite related to the railway boom. For these early collectors, artifacts were chosen based on their self-proclaimed taste, deeply informed by the colonial gazing of the Other,

¹ Encyclopedism in western museums is closely related to the 19th century colonial idea of the "all-encompassing archive of information", where cultures and people were randomly categorized to serve the western colonial gaze and its desire to contain -and control- the world. In our efforts of decolonization, museum nomenclature should also be reviewed.

the power of the exotic and the transnational market of the late 19th and early 20th century – dynamics directly and indirectly fed by colonial violence.

Today, I like to think of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (MMFA) as a museum in “progress,” an entity no more defined by the colonizing ethos of its forefathers, but open to change in a world that is constantly redefining itself and seeks to embrace the fluidity, the entanglement and interconnectedness of “things” and “humans (Hodder 2012).” The institution does not only conserve relics of different material cultures from Asia to Africa, Oceania and the Americas, but elicits new interpretations, asks new questions, and invites a multiplicity of external voices to contribute to the co-creation of knowledge with the aim of crafting a more inclusive politics of representation.

Conscious of its own colonial entrenchment, the MMFA has re-installed and re-oriented its Asian collections in the Arts of One World galleries, offering new curatorial interpretations addressing the social life of the objects² and their various cultural entanglements.

In today’s complex world, a museum’s relevance lies in its capacity to inspire reflection on the works it houses and open the way to multiple interpretations. The MMFA is exploring new avenues of interpretation, without pretending to provide an exhaustive overview of the arts of the world’s various regions, or to “contain” the world in the manner of the so-called universal museums of the nineteenth century. Instead, it seeks a new dialogue with the collections. From the plurality of realities these works embody and the histories they tell, nodes of encounter, entanglement and exchange can emerge, the so-called space “in between,” (Basu 2017) from which new possibilities arise. Within this new epistemic framework, the museum recently welcomed The Kapany Collection of Sikh Art, a new gallery dedicated to historical and contemporary Sikh Art,³ part of a commitment to render the museum into a space receptive to the shifting plurality of voices that comprise our ever-changing Canadian society. The Kapany Collection presented a timely opportunity to re-think conventional museological approaches and offer alternative perspectives to Sikh art and art in general.

² Following the concept that persons and things are not radically distinct categories, and that the transactions that surround things are invested with the properties of social relations. See Appadurai, A. (1986) *The Social Life of Things, Commodities in Social Perspective*, Cambridge University Press.

³ <https://www.mbam.qc.ca/en/news/sikh-art-collection/>

The Reason Behind the Initiative

In recent years, Sikh visual and material culture has been reformulated according to art-historical paradigms, gaining traction within the broader museum community, thanks to collectors within the Sikh diaspora, both in Britain and America (Murphy 2012 and Singh 2013). Under the newly adopted western category of “art,” secular objects and sometimes sacred subjects, produced by Sikhs, whether in India or other parts of the world, and depicting Sikh themes, are re-invested as “art” works in western museums. This category of “Sikh art” transcends ritual and religious objects commissioned by Sikh communities to encompass a large amount of material evidence related to the Sikhs’ own envision of their past and present.

Thanks to a major gift from Dr. Narinder Kapany (1926-2022) and the Sikh Foundation International (Palo Alto, California), supported by the Baljit and Roshi Chadha Foundation (Montreal, Quebec), the MMFA has inaugurated a gallery devoted to Sikh historical visual and material culture as well as contemporary artistic practices in June 2022 within the Arts of One World Wing (Figure. 1). In this space, miniature portraits of the ten Gurus, military and ritual paraphernalia, textiles and archival material from the time of the Sikh Empire and the British Raj as collected and filtered through the eyes of Dr. Kapany are placed in dialogue with contemporary artists of the Sikh diaspora. This approach offers a glimpse on personal collecting practices and modes of self-representation and provides an opportunity to reflect on how Sikh art has evolved in the past two hundred years. It also considers how the inclusion and consequent activations of Sikh art at the MMFA may expand and help critique the Euro-centric status quo and aesthetic canon, as the content and idea of art proposed in the space is challenging the conventional paradigm of what “art” entails.



Figure 1: *The Kapany Collection of Sikh Art*, The Arts of One World wing, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Detail Photo MMFA, Denis Farley

A Platform for Dialogue

Thanks to Dr. Kapany's unwavering determination for over half a century to collect and promote Sikh art, the new space—the first of its kind in a Canadian museum—may be a platform for dialogue, understanding, respect and inclusion, reflecting the values and contributions of the Sikh diaspora in Canada and beyond. Dr Kapany's clairvoyance and commitment made this venture possible. Since our first encounter, his mission was clear to all. A person larger than life, he left India in 1951 to work as a physicist, becoming an entrepreneur and one of the key inventors of fiber optics, as well as the leading collector of a wide range of Sikh material heritage, from art and manuscripts to textiles and weaponry. His presence and vivacious spirit left an indelible mark on those who had the fortune to meet him and on the institutions that have benefited from his generosity. After donating part of his collection to the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco in 1997, he decided to offer another conspicuous number of artworks to the MMFA.

The MMFA's new gallery follows a relatively recent trend of Sikh initiatives to introduce their own material culture in western museum contexts, in what Anne Murphy has defined as “museuming” (Murphy 2015).” While many of the Sikh art

collections in western institutions refer predominantly to the particular collecting interests of their donors, the MMFA's new space distinguishes itself for the commitment to encouraging artists with personal connections to Sikh art to engage with and activate the historical collection donated by Dr Kapany. It reflects the museum's wider intention in supporting self-representation by contemporary artists of Sikh descent, which may enrich the narrative on display in a diachronic and alternative fashion, beyond the conventional categories of articulation that have stemmed out of Sikh interests of the diaspora.⁴

On the Historical Collection

Dr. Kapany's personal interests become clear by the choice of historic objects on display. Among the wealth of works on paper is an allegedly 19th century *Janam-sākhī*, the well-known prose hagiographies of Guru Nanak (Figure.2). Originally conveyed orally and only later represented pictorially with an easily identifiable iconography, *Janam-sākhīs* were sponsored by patrons in different centers and executed by local artists coming from different traditions. Consequently, numerous syncretic styles have been passed down from different regions and different periods (Singh 2014). When looking at the lively imagery featured in the book, the long traditions of preexisting Indic and Mughal paintings are quite apparent, but future studies may better identify the genesis of such illustrations. The museum hopes to develop various partnerships with local university departments for the study and interpretation of this work, as well as others in the collection.

⁴ As Anne Murphy postulates (Murphy 2015) the current transnational and diaspora interest in materiality aligns not only with Sikh religious and communitarian/political interests but also with broader museums circles. The Kapany collection presents a clear example of such converging interests. See P.M.Taylor and S.Dhami, eds., *Sikh Art from the Kapany Collection* (Palo Alto, Calif.: The Sikh Foundation, in association with the Asian Cultural History Program, Smithsonian Institution, 2017); other initiatives include the P. Khanuja collection in Arizona, see *Virtue and Valor, Sikh Art and Heritage*, Phoenix Art Museum, 2017, as well as that of D. Toor, *In Pursuit of Empire: Treasures from the Toor Collection of Sikh Art* (London: Kashi House, 2018). B.N. Goswamy, *I See No Stranger: Early Sikh Art and Devotion* (Ocean Township, NJ: Rubin Museum of Art, 2006); Susan Stronge, *The Arts of the Sikh Kingdoms* (New York: Weatherhill, 1999) among others.



Figure 2: Illustrated *Janam-sakhi*, Mid-19th century Gouache, Powdered gold ink, gold leaf and ink; Photo MMFA, Christine Guest



Figure 3: War Quoit, *chakar*, Mid-19th century; Steel, Gold and silver inlays; Photo MMFA, Christine Guest



Figure 4: *Talwar* Sword with Gurmukhi inscription; Mid-19th century; Steel, Gold and silver inlays; Photo MMFA, Christine Guest

Other objects attest to the wealth and power of the emerging Sikh states. When Guru Gobind Singh created the Dal Khalsa in 1699, it developed a distinctive sense of identity which consolidated through the 17th and 18th centuries. A large collection of *Nanakshahi* coins in silver, copper and bronze as well as a few examples of military paraphernalia, including a *Chakar* war quoit (Figure.3) and a *Talwar* sword (Figure.4), reflect the wealth of the rajas or kings, as they consolidated, expanded and waned their political power during the 19th century.

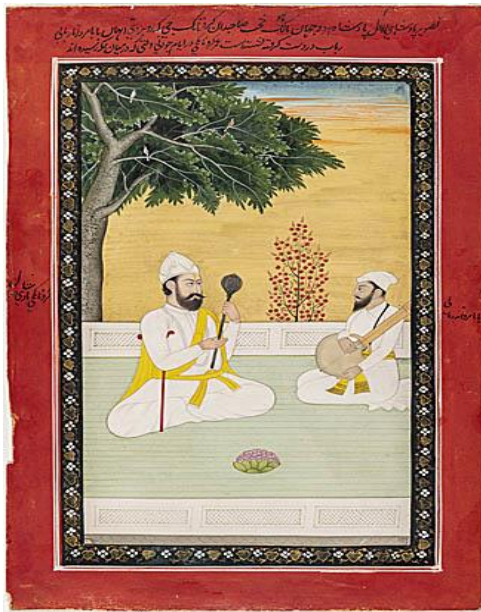


Figure 5: Nanak, the First Teacher, About 1800-1810, Gouache, powdered gold ink, ink; Photo MMFA, Denis Farley

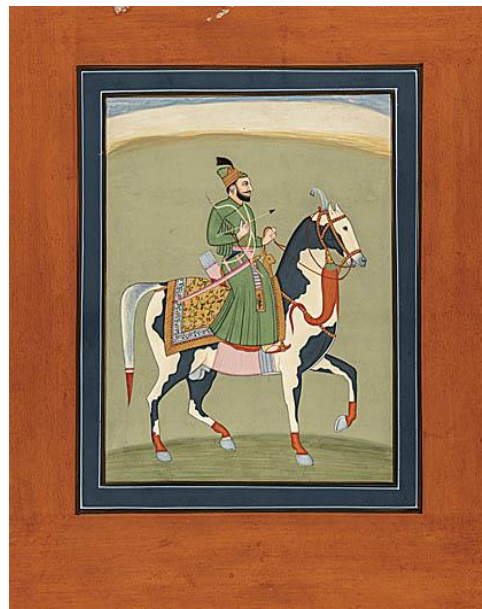


Figure 6: Guru Gobind Singh, Early 20th century, Gouache, powdered gold ink, ink on paper; Photo MMFA, Christine Guest

It is within this new political context that the icon of Guru Nanak was canonized to highlight his leadership qualities. The early 19th century three-quarters-view painting stylizes a young Guru Nanak with a neatly tied turban and all-white simple garments, placing him as the forefather of a genealogy of Sikh spiritual leaders (Figure.5). The syncretic style speaks of the many entangled stories of artists' translocations and territorial conquest that came with the cultural expansion under Mughal rulers when artists from the Punjab and Pahari areas became trained in the Mughal style of painting. Outfits, turbans and composition betray the Mughal princely style, whose draftsmanship and intricacy of details are well known (Singh 2014). Guru Nanak's simple garments are those of a religious person in meditative

pose. Other portraits in the collection reflect the genealogy and the transformation of the iconography of the ten gurus, from contemplative to that of political resistance (Figure. 6).

The warrior tradition led to the expansion of the Sikh rule and the flourishing of the Sikh Empire in Punjab and Rajasthan in the early 19th century under the leadership of Ranjit Singh. Its cosmopolitan capital, Lahore, became one of the richest cities in South Asia, an important center for patronage where some of the greatest painters of the Rajput and Mughal traditions continued to create art. Thanks to them, the visual expression of Sikhism was transformed forever as an increasingly distinctive Sikh visual culture emerged.



Figure 7: Maharaja Karam Singh of Patiala and His Son Narinder Singh with a Holy Man
Mid-19th century; Gouache, powdered gold ink and ink on cardboard.

Photo MMFA, Christine Guest

With the fall of the Sikh empire Patiala emerged as the most important Sikh kingdom of the Punjab. Maharaja Narinder Singh (1845–62), widely regarded as the most enlightened ruler of Patiala, was a great patron of the arts. Eminent artists from Jaipur, the Pahari regions, and the Mughal court migrated to Patiala to work (Singh, K. 2003). The glamor and wealth of the court is evident in this painting portraying Narinder and his father Karam Singh (Figure. 7). Narinder Singh is portrayed as a young boy, clad in orange at the side of his father, while a holy man is featured center stage. When looking at the composition of the painting, its stylistic syncretism is evident, especially in the conflation of inverse and linear perspectives, which may indirectly reflect the entangled relationship between Sikhs and Europeans in the 19th century.

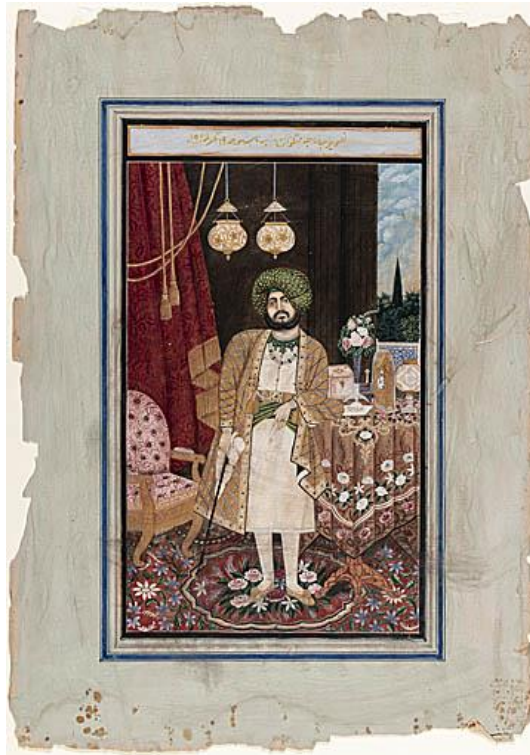


Figure 8: Raja Bhagwan Singh of Nabha; Mid -19th century; Gouache, gold powdered ink, ink on paper; Photo MMFA, Christine Guest

Eclecticism at the court of Narinder Singh was the result of many artists coming from different overlapping traditions. A patronage model that was continued by his successors at Patiala, as well as by the rulers of Nabha, Kapurthala, Faridkot, and Jind (Lafont 2017). The artistic effervescence did not stop at paintings of the Sikh Gurus, but included illustrated manuscripts, architectural decorations, royal portraits, and works capturing the different segments of society. The portrait of the Raja Bhagwan Singh of Nabha (Figure.8) is another interesting blending of styles and media. The ruler is in a seemingly awkwardly bent position, holding a cane with his right hand, probably due to his illness (he died of tuberculosis in 1871). The body is rendered according to traditional conventions of flatness and textured detailing, yet the composition offers an insight on the encompassing interests of the ruler. A European style chair in the corner, a richly covered and adorned table on which various props, including a large sculptural clock under a glass dome, are visible, the slightly ajar curtain with long tassels in the backdrop that leads the viewer into an Italianate garden, may have been influenced by the emergence of

photography in India, which was being sponsored at the time by both the British government and the Rajas. Many of the early photographs captured Indian people posing against Italianate landscapes and assuming unfamiliar poses, while color was systematically added to evoke the more familiar aesthetic of Indian miniatures. The original black and white photo would thus be embellished with flat areas of color and highly decorative surfaces (Edwards 2018). Such transfer of media, miniature to photo and vice versa, is quite evident in the rendering of this watercolor.

On the Exotic Gaze

Related tangentially to the portrait of Raja Bhagwan of Nabha and the consumption of photography in India, is the large corpus of archival materials collected by Dr. Kapany. Mostly magazines and illustrated books produced in Britain in the 19th century for the sole consumption of the British public, these images and texts document the colonial gaze of the Sikh. The year 1849 may have seen the end of sovereign Sikh rule, but Sikh art continued to flourish. With the emergence of British colonization, stereotyped imagery of the Punjabi and Sikh people was readily produced in India, for the exclusive circulation and consumption of the West. Featured in periodicals and illustrated books published in London, these drawings, prints and photographs of Sikh characters, events and places in the Punjab entered British homes loaded with exoticism and prejudices.

The consumption of the Other that informed and produced all these visual stereotypes was one of the interests Dr. Kapany nurtured the most. Among those visual examples demonstrating how the British envisioned Sikh culture and commoditized it, lies the *Portraits*



Figure 9: Portrait of Ranjit Singh, In Emily Eden (1797-1869) *Portraits of the Princes and People of India* (1844), Lithograph, Photo MMFA, Christine Guest

of the Princes and People of India (1844) by Emily Eden (Figure. 9). In her later published book *Up the Country* (1867), her biased perception provides a deeper insight on how her fellow country people imposed their gaze on the Sikhs while living opulently at the natives' expenses (Eden 1867).

On Contemporary Art Weaving New Histories

Among the over 40 works donated, brightly colored cotton cloths embroidered with fine silk, (*phulkari*, “flower-works”), enliven the space with their vibrant stylized design evoking the wheat and corn fields familiar to the weavers (Figure.10). Woven by Hindu, Sikh and Muslim women in rural Punjab, *phulkaris* were made to wear or present on auspicious religious occasions or significant life events like marriages and births, never intended to be made, sold or gifted to outside markets (Singh K. 2003 and Singh N-G.K. 2005). *Phulkaris* represent a well rooted textile tradition of Punjab. Their creation, fruition and later commoditization are all part of the entangled histories of Sikh women, past and present, that need to be told. Their predominant place in the gallery addresses questions on gender and revalidates the place women had -and still have- in Sikh society, history and artmaking.



Figure 10: *Phulkari* (560.2019), About 1900, Cotton and Silk; Photo MMFA, Jean-François Brière

The inclusion of *Phulkari* also prompted the question: how can traditional artistic expressions be revisited in postcolonial terms in the light of today's questioning on representation and materiality? The museum invited artists of the Sikh diasporas to activate the Kapany collection of historic material and to expand the range of interpretations, as they experimented with material, form and method, while thematically considering gender, sexuality, caste, labor and the environment.



Figure 11: Gauri Gill (Chandigarh, 1970); *Indian Grocery Store in Queens, New York*; From the series "the Americans". 2004, print 2021, Ink-jet print, 1/7; Photo Courtesy of the Artist



Figure 12: Gauri Gill (Chandigarh, 1970); *Woman Worker at Sunsweet Prune Packing Factory, Yuba City, California*; From the series "the Americans". 2002, print 2021, Ink-jet print, 1/7; Photo Courtesy of the Artist

For instance, some artists who were invited into the space looked at the traditionally hyper masculine discourse on Sikh art through a new gaze. Among those helping to subvert the mainstream masculinist narrative is Gauri Gill (b.1970 Chandigarh) who proposed a diptych depicting Sikh women on the job (Figures.11-12). Whether in Yuba City, home to the oldest settlement of Sikhs in North America, or in a grocery store in Punjabi-dominated Queens, NY., both images offer a powerful statement on gender and labor within Sikh migrant communities. Humorous, poignant, ironic, at times, beguiling, Gill's women and their lives emerge here through her meticulous attention to detail and sympathetic juxtapositions. Both photos are part of her series *The Americans* directly referencing the eponymous photographic chronicle created by Robert Frank in 1958. Nearly five decades later, Gauri Gill embarked on a similar, solitary journey through the United States, guided by the web of material and psychological translocation of South Asian migrants. Shot across the country from 2000 to 2007, her photographs document the Indian diaspora as it resettles both retaining its traditional signifiers of Indian identity while merging within a larger American plurality (Bakirathi 2010). Like Frank, Gill seeks the candid and revealing moment, her work consciously lacking formality

and intentionally unglamorous providing a “politicized aesthetic of the everyday” (Pinney 2013). The photographs are an intimate, thoughtful insight into the particularities of diasporic Sikh life, but they also find resonances in shared, human experiences – of factory work, of grief, of shame but also, and more importantly, of women’s pivotal role in diasporic communities.

Other contemporary Sikh artists from Punjab and the diasporas who were invited to respond to the collection took up and reconfigured religious ideas and imagery in their work. Take for instance Keerat Kaur (b. 1990, London Ontario), a Canadian-born artist with Sikh-Punjabi roots. Her spiritual compass morphs into painting, illustration, sculpture, music, and architecture, inspired by Indic philosophies. She creates surrealist images with underlying messages of spirituality and fantasia that exude an oneiric feel and capture the complexity of the ideas presented in the Sikh holy texts. In the *Art of Revelation*, (*Zahari Kala*), Kaur broaches the subject of the expansiveness of the universe as envisioned by Guru Nanak and conveyed in the 36th poetic ballad of the Guru Granth Sahib. Guru Nanak is mid-air, holding the hand of the son of a Muslim saint and flying over the infinite universe in a blink of an eye. As the ballad goes, Guru Nanak met a Muslim saint in Baghdad to whom he began reciting the *Japji Sahib*, speaking of infinite suns, moons, planets and the creatures that inhabit them. As the saint staunchly believed in the spatial limits of the universe, he commanded the Guru to prove his claims. The Guru flew the saint’s son over the expansive creations in the blink of an eye (Figure. 13).



Figure 13: Keerat Kaur (London, Ontario 1991), *Zahari Kala* (The Art of Revelation) 2020; Acrylic, gold ink, ink and gold leaf in cardboard; Photo MMFA, Jean-François Brière

Kaur uses the imagery of the heart –a typical symbol for the universe in Sikh writing– to hold together vast worlds. For the artist, the heart and sub-worlds of its arteries and veins further stand as a symbol for our emotional universe. The heart in the center of the composition is beautifully painted with motifs reminiscent of British textile designer and artist, William Morris as well as Indian folk art and pop culture, as it morphs into a spacecraft floating in the cosmos. Anthropomorphized and composite animals in the painting are sourced from Punjabi folktales revisited by the artist, evoking different worlds and realities. The elephant-snake figure in the foreground nods to the possibilities of life on other planets. A sapiens-cat and a ram-bird listen and play a pomegranate string instrument (*taanpura*). Music is key in Sikh culture, central in the Guru Granth Sahib and in Kaur’s own artistic practice. As a piece exploring the Sikh tradition of literature, calligraphy and illustration, *Zahari Kala* is a vibrant commentary to the historic works from the Kapany Collection. Tradition and innovation are both converging, offering an alternative take on Sikh iconography and its potentials.

Innovation and tradition go hand in hand in the work of Jagdeep Raina (b. 1991, Guelph, Ontario), which allows for histories of capitalist exploitation to emerge and enrich the significance of Sikh textiles. Raina’s practice transcends drawing, embroidery, writing, video animation, photography and ceramics. He researches Sikh transnational history and thinks deeply about different materialities, as in *Chemical Cotton Flower* (2020), where traditional weaving and socio-economic issues are conflated (Figure. 14). His “sketched” embroideries are inspired by phulkari shawls. For Raina, engaging the aesthetic and cultural traditions of these



Figure 14: Jagdeep Raina (Guelph, Ontario 1991), *Chemical Cotton Flowers* 2021; Cotton, cotton, silk and metallic threads; Photo MMFA, Jean-François Brière

textiles—which originated in the rural villages of Punjab before being vastly diminished in the aftermath of the violent 1947 Partition of the Indian subcontinent—can speak of colonialism and globalization, celebrate rural life, and connect to his heritage. Phulkari borders and symbols rely on embroidery employed only in small weaving communities today. His embrace of this tradition reflects how South Asian textiles play an important role in the production of art within and beyond immigrant communities.⁵ Raina succeeds in transferring his well-versed pictorial style into the textile format, conveying the same feeling of dynamic vibrancy.

The subject of his embroidery work is related to the severe environmental and health impact on Sikh communities in Punjab during the so-called Green Revolution in the 1960s-70s, when Indian and US officials collaborated to transform India into a food-secure economy and ensured farmers that new technologies would transform Punjab's economy. However, the long-term impact of this initiative had severe consequences on the land and the people, contributing to new patterns of economic debt for most farming families. In Raina's poignant work, the emphasis is on the women's relationship to earth, through detailed articulations of their bodily gestures, dress, and presence in the fields. The two women's extended hands and colorful *salwar kameez* blend with the green fields. The cotton ball in their hands speaks of the important history of women's labor in India's cotton economy, and their deep knowledge of the soil. Raina's concern is further elicited by the poem, "please strip them of these chemical cotton flowers let them cling to peace," reminding the viewer that the hands of labor are marked by the chemical footprints of the Green Revolution and a community wrangling with its environmental aftermaths.

The interconnectedness of lives and societies well beyond religious appurtenance is one of the aspects the new gallery wants to address. By shedding light on the historic, political and social entanglements in which Sikh communities participate while being in the world, their distinctive as well as universal concerns emerge.

⁵<https://torontolife.com/culture/in-conversation-with-artist-jagdeep-raina-on-the-importance-and-place-of-textile-art-in-the-world-today/>

On Entangled Realities

The works by Jatinder Singh Durhailay (b. 1988, London, UK) speak of his own Sikh heritage and beliefs as much as his in-betweenness as an immigrant to the UK, growing up in London and grappling with the absence of role models that could feel familiar. In *Ryu and Hari Singh Nalwa* (2019) the artist brings the street fighting character of Ryu from the popular video game franchise Street Fighter into dialogue with Hari Singh Nalwa (1791-1837), Commander-in-chief of the Sikh Khalsa Fauj (the army of the Sikh Empire) and governor of Kashmir, Peshawar and Hazara (Figure. 15). Durhailay's work is particularly intriguing as it places into dialogue two militant masculinities operating within divergent, yet interlocked contexts. The artist recalls being introduced to Street Fighter 2, a video game, by his older brother during childhood. It was a time of bonding with his siblings and rarely did they see heroes that they could relate to. British TV and American cinema were predominantly a white person-run industry; however, video games were primarily Japanese and introduced a different culture. As Durhailay reaffirms: "Ryu was and still is my favorite character as he represents a journey of self-discovery, and I always liked his colors and the way he moves."

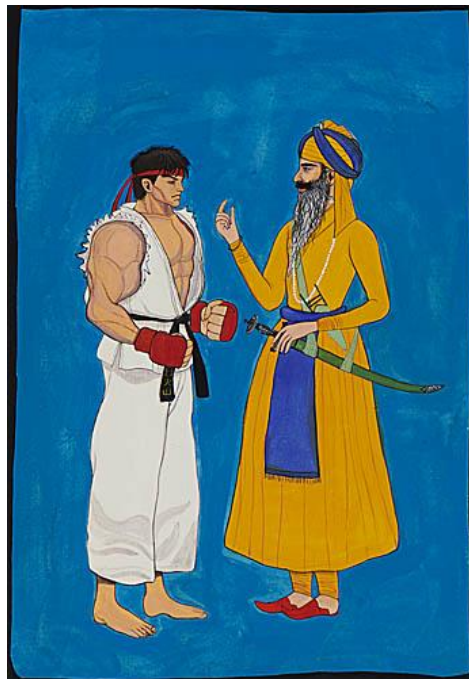


Figure 15: Jatinder Singh Durhailay (London, UK, 1988); *Ryu and Hari Singh Nalwa* (2018); Gouache; Photo MMFA, Jean-François Brière

In *The Decapitator* (2020) the artist revisits the history of Baba Deep Singh (1682-1757), who was appointed head of Misl Shaheedan Tarna Dal – an order of the Khalsa military – in 1748. Revered as one of the hallowed martyrs in Sikhism, Baba is known for his decapitation during the Battle of Amritsar by Durrani forces and, as such he is traditionally depicted in active combat, with a sword in one hand and his head in the other. With humor and deep sensitivity, Durhailay transforms Baba Deep Singh from the decapitated to the decapitator, inverting the agency and challenging traditional iconography and hagiography (Figure. 16).



Figure 16: Jatinder Singh Durhailay (London, UK, 1988); *The Decapitator* 2020; Gouache, powdered gold ink on paper; Photo MMFA, Jean-François Brière

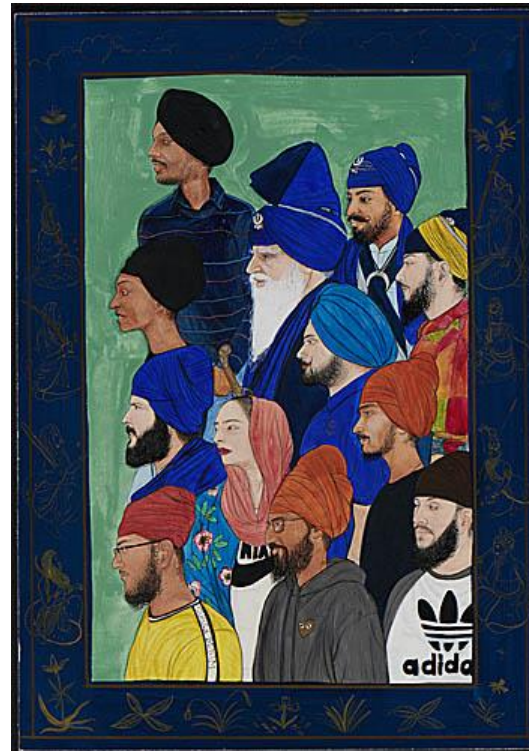


Figure 17: Jatinder Singh Durhailay (London, UK, 1988); *Sangat* 2020; Gouache, powdered gold ink on paper; Photo MMFA, Jean-François Brière

Sangat (2021) brings us closer to today's world by addressing a universal feeling of the pandemic: loneliness (Figure.17). The word "Sangat" comes from the Sanskrit word *sang*, meaning "company" or "association." It is an important part of the Sikh dharma where men and women come into the presence of the Guru Granth Sahib in search of spiritual elevation. In the path of *bhakti* (spiritual devotion), there is a saying in Punjabi "*Jaisee sangat taisee rangat*" which translates in "whose company you keep you shall be colored in that dye". Colors are very important in Durhailay's practice as poignant metaphors for good company. Durhailay painted this miniature during the pandemic, when his immediate world was drastically reduced as he could not go to his gurdwara and associate with fellow Sikhs. He was longing to be around like-minded people and missed seeing his friends, no longer able to enjoy the hustle and bustle, banter and spiritual discourse or actions that occur in the Sangat. This painting represents his yearning for social and spiritual

interaction, unmasked and free. The figures are all facing one direction, symbolizing their spiritual unity and goal, facing the Guru, or God. The composition was partly inspired by the artist's own recollection of people at a train station in Punjab as well as actual photos sent by his friends and family on social media. This work departs from his earlier paintings. Most of Durhailay's previous paintings featured solitary figures but during Covid times his yearning for communion brought him to paint his friends as a group.

The border is traditionally decorated with gold on a deep blue, while on each margin are Sikh mythological warriors, with the sky and the earth standing for growth and flowers. Durhailay is often inspired by flowers, sensing the connection between the plants and the sun. As plants grow towards the light seeking to reach the Sun, but inexorably die in the attempt, the artist feels this unattainable yearning comparable to the spiritual desire for communion with God, one of the main tenets of Sikhism. The ensuing sense of sadness is somehow attenuated by the certitude of growth.

Durhailay builds on the same drawing conventions as a number of important miniature paintings from the Kapany Collection. Yet he injects his characters with the transnational pop culture in which he grew up in London. The inclusion of characters from the Namdhari sect of Sikhism was also an important inclusion to make, as Durhailay spent time with that community and the gallery should encompass alternative perspectives related to Sikhism itself.

What the Future May Hold

The museum continues to build up the collection, by reaching out to artists and collectors of Sikh Art who may wish to help this extraordinary initiative to grow and showcase the dense Sikh material culture of past and present. The mission is to bring the values of Sikhism within an innovative curatorial approach of "learning" and "giving" that can transcend ethnic and religious barriers. Just recently, local scholars working on Sikh art were invited for a panel discussion on the newly installed collection where they proposed using Sikhi - a term used by Sikhs to describe a way of living that involves continuous learning and sense-making (as opposed to the colonial construct of Sikhism the religion) (Singh 2020)- as a viable curatorial alternative. This and many other future discussions may help the museum reach out to the communities, listen and further complexify interpretation, meanings, as well as modalities of representation at large.

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