



# Sikh Research Journal

**Vol. 8 No. 1**

This article is from \*Sikh Research Journal\*, the online peer-reviewed journal of Sikh and Punjabi Studies

Sikh Research Journal \*Vol. 8 No. 1 Published: Spring 2023.

ISSN 2771-3520

<http://sikhresearchjournal.org>

<http://sikhfoundation.org>

## **Representing Sikhs and Sikhi in Museum Spaces**

**Tejpaul Singh Baniwal**  
**Tauna Coulson**

### **Abstract**

This paper provides a dual perspective on an exhibit of Sikh art from the Kapany Collection that was curated at the Eloise Pickard Smith Gallery at the University of California, Santa Cruz, from January to March 2022. The collection was donated to the Sikh Foundation International by Dr. Narinder Singh Kapany, a scientist, entrepreneur and art collector. The exhibit was a collaboration between the Foundation and the University, and was accompanied by an educational exhibit on the history of Sikhs in the United States, particularly California. This paper has two parts. First, Tauna Coulson, a professional art curator, describes her experiences of curating the exhibit. In the second part, Tejpaul Singh Baniwal, co-founder of the Sikh American History Project, provides a broader perspective and analysis on the question of representing Sikhs and the Sikh tradition in museum spaces, along with a commentary on this particular effort.

**Keywords:** Sikhs, Sikh art, museums, minority representation, education

### **Introduction**

After a long period of planning, complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC) agreed to host an exhibit on Sikh Art in America. The exhibit was to consist of items from the collection of Dr. Narinder Singh Kapany, which had been donated to the Sikh Foundation International of Palo Alto, California. The work of Dr. Narinder Singh Kapany and the Sikh Foundation, over many years, has paved the way for Sikh representation within art museums across the United States, yet, as a whole, Sikh representation within museum spaces continues to be rare. The project described here was distinctive in being situated in an exhibit space that is integrally embedded within an educational institution. In that context, a significant complement of educational material was also planned for the exhibit. The purpose of this paper is to 1) explore the process of curating the UCSC exhibit; and 2) understand the role of the community in such projects, that explicitly aim to promote diversity and inclusion within educational and museum spaces.

From January 8 to March 5, 2022, UCSC exhibited “Sikh Art in America” at the Eloise Pickard Smith Gallery, which is housed within Cowell College, the oldest

of 10 residential undergraduate colleges that provide an integrated educational and residential environment for students as they begin their college careers. Each college has a Provost, who oversees the experiences of students affiliated with the college: during the exhibit, the provost was Alan Christy, a history professor who himself works on visually-focused representations of aspects of East Asian and Asian American historical experiences.<sup>1</sup> The implementation effort was led by Tauna Coulson, an artist and graphic designer, professional curator, and manager of the Eloise Pickard Smith Gallery.<sup>2</sup> In the next section, she provides a detailed description of her curatorial process. Given that the outcome of an exhibit is reliant on major decisions during this process, this insight allows us to understand how a final exhibit is shaped. In return, we gain a better understanding about what role the community plays in the process. The second section, by Tejpaal Singh Baniwal, investigates how the UCSC exhibit served as an opportunity for the Sikh community to have at least a temporary space in a visible setting, one where they are typically ignored. Based on personal experiences and interactions, this essay is meant to be a reflection on the UCSC exhibit to investigate how to improve future exhibits in a similar setting. Tejpaal Singh Baniwal is doing advanced doctoral research on aspects of Sikh immigration and settlement in the United States. He is a co-founder of the Sikh American History Project (<https://www.sikhamericanhistory.org/>), and has published several research papers on various aspects of Sikh history, culture and politics (Baniwal, 2020, 2022a, 2022b).

### **Curating the “Sikh Art in America” exhibit: Tauna Coulson**

I was initially approached by one of the professors at the University of California Santa Cruz, Guriqbal Singh Sahota, Associate Professor in Literature and Aurora Chair in Sikh and Punjabi Studies. He asked if I would be interested in exhibiting Sikh art at the Eloise Pickard Smith Gallery, Cowell College, UCSC. As one of my oldest friends has spent over forty years in and around India, I was somewhat familiar with Indian art and very much interested in seeing and learning more so I agreed to the opportunity. During the planning process, the COVID-19 pandemic had hit. This would remain a constant struggle throughout the entire exhibit, but

---

<sup>1</sup> Specifically, Prof. Christy is Co-Director of the Center for the Study of Pacific War Memories at UCSC (<https://cspwm.ucsc.edu/>), and the Director of the non-profit organization, Okinawa Memories Initiative (<https://okinawamemories.org/>) which includes UCSC, CSU Monterey Bay, CSU East Bay, and the University of the Ryukyus as academic partners.

<sup>2</sup> See <https://cowell.ucsc.edu/academics/cw-related-programs/smith-gallery/index.html>.

ultimately, we succeeded in bringing this exhibit to the public, as well as the student body and faculty on campus.

### *Historical Material*

As the Eloise Pickard Smith Gallery is on a university campus, I make it a priority to bring knowledge through art to the students and visitors. In the case of the Sikh collection, I asked myself what is it that makes this Sikh art. Who are the Sikh people and how and why did they make their way to California? What makes it relevant to the students and visitors? So many questions had to be answered, so I began my research through the myriad threads online. I learned that significant records were stored at the University of California, Berkeley but it was archived and difficult to access. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, no one was allowed to come to the campus or to borrow any of the photos. Thankfully, I was given permission to print them from the online images wherein I recreated this extraordinary history of the Sikh migration into California as a part of the exhibit. The timeline begins in 1899 and extends to the current day. Images alongside text (also obtained from online sources) brought us from Sikh men arriving at Angel Island Immigration Center, San Francisco Bay, eventually purchasing land, their relationship with the Mexican people with whom they shared their farming knowledge, the building of *gurdwaras*<sup>3</sup> (with Stockton Gurdwara being the first *gurdwara* in the United States, established in 1912) and finally feeding thousands of people through the pandemic. The historical material was organized into a timeline with thematic sections, and displayed in a room adjacent to the art exhibit.

### *Selecting from The Kapany Collection*

Prof. Sahota had also put me in touch with Raj Kapany, son of Dr. Narinder Kapany (1926-2020). Raj Kapany serves on the board of the Sikh Foundation International of Palo Alto, which had recently inherited his parents' impressive collection of Sikh art. The father of fiber optics, Dr. Kapany, and his wife Satinder Kaur Kapany (d. 2016) had personally collected one of the largest and most important collections of Sikh art. I was given a beautiful book *Sikh Art from the Kapany Collection* (Taylor and Dhami, 2017). This book was an exceptional introduction to the miniatures that I had seen, although not in this manner. The book was large and beautifully printed.

---

<sup>3</sup> A *gurdwara* is a Sikh house of worship. There are now several hundred *gurdwaras* in the United States.

This provided me with a comprehensive introductory journey into the Sikh people and their art.

The artwork was difficult to curate, as there were so many different types of work in the collection aside from paintings; *phulkaris* (fabrics embroidered in a distinctive Punjabi regional style), jewelry, stamps, weaponry, and more. I decided it best to focus on what my personal interests were, the fabrics or *phulkaris*, and the miniature paintings. I then decided to add some modern works as well. This posed the problem of hanging small intricate watercolors in the same space as the large and quite imposing modern pieces, but this was achieved with a moveable wall to bisect the larger exhibit space (Figure 1).<sup>4</sup> It seemed important to look at the popular historical work one might typically associate with art from the Punjab region, as well as what the artists from this same region are focusing on today.



Figure 1- A moveable wall (blue) bisects the larger exhibit space

After some amount of research, I selected what I thought was a sound representation of the ten Gurus, the spiritual teachers who founded the Sikh religion.<sup>5</sup> The individual pieces complemented one another. The miniatures were something else entirely, when I opened the actual work (Figure 2). No matter the size and beauty of the printed page it does nothing to demonstrate the incredible

<sup>4</sup> In preparing the displays, I was assisted by several UCSC students. They are acknowledged at the end of this paper.

<sup>5</sup> Introductory background to the Sikh Gurus may be found in Taylor and Dhama (2017). I am indebted to Sonia Dhama for vital assistance and guidance in preparing explanatory historical text for some of the paintings that were displayed.

complexity and color of the actual paintings. They reminded me of the saying, *it took my breath away*, as they actually did.



*Figure 2: Sikh Miniatures - Guru Gobind Singh (left); Golden Temple (right)*

The *phulkaris*, while quite large (55" x 95"), merged well in between the miniatures, so I selected two. I made sure to pull the colors from the painted pieces hanging alongside them. The *phulkaris* were carefully mounted and sewn onto a dowel so they could be displayed in their entirety. The students who visited the exhibit loved taking selfies in front of the especially bright magenta, orange, and yellow geometric *phulkari* (Figure 3).



*Figure 3: Phulkari fabric embroidered in a distinctive Punjabi regional style*

Of the modern works, I chose Arpana Caur and Sukhpreet Singh as two of the artists I was drawn to. As it turns out, Sukhpreet Singh happened to be visiting the Bay Area during our exhibit, so I had the good fortune to meet him in person (Figure 4). He visited the gallery one afternoon, and I was excited to converse, walk and hear about his life. To this day he emails me his new paintings, which are mostly political of late, and images of his mountain hikes. In fact, I made many new Sikh friends surrounding this exhibit.



*Figure 4: Artist Sukhpreet Singh with his painting of the Golden Temple at the Eloise Pickard Smith Gallery, Cowell College, UCSC*

The Sikh people, I discovered, were extremely warm and supportive of anything I was doing. I was particularly excited when I was introduced to two young musicians that were delighted to perform for our closing reception. Again, I wanted to represent as many parts of Sikh culture and art as possible for the exhibit, including the reception. Sukhamrit Singh, who plays violin, and Shivam Pathak on tabla entertained us with traditional compositions from the Hindustani classical canon.<sup>6</sup>

This exhibit was incredibly surprising and rewarding. I had not anticipated how much appreciation the Sikhs in our community would have for being represented in the gallery. Some of the details of the historical timeline presented, especially

---

<sup>6</sup> “Compositions” is used in a different sense than it is in Western classical or popular traditions. There is not a fixed melody, but instead, a structure of notes and note sequences that define a musical mode called a *raag*. The performance was not strictly from the “Sikh” tradition. The Sikh sacred text, the Guru Granth Sahib, is organized according to *raags*, but the system used in that text is from the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, and predates the modern *raag* organization of Hindustani classical music, which dates to the work of Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, though Bhatkhande drew, of course, on older traditions. Sikh sacred music itself includes the singing of verses from the Guru Granth Sahib, not just instrumental performance, and would typically not be performed in a casual setting, or without certain rituals of respect for the sacred text. For additional background, see Wade (1979), and Kaur (2008, 2011, 2020).



with respect to the artistic material and the details of the immigrant experience, was new to some of the members of the community who visited the exhibit. And the many students and visitors who learned from this was wonderful to see. The miniatures we had the great fortune of hanging on our walls, were a tremendous gift. This was a perfect opportunity to exhibit art as a means to experience and learn something new.

### **Pushing Boundaries within Museum Spaces: Tejpaul Singh Bainiwal**

The two galleries, of history and of art, at UCSC's Eloise Pickard Smith Gallery are a testament to Tauna Coulson's hard work in the curatorial process. Though Tauna served as the curator of the gallery, there were two crucial interactions between the Sikh community and Tauna which helped shape the exhibit. To begin, the effort was initiated in a space with an extremely Eurocentric past by the Aurora Chair in Sikh and Punjabi Studies, Professor G.S. Sahota. The conversation between Professor Sahota and Tauna provided the platform to give the Sikh community visibility in a setting where it typically has very little. Next, interactions between the Sikh Foundation – specifically Raj Kapany, Kiki Kapany, Sonia Dhami, and Tanmeet Gujral – connected the curator to the world of Sikh art. Direct access to one of the largest and most comprehensive private collections of Sikh art allowed Tauna to select her personal interests from a wide variety of work, including paintings, *phulkaris*, jewelry, stamps, and weaponry. These two interactions molded the exhibit to create an amazing exhibit on "Sikh Art in America." The Sikh community, through this collection, was able to share their art, culture, and history with a broader audience. The relationship formed between Tauna and contributing artists such as Sukhpreet Singh broaden exposure of Sikh artists in a space that typically disregards them. While furthering diversity and inclusion within educational and museum spaces, certain limitations bounded the exhibit from its full potential. As someone who had the opportunity to visit the exhibit, there were two things that were quite noticeable.

First, the historical timeline. Where Tauna was able to describe her thought process throughout the selection of pieces from The Kapany Collection in detail, selection for the historical timeline had several limitations. Her research was limited to online images from the archived collection at UC Berkeley. During the closing ceremony, Tauna and I spoke specifically about the difficulty she had with the timeline. Unlike the wide variety of options from the Kapany Collection, where Tauna was able to personalize the exhibit to her interests, the historical timeline did not offer the same

flexibility. Yes, UC Berkeley has one of the most comprehensive collection on the history of Sikhs in the United States, but it remains to be a limited history with a familiar pattern: 1) initial immigration at the turn of the twentieth century; 2) the establishment of Stockton Gurdwara; 3) the Ghadar movement; 4) Punjabi-Mexican families; 5) prominent Sikh Americans such as Bhagat Singh Thind (1892–1967) and Dalip Singh Saund (1899–1973); and 6) discrimination and hardships faced by Sikh immigrants, especially in post-9/11 America. While these narratives and experiences were able to break through, as a collective tradition, Sikhs continue to be on the margins of history. This results in an extremely limited understanding of the history and experiences of Sikhs in the United States.

The second noticeable limitation within the “Sikh Art in America” exhibit was language. Scholars, students, administrators, and community members all gathered to celebrate the momentous occasion during the closing ceremony of the exhibit. While going through the exhibit for the first time, I noticed an elderly Sikh couple making their way through the exhibit as well. However, they scanned through the artifacts and never read any accompanying descriptions or captions which provided context to the artifacts. Upon speaking with the couple, I learned that they had been invited by their grandchildren but could not speak or read English. A space that was meant to celebrate the community prohibited Punjabi-speaking Sikh immigrants from gaining a full appreciation of the exhibit.

The “Sikh Art in America” exhibit at UCSC’s Eloise Pickard Smith Gallery gave the Sikh community space in a visible setting, where they are typically ignored, to share their art, culture, and history with a broader audience. Although the exhibit was a milestone in Sikh representation within an educational and museum space, addressing the two limitations above involves relatively simple solutions, which require more engagement from the Sikh community and would serve two different purposes.<sup>7</sup> First, having access to more stories, for the history timeline, about the evolution of Sikhi and Sikh American immigration, settlement, and development

---

<sup>7</sup> In this case, a greater effort to engage with Sikh scholars and community members during the planning of the exhibit would also have been beneficial, since Tauna Coulson was often left to find information on her own or turn to ad hoc sources for information in the later stages of planning. The broader structural insight raised here is that an “art” exhibit that also aims to provide historical, social and political context in an explicitly education setting requires a team of people with the requisite expertise. Traditional art curation does not necessarily deal with this challenge adequately. Even at the Smithsonian, while the director of the Sikh heritage component there has a strong academic background, it does not necessarily include detailed knowledge of the many facets of Sikh history, culture and tradition that are implicit in any such exhibit, and the text that accompanies the art and artifacts.

in the United States would allow for a more diverse account to be told, placing them into larger narratives of identity; power and oppression; and resistance and liberation. The solution? As leaders in Sikh Art were approached for the art gallery, consulting Sikh American historians would have vastly transformed the timeline to include various powerful narratives as well as local stories that may be unknown to most. In regard to the language barrier, providing descriptions in Punjabi would expand the audience reached. By limiting it to an English only gallery, the class of non-English speaking Sikhs are excluded from gaining the same experience. The solution would have been relatively easy, especially given that UCSC houses one of the longest-lasting Punjabi language programs in the UC system with an experienced teacher. Arshinder Kaur, lecturer of Punjabi at UCSC, has about thirty years of experience teaching Punjabi in India, Singapore, and the United States, and would have made a valuable member of the planning and implementation team. Further collaboration with the Aurora Chair in Sikh and Punjabi Studies and Arshinder Kaur would have been a simple solution in providing Punjabi translations for the exhibit. Future efforts to represent the Sikh community within a museum space should be mindful of these matters, as simple solutions would increase the overall impact of such exhibits.

Acknowledgements: Many thanks to the Sikh Foundation International, and to the Kapany family, for sharing their exquisite collection with UCSC. The exhibit would not have been possible without support from the following people: Raj Kapany, Kiki Kapany, Sonia Dhami, Tanmeet Gujral, Guriqbal S Sahota, Sukhamrit Singh, Shivam Pathak, and Alan Christy. Several UCSC students played an important role in preparing the exhibit, and in staffing it during visiting hours. These students were: Geneva Samuelson, Japleen Dang, Andriana Fernandez, Sabrina Nguyen, Island Gutierrez

## References

Bainiwal, Tejpal Singh (2020), Bainiwal, T. S. (2020). Religious and Political Dimensions of the Kartarpur Corridor: Exploring the Global Politics Behind the Lost Heritage of the Darbar Sahib. *Religions*, 11 (11), 560.

Bainiwal, Tejpal Singh (2022a), Bainiwal, T. S. (2022). Historicizing and preserving the present: The role of music during the Farmers' Protest. *Sikh Formations*, 18(1-2), 193-205.

Bainiwal, Tejpal Singh (2022b), Model minority privilege and brown silence: Sikh Americans and the Black Lives Matter movement. *Sikh Formations*, 10 June: 1-17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17448727.2022.2085421>.

Kaur, Inderjit N. (2008), The Meaning of Ghar in the Guru Granth Shabad Titles. Paper presented at International Seminar on Sikhism in Global Context, University of California, Riverside, December. Paper posted on [wwwSikhMusicHeritage.org].

Kaur, Inderjit N. (2011), Sikh Shabad Kīrtan and Gurmat Sangīt: What's in the Name?. *Journal of Punjabi Studies*, 18 (1&2), 251-278.

Kaur, Inderjit N. (2020), Sikhism, in Rituals and Practices in *World Religions (Religion, Spirituality and Health: A Social Scientific Approach, Vol. 5)*, eds. David Bryce Yaden, Yukun Zhao, Kaiping Peng, and Andrew B. Newberg, Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature, 151-165.

Taylor, Paul Michael, and Sonia Dhami (2017), *Sikh Art from the Kapany Collection*, Palo Alto: Sikh Foundation and Smithsonian Institution (Asian Cultural History Program).

Wade, Bonnie (1979), *Music in India*. New Delhi: Manohar Publishers.