



# 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>

**Deconstructing a Janamsakhi Illustration:  
Guru Nanak in Mecca, from the Kapany Collection,  
Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, USA**

**Priyanka Panjwani**

*B. Arch (India), MSc. Conservation (UK), PG Dip Indian Aesthetics (India)*

(Originally published titled, "The Sacred and the Secular" in *Jnanapravaha* Mumbai, Quarterly,  
July-September 2020. <https://bit.ly/41vSL6K>)

### Abstract

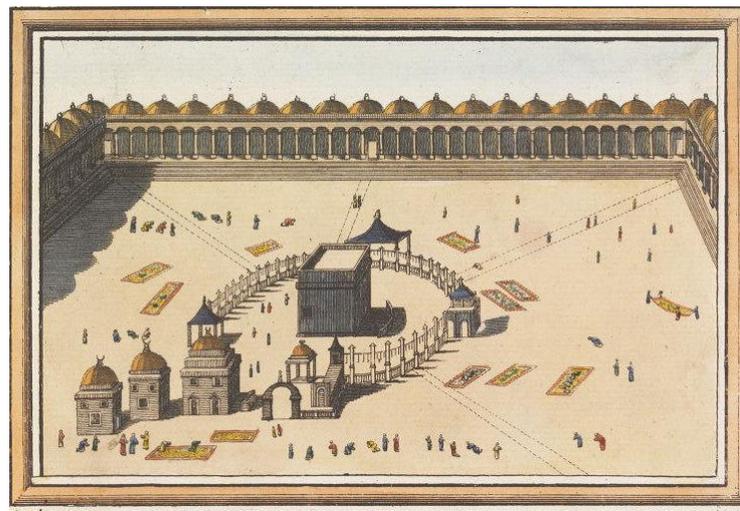
It is rightly said that “*All art is in part about the world in which it emerged.*” As part of a North Indian hagiographic manuscript written in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the miniature painting analyzed in this essay depicts a miracle of the founder of Sikhism-Guru Nanak. This essay will deconstruct the visual elements in the watercolor painting and link it to different styles of miniature painting of that period. It will also attempt to answer a fundamental question formulated by French art historian and archaeologist Oleg Grabar— can a work of culture be meaningfully understood through the application of techniques developed outside of it? The dynamism of icons and symbols due to cross-cultural influences is evident through this investigative process.

Keywords: Janamsakhi, Guru Nanak, Mecca, sacred, symbolism.

### Introduction

It is said that the genesis of Sikh art came about due to the traditional documentation of anecdotes in the life of Guru Nanak formulated as simple yet graphic Janamsakhi manuscripts. Janamsakhis were based on the Sufi tradition of the “tazkira,” a biographical memoir (McLeod, 1991), and they were initially circulated orally. A *Janam* (life) *Sakhi* (*sakshi*, a witnessed story) gives a unique lens into the founder of Sikhism, Guru Nanak’s life. These life stories are sequenced to include events in a pattern influenced by the Indian tradition of the ashramas (life stages), which are the brahmacharin (student), grihastha (householder), vanaprastha (traveler and teacher) and sanyasin (wanderer). Janamsakhis play a vital role in Sikh culture and identity formation. Guru Nanak undertook several spiritual journeys or “udasis” (McLeod, 1991) to spread the word of one God, equality, social justice, and community service. He was accompanied by his disciples- among which were well-known Bhai Bala (a Hindu) and Bhai Mardana (a Muslim). It is said that the Janamsakhis belong to various traditions based on patronages, such as Bala, Miharban, Adi, and Puratan traditions (McLeod, 1991).

During Guru Nanak's travel through the Middle East in 1517-22, it is believed that a miracle occurred in the holy city of Mecca (**Figure 1**). This incident is illustrated in a narrative painting (**Figure 2**) titled, "Guru Nanak and his disciple encounter a Muslim cleric at Mecca." After an evening of spiritual singing in the mosque courtyard or the *musalla*, Guru Nanak decided to lie down to rest. After a while, a Muslim cleric or the *mullah* noticed that the Guru's feet were in the direction of the *mihrab*- the niche which marks the direction of the most sacred Ka'aba, a black stone venerated by Muslims since ancient times (McLeod, 1991). He angrily pointed and shouted at Guru Nanak's irreverence. In some versions of the Janamsakhi, it is said that the mullah moved Guru Nanak's feet away and realized that this action caused the Ka'aba to move around as well (Brown, 1999). To this, Guru Nanak responded calmly by saying, "Turn my feet in the direction where God is not."<sup>1</sup> The mullah realized the greatness of the Guru and took to the path of the omnipresent "Ik Omkar" or "One God." Figure 2 is narrative but still passive, it tells a story without asserting a judgement or interpretation. The story has embedded movement but there are no distinct objects in motion. The viewer is left with clues to decipher that unravel on closer look.



**Figure 1: The mosque complex in Mecca**

A basic layout of the mosque complex in Mecca contains the religious center and a prayer courtyard, surrounded by Islamic arcades on all sides. (Reference: Cooke, J & Drake, E. 1768. *The Temple of Mecca*. A plate from "A New Universal Collection of Authentic and Entertaining Voyages and Travels." V&A Collections)

<sup>1</sup> As the Ka'aba turned, Guru Nanak made all Mecca turn to his teaching. (Goswamy & Smith, 2006, p. 28.)



**Figure 2: Guru Nanak and his disciple encounter a Muslim cleric at Mecca**  
 (Reference: 1800-1850. Sikh Art, The Kapany Collection, tagged 1998.58.23. Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, USA)

As John Berger (1972) explains in “Ways of Seeing,” it is clear here that the uniqueness of this painting lies in the uniqueness of the place where it came from. Different clues about the artwork’s possible origins lead the author to places in North India. Firstly, the artwork resembles a Pahari painting using primary colors and delicate facial features. It is one of forty-two paintings in an unbound set belonging to the Kapany family, originally from Patna. Professor Del Bonta, an art scholar, believes the painting belongs to the Awadhi<sup>2</sup> style. At the same time, its tentative place of origin is deduced to be Murshidabad in West Bengal as per museum records where it currently resides (Singh, N-G. K., 2015, 2016). **Figure 3** indicates that the probable point of origin of the illustration might be in North India. It is an inference and a conjecture from the clues that the artist traveled through all these places—Nankana Sahib (where Guru Nanak was born), Delhi, Lucknow, Patna and, Murshidabad; and gathered experiences that are manifested in the painting.

<sup>2</sup> After the annexation of Muslim dynasty by the British in 1856, trained artists from Awadhi (Oudh) centres migrated from the Lucknow region. (Brown, 1999, p. 68)

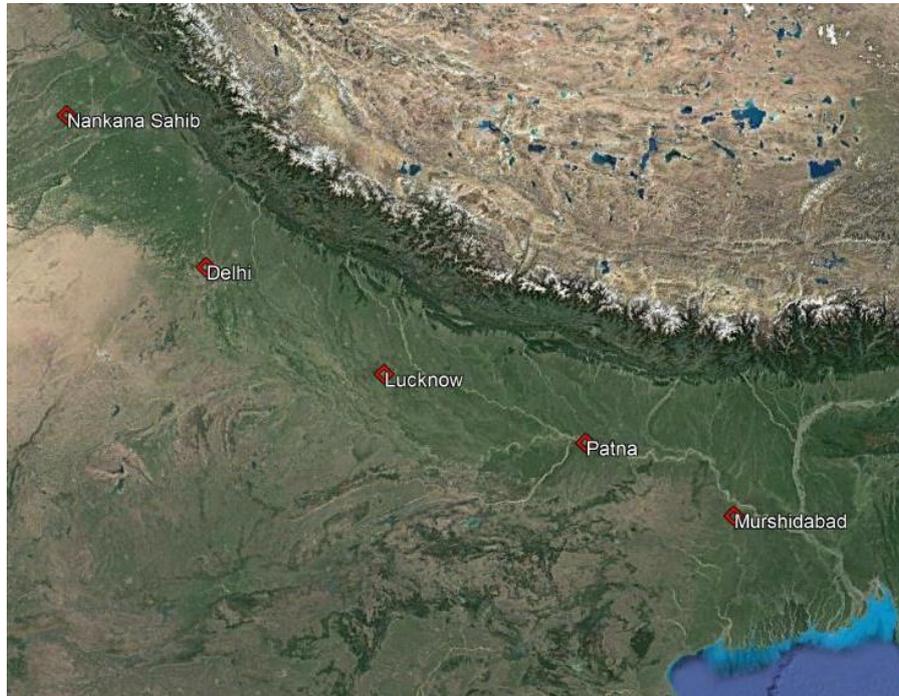


Figure 3: Tracing the Artist's footsteps  
(Reference: Google Earth, 2020)

### **Design Planning and Representation of the Janamsakhi illustration**

Templates conventionalized the mystic events of Guru Nanak's life into easily identifiable forms of stories that played in the memory of the devotees. These templates became a groundwork for replicas in early Janamsakhi illustrations and helped communicate the word of Sikhism quicker (McLeod, 1991). The wood-cut templates suggested the placement of figures and a rough setting, as seen in **Figure 4**. (Goswamy & Smith, 2006, p. 100). Artists from various backgrounds adapted<sup>3</sup> the template to create a unique "Sikh" tradition of artistic expression which incorporated both Islamic and Hindu influences. The illustration discussed in this essay was also created using a template, as seen in Figure 4.

---

<sup>3</sup> The artists transformed these guidelines with their own ideologies and talent. A woodcut image of the same scene in the V&A collection (Museum number: IM.2:161-1917) shows a *mihrab* with a Hindu Shiva *linga*. This represents a late interpolation in the tradition. (McLeod, 1991, p. 127.)



Figure 4: A Janamsakhi template in thumbnail format with the Mecca incident highlighted

(Reference: *The Samrai Collection*, London. 18<sup>th</sup> cent. Goswamy & Smith. 2006. *I See No Stranger. Early Sikh Art and Devotion*. 100, 101. Rubin Museum of Art, Mapin Publishing & the Sikh Foundation. New York, USA.)

### Style: Color, Shading, and Design in the Janamsakhi illustration

Looking further into the illustration in Figure 2, certain tangible design elements are prominent in the miniature painting. The lines, shading, decoration and color are the “ornaments” of the said painting (Nardi, 2006) and are highlighted in **Figure 5**.

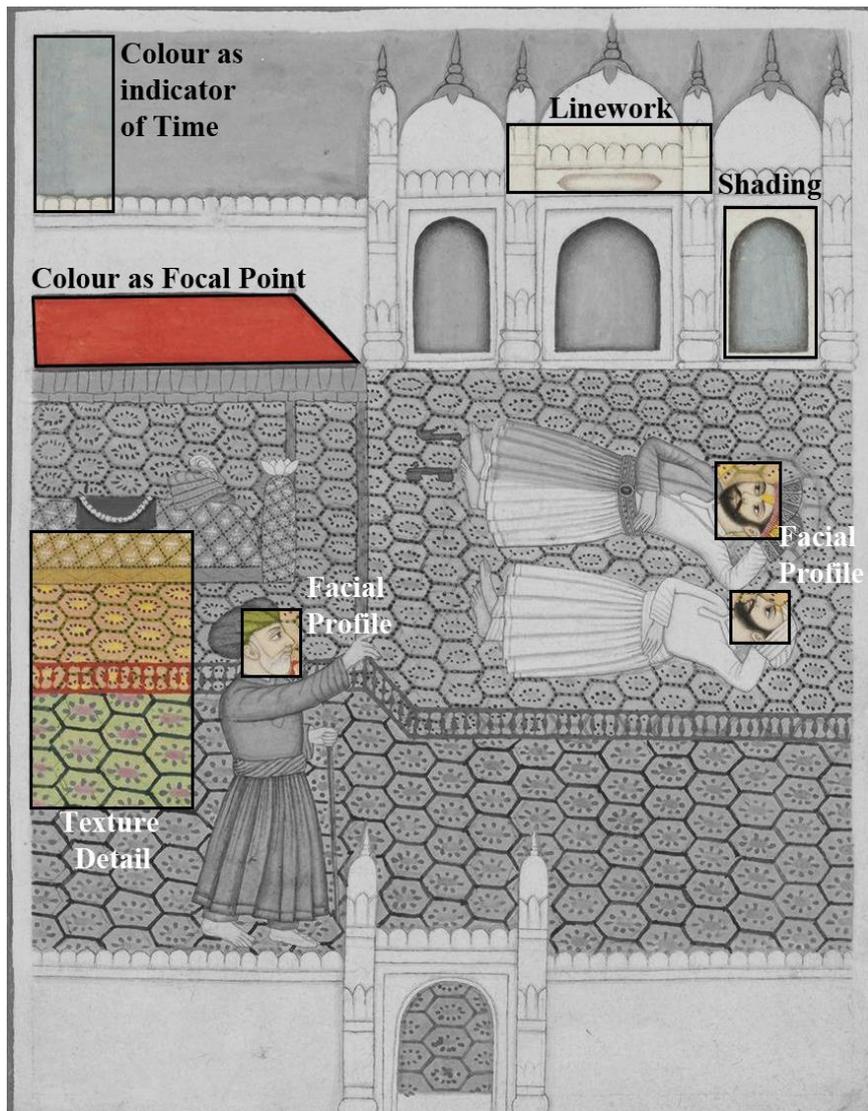


Figure 5: Painting techniques driving the narrative in the illustration. (A detail of Figure 2)

The illustrated scene occurs at dawn, revealed by the pale blue sky on a high horizon. The opaque watercolor or gouache on viscous paper has made the painting bright but flat and lacking significant tonal value. The line work overall is refined and restrained. The textures of the exquisite arabesque of hexagonal tile or carpet patterns in the courtyard, intricate latticework or

*jalidar* balustrade, and the cross diagonals of the cushions gain character as background detail (Kour, 2019, p. 251). Other noticeable techniques used in the painting are the minimal perspective (canopy) and contoured shading (mosque arches).

The brilliant red used for the canopy becomes an iconographically significant focal point. The source of the red organic dye, *majith*, symbolizes devotion in Sikhism. The complexion of the figures and facial features of the sharp chin, nose almost in line with the forehead, and long eyes have been generalized from the Kangra style of Pahari painting. It is also important to note that the mullah and the disciple's faces are in full profile, while Guru Nanak's face has been given prominence through a three-quarter profile (Hans, 1987).

### Composition

The painting is in a vertical format surrounded by a thin white padding and a thick, traditional, monochrome red border or *hashiya* without any decoration. The red border is borrowed from the Basohli style of Pahari painting. The scene unfolds within three horizontal planes called registers. A hierarchy is visible, represented by the key people or the story's heroes, and placed in the central register (**Figure 6**).

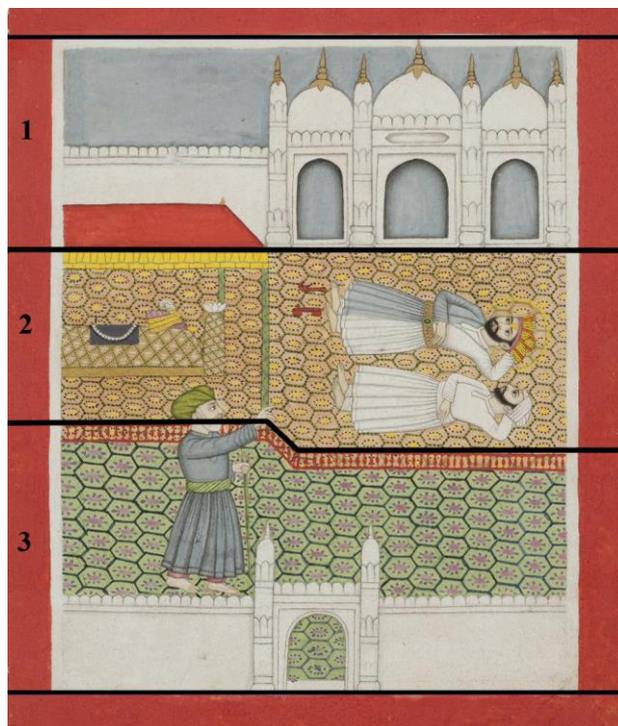


Figure 6: Hierarchy of registers in the narrative painting.  
(A detail of Figure 2)

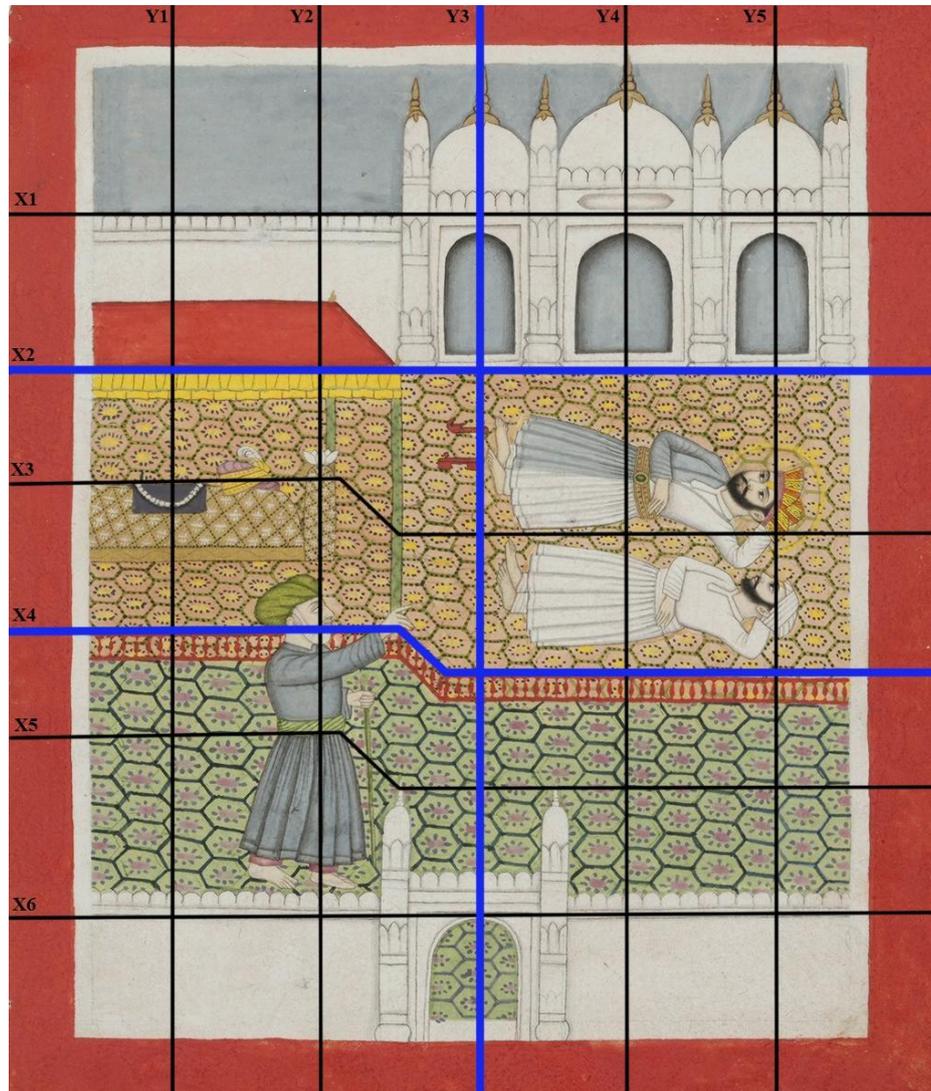


Figure 7: Grid-wise planning of the narrative painting. (A detail of Figure 2)

The composition of the painting is powerful, as verified by drawing a grid on top of it (**Figure 7**).

Apart from the prominent horizontal lines X2 and X4, X1, and X6 frame the painting with the mosque boundary walls, thus clearly defining the area where the story takes place. X3 lines the placement for the Ka'aba and Guru Nanak (two critical story elements). At the same time, X5 goes through the mullah's waistband, offsetting the balustrade to touch the finial tops of the minarets. Vertical lines Y1 and Y2 become guidelines for placing the Ka'aba and the mullah. The central Y3 passes through central archways in the top and bottom registers making the painting almost symmetrical. It also guides the location of

the slippers. Y4 intersects through the arched opening or *pishtaq* in the middle, and it intersects the center of the horizontally lying figures. Finally, Y5 passes through the last portal and the top of the heads of the Guru and his disciple. Hence, every element in this painting has been strategically placed.

When looking closely, a subdued diagonal pattern emerges between the central figure and the secondary figures. The prime characters unify in a balanced configuration- the visual weight in the painting is distributed, making it aesthetically appealing. Also, a motion of circularity in the image seems to disintegrate rigidity. Professor of Religious Studies Nikky-Guninder Singh endorses that the motion of circularity challenges societal assumptions of generic visual perception and widens the viewer experience. (Figure 8).

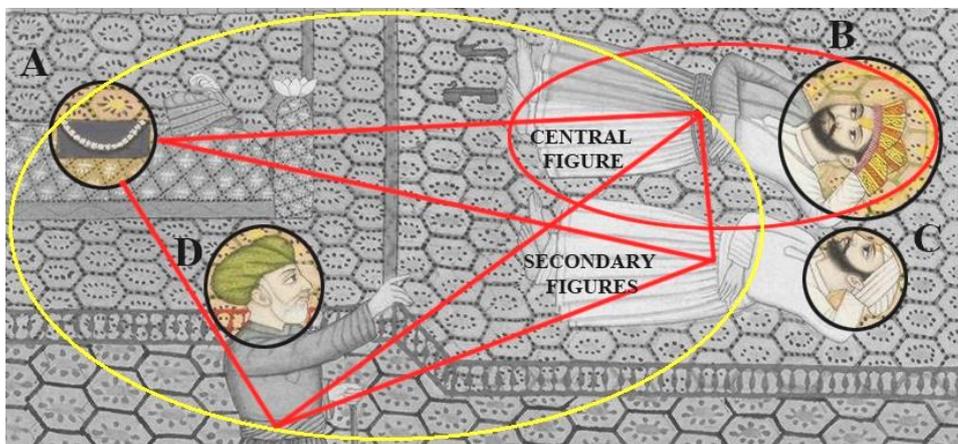


Figure 8: Arrangement of characters in the narrative painting. (A detail of Figure 2)

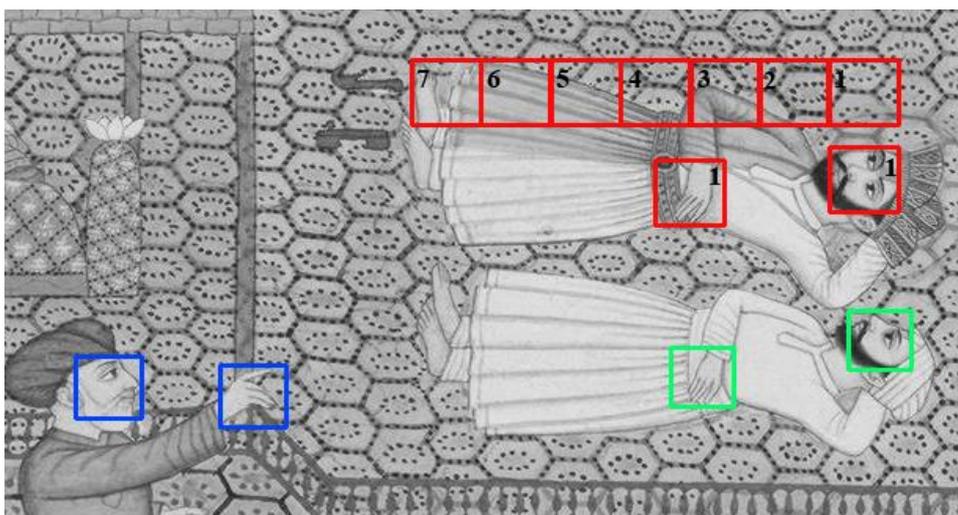


Figure 9: Anatomical proportions of the characters in the narrative painting. (A detail of Figure 2)

Traditional Indian paintings rely on the theory of “*Citrasutras*” for aesthetic proportions and beauty. The *Citrasūtras* are the underlying principles and theoretical guides in Sanskrit scientific literature used to analyze paintings. When these theories are applied to the Janamsakhi illustration, it is found that the face (*mukha*) and palm (*tala*) are equal (Nardi, 2006). The body of the central figure is approximately seven times the size of the face (**Figure 9**). This is smaller than the ideal nine times proportion meant for a *cakravartin* or a king, which may indicate the modest nature of the Guru.

### Symbolism

The other driving agents of the compositional unity in the narrative are revealed in **Figure 10**. These include - (1) the royal throne and tent, (2) mosque architecture, (3) the robes of Guru Nanak and Bhai Bala, (4) Guru Nanak’s face, turban, and halo, (5) Guru Nanak’s wooden slippers, and (6) the mullah’s staff. The discovery seems to make the static painting instantly dynamic as one comprehends the profound meaning conveyed by the symbols. I will elaborate on each of these agents in further detail in the essay.

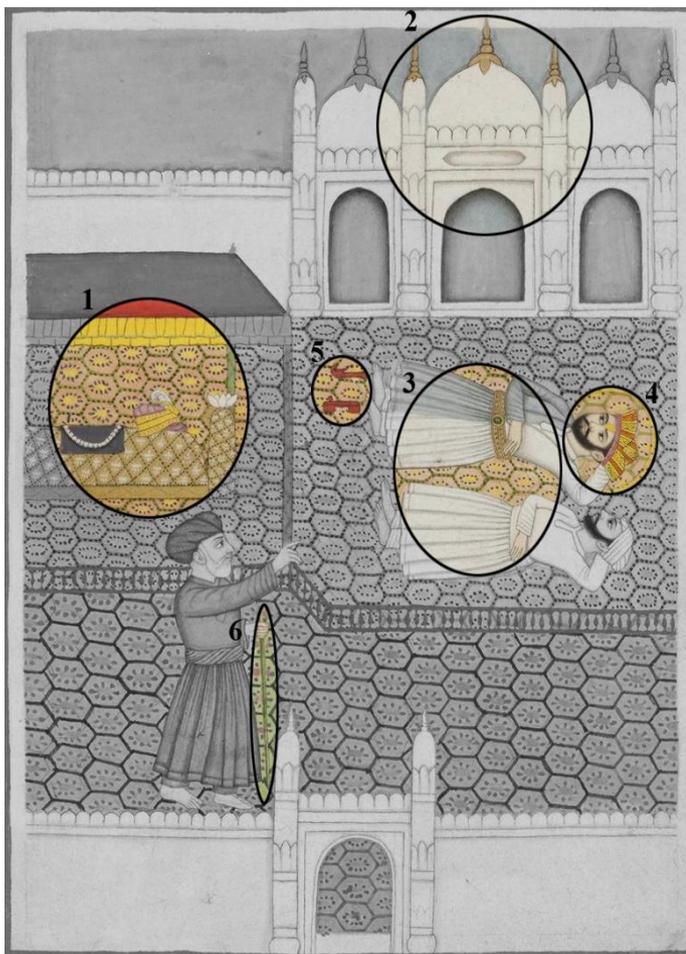


Figure 10: Icons in the narrative of the Janamsakhi illustration. (A detail of Figure 2)

1. The royal throne and tent: On the left part of the central register (Figure 10), I argue that the black rectangular box symbolizes the sacred Ka'aba due to its placement and ornamentation; hence disagreeing with Indian art critic B.N. Goswamy's interpretation that the objects below the canopy are part of a grave or a sepulchral structure (2006). The Ka'aba in the illustration (Figure 10) is adorned with diamond lace with a royal turban beside it as if to indicate that the rich and mighty must bow to the divine. The sacred Ka'aba, as seen in the illustration, is placed beside a traditional cushion or a *takia*, and a *bairangan* or armrest. It is elevated on a *chauki* (platform) or a *takhat* (throne) (McLeod, 1991). These represent royal and spiritual authority, as seen in art depicting a throne,<sup>4</sup> like the setting for a king or a holy book, as seen in **Figure 11**.

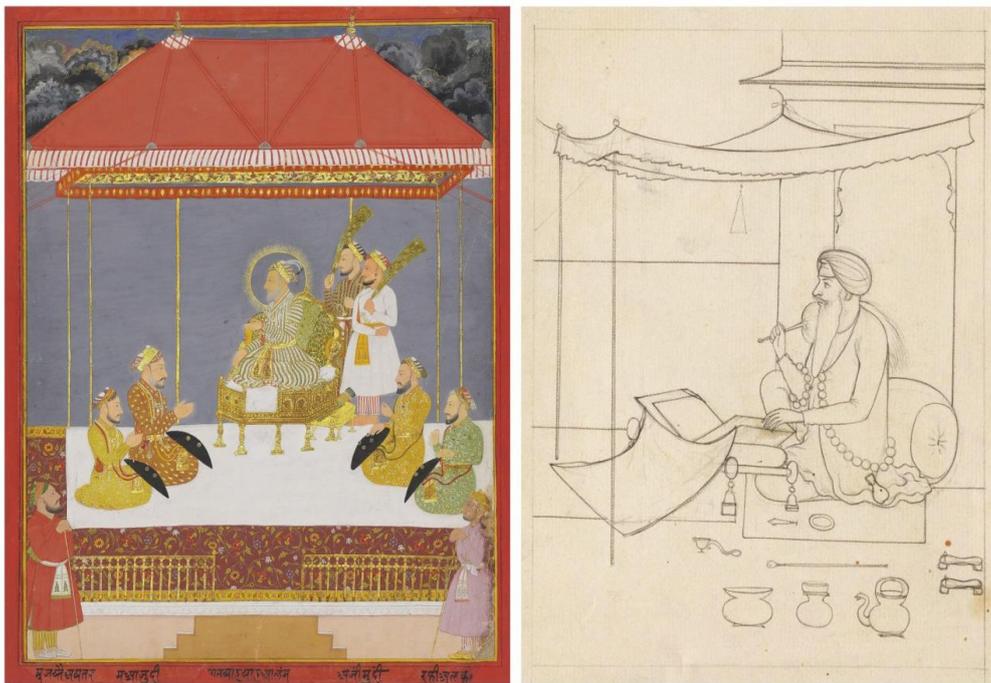


Figure 11: A royal tent for an emperor (Left), a sacred tent for the holy book (Right).  
 (Reference: L: *The Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah (R.1707-12) with Four of his Sons*, North India, Rajasthan, Mewar, Circa 1710-2. Sotheby's. *Arts of the Islamic World*. Lot 179. London, UK.; R: *A Sikh Reciting the Guru Granth Sahib*, Punjab. 19<sup>th</sup> cent. Bonhams online.)

2. Mosque architecture: The white marble mosque, with its niches, doorways, minarets, cupolas, and domes, is arranged like an umbrella or a tree to shade Guru Nanak while he is asleep, denotative of his "spiritual royalty" (Hans, 1987).

<sup>4</sup>It is implicit that the artist may have been a Hindu who had never travelled to Mecca but had heard stories about it. With a sizable and an influential community backing, the artist had access to the template of illustrations used in a typical Janamsakhi and imagined a religious setting with a throne and a canopy.

3. Robes of Guru Nanak and Bhai Bala: Guru Nanak was known for wearing a mix of Muslim and Hindu attire (Brown, 1999, p. 56). The full-sleeved, full-length round-skirted robe (*gheradarjama*) with trousers having ruffled ends (*chooridarjama*), wide *patka* or waistband with a brooch and a collar tie is typical Oudh style Muslim clothing. The artist conveys deep meaning and concepts through colors in the Janamsakhi illustration. Guru Nanak's robes are neatly colored half grey and half white, and they are a metaphor for rejection of any bias that may exist towards religion, caste or class; in this case, Muslims (the mullah is dressed in grey robes)<sup>5</sup> and Hindus (here assumed to be Bhai Bala dressed in white clothes).

4. Guru Nanak's face, turban, and halo: Guru Nanak's tripartite conical turban is distinctive with ornate red and yellow detailing, almost resembling a crown or a Mughal turban, as seen in **Figure 12**. The halo or nimbus around the Guru's face symbolizes the light of God and spiritual supremacy. The vertical yellow line on the Guru's forehead identifies the Hindu tilak of sandalwood (Kour, 2019). It is also marked on the disciple's forehead, which helps us infer that he is Bhai Bala (1466 - 1544), companion of Guru Nanak. Further, it helps position the Janamsakhi manuscript to which the painting belongs as that of the Bala tradition. Professor Nikky-Guninder Singh validates that the first image in the Janamsakhi portrays Bhai Bala; hence, the set belongs to the Bala tradition.



Figure 12: Comparisons in the detail of the facial features in miniature paintings- Emperor Humayun (Left) and Guru Nanak (Right).

(Reference: L: *Emperor Humayun*. 1890. V&A Collections.; R: *Guru Nanak and his disciple encounter a Muslim cleric at Mecca*. 1800-1850. Sikh Art, The Kapany Collection, tagged 1998.58.23. Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, USA)

<sup>5</sup> The green turban and waistband of the mullah add to the notion that he is a Muslim figure based on traditional Islamic associations. (Dalvi, 2019)



Figure 13: Pair of paduka (Wooden sandals similar to Guru Nanak's slippers in the painting)

(Reference: Sanskriti Museum of Everyday Art, New Delhi. Acc. No. R-59 a/b. 19<sup>th</sup> cent. Goswamy, Smith. 2006. *I See No Stranger. Early Sikh Art and Devotion.* 154, 155. Rubin Museum of Art, New York, USA. Mapin Publishing & The Sikh Foundation. New York, USA)

5. Guru Nanak's wooden slippers: Indian paduka or wooden slippers are plain, unembellished yet elegant, and it is said that they were left behind by Guru Nanak in Mecca<sup>6</sup> (**Figure 13**).

6. The mullah's staff: Guru Nanak views the staff of the Muslim cleric as a symbol of sacred authority, and he leads his followers towards spiritual awakening by saying, "Let faith be the staff you lean upon."

### Seen and the Unseen

The artist's skill displayed through iconic characterizations, as seen before, and the subtle expressions of the characters in the painting, when examined simultaneously, hint towards the personality traits of the characters and the play of sight (through implied or abstractly understood lines of vision and direction). Here, **Figure 14** traces the line of vision (in red), which shows that both the mullah and the disciple are concentrated toward Guru Nanak. At the same time, the Guru's gentle gaze is fixed skywards, as if in wonder.<sup>7</sup> The

<sup>6</sup> The wooden sandals have been preserved as a relic in the shrine of Uch Sharif. (Singh, K., 2004, p. 190)

<sup>7</sup> Sikh scripture regards *vismad* (wonder) as the supreme aesthetic mood. (Singh, N-G. K., 2015, p. 80) In Guru Nanak's words, "wondrous are the forms, wondrous the colors; wondrous is the earth, wondrous the species." (Guru Granth Sahib, p. 463-64)

green dotted line traces the direction and position of the Guru's feet, which guide the viewer away from the position of the Ka'aba. These are the apparent undertones of unseen elements in the painting.

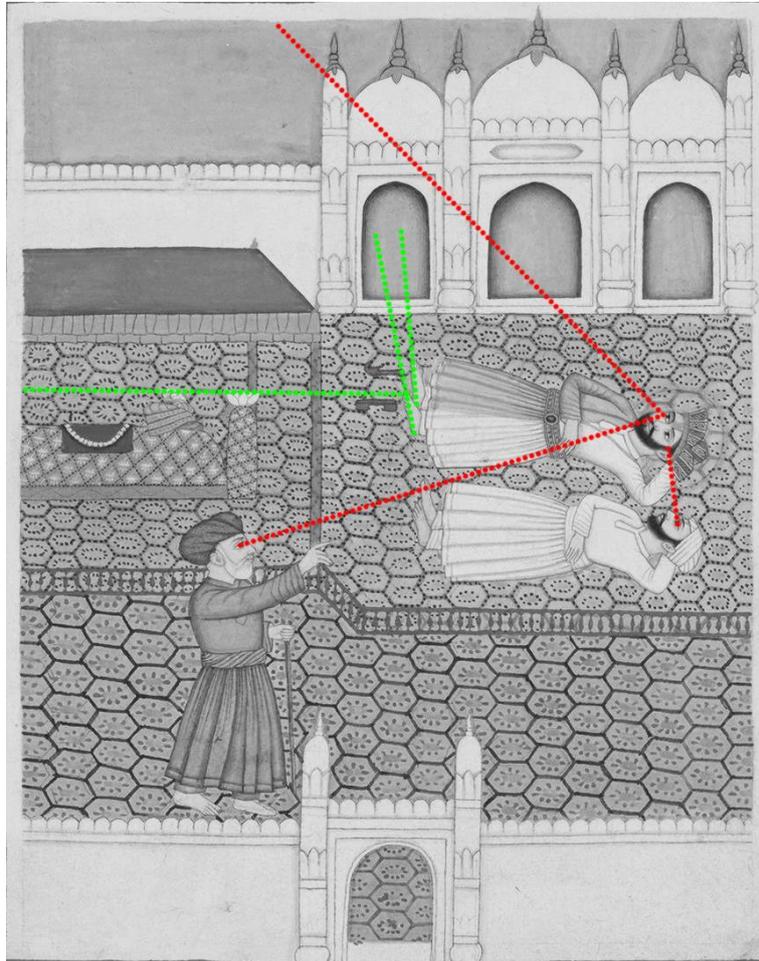


Figure 14: Implied lines that give depth to the narrative painting. (A detail of Figure 2)

### Conclusion

Dated between 1800 -1900 and handed down generations, the Janamsakhi painting has been displayed in the Kapany Gallery of Sikh Art at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, USA, since 2003. The illustration, which belongs to the Sikh culture, can be understood in depth with the help of artistic techniques derived from other Indian traditional paintings such as Pahari and Awadhi, thus answering the question posed by French art historian Oleg Grabar. As a result, the image exposes cultural variations, expands imaginative and emotional horizons, and becomes a direct testimony of the artist's sensitivity and contemplative experience while painting the scene.

The experience and authority of the Janamsakhi painting from a private preserve, sacred shrine, or a religious gathering to a more open museum atmosphere has evolved into a larger public setting with a collective sense of belonging for Sikh and non-Sikh visitors (Singh, N-G. K, 2015) What was once inserted loose leaf into text is now conserved and framed to be exhibited without the text (Brown, 1999, p. 69).

The permanent display of this painting in a major US museum affirms the significance of Sikh identity globally. The space occupied by this painting in the world creates an illusion of its multi-dimensionality (through its influences and metaphors) despite it being a strictly constructed two-dimensional painting. This idea may be indirectly linked to the multifarious diaspora and the dynamic characteristics of the Sikh cultural identity worldwide.

## References

Ahluwalia, R (2020). *Lyrical Visions from the Hills-Pahari Painting and its Masters*. Indian Aesthetics PG course lecture. 25 January 2020. Jnanapravaha. Mumbai, India.

Barrett, T (2000). *Criticizing Art: Understanding the Contemporary*. The Ohio State University. Mayfield Publishing Company Mountain View, California, USA.

Berger, J (1972). *Ways of Seeing*. British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books. London, England.

Brown, K (1999). *Sikh Art and Literature*. Routledge. New York, USA.

Dalvi, S (2019). *Sufism- Mystical Path in Islam and its Expression in Art*. Indian Aesthetics PG course lecture. 21 December 2019. Jnanapravaha. Mumbai, India.

Goswamy, B.N. and Smith, C. (2006). *I See No Stranger. Early Sikh Art and Devotion*. Rubin Museum of Art, Mapin Publishing & The Sikh Foundation. New York, USA.

Goswamy, B.N. (2020). *A Canopy of Arrows; a Mountain on Fire*. An Illustrated Talk. 13 February 2020. Experimental Theatre, NCPA. Mumbai, India.

Hans, S (1987). *B-40 Janamsakhi Guru Baba Nanak Paintings*. Guru Nanak Dev University. Amritsar, India. [online] Available at: <https://bit.ly/3KCijt9> [Accessed 14 January 2020]

Koch, E (2014). *Mughal Architecture*. Primus Books. New Delhi, India.

Kour, G (2019). *An Analytical Narration of Sikh Influence in Miniature Paintings of Kangra- Guler Style from 18th- 19th Century in Punjab*. Lovely Professional University, Punjab. [online] Available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/270415> [Accessed 17 February 2020]

McLeod, W (1980). *The B40 Janam-Sakhi*. Guru Nanak Dev University. Amritsar, India. [online] Available at: <https://bit.ly/3KCnGZ9> [Accessed 11 March 2020]

McLeod, W (1991). *Popular Sikh Art*. Oxford University Press. Delhi, India.

Nardi, I (2006). *The Theory of Citrasūtras in Indian Painting*. Routledge, London, UK.

Singh, I. *Account of a Muslim author who accompanied Guru Nanak from Mecca to Baghdad*. By Sant Syed Prithipal Singh ne' Mushtaq Hussain Shah (1902-1962). Sikh Missionary Society, UK. [online] Available at: <https://bit.ly/3Z7EprY> [Accessed 11 March 2020]

Singh, K (2004). *Janamsakhi an Analytical Study*. Amritsar, India [online] Available at: <https://bit.ly/3kDejhc>. <https://bit.ly/41xLwvs> [Accessed 14 January 2020]

Singh, N-G. K (2013). *Corporeal Metaphysics: Guru Nanak in Early Sikh Art*. *History of Religions* Vol. 53, No. 1. 2013, 28–65. The University of Chicago Press. Chicago, USA. [online] Available at: [www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/671249](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/671249). [Accessed 25 February 2020]

Singh, N-G. K (2015). *Visual Phenomenology. Seeing-in Guru Nanak at the Asian Arts Museum*. Sikh Formations- Religion, Culture, Theory. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group. San Francisco, USA.

Singh, N-G. K (2016). *The Language of Colours: A discussion of Guru Nanak's Janamsakhi Life Stories*. The Sikh Foundation and Asian Art Museum. San Francisco, USA. YouTube [online] Available at: <https://bit.ly/3SyzdKX> [Accessed 7 Feb 2020]

Wagoner, J (2013). *Art 206: Analysis of an artwork*. USA. YouTube [online] Available at: <https://bit.ly/3EFfXpw> [Accessed 7 Feb 2020]