

**Collecting the Arts of the Punjab:
Art and Identity for the Sikh Diaspora in Singapore and Beyond.**

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Singapore: Indian Heritage Centre.

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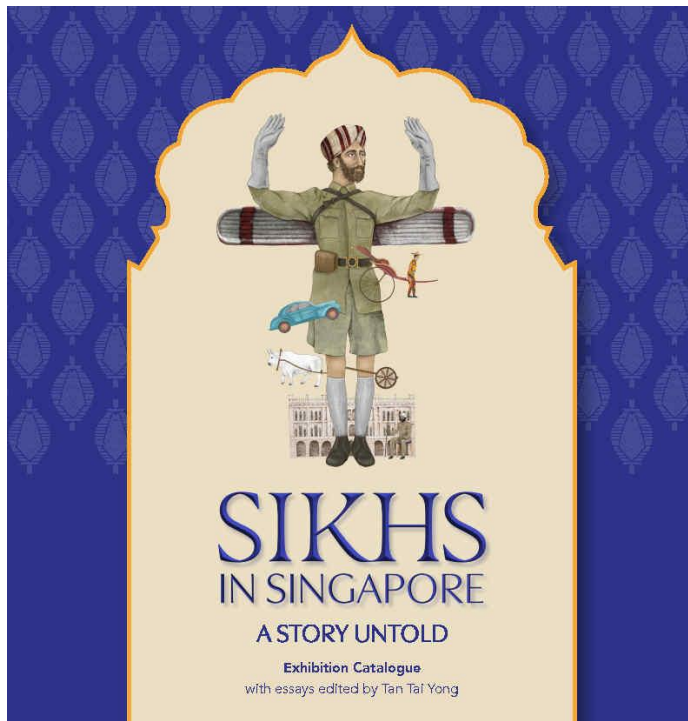
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Temple token embossed with an image of Guru Nanak seated under a tree, with the *Mool Mantra* (a Sikh prayer) on the reverse Punjab, 19th century, Sikh Empire era, Gold. *Kapany Collection of Sikh Art. Courtesy of The Sikh Foundation*

Collecting the Arts of the Punjab:

Art and Identity for the Sikh Diaspora in Singapore and Beyond

Paul Michael Taylor and Sonia Dhami

We are honoured to participate in the present exhibition held at Singapore's Indian Heritage Centre by contributing this essay on a topic that is important to Sikhs in Singapore and — around the world — the role of collecting Sikh artworks within the maintenance of Sikh identity in diasporic communities. In

fact, this exhibition is an example of the regular international exchange of material heritage of the Sikhs, since five important artworks from the Kapany Collection of Sikh Art were loaned to this exhibition. This loan, and the attention this exhibition is receiving in Singapore as well as internationally, are components of the growing international recognition of Sikh art, and the role it plays in diasporic Sikh communities.

We have co-edited a volume of essays exploring aspects of the extensive Sikh art collection assembled by the late Dr Narinder S. Kapany and his late wife Satinder Kapany¹. We noted there the important role they felt art played in helping people in their adopted country, the United States, understand their Sikh cultural heritage². Their collection has frequently been loaned not only in the US but in other countries, in the

same spirit and with the same purpose, so its inclusion in this exhibition is very fitting. Dr Kapany envisioned both his art collections and his philanthropy (through the Sikh Foundation he started in 1967) as a means by which he, as an immigrant in America, could contribute to a better understanding and appreciation by his fellow Americans as well as beneficiaries in many other countries of his own cultural background.

Today it may seem commonplace to think of lending and displaying “Sikh art” as many museums have done in recent decades, producing beautiful catalogues of Sikh art exhibitions largely from collections outside South Asia³, along with studies or compendia of diasporic private collectors and collections of Sikh art⁴. Yet, it is good to remember that Dr Kapany largely defined or even created the academic discipline of Sikh art studies as a recognisable category of artistic collecting and investigation⁵. A well-known early founding document of the discipline is surely the 1999 publication of the proceedings of a conference on *Sikh Art and Literature* (the title of the resulting volume), which had been hosted by San Francisco’s Asian Art Museum⁶, even though Dr. Kapany had first used the term in a 1975 special issue dedicated to “Sikh Art” of the Sikh Foundation’s quarterly journal, *The Sikh Sansar*. In recent decades we have witnessed a growing interest in and awareness of Sikh art and Sikh studies. Yet before the 1980s, Sikh cultural phenomena was often treated as a kind of subset of Hindu culture; and even the Library of Congress classification of books on Sikh art sometimes listed their subject headings (as was initially done for Brown 1999) as “Art, Hindu – India – Punjab.” Gurinder Singh Mann⁷, professor and expert on Sikh studies who held the Kundan Kaur Kapany Chair in Sikh Studies at the University of California (1999 – 2015), has reflected on Dr. Kapany’s role in America’s Sikh diaspora, and specifically the centrality of his support in developing the academic field of Sikh studies, especially in the US⁸. He explores the relationship between Dr Kapany’s Sikh identity and his philanthropic work, then reviews the creation of the Sikh Foundation, describing the establishment of endowed

Sikh Studies professorships, artistic sponsorships, and museum exhibitions that he launched and supported, suggesting that his legacy is built on “the Sikh belief that liberation is not personal but collective” (*api tarahi sangati kul tarah tin safal janamu jagi aia*,” M1, *Guru Granth Sahib*, 1039)⁹. In that sense, the Sikh Foundation he founded, which maintains some of the artworks he originally gathered, continues his efforts by lending art for exhibitions worldwide.

Anne Murphy¹⁰, an expert on vernacular literary and religious traditions of the Punjab region, has investigated, through her fieldwork in the Punjab, the many ways in which Sikhs invest their material heritage with importance and use material artefacts as markers of Sikh identity and as images or objects encouraging Sikh devotion and values – customs maintained among diasporic Sikh communities for whom Sikh art can be reminders of Sikh homeland as well as practice. As studies of Sikh collections and collectors have noted, Sikh art collecting can itself be a form of devotion, or *sewa* (the virtue of service to community), in addition to being a way of informing others about Sikh religion and culture¹¹.

This exhibition’s title, *Sikhs in Singapore – A Story Untold*, reflects the fact that most case studies of Sikh diasporic communities have been done in the European or North American context leaving much of Southeast Asia’s story relatively less explored, with the important exception of A. B. Shamsul and Arunajeet Kaur’s *Sikhs in Southeast Asia: Negotiating An Identity*¹². The book includes Faizal bin Yahya’s¹³ contribution on Singaporean Sikh businessmen which includes several business categories. Information technology is not presented as a major area of Sikh Singaporean endeavour, in stark contrast to the strong Sikh and South Asian network within Silicon Valley to which Dr Kapany, known as the “father of fiber optics,” was a major contributor¹⁴.

Surely the diasporic communities worldwide have much to share and to learn from each other. We feel confident that the artworks from the Kapany collection loaned to Singapore’s

Indian Heritage Centre accomplish the goals for which they were collected, both as encouragement for Sikh understanding and appreciation of their culture and values, and to introduce non-Sikhs to the cultural heritage of the Sikh community.

These artworks included a 19th century temple token from the Punjab, which is an exquisite example of an intricately executed 24-karat gold temple token with a loop. Such temple tokens were once given to pilgrims who made an offering to the Gurdwara¹⁵. On the obverse we have Guru Nanak depicted sitting under a tree that has beautifully stylised leaves and branches. He is seen along with his companions, Bala and Mardana. The reverse, reverently inscribed in Gurumukhi script, is the first verse from the *Japji Sahib*, the *Mool Mantra* summarized in this classical table of components and English equivalents:

Ik Oankar	There is only one God
Sat Naam	True is His Name
Kartaa	He is the Creator
Purakh	He is without fear
Nirbhao	He is without enmity
Nirvair	He is Immortal
Akal Moorat	He is beyond birth and death
Ajonee	He is Self-Existent
Saibhang	He is attained by the Grace of the True Guru
Gur Prashad	

As noted, this *mantra* constitutes the first phrases of the *Japji* of Guru Nanak, the first part of the Sikh sacred book or the *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, recited daily by many Sikhs. A new, recently published translation and commentary on the *Japji* by Rupinder Brar¹⁶, well worth reading in detail, provides detailed commentary and interpretations on this sacred text.

This is a painting on paper from a 19th century album of so-called "Company School" studies of the people of the Punjab, from Lahore or Amritsar. Jean-Marie Lafont records that "miniature" paintings like this one, representing soldiers of the *Fauj-i-khas*, were frequently produced in the workshop of Imam Bakhsh¹⁷. He notes that similar examples can be found



Helmet with chain mail neck-guard. Lahore, Punjab, circa 1820-1840
 Helmet of iron overlaid with gold; mail neckguard of iron and brass, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco. Gift of the Kapany Collection, 1998.69. Courtesy of The Sikh Foundation



| Inscribed and gold-damascened sword. Punjab, circa 1850. Kapany Collection of Sikh Art. Courtesy of The Sikh Foundation



| Shield. Punjab, circa 1835. 42 cm diameter. Kapany Collection of Sikh Art. Courtesy of The Sikh Foundation



| Sikh drummer of the *Fauj-i-khas* and Najib of Avitabile's brigade Lahore or Amritsar, 19th century, 21.6 × 17.8 cm, Kapany Collection of Sikh Art (Album 3, page 37) Courtesy of The Sikh Foundation

in the miniatures of General Court (1827–1843 in Lahore and Peshawar), in the engravings of the court physician of Maharaja Ranjit Singh Dr John Martin Honigberger's book (1829–1849 in Lahore), though the original paintings on which those engravings were based have apparently disappeared. They can also be found in some albums of the British Library, and in the albums of the Kapany Collection. Shown here is a Sikh drummer of the *Fauj-i-khas* with a white turban, and a *najib* of General Paolo Di Avitabile's brigade, most of the time stationed at Peshawar. The *najib* is the same we find in Honigberger's *Thirty-Five Years in the East* (plate VI) along with the Sikh and the Gurkha soldiers of the *Fauj-i-khas*. He is mentioned in Honigberger's *Memoirs* as "Mooselman Sepahee".

This gold-leaf decorated shield, inscribed gold-damascened sword, and helmet are illustrated by Navtej Sarna¹⁸ who discusses in detail the uses and history of these arms in the Punjab. These are magnificent examples of the Sikh martial tradition.

Endnotes

- 1 Taylor, Paul Michael, and Dhami, Sonia *Sikh Art from the Kapany Collection*, Palo Alto, California: The Sikh Foundation, in association with the Asian Cultural History Program, Smithsonian Institution, 2017.
- 2 Taylor, Paul Michael, and Dhami, Sonia Introduction: Art By, For or About the Sikhs. *Sikh Art from the Kapany Collection*, Palo Alto, California: The Sikh Foundation, in association with the Asian Cultural History Program, Smithsonian Institution, 2017, 11-13.
- 3 For examples of recent exhibition catalogues see Stronge, Susan, *The Arts of the Sikh Kingdoms*, New York: Weatherhill, 1999; Goswamy, BN, and Caron Smith, *I See No Stranger: Early Sikh Art and Devotion*, Ocean Township, New Jersey: Rubin Museum of Art, 2006; and Taylor, Paul Michael, and Pontsioen, Robert, *Sikhs: Legacy of the Punjab*. Washington, DC: Asian Cultural History Program, Smithsonian Institution, 2014.
- 4 For information on some diasporic private collections see Taylor and Dhami, *Sikh Art from the Kapany Collection*, 2017; Singh, Runjeet *The Goddess: Arms & Armour of the Rajputs*, Coventry, England: Runjeet Singh, 2018; Toor, Davinder, *In Pursuit of Empire: Treasures from the Toor Collection of Sikh Art*, London: Kashi House, 2018; and Taylor, Paul Michael, *Splendors of Punjab Heritage: Art from the Khanuja Family Collection*. (With essays by Parvinderjit Singh Khanuja.) New Delhi: Roli Books, 2022; Taylor, PM, Sikh Art and Devotion in the Collection of Parvinder S.Khanuja. *Arts of Asia*, 2019: 49 (1): 107-116.
- 5 Taylor and Dhami, *Sikh Art from the Kapany Collection*, 2017: 11-12
- 6 Brown, Kerry, *Sikh Art and Literature*. London/New York: Routledge, 1999.

- 7 Mann, Gurinder Singh, Narinder Singh Kapany: The Man and His Accomplishments. *Sikh Art from the Kapany Collection* (Ed. by P.M. Taylor and S. Dhami), Palo Alto, California: The Sikh Foundation, in association with the Asian Cultural History Program, Smithsonian Institution, 2017: 27-35.
- 8 Ibid
- 9 Mann, Baba Nanak and the Founding of the Sikh Panth, 35.
- 10 Murphy, Anne, *The Materiality of the Past: History and Representation in Sikh Tradition*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- 11 See Taylor and Dhami, *Sikh Art from the Kapany Collection*, 2017: 15; Taylor, PM, Sikh Art and Devotion in the Collection of Parvinder S.Khanuja. *Arts of Asia*, 2019: 49 (1):107-116; and Fernández, María Esther, *Expressions of Divinity*, Santa Clara, CA: Triton Museum of Art, 2019.
- 12 Shamsul, Amri Baharuddin, and Kaur, Arunajeet, *Sikhs in Southeast Asia: Negotiating an Identity*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2011.
- 13 Faizal bin Yahya, Sikh businessmen in Singapore, *Sikhs in Southeast Asia: Negotiating and Identity*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2011: 187 – 202.
- 14 See Rocamora, Rick, *Silicon Raj: making a difference to America's future: an exhibit in the Bernice Layne Browne Gallery in the Doe Library, University of California, Berkeley, July 16-September 30, 2001*, Berkeley: Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2001; Gurmukh Singh, *The Global Indian: The Rise of Sikhs Abroad*, New Delhi: Rupa & Co, 2003; McMahon, Suzanne, *Echoes of freedom: South Asian pioneers in California, 1899-1965: an exhibition in the Bernice Layne Brown Gallery in the Doe Library, University of California, Berkeley, July 1-September 30, 2001*, Berkeley, California: Center for South Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 2001.and Brard, Gurnam S S, 2017 Artistic Gifts and Creations of Dr. Narinder S. Kapany, *Sikh Art from the Kapany Collection*, Palo Alto, California: The Sikh Foundation, in association with the Asian Cultural History Program, Smithsonian Institution,, 2017: 37-50.
- 15 Taylor, Paul Michael, and Pontsioen, Robert, *Sikhs: Legacy of the Punjab*. Washington, DC: Asian Cultural History Program, Smithsonian Institution, 2014: 73.
- 16 Brar, Rupinder S, *The Japji of Guru Nanak: A New Translation and Commentary*. Washington, D.C.: Asian Cultural History Program, Smithsonian Institution, 2019.
- 17 Lafont, Jean-Marie, Arts and Culture in the Punjab Kingdom and the Sikh States, Trans-Sutlej and Cis-Sutlej, *Sikh Art from the Kapany Collection*, Palo Alto, California: The Sikh Foundation, in association with the Asian Cultural History Program, Smithsonian Institution,, 2017: 145.
- 18 Sarna, Navtej, The Sikh Martial Tradition, *Sikh Art from the Kapany Collection*, Palo Alto, California: The Sikh Foundation, in association with the Asian Cultural History Program, Smithsonian Institution, 2017: 209 – 217.

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