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

Paul Michael Taylor and Sonia Dhami

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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 Kapany. We noted there the important role they felt art played in helping people in their adopted country, the United States, understand their Sikh cultural heritage. Their collection has frequently been loaned not only in the US but in other countries, in the...
same spirit and 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 Asia, along with studies or compendia of diasporic private collectors and collections of Sikh art. 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 investigation. 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 Museum, 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 Mann, 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 US. 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). 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 Murphy, 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 culture.

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. The book includes Faizal bin Yahya’s 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 contributor.

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 Gurdwara. 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 |
| Ajoonee   | He is Self-Existent |
| Saiibhang | 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 Brar, 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 Fauji-i-khas, were frequently produced in the workshop of Imam Bakhsh. He notes that similar examples can be found...


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 Sarna 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.


5 Taylor and Dhami, Sikh Art from the Kapany Collection, 2017: 11-12


8 Ibid

9 Mann, Baba Nanak and the Founding of the Sikh Panth, 35.


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.

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