

Sikh Heritage at the Smithsonian

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The Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History

The paper presents a curator's observations on the planning, development, presentation, and public events associated with the exhibition "**Sikhs: Legacy of the Punjab.**" The exhibition, currently at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History (Washington, D.C., USA), represents the first introduction many of its viewers will have, both to Sikhs and to the Punjab. Given the level of worldwide Sikh (and especially Sikh-American) community involvement in this exhibition, this "curator's" perspective should, in fact, be considered the perspective of just one "co-curator" among the many co-curators from a large and supportive Sikh community, which participated in its own self-representation through this exhibition and through the associated public events. This paper summarizes the exhibition's development through efforts of the "Sikh Heritage Fund" within a framework of similar "heritage" funds and projects under the Smithsonian's Asian Cultural History Program (ACHP). Then it addresses the ACHP's procedure of treating an exhibition as the "flagship of a fleet" of related activities that gained acceptance and helped establish a growing community of supporters of the Sikh Heritage Project. The content of the resulting exhibition is also summarized, highlighting examples that illustrate extensive Sikh community involvement.

1. Introduction

On the morning of Saturday July 24, 2004, the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History hosted the Fourth Annual Smithsonian Sikh Heritage Lectures, an international conference on "Sikh Representations Today," followed that evening by the reception and official opening events for the exhibition "*Sikhs: Legacy of the Punjab.*" Other organizations hosted parallel events elsewhere in Washington from July 22nd through 25th – a period that the Washington Post (Dixon 2004), and many Sikh organizations, referred to as "Sikh Heritage Weekend." The conference, exhibition, and associated programs (summarized below) brought together many people from around the world as a community of persons interested in Sikh cultural history.

In fact, the exhibition and its opening events represented some of the highly visible products of a dynamic, behind-the-scenes effort, the “Sikh Heritage Project,” which had begun about four years earlier. During its four years of existence, this became one of the most active “Heritage Projects” within the Smithsonian’s Asian Cultural History Program. In addition, it seems that the collaborative effort to create an exhibition about Sikh identity and cultural history, to be located within America’s “national museum” (the Smithsonian), took on a significant role within many segments of the South Asian American population, especially the Sikh community within the U.S.

The purpose of this paper is to provide, at least from the author’s perspective as curator of this exhibition and as curator for the wider Sikh Heritage Project, a preliminary account of how a very active South Asian American community became involved in a unique collaboration that has produced several very positive outcomes (including the exhibition mentioned) at relatively modest cost and within a comparatively short period of time. In this case, museum and other institutional goals came (over time) to coincide in part with community goals, and with the research interests of scholars based at the Museum and elsewhere. Fortunately, current trends in producing cultural exhibitions have increasingly welcomed real community involvement (not just financial support) in accurately, critically, and respectfully depicting the cultural heritage of those whose art or artifacts are represented in exhibitions.

This mode of preparing an exhibition within a larger framework of community involvement reflects a changing view of the nature of museum curatorship as a social practice (see Kreps 2003). Such a view places museum exhibitions within a more holistic, integrated, and culturally relative approach to curatorial work that explores and includes the relationships among (museum) objects, people, and society in social and cultural contexts beyond the museum collection or exhibition. Museum-based projects that include exhibitions increasingly involve integrating events that bring together a community or communities to celebrate or re-assert shared values, in addition to the traditional curatorial responsibilities, such as the responsibility to preserve and care for collections, to add new information through research on collections, and to accurately interpret and present objects in exhibitions and other media.

Nevertheless, the issues of cultural representation arising during a project of this kind do not easily fit traditional frameworks of analysis. For example, if one considers the project through relations among parts of the triad consisting of (1) a museum (collecting/display institution), (2) a people whose culture is the subject of the museum’s representation (cultural tradition exhibited), and (3) an expected or targeted audience (viewership), one finds considerable overlap¹.

The museum had virtually no Sikh collections, and in the end relied heavily on loaned materials (largely from a few prominent Sikh collectors) while planning to build collections later in this area. In addition, the Smithsonian’s “Sikh Heritage Project,” which came to include this exhibition among its goals, was from the beginning a team effort in which a growing community of supporters not only provided financial backing for the exhibition, but also

helped to organize regular community-building meetings and events that turned the effort into a shared community project.

The nature of this Project's intended audience, however, always included both a broad (non-Sikh) American and international public (which, Sikhs involved in the project felt, did not understand Sikhs or their traditions), as well as Sikhs themselves, who could take pride in seeing their tradition among those represented at America's "national museum." Museum staff members found themselves "translating" Sikh self-representations for a wider audience and, like all translators, modifying the content in the process. Sikh meta-narratives of Sikh history became incorporated into the exhibition; but so did other aspects of Sikh "heritage," including everyday secular music and contemporary celebrations. For Sikh-Americans participating in the process, this led to a transformation or expansion of the range of objects thought to represent Sikh "heritage" – as it became clear that even family albums, mementos, and everyday household objects might be included.

The "Sikh Heritage Project" and the exhibition described here have attempted to seek and integrate community involvement in ways well beyond the norm in contemporary museum work; in fact, an active group of community members was involved even in the early decision of whether to focus our collective effort toward exhibition or toward other potential goals of the Project. And when one considers the wide range of curatorial tasks and responsibilities, including the didactic or educational functions of curatorial work, theme and object selection, and mode of interpretation, this project encompasses many examples of co-curatorship with a large community that arrived at and presented decisions in a process quite separate from a traditional museum-based development process.

This involvement of a large community has, somewhat inadvertently, helped to turn a Museum space into a public, multi-generational gathering space for a broad and diverse Sikh- or Punjabi-American community; a place of inspiring regular events and, in the post-September 11th period in the U.S., a place of national public recognition for Sikhs at a time of perceived threats and hardship resulting from public misunderstanding. Congressional statements issued on the occasion of the exhibition's opening by the Co-chairs of the India Caucus (U.S. Representative Joseph Crowley of New York & Representative Joe Wilson of South Carolina) congratulated "the Sikh Community and the Smithsonian Institution for coming together to establish a Sikh Gallery and a Sikh Heritage Project at the National Museum of Natural History" and commending all involved "for having made this honorable endeavor possible."²

2. The Sikh Heritage Fund

The Sikh Heritage Project was defined in its founding document as an integrated program of exhibitions, research, collection improvement, and public programs; thus any exhibition envisioned was only one component of the Project's potential scope. Stepping outside the process to observe it, one sees

that its frequent successful events, and its highly visible public activities, serve as a good example of how museums (like universities and other components of contemporary public culture) have taken on the role of producing events that are “rituals” in the anthropological sense, because such public rituals serve to assert the importance of the shared values of a community that gathers for these events. However, the goals of these events and of this exhibition included a strong component of educational outreach to the large non-Sikh population, who would come to understand Sikh identity better through a prominent and visually compelling, highly public exhibition on Sikh heritage.

Nevertheless, it was necessary when we began the Sikh Heritage Project in 2000 to have modest goals, and keep open the possibility of expansion later. Unique to this project, within the Asian Cultural History Program, was that the Smithsonian had virtually no Sikh collection, as we soon determined. Other heritage projects, by contrast, were generally built around restoring, researching, and publishing the Smithsonian’s own historic collections (e.g. Heritage of Thailand and Korean Heritage projects, both leading to major recent publications and to exhibitions of historically important Smithsonian collections, see McQuail 1997, Houchins 2004).

A single vitrine (glass display case) in the Hall of Asian Peoples became available in mid-2000 when it was determined that the objects in a vitrine about Tibetan culture were too fragile and light-sensitive to continue to be displayed. In October 2000, we organized a first, informal Sikh Heritage Advisory Group meeting of Smithsonian staff, Sikh scholars, and Sikh Heritage Fund donors and supporters. The group of about 50 people walked together to view the empty display case, then covered with brown paper, whose glass front measured 71 inches high and 77 inches wide, which would be seen by many millions of visitors each year.

It was very revealing to listen to ideas proffered at this Advisory Group meeting about how “Sikh heritage” might be represented to both a Sikh and non-Sikh audience, in a space of that size – a task made more difficult by the fact that we would still need to locate collections. It is interesting that a consensus emerged that the most important “heritage” objects must be obtained from the Punjab. Particular emphasis was placed on objects associated with the Sikh Gurus, which might be available for loan through the help of appropriate government officials. There was, at this stage, little interest in exhibiting everyday objects or even contemporary artworks by Sikh artists – none of which seemed to have the high iconic value of objects associated with the Gurus that might be borrowed. In fact, a trip to the Punjab was soon organized for the purpose of surveying collections that might be available for loan, and in December 2000 I traveled to New Delhi and Chandigarh with a delegation of supporters and donors to the Sikh Heritage Fund, who by then had separately organized their own Foundation and made arrangements for our reception in India.³ After my return, I submitted to the government of Punjab a list of proposed objects for loan, to use in the proposed vitrine.

A portion of the Punjab government loan was approved in late 2001, but for only two years and with many stipulations on the loan. Almost all the objects approved for loan were in fact weapons, from the Arms and Armour Gallery at Qila Mubarak, Patiala. The preponderance of metal objects among the items approved, rather than fragile manuscripts, textiles, or paintings, may largely reflect the sturdiness or durability of the medium, since these might well be considered more able to travel. However, this also undoubtedly reflected an “indigenous” concept of iconicity and value as well as curation, since historic weapons are often treasured Sikh artifacts. Working with what was available and approved for loan (that is, entirely weapons), our Smithsonian team proceeded to develop a theme for the vitrine, softened a bit in tone by some photographs including a color photograph of a gouache on paper painting of the Ten Gurus in the Kapany Collection of Sikh Art.⁴ The goal of the vitrine was to introduce Sikhs and Sikhism to the museum’s visitors, and also to recognize the importance of heritage preservation by highlighting on-going preservation work at Qila Mubarak, which in turn provided another connection to the weapons seen on display. The main title proposed was: “Armed With Tradition: The Heritage of the Sikhs” (see 2002 design, Figure 1).

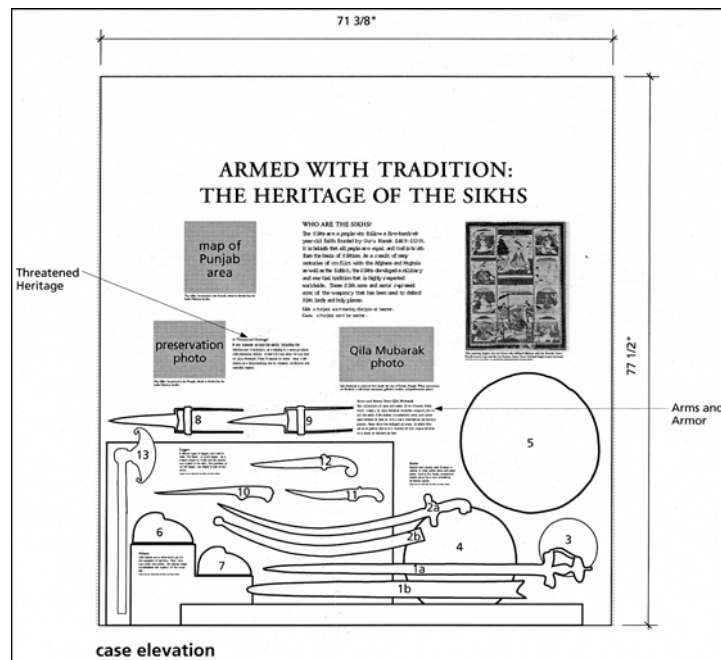


Figure 1. Design (2002) for the originally proposed “Sikh Heritage” Vitrine exhibition, with arms and armor from Qila Mubarak approved for loan by the Punjab Government. (Vitrine never constructed.)

Though this “Idea Statement” and overall vitrine plan and design were approved within the Museum, several events in 2002 led us to conclude that this plan should be completely changed. Not least of these was the concern expressed by Sikh community members actively involved in the overall Sikh Heritage Project (and shared by some museum staff), about the fact that in the difficult post-September 11th environment, the actual objects used to represent Sikh heritage (approved for loan in August 2001) were almost entirely weapons. No matter how this might be softened with explanatory text, and photographs of images of the Gurus and of courtly scenes in the Punjab, this still potentially could leave an unfamiliar audience with an overall impression associating Sikhs with religiously motivated violence (weapons). No amount of label text could undo this impact among those who might only remember the impressive weapons but would not even read the text. Obviously Sikh heritage included a martial tradition, but there needed to be more context, necessitating access to additional objects for display. In addition, though the loan had been approved for two years, there were a large number of conditions within the approved loan agreement that still needed negotiation.

Aside from these issues concerning our first attempt to develop a Sikh exhibition, there were some very fortunate developments during 2001 and 2002, which made a much larger exhibition possible. First, enthusiasm for the Smithsonian’s Sikh Heritage project was growing rapidly within the American Sikh community, as measured by attendance at many Sikh Heritage events we organized, and by various offers to help develop the goals of the project. Another very fortunate development for this project, especially from around the time of the August 2001 first Sikh Heritage gala event in Washington, was the involvement of the preeminent American collector of Sikh art, Narinder Singh Kapany. In March 2002, Dr. Kapany, founder of the Sikh Foundation (Palo Alto, California) offered to lend his private collection for use in the Gallery, thus very substantially changing the possible size, scope, and impact of any proposed exhibition. The availability of this collection for loan made it possible for us to develop a new idea statement and proposal (for presentation to the Smithsonian committees overseeing exhibition approvals), for a much larger “Sikh Gallery” exhibition using images of objects that had now become available from the Kapany Collection. This draft proposal went through various modifications as it circulated among donors and community supporters.

The subsequent annual Sikh Heritage Lectures, and many other Sikh Heritage events, were hosted around the U.S. in 2002 through 2004. Such “heritage” events, however, did not just serve to build community support for an exhibition that was being decided and produced elsewhere. Quite the opposite, such events elicited innumerable suggestions and comments on successive drafts and design plans; helped locate additional objects or illustrative photographs for inclusion in the exhibition; and even led to tips on finding appropriate speakers and performers -- even detailed suggestions for food to serve at future Sikh Heritage receptions. The evolution and composition of these events (which will

be the subject of a separate publication) also had extensive community involvement.

3. Flagship of the Fleet

Within the Asian Cultural History Program, and specifically its “Heritage” projects, every exhibition is considered the “flagship of a fleet” of related activities. These include behind-the-scenes research and publication efforts, collection improvement, conservation or preservation of historic artworks or artifacts, and public programs such as lectures, films, and performances. All such efforts, in fact, are subsumed within the goals of the Sikh Heritage Project, according to its founding document.⁵

The resulting exhibition⁶ aimed to build synergies for these other areas into its design. The emphasis on conservation and preservation of endangered Sikh material heritage began from our first advisory group meetings, and our first Sikh Heritage Lectures. Extensive conservation or restoration work was carried out on several of the objects placed on exhibition. Furthermore, by designing a built-in rotation of objects through the use of “mini-gallery” spaces within the Gallery, we allow for future research and conservation/preservation projects to be depicted. Such efforts, when applied to objects that may be borrowed from East or West Pakistan (for example) should involve cooperation rather than competition with collecting institutions there.

Many Sikh artworks are inherently fragile or light-sensitive, and thus not able to withstand being exhibited for long periods of time. Thus regular rotations of objects must be planned within such exhibitions. Though time-consuming and costly to change objects regularly, this procedure can nevertheless very appropriately be tied to a “behind the scenes” research and preservation effort, in which the preservation and research are tied to thematically related components of the exhibition. This also can be related to events that reinforce community involvement in the project, since supporters who return will regularly find new components and materials on exhibit.

In short, the exhibition *Sikhs: Legacy of the Punjab* was designed to be a regularly changing, flagship public presence that will continue to inspire other related initiatives (research, lectures, preservation projects, and annual conferences) of the Sikh Heritage Fund. Since this long-term exhibition also includes a component for rotating artworks and artifacts on display, it follows that the very active involvement, or “co-curatorship” of this long-term project, will hopefully continue with the continuing participation of many people. One of the continuing challenges of the Sikh Heritage Project and its supporters will be finding ways to balance the various potential goals and projects within the scope of the Sikh Heritage Fund, including preservation of threatened heritage in the Punjab, recognition of Sikh American achievements, and support for contemporary artists and performers.

Amid this growing community involvement in the conceptualization and production of a major exhibition, however, we must look back and remember that in early 2000 this outcome would have seemed highly unlikely: the Museum had no Sikh collections, no such exhibition had even been proposed let alone approved within the normal Museum system, and no objects were available with which to construct such a proposal (even if funding had been available, which it was not at that time). Through active and growing community involvement over four years, and through access to essential collections of Sikh art and artifacts, the Sikh Heritage Project (which was never anyone's full-time job) acquired the shared purposefulness that brought people together to build a meaningful exhibition that became a source of pride to many Sikhs involved.

4. "Sikhs: Legacy of the Punjab"

The purpose of this overview is not to summarize the entire exhibition, but rather to simply outline the range of topics covered and provide some examples of community involvement in the process of this exhibition's creation.⁷ The exhibition and its opening events have also been described in numerous press accounts and other media coverage (see e.g. Hocking 2004, *India Journal* 2004, Shaw-Eagle 2004, Singh 2004, *Voices Across Boundaries* 2004).

An introductory area of the exhibition "**Sikhs: Legacy of the Punjab**" (Figure 2) is entitled "**The Sikhs: A People of the Punjab and Beyond**":

"The Sikhs, originally from the Punjab of northern India and present-day Pakistan, follow a 500-year-old religion called Sikhism. Ideals of equality, truthfulness, generosity, and compassion attracted many of the faith's early followers. From their homeland in the Punjab, the Sikhs fashioned a unique culture which they carried with them around the world."

The Punjab is introduced using a historic map depicting the region, overlain with the modern borders of India and Pakistan. Labels identify the etymology of the word **Punjab**. A photograph of a Punjabi landscape also helps establish a sense of place. The map is located below the display case containing a contemporary steel *Nishan*, popularly called the *khanda*, the prominent Sikh symbol. The prominent use of this symbol, and also the design and commissioning of a large model of the Darbar Sahib at Amritsar which has a place at the center of the exhibition, grew out of suggestions provided during community "progress reports" held in California, on the development of the exhibition.⁸



*Figure 2. Entrance to the exhibition “Sikhs: Legacy of the Punjab” (July 2004).
Photo: Michel D. Lee.*

Beyond this introductory area, the first major section (that is, a section designed to last through rotation cycles of individual artworks) introduces the visitor to some of the fundamental figures and ideas in Sikh cultural history, following a narrative that recounts the revelatory tradition beginning with Guru Nanak. This major section, entitled “**Age of the Sikh Gurus,**” includes a Tanjore-style portrait of Guru Nanak with Mardana and Bhai Bala, on loan from Anmol Singh Mahal and Surjit Kaur Mahal. The wood with its gesso surface to which gouache, decorative glass, and gold paint have been added probably dates from the early 1900s. It is sturdy enough to be in this non-rotating component of the exhibition along with a photographic reproduction from an early 19th century Kapany Collection painting of the Ten Gurus. This use of a reproduction (rather than the original) within the non-rotating portion of the exhibit makes possible the preservation of fragile works on paper that can be safely displayed for only a few months at a time. For the first six months of the exhibition (beginning July 2004), this original gouache on paper painting is actually also on display, along with four other wonderful paintings of Sikh Gurus from the Kapany Collection, in a separate section set aside for original paintings. These will of course need to be rotated approximately every six months due to their inherent fragility. After the original has been returned to storage for its preservation, the reproduction

will continue to be seen in the section about the “Age of the Sikh Gurus.” The exhibition’s discussion of the life of Guru Nanak is built around an original janamsakhi from the Kapany Collection. In addition, a photograph depicts another illustrated janamsakhi that is in need of restoration. This provides the opportunity to describe, in the exhibition itself, some of the “behind the scenes” work of the Sikh Heritage Project to restore endangered material heritage.

The discussion of Guru Gobind Singh’s life is built up around two very colorful oil-on-canvas portraits in the exhibit by Gursewak Singh (1951–), showing the Guru giving and receiving amrit – paintings that were suggested by donors and supporters who viewed the design and felt they were missing. After discussing the origins of the Khalsa through the story of Guru Gobind Singh, the exhibit further examines the meaning and practices of the Khalsa. This also leads to the depiction of the “Five Ks” in this section.

The section describing the transfer of spiritual authority from the last human Guru to the Guru Granth Sahib was also a topic of very considerable discussion and debate, because it did require some kind of depiction of the Guru Granth Sahib. One suggestion was to display the version which includes a transcription and English translation in other columns⁹; however some do consider this version also to be sacred and it is sometimes used in ceremonies (Mann 2001: 136). In the end, a prop was used, completely covered with *rumala*, and with cushions, *chouri*, tables, under a canopy, with the exhibition text under the title “Sacred Book Becomes the Last Guru.” (Figure 3) A disclaimer reads “Sikh tradition requires covering the head and removing shoes when in the company of the holy book. Because it is not possible to comply with these practices in a Museum environment, this display substitutes a prop for the holy book.”

The text accompanying a photo of the *Guru Granth Sahib* explains that Sikhs treat their holy book with the same signs of respect that were accorded their living Gurus. During services, it rests on a platform and is protected by a canopy. The *chouri* is waved over the book when it is opened or closed. Photographs show this, and also show sample pages of the sacred book (one in Gurmukhi script; another showing the three-column version of the same page, with Gurmukhi script, a Romanization of the Punjabi text, and the English translation).

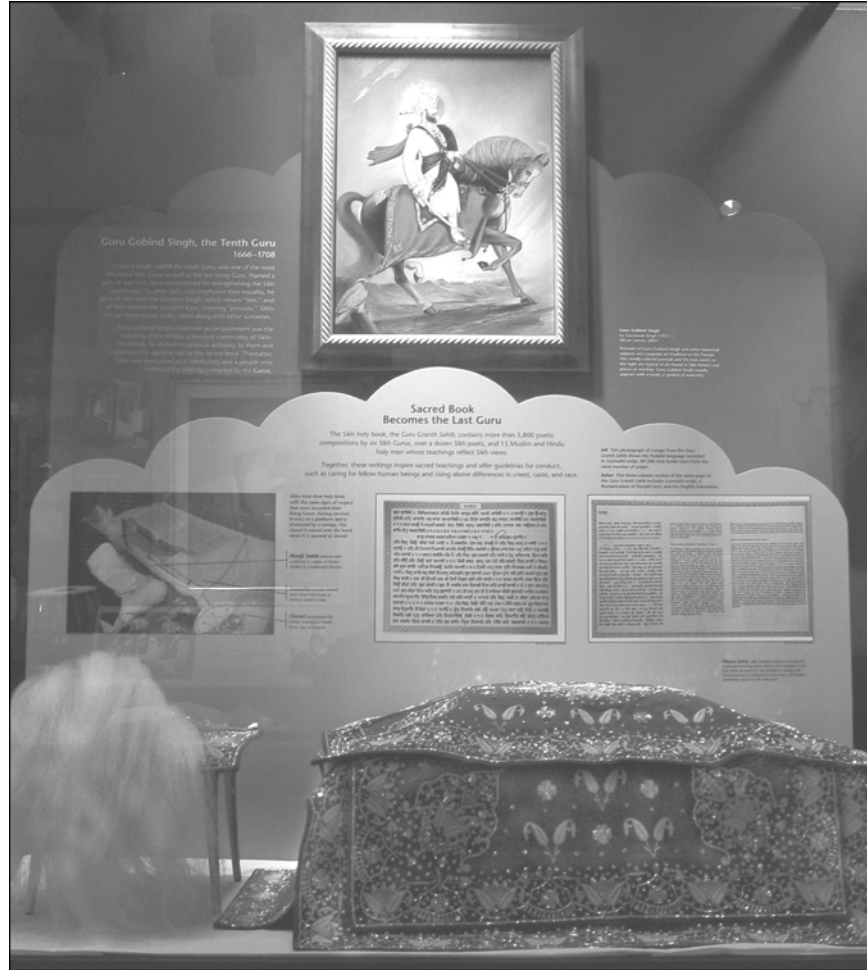


Figure 3. “Sacred Book Becomes the Last Guru.” The label explains that a prop is used, instead of the actual Guru Granth Sahib, for the exhibition.

Photo: Michel D. Lee.

The next major section of the exhibition is entitled “Sikh Heritage of the Punjab” and among this section’s striking objects are a suit of armor loaned by Satjiv Singh Chahil, Sikh coins and weapons from the collection of Gurbal Singh Bhuller, and a 1937 oil painting of Maharaja Ranjit Singh by Lachman Singh, loaned by Rita and Gurinder Singh Mann. (Though every object in it is different, the case containing the suit of armor bears the title “Armed With Tradition,” not entirely lost from the first vitrine planned.) Among objects from the Kapany Collection are a fine set of ivory miniature portraits of the family

and court of Ranjit Singh; the 1863 portrait of Rani Jindan by George Richmond along with Rani Jindan's necklace of diamonds, pearls, rubies, and emeralds; a ceremonial shield depicting early 19th century Sikh leaders including Maharaja Ranjit Singh; and a copper with gilt ceremonial Sikh helmet. Overall the text includes a historic overview of the Sikh kingdoms after Guru Gobind Singh's death, and also discusses colonial encounters, partition, and more recent history of the Punjab, illustrated by photos of the line of the Maharajas of Patiala ("300 Years of Patiala Maharajas"), up to current descendents in the modern Indian nation. As it happened, Manmohan Singh also became India's Prime Minister in time to provide a fitting final photograph within this historical section, before the exhibition opened.

The center of the exhibition, as mentioned above, is dedicated to the scale model of the Darbar Sahib with explanatory photographs and narratives around it. The final two sections of the exhibition (other than the smaller galleries for rotating artworks) are entitled "How Do Sikhs Practice Their Faith?" and "How Do Sikhs Celebrate?"

The section dedicated to "How Do Sikhs Practice Their Faith" includes a silver *palki* containing a miniature Guru Granth Sahib (removed from the *palki* in this exhibit), and also an oil painting of Guru Nanak by Sobha Singh (1901–1986), both from the Kapany Collection. A photograph from the popular movie *Bend It Like Beckham* shows a similar Guru Nanak portrait in the background. There are also examples of the *Tabla* and the harmonium with photographs showing how they are used in sacred services, and a book of holy songs, the Amrit Kirtan. Visitors can push a button on the exhibit case that activates a recording of Sikh sacred music; photographs show a range of Gurdwara activities.

In this section, also, is placed a discussion with many examples of the Sikh turban, including photographs showing the *patka* of a young boy and also showing the *keski* worn by some Sikh women. A panel is dedicated to explaining the Sikh turban, posing the most commonly asked questions and providing descriptive answers:

What are turbans made of?

Most are colored muslin. About 6 m (19.5 ft) long, the cloth weighs only a few ounces.

How is the turban tied?

Adults usually wrap the length around the head six times in a clockwise motion and tuck in the ends.

Why are there different colors?

Many adult Sikhs choose black, maroon, or blue, while Sikh youths may wear bright colors and prints. Some colors and designs are part of Sikh military uniforms.

Do Sikhs sleep in turbans?

No. Sikhs remove the turban but keep a small cloth called a patka over the hair at night.

Do Sikhs wear turbans to play sports?

Sometimes, but many Sikhs prefer a small square of muslin, or patka, when they play sports or swim.

The case includes examples of an everyday turban, a rural Punjabi turban, a royal turban, and a military-style turban. In general, the emphasis given to this topic reflects less on Sikh community involvement in self-expression, and more of a proactive attempt to respond to some of the most frequently asked questions by a non-Sikh audience.

Photographs, of a Sikh Sunday school classroom, and of Sikh teachers and students, were all done by Smithsonian photographer Chip Clark during a visit by our exhibit team to the Guru Nanak Foundation of North America in Silver Spring, Maryland. This section also includes a large oil painting, “Endless Journeys” by Arpana Caur (Oil on canvas, 2002; loaned by the Kapany Collection). Arpana Caur practices her faith and expresses her devotion to Sikhism through her art. She has explained that in this work, she depicts Guru Nanak inside a large footprint because she feels Guru Nanak “spread his message of love and peace wherever his feet would take him.”

The final major (non-rotating) section is “How Do Sikhs Celebrate?” This includes photographs of a range of Sikh holidays, and objects relating to the Sikh wedding, described in the exhibition text. This wedding component was the subject of considerable community input, as Sikhs (especially those in the Washington area) brought jewelry or wedding garments to properly “dress” a bride and groom manikin; or helped purchase additional materials needed. This area also includes a case for the *phulkari* textiles, which will be rotated every six months due to their fragility. Here also there are a wide range of musical instruments; and again, the viewer can push a button to hear a selection of secular Punjabi music.

In addition to the sections mentioned above, there are areas for artworks that will need to be rotated due to their fragility, or to provide opportunities for the exploration of other themes. At the opening (July 2004), these areas were dedicated to contemporary Sikh art, specifically including paintings by Arpana Caur (including “1984” loaned by the Kapany Collection), and by Amrit and Rabindra Kaur Singh (the “Singh Twins”). The latter paintings fuse an Indian miniature style with today’s subject-matter. All are loaned by the Collection of The Singh Twins. Displayed at the opening of the exhibition were: “All That I Am” (a portrait and narrative of the Twins’ father), “Nyrmla’s Wedding II” (on their sisters’ wedding), and “1984 (The Storming of the “Golden Temple”).”

The presence of two contemporary Sikh artworks with the title “1984” required explanation of the date’s significance. Here there was especially heated disagreement in how this subject-matter should be handled within the exhibition. Originally we had intended to include, among the photo panels surrounding the central scale model of the Darbar Sahib, a narrative with photos of the 1984 Operation Bluestar attack. This elicited strong negative reaction among those who felt that the central model should be uplifting and focused on the religious

experience of the place. In the end, everyone accepted that a simple label should be placed near each of the “1984” contemporary paintings in the gallery of rotating artworks, for which I proposed the following text (as corrected by numerous suggestions from among those to whom it was circulated):

Sikhs and 1984

Works by contemporary Sikh artists outside the Punjab often commemorate the Amritsar tragedy of June, 1984 and its aftermath. In "Operation Bluestar," Indian troops attempted to displace a group of Sikh nationalists, who were inside the sacred Darbar Sahib (Golden Temple) complex. The attack left many dead and damaged sacred Sikh buildings. These events and the October 31, 1984 assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards triggered civil unrest that resulted in the arrests and deaths of many Sikhs.

These contemporary oil paintings by the Singh Twins and Arpana Caur have been among the most popular artworks for Sikh and non-Sikh viewers of the exhibition. The rotating artwork areas in which they are displayed will hopefully, in the future, allow for the exploration of many other themes within the broad scope of Sikh heritage. These areas might also be used to present examples or illustrations of “behind the scenes” work carried out elsewhere, including the kind of preservation of material heritage that has been a theme of the Sikh Heritage Project since its inception. In any case, the future of this Project will probably continue to be dependent upon the efforts and inspiration of a large and growing community of co-curators that have carried it this far.

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Voices Across Boundaries

2004 Photoessay of an exhibition: Sikhs: A Punjab Legacy. *Voices Across Boundaries* (Fall 2004), pp. 53-56.

¹ I have elsewhere used this triad to consider the changing ways in which Indonesian material culture has been represented in museums and their predecessors, from the Renaissance to contemporary museums in the Republic of Indonesia; see Taylor (1993, 1995, 2001, 2002).

² See News Release by Rep. Joseph Crowley (dated July 25, 2004), "Congressman Joseph Crowley Commends Opening of First Ever Sikh Gallery at Smithsonian Institution," retrievable at:

<http://crowley.house.gov/news/record.asp?id=530>; and Statement for Immediate Release by Rep. Joe Wilson (dated July 24, 2004), "Wilson Applauds Opening of Sikh Exhibit at Smithsonian," distributed.

³ The "Sikh Heritage Foundation," incorporated in Weirton, West Virginia, is a great supporter of the Smithsonian's Sikh Heritage Fund but is independent and has no Smithsonian affiliation or management.

⁴ It would have been impossible to include the original painting because, unlike the metal weapons, that would have needed to be rotated due to light sensitivity. The painting later was included at the opening of the 2004 exhibition "Sikhs: Legacy of the Punjab."

⁵ The Fund's goals, as listed in the founding document, are "to support acquisition, conservation/restoration, and exhibition of Sikh collections, to support research on the heritage of the Sikhs, and to support other Sikh cultural activities at the Smithsonian Institution."

⁶ Among the many Smithsonian staff who helped put together the exhibition; special thanks go to the creative talents of scriptwriter Sarah Grusin, and designer Tom Thill. The Family Guide for the exhibition is primarily the work of Junko Chinen. Within the Asian Cultural History Program, Michel Lee served as the project coordinator and Kyle Lemargie helped throughout as program manager. Hanna Szczepanowska oversaw all conservation and preservation work on the objects. Prof. Gurinder Singh Mann of the University of California, Santa Barbara generously agreed to become the "external content-specialist" member of the Smithsonian exhibition approval team.

⁷ This summary does not include any discussion of a proposed (but not yet approved) exhibit video, contracted by the Exhibits Department administration to an outside production firm unfamiliar with the subject matter. The results of that experiment, which bears little relation to the mode in which the exhibition itself was done, are not yet known.

⁸ Both are among the contemporary exhibitory objects commissioned and donated by the Malik family.

⁹ *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*. Translation and transliteration [1986-1990] by Sardar Pritam Singh Chahil, New Delhi: Sardar Pritam Singh Chahil, n.d.