

I see no Stranger – Early Sikh Art and Devotion

A selection by Inni Kaur

Sikhism is a way of life, a journey that begins without but takes you within. It is an endeavour to connect with the Formless, the Enduring, the Divine, through the Guru's grace. The journey is the destination. Even though there is no religious art in Sikhism, no visual that reflects its ideology, there is however, art inspired by Sikhism. The exhibition comprises a series of such art, which is motivated by Sikh saakhis, devotion and a way of life. The artists may or may not have been Sikhs, may not have understood Sikhi in its most basic mode, nevertheless they

strove to capture the mysticism of an intensely spiritual faith on their fragile canvasses. I am grateful for their efforts for they take me back to my childhood, to my grandfather's saakhi-telling sessions, to lessons first learnt and subsequently re-learned, a reminder of the ideology the saakhis portray – for me these paintings and sketches carry the fragrance of Guru Nanak's message and their simplicity is their ever-lasting beauty. Let me share with readers some of the art as I perceive it...

The exhibition is divided into five sections:

Searching for Answers - Saach Di Khoj

This section of the exhibition brings together paintings and drawings that depict episodes in the life of Guru Nanak. They are drawn from a genre of literature known as Janamsakhis, literally "eye-witness stories of a lifetime."

All Is One - Ik Onkar

The works of art in this section of the exhibition reflect the imprint of Sikhism on a broad range of religious art, as artists and patrons seek to find images to embrace its truths, and integrate them into their known world.

A Light Moving across Time - Ik Jyot

The growth of early Sikhism is shown in these paintings of the Gurus – who were one, and yet had eventful individual stories.

Meditations on the True Name - Naam Jaap

A canopy and the implements surrounding the display of the Guru Granth Sahib (chauri, morchaal, rumal, etc.) are installed in the gallery.

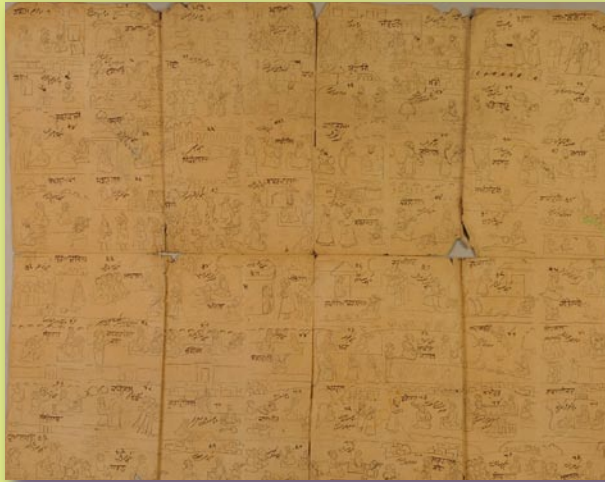
Faith in Labour - Kirt Karo

Works in this section reflect the skills of Sikh craftsmen and craftswomen.

Guru Nanak dressed in an Inscribed Robe 2.4

There is a gentleness in the painting. It says to me, 'Koyee bole raam raam, koyee khudaye, koyee sayvai gusiyaa, koyee allaahe.' I love the way Guru Nanak's head is tilted and his expression one of 'pure compassion.' The front of his robe has verses of the Quran, the sleeves and part of the hem have his wonderful composition, the Jap ji. I feel the artist's love for the message of Guru Nanak and he has done his best to incorporate it in his way of thinking.





Janamsakhi template 1.26

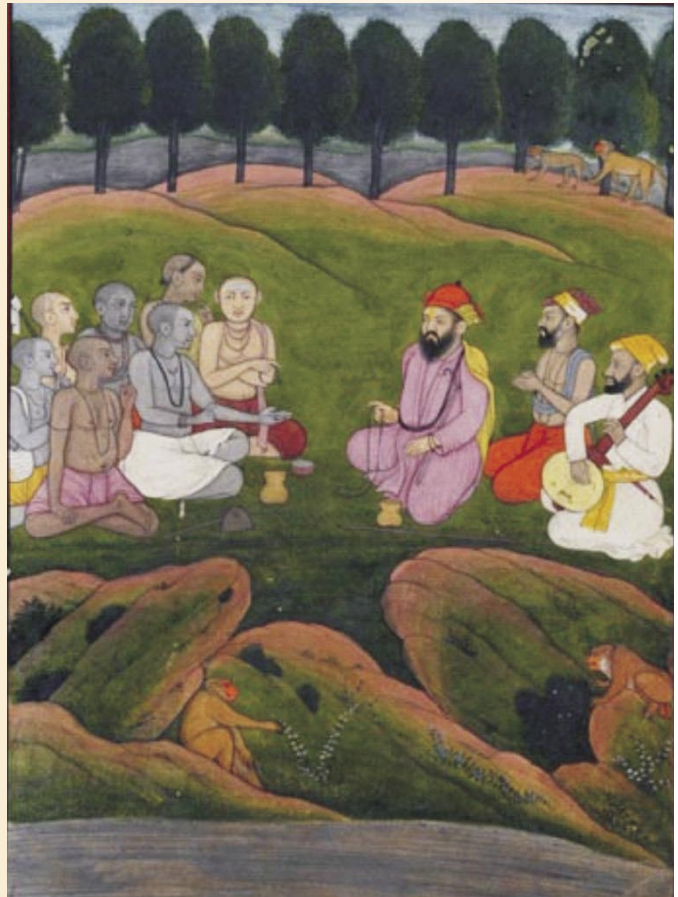
The first section comprises artistic portrayals of the Janamsakhis. These Janamsakhis are not just stories but memories of Guru Nanak which have been orally passed down through the ages. The Pahari painters created a template of these stories and when a patron requested a set or a few paintings they referred to their template and painted them. Thus there is a set pattern to these paintings. The historicity of these accounts is debated, but their power in the popular imagination is enormous. These paintings, while being magnificent pieces of art also have great value as they interpret a doctrine. I don't revere these paintings, but they hold a very special place in my heart because they raise my birthi (consciousness) and I get tuned into the message that they portray.



Guru Nanak with a Group of Sadhus I.1

Here is Guru Nanak sitting on a river bank in a purple robe with Mardana. My thoughts tune in and I wonder what he is discussing with these sadhus. Is he telling them that "Yoga is neither in the patched coat, nor in the yogi's staff, nor in smearing oneself with ashes, nor in wearing the earrings, nor close-cropping the head, nor in blowing the horn; only if one remains detached in the midst of attachments, one attains to the true state of yoga. One becomes not a yogi by mere talk. If one looks upon all creation alike, he is acclaimed as a true yogi." Page 733 GGS.

I love the way the monkeys are sitting so still in the foreground. To me the artist is trying to convey the sacredness of this meeting; everything around Guru Nanak is still while he speaks.



Guru Nanak addresses yogis at Achal Batala I.26



Guru Nanak is shown here in conversation with yogis devoted to Shiva and of the kanphata (split-ear) sect at a festival held in honour of Shiva. I would love to have been there to hear the conversation; once again, my senses blend into the painting and Guru ji's words flow in my head:

"One bathes oneself at the pilgrim-stations and worships stocks and stones, but being imbued not with Naam, one remains impure." Page 904 GGS

I think this is the place where the beautiful in-depth dialogue titled Sidh Gosht took place. I can only imagine how charged the atmosphere must have been. Sidh Charpat asks:

"How does one cross over this treacherous and impassable ocean of life?"

Charpat Sidha says, "O Nanak, think over and give the true answer".

And the answer: *"Like a lotus flower floats above water and a duck swims through water without getting wet, you can cross this world ocean by riding your consciousness on the Word of God and connecting to Naam, the Divine Consciousness."*

Is there anything more beautiful than this? How can I help not falling in love with this art? When I look at it, I am transported into a world of wonder and bliss.

Guru Nanak at the carpenter Lalo's home I.3

We all know and love the saakhi of how Guru Nanak refused to go to eat at the feast thrown by Malik Bhago and preferred the simple food served by Lalo; for the food at Lalo's home was earned through honest means – it was *kirat kamayee*. Guru Nanak was always with the people. He broke down all caste barriers by this simple action.

I ask myself, if I was presented with the same choice what I would do? Truthful living is highlighted in this painting. Lalo continues to work while he listens to the Guru's shabad. Lalo's expression is one of complete submission, I wonder if it is because, "The serenity is intoxicating, I am in bliss, My search is over, I am a Sikh."



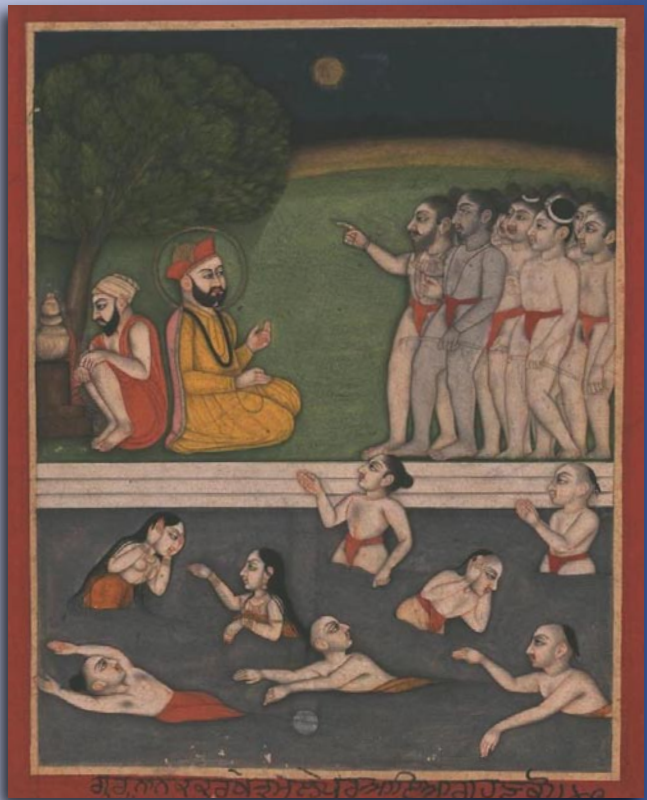
Guru Nanak and the priests of Kurukshetra I.4

In this painting Guru Nanak is shown at the fair in Kurukshetra. As the saakhi goes Guru Nanak decided to challenge the extreme orthodox views that had turned vegetarianism into a rigid fetish, by cooking the meat of a deer gifted to him by a devotee on their most auspicious day. I can only imagine the distress that must have caused the Brahmin priests - they must have been beside themselves.

To top it off Guru Nanak says:

“Men know not wisdom and quarrel over what is flesh and non-flesh and which food is sinful and which not. Conceived in flesh and born of flesh, we are the vessels of flesh. But the Pandits who know not wisdom call themselves clever and wise!” Page 1290 GGS.

There is great drama and activity around Guru Nanak but he remains calm. In the painting he is physically separated from the confrontational yogis by a patch of green and the pilgrims bathing have been painted at a distance from him too. I feel this calm.



The Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, Gift of the Kapany Collection



Guru Nanak sleeping with his feet toward the Ka'aba at Mecca I.6

This painting portrays what is probably the most recited and loved saakhi. Guru Nanak tired from his travels falls asleep with his feet inadvertently pointing towards the Ka'aba. The Arab priest kicks him and demands to know why his feet are pointing towards God. To this, Guru Nanak replies, “Turn my feet in a direction in which God is not.” The priest seizes Guru Nanak's feet and turns them in the opposite direction. As the saakhi goes, the entire Mecca turned to follow the direction in which Guru Nanak's feet were turned. The message : there is no place, nook or cranny in which God does not reside.

I know that here the image of Guru Nanak is like a Muslim traveler but the message that the painting depicts comes out loud and clear.



Possibly Guru Nanak approached by a princely figure 3.6

It is still being debated whether or not the figure in this painting is that of Guru Nanak.

But for me that is not important. What I focus on is the wealth of the princely figure, his elaborate style of dress and his servant behind him and then my eyes rest on a simply clad saintly figure barefoot. The contrast is so vivid and a Shabad comes to mind: "Who is rich, who is poor? Rich is he in whose heart resides Naam." Wealth is bowing to Naam and it has always been that way and I pray that it will continue to be that.

My mind travels to a child laying in a manger and the three wise men bowing to him. This is what this painting says to me – bow your head at the feet of the true, for it is they who possess actual wealth. I am not distressed at the way Guru Nanak (?) is depicted; the message that this painting conveys is so powerful.



Wonderful Phulkaris 5.19

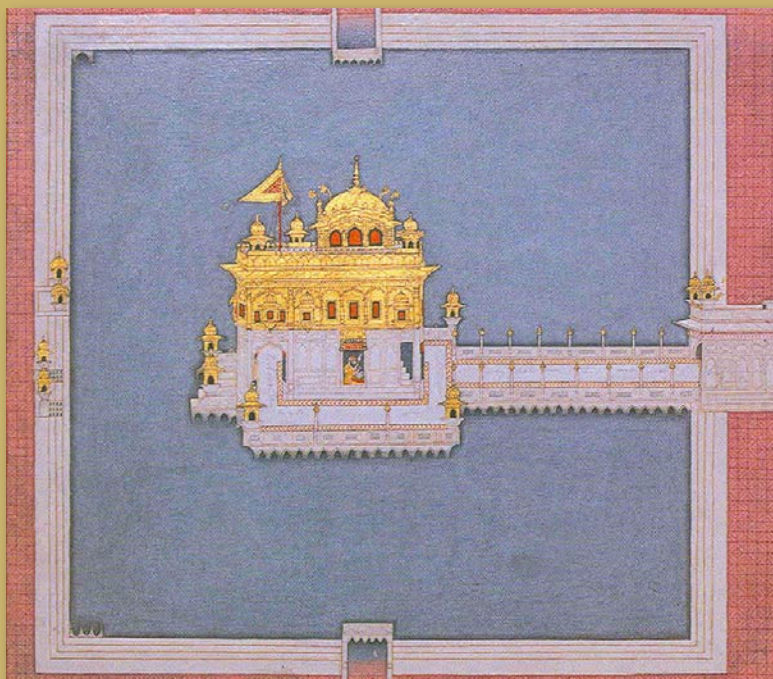
My mother has a very large framed phulkari in her living room. She is quite sentimental about it. It was her grandmother's and was left to her. Every stitch on this fabric was done reciting the Sukhmani Sahib. My mother claims this phulkari is, "Sadhie ghar di barkat." The phulkari I inherited was embroidered by my grandmother's sister. My grand-aunt was widowed at a very early age and did not have any children. I too treasure my phulkari for my grand-aunt was a woman of prayer. At times, I wonder, will my daughters be attached to these phulkaris the way I am? I

know we are living in a mechanical era; things are happening at a speed of light but once in a while I feel we need to slow down and look around to see what we are losing. The other day, I was listening to some Punjabi folk songs and one particular line touched my heart, 'Mera naa dha phul na painie tu apni phulkari tey.' I was transported into a world where young hearts connected via the phulkari. I look at them and I am reminded of what we lost in 1947.

We lost our land, our roots and we also lost a way of life.



Harmandir Sahib, the Golden Temple at Amritsar 2.1β



On any given day the parkarma of Sri Harmandir Sahib is thronged with devotees, walking towards the Darshani Daudi, to take ishnaan, doing seva, sitting, meditating. The snug interiors of the structure are filled with devotees and from it the sweet strains of kirtan flow incessantly. In spite of all the constant activity, one is enveloped in a sustained sense of calm and the spirit is at once still when one enters the hallowed premises.

I am revisited by this tranquility when I see this painting. To me the structure amidst the still blue seems like a glittering, precious jewel and I long to mount it in my heart and soul. The artist has captured the Golden Temple in all its magnificence. He seems to have compressed every grand detail into its neat compact borders.

The Manji Sahib

The exhibition also has a Manji Sahib to create awareness of the devotional aspect of Sikhie. It sits majestically and fittingly so. As much as I love the paintings the object that holds my heart is the Manji Sahib – the Beed Sahib is not present, yet the presence of the Manji Sahib in the centre of the exhibition is breathtaking – the serenity it lends the surroundings and the reverence that it invokes in the people is humbling and awe-inspiring at the same time. The feeling that ‘Pohti Parmeshar ka sthan,’ is apparent; I am not surprised



that Holland Cotter of The New York Times wrote so beautifully about the Guru Granth Sahib after viewing the exhibition: “(The Guru Granth Sahib) became and remains an object of incalculable charisma, almost a sentient being, enthroned on cushions, swathed in rich fabrics, and handled with tender, punctilious deference. Reciting or singing from it is the defining act of the Sikh worship. So intense is its sanctity that, while a throne has been prepared for it in the show, the Guru Granth itself is physically absent.” ☪