

[Arts of the Sikh Kingdoms](#)

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HERITAGE

## Arts of the Sikh Kingdoms

San Francisco exhibition showcases Punjabi treasures

"Ranjit Singh's court," commented one 19th century traveler to India, "reduces European magnificence to a very low pitch." Among the masterpieces of Singh's court which overwhelmed his foreign guest was the Golden Throne. This three-foot high and wide throne is the centerpiece of the "Arts of the Sikh Kingdoms" traveling exhibition organized by UK's Victoria and Albert Museum and appearing at San Francisco's famed Asian Art Museum through January 9, 2000. The throne was made--by a Muslim goldsmith using Hindu designs--with highly embossed plates of gold imbedded with diamonds over a wood core. Of course, for someone who wore the Koh-i-nur ["Mountain of Light"] Diamond as an armband and owned the "Timur Ruby," a gold throne is only to be expected. Those jewels' present owner--the Queen of England--wouldn't part with them for the exhibition, but she did send along some marvelous photographs. Her ancestors acquired both as part of the "Lahore State Property" shipped to England after England's 1849 conquest of Punjab, home of the Sikh religion. The gems joined the vast superfluity of precious treasures looted from the Empire's possessions to reside in British museums or become part of the Crown Jewels. Ranjit Singh himself bought these gems--and quite a few others--at bargain prices from the hapless ex-ruler of Afghanistan, Shah Shuja, whom he rescued

from prison.

The exhibition coincides with the 300th anniversary of the founding of the Khalsa, the pivotal event in Sikh history, when Guru Gobind Singh, the last of the ten Sikh gurus, initiated five of his followers to create the "Khalsa," or "Order of the Pure." Following his decrees, men adopted the name Singh (lion) and women were called Kaur (princess), a tradition which, along with customs such as the wearing of turbans, continues to this day.

Narinder Singh Kapany of the Sikh Foundation, Palo Alto, California, first promoted the idea of such an exhibition, eventually winning the support of the Victoria and Albert Museum in whose possession lay many great works of art from the Sikh kingdoms. Known as the "father of fiber optics," the wealthy scientist has become one of Sikhism's major benefactors in America. Many others of the world's 16-million Sikhs cooperated in the exhibition's development, including the large communities in England, Canada (200,000 in Vancouver alone) and the US.

The 256-page exhibition book, *Arts of the Sikh Kingdom*, catalogs all of the major pieces and includes engaging commentary on the historical events and personages surrounding each. It opens with a useful chronology of Sikhism, from 1507 when founder Guru Nanak proclaimed, "There is no Hindu, there is no Muslim," through the completion of the Golden Temple at Amritsar in 1601, the formation of the Khalsa in 1699 in response to Islamic oppression, Ranjit Singh's occupation of Lahore in 1799 and the rise of Sikh

political power, the annexation of Punjab in 1849 by the British, right up to modern times.

The exhibition includes paintings, textiles, ceramics, metalwork, books, decorative arts and photography. Many of the best pieces come from the reign of Ranjit Singh. He was noted for the harmonious coexistence of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs in Punjab, reflected in the fact that he patronized artisans of all three communities equally to produce the various treasures of his kingdom. This peaceful alliance resulted in the melding of Hindu, Muslim and Sikh artistic traditions to create exquisite works of art.

This look at the past will help all who visit to better understand the Sikh present and future. The show opened in London to rave reviews. After San Francisco, it will travel to Delhi in March, 2000, then to Toronto in September and finally return as a permanent exhibit of the New Asian Art Museum slated to open in San Francisco's Civic Center in 2002

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