

# Sikh Arts Gallery opens new Vistas of Creativity in USA

## CONTRIBUTED

THE SIKH FOUNDATION, a non-profit organization dedicated to preserving and promoting Sikh heritage in the West, announced last April that it would organize a gala banquet and seminar on Sikh arts at the new Asian Art Museum in San Francisco. This function marked the opening of the first permanent Sikh Arts Exhibit in North America - the Satinder Kaur Kapany Gallery of Sikh Arts displaying over 100 authentic Sikh paintings and artifacts that have been gifted permanently to the Asian Art Museum from the internationally acclaimed Sikh Arts Collection owned by Dr. Narinder S. Kapany, Chairman and founder of the Sikh Foundation.

Besides undertaking programs to impart Sikh education to the new generations of the Sikhs far away from their land of origin, the Sikh Foundation feel concerned that Sikhism is little known or understood by the general non-Sikh public. To address these two areas, the Sikh Foundation, founded in 1967, pursues a number of projects that support these two objectives.

Since its inception the Sikh Foundation has undertaken many projects in accordance with its charter, as for example:

- Publication of a scholarly magazine "*Sikh Sansar*", and a newspaper "*Sikh Times*" to present the correct image of Sikhs.
- Propagating, in presentable packaging, a library set and books for children in English and holding retreats and conferences for the Sikh youth.
- Organizing and funding international lecture tours of eminent Sikh scholars.
- Sponsoring the first conference at University of California, Berkeley, and the second International conference on Sikh Studies with the Graduate Theological Union and the Smithsonian Institute Travel Fund.
- Initiating a Punjabi Language Program at the University of California, Berkeley. The local community is now supporting the program.
- Initiating a Punjabi Language Program at Stanford University sponsored by the Sikh Foundation.
- Contributing towards the Sikh Studies Program at Columbia University, New York.
- Financial assistance/scholarships to Sikh students pursuing Ph.D. studies.
- Contributing towards the Sikh Sunday School in San Jose.

As a result of these efforts, Punjabi has been recognized as a court language in the State of California.

## **Sikh Arts project of the Sikh Foundation**

The period of 1990's has been one of rapid growth in The Sikh Foundation activities in Sikh Arts, academia and publications. In 1992 the Sikh Foundation celebrated its 25th anniversary by organizing a conference and an exhibition on Sikh Arts entitled: "Splendors of Punjab: Sikh Arts & Literature" at the Asian Art Museum

in San Francisco. This conference was co-sponsored by the Department of South East Asian Studies, U.C. Berkeley. This event was the first of its kind in North America because it not only brought Sikh Arts to the attention of local Sikh community but also marked the beginning of the International touring exhibition.

### **Evolution of Sikh Arts!**

Until recently the Arts of the Sikhs has been confused with either Hindu and or Islamic Arts. It is only recently that arts of the Sikhs has emerged as an entity with unique characteristics of its own. Today the arts of the Sikhs have been widely acknowledged and several books have been devoted to its publication. These publications continuously bring to light the unique cultural, historical and religious features of the Sikhs in the last five centuries. This also brings into focus the unique aspects of the religion of the Sikhs.

The Sikh Foundation is one of the very few organizations that played a key role in the evolution of Sikh Arts. It all began with the International touring exhibition, The Arts of the Sikh Kingdoms in 1999.

The Arts of the Sikh Kingdoms began as a dream in 1992 when the Sikh Foundation organized its 25th anniversary with an exhibition and a conference, 'Splendors of the Punjab, Sikh Art and Literature', in collaboration with the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco and UC Berkeley. This small exhibition of works from local Sikh collectors was clearly 'the tip of the iceberg.' With the thought of an international Sikh arts exhibit, Dr. Narinder Singh Kapany, chairman of the Sikh Foundation, approached the Victorian & Albert (V & A) Museum in London, one of the largest museums in the world, to make the dream of an international exhibit of Sikh art a reality. He had the support of the Asian Art Museum and of Susan Stronge, a curator with the V&A who was also a presenter at the 1992 conference. Furthermore, The Asian Art Museum of San Francisco and the Royal Ontario Museum of Toronto consented to exhibit the Sikh collection. Within a few years, the communities and collectors in the UK, USA, Pakistan, and India had also risen to the occasion, and helped make a fabulous exhibition possible. Susan Stronge's dedicated curatorship has brought together breathtaking treasures from around the world. Over 500,000 people have seen this exhibition in London, San Francisco and Toronto. With this exhibition, promoting and preserving Sikh Arts became a very important project of the Sikh Foundation.

### **The Satinder Kaur Kapany Gallery of Sikh Arts:**

After the success of the "Arts of the Sikh Kingdoms" exhibition, Dr. Narinder S. Kapany opened dialogue with the Asian Art Museum to endow a permanent Sikh Arts Gallery within their proposed new building. After many months of discussions and negotiations he pledged \$500,000 to the Asian Art Museum. The Museum agreed to establish the Satinder Kaur Kapany Gallery in its new building in honor of Dr. Kapany's wife. Dr. Kapany, has also donated to the Museum nearly one hundred works of Sikh art, many from the 18-19th century court of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, 'the Lion of the Punjab'. **This will be first first time in the history of Sikh Diaspora that there will be a permanent place to house the heritage and culture of this fifth largest religion in the world.**

### **Future plans of The Sikh Foundation in the field of Sikh Arts:**

With this first permanent Sikh Arts Gallery now established, many other museums and art institutions in the western world have shown interest in hosting a permanent or long-term Sikh Arts Exhibits. Recently Dr. Kapany has finalized an agreement with the Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of Natural History in Washington D.C. Under this agreement, authentic Sikh arts objects that are different from the collection at the Asian Art Museum will be loaned to the Smithsonian for a period of five years.

The National Museum of Natural History is going to open a long-term exhibition entitled "Heritage of the Sikhs" about Sikh art and Sikh cultural heritage using the objects primarily borrowed from "Dr. Narinder and Mrs. Satinder Kapany Collection of Sikh Art". The Smithsonian acknowledges that it is an honor for them to exhibit part of this esteemed collection on a long-term loan status.

The Sikh Foundation aims to establish one or two more permanent Sikh Art Galleries in North America apart from the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco and Smithsonian. Efforts have begun to establish one such center in UK.

