



Royal Ontario Museum

ROM

NEWS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

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The Arts of the Sikh Kingdoms comes to the ROM

The rich artistic heritage of the Punjab fills Garfield Weston Exhibition Hall

May 27 to August 20, 2000

(Toronto, Ontario, March 3, 2000) – The landmark traveling exhibition, ***The Arts of the Sikh Kingdoms***, comes to Toronto's Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) from May 27 to August 20, 2000. Organized by the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in London, England, this magnificent exhibition is the most extensive exhibition on the art of the Sikh Kingdoms ever shown in North America, and one which enriches the ROM's extensive array of galleries and exhibits on world cultures. Rich colourful textiles, beautiful paintings, ornate weapons and the magnificent Golden Throne of Maharaja Ranjit Singh are among the 160 fine works on display reflecting the artistic flourishing and rich cultural history of the Sikhs.

The Arts of the Sikh Kingdoms was created to mark the 300th anniversary of a pivotal event in Sikh history, when Guru Gobind Singh instituted the Khalsa, or Fellowship of the Pure. The outward visual symbols established by the Khalsa have identified Sikhs around the world ever since. The exhibition is particularly significant in that it shows how the artistic traditions of the Punjab under Sikh rule are rooted in the interrelations of Sikh, Hindu and Islamic traditions.

"The ROM is delighted to partner with the V&A Museum for the second time to bring this exceptional exhibition to Toronto and Ontario," said Dr. Lindsay Sharp, President and CEO of the

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ROM. "After the extremely successful *A Grand Design: The Art of the Victoria and Albert Museum* (featured at the ROM in 1998), our visitors know that the V&A name guarantees the highest quality in the museum world, and this splendid exhibition is no exception."

The Arts of the Sikh Kingdoms is presented at the ROM with the support of The Sikh Foundation, as part of the ROM's South Asian initiative. The Sikh Foundation is a non-profit national organization dedicated to enhancing understanding of the Sikh Canadian community. Its objectives include promoting Sikh arts and cultural events, distributing scholarships and operating aid programs. The Sikh Foundation has been working closely with the ROM over the past year to bring the exhibition to Canada from the V&A in London, after it closed at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco in January, 2000. The Sikh Foundation has undertaken to assist the ROM in raising funds from the Indo-Canadian Community, the corporate world and governmental agencies. As part of these efforts, it is planning an awareness and acknowledgment dinner event prior to the exhibition's opening; details are yet to be confirmed.

Highlights of *The Arts of the Sikh Kingdoms*

The *Arts of the Sikh Kingdoms* presents a dazzling array of objects ranging from paintings and textiles to ceramic tiles, metalwork, books, decorative arts and photography, which all attest to the flourishing of the traditional arts during Sikh rule and thereafter. More than 160 rarely seen objects drawn from public and private collections in Pakistan, England, France and the United States will be on view in a 5,000 square foot display area in the ROM's Garfield Weston Exhibition Hall. A special selection of artifacts from private Canadian collections will augment the ROM's presentation of the core traveling collection.

"This exhibition was created to present the Sikhs' rich artistic heritage, history, and religion to both Sikh and non-Sikh audiences," said Seema Bharadia, the ROM's curator for the exhibition. "This diverse presentation of the artistic strengths of the Punjab region during Sikh rule gives visitors a unique opportunity to learn more about Sikh culture and history, from the establishment of the Sikh Kingdoms 300 years ago to the present."

The exhibition's **ten thematic sections** provide a historical overview of Sikh and Punjab history, starting from the origins of the Sikh religion through to the period of British colonial rule, and also highlight continuing Sikh traditions. Reflecting the cosmopolitan and egalitarian atmosphere of the Sikh court, the exhibition shows that the fine arts and architecture flourished in the Sikh courts, and that rich textiles of extremely high quality were produced.

A large number of objects in the exhibition reveal the outstanding cultural achievements of the early 19th century reign of **Maharaja Ranjit Singh**, the Lion of the Punjab, who, during his rule from 1801 to 1839, led the Sikh empire to its height. Some of the finest pieces from the court of Ranjit Singh are among the exhibition's highlights, including the Maharaja's famous octagonal **Golden Throne**, from the collection of the V&A. Hand-crafted by a Muslim artisan in pure gold, drawing on Hindu forms, the Golden Throne is an outstanding example of the opulent decorative arts produced for the beautiful Golden Temple and the tiled palaces and gardens of Lahore, which became the centre of cultural and artistic activity. Artists and painters enjoyed the patronage of the Maharaja and his circle, producing a great number of paintings also included in the exhibition, of Sikh Gurus, Maharaja Ranjit Singh, and leading personalities of the Sikh Court, as well as elaborate, colourful decorations for the palace walls, often for the benefit of foreign visitors.

The Sikh religion is explained through **paintings and the art of book illustrations**, notably the illustrations of the *Janam Sakhi* manuscript which recount the life story of Guru Nanak, the first Guru of the Sikhs. The Ten Gurus and other exalted courtiers and religious figures are the subjects of a number of other paintings, particularly the tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh.

The numerous ornately decorated **weapons and armour** in the exhibition convey a striking sense of the extravagance of the mid 19th century Sikh court. Among the military objects included are: an enameled gold medal set with emeralds and diamonds; a turban helmet; a sword hilt of jade inlaid with precious stones; a full set of armour; and intricately carved pistols and a matchlock musket, manufactured in accordance with the latest European technology, with inlaid leaping figures and cast animal head finials.

The woven **silks, carpets and printed cottons** of the Punjab are extraordinarily diverse in character. The colourful textiles in the exhibition range from the elaborate pictorial embroideries known as Chamba rumals made for the Hindu courts, to the highly refined carpets of Lahore. The renowned **Kashmir pashmina shawls** were the most important textiles produced during the Sikh period, greatly prized at court and by visitors. Several of these highly valued goat's wool shawls are also featured in the exhibition, as are a robe richly embroidered with gold thread and a remarkable man's garment of yellow silk and gold-wrapped thread.

Another portion of the exhibition demonstrates the impressions of Western visitors to the Sikh court, whose reactions to the luxury of the court survive in enthusiastic prose, on paper and on canvas. Among the collection are the first known photographs of Sikhs, taken in 1849 by John McCosh, a surgeon in the Bengal army stationed at Lahore. This European perspective is also evident in many paintings by other well known artists, and albumen prints which document important sites and prominent individuals. Notable among these are Emily Eden's renowned hand-tinted lithographs.

The History of the Sikh religion

Sikhism is a unique faith founded by Guru Nanak (1469-1539) who lived 500 years ago in what is now known as the Punjab region of Northern India. Breaking from the caste system of the Hindu faith, he taught his disciples that God is Truth and that all people are equal in the eyes of God. The faith he founded emphasized the values of democracy, tolerance, equality, courage and self-reliance.

Almost two hundred years later, in April 1699, Guru Gobind Singh (1675-1708), the last of the Ten Gurus, initiated five of his followers to create the sacred brotherhood called the Khalsa, completing the work of Guru Nanak. Declaring himself to be the last in the line of Gurus, he ordained the Sikh scriptures, called the *Guru Granth Sahib*, to be the everlasting Guru. To ensure equality for all individuals and eradicate caste, Guru Gobind Singh asked that all men adopt the surname Singh, and all women the surname Kaur. He also prescribed the incorporation of five outward symbols for

Museum. To this end, in July of 1999, the Museum received \$1 million from Canadian philanthropist Christopher Ondaatje, to develop the new Christopher Ondaatje South Asian Gallery, which will open in late 2000, and a further \$1 million from the community for the creation of an endowed Curatorship of South Asian Civilizations. As well, in the fall of 1999, the ROM opened the new Asian Sculpture Gallery, which currently features an exhibition entitled *South Asian and East Asian Religious Sculpture*.

The Arts of the Sikh Kingdoms was organized by the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

It is presented by the ROM with the support of The Sikh Foundation.

Other information

The Royal Ontario Museum is an agency of the Government of Ontario.

For more information visit the ROM's website at: www.rom.on.ca

Telephone (416) 586-8000 for 24-hour information in English and French.

Cette information est aussi disponible en français.