



The Arts of the Sikh Kingdoms, which opens next Saturday, wouldn't have happened were it not for a dedicated fundraising effort

BY RACHEL RAFELMAN

which examined the continent through the eyes of Canadian missionaries, prompted months of protests in the summer of 1990. Its curator, Jeanne Cannizzo, quit teaching an anthropology course at the University of Toronto when students badgered her with accusations of racism, and she eventually left town.

To some, the ROM problem was that it hadn't included in its planning the group it sought to portray.

But those days, it would seem, are past. One week from today, the ROM opens its massive creaking doors to unveil *The Arts of the Sikh Kingdoms*. The exhibit is without precedent at this historically Anglo institution.

First, had it not been for the dedicated lobbying and energetic fundraising of Toronto's Sikh community — combined with the ROM's clout with the museum of origin, the Victoria and Albert Museum — the show never would have made it here. Kudos go to the ROM's newfound openness to co-operating and collaborating with minority communities.

Second, *The Arts of the Sikh Kingdoms*, created to mark the 300th anniversary of Khalsa, an event of great significance in Sikh religious history, is the most extensive exhibit of the art of the Sikh Kingdoms ever mounted. It is an eye-popper.

But it might not have happened. The ROM demurred when it was first approached in late 1998 by the Sikh Foundation, a non-profit organization dedicated to enhancing understanding of the Sikh community in Canada. Even the bare-bones budget of \$650,000 was daunting to the museum.

"The ROM was going through a difficult transition at the time, and they didn't know us from Adam," recalls Suresh Bhalla, vice-president of the Sikh Foundation and the show's chief fundraiser.

With no commitment from the ROM, the Victoria & Albert sent the show to the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco. When the U.S. show ended, negotiations resumed with the ROM last November.

This time there was even more pressure; a decision was needed by mid-December or back it would go to England. "The ROM wanted a financial comfort level ... this was understandable," says Bhalla. "They had had some



Clockwise from bottom left: A musical instrument; a golden throne; Suresh Bhalla of the Sikh Foundation of Canada is seen in the ROM display of *The Arts of the Sikh Kingdoms*; and a pair of daggers.

The *Arts of the Sikh Kingdoms*, an exhibit of 160 artifacts, includes 47 superb pieces from Canadian collections.

"We were all pleased that what initially appeared to be a setback — some 20 objects were pulled out in the process of moving the show from San Francisco to Toronto — turned out to be so positive," says Lally Marwah, a private collector who worked with Royal Ontario Museum curator Seema Bharadia. "When designing the installation, I was very conscious of the cultural gaps that exist between Sikh viewers and others. We've really tried to bridge those gaps and provide a comprehensive definition of Sikh culture."

The Sikh religion was founded by Guru Nanak (1469-1539), who broke with the Hindu caste system and taught

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that there is only one God and that all are equal in his eyes. Nanak was the first of 10 gurus. The last was Guru Gobind Singh (1675-1708), who initiated his followers into a sacred brotherhood called the Khalsa (the 300th anniversary of which this show commemorates).

Gobind Singh asked all men to adopt the surname Singh, and all women to take the surname Kaur, in order to eradicate caste. He also established the symbols of the Khalsa: the steel bangle, uncut hair, turban and the kirpan (a small ceremonial sword).

At the core of the ROM exhibit are artifacts from the first half of the 19th century, a time of relative peace and a flowering of the arts throughout the Punjab. Ranjit Singh, the maharaja from 1801 to 1839, encouraged culture in the entire region. Several pieces from this

period are highlights of the exhibit. The famous octagonal Golden Throne, for example, designed by a Hindu and carved by a Muslim, is a tangible symbol of the religious tolerance and egalitarianism of this period.

The opulence of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's court is captured in one of a series of paintings never before seen in North America. Painted by Indian artist Iman Bakhsh Lahori in 1838, it captures the luxurious Sikh court, with its teeming fabrics and carpets, jewels, gardens and architecture.

One of Bharadia's favourite artifacts is a magnificent silver royal casket made in the image of the Golden Temple in Punjab. It has been on loan to the ROM from the Royal Collections in Windsor, Canada since 1939.

problems in similar situations in the past." At the 11th hour, a Sikh business- they'd have to come up with a large sum quickly. Gary Singh, who, along with Bhalla, is a director of the Sikh Foundation, was tapped to be chief fundraiser.

The base budget was \$650,000. "I said to my committee, if we stick with the original amount, we might as well

display our artifacts in the attic," says Singh. He jacked up the budget to nearly \$1-million to allow for promotion and advertising.

"Everyone said, 'We don't have the money.' I said, 'We'll find it.' They did.

"My angle was: This is a once in a lifetime opportunity for Sikhs to see their art and culture all in one place," he says. "It was an emotional appeal and it moved them to write out their cheques."

Using a "top-down" strategy (he figured 60%-70% should come from government and the corporate community) he first wrangled the public money: \$140,000 from federal Heritage Minister Sheila Copps; \$110,000 from Ontario Citizenship and Culture Minister Helel Jones.

"The money is symbolic," says Singh. "What is important is that we were able

to do this together ... as a diverse group of Canadians."

Cedara Software, Scotiabank, CYBC World Markets, Ernst & Young, Loewen Ondaatje McCutcheon and the Royal Bank.

To further sweeten the deal with the ROM, the Sikh Foundation promised to deliver between 20,000 and 50,000

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presold tickets, worth about \$200,000. "When we told them this, their jaws dropped," says Bhalla. "I don't think any other show has had a presale like this."

That's just one indication of the level of participation in the Sikh community. People are paying for buses to bring seniors and children to the show. Many have bought blocks of tickets to give away through Sikh temples. Dinners, presentations, concerts and talks have all been planned to coincide with the exhibit.

There are great hopes for this show on the part of both the ROM and the Sikh community. The ROM anticipates that roughly 15% of visitors to this show — many will not be regular museum goers — will return for other exhibits.

In addition, there is the boost to the ROM's street credibility as a rejigged institution dedicated to interacting with different communities — and a shot in the arm for its ongoing South Asian initiative (a new South Asian gallery opens in November). For Sikhs, the benefits are more emotional: It offers a chance to view many superb examples of their culture in one locale.

Public education is also important. "There is so much ignorance about Sikhs," says Bhalla. "Many people still think we're all cab drivers, or even terrorists. We hope this exhibition will dispell those old negative stereotypes. We have a rich history and culture. But we are also, really, just like a lot of other Canadians." □

The Arts of the Sikh Kingdoms runs May 27 to Aug. 20 at the Royal Ontario Museum, 100 Queen's Park Circle.

Monday to Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Saturday to 6 p.m. and Sunday 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.; \$10 adults, \$7 students and seniors, \$6 children 14 and under.

— Rachel Rafelman