

## **‘CENTRAL SIKH MUSEUM, AMRITSAR’- A TREASURE-HOUSE OF SIKH ART**

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### **Abstract**

*This research paper is a serious endeavour to unravel the artistic treasures in the permanent collection of Central Sikh Museum at Amritsar and it throws light on rare collection of historical as well as religious paintings, manuscripts and other artefacts and weaponry. The museum has a unique distinction of being the largest Sikh museum containing Sikh art and creations of some of the doyens of Sikh art and is famous all over the world. This is perhaps the first-ever of the researcher to deal with all aspects of art and aesthetics of Sikh art and systematically documents its precious collection.*

**Keywords:** *Sri Harimandir Sahib, Golden Temple, Sarai, Sikh Gurus, Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, Ghanta Ghar, Brahm Buta, Ghalugharas, Janam Sakhis, Udasis, Mool Mantra, parikarma, sangat, Khalsa Panth.*

Since its establishment in AD 1589, ‘**Sri Harimandir Sahib**’ popularly known as ‘The Golden Temple’ at Amritsar (**Plate No.1**), has been a living symbol of spiritual and historical traditions of the Sikhs. It is much more to the Sikhs than a mere place of worship. Sri Harimandir Sahib has a number of buildings of historical importance around it. ‘Guru Ram Das Langar Hall’, adjacent to the shrine, is a place where meals from the community kitchen are prepared by the devotees and served to the visitors. (**Plate No.2**) ‘Guru Ram Das Hospital’ helps the poor and the needy with free medical aid. ‘Guru Ram Das *Sarai*’ provides free lodging to the pilgrims. To meet the growing need to the devotees, ‘Guru Nanak Niwas’ and ‘The Akal Rest House’ have been built. Next to the *Sarai* is the office of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (S.G.P.C), a statutory body for the management of historic Sikh shrines. (**Plate No.3**) On the first floor of the main entrance, is the “**Central Sikh Museum**” it displays rare paintings of the Sikh heritage. (**Plate No.4**) It also has a rich collection of antiques, coins, rare documents, manuscripts, old arms and other relics.<sup>1</sup>

‘The Central Sikh Museum’ situated in the precincts of ‘**The Golden Temple**’ at Amritsar was established with a vision to collect, protect, propagate and restore the rich Sikh heritage and its glorious history. The magnificent paintings painted by stalwarts of Sikh Painting portray the philosophical, religious, historical and cultural ethos and the very essence of Sikhism through the universal idioms of valour, religious tolerance, oneness of God and a firm resolve to stand against the tyrants. (**Plate No.5**) These Sikh Paintings also depict scenes from the lives of Sikh Gurus, religious anecdotes and episodes of various Sikh wars and campaigns to establish the rule of truthful living and the ideals of universal brotherhood. (**Plate No.6**)

There are various museums in Punjab which have collected the paintings, sculptures and other artefacts related to Sikhism and Sikh history. Prominent among them Qila Mubarak, Patiala; Sheesh Mahal Art Gallery, Patiala; Central Sikh Museum, Golden Temple, Amritsar; Museum Sri Amritsar; Archaeological Museum, Hoshiarpur; Site Museum, Dholbaha; Archaeological Museum, Sanghol; Village Life and Cultural Museum, Ludhiana; Science City Kapurthala etc. are important museums. Apart from these, in Punjab, Sangrur, Faridkot, Sri Anandpur Sahib, Kapurthala houses small museums. Many Gurdwara Sahibs also have small museums and art galleries.

The largest and the most significant Sikh Museum pertaining to Sikh history was established by Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee, Amritsar in the periphery of Sri Darbar Sahib, Amritsar on the first floor of the *Ghanta Ghar* (Clock Tower) building with the name of “**Central Sikh Museum**”. The Central Sikh Museum was established in 1957 A.D. It was a general feeling among the Sikh masses that Sikhs create history but do not preserve it properly. So the aim was to protect the aspects and ideology of Sikh

religion. During the administration period of Master Tara Singh, it was demanded that the ever being created Sikh history should be archived and showcased properly in the 'Central Sikh Museum'. Master Tara Singh assigned this responsibility to Principal Satbir Singh who met S. Kirpal Singh in Karnal and asked him to create paintings on Sikh history registered in Sikh *Ardaas* portraying the life of Sikh martyrs. S. Kirpal Singh created beautiful paintings showing 'Shaheed Bhai Taru Singh ji', 'Shaheed Bhai Subeg ji', 'Shaheed Bhai Mani ji', 'Shaheed Baba Deep Singh' and *Ghalugharas* (holocausts). These paintings were very expressive and astonishing. Due to the dedicated efforts of the Sikh artists in bringing alive the scenes of such heart-rending tyranny perpetuated by the tyrant Mughals on the followers of Sikhism, Baba Jhanda Singh ji of *Kar Sewa* constructed the first floor on the belfry circuit. According to the decision, the building was used as a 'Museum'. S. Bhan Singh was appointed as the 'Curator' of the Museum and it was open for public on 5<sup>th</sup> July 1958 A.D. After S. Bhan Singh ji, S. Narinder Singh Nanda, Giani Harjeet Singh and S. Mohan Singh etc performed the role of curators. S. Iqbal Singh is the present main 'Curator'.<sup>2</sup>

The paintings in Central Sikh Museum, describing the Sikh history, were the hardwork of S. Sobha Singh, S. Kirpal Singh, S. G. Thakur Singh, Master Gurdit Singh, S. G. S. Sohan Singh, Shri Bodh Raj, S. Amar Singh, S. Mehar Singh, S. Devinder Singh, S. Amolak Singh, S. Bhupinder Singh, S. Satpal Singh Danish, S. Gurvinderpal Singh and S. Sukhwinder Singh. These paintings successfully brought the history to the *Sangat*.

The Central Sikh Museum that was earlier in a big hall was extended by constructing new halls upto *Brahm Buta* (eternal tree). This was done during the administration of Jathedar Gurcharan Singh Tohra for honouring the demand of the *Sangat*. Here the paintings are displayed in an orderly manner.

The Hall No.1 showcases the paintings of *Guru Sahiban* and their contemporaries along with the paintings of Ten Sikh Gurus and their families. **(Plate No.7)** Beautiful paintings of 'Bhagat Ravidas', 'Bhagat Namdev', 'Bhagat Sian' and 'Sheikh Farid' are displayed. Paintings of several other great personalities, martyrs from the period of the Gurus are also displayed with great care on the walls of this prestigious museum.

At 'Gurdwara Atal Rai Sahib', wall paintings or murals are found about Guru Nanak Dev ji's *Janam Sakhis*. Paintings of these murals are displayed in the small room attached to the Hall No.1. Apart from these paintings, the room also houses map of Guru Nanak Dev ji's 'Four *Udasis*' (spiritual travels), an old map of Guru Baba Atal Rai Sahib, map of Sri Darbar Sahib ji, Amritsar made by S. Mehtab Singh *Naqqash* that depicts names and signs of old *Bungas* (ancient victory towers). These are encased in glass frames and hung on the wall.

In Hall no.2, paintings displayed are of the famous Sikh General- 'Baba Banda

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Singh Bahadur', 'Bhai Baaz Singh', 'Shaheed Bhai Mani Singh', 'Shaheed Bhai Taru Singh', 'Shaheed Bhai Subeg' and 'Bhai Shahbaz Singh', 'Victory of Kasur', unimaginable tolerance and patience of Sikh women, 'Shaheed Baba Bota Singh', 'Baba Garja Singh', 'Military Cantonment of the Sikhs in 18<sup>th</sup> Century', 'Shaheed Jai Singh Khalkat', 'Shaheed Baba Natha Singh', 'Baba Deep Singh Shaheed', 'Chotta Ghalughara', 'Bada Ghalughara' and 'Portrait of Mata Bhag Kaur'. **(Plate No.8)**

In Hall no.3, portraits of Sikh *Sardars* (Sikh Commanders and Chieftains) are displayed that include paintings of 'S. Jassa Singh Ahluwalia', 'Sham Singh Attariwala', 'S. Hari Singh Nalwa,' 'Maharaja Ranjit Singh', 'Akali Phula Singh', 'Baba Bir Singh Norangabadi' and 'S. Thakur Singh Sindhawalia'. **(Plate No.9)**

In Hall no.4, paintings of 20<sup>th</sup> century Sikh martyrs are exhibited like 'Shaheed Jarnail Singh Khalsa Bindranwale', 'Shaheed Bhai Amrik Singh', 'Shaheed General Subeg Singh', 'Shaheed Singh Nachhtar Singh Bhalwan', 'Shaheed Sujaan Singh', 'Shaheed Kehar Singh', 'Shaheed Sukhdev Singh Sukha', 'Shaheed Darshan Singh Ferumaan' and 'Shaheed Kamaljit Singh'. The hall also shows the paintings of the main personalities that were part of the freedom struggle against the British. Portraits of all the famous *Raagi* (Balladeers) and *Granthi Sahiban* (Preachers) of Sikh *Panth* (rule) are also displayed.

The Hall no.5 displays the paintings of important personalities of Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee, Shiromani Akali Dal, famous Sikh Army officers, freedom fighters and Shaheeds of Sri Nanakana Sahib.<sup>3</sup>

Hall No.6 has paintings of 'Jathedar Sahiban', 'Head Granthi Sri Darbar Sahib', 'Manager Sri Darbar Singh', 'Secretary Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee', 'Sikh Artists', 'Architects' and the humble philanthropists.

Aside from the historical paintings, Central Sikh Museum also shows hand-written manuscripts for the *sangat* (public) to see. Hall No. 1 holds the 'Pothis Sahib' that contains the *Mool Mantra* written by the pious hands of Guru Harigobind- the Sixth Sikh Guru. The other significant hand-written manuscripts of 18<sup>th</sup> century including 'Gutka Sahib' in *Devnagri* script in 1864 A.D. 'Gurbani Gutka Sahib' written in Thai language, '*Naseehat-nama*' are displayed there. These hand-written manuscripts are kept in beautiful boxes in glass showcase for public viewing.

Central Sikh Museum is a home to many heritage symbols. Gracing the Hall no.1 is the dagger of Guru Harigobind- Sixth Sikh Guru. Tenth Sikh Guru- Guru Gobind Singh ji's comb, dagger, waistband and *gaatra* which was brought from Lahore and has been displayed here. Baba Deep Singh's *Toshakhana* brought from Sri Akal Takht is also displayed here. 'Sword of S. Mehtab Singh Mirakot' that punished Massa Rangad for disrespecting Sri Darbar Sahib and 'Sword of Maharaja Ranjit Singh' that conquered Kasur is also exhibited

here. *Karbeen* (Pistol) of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's Officer- 'General Ventura'. 'Bow and Arrow of Baba Ala Singh ji of Patiala' are also present here. Weapons of many more Sikh warriors and chiefs are also displayed here.

Hall No. 2 has displayed 18<sup>th</sup> century various kinds of weapons. In these weapons includes *Katar*, *Khukhari*, arrow, *Kirach*, *Khanjar* and *Sanjoya*. The weapons displayed here are also brought from Gurudwara Moti Bagh, Patiala.

Hall No. 3 has a 'Glass Vase' placed in a wooden box that was gifted by the England's Queen Elizabeth, II<sup>nd</sup> of England. Ancient copper and silver coins are arranged in a box. On one side of the coin is engraved "*Deg Teg Fateh Nustare bedh Rang Yafat Aj Nanak Guru Gobind Singh*" in Persian Language. These coins are called 'Nanakshahi' coins. These coins were minted in Sri Amritsar and issued by Sri Akal Takht.

Hall No.4 exhibits a box that holds bomb encasing and bullets from the Military attack on Sri Darbar Sahib, Amritsar in June 1984.<sup>4</sup>

Hall No.5 has Gurdwara Sri Dehra Sahib Lahore's Hazoori Ragi- 'Bhai Jawala Singh's' musical instruments that he used to play in *Kirtan*. This hall also showcases *saranda* of Baba Sham Singh and Bhai Sumand Singh's *veena* and table who had been performing *kirtan* for the last 70 years at Sri Darbar Sahib, Amritsar.

Hall No.6 also contains Cannon Balls of 18<sup>th</sup> century, 20<sup>th</sup> century cannons, tanks and empty casing of guns. It also has the casing of the tear gas bombs that were thrown by the police on 4<sup>th</sup> July 1955 at Sri Darbar Sahib's *parikarma* (periphery) are also preserved there.

The effect of June, 1984 Military attack and 1986 Black thunder was also visible on Central Sikh Museum, Amritsar. Many priceless artefacts and heritage paintings were riddled with bullets. Amongst many of them have been restored and re-displayed. However amongst the lost and destroyed articles in this bloody Military attack, the pearl necklace of Maharaja Dalip Singh which was donated to this museum by Fakir Azizuddin grandson from Lahore and a *Janam Sakhi* containing precious miniature paintings. The bust of bullets pierced and destroyed 50 paintings.

The first edition of the 'Album Central Sikh Museum' was published in 1991 A.D. by Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee, Amritsar. Its amended second edition was printed in 1996 A.D. By 2012, the Museum became well developed. Several new paintings have been put up on display and to include them the album is being published again.<sup>5</sup> The museum is visited by large number of Sikh devotees from India and abroad and foreigners take keen interest in learning Sikh religion and history and fulfilling the purpose of the museum in the belfry way and spreading the message of Sikh ideology and philosophy besides preserving the priceless paintings and artifacts relating to Sikh religion.

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*Ibid*, p.8

*Ibid*, p.9

*Ibid*, p.10



**Plate no. 1**



**Plate no. 2**



**Plate no. 3**



**Plate no. 4**



**Plate no. 5**



**Plate no. 5**



**Plate no. 7**



**Plate no. 8**



**Plate no. 9**