

Kirpal Singh- A Painter of Sikh History

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Reference to this paper
should be made as follows:

Hemwati Vaid,

*Kirpal Singh- A Painter of
Sikh History,*

Artistic Narration 2018,
Vol. IX, No.2, pp.22-27

[http://anubooks.com/
?page_id=485](http://anubooks.com/?page_id=485)

Abstract:

This research paper is a sincere and thoughtful effort to throw light on the artistic career as well as personal life of the stalwart artist of Sikh history- Kirpal Singh. The artist's inner self was fully inspired by extraordinary pieces of art by outstanding artists of Italian Renaissance like Michelangelo, Leonardo Da Vinci and Rubens which deeply affect his style which is reflected in his colour palette. He begins his artistic sojourn in very simple yet effectively manner and played an important role to flourish the messages of Sikh Panth through Sikh Art. His paintings on Sikhism are displayed on the walls of 'Central Sikh Museum' Golden Temple, Amritsar.

Keywords: *Central Sikh Museum, The Golden Temple, Amritsar, Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee, Wood Carving, Sikh Panth, Italian Renaissance, Sikh Art, Phulkaris, Bhai Vir Singh, Sundari, Black Chola, Museum of Evolution of life.*

Introduction

Artist Kirpal Singh-an accomplished and intellectually productive painter of Sikh history was born in the house of Bibi Har Kaur, a pious lady and Sardar Bhagat Singh Panesar in the village named 'Vara Chain Singh' at district Ferozpur in Punjab on 10th of December in the year 1923. The father of this hardworking and talented person, was a very famous craftsman who was proficient in wood carving, engraving and designing.¹(**Plate No.1**)

The famous Jain temple in Zira (Punjab) having a fabulous wooden gate with intricate and exquisite work is the matchless example of his father's craftsmanship. In his childhood, he was very fond of natural beauty and passed most of his time watching and observing village women who were busy on their spinning wheels and were engaged in twisting and untangled the cotton fiber to make clothes and *Phulkaris* in the courtyard of artist's abode. He loves colours very much and one can easily describe him as an avid lover of colours and felt motivated and wished to do something innovative and creative on his own and this passion is expressed in his own words, "*I was itching to utilize my fingers by drawing something or making some crude pictures*". In 1939 after passing his matric examination², he moved to Lahore and joined Dharam College there. And in 1941 he had completed his graduation in Forensic Science and started working on a clerical post at Mian Mir (a place in Pakistan) in Military Accounts Department in Lahore Cantonment. He had undergone a huge transformation and became conscious about the matchless sacrifices of the Sikhs, when he visited some Gurdwaras at Lahore namely Gurdwara Bhai Taru Singh, Bhai Mani Singh, Dera Sahib, Shesh Ganj in 1940. Sardar Kirpal Singh had invested considerable time in enhancing his knowledge about Sikh history as a student in Lahore and was fortunate to be part of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's birth celebrations at Lahore. He devoted every minute to examine and learn more and more about Sikh history. Instead of being engaged in various other activities, he always spared time for his passion to paint and draw and he continued to paint landscapes and human figures in his preferred medium like water colours. At the age of 18, he was married to Sardarni Kuldeep Kaur of village Kadyal in Tehsil Zira in 1941 and he had two sons and a daughter from this young lady. His younger son Jarnail Singh chooses and follows the similar profession as he had and inherited the natural endowment of painting. In August 1947, Kirpal Singh settled in Jalandhar and he got a chance to see the replicas of Great Russian artists in the Encyclopedia Britannica at Jalandhar where his elder brother was already working as a clerk in Industrial Department of Punjab Government and in 1947 after partition he also moved and settled down there.

At Jalandhar, Kirpal Singh also got acquainted with the replicas of the wonderful Italian Renaissance artists such as Michelangelo, Leonardo Da Vinci and Rubens and was

profoundly charmed by the photo-realistic mannerism of these outstanding artists and their works left an everlasting impression on his mind and heart.³

Bhai Khazan was a great scholar and writer of the 'History of the Sikhs' which extremely motivated and stirred up the soul of the artist Kirpal Singh and without any delay he was once again stimulated by Bhai Vir Singh's novel named 'Sundari'.⁴

In June 1955, with the support and worthy patronage of Principal Sant Rian Grover, he got an opportunity to display his artworks at Dyal Singh College, Karnal as his first Solo Art Exhibition. At this moment, he was filled with both happiness and sorrowfulness at the same time because his work was fully understood or appreciated by almost every spectator but sadly not a single painting was sold during this exhibition. After that he did not lose courage and had organized his second art exhibition of his paintings at Lyllapur Khalsa College, Jalandhar but this time Professor Satbir Singh, a member of Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee, Amritsar, bought his some paintings for his college when Principal Gurbachan Singh Talib expressed good and acceptable opinion of his works and also patronized him.⁵

From 1956 to 1962 A.D. he did 63 paintings on Sikh history and through these works he tried to represent the true picture of the Sikh religion and the tradition of martyrdom of this brave and fearless community by the means of his sensitive works which are now adorned on the walls of the Central Sikh Museum, Sri Darbar Sahib at Amritsar. **(Plate No.2)** At that time, he received only 250 rupees as salary for his services as an artist there. His significant mesmerizing paintings which are now displayed at Central Sikh Museum, Sri Darbar Sahib at Amritsar are 'Darbar of Maharaja Ranjit Singh' **(Plate No.3)** and 'Sikh men and women during Mughal Rule' **(Plate No.4)** helps us to peep into the past and provides us vivid glimpses of royalty and lavishness in Maharaja Ranjit Singh's court at Lahore and the other paintings make us aware of the inhumane behavior of the Mughals at that period. On his 31st birthday, he started to wear 'Black Chola' (Robe) as a mark of respect to Sufism and devoted and spent rest of his life with Sufi thoughts. His works are displayed in the following Gurdwaras like The Golden Temple at Amritsar, Guru Tegh Bahadur Niwas which was built in honour and remembrance of Guruji's martyrdom at Gurdwara Sis Ganj, New Delhi and Gurdwara Bangla Sahib at New Delhi.

Apart from his artistic quality, he was very fond of reading and always curious to attain knowledge from various sources about Sikh history. In order to keep his passion alive, he preserved the treasure of Sikh history in the form of personal library and graced his library with rare and extraordinary collection of books on Indian history and art. He always painted his paintings with keen observation and study of these worthy pieces of knowledge and implement and tried to reflect those facts in his paintings on required places.

He made it his habit before creating any artwork, he must read a book related to that particular piece of artwork and whether it would be a Mughal, Rajput, Sikh or Company style of painting, he took great care in maintaining the authenticity of every aspect.⁶

Artist Kirpla Singh was never interested in Commercial art but to earn his living, he had to do so, when he was residing in Karnal, he lived in the reclamation farm at 'Indri' and the peaceful and soothing surrounding of 'Indri' played an immensely formative stage of his career and in this favorable environment, he began to paint thoughtfully. Here he mainly worked on village women who were shown working in the fields like 'Women-transplanting paddy' and another important subject was 'Caravans of Gypsies' and most significant subject was 'Guru Hargobind in Gwalior Fort' were the topics of his interest at this particular time. Designing book covers and drawing illustrations were the main financial means of the artist bread and butter when he shifted to Delhi in 1952.

Later on Dr.M.S. Randhawa- Former Deputy Commissioner and eminent Art Historian, made a systematic plan to allot plot for scientists, writers and artists on the reasonable rates at Chandigarh. Kirpal Singh also bought a plot and started constructing his house in 1967. Simultaneously the work of establishing a 'Museum of Evolution of life' started at Chandigarh and Dr. M.S. Randhawa accredited Kirpal Singh and Jaswant Singh to paint large paintings representing the growth and development of life in the geological perspective. Kirpal Singh was not interested in this sort of subject but to stabilize his financial side, he completed this project and did justice to his given duty. After Sardar Inderjeet Singh's proposal, Kirpal Singh started working on subjects related to Sikh history, art and culture. He also got acquainted with a number of Army officers who assigned him work. His twelve wonderful works are displayed in the Army Museum at Meerut Cantonment in which he has shown the bravery acts of the Sikh soldiers during Indo-Pakistan War.⁷

Artist Kirpal Singh was very fortunate that got a chance to create paintings for 'Anglo-Sikh Wars Memorial' at Ferozshah in Ferozpur district and these paintings throw light on the episodes of the Mudki, Ferozshah, Subronon and Chillianwalla's battles. These paintings are monumental in size and are one of the largest paintings ever painted in India. To paint such an immensely large-sized canvases, the artist had to make a huge tent outside his residence and he completed this work in three years. These paintings are a sort of saga of the brave Sikh soldiers and also reveal battles of Sikhs with Britishers. On the inauguration of this Wars Memorial in April 1976, uncountable people gathered there from every corner of Punjab to pay tribute to Sikh martyrs and Ministers from various significant departments of Punjab Government and Deputy Defence Minister, Government of India came to pay their tribute and all the three heads of Army, Navy and Air forces saluted the Memorial and indirectly they paid tribute and bowed their heads against his paintings which was a mark of

great respect to his works and moreover his works were acknowledged and appreciated at such a large scale.⁸

Sardar Kirpal Singh's some selective works are also adorned on the walls of Guru Gobind Singh Bhawan at Punjabi University, Patiala on the recommendations of Dr. M.S. Randhawa and Dr. Ganda Singh.⁹

Kirpal Singh has painted a number of significant paintings which depict the prominent episodes of Guru Gobind Singh's life like 'Battles of Anandpur', 'Battle of Chamkaur' and 'Martyrdom of Four Sahibzadas'. Kirpal Singh is truly the artist who made alive the history of Punjab.¹⁰

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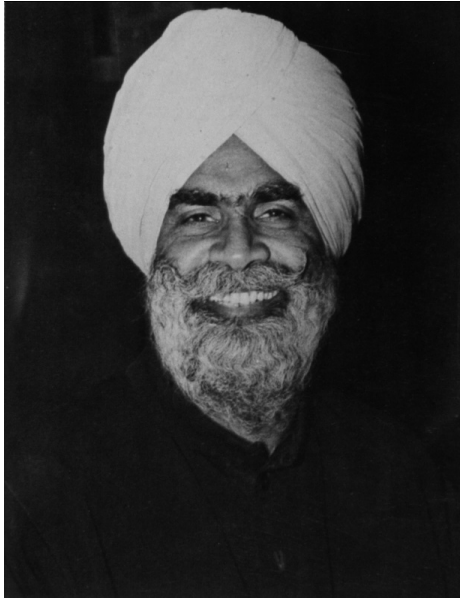


Plate No. 1



Plate No. 2



Plate No. 3



Plate No. 4