



Ranjit Singh: Sikh, Warrior, King

10 April – 20 October 2024

This spring, the Wallace Collection will explore the remarkable life and legacy of Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1780-1839), the founder of the Sikh Empire (1799-1849).

In a period riven with anarchy following decades of Afghan invasions, Ranjit Singh emerged as the Punjab region's undisputed Maharaja by the turn of the 19th century. Possessed with an indomitable sense of destiny, his meteoric rise to power brought about the hugely influential Sikh Empire – a kingdom which created seismic change in the region, impacting the fortunes of the Mughal and British Empires and shaping the future of the Indian subcontinent.

Co-curated by Wallace Collection Director, Dr Xavier Bray, and guest curator and scholar of Sikh art, Davinder Toor, *Ranjit Singh: Sikh, Warrior, King* will present glittering weaponry, intricate miniature paintings and exquisite jewellery from the Sikh Empire, drawn from major public and private collections. Visitors will experience how this extraordinary individual brought about a golden age in which trade boomed, the arts flourished, and a formidable army was developed.

Featuring historic objects from Ranjit Singh's court, courtiers and family members, including those personally owned by the Maharaja and the most famous of his wives, Maharani Jind Kaur, the exhibition will also display objects intimately connected with their son, Maharaja Duleep Singh – the deposed boy-king who was a favourite of Queen Victoria and the father of the prominent suffragette, Princess Sophia Duleep Singh.

The Wallace Collection is renowned as the home of one of the finest collections of arms and armour in the world, and the exhibition also affords an opportunity to showcase the Collection's group of Sikh arms and armour, of which the star is a beautiful sword richly mounted in gold and gemstones, thought when acquired by the Marquess of Hertford, to have belonged to the Maharaja himself. For the first time in the museum's history, the exhibition will place the Collection's Sikh holdings in their historic and artistic context, showing them alongside other Sikh artworks.

Highlights of the works on show include an incredibly fine miniature painting of Ranjit Singh and his favourite, depicted in vibrant crimson, emerald and gold, on public display for the first time from the Toor Collection, and the dazzling throne made by Hafez Muhammad Multani for Ranjit Singh, a major loan from the Victoria & Albert Museum. Covered in thick beaten gold and lavishly ornamented, the Golden Throne epitomises the splendour of the Maharaja's court.

At a time when revolutionary fervour was sweeping across France and America in the late 18th century, Ranjit Singh rose to power in the ancient region of Punjab, an area that today spans Pakistan and India.

Overcoming smallpox and sight loss in one eye, he was just 17 years old when he successfully led Sikh troops against the invading Afghan ruler Shah Zaman. Four years later he took Lahore from a larger rival Sikh confederacy and was proclaimed Maharaja of the Punjab in 1801. He went on to take Amritsar, the holiest of cities for Sikhs in 1802 and, by the time of his death in 1839, his territories covered large tracts to the north of the subcontinent, from the Khyber Pass to the borders of Tibet.

Although he was driven in his youth by an insatiable ambition for conquest, Ranjit Singh also formed political allegiances and became a patron of the arts, all while ruling with an equitable hand. Under his aegis, he brought about an unprecedented era of peace and prosperity to the region, noted for its religious tolerance and diverse, multicultural make-up. In return, he was hailed by his subjects as Sher-e-Punjab ('Lion of Punjab').

Ranjit Singh founded his extravagant durbar, or royal court, in the imperial walled city of Lahore. Sumptuous objects were produced to reflect the vibrant and potent power of his Empire, with examples of such objects in the exhibition demonstrating the sheer variety of cultural and artistic influences of this unique kingdom.

With his dominions centred in the plains adjacent to the Khyber Pass, Ranjit Singh was forced to quash the ambitions of the ferocious but disunited Afghan tribes on his north-western border. To seal his victories, the Maharaja took the fabled Koh-i-Noor diamond from the Afghans, which had been looted from the famous Peacock Throne of the Mughals during the Persian invasions of Nadir Shah. The Koh-i-Noor is now part of the British Crown Jewels.

Despite increasing tensions on the Sikh monarch's southern border with the British East India Company, Ranjit Singh maintained cordial relations with his foreign neighbours but alive to their territorial ambitions, he began to modernise his army. Part of this process was the recruitment of Europeans – collectively known as Firangis ('Franks', foreigners) – including Company deserters, mercenaries and surgeons from Europe.

Foremost amongst the Firangis were four ex-Napoleonic officers who were instrumental in developing Franco-Sikh relations. Acknowledging Ranjit Singh's remarkable feat of holding back the threat of a British invasion for four decades, they nicknamed their Sikh sovereign 'The Napoleon of the East'.

Although the Empire quickly collapsed after his death, such is Ranjit Singh's enduring legacy that, in 2020, he topped a poll of more than 5,000 readers of BBC *World Histories* magazine. With 38% of the votes, he emerged victorious as the greatest leader of all time, ahead of such leaders as Winston Churchill, Abraham Lincoln and Queen Elizabeth I.

Dr Xavier Bray says: *'I have been working toward this exhibition ever since I started at the Wallace Collection and learned of our incredible Sikh holdings. These works of art deserve to be better known by the public, and I am thrilled that they will be in the spotlight as we tell the incredible story of Ranjit Singh. As well as his military prowess and political genius, the Lion of the Punjab was known for the diversity and tolerance he fostered in his Empire, and celebrating this has never been more important.'*

Davinder Toor says: *'This exhibition brings to light for the first time many works hitherto unseen. Private collections and museum reserves have been opened to display their treasures. Many works of art have only recently been discovered and others have been hiding in plain sight. Aside from telling the story of a historic figure in whom we can all recognise parts of ourselves, this exhibition goes beyond to highlight a shared heritage that holds an enduring power to inspire.'*

NOTES FOR EDITORS

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Above L-R:

Maharaja Ranjit Singh (r.1799–1839) with his favourite, Raja Hira Singh (1816–1844), attending as a cup-bearer, c.1835–1838 © Toor Collection (detail)

Hafiz Muhammad of Multan, The Golden Throne of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, around 1818 © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Suit of armour comprising cuirass (chair-aina), mail chausses (pyjama zirah), arm defences (dastana), helmet (taup), mail shirt (zirah) and a pair of shoes, Lahore, Punjab, c. 1830-1840 © Royal Armouries

About the Wallace Collection

As one of Britain's preeminent cultural institutions, the **Wallace Collection** is home to one of the most significant ensembles of fine and decorative arts in the world. Highlights include oil paintings from the 14th to the late 19th centuries by artists such as Titian, Velázquez, Rubens and Van Dyck; princely arms and armour; and one of the finest collections of 18th-century French paintings and decorative arts. Visitors can also enjoy superb medieval and Renaissance objects, including Limoges enamel, maiolica, glass and bronzes. Displayed at Hertford House, former home to Sir Richard and Lady Wallace, this outstanding collection is displayed in a manner designed to evoke the lives and tastes of its founders, creating a special ambiance that remains an essential part of its charm.

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