

Friends of South Asia

Spring 2024



Figure 1: Artist Meera Margaret Singh speaking at an FSA tour this spring. © Piali Roy.

Message from the Chair

Friends of South Asia (FSA) has a lot of news, including the announcement of a new Global Sikh Art & Culture Gallery at ROM and an acquisition of work by Heidi McKenzie. And despite the closing of the Sir Christopher Ondaatje South Asian Gallery as the Crystal is renovated, we have been busy with many tours from Meera Margaret Singh to Sarindar Dhaliwal at the AGO. We also helped initiate ROM's new Conversation Café series with Tayeba Begum Lipi, who we brought in from Bangladesh, thanks to donations to the FSA.

Don't forget to visit the Wonder Garment exhibition based on Jayshree Khimasia's donation of saris to ROM. FSA donors were fortunate to go behind the scenes to ROM's textile lab to see these amazing pieces. By Piali Roy, Chair.

To be Launched at ROM: Global Sikh Art & Culture Gallery and Program



Figure 2: Sikhs in Canada, ROM ID: ROM 2010.53.1. © The Singh Twins.

On Saturday, May 4, Sikh cultural leaders and community members gathered at ROM for an evening event to connect, celebrate and recognize the tremendous fundraising efforts in support of the newly established Global Sikh Art & Culture Gallery and Program. This project is the first announced element of a planned refurbishment and expansion of ROM's renowned suite of South Asian galleries and part of the Museum's transformative OpenROM project. For the Global Sikh Art & Culture Gallery and Program at ROM, the community has now raised \$16.6 million for this exciting program. Heritage Canada will also deliver an additional \$6 million for the project as recently announced in the 2024 Federal Budget and subject to passing of the budget.

Through visionary support from over 30 dedicated donors, ROM will become an even greater gathering place and destination of global significance for the Sikh and broader South Asian community and the global diaspora. For decades, ROM has collaborated with local communities to develop South Asian representation within the Museum opening a gallery featuring South Asian art and culture in 2000 — the first of its kind in Canada — which was further enhanced and expanded in 2008. The Global Sikh Art & Culture Gallery and Program will enable ROM to expand the Museum's suite of galleries

devoted to South Asia to include a dedicated Gallery of Sikh Art & Culture, establish funds to acquire Sikh historic objects and contemporary art and introduce a new endowed curatorial position dedicated to Sikh art and culture. In addition, public programs will highlight global Sikh art and culture, engaging Museum visitors through a regular series of talks, performances, and gallery tours.

Once completed, the Sikh Art & Culture Gallery will encompass 2,300 square feet of new space created by Open ROM a multi-faceted initiative that includes a sweeping architectural transformation of the Museum's main floor, a redesigned Bloor Street entrance, and enhanced public and gallery spaces. OpenROM construction is currently underway and expected to be complete in late 2027.

The Global Sikh Art & Culture Gallery and Program builds upon ROM's long-standing involvement of showcasing Sikh and South Asian culture. In 2000, ROM presented the landmark exhibition, Arts of the Sikh Kingdom, from the Victoria and Albert Museum, augmented with pieces drawn from the private collections of Sikh community members living in Canada. ROM's South Asian collection is one of the foremost outside South Asia, with 15,000 objects spanning over 5,000 years of history, including the intricate model from the 1870s of the Golden Temple of Amritsar, and a rare, illustrated manuscript from the court of Maharaja Ranjit Singh from 1822.

The Museum has been home to a dedicated South Asian gallery, the Sir Christopher Ondaatje South Asian Gallery, for nearly a quarter century, and over that time it has been augmented with curatorial expertise and dedicated funds for exhibitions, programs, community engagement, and research made possible by the Dan Mishra South Asia Initiative.

ROM Acquires Works by Heidi McKenzie

Thrilled to share that two wonderful works by Toronto-based artist Heidi McKenzie have joined @romtoronto 's collection.

Both pieces address the history of Indian indenture labour in the Caribbean while making a decolonial gesture toward reclaiming that history by incorporating family photographs and personal history.

"First Wave," created in 2021, is a stoneware sculpture in the shape of a ship with iron-oxide photographic prints fired onto handmade porcelain tile, 48 x 60 x 20 cm. This work references the first ship that brought Indian subjects to the Caribbean to work as indentured labours in 1845.



Figure 3: "First Wave" by Heidi McKenzie. © A-Space Gallery.

The handmade porcelain sails hold images displaying the names of the passengers from the ship's manifest. The artist's great great grandmother from her father's paternal line may have been on that ship based on the names listed. Conceptually, the images of the manifest make a powerful statement. Naming the individuals who made that first passage makes them visible and gives them voice in history, commemorating their presence.



Figure 4: "Illuminated" by Heidi McKenzie. © Heidi McKenzie.

"Illuminated," also created in 2021, comprises of three LED light boxes shaped like lanterns. These boxes feature iron-oxide photographic prints of "coolie belles" fired onto

handmade porcelain tiles, ht. 15.25 – 22.86 cm (6, 7.5 and 9 inches). Women were a minority among the indentured workers, often single and fleeing difficult circumstances at home. Toward the end of the 19th century, studio photographs were produced of Indo-Caribbean women dressed in elaborate textiles and silver jewelry as part of an emerging tourist industry; the “coolie belle” imagery conveyed the Caribbean as an exotic, picturesque location with beautiful, happy, unthreatening locals. Within this mix, McKenzie has inserted photos of her great great grandmother, Roonia. By doing so, she shifts the nature of all the imagery. Rather than being objectifying and exploitive, McKenzie reclaims the “coolie belle” away from a tourist gaze and back into the familial relationships they were a part of as individuals. By Deepali Dewan, Instagram.

Conversation Café with artist Tayeba Begum Lipi



Figure 5: left to right, curator Fahmida Suleman, artist, Tayeba Begum Lipi, emcee, Sebastian Salazar. © Paul Eekhoff.

On November 24, 2023, Friends of South Asia along with Canadian Community Arts Initiative partnered with ROM to hold a [Conversation Café](#) with Dhaka-based multimedia artist and activist, Tayeba Begum Lipi.

Lipi, who had works featured in the exhibition, *Being and Belonging*, was on site to engage with the attendees. Her visit to Toronto was made possible by Friends of South Asia. The Conversation Café provided participants an opportunity to dialogue with each other and pose questions to ask Lipi.

ROM Curator of Islamic World, Dr Fahmida Suleman, moderated the session. She began by providing a brief biography of Lipi's artistic trajectory, her participation in various art summits and biennales, her works being featured in collections worldwide and her co-founding the Britto Art Trust in Bangladesh. Dr. Suleman also highlighted the recurring themes of gender and identity that inspire Lipi's work.

The first question focused on the razor blades featured in Lipi's two works showcased in the *Being and Belonging* exhibition. Lipi described how these razor blades are hand-made fabrications, involving a team of welders who assist her in her studio. They are made from molds of various sizes and are not intended to be very sharp. Later in the interview, Lipi reminisced about her childhood memories, including the range of old furniture that her father, a former railway employee, had acquired from his English superiors. These memories inspired Lipi to manufacture objects made from razor blades. These include her mother's dresser and wheelchair, as well as symbolic items representing women, including handbags, undergarments such as bras, which were first shown at the Venice Biennale, and bikinis, which faced controversy when they were exhibited in Bangladesh. At times, Lipi explained, these are welded, whereas sometimes, like the frock that was on display at ROM, they are made with links. As Lipi reminded us "nothing is made by machine...it takes time to do it.

Lipi also responded to an inquiry about the male gaze and societal pressures on women to conform to certain beauty standards, symbolized by the discomfort of wearing stilettos. Lipi reflected on anecdotes from Dhaka to illustrate how these issues intersect with women's autonomy and choices.

Another question focused on Lipi's video work titled "Home," which examined the life of Anonya, a member of the hijra (transgender) community in Dhaka. Lipi described the genesis of this work can be traced to a 2013 Britto Art Trust showcase on LGBTQ+ communities, curated by Lipi's partner, and work by the Goethe Institute. Lipi's approach involved building trust with Anonya which began with a seemingly simple gesture of inviting her home for coffee, which most people in Bangladesh would never do. Lipi aimed to involve Anonya in the project and gain insight into her experiences. After establishing trust, Lipi extensively interviewed Anonya at a historic hotel for an entire day and explored her experiences of abuse, familial rejection and societal marginalization. Lipi noted that Anonya's statement that, "I'm very colourful, but our life is black and white," inspired her to make the film in black and white.

Lipi discussed ongoing projects relating to the hijra community, including a longer, feature-length film directed by her partner and a project in Delhi. Lipi noted that hijras continue to be marginalized in Bangladeshi society, working as sex workers and beggars

for survival, despite their customary role as celebrants at the birth of new babies or weddings.

Lastly, Lipi answered a final question regarding her upcoming endeavors. Lipi discussed her sculptural work for the Thailand Biennale, which involves Thai prisoners as well as Bangladeshi village women creating embroidery work incorporating Nepali *lokta* fabric, and of course, her signature razor blades, this time melded into jewellery. By Nitin Deckha.

Sarindar Dhaliwal at the Art Gallery of Ontario



Figure 6: Artist Sarindar Dhaliwal at the Art Gallery of Ontario. © Piali Roy.

In December 2023, a group of fifteen FSA members visited the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) to meet the South Asian-Canadian artist Sarindar Dhaliwal and view her art exhibition titled 'When I grow up, I want to be a namer of paint colours.

Curated by Renée van der Avoird, Associate Curator of Canadian Art, the exhibition displays more than forty years of artmaking by Dhaliwal. Deeply personal, exploding with vibrant colours and sprawled across length and breadth, her artwork completely engulfs the watching eye. Sharing anecdotes from her immigrant childhood in Britain and travels worldwide, Dhaliwal invited us to walk through the tapestry of memories and impressions that inform her art. From collages to an autobiographical video, from clay to colours and

spices, Dhaliwal describes her mixed media creations as a space to speak from her heart, challenging set conventions and boundaries.

The first four words, 'When I grow up,' immediately set the frame of reference for viewing the art; the innocence and wonder of the child challenging the normalization and acceptance of longstanding customs and norms. Standing in front of the piece *Hey Hey Paula* (1998), Dhaliwal recalled her former experience of attending the wedding of a mentally unstable cousin to a girl who was brought all the way from India for the purpose. The bride and groom had never met or talked before. What will the bride say when she meets the groom for the first time after the wedding? How would she feel? Why was no one talking about her? Did she know? Was she asked? Why wasn't anyone bothered?

The same astonishment appears in *Hey Hey Paula*, where the artist assembles six hundred photographic portraits from 1980s New York Times engagements' announcements in a monumental grid spanning sixty-five feet. Photo after photo features women with glistening smiles, perfect hairdos and shiny pearls. Through this piece, she questions issues of women's agency, their negotiated autonomies, public appearances, and a convenient disregard of their personal voices. Dhaliwal challenges the constructed reality of women's identities across cultures and geographies.



Figure 7: Sarindar Dhaliwal in front of *The cartographer's mistake: the Radcliffe Line*, 2012. Chromira print, 107 x 107 cm. Collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario. Purchase with funds by exchange from the J.S. McLean Collection by Canada Packers Inc., 2020. © Piali Roy.

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The artist's sensory absorption of the world around her generates a unique dialectic of experience, naming and expression across her creative practice. Inspired by the plethora of paint chips and their various descriptive names, during her time in France, Dhaliwal chose the delightful vocation 'Namer of Paint Colors' for herself. Upon returning home, she made a colour chart of her own. The titular artwork features a chart displaying colours in all their hues alongside names given to them by the artist herself. Interestingly, names such as 'Swansea Fireman Red' for a crimson square, 'Belfast Midnight' for a light purple, 'Imperial Indigo' for another shade of red and 'lime' for a dull pink intricately weave together sensory memories, personal experiences, spatial associations and emotional or even political states of being. All of these meanings are encapsulated within representative colours by the artist.

Looking at artworks as the tour progressed, it became increasingly apparent that politics and personality are never far from one another in Dhaliwal's art and remain continually engaged in an immigrant's life. The artist shared a poignant childhood memory with the group, recalling the 'smelly' odour of the hair oil her mother applied daily to her and her sister's hair, leading to their ostracization by peers at school. This underscored how celebrating one community can cause exclusion from another – even smells become politicized, as can colours and their names. The titular piece of the exhibit may be interpreted as the artist's attempt to claim the rightful authority and autonomy in mapping out a life uniquely her own. Dhaliwal confirmed how, in her artistic practice, she uses past traumas to piece together poetic works and transform ugliness into beauty.

The vibrant exploration of limitless possibilities and boundless ideas is at the heart of Dhaliwal's art. To question, to wonder, to imagine, and to re-construct – her art is a testament to the practice of these principles. For instance, in *The Cartographer's Mistake: The Radcliffe Line* (2012), she envisions the reincarnation of Cyril Radcliffe, the British barrister tasked with partitioning British India into Pakistan and India, as different birds in a world not bounded by time and space. Similarly, in the collage *Triple Self Portrait with Persimmons and Pomegranates*, she playfully depicts Frida Kahlo's chance meeting with Oscar Wilde and envisions the many forms and shapes the encounter may take. Imagination comes to life in Dhaliwal's art, as she ingeniously employs fantastical imagery and magical recreations to narrate political and personal histories.

Dhaliwal's world of subversions and boldly beautiful mappings of memories, identities, and places open a vast dialogue space accessible to all audiences. The viewer may find

it valuable to approach the exhibition as a 'story', mirroring a rich South Asian oral storytelling tradition. The title, 'When I grow up, I want to be a namer of paint colours,' lays out this narrative structure, inviting the viewer to enter with eager ears to listen to the tale of the child who wanted to become a namer of paint colours.

The FSA tour concluded with Dhaliwal's prophetic warning proving true: 'By the end of the tour, the group is usually thrice the size we start with.' Her generous sharing of her inner world, craftsmanship, numerous anecdotes, and exceptional artwork drew in other museum visitors. By the evening's end, the group had expanded substantially, forming a large and artfully engaged gathering. By Samia Naqvi.



FSA Membership

Membership in Friends groups at ROM is a fantastic way to financially support the Global South Asian collection at the Museum. A long history of generous benefactors led to the creation of the gallery, an endowed curatorship, innovative programming, and ongoing education about South Asian art, culture, and history.

Friends of South Asia

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