

Sikh Exhibit at Wing Luke Asian Museum

Judith van Praag

On Saturday, April 8 at 2 p.m., you're invited to a vibrant, musical event: "Images Through the Ages", at the "Theatre Off Jackson". Bring the family to listen to the Tabla, the Dilruba, the vibrant beats of the Dhol, and watch, or become part of the Bhangra (folk dance) performance.

If you haven't seen the exhibit "Sikh Community: Over 100 Years in the Pacific Northwest" at the adjacent Wing Luke Asian Museum yet, make sure you catch the show before it closes on April 16.

There's no better way to fight prejudice than through education, by giving people a chance to share in each other's culture and tradition, and the folks at WLAM and of the Sikh Coalition have done it once again.

The exhibit at WLAM is geared toward acquainting the public with everything Sikh; the role Sikhs play in American life, and their long-standing roots in Pacific Northwest.

The gaze of a life size cardboard figure of a turbaned Sikh in the red serge coat, breeches and boots of the "Royal Canadian Mounted Police" (RCMP) a.k.a. "The Mounties" greets visitors at the entrance. A wonderful example of roles Sikhs play in North American life, but also exemplary of the Sikhs' dedication to their faith and rituals. After all, the case to allow Sikh Mounties to wear a turban, instead of a Stetson, had to be taken to (Canadian) Federal Court.

A video presentation of interviews, conducted at the Seattle Center grounds last summer, presents moments of ignorance, but also humorous misconceptions about Sikhism.

At one instant the interviewer asked an unsuspecting tourist if he knew any Sikh people. After a moment the man said yes, he did. The following question was: "What do you know about the religion?" Upon which the tourist mumbled, "Oh, I thought you meant a sick person."

Another man, asked about his knowledge, said that after 9/11 he knew one thing for sure: Sikhs were not Muslims.

On March 29, the museum was abuzz with visitors. WLAM intern Tripat Singh (intermediary during last year's VISNA project), was showing his cousins from Kansas around. They admired a photo sequence by Richard Nicol Patka: Savraj Singh's Turban Tying 101 in 33 images.

"Now it takes me ten minutes," Tripat said in answer to my question how long it takes to tie a turban. "When I started doing it in eighth grade, my arms got so tired from keeping them up, it took me I don't know how long."

Seeing the maps, artifacts, personal documents and photographs (provided by people from the Sikh community), the musical instruments, the model and rendering of the Harmandir Sahib (a.k.a. Golden Temple of Amritsar) on display against the colorful flats made him smile with pride. He had no idea what the result of working on the separate elements would be like.

Actual objects illustrate explanations of basic beliefs, and clothing.

A time line, placed on the flats above documentation material, provides a guideline through history, starting in Punjab, 1450, leading to present day America.

The first Sikh immigrants arrived in this region in the late 1800s. They found work in lumber mills and railroad construction.

In the 1910s many returned to India to help free the country from the British rule. After World War II the immigration quotas allowed more Sikhs to enter the US.

Immigrants arriving since the 1960s have been professionals, businesspeople, and entrepreneurs.

An area dedicated to "Achievement", "Leadership" and "Inspiration" shows some of the Sikhs who've made the news. Among whom the bearded Sikh "light-featherweight" boxer Pardeep Singh Nagra and marathon runner Fauja Singh, who at age 93, ran the 2004 London Marathon in 5.40 hours.

For the little ones, there are Sikh cartoons to watch, and Sikh storybooks to look at, or pictures to color.

A video screen allows for a look in the Guru Ka Langar (community kitchen) of the Renton Gurudwara (house of worship) where members of the congregation welcome people from all walks of life to share their food. This is an important element of Sikh tradition and religion.

If you're not ready to make the trip to Renton, make sure you don't miss the opportunity to discover the ways of the Sikh at WLAM.

Previously published on April 5, 2006 in the International Examiner. © 2006 Judith van Praag, All Rights Reserved

www.dutchessabroad.com