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Emily’s Eden: Contemporary Sikh drawings by Emily de Klerk

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ABSTRACT
During the corona-lockdown, the Dutch Emily de Klerk sat down to digest her Sikh sketches and photographs. Among the results are the 10 drawings included in this essay. While they overall reflect her fascination with Punjab and the Sikhs, they specifically also channelized a feeling of empathy with the farmers protest in New Delhi to which Sikhs play a fundamental role. In the essay, Bob van der Linden embeds Emily’s drawings in the light of earlier (colonial) paintings and drawings made of Sikhs by Western artists. Afterwards, an interview provides further context to Emily’s work.

KEYWORDS
Emily de Klerk; Sikh portrait drawings; Western representations of Sikhs; Sikh male image; farmers protest

Introduction
In April 2019, New Delhi’s All India Fine Arts and Crafts Society presented ‘The Sikh: An Occidental Romance’, an exhibition organized by the Hubris Foundation of 80 replicas of paintings and drawings by nineteenth and twentieth century Western artists collected from museums around the world. Afterwards, the presentation was taken to Chandigarh (Punjab Kala Bhawan) and Amritsar (Gobindgarh Fort). As a historian of Punjab and the Sikhs, with an interest in Sikh art, I was familiar with most of the exhibits. Also, I once again realized how a sincere fascination with Sikh art, both among scholars and the Sikh community, had only begun with the tercentenary celebrations of the founding of the Khalsa in 1999. In the first place because it led to the exhibition ‘Arts of the Sikh Kingdoms’ curated by Susan Stronge at London’s Victoria and Albert Museum (Stronge 1999), of which a truncated version was subsequently displayed at the Asian Arts Museum of San Francisco and the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto. Moreover, when plans to send the same exhibition to India did not work out, the renowned art historian B. N. Goswamy organized another exhibition with materials from Indian museums: ‘Piety and Splendour: Sikh Heritage in Art’ at New Delhi’s National Museum of India (Goswamy 2000). All in all, these expositions set a trend for numerous other ones and books on Sikh art. While keeping myself updated in this field for some time now, I recognized the surveyability of Western art works of the Sikhs (two pioneering overviews are: Archer 1966; Aijazuddin 1979). Furthermore, how into the twentieth century sketching, drawing, and painting increasingly became activities of the past, as both Westerners and Indians turned to photography and other modern (popular) art
forms, including computer drawing recently. In a moment of epiphany, then, I began to think about to what extent my partner’s Sikh drawings fit in this wider scheme, if at all.

The Dutch Emily de Klerk always doodled around with a pen or a pencil but remains largely autodidact in her drawing. Since 2010, she travelled around widely in India for about a year in total. As an artist, nonetheless, she felt particularly attracted to the Sikhs. In India, she also took photographs, which she subsequently uses as an aid in drawing, as did many before her. In fact, it remains generally unknown that, before the arrival of photography in the 1850s, European artists in India already carried a camera obscura with them. Without the help of this optical device, for example, the famous English painters Thomas Daniell and his nephew William would have found it much more difficult, if not impossible, to produce the fine details or near-perfect perspective in their works. Further, after their return to England, they spent many years ‘translating’ their sketches and watercolours into their famous aquatints, as mainly published in Oriental Scenery (six parts, 1795–1808). Likewise, Emily sat down during the corona-period to digest her Sikh sketches and photographs. Among the results are the 10 drawings included in this essay, which undeniably deserve to be known to the Sikh community. While an interview provides further context to her work later, I will first briefly discuss Emily’s drawings in the light of earlier Western paintings and drawings of Punjab and the Sikhs.

**Sikhs on a Western Easel**

In comparison to other parts of India, few Western professional and amateur artists drew the landscape, monuments, and people of the Punjab during the first centuries of European expansion in the subcontinent. This simply because the region was the last to be conquered by the British in 1849. At the Lahore court, however, Maharaja Ranjit Singh and his successors welcomed several European artists, who mostly made portraits, as was commonly asked for at the time by both the British and Indian rulers. Most famous became Emily Eden. Her celebrated collection of letters Up the Country (1866) reports of the six years that she lived and travelled in India, accompanying her unmarried brother George, Governor-General Lord Auckland. As part of his over-the-top march at the head of a ten miles long caravan through northern India (October 1837 – March 1840), designed to impress the Indians in an ‘Oriental’ style, she gained access to Indian royal courts, including that of Sikh Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1780–1839), the ‘Lion of Punjab’, in Lahore. As a matter of fact, in view of the perceived threat of a Russian invasion in Afghanistan, the most important reason for Lord Auckland’s imperial cavalcade was a reaffirmation of the treaty of friendship that his predecessor Lord Bentinck had signed in 1831 with Ranjit Singh.

Emily Eden never really enjoyed and constantly complained about her stay in the subcontinent, but she found solace as an amateur artist in drawing the landscape and people (Prior 2012). She became especially known for her depictions of Maharaja Ranjit Singh (whom she admired for his wit and intelligence), his son Sher Singh and Ranjit’s favourite, Raja Hira Singh, the son of his chief minister. These portrayals are among the twenty-eight lithographs drawn from her sketches and published in Portraits of the Princes and People of India (1844). As emphasized by Giles Tillotson, however, it remains doubtful ‘whether the Sikh princes would have recognized themselves as the epicene creatures of her plates’ (Tillotson 1990, 151). Overall, Eden’s Portraits – and, to a lesser extent, her letters – confirmed to European audiences the view of India as a colourful Oriental
land of riches. At the same time, her drawings of Sikh princes contributed to the making of the image of the stalwart Sikh with neat beard and turban. To some degree, of course, this Sikh male look corresponded to the one bequeathed on the community with the institution of the spiritual and military order of the Khalsa in 1699 by the tenth and last Sikh guru, Gobind Singh, of whom the subsequent royal and martial representations gave it further prominence in turn. Likewise, it was influenced by the European portraits and photographs of Maharaja Ranjit Singh’s seventh and youngest acknowledged son, Maharaja Dalip Singh (1838–1893). After the British’ annexation of Punjab, he was the first notable Sikh to arrive in Britain and became Queen Victoria’s Oriental protegé. In fact, Dalip Singh was among one of the twelve Sikh heroes reproduced in nineteenth century woodcuts and, during the 1880s, the printers Diwan Butah Singh of Lahore and Partap Singh of Amritsar widely distributed iconic images of the exiled Maharaja in Punjab (McLeod 1991, 19 and figures 2, 4 and 5). Even so, the point is that, as contemporary portraits and, somewhat later, photographs show, in Emily Eden’s time the image of the brave Sikh male look was still anything but common among Sikh men, who generally adhered to more erratic hairstyles and headgears.

In contrast to Emily Eden’s work, Original Sketches in the Punjaub by a Lady (1854) is rather unknown. It was published anonymously by the wife of a British army officer serving in Lahore and contains twenty hand-coloured lithographed drawings of the major monuments in Amritsar and Lahore. Even so, I mention it because the artist’s intentions and remarks about the Indian light were typical for the era:

No attempt has been made to draw pictures as they ought to be; the desire has been to convey to an English eye some notion of the bright, vivid colouring of Indian scenes – the strange and often uncouth attitudes of the natives – and their costume, as far as the scale of these sketches will admit of exactness. Nothing is more untrue than the heavy, brass sky, the usual accompaniment of an Indian sketch. The great heat, on the contrary takes away colour from the atmosphere, and leaves it almost white, leaving houses, and gay clothing of the natives, all the brighter for contrast. (Anonymous 1854, Preface)

From the 1850s onwards, famous British landscape painters like William Carpenter and William Simpson, who chiefly worked with watercolour, visited Punjab. Of a different kind are the sketches and drawings of John Lockwood Kipling of Punjabi/Sikh craftsmen, the oil paintings of the American Edwin Lord Weeks and the early twentieth century woodblock prints of Charles W. Bartlett. By and large, these Western artists adhered to that complex aesthetic known as the (romantic) ‘picturesque’. In India, they were attracted not only to the exotic scenery and people, but especially also to the fact that ‘there is always a contrast between bright sunlight and the deep shadows, except around noon’ (Pal and Dehejia 1986, 98). This made it much easier for them to experiment with the use of dramatic light and shadow (chiaroscuro), which was one of the essential ingredients of the picturesque genre. Thus, William Simpson remarked when he returned to Southampton after his first trip to India: ‘To my eye, after the bright colours of India, the contrast was great, and it seemed to me that the people went about with the appearance of black beetles’ (as cited in Pal and Dehejia 1986, 124). All Western artists visited mainly Amritsar and Lahore and depicted the same monuments, above all the Golden Temple. They hardly produced any close-up portraits and, besides their individual styles, street scenes with (groups of) people mainly mark the difference
between their works. Moreover, when artists recorded individual Sikhs, they often classified them as ‘types’ in accordance to rank (Maharaja, prince and so on) or livelihood (soldier, wood carver, fakir, priest and so on). Indeed, picturesque depictions of individuals probably misrepresented reality even more than those of landscape and architecture because artists consistently sanitized their subject with the aim to show an idealized land and people. Simultaneously, photography did not lead to great changes in subject-matter, but it surely gave Western audiences a more realistic view of the Punjab.

My decision to present Emily de Klerk’s drawings in this context has two reasons. First, because she received numerous very enthusiast reactions about them from Sikhs and I therefore thought that her drawings perhaps might be of interest to the audience of Sikh Formations as well. Second, because a paragraph in an article by B. N. Goswamy about a few little-known nineteenth century Sikh portrait drawings from Patiala made by local (Rajasthani?) artists made me think about them historically and aesthetically. Like Emily’s drawings, these informal Patiala portraits are of common Sikhs instead of Maharajas and noblemen. Yet, Goswamy writes:

> What is different about this work, however – different from the dry and academic European work, or photography, which initially inspired it, or at least triggered it off – is the warmth it possesses. Whether this came from the intrinsic nature of the artists themselves, or the closeness they naturally felt to the people they now began to portray – people whom they mingled with, knew from the inside, as it were, or could call their own – must remain difficult to determine. But one sees it clearly mirrored in the work that has survived.

(Goswamy 2003, 92)

My response to this paragraph was immediate: ‘But do Emily’s drawings possess not a similar warmth?’

Overall, the drawings in this essay are different from and more detailed than the Patiala portraits as well as most other ones created before by both Sikhs and Westerners. Assumingly, since the early twentieth century, similar detailed portraits have been drawn by Sikh artists, but these in general were preliminary studies for different kind of works (oil paintings and so on). Until now, to her own surprise, Emily has drawn Sikh men mostly, as has been the dominant practice among Western artists since colonial times. Yet, this happened unconsciously and was not part of a self-deceptive quest for the exotic. Similarly, the explanation for the fact that these men remain unnamed (another colonial habit) is simply because she based them on photographs and was attracted to certain faces only in the peace and quietness of her studio. In any case, it remains fascinating to compare Emily’s work and that of Emily Eden in relation to the modern steadfast Sikh male image. As I already mentioned, Eden’s representations of Sikh princes may be discussed in the context of the emergence of an imagery that subsequently developed into the iconic look that Sikh men nowadays endorse throughout the world. One indeed that would have amazed Eden because, unlike her Sikh princes and the portrayals of Maharaja Dalip Singh, for instance, the turbans of common contemporary Sikhs are anything but bejewelled and plumaged. In contrast, then, some of Emily de Klerk’s Sikhs (Illustrations 2, 3, 5, 7 and 9) by and large show the outcome of a process of standardization to which the Singh Sabha reforms (1870–1925) and the British recruitment of Sikhs for the colonial army and police – that was partially based on the ideology of the Sikhs being a ‘martial race’ – were fundamental. Illustrations 1 and 8 show the easier to tie and more comfortable turban (generally known as gol parna) that Sikhs wear in modern times, while being at
leisure or at labour. Thus, through their visual representations, the two Emilys – each in their own way and time – participate(d) in the ongoing process of Sikh identity and memory formation. Some might argue that Emily de Klerk’s drawings are sanitized and merely a continuation of ‘an occidental romance’. To the contrary, I would like to believe that her work was born out of a desire to empathize, if not identify, with Sikhs. Regardless, this essay’s drawings above all reflect Emily’s preoccupation with the unique (facial) features and turbans of distinct Sikh men, which she subsequently made her own and transformed into something new and personal. Really, drawing has the power to surpass the literal and reshape the everyday into one’s own Eden.

Interview with Emily de Klerk

Could you tell us a little about your personal background?

I completed an MA in Art History at Utrecht University, which included a year at the Netherlands Interuniversity Institute for Art History in Florence, Italy. I specialized myself in the generally unknown Italian drawings of the famous Dutch graphic artist M. C. Escher. At the time, I drew little myself, but my interest in these drawings shows that I was unconsciously drawn to the medium. I learned to speak Italian fluently and, following my MA and a teacher training, I worked as a cultural guide for Dutch tour groups to Italy for ten years. In addition, I wrote a book about Emilia-Romagna, one of my favourite Italian regions, and made a documentary about the Dutch polymath and M. C. Escher expert Bruno Ernst. Expectedly, I also organized numerous group journeys to Italy with ‘M. C. Escher’ and ‘Emilia-Romagna’ as a theme. During my Italian ‘grand tours’, I sat down to sketch whenever I had the time, but for one reason or the other it never developed into something serious.

How did you become interested in the Sikhs and, indeed, end up drawing Sikh men?

It is of course difficult to answer such a question in hindsight, but maybe ‘the first cut is the deepest’ applies. My first experience in India was an early morning visit to New Delhi’s Gurdwara Bangla Sahib, where I was highly impressed by the devotion of the people, the singing and music, and the communality of the free kitchen and dining hall (langar). Afterwards, I recognized Sikhs and gurdwaras, and a visit to a gurdwara anywhere in the subcontinent felt as a sort of homecoming. For, to be clear, I did not know anything about India on that first visit. Beyond Europe, I had solely travelled to Morocco and Istanbul. I was truly overwhelmed by the diversity of the Indian people and thus was glad to have some point of reference in the crowds: Sikhs! Following several visits to Punjab (Amritsar, Anandpur Sahib, Kapurthala, Patiala, Sultanpur Lodi and so on), my fascination for Sikhs and their ways of living only intensified. During the corona-lockdown, then, I relived my Punjab experiences by going through my Indian sketches and photographs. Probably my subsequent drawing of Sikhs was partially fed also by the fact that I empathized very much with the farmers protest in New Delhi. I closely follow(ed) the daily news, including the numerous messages, photographs, and film-clips from the Sikh community through social media. All those men and women of all ages striving
for a cause with so much dignity and in such a communal way really touched my heart. Men who could well have been my grandfather offering food and water to the very same policemen that harassed them earlier: incredible! Simultaneously, I was impressed also by the voluntarily help of the Sikh community to people in need of oxygen in Delhi. Maybe I channelized such feelings in my drawing. Through Instagram I also came to known about the work of photographers who recorded the farmers protest in Delhi. Some of their photographs gripped me instantly and, in fact, two of the included drawings in this essay are based on them. But, indeed, why Sikh men only? To some extent, no doubt, this has to do with the fact that I began to recognize female Sikhs only at a later stage. Further, I am still not happy with the few Sikh women that I have drawn so far, and I therefore selected only men for this essay. But no worries, women will come too.

Could you tell us something about your way of drawing?

Most of all I like to work with pen and ink, and I have made numerous drawings in that medium of Indian street views, especially of cramped full bazaar shops. But then one day in 2019, I made my first portrait with a red pencil. To my own surprise, I was satisfied with the result and from there onwards I simply continued to draw most of my portraits in that medium. Coincidentally, I realized only recently that the name of that specific red pencil is ‘Koh-i-Noor Hardtmuth “Gioconda”’: how appropriate for my Sikh men indeed! In general, I tend to choose sepia/red/orange colours, also for my ink works. Maybe this has something to do with an idea of timelessness, just as in the case of sepia photographs. At the same time, I recognize that by using pencil I miss the colourfulness of the Sikhs, especially of their turbans and shawls (and of course of the female salwar kameez and phulkari dupatta), and of India at large. Yet again, although I so far found enough challenge in drawing monochrome, maybe colour will come one day too. As for paper, I made most of my favourite drawings on hand-made Indian paper. I especially like the fact that its rough texture gives a good grip to the pen and that it absorbs both ink and chalk in a beautiful way.

My Sikh drawings only came out accidentally during the corona-period. It was not planned. Earlier, I mainly drew street views, forts, and temples rather than people. In the process of making these Sikh portraits, then, I encountered several problems. To begin with, I never took my photographs with the idea of drawing them later. Hence, they were often shot in bad light conditions and that created difficulties. For instance, sunlight from above, say around midday in India, leads to weird shadows around the eyes and nose, which generally makes the image flatter. I am generally too shy to ask someone to pose in a certain way, yet maybe I will have more courage to do so in the future, to manipulate lightening conditions. On the other hand, working from photographs had the advantage that I could zoom in on specific details and notice things that I would never have seen when sketching on the spot. In each portrait, I found the intricate drapery of both turban and clothes particularly challenging. I practiced repeatedly with a blocked dishcloth to get things right. Eventually, I learned that no turban is alike. I often became preoccupied with the structure and texture of beards and moustaches too. Unlike for turbans and cloth, the use of photographs was less helpful here. On the contrary, when I enlarged a photograph to see details of a certain beard, I often got entangled in bundles of hair and lost the idea of the thing as a whole!
I based this drawing on a photograph showing a group of nine Sikhs that I encountered during a visit to Anandpur Sahib’s Virasat-e-Khalsa Museum in 2014. This man stood out for me in the group and his portrait was one of the first cases that I was truly satisfied with using red chalk.
I met this friendly *granthi* (custodian) near the Akal Takhat, the primary Sikh centre directly opposite the Golden Temple. He was just coming out of one of those little rooms around the building where *granthis* continuously read the Sikh scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib. I am particularly happy that I managed to convey the friendliness that this man radiated and the texture of his beard.

**Illustration 2.** Golden Temple, Amritsar, 2014 (photographer Emily de Klerk).
This man haunted me for quite some time; I must have made more than ten drawings of him using different materials. He was delighted to pose for me and hence the photograph has almost ideal lightening.

**Illustration 3.** Nakodar, 2014 (photographer Emily de Klerk).
This drawing is made from a beautiful photograph from 1910 that I found in the Life Archive. It is entitled 'A Punjabi man', but I have always assumed that he is a Sikh. I particularly love the complexity of his turban.
This man I saw in the langar of Amritsar’s Golden Temple. I had never seen such a combination of a turban (blue) with a huge shawl (orange) and loved it instantly. Also, I was attracted to the fact that this man with his grand appearance was simply making chapatis.
Willingly and proudly, this man posed for me at Amritsar’s Golden Temple. He had a decorated walking-stick in his left hand, but ultimately the lop-sided turban and the nek-chain did it for me.

The main challenge of this portrait were the glasses, which always distort facial features. I love the atmosphere of this friendly but pensive man looking downwards.

While following the New Delhi farmer protests, I came into contact through Instagram with the Indian film director Param Shiv. We became fan of each other’s work. He truly makes amazing photographs. I was particularly struck by this praying Sikh. Such tranquillity amidst all the turmoil. The photograph was taken at night and beautifully contrasts light and darkness.

I find Jaskaran Singh another inspiring photographer. Admirably, he aims to keep the New Delhi farmer protests in the limelight through his wonderful photographs and film-clips. The man of this portrait has a lazy eye, which I initially found strange to draw, yet in this case I stuck to reality!

I still vividly remember the moment that a nihang (member of militant Sikh sect) sat down next to me in a local bus somewhere between Sultanpur Lodhi and Nakodar. Nobody looked up, but I was completely gobsmacked. What kind of man was this with that incredible turban and all that weaponry? Later, I saw nihangs elsewhere in Punjab, including in groups riding on their horses or making their camp along the road. No doubt, they are great for drawing. Perhaps that my interest in nihangs has a streak of exotism, yet simultaneously I wonder how Indian/Sikh elites view them nowadays.

**Illustration 10.** Nihang, Patiala, 2014 (photographer Emily de Klerk).
I encountered the *nihang* in this drawing, which is my first portrait in pen and ink, near Patiala’s Gurdwara Dukh Niwaran Sahib. He was very friendly and keen to pose for me. His head truly disappears beneath the amazing turban full of daggers, quoits (a steel ring and weapon peculiar to *nihangs*) and *khandas* (a vertical two-edged sword over a quoit, with two crossed sabres below the quoit). In result, the greater part of his face is in the shadow.

Note by Bob van der Linden:
Emily Eden found *nihangs* (whom she called *Akalis*, as was common at that time) ‘very picturesque’, a term that she frequently used to mean ‘approved for painting’. She included a portrait of three of them in her *Portraits of the Princes and People of India* with the following accompanying explanatory text:

*Akalees* or Immortals, Sikh religious devotees, being very wild in appearance and turbulent characters. They formerly were largely employed in the Sikh armies and were often remarkable for acts of desperate courage, but their licence renders them formidable to any regular Government and Runjeet Singh gradually reduced their numbers, and broke their power by distributing them in small companies among his disciplined battalion; their blue dresses, their high-peaked turbans, the rings of steel, which they wear as the peculiar emblems of their devotion to the first great military leader of the Sikhs Gooroo Govind, and the profusion and variety of their arms make them very picturesque objects.

Interestingly, Emily’s nephew William Osborne, who in an act of sheer nepotism was given the job of Military Secretary to her brother when he was Governor-General and together with them travelled ‘up the country’, had a somewhat different opinion about the *Akalis*. As he wrote in his travelogue *The Camp and Court of Runjeet Singh* (1840), which he illustrated himself and includes a portrait of two *Akalis* as well as of a mounted one:

They are without exception, the most insolent and worthless race of people in all India. They are religious fanatics, and acknowledge no ruler and no laws but their own; think nothing of robbery, or even murder, should they happen to be in the humour for it. They move about constantly, armed to the teeth, and it is not an uncommon thing to see them riding about with a drawn sword in each hand, two more in their belt, a matchlock at their back, and three or four pairs of quoits fastened round their turbans.

In fact, although Maharaja Ranjit Singh employed the *Akalis* as a sort of irregular soldier, Osborne witnessed how they habitually disrespected him while on parade:

Though Runjeet Sing has considerably moderated the nuisance, he has no means exterminated it, and has signalily failed in emancipating himself from their insults and abuse, for at any review where any of these regiments may be paraded, it is still common occurrence for them, on marching past him, to throw handfuls of musket balls at his feet, and abuse and insult him in every sort of manner, frequently threatening his life – a threat which in more than one instance they have attempted to fulfil. The Maharaja bears it all with the greatest coolness, and they proceed with perfect impunity until they are detected in any great crime, such as robbery or murder, when he shows no mercy, and they are immediately deprived of either their noses, ears, arms or legs, according to the degree of their offence.
Notes

1. About this march, which due to the heat progressed for only two hours a day, between six o’clock and eight o’clock in the morning, Emily Eden wrote in her characteristically ironic style: ‘It seems wicked to move 12,000 people with their tents, elephants, camels, horses, trunks, &c., for so little, but there is no help for it’. In Eden (1983, 31).

2. Bruno Ernst (b. 1926) is a pseudonym of Hans de Rijk, a Dutch physicist, teacher of mathematics, physics and cosmography, publicist, and science popularizer, who became internationally known for his books on the oeuvre of M. C. Escher. Under six pseudonyms, he published over 250 works on subjects ranging from sundials and astronomy to calligraphy and art. His motto is ‘Nescius omnium curiosus sum’ (I know nothing but am curious about everything).

3. The khanda is the modern insignia of the Khalsa, the spiritual-military order established by Guru Gobind Singh in 1699. The origins of the nihangs are unknown, but they themselves claim to be the true representatives of Guru Gobind Singh and accordingly of the true Khalsa.

4. Eden (1844, Plate 5, no page number).

5. Osborne (1840, 143). The portrait of the two Akalis is to be found between pages 144 and 145, and that of the mounted one between pages 180 and 181.

6. Osborne (1840, 147).

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