

New perspectives in visual studies: the contributions of Kavita Singh

The Infosys Prize in Humanities for 2018 has been awarded to Kavita Singh, who is currently the Dean, School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi. A tremendously versatile scholar, she combines research and teaching with effortless ease, charting out an inspiring legacy in the process. Her publications display reflections on the history of museums in colonial and post-colonial India; the global art museum; debates surrounding repatriation; religious objects and secularization of art; religious revivalism and its cultural forms; heritage discourse; historiography of art history; connecting art histories; history of Indian courtly painting and painterly style as a vehicle of meaning; the circulation of paintings; Mughal–Rajput artistic interactions, and the arts of the Deccan.

Pedagogical interventions

At the School of Arts and Aesthetics where she has taught since its foundation in 2001, Singh was part of a visionary team that chalked out a multi-disciplinary integrated Master's programme covering visual arts, theatre and performance, and later cinema, creating a first-of-its-kind intervention at the level of teaching, learning and research in the vast field of humanities in India. Radically, against established norms, the School does not offer a practice-based programme of the creative arts – in this case, fine arts, theatre and film – but focuses on critical discourse, which allows disciplinary independence as well as critical distance from practice-based curricula. Singh and her colleagues have been instrumental in shaping, delineating and invigorating the pedagogic trajectory of visual studies as a discipline in 21st century South Asia. Visual studies broadly encompass the discipline of art history as well as a range of topics that engage with visuality, from images found in popular culture such as on matchboxes, to iconic objects such as the Ashokan Lion Capital that serves as a visual emblem of the Indian Republic even today. Visual studies as a discipline traverse a field that goes well beyond the empirical remit of 'art history' – seen as an enlightenment discipline, and often as an adjunct to what is considered the more

formidable discipline of history. It actively embraces not just history, but also philosophy, anthropology, sociology, as well as literary, cultural and visual theories. Singh's own work and teaching have reflected this disciplinary shift, but in a variety of ways, her interventions have been crucial in ensuring this shift, freeing the visual image/object from the confines of a provenance, period and style-based analysis, still prevalent in the pedagogical approach to 'art objects' in South Asia. Not only has this allowed her to cover vastly different subjects, but also different periods, from 16th century illuminated manuscripts to 20th century holocaust museums. Singh's wide-ranging engagement and interests have enabled some of the most exciting doctoral research works conducted under her supervision, which have in turn further strengthened the field.

Research and critical trajectory (with inputs from Deepti Mulgund)

Singh received her Ph D in the History of Art from Panjab University, Chandigarh in 1996, Master of Fine Arts in the History of Art from M.S. University of Baroda in 1987 and Bachelor of Arts in English Literature from Lady Shri Ram College, University of Delhi in 1985. Singh's doctoral research, on scroll painting traditions from Rajasthan and Bengal, reflects her early foray into the study of visual narratives, display and representations – critical preoccupations that inform her work even today. Her recent books and monographs include *Scent upon a Southern Breeze: The Synaesthetic Arts of the Deccan* (edited volume, Marg Publications, Mumbai, 2018); *Real Birds in Imagined Gardens: Mughal Painting between Asia and Europe* (Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, 2017); *Museum Storage and Meaning: Tales from the Crypt* (co-edited with Mirjam Brusius, Routledge UK, 2017); *Museums, Heritage, Culture: Into the Conflict Zone* (Reinwardt Academy, Amsterdam University of the Arts, 2015), and *No Touching, No Spitting, No Praying: The Museum in South Asia* (co-edited with Saloni Mathur, Routledge India, 2015). While it is impossible to do justice to her work in the space provided here, the following section will provide a

glimpse into her broader critical trajectory with a few exemplars.

Singh's cosmopolitan approach offers much-needed correctives to the parochial or even nationalist view that cultures in pre-modern times had independent lines of development. On the contrary, they were sustained by and grew through contacts with other cultures, near and far. Therefore, every artistic product is reflective of a dialogic engagement with a multiplicity of cultures. Whether that was conciliatory or confrontational, subversive or citational, depended on contextual paradigms. Premised on this hypothesis, Singh has mounted vast and intricate frameworks of transcultural and transhistorical matrices around her objects of study, often challenging the established order of art histories based on artificially created nationalist, religious and even stylistic boundaries. As a specialist in Mughal and Rajput paintings, for instance, she has steadfastly questioned the sharp aesthetic divides posited between the two; where Rajput painting is seen as quintessentially capturing the esoteric mystic of the Indian psyche as opposed to the shallower refrains of Mughal paintings which had failed to penetrate the true metaphysical depths of the Eastern mind. Singh has repeatedly pointed out that political alliances and familial connections between the Mughal and Rajput courts made such dichotomies and superfluous. She has enumerated the rich artistic and creative collaborations between Rajput and Mughal courts, which had established a deeply enmeshed, hybrid cultural well-spring in North India. In a seminal essay on the topic, 'A knowing look: appropriation and subversion of the Mughal idiom in Rajput paintings of the eighteenth century', Singh¹ delineates the processes through which artists who left the shrinking Mughal painting ateliers in the 17th and 18th centuries found patrons in wealthy Rajput courts. Charting out the new surroundings that these erstwhile Mughal artists found themselves in, she analyses how they re-inscribed their practice within a new courtly trajectory through means of repetition, citation, appropriation and subversion. In this process of re-signification of their Mughal artistic heritage, the artists offered telling and often conscious commentaries on the

political imperatives of their time. The political imperatives behind courtly paintings form a central theme in her work, for example, in her essay 'Congress of kings: notes on a painting of Muhammad Shah Rangeela having sex'². Here she boldly brings her own 'knowing look' and offers a refreshingly original visual engagement with the painting under consideration. In a masterful demonstration of her method and skill, she concentrates on every microscopic detail of the page to reveal the deep symbolic allusions through which this intimate portrait of the 18th century Mughal emperor, struggling with diminishing political control, ill-health and rumoured impotency could have helped reassert the strength and vigour of his empire in the minds of the public. Crucially, in doing so she opens up questions about circulation of court paintings, their target audience, their visual reach as well as extra-visual engagement as lines of enquiry. The reception of Indian paintings is a field of study that is still little looked at and Singh has shown continuous efforts to bring it out of the shadows. The themes of repetition, citation, appropriation and subversion mentioned above, flow into her most recent publication titled *Real Birds in Imagined Gardens*. One of the trends in early writing on Mughal painting had been the tendency to offer a linear trajectory of stylistic development from Persian influence to the co-opting of central Indian painting traditions to the eventual embracing of European stylistic traditions. Since the 1990s, however, scholarship in Mughal arts proposed more critical expositions into the actual dialectics of these supposed transitions, to reveal nuanced, conscious and ecumenical engagements on part of the Mughal artists with the array of traditions they encountered. Singh takes this scholarly tradition forward in her study of paintings made under emperors Akbar and Jahangir, and demonstrates how the painting tradition underwent repeated cycles of adoption, rejection and revival of the Persian and European styles, motivated both by the aesthetic interests as well the political dynamics of a large, diverse and cosmopolitan population that formed the Mughal ecumene.

In the field of museum and heritage studies, Singh has emerged as one of the foundational scholars of the modern discipline in India, looking at museum

collections, museums and heritage complexes as a whole, rather than at individual objects. Deftly working through meta-narratives like the enlightenment, state, colonialism, post-colonialism, and recent preoccupations with multiculturalism and universalism, she weaves into the interstices, micro-narratives of the local and the immediate on a contextual case-by-case basis, rejecting clichés and producing surprising conceptual categories along the way. For example in her essay 'Material fantasy: museums in colonial India'³, Singh sets out, with forensic precision, to lay bare the minutiae of the development of museums in colonial India. Even as she studies the colonial enterprise of 'knowledge production', Singh agitates the ready prism of Foucauldian theories of knowledge-power-control, by putting forward the notion of the 'foundling', her appellation for the first museums in India which were founded, not by the grand machinery of colonial power, but by amateur scholars and private individuals. In other words, they were foundlings that were 'thrust upon' the care of the colonial administration propelled by practical requirements. Singh's work has constantly challenged us to look closely at how museum collections have been built, and the purposes they have served, the creation and canonization of categories of Indian art and crucially the engagement between the museum and public, the space of the museum and the objects on display. She has studied the re-signification of colonial museums in context of Indian nationalism and the multitudinous fissures of post-colonial encounters. These are also the themes that run through the co-edited volume with Saloni Mathur *No Touching, No Spitting, No Praying: The Museum in South Asia* (2015). In 'The temple's eternal return: Swaminarayan Akshardham complex in Delhi', Singh⁴ provides a fascinating study of a new and self-proclaimed 'heritage complex', its architectural, visual language and stylistic choices to capture its political effect. Her ability for surprises is reflected in another co-edited volume, *Museum Storage and Meaning: Tales from the Crypt*, where she and her fellow scholars engaged with that which is hidden from sight in museum storage, and unearthed the social, political, material, epistemic as well as economical imperatives behind museum displays. Singh looks at museums and cultural heritage not just as sites

of confluence, but also conflict. In *Museums, Heritage, Culture: Into the Conflict Zone*, she discusses cultural flashpoints that occurred in South Asia which generated tensions, anxieties, distrust and anger, and precipitated crises between communities, cultures or nations; for example, destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan. Also critically important in this context is her work on repatriation of cultural objects such as the Amravati sculptures or the Kohinoor. While it is one thing for a sovereign nation such as India to demand its artefacts back, it is quite another thing for a 'virtual nation' like Tibet with a government in exile to do the same for a 'homeless' population, a theme she takes up in 'Repatriation without Patria: repatriating for Tibet'⁵. Last but not the least, the question of 'theft' not just of cultural heritage but also the violent theft of lives, community and territory finds its way in her work on museums dedicated to historical trauma, an area few scholars have ventured into. In 'Ghosts of future nations: the uses of the Holocaust museum paradigm in India'⁶, Singh analyses two such 21st century institutions in the country – the modest Tibet Museum at the refugee colony in Dharmshala with its permanent exhibition titled 'A long look homeward', and the far more extravagant Khalsa Heritage complex, a multimillion dollar project, both dedicated to the memorialization of violent encounters. As she continues to expand her formidable body of research and explore new avenues, Singh's depth and versatility have already cemented an outstanding legacy in the field of humanities in India.

Curatorial initiatives

The same critical engagements that have informed research have enabled her curatorial work. In the past, as Guest Curator at the San Diego Museum of Art in California, USA, Singh was co-curator of 'Power and desire: Indian Paintings from the Binney collection', an exhibition of Indian miniature paintings organized in collaboration with the Asia Society, New York, that travelled through the US, Europe and Asia between 1998 and 2000. More recently, in 2015, she co-curated with Preeti Bahadur, 'Nauras: the many arts of the Deccan', that exhibited the flourishing arts and composite cultures of the Deccani Sultanates between the

15th and 18th centuries. The exhibition was a collaboration between the National Museum and The Aesthetics Project, and had more than a hundred objects drawn from the National Museum's collections of paintings, manuscripts, textiles, metalwork, arms and armour, decorative art, as well as a set of ragamala paintings borrowed from the National Gallery of Modern Art. The exhibition and the accompanying symposium spearheaded by Singh brought much needed attention to Deccani arts, a subject that is often overshadowed by the voluminous studies on Mughal and even Rajput arts. The exhibition and the symposium culminated in the publication of the edited volume, *Scent Upon A Southern Breeze: The Synaesthetic Arts of the Deccan*. As part of her course 'On curating', Singh also co-curated two acclaimed exhibitions along with her students and colleagues from the School of Arts and Aesthetics, JNU. 'Where in the world' in collaboration with the Devi Art Foundation, Gurgaon in 2008–09, addressed critical questions of the impact of globalization and economic liberalization on contemporary arts in India. The exhibition 'Waste' in 2014 was conceptualized by Singh, wherein students with the help of the NGO 'Chintan' interacted with ragpickers to gain perspectives on the un-

seen afterlife of that which is discarded, demonstrating once again her preoccupations with objects hidden out of sight.

Awards and honours

Kavita Singh has been awarded numerous grants and fellowships, most notably from the Getty Foundation, Los Angeles; the Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Mass; the Victoria and Albert Museum, London and the Asia Society, New York. More recently, before she assumed the stewardship of the School of Arts and Aesthetics as Dean in 2017, she had received the Clark–Oakley Fellowship, Williams College and Clark Art Institute, 2015–16. She is also a member of Advisory Council, Research and Academic Programmes, at the Clark Art Institute. Since 2012, she has been a member of the India–Europe Advanced Research Network group on the History of Museums established by the Wissenschaftskolleg (Institute for Advanced Studies), Berlin; and member, Advisory Board, *Archives of Asian Art*, an international peer-reviewed journal published by the University of Hawaii and Asia Society. She was Advisor to South Asia Initiative, Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2011; member of Transcultural Visuality Learning Group at the Cluster of Excel-

lence 'Asia and Europe in a Global Context', University of Heidelberg, 2010–2012 and member, Advisory Board, *de Arte*, Visual Arts Journal of the University of South Africa Press, 2008–2013. Between 2009 and 2014, she headed a partner group between School of Arts and Aesthetics, and Max Planck Institut-Kunsthistorisches Institut, Florence, to run a five-year project titled 'The temple and the museum: cross-cultural sites of art'.

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2. Singh, K., In *A Magical World: New Visions of Indian Painting* (ed. Aitken, M. E.), Marg Publications, Mumbai, 2017, pp. 38–49.
3. Singh, K., In *Art and Visual Culture in India* (ed. Sinha Gayatri), Marg, 2009, pp. 1857–1947, pp. 40–57.
4. Singh, K., *Artibus Asiae*, 2010, **70**(1), 47–76.
5. Singh, K., *J. Mater. Cult.*, 2010, **15**(2), 131–155.
6. Singh, K., In *Museum Transformations* (eds Phillips, R. B. and Coombes, A. E.), Blackwell, Oxford, 2015, pp. 29–60.

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MEETING REPORT

Doubling farmers' income*

Keeping in view the present scenario of agricultural production system and the need of the hour, a conference on doubling farmers' income was organized. More than 300 students and about 95 teachers/scientists/researchers from 15 national institutions across the country participated in the conference. One researcher from Tanzania was also among the participants.

*A report on a two-day conference under the major theme 'Doubling the Farm Income: Challenges and Strategies' organized by Agrivision, a non-profitable organization of agricultural scientists, researchers and agricultural students in collaboration with Agricultural Scientist Forum, and Chaudhary Sarwan Kumar Himachal Pradesh Agricultural University during 23–24 April 2018 at Palampur.

With the intention of keeping pace with climate change and finding a solution to the challenges being faced by the farming community, the prime objectives of the conference were as follows:

- Sensitizing the scientists, researchers, and students associated with the field of agriculture, towards doubling farmers' income with special reference to hill agriculture.
- To mitigate the challenges and formulate strategies for doubling farm income through high-tech agriculture, crop diversification, natural farming and sustainable animal husbandry for increasing livelihood security of the hill and mountain farmers.

The outcome of the conference will facilitate sharing of scientific and personal

experiences by different stakeholders, including teachers/scientists/researchers and students across different agricultural disciplines. The deliberations and recommendations have been documented in the form of proceedings and will be shared at different platforms for wider circulation with an objective of augmenting the sustainable farming systems of the country as a helping tool/document for doubling farmers' income by 2022. The conference aimed at providing a platform for the agricultural scientists, professional experts, resource persons and students dealing with different aspects of integrated farming systems. Undergraduate students participated in the general poster and declamation contest, which was part of the conference for sensitizing youth regarding problems being faced by the farming community.