



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

## 20th Century Realistic Punjabi Artists Of India : A Study

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### Abstract

The contribution of **Realist Punjabi artists** to modern Indian art is significant in showing cultural identity, social history and imaginative art changes. Their works features traditional dressing, festivals and farm life, these artists blend realism with modernist or abstract techniques, maintaining a connection with traditional themes. Realistic Punjabi artists often draw inspiration from local culture, folklore and the rural lifestyle of Punjab. It helps to preserve and promote Punjabi heritage in the larger Indian context. Through emotive and accessible visuals, these artists highlight past and ongoing challenges in Punjabi and Indian society. The Realistic approach allows for a balance between accurate depiction and symbolic expression, allowing their work to resonate emotionally with audiences. It places their work within a national and international framework, contributing to India's dynamic art scene. offer realistic depictions that resonated with both local audiences and the wider Indian art landscape. His works form a bridge between past and present, tradition and innovation, making a lasting impact on modern Indian art. 'Sobha Singh is one of the most famous painters of Punjab known for his Realistic depictions of Sikh Gurus, warriors and Punjabi women. His art is known for its depth, detail and seamless expression, making him a leading figure in Punjabi realism. **Meher Singh's portraits, Jarnail Singh's Punjabi culture, Amrita Shergill's women, Gurbani of Master Gurdit Singh, Chitrakar Thakur Singh's Bhavan, Bhudrish and female figures, Kirpal Singh's Sikh history, Tilok Singh's Gurbani, C. L. Sharma's Bhudrish, Jarnail Singh's Punjabi culture** etc. have a new identity. For all these painters, art is creation as a form of meditation, neither the subject nor the technique created any obstacle. These were passengers of the same name.'<sup>1</sup>

**Keyword:** Realistic, Punjabi, Artist, Fantasy art

## Introduction

When man was wandering in search of himself, and the world was exploring the art of living, Then he meditated on his mind which changed the view of seeing the beautiful world created by God in his mind and he gave it the form of art which comes from thinking in the form of God. In the earlier days, when the women of the house used to make flowers and plants on the walls to decorate the mud houses and everyone was stunned to see their imaginary art, which he created under the influence of his surroundings, which can be called realistic art in the truest sense. A realist artist is one who mixes elements of realism with stylized or imaginative elements in his artwork. This approach captures real-world details, such as accurate anatomy, lighting, and textures, but with some exaggeration or creative freedom. For example, a realist artist may draw human figures with generally correct proportions but include unusual facial expressions, slightly enhanced colors, or simplified backgrounds. The background of realist art is rooted in an extended history of art movements that explored the balance between realism and abstraction. This approach developed as a reaction to both classical realism and modern abstract art. The history of Realistic art is unique.

### **Classical Realism (Renaissance, Baroque, etc.):**

During the Renaissance and Baroque periods of art, artists such as **Leonardo da Vinci** and **Caravaggio** were known for mastering realistic representation, using techniques such as perspective, chiaroscuro (light and shadow), and accurate anatomy. These works focused heavily on capturing reality in fine detail, which laid the foundation for later artists to experiment with different levels of realism.

### **Modern art of the future**

Around 1818-19, J.M.W. Turner exhibited his famous historical revolutionary painting '**The Raft of Medusa**'. In this picture the painter made the subject of his picture an unforgettable accident of his time, depicting very accurately the pathetic scene of the passengers trying to save their lives after the shipwreck. Never before had any painter painted such a realistic picture of a social event of his time.

Before this, European artists, especially French artists, painted only religious, mythological, classical or historical subjects and the images in their paintings were purely fictional or based on Greco-Roman art. which had no particular relation to real life. On this path, art was following a certain path for centuries. J.M.W. Turner trumpeted a revolution in the field of art with 'Raft of the Medusa' and directed the future direction of art which was later used by artists such as **Delacroix**, **Corot**, **Courbet** and **Daubigny** to depict contemporary society and life. In a realistic manner he made it his aim and executed it very effectively, leading to the emergence of the modern art of the future. This suggests that the basis of modern art is to make original expressions in response to or portray contemporary dreams and life, which became an indicator of the revolution in European art. A second important foundation of modern art became evident when Edouard Manet exhibited his famous painting 'Luncheon on the Grass' at the Salon d' Refusee in 1863, which was not only a nude realistic depiction of contemporary life, but also proved that every artist should have complete freedom in what manner or style he should express himself.<sup>2</sup>

## **Company School (19th Century)**

Realism in Indian art gained prominence during the British colonial period, particularly with the rise of the Company School of Art, where local Indian artists began incorporating European techniques of perspective and shading to depict Indian life and landscapes.

**Raja Ravi Varma** (1848-1906) is a major figure in this development. He combined traditional Indian themes with European realism. His work is considered a turning point in modern Indian art.

## **Beginning of the 20th century**

In the early 20th century, Indian artists began experimenting with realism, trying to create a distinct national identity in their work. Artists such as **Amrita Sher-Gill** and members of the Bengal School of Art combined Realistic techniques with Indian subject matter, contributing to the country's nationalist movement.

## **Realistic Art in Punjab**

Realist Art in Punjab (mid-20th century onwards) As in other parts of India, Punjabi artists during the British Company School period were influenced by European realism. Art schools established during this period, such as the Mayo School of Arts (now the National College of Arts in Lahore, Pakistan), introduced Punjabi artists to Western techniques of Realistic drawing, portraiture, and landscape painting.

During the 19th century, Realistic depictions of Sikh rulers, saints and famous figures gained prominence. Many of these portraits combine European techniques with traditional Punjabi aesthetics. Some of these were appointed by the ruling Sikh Maharajas and patrons.

**Sikh Art and Realism** Sikh art often uses realism to depict the life of the Gurus, historical battles and religious events. Artists would capture scenes of Sikh history and daily life in great detail, using realism to convey a sense of reverence and historical accuracy.

After the partition of India in 1947, many artists in Punjab used realism to capture the trauma of partition and the displacement of the people. Realist depictions of refugee camps, migration and post-Partition became important themes. Punjabi art in the post-independence era adopted realism in depicting rural life, focusing on hardworking farmers, vibrant rural life, and celebrations of Baisakhi and other festivals. The use of realism in Punjab, especially in Sikh art, is not only about aesthetic appeal, but also about preserving and celebrating history, culture and identity. Detailed representation of important religious and historical figures helped keep these stories alive for future generations. Sobha Singh Ji's achievement is unique among these contemporary artists.<sup>3</sup>

## **Here are some of the main artists known for their work:**

Sobha Singh (1901–1986) was a prominent Punjabi artist known for his significant contribution to realist art, combining realism with a distinct artistic vision that absorbed elements of Indian spirituality, culture and folklore. His work is often characterized by a deep connection with Sikh history and Indian religious figures, which he depicts in a realistic style. Sobha Singh was a staunch custodian of India's cultural heritage. The main aim of the artist was to express feelings of love, peace and harmony through his paintings. He painted to increase the mental power of the Indian masses. He portrayed **Sohni-Mahinwal** to the delight of all Punjabis.

He painted "**Kangara Brides**" and **landscapes**. Sardar Sobha Singh was primarily a divine painter. The portraits of the Sikh Gurus are known as his major works. Life portraits of **Sikh Gurus, Lord Rama, Lord Krishna** and **Jesus Christ** are lovingly kept in many of our homes. combining realism with idealistic images of spiritual peace and wisdom. Indian epics like **Ramayana** and **Mahabharata** as well as paintings of historical figures like Maharaja Ranjit Singh. His works struck a balance between Realistic detail and romanticism, making historical and mythological subjects accessible to a wider audience. His Realistic style allowed for storytelling through subtle facial expressions and seamless compositions. From this, he became the national warrior of India like **Mahatma Gandhi, Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru** and **Lal Bahadur Shastri** etc. are the reflection of his national vision. His painting adorns one of the balconies of the Art Gallery of Parliament House in New Delhi. A panel depicting the development of Sikh history shows **Guru Nanak** with **Bala** and **Mardana** on one side and **Guru Gobind Singh** on the other. Trained in Western art techniques, Singh combined the purity of Western realism with the fluidity and spiritual depth of Indian classical styles, creating a unique realist style that was both accessible and profound. Sobha Singh has done monumental works.<sup>4</sup>

He was truly a true creator and used many techniques to perfect a style. The mediums he used were **water colour, oil colour, ink, pastel poster colour, pencil, clay, plaster of Paris, cement and bronze**. His creations exude beauty, delicacy and finesse. They used oil colors with wash technique or watercolor. Supernatural realism sheds light on the subject. Sobha Singh used delicate and **soft colors of reds, ochres, blues and greens**. Persian influence is seen in ascetic works. Sobha Singh belongs to the generation of artists who were associated with the Indian Renaissance of the time. It was a period of social and religious reform and cultural awakening.<sup>5</sup>

### **SG Thakur Singh**

SG Thakur Singh was a prominent realist artist of the early 20th century. S.G. Thakur Singh was born in 1894 in Verka, a suburban village of Amritsar. A style that combines realism with a touch of impressionism and expressionism. His work often focuses on depicting scenes of rural Punjab, landscape, people and culture, while imbuing them with his unique artistic vision. This allowed him to present his subjects with a combination of still life and artistic abstraction. Thakur Singh's Realistic style involved capturing the essence of his subjects rather than strictly following the details. His use of color, light and form gave his paintings a mood or feeling that went beyond mere realism. Through this approach, he was able to evoke emotional depth, while maintaining a recognizable depiction of Punjabi life and landscape.<sup>6</sup>

His art is celebrated for being deeply connected to the culture and traditions of Punjab and he played an important role in bringing the artistic sensibilities of the region to a wider audience. His ability to balance realism with artistic interpretation made him a pioneer of quasi-realism in Indian painting, particularly in the Punjabi artistic tradition. SG Thakur Singh was a realist leading artist of the early 20th century. His works are characterized by detailed realism, capturing the cultural depth of the region.

According to a researcher S. G. Thakur Singh not only elegantly documented countless glimpses of the country's landscapes, he was well versed in architectural aspects such as perspective and projection. He even accompanied some multi-color publications of his works with apt descriptions. Also tried to publish it so that future generations can get a chance to see a glimpse of India. This great artist had a photographic eye and memory and another feature of his work is that he poured his soul into the pictorial subjects and his works do not look like mere copies of the originals, but divinity in these magnificent works. There is a kingdom of those who bathe in the light that transmits that awakening.<sup>7</sup>

### **Amrita Sher-Gil**

Amrita Sher-Gil, often considered one of India's most important realist artists, made a significant contribution to realist art by blending Western techniques with traditional Indian themes. Her work combined European modernism and Indian themes, often focusing on the lives of rural Indian women and common people, depicting them with a deep sense of realism and empathy. His Realistic sentimental paintings and everyday village scenes resonate deeply with the agrarian and folk culture of Punjab. Amrita Sher-Gil's semi-realist style was a major development in Indian art, blending realism with a modernist approach to conveying social themes and emotional depth.

“Amrita Shergill - After Yamini Roy, Amrita Shergill's name appears in the history of modern painting. Yamini Roy remained in certain constraints but Amrita Shergill presented her freely. Originality and progressive tendencies are found in his art. He gave birth to a new style by integrating Western modern art and Indian painting.”<sup>8</sup>

Paintings such as "**Bride's Toilet**" (1937) and "**Three Girls**" (1935) are excellent examples of his focus on the simplicity and hardships of Indian rural life, expressed through realistic, yet stylized, imagery. Sher-Gil's realism allowed him to go beyond the representation of the human figure to evoke deeper emotions. Her characters are often portrayed with somber expressions, symbolizing the struggle and isolation of women in Indian society.

His use of earthy tones and soft colors combined with Realistic depictions of Indian people and landscapes, creating a visual narrative that was distinct in early modern Indian art. “There is also technical innovation in their images. In all his paintings, the particular elements and rules of beauty are well represented. Their colors are transparent, the images intellectual order, true passion, deep impact in ethereal silence.”<sup>9</sup>

### **Kirpal Singh**

A contemporary Punjabi artist, Kirpal Singh is known for his Realistic paintings depicting Punjabi landscapes, rural life and religious scenes. His work continues the tradition of realist art while incorporating modern sensibilities. “Much of his work is impressionistic and dramatic. Allegrico's influence is reflected in their paintings.”<sup>10</sup>

Especially has contributed significantly to the Indian art scene. His works often blend realism with a touch of abstraction and capture the essence of the subject while leaving room for interpretive expression. He has

explored themes rooted in Indian culture, spirituality and everyday life, maintaining a balance between traditional and modern art forms. Kirpal Singh's Realistic style often features attention to detail, especially in the depiction of human figures and emotions. He focuses on form, color and composition to bring a life-like quality to his paintings, but he does not limit himself to the purity of absolute realism. His works can sometimes feature imaginative elements, using expressive brushwork or unusual perspectives that go beyond strict realism. In terms of technique, Singh is known for his skillful use of light and shadow, which adds depth and emotional impact to his paintings. His art has been featured in numerous exhibitions and has been influential in shaping modern Indian art, particularly in bridging the gap between traditional realist approaches and more contemporary, interpretive styles.

"The emergence and development of his realistic painting came from studying the works of Russian and European painters. Painter Kirpal Singh ji excelled in his rendering of Jangi Sakya. They were drawn to images published in history books. His paintings have a special quality of evoking a historical environment."<sup>11</sup>

**GS Sohan Singh (1905-1984)** was a renowned painter of Punjab who contributed significantly to the revival and promotion of Sikh art and Punjabi painting. His work played a major role in defining the visual identity of Sikh culture and heritage through depictions of religious, historical and cultural themes.<sup>12</sup>

**Contribution to Punjabi painting** The revival of Sikh heritage is best known for his paintings depicting important moments in Sikh history, including depictions of Sikh gurus, martyrs, and historical events such as battles. His work preserved and promoted Sikh religious and cultural values through vivid, detailed imagery. His painting style combined elements of realism with traditional Indian art forms, bringing a unique visual depth to his works. His attention to detail in depicting Sikh dress, weapons and architecture distinguishes him as an artist who deeply understands the aesthetics of Sikh history. Many contemporary Sikh artists drew inspiration from his works, particularly in how they depicted Sikh gurus and historical events.

Sohan Singh also created paintings based on verses of **Gurbani**. Five of his religious paintings have become very popular **Darbar Sahib, Harmandir Sahib, Gagan Me Thal, Hemkunt Sahib, Dashmesh Guru Gobind Singh Ji's penance, Kashmiri Pandits' cry before Guru Teg Bahadur Ji**. Light colors are used in these images. By doing this, a beautiful and attractive environment has been created. These images captivate the mind because of their color scheme. your's religious images are present in the Central Sikh Museum, Amritsar.<sup>13</sup>

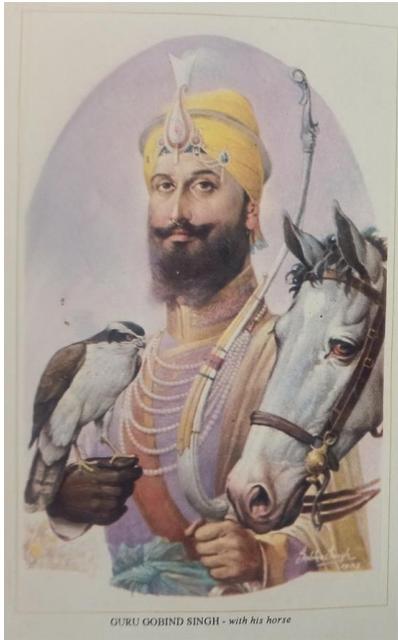
**Meher Singh** was born on 1929 at Lahore. His first love for painting was from childhood. He left his schooling and went to Sr. Sobha Singh for guidance in painting from 1946-48. Artist Meher Singh pushed the tradition of Sikh painting into new territories and was instrumental in creating masterpieces of Sikh history that reflect his creative skill and expertise. Classical realism, clarity of thought and depth of composition characterize his work. As a true disciple of artist Sobha Singh, he imbibed some precious elements of his master's works. The portraits he creates are precise and life like. In some of his paintings the richness of color reigns supreme while painting group portraits of Sikh royalty. An eye for detail for costumes and jewelry is elegant and charming. His great love for drawing shows in his masterpieces and offers a close glimpse of the

rich works of European painters in the Sikh courts. He is also a huge commercial success and his paintings are in the collections of universities, museums, academies and art galleries. He is a very famous portrait painter. Among the impressive paintings that come to mind are '**Robe of Honour**', '**Jehangir's Journey to the Golden Temple**', '**My Farewell to the Battlefield**', '**The Birth of Gobind Rai**', '**Gobind Rai in the Lap of Queen Mai**', '**are included Pictures of Maharaja Ranjit Singh - The Lion of Punjab, His Generals and Courtiers**'.<sup>14</sup>

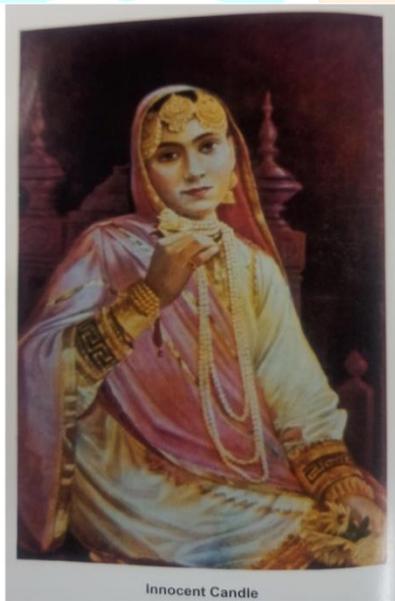
**Sardar Amolak Singh Ji** was born on 2 October 1950 at Amritsar near Harmandir Sahib. He created images by highlighting the social reality through a realistic style. Sikh historical events, Guru Sahibs and rich scenes of rural life have been the subject of his paintings. They are famous artists like Sardar Sobha Singh, M.S. Pandit, Ram Kumar, was influenced by rappins and ravers. Sardar Sobha Singh Ji's artworks have been a source of inspiration for him."<sup>15</sup>

**Taking Sardar Sobha Singh Ji's** life and art as his ideal, he considered him as his Guru and received worthy guidance from him. The influence of Sardar Sobha Singh ji is clearly seen in the paintings of painter Amolak Singh ji. **The style of dress and colors used by him in the portraits of the Gurus shows the influence of Sardar Sobha Singh Ji.** Painter Amolak Singh Ji is a traditionalist painter. His paintings can be divided into two categories. The first category includes paintings that he created on the subject of Sikh history and the second category includes paintings that he inspired from his personal life. He had complete knowledge of colors and also knew the titles of magazines and books **Sri Guru Arjan Dev Ji, Sri Guru HarGobind Singh Ji, Sri Guru Hari Krishna Ji Ji, Sri Guru Teg Bahadur Jiso, Giani Gian Singh Ji, Master Tara Singh Ji, Baba Kharak Singh Ji, Sardar Karnail Singh Ji, Painter Kirpal Singh Ji, Master Gurdit Singh Ji, Principal Bawa Bhan Singh Ji, Bhai Amrik Singh Ji.** There are pictures of martyrs etc. The images of modern Sikhs depicted by him reveal the inner and outer form of individuals.<sup>16</sup>

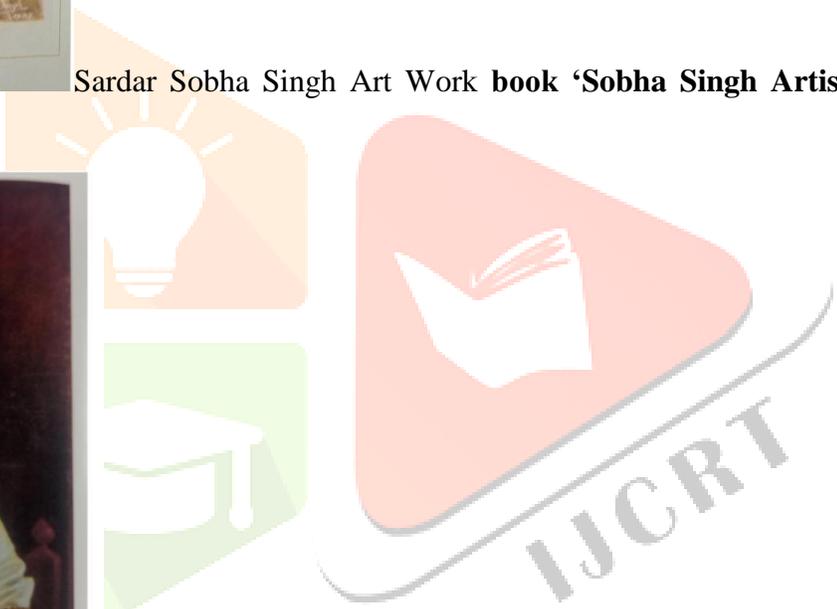
Photos

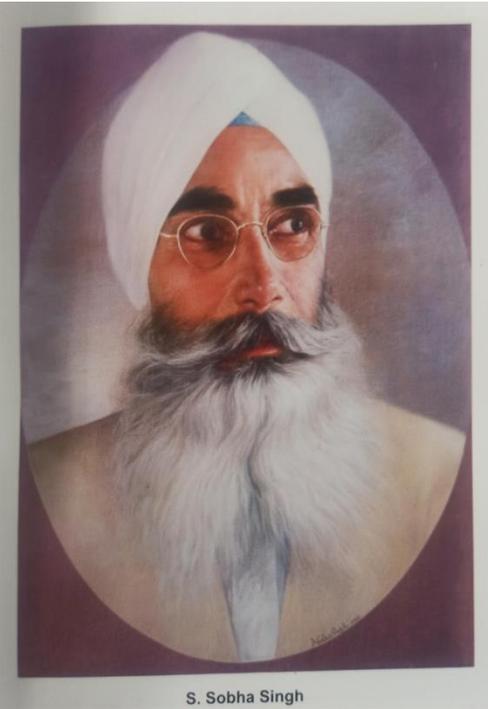


1. **Sardar Sobha Singh Art Work book ‘Sobha Singh Artist, Kulwant singh Khokhar**



2. **SG Thakur Art Work Rani, Dr. Saroj: 2001, Realist Artists of Punjab, Punjab Lalit Kala Akademi, Chandigarh and Lokayat Publications, Chandigarh, Page No-8**





S. Sobha Singh

3. Mehar Singh Art Work Rani, Dr. Saroj: 2001, Realist Artists of Punjab, Punjab Lalit Kala Akademi, Chandigarh and Lokayat Publications, Chandigarh, Page No-18



Baba Deep Singh

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