

## Friends of Global South Asia

Spring 2025



Figure 1: Artist Angela Aujla at Gallery 1065 for FGSA tour.

### Message from the Chair

We are excited to announce our official name change from Friends of South Asia to the Friends of Global South Asia (FGSA)! This is to better reflect ROM's Global South Asia collection as well as our activities here in Toronto and beyond.

In this newsletter, we introduce Santbir Singh, the Associate Curator of Sikh Art and Culture, who is busy with developing a totally new gallery at ROM, while FGSA committee member Samia Naqvi writes about author Ruby Lal's visit to the museum and her visit to a ROM book club. We also have links to videos for events you may have missed including Remembering Indo-Caribbean Legacies through Art and a talk by curator Dr. Deepali Dewan on the photography of Mazer Master. – Piali Roy, Chair.

## An Exciting Moment for Sikh Art and Culture at ROM



Figure 2: Santbir Singh

In November of last year, I joined the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) as the Associate Curator of Sikh Art and Culture. The ROM is currently in the early stages of planning a dedicated gallery of Sikh art and culture, scheduled to open in 2028. Once complete, it will be only the fourth gallery of its kind in North America – and by far the largest. I feel incredibly blessed to be part of this historic initiative. To the best of my knowledge, I am the first curator of Sikh art and culture in the world. My role at the ROM is to work closely with fellow curators, interpretative planners, and designers to help shape the vision and content for this future space.

This gallery is being made possible thanks to the immense generosity and dedication of the Sikh community in Canada, which has raised significant funds to support its development. There is a deep sense of commitment and passion behind this initiative. Sikhs have been in Canada for over a century and have become an integral part of the country's fabric. There's a strong desire within the community to see public institutions reflect and honour Sikh culture, and the ROM is taking a powerful step in that direction. In addition to planning the future gallery, I'm actively organizing temporary exhibitions and public programming related to Sikh themes – from panel discussions to artist talks. One of the most exciting parts of my role is growing the ROM's permanent collection of Sikh art and artifacts, both historical and contemporary. I recently submitted my first

acquisition proposal for a body of work by four female-identifying Sikh Canadian artists – an initiative I hope will soon bring their art into our collection.

With the ROM's upcoming gallery, and the creation of a Sikh Studies Chair at the University of Toronto, Toronto is fast becoming a global centre for Sikh culture and scholarship. It's a very exciting time to be at the ROM, and I'm honoured to be a part of this journey. – Santbir Singh

## Listening in the Silences: Ruby Lal in Conversation



Figure 3: Author Ruby Lal in conversation with Aparita Bhandari.

On May 3, 2025, an eager audience gathered at Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) as Ruby Lal took to the stage to deliver a lecture that did far more than illuminate history: it challenged us to rethink the ways in which women's voices are recovered, interpreted, and remembered. *Adventures of Princess Gulbadan: (Re)Discovering Women's Narratives in South Asian History* brought together scholarly insight and storytelling sensibility in a compelling re-reading of the Mughal world.

Lal's lecture began with a personal anecdote: memories of her "storytelling mother," whose vibrant retellings of myth and memory first introduced Lal to the idea that history

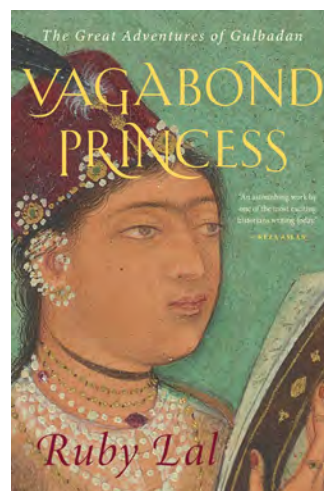
could be felt, not just learned. This intimate thread ran through the rest of the evening, as Lal moved from the personal to the political, weaving together her ongoing efforts to recover women's agency in the grand narratives of Mughal history.

She spoke of Princess Gulbadan not just as a royal chronicler of Humayun's court, but as a daring traveler, an astute observer, and above all, a writer. Gulbadan's memoir, considered the only surviving female-authored manuscript of its kind from the Mughal period, is fragmented and understated, yet, as Lal argued, profoundly radical in its refusal to be erased.

Through painstaking archival work across multiple continents, from the British Library to libraries in Turkey, Sweden, and beyond, Lal has worked to piece together Gulbadan's life and times. She recounted collaborating with art historians and visual artists to bring forth the sensory textures and iconographies surrounding Gulbadan and her contemporaries. The result is not just a biography, but an act of historical reclamation.

What made the evening especially engaging was the rich conversation that followed between Ruby Lal and journalist Aparita Bhandari, who moderated the event. Bhandari's questions were sharp and empathetic, drawing out deeper layers in Lal's research, especially around the emotional and imaginative demands of recovering women's histories.

As fellow audience member Nitin Deckha reflected, Lal's work offers "a feminist counternarrative to the 'official' historical record," one that embraces creativity, curiosity, and a deep commitment to plural ethics. His words echoed the very spirit of the evening: a call not just to recover voices, but to rethink the frameworks we use to listen.



The lecture also served as the culminating event of the Vagabond Princess book club, hosted by ROM. Unlike the public lecture, this final session was an exclusive gathering

for those who had participated in the club – a smaller, more intimate space that allowed for sustained conversation with Lal. I was fortunate to be among those present.

Over the course of the discussion, we had the opportunity to ask Lal detailed questions about her research, including the complexities of translating Gulbadan's memoir from Persian to English, and the silences that surround its missing sections. Lal shared her strong suspicion that the absent portions of the manuscript were likely erased or destroyed – an act of censorship by those in power. As she reminded us, narrative control in the Mughal court was tightly managed, and few accounts could survive without imperial sanction.

It is precisely for this reason, she emphasized, that efforts to reclaim and reimagine these histories are vital. As inheritors of these cultures, traditions, and the legacies of powerful women like Gulbadan, we are also responsible for filling in the gaps, not with speculation for its own sake, but with care, historical insight, and a refusal to let erasure stand unchallenged.

For me, this event was more than an academic engagement; it was a reminder that history is also about tenderness, about who we choose to see, and how much care we bring to their stories.

To study women like Gulbadan is to engage in quiet acts of recovery, resistance, and responsibility. I left ROM not with a sense of completion, but with a deepened sense of curiosity. What other voices lie buried in archives and footnotes? Whose stories still wait for a listener? And how do we, as scholars and readers, learn to listen in the silences? – Samia Naqvi, FGSA committee member

Missed the event? [Watch the video.](#)



## Video: Curator Dr. Deepali Dewan on the Photography of Mazher Master



Figure 5: Curator Dr. Deepali Dewan speaking

[Watch the Dan Mishra Curator of South Asian Art and Culture Dr. Deepali Dewan](#) explore the recently identified archive of photographer Mazher Master (1920-1977) that is part of ROM's collection. This unique archival resource traces his previously unrecognized photographic practice from the 1940s to the 1970s and from Palanpur, Gujarat, India to Karachi, Pakistan to Ottawa, Canada.

Make sure to visit [ROM's YouTube channel](#) for past talks and presentations by ROM speakers and curators.



## 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 Global South Asia**

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**Friends of Global South Asia** is organized by ROM's Department of Museum Volunteers to provide support for the Museum. ROM is an agency of the Government of Ontario.

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