

Manchester Museum Podcast
Season 1: Episode 3

What are the legacies of colonialism?

The Singh Twins in conversation with Nusrat Ahmed

00:00:00 The Singh Twins

We have to learn about it because of misperceptions about the past. So, Empire colonialism is often pictured by some people as this, you know, glorious and benevolent force for good. And yet you know it was far from it in so many ways. A better understanding of the past and how it leaves the legacy in the present can help to change society for the better.

00:00:33 Lowell Wallbank, Manchester Museum

We are delighted to be joined on the podcast today by internationally acclaimed British artists The Singh Twins.

The Singh Twins' distinctive style mixes the traditional practice of Indian miniature painting with eclectic contemporary influences, creating unique works that explore important social, political and cultural issues. Their most recent work explores hidden narratives of empire, colonialism, conflict and slavery with their 2019 Commission for the Manchester Museum, 'Jallianwala Repression and Retribution', commemorating the 100 year anniversary of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre.

The Twins are joined in conversation today by Nusrat Ahmed, the Manchester Museum South Asia Gallery Project Lead.

00:01:28 Nusrat Ahmed, South Asia Gallery Lead, Manchester Museum

The South Asia Gallery, this is going to be the first of its kind in so many ways. When it opens in 2022, it will be the first permanent gallery in the UK that's dedicated to the histories, experiences, cultures and contributions of South Asia diaspora communities. Not only this, but it will be the first time a museum gallery has co-curated at the scale. We've been working alongside these local communities, putting their voices and lived-experiences at the heart of the Gallery.

The Singh Twins have been active members of the South Asia Gallery Collective and this is a group of people from different backgrounds and disciplines; it includes designers, historians, artists, scientists, writers, community members, students. And they've been working with the museum since 2018 to shape the Gallery into something we hope will be unlike any museum exhibition you will have seen before.

In 2019, the Manchester Museum and the Partition Museum in Amritsar, India came together to commemorate the 100th year anniversary of the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre. They co-produced the exhibition 'Jallianwala 1919: Punjab under Siege'. For the exhibition, The Singh Twins presented a unique creative response to this largely hidden episode of British rule in India.

I spoke to them about this artwork, their journey as artists, and the importance of learning overlooked histories.

So a very warm welcome to you both and a big thank you for being part of our podcast.

00:03:30 The Singh Twins

Not at all, thanks for inviting us.

00:03:33 Nusrat Ahmed

Going back to the Jallianwala Bagh exhibition, could you please tell us more about this work? The research you undertook for the artwork and the historical context?

00:03:44 The Singh Twins

Well, the work was basically our artistic response to the centenary of this event, the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre, as it's known, which was basically an atrocity committed under the British rule in India in 1919, whereby a Brigadier General of the British Army opened fire on a peaceful protest. Indians were basically protesting against a tightening of racist laws that were restricting Indian rights and freedoms at that time. So the central panel of this triptych piece, a three part piece, is looking at the massacre itself. And then we have the panel left and right of that. The panel on the left gives a historical context to the event itself, and the panel on the right looks at the legacies of what that event actually led to in terms of the developing relations between Britain and India.

Most of our research for this artwork was based on internet research. I mean, we have, in our earlier days visited India, and we actually visited the park that is now a memorial to this massacre. And so we learned quite a bit of the history at that time, and we're

going back many years now. But it wasn't until Centenary that we really felt as artist this was something that we felt warranted some kind of artistic reflection, not least for the fact that it's an event that is pretty much been hidden or forgotten in certainly, British history. And yet it played such an important part in the way in which Britain and India relations developed. I think it was something that really shook India to the core because I think up to that point, you know, they kind of looked upon England as this sort of, you know, beacon of righteous practice, if I could put it that way, [benevolent rulers almost], and yet here they were opening fire on this innocent crowd of people with no warning, you know, several thousand people were injured and died in in this event, so we wanted to represent this and bring it to a wider audience in the modern day, because it also links into a lot of other sort of atrocities associated with empire and particularly the British Empire, both abroad, but also at home. So, it's a little detail in the artwork relates this massacre to something called the Peterloo Massacre, which is something that happened in Manchester, of course with 100 years that divide the two events. But nevertheless it was a similar kind of occasion where you had this peaceful protest, and the right for peaceful protests being quashed by the authorities.

So the research, as I say, beyond our immediate knowledge of this as teenagers visiting India, pretty much came from internet research but also historical documentation. So, we bought some historical literature; one particular book by a journalist called Horniman, who reported on the event at the time, and was actually an Englishman who exposed what had happened in India, because at that point the British government tried to cover this up. And this book is obviously more than 100 years old now, really detailed what had happened from the Indian perspective, which is really important because the story has not only been hidden, but it's also been told from a predominantly white British perspective.

00:06:52 Nusrat Ahmed

So for me, actually, coming into the Museum, and I came right at the time when the exhibition for the Jallianwala Bagh massacre was being launched, and I felt really sad about the fact that I didn't know about this. I'd never been taught about this in my history lessons and I hadn't had the opportunity or been open to that environment to then go and learn about this history, and it was part of my heritage as a South Asian woman. How important do you think it is that we do learn about our history? And just to expand on that, to actually, for us to be actually honest about what our history was and for people to understand it in more complex details. And that's taking on those and facing those uncomfortable truths at the same time.

00:07:53 The Singh Twins

Yeah, well history is really important to learn about because it basically has an impact on the present, and it helps us to put the present into perspective, particularly, you know, if we're talking about reassessing certain views of the world and the people around us, and how that impacts on present day or current debates and attitudes. So, for example, you know, you have the Brexit campaign, which was very much run on the whole anti-immigration card, if you like it, you know this idea that immigrants are in this country, you know, taking jobs and basically being a drain on, you know, on the country's resources. And, you know, it makes you wonder, you know, where do those kinds of attitudes come from in the first place? It's kind of racist attitudes. But at the same time, you know, people, if they understood the kind of context of why immigrants were here in the first place, you know, in the context of Britain and its empire building. I mean, we certainly wouldn't be here, had it not been for the British Empire, you know, we wouldn't have been here, grandparents wouldn't have come here, and we wouldn't have been born here. But the idea that, you know, this countries, like Britain and their empire, have been built on, you know, the blood, sweat and tears of the people that they ruled over, the so-called immigrant communities that they ruled over. They've always contributed to the building of countries like Britain. I think if people understood that more, there might be more respect for those communities that certain people feel are Other, or have no place in Britain. I mean, there's other examples further afield where history is important, for example, you just look at racism in America, not that it exists only there, but with this recent, you know the horrific murder George Floyd and kind of police victimisation or sort of lynch mentality, if you like, towards Black Americans, which we feel links back to this colonial mindset of white superiority or supremacy, which is, you know, rooted in the whole history of slavery.

And then, you know, I think a better understanding of the past and how it leaves a legacy in the present can help to change society for the better. So, for example, our Jallianwala Bagh artwork is part of a series of works called 'Slaves of Fashion', which it looks at, in particular, issues around empire and colonialism, which were basically institutions that were about conquest and exploitation for commercial gain. And you know, these institutions, they're not really a thing of the past; they have modern day parallels in the land grabbing and conflicts and labour exploitation linked to trade today and, you know, these link in turn to important debates around things like ethical trade and consumerism. So, looking at history [and it helps...] especially yeah, especially if we reject certain aspects of history. And I think it's universally [accepted] accepted that slavery was not a good thing, and that abolition, you know, came far too late. [And exploitation is not a good thing].

So, if we reject that as something of the past, then we should also reject the similar kind of attitudes and behavioural patterns that we see in, you know, in the present day world. But also just even on a personal level, you know, talking about our own experiences as Asian artists, whose practice is very much rooted in a traditional Indian art form, we experienced quite a lot of institutional prejudice because, basically I think our tutors fail to recognise that the style that we were inspired by, which they

dismissed as backward and outdated basically, and having no place in contemporary art. They failed to recognise and acknowledge that Indian arts, like many other non-European art forms such as Tahitian art in Japanese art, for example, African art, had a very significant impact on the way that Western art developed, and particularly, you know, those movements in art that were seen to be great innovators.

And also we have to learn about it because there are misperceptions about the past. So Empire and colonialism is often pictured by some people as this, you know, glorious and benevolent force for good. And yet, you know, it was far from it in so many ways. One of the things that's commonly touted, for example, when you talk about empire in Britain and the British Raj, is this idea of the railways. So, just a simple example how the railways are seen as, you know, Britain's gift to India and if we tell that story in a more truthful way which addresses this misunderstanding, in reality the railways were there. First of all, they were built by and paid for by the Indians, and secondly they were really there not to serve the Indian interests, but British interests, you know, the way of mobilising the troops and keeping control of India; a way of mobilising the raw materials and the finished goods which they exported for, you know, this growing British markets in Britain and abroad, all paid for by Indians who were by and large living, you know, under the poverty line under British rule.

00:12:39 Nusrat Ahmed

How important do you think it is for future generations to have and know different narratives about history?

00:12:49 The Singh Twins

Well, it's vital, isn't it? Because if you don't know different narratives, you don't put any one narrative in its correct perspective, and the thing about history is that, you know, we talk about histories, but there is actually only one history, and they're also interconnected, so learning about other histories helps you also to understand who you are as a person. It's not just about understanding the so called Other culture and the Other perspective, it's also understanding how you've reached, you know, where you are today and how you kind of imagine your own identity and heritage. So, for example, you know, this idea of Britishness and what constitutes Britishness, it's not this sort of, you know, [isolated] kind of far right, isolated thing of, you know, only being, belonging to, you know, white Britons. Britain is a nation that's built on so many other factors and the sacrifice and input of so many other cultures. And, you know, first, second generation Indians who are here today, for example, are just as much British as their white counterparts.

00:13:58 Nusrat Ahmed

So, just going back to when you talk about the racism that you had to overcome in your studies, and your art, your development of your artwork, I did hear your honorary degree speech from the Liverpool University and I was really intrigued and wanted to know more. And so, yeah, if you could just talk about that and what were the kind of things that you faced and how did you overcome those?

00:14:23 The Singh Twins

Well, we studied a Combined Studies degree at Chester College, which was affiliated college to the University of Liverpool, so it was a University of Liverpool degree, a BA honours in Combined Studies. And one of the modules that we studied was contemporary Western Art History, and we really did face a lot of racist attitudes going through the system at that time, against the kind of work that we were trying to develop as artists. We were very much interested in pursuing our passion for the Indian miniature painting tradition and bringing that to a contemporary audience. So although we were, aesthetically, the work, you know, was picking up on traditional kind of conventions, and aesthetics of the Indian miniature style. We were very much dealing with contemporary issues, you know, looking at our life in Britain, for example, growing up and how you know we were really striving to project a pride in our own Indian heritage, if you like, against a kind of backdrop of feeling that pressure to conform to Western ways of living and dressing and thinking and socialising.

We've always lived in a very white, predominantly white area, and we went to, you know, Catholic convent school. We were the only Indians in the school. So, you know, there was that peer pressure there to kind of fit in to you know, what your friends were doing. There was also, you know, we grew up with a lot of negative media coverage of our traditions. You know, there was always, you know, whenever there was a play on TV, for example, which had an Indian family in it, you could always bet your bottom dollar that it was about the girl who was being forced into an arranged marriage, you know, being oppressed under this, you know, extended family system that we have. And we didn't see it that way at all. We've, you know, we've always been very proud of our Indian roots and the traditions that have come with that.

So, when we were studying for this Art degree, we just felt that the attitude in the Art Department that we were getting from our tutors which, we were basically saying that, you know, we must express ourselves as contemporary artists, but when we tried to do that in a way that we felt comfortable with, i.e., you know, [inspired by our heritage] drawing on our own heritage, it was, all of a sudden, no we can't do that because miniature painting had no place within contemporary art expression according to them. So we felt that this attitude was just an extension of the kind of racist attitude that we'd grown up with, you know, in the area that we live in, but the colonial mindset of 'West is

best'. Yeah, it really went back to that, I mean even, to be honest, even when we visited India as teenagers for the first time, we were very disappointed to see how India itself was even rejecting its traditional art forms. And again it went back to this 'West is best' attitude, which is a hangover from the British Raj. You know, 200 years of ruling India and Indians even today still think that to be seen as progressive and modern you have to be westernised.

But as artists in our course, we were expected instead to draw upon Western role models in art, people like Van Gogh and Picasso and Matisse, who ironically themselves had actually been influenced by non-European art forms. And initially we tried to kind of compromise our work because we thought, you know, we're here, we've got to a degree to get, if you like. But it was clear to us as we went on that the tutors were not really going to accept even a compromise in the work; they wanted us to go entirely towards the kind of Western canon of ideals of what, you know, the expectations of what contemporary art should be. And so we did a U-turn and our work, then, became much more clearly defined by the aesthetics of the Indian Miniature style, a traditional style that has come to be a hallmark of our work, with a very decorative and detailed narrative symbolic work.

Yeah, and I think the work itself became our way of rebelling against that system too, and that attitude. So, you know, we could easily have just turned, you know, our attention to doing Western style art and got through our degree with no problem, but we decided that we needed to really challenge that kind of narrow Eurocentric mindset that was within the Department. And the way we did that was to use our art as a political tool, if you like, with the themes and maintaining that style, so we did very early on, do a lot of work that reflected, as I said earlier, you know, our life growing up in this country and the way that we balance both our Western and our Indian identity. But we also backed up our practical work with a thesis that was required as part of the final year examination and we both had argued each in our own way about how Western art would not have developed if it had not been for the impact of these non-European art forms and developed in the sense of the direction that it took away from the establishment at that time.

And unfortunately, that didn't go down well with one particular examiner who refused to mark the work. And it's a very long story, but the bottom line is, it was confided in us that he really hadn't liked what we'd written about, particularly arguing about the impact of Indian art on Western art. And there was a debate about what grade should be given us, and I think he awarded something that was really derisory, and that's a description of one of the other tutors, and when, well he refused to mark the work. But although he had put in writing that it was undoubtedly scholarly and beyond BA level, he felt it was PhD level. But when trying to justify his decision, apparently he had made a statement that we would be happy with that mark because we'd only be going off and getting married anyway. And I think again that portrayed another kind of stereotype view of, you know, the poor little Indian girl who's forced into an arranged marriage the minute

she leaves University, if she's even allowed to go to University. So, that infuriated us, and I think our family, and, you know, we entered into a huge appeals procedure with the University which eventually did come down in our favour; not to the extent that it should have done, we feel.

But the bottom the line is we refused to accept our degree, that they've tried to award three times, and we've never accepted our degree to this day. But the honorary degree that you saw online was actually, you know, 30 years later, it did go towards recognising the wrong that was done, and, you know, that was no matter about the time that's passed, I think that was something that we felt really kind of put a full stop to that whole episode, which really stayed with us throughout our lives, you know, it was a real knock back at the time, we didn't want to have anything further to do with academia. But it was only the support of our family and the fact that we felt so outraged by what we felt was a really [racist attitude], yeah racist, well, institutional attitude, racist attitude. I don't even know whether the tutors felt that they were being racist, but it was the whole part of that mindset again of going back to this impression that, you know, the West is the benchmark for everything.

But I'm sure, you know, that there is still that pressure, that peer pressure, [institutionalised pressure] institutional pressure, to be like the mainstream, however, you know, you would define that, but it certainly, I don't think there is that creative freedom, particularly in the arts to, for many artists, whether Indian or otherwise, to necessarily practice in a way that they feel is true to who they are. Because of the dictates of, you know, a certain circle of people who feel that they have a monopoly on defining what contemporary art should be.

Yeah, I think there is that pressure to kind of tow the line in order to be accepted within the mainstream. And we've never really subscribed to that. We've always really stuck to our guns and we've always demanded respect for our work on our own terms rather than, you know, changing who we are as people to get on. If you like.

Yeah, and I guess the way we've overcome that is really just by having self-belief in what we do [and being stubborn]. Yeah, being stubborn, and often taking chances, you know, saying no to projects that we feel might pigeonhole as in some way or undermine the kind of work that we want to do.

00:22:37 Nusrat Ahmed

Just moving on to the South Asian Gallery, which we're all really, really excited about. It's part of Manchester Museum's £14m transformation project called 'hello future'. How important do you think it is for cultural institutions like museums and art galleries is to adopt similar approaches and to acknowledge it and give a platform to variable narratives?

00:23:04 The Singh Twins

Well, I think it's vital because without that input you don't get those variable narratives. I mean, it enables these institutions to uncover hidden stories and diverse stories which really reflect the complexity of those communities and cultures and represent those communities too in terms of who they want to welcome within the museums. It also makes the exhibitions that they stage much more meaningful and relevant to the communities, but also modern audiences, you know, from different backgrounds and it kind of also steers away from those institutions really imposing their particular stories onto those communities.

00:23:47 Nusrat Ahmed

And do you want to give us some information around your anthology for the Gallery?

00:23:54 The Singh Twins

Well, our anthology is really based on the kind of work that we do, which is looking at very often the hidden histories of colonialism and empire. That's really what our interest is, because I think really those are the histories that today, if people have a better understanding of them are going to make a much more even-handed society, in terms of, you know, the racial attitudes that we experience from time to time.

00:24:20 Nusrat Ahmed

And finally, what are your aspirations for the South Asia Gallery at Manchester Museum?

00:24:26 The Singh Twins

Well, I think the Museum, really, we hope, will be a place where a balanced view of history can be learned. You know, and how the South Asia story is very much part of the British story, so that the two aren't seen as something separate, and in doing that we hope it will very much be a place of debate and discussion and a platform for really cultivating with mutual understanding and appreciation really, of those shared histories and how they impact today.

00:24:57 Nusrat Ahmed

Thank you both very much for being part of our podcast today. I've really enjoyed speaking to you. I feel like I've learned so much. I want to learn more, and I think for me, that's where these conversations really achieve, what they achieve in people wanting to delve into it further. And so, yeah, thank you from personal level from me and I really do look forward to working with you over the next year, co-curating the South Asia Gallery.

00:25:28 The Singh Twins

You're welcome, same here, thank you.