



PHOTO BY FIONA ABOUD

Five years ago Vishavjit Singh, above, took on the persona of Captain America. Singh has applied this humor to famous images and icons, including superheroes from the Golden Age of comic books.

Sikh Captain America

With his creations, cartoonist Vishavjit Singh throws a mighty shield at the hate and prejudice he's experienced

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On the first floor of Wing Luke Museum in the International District of Seattle, several cartoons of people wearing turbans accompanied by succinct statements are on display. They're the creations of Vishavjit Singh, a Sikh man who is sharing his story through colorful, witty and sometimes sarcastic cartoons.

"We Are From Here" shows a Sikh woman and man donning turbans while standing side by side. The man is holding a pitchfork in his hand. It's a nod to Grant Wood's iconic "American Gothic" painting. It was painted in 1930 and is an example of regionalism, representing two people living in Iowa. In Singh's cartoon there's no farm house or trees in the background. There's a word bubble above them that states: "We are from freaking right here. Next question!"

"People in turbans and beards are just like you. They love humor," said Singh. "I want people to question their propensity to use stereotypes, to have stereotypes of other people."

Singh has applied this humor to famous images and icons, including superheroes from the Golden Age of comic books.

In his cartoons, Singh often addresses what he calls "turbanphobia," the irrational fear of those who wear them. "What's Under the Turban" shows a smiling man

with glasses and a beard, captioned: "It's called a turban, underneath is a 3-pound explosive device known as the brain."

Singh is well acquainted with dealing with people's negative attitudes toward him. Because of the way he looks — a bearded Indian man who wears a turban — he's mistaken for a Muslim and seen as someone who doesn't belong.

Sikhism is an independent faith that originated in the Punjab region. It is the world's fifth-largest religion, and Sikhs have been in the U.S. for more than 125 years, according to the Sikh American Defense Fund.

The reaction to his appearance changed dramatically after the events of September 11, 2001. Brown men wearing turbans became closely associated with terrorism and came to symbolize the ultimate "other." He said Americans have a limited tolerance for turbans unless they are in a Disney movie or caricatures in entertainment.

Singh lives in New York City and has been the target of verbal abuse. After a quick assessment, he'll either ignore the insults or confront those attacking him. Singh will ask them outright if they think he's Osama bin Laden or a terrorist. Often, they'll back away from their insults and apologize. One might expect the people directing derogatory comments his way to be white; Singh said that's not always the case. It often comes from black and hispanic men. It's a layered and complex

dynamic as to why those groups direct derisive comments his way.

"I've come to realize everybody has prejudices, everybody stereotypes, has stereotypes," said Singh. "We're prone to engage in simple narratives but life is very complicated, human beings are very complicated, individuals are very complicated."

Rather than label those who label him, Singh hopes they learn a lesson instead. As upsetting as they are, he's chosen to not let those experiences turn him into a jaded person.

Singh was born in Washington, D.C., and spent most of his childhood in India. His family survived the 1984 Sikh Massacre that left thousands dead. After high school he moved back to the states to attend college in California. He removed his turban and cut his hair short. During those years he was often mistaken as hispanic. Exploring Eastern philosophy led him back to embracing his Sikh identity.

Singh said an interactive cartoon by Mark Fiore titled "Find the Terrorist" published in October 2001 led him to cartooning and back to his love for drawing. He connected with Fiore's piece because it captured his predicament and combated hatred through humor. The deadly attack on a Sikh temple in Wisconsin in 2012 also had a profound effect on Singh. He decided the world needed a superhero who fights the bigotry and hate in our midst.

Five years ago Singh took on the persona of Captain America. The tall, intelligent and athletically gifted superhero is a one-man army defending freedom and liberty. Even if one is unacquainted with the super soldier's abilities, his red, white and blue costume alone signals his unrivaled patriotism.

Captain America was created by Joe Simon and Jack Kirby for Timely Comics (later Marvel) and is known for the infamous first issue in 1941 in which he punches Adolf Hitler square in the face.

Many Marvel characters other than Steve Rogers have donned the suit and wielded the shield, each bringing their own personality to the icon. Singh's Captain is the perfect pairing in his fight against bigotry. He initially created a poster showing Captain America in a beard and turban for New York Comic Con. A year later a photographer convinced him to bring the cartoon to life by donning it himself, vibranium shield and all.

Since then he's brought his message to thousands of people on the streets of New York, at comic cons and at the 2016 Republican National Convention in Cleveland. His message is strong but not as violent as how Steve Rogers takes down Red Skull, Captain America's most infamous nemesis. In one of the photos on display in the exhibition, Sikh Captain America stands in front of a line of police officers. He's holding a sign with the phrase: "Let's kick some intolerant ass with compassion."

The popularity of Sikh Captain America has given him the opportunity to leave his career as a software engineer and become a full-time artist. You can hear the enthusiasm in his voice when he talks about the storytelling sessions he holds at diversity conferences, corporations and schools from elementary to the college level.

"I share my story through cartoons, then I connect it to broader issues of race, identity, bullying, diversity, vulnerability, prejudices," said Singh. "I mix up all those things that little ones can connect to, adults can connect to."

When talking to students he'll ask them to share the first words to come to mind when they see him. For elementary school kids it's "turban or that thing on your head," "I like your shoes and you're skinny." By middle school the response to where they think he's from is usually outside of the U.S. He uses the misperceptions as a teaching opportunity.

"I make the point that we all fall into this trap of labeling and stereotyping each other although we know we should not but we do it anyways because that's how our brains are wired," said Singh. "How we culturally kind of learn a lot of these kinds of things."

He also holds cartoon workshops and encourages the kids to express themselves through art.

In addition to writing about his experiences for various publications and cartooning, the next big project for Singh is an autobiographical graphic novel. Given his ability to share frustrating experiences in a straightforward, inviting way, it should come as no surprise that Singh describes himself as a hopeful person. He's also confident there are better days ahead of us.

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