

A leap of faith

David Khalili tells Susan Moore why he embraced Islamic art – and how it can help to build bridges

The last time I interviewed David Khalili – Professor Nasser D Khalili to give him his full name and title – was in 2008 in the Emirates Palace Hotel in Abu Dhabi, the rather unlikely venue for an exhibition of treasures from his collection. It was, remarkably, the first comprehensive display of Islamic art ever staged in the Middle East. That it was also the largest Islamic art show ever held anywhere was less surprising, for over the previous 40 years Khalili had discreetly assembled a vast and synoptic holding of the art and material culture of Islam that is unparalleled in private hands.

Ranging from the eighth century to the early 20th, from Moorish Spain to Mongol China, its 20,000 or so items embrace works in every conceivable medium, from outstanding miniature paintings, illuminated manuscripts and calligraphy to the decorative arts, and down to the humblest coin.

"The collection is like a symphony," he told me at the time. "Every object has its note and the combination of them all makes the music. There is not much point just having the lead violin and the piano."

Since then he has continued to add to the collection on the rare occasion when something turns up that is either better than what he already owns or fills a gap. Recently he acquired an archive of documents and photographs relating to the Dar al-Kiswah, the Cairo-based workshop responsible for producing the sumptuous embroidered textiles that cover the Ka'bah, the cube-shaped building at Mecca.

Items from the archive – as well as the spectacular embroidered textiles themselves – were recently on show at the British Museum's exhibition *Haji: Journey to the Heart of Islam*. Indeed, the Khalili Family Trust was the largest lender to this landmark show, the first to explore the history and significance of the pilgrimage to Mecca. After Topkapi Serayi in Istanbul, the trust also holds the world's largest group of textiles and objects – among them scientific instruments, maps and miniatures – relating to Mecca and Medina.

"There are 1.6bn people following the faith of Islam. I realised that no one was representing the core and anchor of that religion, and so I took it upon myself to buy everything that was available," says Khalili, 66. "I have been doing this quietly for a long time. I never tell anyone what I am doing."

It is characteristic that Khalili should have swooped on a



Finesse David Khalili with some of his collection in his London apartment; below, *sitarah* (curtain) made for the mosque in Medina, in silver thread, silk and cotton, a gift of the Khalili Foundation to the British Museum

Charlie Bibby, Nour Foundation

unique opportunity to acquire this material after it began to trickle out of Egypt. For not only is he one of the most prescient and determined of collectors, he also has a knack of buying material that only subsequently makes sense as a group.

The key to understanding him, his collections and how he now chooses to use them is that Khalili grew up in an observant Jewish family in a Muslim country. He was born in Isfahan, Iran in 1945 into a dynasty of antique dealers, and from the age of eight he accompanied his father on buying expeditions. In 1967 he left for New York to study and began dealing in Islamic art, keeping the cream for his own collection. He moved to London in 1978 after meeting his wife, Marion, and began to channel his profits into property.

Khalili bought Islamic art because he thought it was beautiful – and was incredulous that so few others thought

so too. The number of serious buyers could be counted on one hand: among them Sheikh Nasser al-Sabah of Kuwait; the David Collection in Copenhagen; the London-based Edmund de Unger; Kuwaiti Jasim al-Homaizi; and the Iranian oil magnate

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Hashem Khosrovani. Prices were brought still lower by the 1979 Iranian revolution and a dip in the Turkish art market. The Sultan of Brunei entered late into the fray, as did Sheikh Saud al-Thani of Qatar. But the opening last

year of the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha changed the market dramatically and, as always, the supply of top-quality pieces is the real issue.

"With all the money in the world, and all the time in the world, you could not put 20 per cent of this collection together now," Khalili says. "The chapter is closed."

"I found things that belonged to a great heritage that were just sitting there unnoticed," he says. "They were displaced from history and deserved to be preserved and recognised."

During the 1980s he threw himself into organising a programme of research, publication and exhibitions that began to bear fruit in the following decade. So far, 17 of the 27 projected volumes on the Islamic collection alone have been published, and the Khalili collections field at least one exhibition a year.

From the first, these publications and exhibitions had a kind of proselytising zeal, posing a challenge to the traditional Eurocentric view of art history in which Islamic art was marginalised. They also expanded the traditional western notion of what Islamic art might be. Considering himself the custodian rather than "owner" of his collections, Khalili has never kept any of this material at home.

It was in Abu Dhabi and in Sydney, where a smaller version of the 2008 Islamic show had opened, that Khalili began to realise the extent of Muslims' thirst for their own culture. He was delighted by the number of visitors who were astounded – and deeply moved – to discover their unknown artistic heritage. After 9/11, of course, the west wanted to know too. It is no coincidence, he says, that the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the David Collection in Copenhagen have refurbished their Islamic galleries, and the Louvre's are soon to reopen. "We are constantly being approached for exhibitions and loans from all around the world," he says.

In 1995 he co-founded the Maimonides Foundation, one of a number of charities established in recent years to promote understanding between the three great Abrahamic faiths – Judaism, Christianity and Islam. "The biggest weapon of mass destruction is ignorance," he says. "There is far more that unites us than divides us."