

Artistic bridge-building

By SIMON ROCKER

RELIGION AND politics each has a particular language, Dr David Khalili is fond of saying, “but the language of art is universal.”

One of the world’s foremost collectors of Islamic art, he has for years displayed his treasures not simply for aesthetic pleasure but for cultural bridge-building. The day after September 11, he took a call from the United States, where one of his exhibitions was showing, asking to triple the number of catalogues, so great was the demand.

“Appreciation of Islamic art is one of the major means of combatting anti-Muslim prejudices,” he told the JC during a rare interview at his Mayfair offices — a spacious Georgian house, itself a mini-museum of exquisite vases and *objets d’art*. “The rich and multi-faceted cultural history of Muslims demonstrates that Islam is neither an inward-looking and monolithic religion, nor is it about terrorism and xenophobia.”

A few years ago, after lecturing on Islamic culture to thousands of South-East Asian Muslims at a conference in Malaysia, a fundamentalist in the audience rose to ask him how a Jew had done what he had. “I said: ‘Take it as a gift, a contribution from one member of the family to another, because I am your cousin.’ The whole place erupted in applause.”

At one stage, Dr Khalili was buying an incredible 1,000 pieces annually, funded out of his property business. That has now slowed to 10 or so a year. But as he says: “You are born a collector. You die a collector. You never stop.”

The 57-year-old grew up in a Muslim country, the son of art-dealers in Iran, which he left at 20 to study computer science in America.

His ticket was paid for out of sales of a book he had authored just a year after his barmitzvah — pen portraits of the great “luminaries” of the world, including, naturally, painters.

The unique feature of his 20,000-work collection — ranging from carpets to Koranic calligraphy — is its global span.

“Most of the Islamic collections in the Muslim world are local,” he explained. “If you go to Turkey, it’s Turkish. Egypt, Egyptian. What I did was totally different. I wanted to represent the Islamic art of every Muslim country. So mine is comprehensive. I have Islamic art from China.”

Dr Khalili recalled a meeting with a guru in India a quarter-of-a-century ago, long before his reputation was made. “He told me: ‘There is a single reason that I think you will succeed in your endeavour. The souls of the artists who produced [the work] are going to look after you because you make them relive their life again.’”

Apart from Islamic art, he has also built collections in Swedish textiles,



Dr David Khalili: appreciating Islamic art helps to combat prejudice

Spanish damascened metalwork, and Japanese Meiji art from the latter part of the 19th century.

He is often up before dawn — “I go to sleep at one to one-thirty and wake up at quarter-to-five” — editing a series of 40 catalogues which will enable his entire collection to be shared with the world.

Based in London for more than 20 years — and a low-profile patron of a number of Jewish causes, including last year’s JC Festival of Jewish Arts and Culture — he has left at least one permanent mark on the capital. A few years back, he bought two grand houses in Kensington Palace Gardens — designed from left-over stone from the House of Commons by the Victorian architect Sir Charles Barry — whose previous occupants had included the Rothschilds. Both had become embassies — one Egyptian, the other Russian.

“From the outside it looked like one house,” he recalled. After winning permission from English Heritage to convert them into one — the first time this had been allowed for two A-listed buildings — he turned them into a palace. A video of the interior conveys the impression of intricate artistry, full of Oriental

touches, rather than of opulence.

Originally, the aim had been to “create a house for ourselves.” But even after the family of five decided it would be too big to live in, he continued the renovation. “I treated it like an art project,” he said. “I’m not a developer. Every design in that house is based on artefacts in my collection — from the inlaid marble and the wall-papering to the carpets and curtains.

“I wanted it to be my legacy. After Windsor Castle, this was the biggest refurbishment in my country. If I start something, I want to do it properly. It took about eight years. I bought the buildings for £40 million and spent another £40 million-plus on expenses.”

The house has since been sold. But the collections have been preserved for future generations in a family trust. Dr Khalili’s eldest son is in his second year of history of art at university, while the younger twins are taking the subject at A-level.

“I’ve done my collecting of art,” he said.

He now wants to “collect human beings. I’d like to find friends I can talk to, people I can learn from — because in life, you need that, too.”

Jewish-Muslim body expands programme