

Bridge over troubled water

Nasser Khalili has the largest private collection of Islamic art – and he wants the world to see it. He tells [Peter Aspden](#) how these masterpieces can help bring east and west together

Nasser David Khalili's extraordinary collection of art runs to 25,000 objects. He says his photographic memory enables him to recall each and every one. But just don't make the mistake of asking him to identify his favourite piece for he will shake his head animatedly even before you have finished asking the question.

"You can't look at it like that," he says firmly. "It is like going to a symphony and asking which is the most important player in the orchestra. Of course they all have a role to play. And a collection is like a symphony orchestra. Every single piece has a contribution to make."

That contribution, he believes, can be a telling one in today's fragile geopolitical climate. The bulk of the Khalili Collection consists of art of the Islamic world. It is the largest

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such private collection in the world, and many of the objects are masterpieces in their own right, frequently loaned to the world's leading museums to augment exhibitions on Islamic culture.

It is Khalili's firm belief that it is through the dissemination of Islamic art that bridges can begin to be built between the currently warring powers of east and west. "The contribution of Islam to the betterment of the west was immense," he says. "The west owes a great debt of gratitude

to Islam. But not enough people know about it. Even many Muslims themselves are not aware of their own legacy. Politics and religion have their own languages – but the language of art is universal. And we can use that universality to bring people together."

The journeys made by Khalili's various collections look like the itinerary of a multi-platinum selling rock band: his exhibition of Ottoman art, *Empire of the Sultans*, travelled from Geneva to London, then to Jerusalem, before settling into a four-year tour of the US. More than half a million visitors saw the treasures worldwide. In 2004, many works from the Khalili Collection featured in *Heaven on Earth*, the ravishing show of Islamic art at the Hermitage Rooms in London's Somerset House.

The passion for collecting struck Khalili early. He was born of Jewish parents in the beautiful Iranian city of Isfahan in 1945, and, like many of his schoolmates, started collecting stamps at the age of seven. In his teens, he rather left his contemporaries behind when he precociously wrote and had published a book of biographies of geniuses throughout world history. (The work is still in print.)

But it wasn't until he left Iran in 1967 to be educated in the United States that he began to find his vocation. His first interest was in Persian lacquer, and still one of the most impressive pieces of his collection is a magnificent backgammon board from early 19th century Iran ("I think



Nasser Khalili:

"I consider myself a patron of art,
and a servant to humanity"

Photograph by Simon Butcher



Some treasures from the Khalili Collection

Left: A pair of iron urns with gold and silver damascene by Plácido Zuloaga (1834-1910), the virtuoso Spanish metalworker

Above: War mask; possibly made for the Akkoyunlu, late 15th century

it is at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris," he says. "I lose track because we give loans all the time.")

That interest expanded into Islamic art in general; he acknowledges the irony that a Jewish collector should take such an interest in it by emphasising the secular nature of the "vast majority" of the works he collected. "It is art produced by Muslim people, but most of it is not religious in nature." (Khalili is the co-founder and chairman of the Maimonides Foundation, which promotes understanding between Jews and Muslims.)

He gradually put together his lavish 'orchestra', focusing on other areas that he considered under-appreciated: today he has major collections of the exquisite Japanese art of the Meiji period, Indian and Swedish textiles, and Spanish damascened metalwork. "I started sowing seeds hoping for a nice garden," he says, switching metaphors abruptly. "I didn't know I would create a forest."

Khalili was not averse to the rough-and-tumble of dealing – "If you are a boxer, you have to be inside the ring, not outside looking in" – but he was determined to get to know his areas of interest with a rare thoroughness: "In every field, I made sure I knew more than the academics. I didn't have to pay inflated prices for anything." He is today a frequent lecturer in his subjects, holds a clutch of honorary

degrees and has written a history of Islamic art and architecture which is being translated into several languages.

I ask him how easy it was in his early life to combine the roles of collector and dealer, and he bristles slightly. "How easy is it to be the 100 metres world champion? How easy is it to be [Roger] Federer, beating everyone? You are born with it. You cannot say: 'Expertise is a very good thing, can I have a kilo of that?' You have to be born with love, passion, and direction for what you do."

We happen to speaking on the fifth anniversary of the September 11 atrocities, and I ask if the events of that day had given him an extra sense of urgency in his mission.

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"Yes and no," he replies. "Nothing I have ever done has been under any political influence. I don't like politics; I have never been a member of a party or organisation. My only duty as a collector is to pay tribute to the soul of the artist. The

Below: Illuminated opening spread from a large Qur'an, probably commissioned by the Safavid ruler Shah Tahmasp Iran, Shiraz or Qazwin, dated AH 995 (AD 1552)

Right: Iron shrine with Virgin and Child, Eibar, 1880
Forged iron, gold and silver damascene, cast silver by Plácido Zuloaga



events of 9/11 showed there is still great misunderstanding between nations. And there are two ways of solving it: you fight and lose, or you trade and win. When you start trading, you have to understand each other." His purpose, he says, in bringing the world's attention to Islamic art, is to "try and dilute the misunderstanding".

He must find it frustrating, given the way things are heading? "No, it is rewarding," he explains, "because when you have total darkness, even the smallest candle can break that darkness. You don't need 7,000 watts of electricity." The works in his collection have illuminated some 40 exhibitions around the world over the past 20 years.

At present Khalili is putting the finishing touches to a catalogue raisonné of his entire collection, published by his family trust. Then, he says, it is time to find a home for it. He would like to house it in a museum in Britain – where he has lived since 1978 and where he has made most of his fortune through real estate – but he is anxious "not to create a burden" for future generations. "It must have a proper endowment, we have to set it up properly. Finding a building is just the beginning of it. We will see."

Are there pieces he still covets for his collection? "It is wrong to think like that," he admonishes. "It is destructive. The problem with many collectors is that they become self-

important – they think they have a statement to make. I consider myself a patron of art and a servant to humanity."

More pragmatically, he says it is "ten times more difficult to buy today than it was 10 years ago. When I started, I was the only forest. Now there are many. There is intense interest from the Gulf. And there are second generation Muslims living in the US and other parts of the west, who are coming to realise that the best PR for the world of Islam is its culture."

"When I was in the US, I would be invited to typically American homes, and look at the curtains and say, 'Did you know that design is Islamic?', and of course they had no idea and I had to explain it to them. I want more and more of that to happen."

And then, warming to his theme: "I see no reason why a Muslim artist today, by using the resources of the past, cannot challenge the west and become the next Picasso or Cézanne or Monet. Why not? Why not?"

Peter Aspden is the Arts Columnist for the Financial Times.

The Timeline History of Islamic Art and Architecture by Professor Nasser D. Khalili is published by Worth Press. An exhibition of 300 pieces drawn entirely from the Khalili Collection will be shown at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney from 22 June to 16 September 2007.