



---

While amassing one of  
the world's hottest art  
collections, buying up  
London real estate, and  
lecturing everywhere  
from Tel Aviv to Abu  
Dhabi, who has  
time for sleep?  
Not **David Khalili**.

---

# Center Stage

**By Marc Weisblott**

Artwork photos © Nour Foundation  
Courtesy of the Khalili Family Trust

Photo by Terry O'Neil  
Photo courtesy of Nasser David Khalili

## PROFILE *David Khalili*

**F**or someone who only got a couple of hours of sleep the night before, David Khalili sounds awfully alert when reached on a late summer afternoon at his London office. Yet, for much of his nearly 64 years, the scholar, art collector, property developer, and philanthropist has never wanted—let alone needed—a whole lot of rest.

“The need for sleep is in your genes,” boasts Khalili. “This morning, I went to bed at 1:15 A.M. and was awake again at 3:47 A.M.”

Twelve hours later, he’s more than eager to share the wisdom that took him from military service in his homeland of Iran to studying computer science at Queens Col-

lege in New York City, and then to a Ph.D. in art history at London University—all the while amassing five of the world’s finest and most comprehensive art collections. Most of his academic work, after all, would be finished each day before dawn.

Khalili also has a day job, with headquarters on the penthouse level of a former Bank of England building, one of the many projects of his firm, Favermead, that reflect a passion for preservation.

Join him for a business meeting at a restaurant in the city, and you won’t be allowed to go home before riding to the top floor for a personal tour; a few rooms in the office are filled with some of his favorite pieces.

“I do not expect everyone who visits me to get around to visiting the museums in Paris or St. Petersburg,” he says, referring to the two cities where items from the Khalili Collection will be displayed this fall. “But my joy comes from other people’s joy—I want to influence their pleasure, and see their smile. To me, that is the greatest reward. If you can’t do that, then, who the heck are you?”

Khalili has been awarded various honors, which include Trustee of the City of Jerusalem, an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters degree from Boston University, and Knight Commander of the Royal Order of Francis I. He is exceptional in having received knighthoods from two

### **RECTANGULAR CASKET WITH THE REMAINS OF A COMBINATION LOCK**

*Sheet brass, with silver inlay*



### **THRONE TABLE**

*Six-character seal mark Da Qing Qianlong nianzhi  
[made in the Qianlong period of the Qing dynasty]  
Guangzhou (Canton), 1736-1795*

## David Khalili PROFILE

popes: The late Pope John Paul II honored him as Knight of the Pontifical Equestrian Order of St. Sylvester, and Pope Benedict XVI has further elevated him to Knight Commander for his pursuit of peace and culture amongst nations.

Khalili's life is a study in contrasts. Humble about the real estate successes that have contributed to his billionaire status, his Persian personality is easily ignited by conversation about the purpose—and the politics—of art.

As far as he's concerned, the pieces worth the greatest attention are ones that can tell their own story. And he has collected 25,000 such stories—and counting.

"Art doesn't need to be explained," says Khalili. "When you need to explain it, it's not art anymore, it's an idea. If the piece talks to me, I don't need to see a label."

How much has he read into these pieces? The culmination of 40 years of collecting and 25 years of publishing amounts to 50 catalog volumes of between 250 and 350 pages each, totaling more than 15,000 pages—the largest number by any single collector. *The Arts of the Islamic World (700–1900)* is expected to ultimately fill 27 volumes, *Japanese Art of the Meiji Period (1868–1912)* comprises a nine-volume series, and *Swedish Textiles (1700–1900)*, *Spanish Damascened Metalwork (1850–1900)*, and *Enamels of the World (1700–2000)* comprise the remainder of

Khalili's focus.

What has appealed to him throughout is the deep history behind each work, something he finds especially lacking in contemporary creativity—"There wasn't a desperate need for recognition," he says. Nor is Khalili looking to become eternally linked to the works.

"I am just a temporary custodian," he affirms. "Nothing, but nothing, belongs to us—every one of us on this planet is a guest. We are given a minute on this stage to show what we can do best. What you do between birth and death is your choice."

So, while he's still around, Khalili boasts of his five credentials: collecting, conserving, researching, publishing, and exhibiting. Keeping the artwork behind closed doors was never his desire when he started collecting in 1970.

Now, he takes great pleasure in stringing together more observations about the typical piece than the average art historian: "I find myself writing a half page on something that others tell me is only good for two or three sentences. But, if a piece has been around for 150 years or longer, there must be a reason—it means that it's stood the test of time."

KHALILI, BORN IN ISFAHAN  
into a dynasty of Jewish antique



**LARGE KOVSH**

Silver-gilt, opaque and painted filigree enamel, cabochon amethysts  
**Moscow, 1899-1908**



**VASE, ABOUT 1885**

Silver, with shakudo and gold; the body and cover both embellished with cloisonné enamel worked in gold wire  
**Produced by the Ozeki Company**



**FLAT-WOVEN  
CARPET (KILIM)**

Turkey or Iran, 16th or 17th  
century AD  
*Silk with metal thread*

## David Khalili PROFILE



Khalili with President Bill Clinton in 2004 during a private tour of the exhibition *Heaven on Earth: Art from Islamic Lands*. Photo courtesy of Nasser David Khalili

dealers who moved to the Iranian capital, Tehran, when he was 8 months old, started thinking about collecting at around age 7. Given pocket money by his parents each morning, he would come home hungry, opting to spend the money on Persian stamps to trade with classmates during the lunch hour. By age 13, his mind—which was filled with thoughts about geniuses—produced a book ranking 233 of them.

Precociousness came with a price, however. “The parents of my classmates saw me interviewed on television and wondered why their own children weren’t doing the same,” he recalls. “The next day, at school, I was beaten severely.”

Compulsory service as an Iranian army medic gave Khalili the physical clout to take on grander challenges. “I felt a huge wave coming toward me,” he says. “I could either swim in it, or drown in it.” His arrival in New York City in 1967 “was a culture shock, but a pleasant one.”

The computer science degree was just a pathway into this new world: art dealing was at the forefront of Khalili’s mind, and the creative history he was familiar with from growing up in Iran seemed especially underrated amongst curators at the biggest galleries in America. During a trip to England in 1976, he met his future wife, and settled in London in 1978.

What a Jewish entrepreneur saw in these Islamic art traditions seemed increasingly intriguing over subsequent decades. Yet the fraught political environment, especially

after September 11, 2001, gave Khalili the clarity he was seeking to articulate the value of his collection to the increasingly curious.

“The contribution of Islamic culture is absolutely immense,” he says. “The West owes so much cultural enhancement to its splendor, whether expressed through astrology, medicine, or mathematics. There was much talk about weapons of mass destruction, but the real weapon of mass destruction is ignorance.”

In this vein, the co-founding and chairmanship of the Maimonides Foundation, dedicated to promoting peace and understanding between Jews and Muslims, is prominent among his philanthropic efforts. In 2000, he commissioned five large paintings from artist Ben Johnson illustrating the spiritual panorama of Jerusalem—including the Western Wall, the Christian Quarter, the

Dome of the Rock, and a painting designed by Khalili himself that depicts eternal light shining on Arabic, English, and Hebrew variations on the word *peace*, which, together, comprise a “House of Peace.”

This spiritual outlook has taken Khalili around the planet. “Jews were not chosen to live like kings and queens,” he says. “We were chosen to carry the burden of humanity. I consider myself an observant Jew, but I can also see God’s role in a church or a mosque and feel comfortable in any four walls built for worship.”

Secular themes are evident in the 20,000 pieces of Islamic art in Khalili’s possession, however, and the endowments provided to British universities to study and celebrate these historical works represent one part of his cultural contributions—these include the first-ever Chair of Islamic Art and Archaeology at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London, and The Khalili Research Centre for the Art and Material Culture of the Middle East at the University of Oxford.

Developing shopping centers throughout the U.K. has provided Favermead with a lucrative portfolio, but Khalili’s greater pride was in transforming two buildings in Kensington Palace Gardens into Britain’s most gloriously restored palace—a five-year project that employed 400 detail-oriented craftsmen. But he remains hungriest to connect one-on-one with art aficionados.

Selections from each collection have been exhibited in

## David Khalili PROFILE

over 35 world-class museums, such as the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, the Alhambra Palace in Granada, the Portland Art Museum in the U.S., and the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam. Key objects have been loaned to more than 40 different museums and institutions, from The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York to Somerset House in London.

The global footprint of the Khalili Collection will extend from October 2009 through March 2010, at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris, for *The Arts of Islam*, showing 13 centuries of religious and secular work spanning all forms of media. And from December 2009 through March 2010, the State Hermitage Museum will feature a selection from the collection of 1,200 works spanning 300 years of the art of enameling, the first time works from this collection have ever been on display. And perhaps lurking amongst the crowds will be Khalili himself. As his three sons gradually left the family nest, he seized more opportunities to lecture around the globe—from Tel Aviv to Bilbao to Abu Dhabi. But, in this case, the man behind the lectern is just as eager to listen to what those in the audience think.

"I am blessed with a photographic memory," says Khalili. "If I explain one or two things to you, then I want to hear four more ideas in return."

Khalili has high hopes for the future of the world—besides, he barely wants to sleep through a moment of living history. But he long ago determined that the type of expression he can connect with dates back to another era—one in which capturing the emotions of a place and time was more nuanced than simply snapping a digital image. "Some of the art that is produced today is a representation of our life on a fast track," he says. His belief has always been that religion and politics have their own language, but the language of art is universal; never afraid to get burned, Khalili approaches each piece, and each new adventure, with a child's curiosity and passion. "Life without knowledge is like fire without a flame," he says. **LM**

### INCENSE BURNER, ABOUT 1890

Silver, with shakudo, shibuichi, gold, malachite, coral, tigeris-eye, agate and nephrite; crystal ball  
By Shoami Katsuyoshi (1832-1908)

