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Knight of Hospitality

PROFESSOR NASSER KHALILI
The arts of Islam

ABU DHABI REVIEW

AVIATION

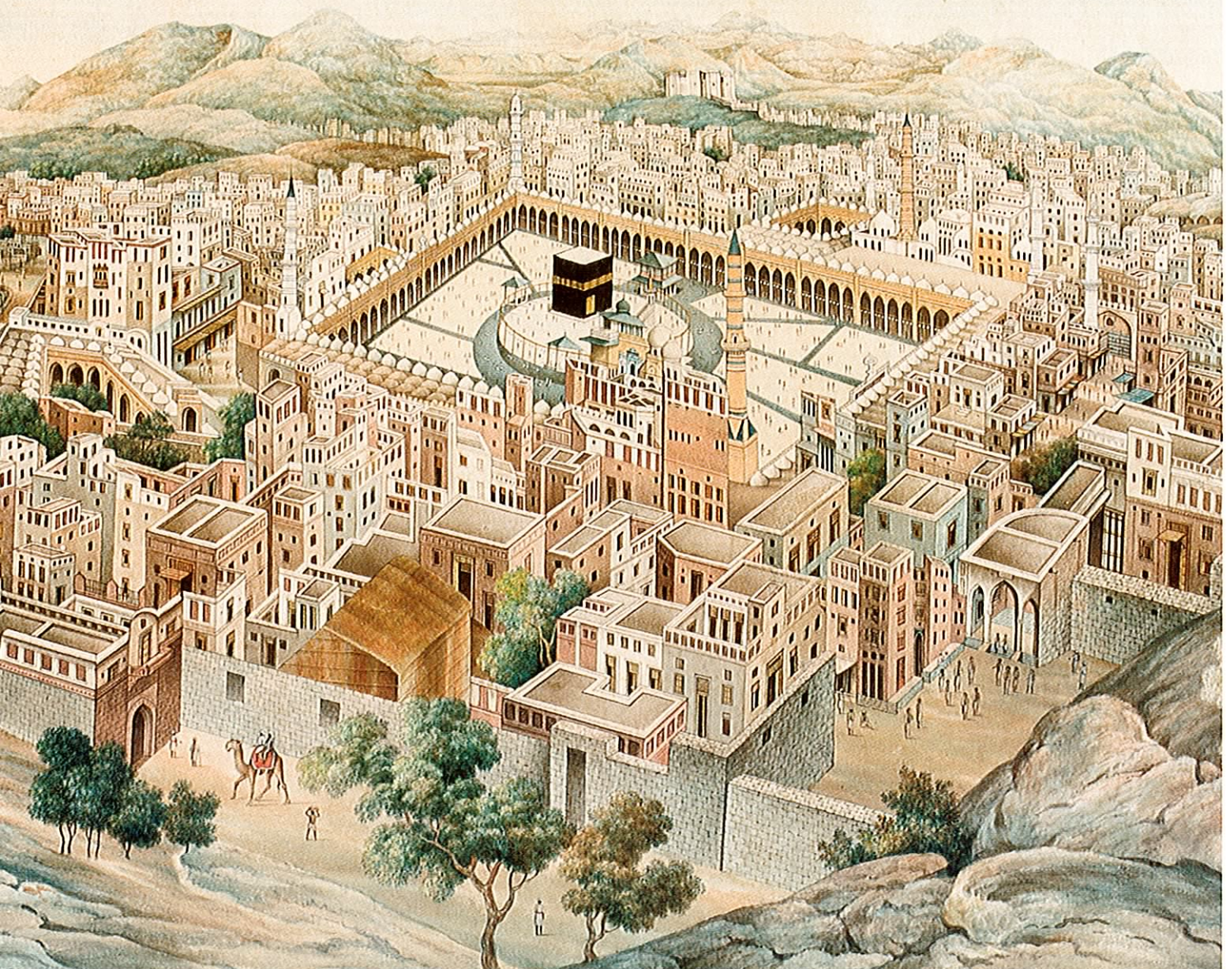
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Khalili makes dazzling debut

When Nasser Khalili was a student and young art collector in Iran, someone invited him to their home and offered him an exquisite enamel box. Such was its beauty, he instantly fell in love with it, but he was unable to afford it. Almost 30 years later he was in Paris having coffee with a friend when a prominent Iranian collector recognised him. By then, Professor Khalili had amassed the biggest private collection of Islamic art in the world, and had made a name for himself as a man who exhibited his treasures rather than keep them for his own private indulgence. The woman explained that she had been trying to get in touch with him, as she had some pieces she had taken with her after the 1979 revolution that she wanted to sell. He accompanied her to her bank safe, and the first object she took out was the marvellous lacquer box.

Then there was the time, in 1974, when Prof Khalili bought a Qur'an from Sotheby's in London with a missing page of illumination. Almost 18 years later, he received a phone call from a



The panoramic Makkah watercolour, painted by Mubammad Abdallah, the Delhi cartographer, circa 1845.



Prof Khalili's determination to show his pieces to the general public sets him apart from other collectors.



London dealer asking him to come and see him as he was selling some loose illuminated pages. As Prof Khalili was going through the pile, he said he had found the missing page that belonged to one of his Qur'ans. The dealer was astounded "Are you mad?" he said. "That's like finding a needle in a haystack. I'm coming with you to see if you still have a photographic memory." When the Qur'an with the missing page was taken out of the safe

and opened, the dealer almost fainted, remembers Prof Khalili.

These are just two remarkable coincidences that come from 40 years of amassing a breathtaking collection of Islamic art that comprises some 20,000 pieces, encompassing the entire history of the genre from its beginnings in the 7th century until the present day. With stories like these, it is little



Part 9 of a 10-part Qur'an, circa 1030 AD, crafted in ink, opaque watercolours and gold on vellum, and a 13th century ceramic figurine of a dromedary (below) decorated in lustre over a white glaze, from Kashan in Iran.

wonder that four decades later Prof Khalili feels the thrill of the chase just as keenly. "It's a passion. If you don't have passion, you're like a fire without a flame. Things come to you and you make a judgment. It's a life of unpredictability. You wake up in the morning and you've been thinking of an object that you don't think ever existed and somebody walks in with it. That's the beauty and

challenge of being a collector. There is no norm. There's an element of surprise that always gives you the adrenalin," he says.

What sets Prof Khalili apart from many other collectors is his determination to show the pieces to the general public. "What is the definition of a collector?" he asks. "It's a person who fulfils five criteria: to purchase art, to conserve art, to research art, to publish art, and to exhibit art. When you have done this, you have done something for humanity. Don't call yourself a collector if you buy a painting because you're rich, take it home and put it in the dining room, because that is for your benefit, it doesn't benefit anybody else. So calling yourself a collector is a very tall order – make sure that you have fulfilled the criteria before you make that claim."

Works from Prof Khalili's collection have been exhibited around the world since 1995 but his latest exhibition, *The Arts of Islam: Treasures from the Nasser D Khalili Collection*, which opened in Abu Dhabi's Emirates Palace in January, was the first time his treasures had been shown in the Middle East. It was the largest exhibition of Islamic art by one collector in the world, and the largest Islamic art exhibition in the Middle East ever. By the time it closed three months later, around 50,000 people had seen it.

"Because it is their culture it really got to them, and they really took it to heart," says Prof Khalili. "I'm really proud that I had something to do with bringing an understanding and message to the people of the region where these objects were produced. With the development of Saadiyat

Island in Abu Dhabi people there are taking culture very seriously. I commend them for what they are doing for culture. I'm sure that within three or four years they will become one of the largest contributors to culture in history."

The exhibition featured over 500 pieces from both the religious and secular arts of Islam, including ceramics, jewellery, carpets, tiles, miniatures, weapons and Qur'ans. It included a number of works that had never been exhibited before, such as an exquisitely detailed panoramic watercolour of Makkah, painted in 1843, which is the earliest known visual record of the Holy City.

Such a collection is not, perhaps, what one would expect from a Jew. Born in Iran in 1945, Prof Khalili started collecting Islamic art in 1970 simply because of its beauty. "I was born in a Muslim country and the first art which I was introduced to was Islamic art. I didn't collect it because it was Islamic, I collected it because it was beautiful. Islam is probably one of the most diverse cultures in the world because it covers about 50 Muslim countries, and there was a fusion of cultures between different nations each time a Muslim country took over another country. That is the strength of Islamic art."

Are people surprised that he is not a Muslim? "They are proud, that's why I've been called the cultural ambassador of Islam. There is no problem at all. If anything I consider my contribution as a

gift from one member of the family to another, so my being Jewish has never been an obstacle at all," he says.

Prof Khalili is the co-founder and chairman of the Maimonides Foundation, which promotes peace and understanding between Jews and Muslims. In 1996 he was honoured with the title Trustee of the City of Jerusalem for his pursuit of culture and peace among nations, and in 2003 he was made a Knight Commander of the Royal Order of Francis I at Westminster Cathedral in recognition of his inter-faith activities. Pope John Paul II granted him an audience at the Vatican in 2002, when he bestowed on him the Medaglia Pontificia. Two years later he further honoured him by making him a Knight of the Equestrian Order of Pope St Sylvester.

The collector left Iran in 1967 for the US to finish his education, and while he was there honed his skills as an art dealer, the profession of his father. He would buy 20 pieces, keep the best three and sell the rest for a healthy profit. After marrying his British wife, he settled permanently in London in 1978. In 1992 he founded Favermead Limited, and started purchasing shopping centres in the UK. (Favermead's portfolio also includes property in Central London, Exeter and elsewhere). It was around that time that he transformed himself from

The Diwan of Al-Mutanabbi of Nachjavan, Iran, dated 1313-14 AD in ink, watercolours and gold on paper, copied by Muhammad ibn Sa'id, known as ibn al-Saviji, or his son.



a highly successful dealer to one of the world's most important collectors of Islamic art.

But it has not been his sole interest. Prof Khalili has amassed four other collections that are also exhibited around the world: Japanese art of the Meiji period (1868-1912); Swedish textiles (1700-1900); Spanish damascene metalwork (1850-1900); and enamels of the world (1700-2000). They are all in the process of being published by Khalili in glossy volumes, nearly 80 per cent of which are already available. There are around 25,000 pieces in the five collections that are either travelling around the world (there have so far been 37 exhibitions); are on loan to museums (50 have shown them); or they are being restored, researched or photographed for the books. There are warehouses in several countries, though the research centre is in London.

Like a museum, Prof Khalili continues to collect, and will always do so. "You do your utmost to make sure that what you buy has a place in the collection and you don't duplicate," says the collector. "Unlike a lot of museums around the world who have curators coming and going who only have one expertise – say Indian miniatures or carpets – and they buy the things that they like, not thinking of the museum necessarily, with my collection there has been continuity for the last 40 years. There has only been one person – me – and I know what I bought, what I need and what an object can do for the collection. And that's its strength."

"If there are objects that would enhance the collection I usually endeavour to buy it, and 99 per cent of the time I succeed. I don't look at the money side of things because the minute you start collecting, and you think about the money, you'd better go home and wash dishes. The moment you mix the two together you are not a collector, you are a businessman buying and selling like you're on a stock market. A real collector never thinks of the value. He buys it. And in the minute we buy something it becomes dead money for us anyhow. We don't sell anything. At the end of the day none of these things belongs to us, we are only temporary custodians."

Prof Khalili no longer attends auctions personally as his presence drives up the prices. "Almost all of the pieces in the five collections have been bought in Europe and the US. In the beginning I would go to the auctions, but in the last 10 years I've had my people cover it. I make the decision about what to buy, but I cannot go because the moment I put up my hand two other people put up theirs. I decided it would be very expensive if I go myself, so we do it very quietly now. Last year we acquired 200 pieces. In the early '80s or early '90s we sometimes used to buy 500 pieces in a year. Out of three auction houses selling 700 objects, maybe two are of the quality of those in the exhibition."

"When he was buying at his strongest Prof Khalili's purchasing had a marked effect on the market," says William Robinson, international

A brass and silver inlaid rectangular casket with the remains of a combination lock from Jazira in Iraq, 1200-50 AD.





A 12th century
Laqabi-ware dish
from Syria, with
polychrome in-
glaze staining.

director of rugs and carpets and Islamic art for Christie's, the auctioneers. "Since that time he has continued to buy and improve the collection. It is one of the largest in private hands in the world. It also has many world-class masterpieces which would be impossible to find elsewhere, including such outstanding items as the Jami al-tawarikh manuscript that came from the Royal Asiatic Society's collection and which for a decade was the most valuable work of art ever sold at auction."

The collector doesn't have a favourite piece. "You can't have a favourite," he states. "It's like having children and someone asking you which is your favourite. You are not going to say 'I like the small one'. Collecting is the same, you can't have favouritism because you collect and the collection is like a symphony, every note has a role to play."

Once all the publications have been completed, plans to build a museum for the collections will swing into operation. Its location will be decided nearer the time. "There has always been a plan from day one to have a museum," he says. "But what we are doing is no less than having a museum because we are taking the art around the world and showing it to people. We are doing more than a lot of major institutions around the world are doing." Meanwhile, the Khalili Family Trust, set up in 1970 by Khalili's late father to act as an "umbrella" for his son's growing art collection, is in negotiations with two countries about the next venue for *The Arts of Islam: Treasures from the Nasser D Khalili Collection* exhibition.

As well as being a frequent lecturer on his areas of interest, Prof Khalili has also made notable

contributions to the scholarship of Islamic art, having endowed in 1989, under the auspices of The Khalili Family Trust, the Nasser D Khalili Chair of Islamic Art at the School of Oriental and African Studies, at the University of London. It was the first chair devoted to the decorative arts of Islam to be founded at any university. He has supported a research fellowship in Islamic Art at the University of Oxford, and The Khalili Family Trust has also made a significant endowment to the university to establish and support The Khalili Research Centre for the Art and Material Culture of the Middle East, which was officially opened in July 2005. In recognition of his support, Prof Khalili was appointed to the Chancellor's Court of Benefactors. He is also a graduate, Associate Research Professor, and Member of the Governing Body at the School of Oriental and African Studies, as well as an Honorary Fellow of the University of London and of Wolfson College, Oxford. In May 2005 he was made an Honorary Doctor of the University of the Arts, London. He was appointed to the International Board of Overseers at Tufts University, Massachusetts, US, in 1997. In 2003 he received the honorary degree Doctor of Humane Letters from Boston University, and was elected to the Board of Trustees of Boston University in the same year.

Rare for a collector, he keeps only a few pieces at his Mayfair home. "I'm not one of those collectors who takes these things and imprisons them in his home for his own pleasure. My aim is to share as much as I can of my passion, my love and my knowledge of what I have collected in all five areas with the world. I couldn't keep much of it at home anyway for conservation reasons. You couldn't hang a miniature on the wall, for example, because of the light. These things have been around for up to 1,000 years. I want to make sure they survive well after we are gone. It's a responsibility and a duty. I consider myself a custodian and responsible for the well-being of these objects."

During any spare time he gets (he only sleeps for four hours) he likes to read or play tennis, golf or football with his children – three sons. So what does his family think of his life's work? "My wife and three boys have realised a long time ago that what I am doing is not for the family. Obviously the family recognises this as a contribution to humanity, and they understand that it is not a financial venture. It's not like money in the bank that will buy you real estate and give you 10 per cent on your money. I've been doing this for 40 years, and it doesn't bother me at all because when I wake up in the morning or when I go to sleep at night, I realise that what I am doing is right. A lot of people have money, but money doesn't give them recognition or a contribution to humanity."

So it is a passion or an obsession? "It's a combination," he admits. "Once you are born a collector, you die a collector. There is no in-between." ■