

# MARG

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Master  
Painter  
of Jammu



The Ass Curse  
Stele Tradition  
of Ancient  
Maharashtra



Mithila  
Painting  
1949-2014



Khalili  
Collection of  
Islamic Art



The Blue  
Shores  
Prison Art  
Project



# Mughal Mystique The Khalili Collection of Islamic Art

ANJALI DEVIDAYAL



**S**HORTLY BEFORE THE OPENING OF ONE OF THE LARGEST EVER EXHIBITIONS OF Indian jewellery entitled *Jewels That Enchanted the World*, at the State Kremlin Museums, Moscow, in April 2014, I had the rare privilege of interviewing Professor Nasser D. Khalili, one of the major lenders to this landmark show. London-based Professor Khalili, whose name is synonymous with Islamic art, is a scholar, patron and philanthropist of international repute. He has, over four decades, built one of the world's largest and most comprehensive private collections of art of the Islamic world (700–2000). Ranging in period from the 8th to the 20th century and in regions from Mongol China and Moorish Spain to Mughal India, the Khalili Collections encompass other categories as well: Japanese Art of the Meiji Period (1868–1912); Three Hundred Years of the Japanese Kimono (1700–2000); Swedish Textiles (1700–1900); Spanish Damascened Metalwork (1850–1900); and Enamels of the World (1700–2000). Together, the collections embrace every conceivable medium, from exquisite miniature paintings and illuminated manuscripts to arms, armour,

*In jewells (which is one of his felicityes) hee is the treasury of the world, buying all that comes, and heaping rich stones as if hee would rather build than weare them.*

~ SIR THOMAS ROE ON Emperor Jahangir<sup>1</sup>



metalwork, textiles, bejewelled works and coinage. Renowned for his keen eye and depth of knowledge built over years of study, it is hardly surprising that each of his collections is widely acknowledged in its own field as the finest and most synoptic of its kind in the world. Professor Khalili's impetus for collecting was simply that he was captivated by the craftsmanship and beauty of Islamic art objects. As early as the 1970s he saw an opportunity to acquire these exquisite pieces of a hitherto marginalized art-historic legacy that few others appreciated at the time. He says, "With reference to Islamic art, the aim was to collect art produced by Muslim artists under Muslim patronage (which is the definition of Islamic art) from all the 50 Muslim countries in the world, including India."

With fortune favouring his interest, by his own admission, the early years were exciting. The generous supply of top quality works, that first came on to the art market from Egypt, was limited to a small but discerning community of collectors, notably Sheikh Nasser al Sabah of Kuwait; C.L. David in Copenhagen; London-based Edmund

<sup>2</sup> Professor Nasser D. Khalili.  
Photograph: Terry O'Neill.

<sup>1</sup> Turban-crown, Nepal, 19th century. Diamonds, natural pearls, foiled rubies (genuine and synthetic) and emeralds, green glass, gold, enamelled gold and silver mounts, gold thread and silver strips, core of wood and papier-mache covered with maroon velvet; diameter 23 cm.

3 Circular box,  
Mughal India, c. 1635.  
Gold sheet, set with carved  
Columbian emeralds and  
faceted diamond in gold  
kundan, enamelled base;  
diameter 5 cm.



de Unger; Hashem Khosrovani the Iranian oil magnate; Kuwaiti Jasim al-Homaizi; the Sultan of Brunei; and Sheikh Saud al-Thani of Qatar. Professor Khalili acknowledges that the market is unlikely to see such times again, prices having risen drastically in recent years because of a dwindling supply of top quality pieces. The rise in prices can also be attributed in part to the dramatic developments in the cultural landscape of West Asia where efforts to renegotiate and present to the public a regional view of Islamic history (as against that from a Western perspective) have ensured that the competition for top quality works of Islamic art only gets stronger, driving prices even higher. No less than nine museums in Qatar, including a dedicated Museum of Islamic Art (MIA), and the proposed cultural Mecca on Saadiyat Island of neighbouring Abu Dhabi in partnership with Western institutional giants such as the Louvre, Tate and Guggenheim Museums, are marking their presence at various stages of development. In the West as well, the complete overhaul and re-anointing of the galleries of Islamic art at institutions such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York and the Louvre in Paris reflect a reorientation of the traditional notions of viewing Islamic art. It is of course Professor Khalili's prescience in having started early, coupled with a steady and discreet collecting trajectory of over four decades, that has resulted in what now constitutes his unparalleled collection of over 25,000 works. It is interesting to note that each of the collections mentioned here, whether private or institutional, carries significant holdings of museum-worthy objects from the Indian subcontinent. One such collection that relates closely to the Khalili Collections is the al Sabah Collection in Kuwait from which an exhibition titled *Treasury of the World*, with a selection of nearly 450 bejewelled objects from Mughal India, has travelled for almost 12 years to several important museums worldwide.

The aim of this article is to trace the growth and development of the Nasser D. Khalili Collection of Islamic Art from its nondescript years in the 1970s to its present avatar as a global catalyst of unity and harmony, through the collecting journey of its patron, Professor Nasser D. Khalili – his collecting philosophies and interest in India and Indian objects. It is presented as a narrative rather than as a structured conversation.

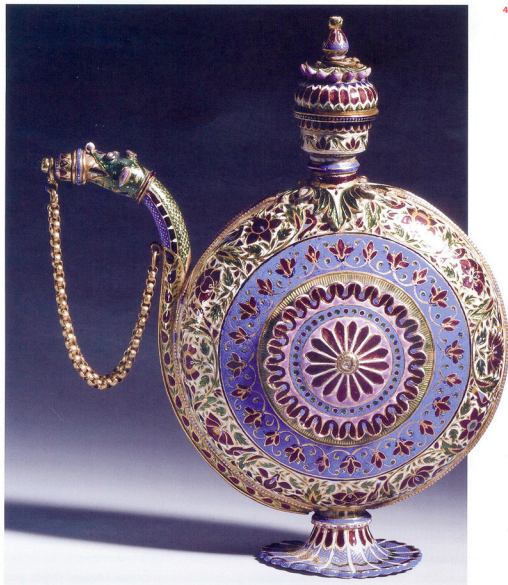
### “Ownership is a myth”

Professor Khalili's deeply philosophical personality reveals his belief in being more the provisional keeper of a heritage rather than the owner of prized objects, a conviction that has had a profound impact on his collecting ambitions. He says, “As far as I am concerned, to be called a collector is a huge responsibility that should not be taken



lightly. A real collector must collect, preserve, research, publish and exhibit his collection. Without these five criteria, you are not a true 'collector', only a selector for your own enjoyment. I don't know of many real collectors. Taking all this into account, you will understand that at the end of the day ownership is a myth. We are all only temporary custodians."

True to his word, Professor Khalili has surrounded his home and office with only a limited portion of his vast collections. Over the decades since the 1980s the Khalili Family Trust has pursued an active programme of research, publications and exhibitions with selections of the collection having been shown at over 35 museums worldwide, such as the British Museum and Victoria and Albert Museum (London), the Alhambra Palace (Granada) and the Van Gogh Museum (Amsterdam). Key objects from the collection have also been loaned to over 40 eminent museums and institutions from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, to Somerset House, London.<sup>2</sup> However, plans to house the collection under one roof seem to be underway, as Professor Khalili suggests, "The ultimate aim for the collections would be to one day display them in our own museum while continuing our worldwide exhibition strategy."



4 Rosewater sprinkler, Jaipur, 19th century. Gold, translucent and opaque champlevé enamel; height: 14.8 cm.



5 Necklace, Jaipur, 19th century. Gold, translucent enamel and opaque champlevé enamel, diamonds, pearls and an emerald pendant; circumference: 48.5 cm.

6 Mango pillbox, northern India, 19th century. Gold, enamelled and set with rubies and diamonds in gold kundan; height 6.5 cm.

Professor Khalili's academic zeal has translated into a small library of 40 volumes that represent the Khalili Collections, 90 per cent of which have already been published with contributions from scholars who count amongst the most distinguished in their fields, such as Dr Stephen Vernoit and Professor J.M. Rogers. Intended to challenge the traditional approach to viewing Islamic art history that had formerly been viewed through a Eurocentric lens, the combined efforts of the simultaneously driven initiatives have had the desired effect in broadening the conventional scope and understanding of what Islamic art might be.

### **"Collecting is a disease...you are born with it and you die with it"**

Professor Khalili's early years and family background are, literally, testimony to the fact that he was born with the collecting disease. Born in 1945 in Isfahan, Iran, to an observant Jewish family that had been involved in the antique trade for a few generations, he was exposed to the mystery and romance of collecting from a very young age. The young Nasser's obvious affinity for the family trade encouraged his father to begin his apprenticeship at the tender age of eight – taking him along on buying trips where he was exposed not only to a vast range of Islamic art objects but also to the subtleties of the trade. Looking back fondly on one of those trips, Professor Khalili remembers the first piece he considers the start of his magnificent collection, a lacquer pen box that was gifted to him by his father's friend who was struck by the passion he saw in the young boy. It is easy to assume that it is this very passion that fuelled his lifelong dedication to building a collection of unprecedented depth and

breadth. Of course, one can't help but credit his early start as the foundation of his connoisseurship abilities.

In 1967, Professor Khalili moved to New York to study computer science and started dealing in antiques as a source of income, keeping the finest pieces for himself. Another move in 1978 to London led him to meet his future wife Marion who at the time worked at an antiques centre. He married Marion and continued to successfully deal in antiques, subsequently channelling the profits from his art business into property.

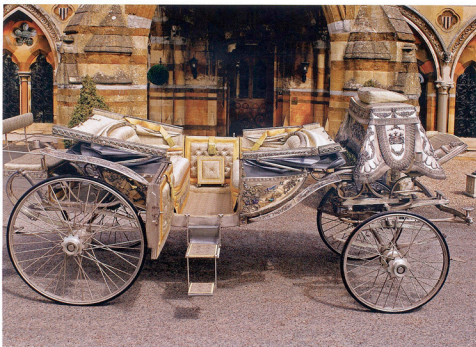
On the personal front, he seems to run a very democratic family where the opinions of his wife and three sons Daniel, Benjamin and Raphael count in important decisions. This became evident when, on their insistence, he took the decision not to move into 18 and 19 Kensington Palace Gardens, two derelict buildings he had painstakingly restored over a five-year period. Not your average art collector, but rather a connoisseur of all things beautiful, Professor Khalili's sense of responsibility towards the preservation of heritage led him to purchase and repair these two buildings as a means to give back to England, his country of adoption. Ensuring that the structures received the same degree of care, attention to detail and extensive research as any of the valued objects in his art collection, the two buildings were refurbished as close as possible to their original design, creating a residence that has become a monument of living art in London, second in stature only to Buckingham Palace. The buildings were combined into a single residence, that his family deemed too "palatial" for a home. Following this, Professor Khalili put the property up for sale, and after a few changes of ownership it is now home to Indian-born steel tycoon Lakshmi Mittal and his family.

**"Some of the finest examples of Indian jewellery were made during the Mughal period and it was not difficult to fall in love with it from the outset"**

India's longstanding jewellery tradition which can be traced back almost 5,000 years, carries with it emotional, religious and symbolic importance. Traditional jewellery has a special place in the personal and collective history of Indians. It is not difficult to relate to Professor Khalili's sentiments about jewellery from the Mughal period, an almost 500-year period beginning in the early 16th century, that is widely acknowledged as one of India's art-historically most prolific periods, when royal patronage and support combined with an exchange of ideas and techniques from Europe, Persia and within India resulted in the production of some of the most exquisite objects the world has ever seen. Professor Khalili is quick to express his admiration of the skill and craftsmanship of the unnamed Indian artists who assimilated and adapted the various influences they were exposed to. He says, "The majority of the objects that were produced during the Mughal period were of the ultimate sophistication, craftsmanship and fusion of cultures, particularly that of Persia which was contemporary with the Mughal period."

Nearly 200 traditional bejewelled and enamelled works from Mughal India form the Indian contingent of the Khalili Collection of Islamic Art, and comprise primarily luxury objects and personal ornaments made in the imperial workshops. The lush visual vocabulary of these objects provides glimpses into the history of goldsmiths' work and hardstone-carving in India at the time and also serves up examples of unique techniques employed in Mughal workshops – such as kundan used by Indian craftsmen in setting gemstones, and minakari, a traditional form of enamelling.

7 Carriage, made for the Maharaja of Bhavnagar at the Fort Coach Factory, Bombay, 1915. Gold, silver, iron, enamel, wood, silk; 208 x 470 x 175 cm.



These are forms that continue to be used by craftsmen in India today. Unlike other collections of Islamic art that hold mostly later or post-Mughal pieces, the Khalili Collection is distinguished in being able to trace the provenance of its objects to early Mughal India around the 17th and early 18th centuries. However, the later 18th- and 19th-century objects in the collection are equally mesmerizing and include a number of items of personal jewellery that trace the Mughal legacy in the provincial territories of northern India, Rajasthan and Gujarat, the Deccan and southern India into the 20th century. Central to the Indian collections are a number of carved gemstones such as the one-of-its-kind ruby engraved with the names and titles of Jahangir and Shah Jahan; a circa 1635 gold box overlaid with 103 carved emeralds from the period of Shah Jahan; as well as two carved emeralds of notable size and superb colour, also from the period of Shah Jahan or perhaps the early years of his son Aurangzeb's reign. These are merely examples of the magnificent and extensive holdings of historic gems that Dr Pedro Moura Carvalho, former deputy curator of the Khalili Collection and author of Catalogue XVIII of the collection, entitled *Gems and Jewels of Mughal India: Jewelled and Enamelled Objects from the 16th to the 20th Centuries*, suggests were part of the vast Mughal treasuries. He contends, "No other ruling dynasty in Asia or Europe possessed such a high number of historic gems as the Mughals."<sup>3</sup>

Approximately 1,200 enamelled works from geographically and artistically different parts of the world such as Persia, France, Russia and India make up the selection of enamelled objects in the Khalili Collection, collectively labelled "Enamels of the World". This selection was showcased at the State Kremlin Museums in Moscow in October 2009 and highlighted a number of exceptional works from Mughal India such as an enamelled cigarette case; a rosewater sprinkler; dagger and scabbard; a unique enamelled gold hookah with matching decorated chillum support, likely an early product of the Rajasthani court workshop; and a decorative gold enamelled box and tray of unparalleled quality. These objects were not only symbols of power and prestige but also conveyed the sophistication and taste of the Mughal rulers who commissioned their production.





8 Detail of metalwork on the carriage in figure 7.

Reasons enough for the Khalili Collection's Indian corpus to be co-opted in the league of important museums around the world – including the Victoria and Albert Museum and British Museum in London, the State Hermitage Museum in Moscow and the Kuwait National Museum – that are esteemed for their Indian collections and as centres for art history scholarship.

**“I have been influenced by many great thinkers, philosophers, writers, poets and politicians but, at the top of that pyramid, is Mahatma Gandhi”**

Perhaps it is Professor Khalili's early years growing up a Jew in a Muslim-majority country that have shaped his attitude to religion and politics and sparked his desire to promote interfaith dialogue. A firm believer in harmony as opposed to conflict, he is convinced that culture can be used as a bridge between nations and an important tool in improving the lives of people. He has used his collection as a true example of how three world religions – Islam, Christianity and Judaism – can be brought together. He says, “From early on, I realized that religion and politics have their own language but the language of art is universal. This universality is what brings people from all over the world together regardless of their religion, colour and race.”

This becomes evident through an analysis of the surprisingly large number and demographic of visitors comprising Muslims and non-Muslims alike who attend the travelling exhibitions of the Khalili Collection of Islamic Art in different parts of the world. It is an indication of the curiosity and thirst for knowledge that people within and outside the faith have for Islam.

Professor Khalili is Chairman of the Maimonides Interfaith Foundation, an organization that he co-founded in an attempt to foster dialogue and understanding among the three Abrahamic faiths of Christianity, Judaism and Islam.<sup>4</sup> He has been widely acknowledged for his consistent efforts in the pursuit of peace, education and culture amongst nations and has been conferred several honours and titles, from Trustee of the City of Jerusalem, the honorary degree of Doctor of Humane Letters of Boston University, and Knight Commander of the Royal Order of Francis I (KCFO) of

the UK, to knighthoods from two Popes. He was also honoured by UNESCO as a Goodwill Ambassador in 2012.<sup>5</sup> Of the several ways to give back to society, Professor Khalili is convinced that art tops the list. Sharing his art collection with the world is his way of contributing to humanity but he has also ensured that this legacy is carried on in the form of his contributions to the study of Islamic art. He has founded the Nasser D. Khalili Chair of Islamic Art at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, and supported a research fellowship in Islamic Art at the University of Oxford in addition to making a significant endowment to set up the Khalili Research Centre for the Art and Material Culture of the Middle East at the university. In 2011 the Khalili Family Trust endowed the Nasser D. Khalili Chair of Islamic Studies at Queens College, New York, where Professor Khalili graduated in the early 1970s.<sup>6</sup>

A selection of approximately 40 works from the Khalili Collection's Indian holdings were showcased in April 2014 at the State Kremlin Museum, Moscow, amidst its own astounding collection from the Indian subcontinent that includes Shah Jahan's gold signet ring, decorated with a large diamond, rubies and emeralds and the only item bearing an original engraved inscription in Persian. In what was likely the most ambitious project of its kind, this exhibition covered the history of five centuries of Indian jewellery. The objects, sourced from a long list of lenders, traced the history of Indian jewellery – through sophisticated pieces from the temples of Tamil Nadu, kundan and minakari from Rajasthan, Place Vendôme creations for Indian royalty and the works of some leading contemporary Indian jewellery designers.<sup>7</sup> Amongst the 40 pieces included from the Khalili Collection were an exquisite 19th-century mango-shaped box in gold, enamelled and set with rubies and diamonds (most likely a pillbox) and a magnificent 19th-century turban-crown from Nepal studded with diamonds, rubies and pearls, as well as amulets, necklaces, some manuscripts and – last but not the least – an ultimate masterpiece on wheels, a silver and gold carriage that once belonged to the Maharaja of Bhavnagar.

In closing, it would be appropriate to say that the Nasser D. Khalili Collection of Islamic Art has in great measure already achieved, through its unifying message, what politicians and peacemakers have been attempting and some upcoming institutions in West Asia are in part setting out to do. This interview was a privileged insight into Professor Nasser D. Khalili's collecting world. Ever greedy, I close on the promise that one day I will have the opportunity to linger over the entire collection, hopefully housed in a home of its own.

Professor Khalili's final note is a message for unity and peace through knowledge and culture: "The biggest weapon of mass destruction is ignorance...there is far more that unites us than divides us."



9 Cigarette case, Jaipur, late 19th century. Gold, opaque and translucent champlevé enamel, diamonds; 8.3 x 5.7 x 2 cm.

#### NOTES

- 1 Sir Thomas Roe was England's first ambassador (1615–19) to the court of the "Great Moghul", Emperor Jahangir. The words quoted here were written by him in a letter to Prince Charles, later King Charles I, dated October 30, 1616. William Foster, "The Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe to India 1615–19", in Manuel Keene, *Treasury of the World*, London: Thames & Hudson in association with The al Sabah Collection, Dar al-Athar-al-Islamiyah, Kuwait National Museum, 2001, p. 6.
- 2 Short biography of Professor Nasser D. Khalili, courtesy the curatorial team, the Khalili Collections.
- 3 Dr Pedro Moura Carvalho, Khalili Collection Catalogue XVIII, *Gems and Jewels of Mughal India: Jewelled and Enamelled Objects from the 16th to the 20th Centuries*, p. 11.
- 4 Note on the Maimonides Interfaith Foundation, courtesy the curatorial team, the Khalili Collections.
- 5 Short biography of Professor Nasser D. Khalili, courtesy the curatorial team, the Khalili Collections.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Press Note, *India: Jewels That Enchanted the World*, February 2014, courtesy Sue Bond Public Relations, London. A lavishly produced 428-page catalogue has been published in conjunction with the exhibition. See "Books Received" in this issue, p 95.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

All photographs of objects courtesy the Khalili Collections, London.



10 Hookah and chillum support, probably Mewar (Rajasthan), early 18th century. Gold on a lac core with painted, cloisonné and champlevé enamels; diameter 21 cm.