

# The 'Born Collector'

Nasser D. Khalili, who put together the world's most comprehensive collection of Islamic artifacts—more than 20,000 items—wrote his first (published) book at the age of 14, memorized the labels in the British Museum, and sometimes bought a hundred objects a day

BY MARTIN GAYFORD



**T**he reason," says Nasser D. Khalili, "why I have worked so hard for 35 years to put the culture of Islam on the map is because I have always believed that the real weapon of mass destruction is ignorance. Once you tackle that, you solve a lot of problems."

We are talking over a cup of tea and honey in Khalili's headquarters in the Mayfair district of London. He is a dapper 60-year-old, elegantly suited and unstopably eloquent. Khalili was born in Iran in 1945 and brought up there, but after a quarter century of living in Britain, he has developed a style that is distinctively British while remaining in some ways Middle Eastern. On arrival and departure, one is given a friendly embrace, which is not normally the practice in London's West End.

It is true that Khalili—known to his friends as David—has made extraordinary efforts to bring the arts of Islam to the world's attention. He has put together what is widely regarded as the most comprehensive collection of Islamic artifacts, more than 20,000 objects, in existence. This in turn has been documented in 27 lavishly illustrated catalogues and shown in 40 or so exhibitions around the world.

Khalili owns some outstanding masterpieces, one of the most remarkable being the *Jami al-Tawarikh*, or *Compendium of Chronicles*, of Rashid al-Din, a history of the world written in the 14th century, worth perhaps \$20 million. But the Khalili collection is impressive for its range as well as its quality. It contains scientific instruments, tools, and early legal documents, as well as paintings, textiles, manuscripts, and metalwork. There are objects from all periods and all parts of the Islamic world.

"The unique feature of our collection," he tells me, emphasizing that, strictly speaking, all this belongs not to him but to a family trust, "is its comprehensiveness. I think of Islamic art as a magnificent picture. I've treated it like a masterpiece, like the Mona Lisa. Some museums have only the head, some only part of the body. Our collection presents the totality, the way it should be presented, from China to North Africa. I didn't want to collect only things that were made for kings and queens, because that's the wrong way to present any culture."

Recently Khalili wrote *The Timeline History of Islamic Art and Architecture* (published in England by Worth Press; the American edition, titled *Islamic Art and Culture: A Visual History*, will be published this fall by Overlook Press). It aims to present the entire material culture of Islam—ranging through 14 centuries and 50 modern nations—to the general reader. In today's political context, perhaps the most startling aspect of all this activity is that Khalili is Jewish.

He told me of a visit he paid not long ago to an organization that trains imams, or Muslim clergy, in Britain. After Khalili's talk, the scholar in charge—the late and much revered Zaki Badawi—got up and said, "I have to tell you something else: David is not Muslim. He's Jewish."

Khalili continues, "You should have seen their faces. They never thought in a million years that this Jew would do all this for their culture. They came and gave me hugs and kisses. I said, 'I'm your cousin. What I'm doing is a contribution from one member of the family to another.'" Khalili has the distinction of having been knighted by the pope for his contributions to inter-

---

*Martin Gayford is art critic for London's Spectator and contributes regularly to the Daily Telegraph, Modern Painters, and Harpers & Queen.*

faith understanding and also of having been made a trustee of the city of Jerusalem for his pursuit of peace and harmony between Jews and Muslims—the aim of the Maimonides Foundation, of which he is cofounder and chairman.

**In Iran Khalili's family dealt in art**, specializing in Achaemenid, Parthian, Sassanian, and Byzantine antiquities. His background, therefore, is in an older Middle East, one in which the adherents of different religions lived in comparative harmony. At an early age he was drawn to acquire not the works of pre-Islamic civilizations, as had been the family tradition, but the products of the culture that surrounded him. As a child he collected such things as old stamps. "I was introduced to the culture of Islam bit by bit as I went along," he recalls. "To start with, I lived in Iran, an Islamic country, and one of the first things I was introduced to was something I still appreciate: small-scale figurative paintings." (Figurative art, prohibited in some parts of the Islamic world, was common in Iran.) His first purchase with his own money, in 1966, was a lacquer pen box.

When Khalili was 14, he had an argument with one of his teachers in front of the class. As a result, he failed the course. His response was to spend the next summer writing a collection of short biographies of the world's great geniuses, 225 in all. This was successfully published, making him one of the youngest authors in Iranian history.

In 1967, after completing his military service, Khalili went to the United States to explore a wider world. "I only knew about life in the aquarium," he has said, "and wanted to hit the sea." He sold the rights to his book and bought a ticket with the proceeds. In New York, he acquired a degree in computer science at Queens College and began to buy and sell art. To finance this interest, he also entered the real estate business.

In 1978 Khalili walked into a shop on Bond Street in London and saw a young woman named Marion Easton behind the counter. "If she is Jewish and unmarried," he later recalled thinking, "I will marry her." She was and he did, and as a result he moved permanently to Britain. The Khalilis have three sons—Daniel, born in 1981, and twins Benjamin and Raphael, born in 1984. In London Khalili studied Persian lacquer, earning a Ph.D. at London University's School of Oriental and African Studies (where he is now an associate research professor and a member of the governing body).

His purchases began to increase exponentially—frequently up to 20 a week—and there were days on which he would buy a hundred objects. Naturally all of this activity led to myriad art-world rumors; for example, that he was the front man for a Persian Gulf ruler.

Khalili is discreet about the exact sources of his fortune, but he has spoken about extensive dealings in real estate and commodities. In recent years he has been associated with the sale of 18-19 Kensington Palace Gardens, London, which was rumored to be the most expensive house in the world. The exact price tag was disputed but was reported in the press as being as high as £70 million (\$122.5 million). The transaction is shrouded in mystery. But if the origin and growth of Khalili's fortune remain private, there is little doubt as to his current wealth. He features on *Forbes* magazine's list of billionaires (620th, with \$1 billion in assets) and on London's 2005 *Sunday Times* list of wealthy Britons (76th).

The way Khalili put together his vast collections suggests that



**ABOVE** Luster-painted vase in the form of a camel, from Iran (Kashan), early 13th century. **BELOW** Dish decorated with a bird, from Syria, 12th century.





**ABOVE** Koran page, from North Africa, probably Tunisia, early eleventh century. **BELOW** Incense burner in the form of a lynx, from Iran, late 12th or early 13th century.



he is remarkably astute. But there is no reason to doubt the overriding motive he proclaims for accumulating this hoard of treasures, which is kept at locations in London and Switzerland: to increase knowledge and understanding both outside and within the Islamic world. As Khalili points out, Islamic culture used to be disregarded in the very places that had produced it. “Western countries played a huge role in collecting, exhibiting, and studying Islamic art,” he says. “Most of the books on the subject and most of the scholars are not of Muslim origin.”

The reasons for this neglect were varied. In the Middle East, there was little regard for ancient artifacts. In his book *A Year Amongst the Persians* (1893), the Cambridge Orientalist Edward Granville Browne reported that his Iranian acquaintances were puzzled as to why Westerners were so preoccupied by old bits of tile and pottery. Through most of the 20th century, though connoisseurship of Islamic art was greater in the West, the field remained a minor concern. But now, both within and outside Islam, interest is growing rapidly.

“Muslims themselves are trying to understand their own culture, which they have ignored, and the West are realizing how much influence from East to West they have ignored,” Khalili says. “So the East and the West are working toward one another.” He points out that numerous museums are currently enhancing their displays of Islamic art. The Louvre has announced a \$60 million expansion to house its Islamic collection; in London the Victoria & Albert Museum is constructing an Islamic gallery. The British Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York have similar projects.

Politics has focused attention on Islam. Understanding the Islamic world suddenly seems much more important than it did a few decades ago. And, as Khalili argues, art and culture provide windows into a society. His encyclopedic collecting now looks prescient.

Although his holdings of Islamic art have made his name renowned, Khalili also has three other collections, one of which—Japanese art from the Meiji period (1868–1912)—is itself the most important private collection in the world in its field and comprises some 2,000 objects. No one was aware of the existence of this remarkable holding until Khalili revealed it to the public in 1993. “Wonders of Imperial Japan: Meiji Art from the Khalili Collection” will be at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam from July 7 through November 5. The other two collections—of Swedish textiles and Spanish Damascene metalwork—are much smaller. All of this amounts to art accumulation on a grand scale. The names Gulbenkian and Getty have been used in comparison.

Why did he collect in only those circumscribed areas? “People ask me why I collected Islamic art,” he explains. “The reason is that it was unfairly neglected for many years. That was true of all four areas I have collected; they needed to be brought to the world’s attention.”

Another advantage of neglected areas, of course, is that the competition for any given prize is less intense. When Khalili began to acquire Islamic calligraphy, for example, in the aftermath of the fall of the shah of Iran, it had been overlooked by the art market. The Khalili collection remains particularly strong in calligraphy and Korans, which fill the first five volumes of the catalogues (with others devoted to illuminated manuscripts and secular documents).

The subtleties of Koranic penmanship might be regarded as esoteric by those who don’t read Arabic. Khalili, however, strongly defends calligraphy as an idiom of universal interest. “The beauty of Islamic calligraphy is twofold,” he says. “If you can read it, it’s full of wisdom. So you have a bonus if you can understand it. But if you can’t, esthetically it still beats anything else you’ll ever look at. Sometimes people who collect contemporary art look at Islamic calligraphy, especially early pieces, without knowing what it is. They think it’s a contemporary painting.”

But by and large Khalili is not an admirer of contemporary art or its collectors. The hallmark of a true collector, in his opinion, is knowledge. “In the old days, collectors like me who come from different backgrounds looked at art seriously, and they did not touch anything unless they knew the history,” he says. “So in the years before I became a collector, I visited every major museum and institution I came into contact with. The first port of call was the British Museum. I walked in and was overwhelmed. I went around it section by section. I spent two hours, then went out and had a coffee. Then I came back and looked at another section. Since then, I’ve visited the BM so often that I know every corner of it like I know my house. Sometimes I’d spend hours at certain display cabinets, trying to learn the captions and testing myself—going back, looking at it, and reciting, checking the description against the object. “The new generation make money, say to themselves, ‘Now what?’, and then hire a curator for themselves. They don’t go out to the museums; they don’t educate themselves, so they don’t know what they truly like. The minute you buy for economic reasons, not out of passion, forget it. You’re not a collector. The true collector does it first to satisfy himself, from the point of view of experience, intelligence, and knowledge. Then you share your knowledge with others.”

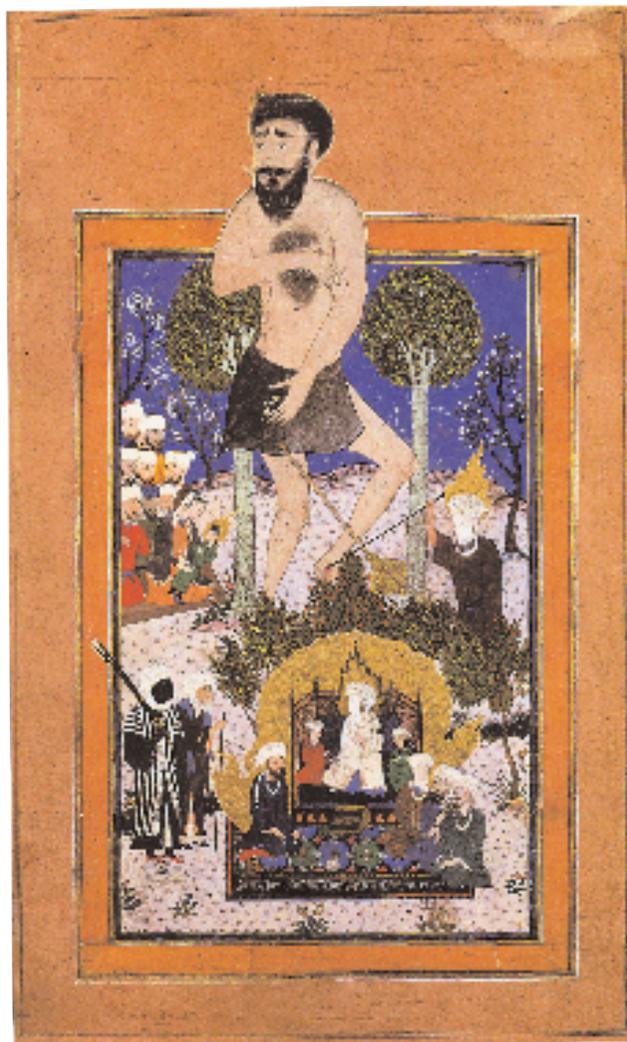
**The obvious final stage in this process** of collecting is for Khalili to found a museum. It is an idea that has been floated frequently. As long ago as 1992 he offered to lend his collection to the British government if the state would provide a place to house it. This offer was rebuffed, and nothing came of a proposal to offer the collection on long-term loan to the British Museum.

Khalili remains positive about the project. “I don’t think there is any question of it going anywhere except this country,” he says. “This is my adopted home. I’m British. I’m extremely proud to be British. I’m proud of the system in this country. My wife is British; my children were born here. I want to repay some of the privileges I’ve been given.”

In May 2005, according to the London press, Khalili predicted that the museum would be in existence within five years. But there are a number of obstacles to be overcome. It would require an endowment of tens of millions of pounds. Then there is the question of finding suitable premises. Another reason for delay is that the Khalili collection was put together under the auspices of the Khalili Family Trust. Khalili emphasizes that any decision is going to be collective and will not be made in a hurry. “I’m not going to take the decision myself,” he says. “I run a very democratic family. I’ll wait until my children get married and we have daughters-in-law. Then we’ll make a collective decision. I want to make sure everybody else feels that they are part of the team. The last thing I want to do is rule from the grave.”

Meanwhile, Khalili’s buying—which has slowed in recent years because he already has prime examples of almost everything his collection needs—continues. Recently he was in India, where he looked for material related to the Mogul emperor Aurangzeb (who reigned from 1658 to 1707). “Aurangzeb reigned for a very long time, and I wondered why he didn’t create any albums during that time,” Khalili says. “I came back, and a week later a dealer telephoned me. He said, ‘I have something very special for you.’ I sat down and he put an album in front of me. It was an album assembled for Aurangzeb of pages of calligraphy and Korans, from the 13th century until his own time, of the most unbelievable quality. It was an extraordinary coincidence.”

Khalili’s eyes shine. It is obvious that after more than 20,000 purchases, his enthusiasm for rare and beautiful objects is undiminished. As he once said, “You are born a collector, and you die a collector.” ■



**ABOVE** Album leaf featuring the giant Uj (the biblical Og) and the prophets Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad, from Iraq or Iran, 15th century.

**BELOW** Illustration of Jonah and the Whale, from the *Jami al-Tawarikh* of Rashid al-Din, Iran, 1314–15.

