

THE INDEPENDENT

Arts & Books Review

16 April 2004

INSIDE ▷▷ Film ▷ Music ▷ Books ▷ Television & Radio



THE COLLECTOR

A rare glimpse of billionaire David Khalili's art



FORGOTTEN HEROES

MICHAEL HOROVITZ

The jazz poet on his fellow polymath Jeff Nuttall

Who was he?

Jeff died aged 70 last January. He was a creator, comedian and prophet who saw in his teens that the gratuitous terror-bombings of Dresden, Hiroshima and Nagasaki left little hope for global survival save in the pursuit of love, art, and non-military intelligence. He conveyed this vision in *Bomb Culture* (1968). He hated the hijacking of mid-1960s human-scale counterculture by the soulless forces of profiteering and realpolitik.

What did he do?

His five adult decades were spent inspiring hundreds of students, mainly at Northern art schools, to fulfil their potential, and in later years he did cameo roles for films, television... and money. But he never stopped working on his personal mission, which embraced plays, poetry, novels, essays, memoirs, polemics, painting, sculpture, ceramics, comic-strips and cartoons. He introduced multimedia happenings, performance art and improvised theatre, co-founding, scripting and acting in *The People Show*. His jazz cornet, vocals and piano reincarnated his hero, Fats Waller, in the outsized high spirits and satirical zest with which he conducted ever more heterodox line-ups and audiences to mutual euphoria. His poetry and prose are imbued with his love of GM Hopkins, Dylan Thomas, The Beats et al, whilst at all times like his visual, musical and dramatic productions making it new.

Why do I admire him?

Because however desperate the circumstances or ghastly the opposition, Jeff hardly ever lost his sense of humour, nor his militant lyricism, nor his instincts for bringing out the best from people. Because his works and energies were so wide-ranging, moving in verse from wonderment to metaphysical depths. Because he was such a Blakean good mate to "Everything that lives is holy", and so exemplary an engineer of unfettered spontaneity.

Jeff Nuttall's Wake is at St John's Church, Waterloo Rd, London SE1, 1 May, 1-3pm

INSIDE

| | |
|--------------------|-------|
| Cover story | 2-4 |
| Thomas Sutcliffe | 5 |
| Film | 6-11 |
| Rock, Pop & World | 13-18 |
| Books | 20-27 |
| Reviews | 28-29 |
| Concise Crossword | 31 |
| Radio & Television | 32-34 |

THE WEEK AHEAD

Monday: Classical Music
Tuesday: Visual Arts
Wednesday: Architecture & Radio
Thursday: Theatre
Friday: Film, Books, Rock & Pop

David Khalili is a billionaire collector on an epic scale. In a rare interview, he tells MARTIN GAYFORD that he hopes his unique pieces can bring people together. And, overleaf, we review the exhibition that features his greatest treasures

Healing the world with art

The question of value," David Khalili insists, "is irrelevant. Nothing belongs to anyone for ever: we are all temporary custodians. If you are here to be the custodian of a certain tradition, let it be." It is a surprising view, perhaps, for one of the world's foremost art collectors. But then, Khalili is a most unusual collector – and also an extraordinary man.

So remarkable are the masterpieces of his collection, that it is able to complement that of the mighty Hermitage in St Petersburg. The majority of the exhibits in the current show "Heaven On Earth: Art From Islamic Lands" at the Hermitage Rooms in London's Somerset House come from Russia. But a substantial proportion are provided by Khalili. What the tsars and the Soviets didn't manage to amass, he has acquired.

In the inner circles of the art world his name – though not widely known to the general public – is placed with such predecessors as J Paul Getty and Calouste Gulbenkian. He is, like them, an art collector on an epic scale. Over the last 30 years he has built up a vast array of more than 20,000 objects, including the most comprehensive holding of Islamic art ever in private hands. He also has the most complete collection of decorative work from the Meiji period (1868-1912) in Japan, plus smaller accumulations of Swedish textiles and Spanish metalwork.

But his aim in putting together this astounding panoply of ancient Korans, Persian miniatures, precious ceramics, intricate metal-work, glass, jewels, superb carpets and endless other items – is not that of the billionaire collector of fable, who gloats alone over his possessions in a mansion. Khalili's motives are idealistic and educational. He wants the world to understand these things better and value them more highly.

"Giving exhibitions is like throwing a drop into an ocean. Any contribution to the enhancement of the understanding of Islamic culture adds to that ocean, which I call the ocean of understanding. The greatest and one of the strongest bridges between cultures is the one that is built out of art. Religion and politics have

their own dialects. The language of art is universal. There you are safe. Nobody can label you."

Khalili values his privacy, and seldom gives interviews – indeed, I was warned when I made the request, hardly ever. But when I met him in his Mayfair headquarters he turned out to be dapper, friendly and extremely articulate.

Nasser David Khalili was born 58 years ago in Isfahan, Iran. He came from a family of Jewish art dealers. At the age of 14, after a row with a school teacher, he decided to write a book – and produced a set of lives of the world's geniuses that proved to be a bestseller. At this stage, he had already begun to buy works of art.

"My very, very first purchase was when I was about 12 or 13. My father used to take me wherever he went buying or selling anything from the age of eight, because amongst my other sisters and brothers I was the only one who showed interest. We bought ordinary things like Persian lacquer to start with. Many years later I did my PhD on Persian lacquer."

In 1967 Khalili left Iran for New York, funded partly by the royalties from his book. As he has often said, after experiencing life in the aquarium, he wanted to find out what it was like in the sea. And once in the US, he began to deal in art, and also to invest in property. In the end, unlike most dealers, he found himself loath to part with his finest pieces, so his activities in property began to fund what became a permanent collection – and continue to do so. A couple of years ago he created a stir by putting on the market a mansion in Kensington which – with an asking price of £80m – was the most expensive private house in Europe. It sold for £50m, but has recently been sold again, this time for £70m.



But why, I asked, did he buy in just the four areas he did – Islamic, Japanese, Swedish and Spanish? "The reason is that it was art – in all the four areas I have collected – that was unfairly neglected for many years, and that needed to be brought to the world's attention."

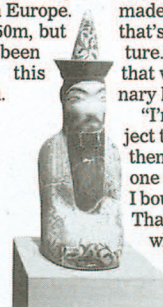
Islamic art was overlooked until recently, he feels, by the very countries that produced it. "People appreciate art of any kind – Renaissance, Impressionism, Modernism – when they were exposed to it. But this effort was not taken up by a lot of Muslim countries, they never tried all out to educate their masses in their own culture. Most of the books on the subject, and most of the scholars are not of Muslim origin. A simple example is me: I'm Jewish. But I consider the Muslims my cousins, I don't draw a line between myself and them at all.

"This is the attitude that should be taken by the Muslims towards other nations too – because at the end of the day Islam is one of the most harmonious religions in the world." One of Khalili's many charitable and educational initiatives is the Maimonides Foundation Trust – of which he is co-founder and chairman – which promotes peace and understanding between Muslims and Jews.

But what is the point in bringing together such staggering quantities of art? "Islamic art – or for that matter any art – is like a huge, beautiful picture made out of different pieces, like a jigsaw. You only appreciate the picture when all the pieces of the puzzle are put in place.

"Our collection presents the totality of Islamic art, 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. You have to represent the objects that were used in everyday life, in ordinary homes.

"I'm delighted to have every single object that we have, because every one of them is part of that picture. I know each one of them – where I bought it, whom I bought it from, how much I paid for it. That is why I was able to put together what I have put together. If somebody walked in with something, I always immediately knew whether I had a space for it, or whether I have a



Cover photograph by Tom Pilon



'Maharana Sangram Singh of Mewar out Hunting on His Horse, Jambudvipa' (India, c1720-30, watercolour and gold on paper, detail); David Khalili (opposite)

similar one, or a better one. Often I have made the decision whether to buy or not in less than 50 seconds."

The value of the whole lot is incalculable – certainly more than £100m, but any such estimate would be arbitrary, and, as he says himself, "Finally, money is just paper. My loyalty is to the objects; to be honest, I really don't care about the financial side of it too much. People forget that whenever you are faced with a masterpiece, the day you pay for it it may be a bit expensive, but if you wait one month, two months, six months, then it

becomes terribly cheap." In recent years, however, his buying – which sometimes ran at up to 20 pieces a week – has slackened, and he is devoting more of his attention to publishing the catalogues of his collection, which will run to a projected 40 luxurious and meticulously scholarly volumes.

Establishing a collection, he explains, is something that should be done in orderly stages. First you buy the objects, then conserve them. Next you research them, and publish the results – as he is now doing – and lend to exhibitions, such

as the one at the Hermitage Rooms. Finally, the collection needs a permanent home. And for some time now, he has been thinking about that. Geneva has been considered, and finally turned down.

At present, he tells me, "I don't think – nor for that matter do any of my trustees [the collection is owned by the Khalili Family Trust] – that there is any question of it going anywhere else except this country. 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. But I can't say anything about the timing."

London has let slip many a great collection – the Gulbenkian, for example, and the Thyssen – but it sounds as if the Khalili Collection won't be one of them. On the way out, he points to his latest purchase, which has just arrived. It is a small, charming 18th-century Persian painting – much the sort of thing he started off by buying all those years ago. And it is obvious that, like every other object he owns, he loves it.

The finest display of Islamic art in decades is on show at Somerset House. MICHAEL GLOVER is mightily impressed

His heavenly objects

How are ignorance and prejudice about Islam and its multifarious contributions to civilisation to be dispelled? One way is by mounting a great exhibition such as this one, which is the largest and most significant to be devoted to the subject of Islamic art, fine and decorative, in almost 30 years. The show brings together a sampling of about 120 works from two great sources – the Nasser D Khalili Collection of Islamic Art in London and the Hermitage collections from St Petersburg. Khalili's collection is particularly strong on the calligraphic arts; the Hermitage collections most often remind us of the way in which the Russian Empire impinged upon its Islamic neighbours, of how various civilisation borrowed from or impinged upon each another.

The show opens with a display of calligraphy – on tiles, on stone monuments and in sacred books. The variety of Arabic scripts is astonishing, and the way it is used can shift from texts of the utmost complexity, in which one script is layered on another, to the utmost simplicity. One of the most extraordinary single works in the show is an 18th-century panel, probably from North Africa, which consists of nothing but line after line of text, one beneath another, gold lettering set against a starkly simple blue ground, which repeat the one word "Allah" in Arabic. The ground is of silk; the elegant patterning of the repeated word is carried on additional wefts. The whole exercise, of elegantly simple, minimal incantation, throws you forward 200 years to Allen Ginsberg and the Beat Generation.

But there is much more to this exhibition than art in the service of God. It is at least as much about art in the service of princely luxury. Some of the ceremonial table ware is especially fine – an 11th-century cockerel from Iran, brazenly forthright and self-preeningly majestic in its bearing, is just one of the many vessels created in the forms of animals.

Of equal interest is a splendidly patient-looking zebu (like a cow) of brass/bronze inlaid with silver, which stands with a weary air of stoicism as a calf sucks greedily at its teat and a lion bites ferociously down on its hump. This is a superb example of Persian cast metalwork. Then there is the Iranian incense-burner in the shape of a lynx, complete with beautifully observed eyebrows, moustache and curly mane.

It is often mistakenly thought that Islam absolutely forbade the representation of the human form. Not quite true – as anyone would know who has studied Islamic miniature painting. The best examples here are from the Hermitage – a *Reclining Youth* (1600-35), the very epitome of luxuried indolence, done in a mixture of opaque watercolour and gold, and a 17th-century *Portrait of an Indian Prince* tricked out for battle, who happens to be sniffing at a delicate posy of flowers.

In spite of all the thunderous warnings of theologians, courtly life became more and more irredeemably lavish. A small



FOUR OF KHALILI'S FINEST



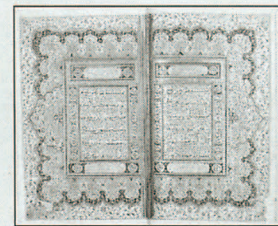
Rulers of the Mughal Dynasty, from Babur to Awrangzeb, with their ancestor Tamerlane (Mughal India c1707-12) This painting, one of the greatest pieces of collective portraiture from Mughal India in the realistic manner, is a rare, stylised portrayal of Tamerlane the Great. The emperor sits centre stage, surrounded by his successors. Extraordinary attention has been given to matters of dress and weaponry, and the overall atmosphere is serene.

Mughal-era tray for an octagonal box, conventional enough in form, is distinguished by its luxurious use of gold, enamels, rubies, emeralds. Near the vitrine containing this tray hang ornamental daggers, swords, sabres, all set with gold, pearls, enamels and other precious stones. It seems like a lurch towards worldly decadence, a mood confirmed by the largest single, full-length portrait of a ruler in this show.

The Qajar ruler, Fath Ali Shah,

Figurine of a Seated Man, identified on the brim of his hat as Sultan Tughril (1143-44, Iran) This ceramic seated man, painted in black with a turquoise glaze, is the single most enigmatic figurative piece in the show. What was its use? It may have been a large chess piece or be a representation of Sultan Tughril himself.

What makes it so memorable is its pose and its poise – the imperturbable gravity of that slightly hunched posture, and its slightly sunken, almost ethereal features, drawn as if what the face knows or thinks will never truly be known.



Single volume Qur'an, written by the calligrapher Muhammad (Arab, before 1710) What is outstanding here is the way in which the black and gold inks of the sacred text work together with the polychrome gouache of the illumination. The calligraphy is at the centre of each page, while a crenellated border and interwoven floral patternings bring a glorious dancing movement to the prophet's message.

crowned in Iran in 1798, stands before us in coronation robes of his own devising – long, pleated white skirt stretching down from his improbably tiny waist; blockish cuban heels; a long beard painted and combed strand by careful strand; and a crown which towers at least one foot above his head, and which is inset with diamonds, emeralds and a plume of black heron's feathers.

He carries a staff surmounted by a hoopoe, traditionally the messenger of

White Crystalline Marble Stela (North India, late 17th century)

A thin, 6ft-high standing stone made from a pale crystalline marble, richly carved in low relief. On the obverse, an inscription stands above three tiers of pointed arches. Within the arches there are vases, cypresses and flowers. Beneath that, a much deeper panel is inset with a vase of irises and tulips. The whole is surrounded by weaving, plant-like forms. The reverse of the stela consists of four panels of inscriptions from the Qur'an.

MG



Heaven on Earth: Art from Islamic Lands, Hermitage Rooms at Somerset House, London WC2 (020-7845 4600; www.hermitagerooms.com) to 22 August