

Few men have made such an impressive contribution to the preservation and understanding of Islamic art as Nasser David Khalili, one of the world's foremost collectors. Driven by a passion to share the riches of the past with the modern world for more than three decades, his quest to assemble an unparalleled collection has played a central role in his life.

# the eloquence of art

TEXT BY PHILIPPA SCOTT AND NAHLA NASSAR

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID LEVENSON AND COURTESY OF THE KHALILI FAMILY TRUST



“ Religion and politics have their own languages, but the language of art is universal. Never has there been a greater need for this unity. ”

*Nasser David Khalili*

**I**t is one thing for a man to satisfy his own aesthetic appetite, but it is quite another for him to build a collection that puts all others in its shadow and communicates such a powerful and relevant message to the world today. The Nasser David Khalili Collection of Islamic Art is one of the largest and most comprehensive collections in private hands. Featuring over 20,000 works, many of them masterpieces in a given field, period or technique, the collection is unrivalled, leaving even the most venerable experts in awe.

Born in Iran, Khalili's family had been art dealers for generations. In 1967, at the age of 22, he moved to New York where he began to invest in art and property, subsequently moving to London in 1978, where he has lived ever since. An astute and phenomenally successful businessman, Khalili has been able to finance his collecting through real estate and other investments. As a regular face on the annual Sunday Times Rich List and Forbes' magazine's list of billionaires, he has not hoarded art purely for his own enjoyment. Rather, Khalili describes himself as a 'custodian' of the numerous pieces in his collection.

By accumulating a wide range of artefacts, he has been able to offer a detailed yet panoramic view of past cultures. Among the many highlights of the collection is a manuscript of Rashid Al-Din's 'Jami' Al-Tawarikh' ('Compendium of Chronicles'), which he purchased in 1990 for \$12 million. It is widely acknowledged to be one of the finest manuscripts from the Islamic world. The collection is also remarkable in the

emphasis given to calligraphy and Qur'ans. "Calligraphy has always held a pre-eminent position in Islamic art since Arabic and the Arabic script were the means through which the Qur'an was transmitted and recorded," he says.

What is perhaps most impressive about the Khalili Collection is the breadth of material it encompasses, including representative pieces from almost all periods of Islamic history, from the seventh to the 20th century, and from across the Islamic world, from Valencia to Beijing. "It was important to me not only to collect objects made for kings and queens, but objects from everyday life, from ordinary homes," he says. "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 in one place."

Communicating the significance of the jigsaw is something that Khalili does extremely well through the 32 volumes published so far on the collection, written by some of the world's most accomplished experts. In 2005 Khalili wrote 'The

Previous page: Part of a 30-part Qur'an. Iran, perhaps Azerbaijan. 1175-1225 AD. Ink, colours and gold on paper. 39.2 x 32.4 cm (each page). This imposing manuscript is from a set of *ajza'*, each of which contains one-thirtieth of the Qur'anic text. The main text, written in three lines to the page, is in a stately form of the *muhaqqaq* script, in black, while the vocalisation is in gold, outlined in black, and other aids to pronunciation are in blue.

Facing page: Nasser David Khalili with a selection of beloved artefacts from his collection of Islamic art. On the table, stands a gold *huqqa*, with opaque and translucent enamels. India, probably Mewar (Rajasthan). Early 18th century. Height 48 cm x Diameter 21 cm. On the right is an incense burner or pomander in the shape of a lynx (caracal), from Iran. Copper alloy, cast with engraved and openwork decoration. Dated late 12th or early 13th century. Height 27 cm.



Incense burner or pomander in the shape of a lynx (caracal), from Iran. Dated between the late 12th and early 13th century. Copper alloy, cast with engraved and openwork decoration. Height 27 cm. Lynxes were highly prized hunting animals at Muslim courts, and were favourite pets. The detail of the head, with its moustache, eyelashes, faceted nose and curly mane, are particularly attractive, and the lines at its eyes indicate that it is smiling. It seems to be pawing the ground, as if it is about to jump and catch its prey on the wing, as is the habit of lynxes.

Facing page: Lustre-painted vase in the shape of a camel from early 13th-century Iran. It is made of fritware and painted in pinkish-olive lustre with an opaque white glaze. Height 39.5 cm.







Saddle fittings (pommel and cantle coverings, front and back wings). Central Asia or lands of the Golden Horde, first half of the 13th century. Made out of gold sheet, the saddle is worked in *repoussé* with chased details. The approximate size after reconstruction is 40 x 60 cm.



Box and cover (*pandan*). Mughal India, period of Shah Jahan. Circa 1635. Gold sheet, covered with emeralds carved with a design of cypress trees, surmounted by a diamond. Height 4 cm. Diameter 5 cm.

Facing page: Door handle. Cast in the form of two dragons. One of a pair. Jazira, Southeast Turkey. Early 13th century. Copper alloy.







Timeline History of Islamic Art and Architecture' (see page 114), intended to make the history of Islamic art accessible to a wide audience. The book, which draws on illustrations from his collection, is now being translated into more than ten languages. As with many of his other publications, copies will be donated to educational institutes, including schools and universities in the Palestinian Territories.

It is Khalili's fervent belief that to study the history of Islamic art is to study the history of humanity. "People in the West generally don't know how much they owe to the Muslim

cultures, even many Muslims themselves are not aware of this," he says. In recent years, the Khalili Collection has been visited by an ever-growing number of Muslim academics. "When you see what your ancestors have achieved, you have pride, dignity and a reason to leave your own legacy to mankind," says Khalili. "And if I have played a part in generating an interest in that ocean of Islamic beauty, then I am only grateful to have had the opportunity to do so."

The burning question remains: Why does a Persian Jew promote Islamic art? Better to ask why not? After all, beauty has no boundaries and art unites mankind. A committed believer in the vital importance of understanding between faiths, Khalili is the co-founder and chairman of the *Maimonides* Foundation, created to promote greater peace and understanding between Muslims and Jews. "I see Jews and Muslims as cousins, and I consider my activities as a collector of Islamic art a contribution from one member of the human family to another," he says. "The real weapon of mass destruction is ignorance." All Khalili's cultural and educational endeavours as patron, writer, and lecturer flow from this

Above: A pilgrim's verse guide to Mecca and Medina, by Ghulam 'Ali. Autographed copy, written at Mecca in AH 990 (June 1582). Ink, colours and gold on paper, text in *nasta'liq* script, and is part of 42 folios. 21.6 x 14.6 cm. The text is partly in praise of Mecca and Medina and partly a descriptive handbook of the obligatory rites of the pilgrimage. The illustrations include diagrammatic views of the stations of pilgrimage, as well as two beautifully executed views of the Holy Mosque in Mecca, as seen on the right-hand page.

Facing page: Nasser David Khalili with a large ceramic aquamanile or table-fountain, from Iran or Afghanistan in the early 13th century. Made of fritware, it is painted in black under a transparent, bright turquoise glaze, with overglazing painted in red. Height, 45.7 cm. The aquamanile is in the form of a stocky feline with a flattened face and a tail curled up on its back. The vessel is hollow, but closed at the neck. It can be emptied through the narrow tube concealed below the extended tongue, and the two circular dishes on either side might have been used for sweetmeats.

“The real weapon  
of mass destruction is  
ignorance.”

*Nasser David Khalili*



Cotton batik cloth. Java. Dated early 20th century.

“My only wish as a collector is to pay tribute to the soul of the artist who has produced these magnificent objects.”

conviction. In recognition of his inter-faith activities he was made Knight Commander of the Royal Order of Francis I in 2003 and Knight of the Equestrian Order of Pope St Sylvester in 2004. He was one of the founders of the Iran Heritage Foundation, which was established in 1995 to promote and preserve the cultural heritage of Iran, and has been described by both the former Iranian Foreign Minister and the Iranian Ambassador in London as the Cultural Ambassador of Islam’.

Khalili is quick to deny any political motivation behind his activities as a collector. “Nothing I have ever done has been under any political influence. My only wish as a collector is to pay tribute to the soul of the artist who has produced these magnificent objects.”

Education also remains high on his agenda. In 1989 he endowed the Nasser D Khalili Chair of Islamic Art at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London - the first chair devoted to the decorative arts of Islam to be founded at any university. He has also supported a research fellowship in Islamic art at the University of Oxford, and has made a significant endowment to the University of Oxford to establish and support The Khalili Research Centre for the Art and Material Culture of the Middle East, which

was officially opened in 2005. He has received honorary Fellowships and Doctorates from both these and other institutions, and in 2006 was appointed to the Chancellor’s Court of Benefactors at the University of Oxford.

Alongside the Islamic collection, Professor Khalili has built up an unrivalled collection of Japanese art of the Meiji period (1868–1912), containing some 1700 pieces and constituting the largest and finest collection of Meiji art in the world. He has also assembled smaller, but no less significant, collections of Swedish textiles and Spanish damascened metalwork. “Islamic art is a truly great art, yet it was unfairly neglected for many years. That was true of all four areas that I collect - they needed to be brought to the world’s attention.”

Exhibitions and loans from all four of Khalili’s collections have been shown at some 35 major museums around the world,

**Contd. on pg 126**

**‘Islam - Treasures from the Collection of Nasser D Khalili’ will run from 22 June to 23 September at The Art Gallery of New South Wales in Australia. For details, log on to [www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au](http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au). For further information on the collection itself, visit [www.khalili.org](http://www.khalili.org)**



# continued

Contd. from pg 49

## the eloquence of art

including the British and Victoria and Albert museums in London, the State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Most recently, objects from the Japanese collection were exhibited at the Van Gogh Museum in the Dutch city of Amsterdam, attracting over half a million visitors.

Patronage has always played a vital



role in the development of the arts and sciences. Khalili points out that during the golden age of Islamic art, it was not unusual for Muslim and Jewish artists to work alongside one another, or for that matter in the service of Christian patrons, and vice versa. For example, the Jews were known as the people who dyed and traded in textiles and carpets. However, the original yarns would have been worked by non-Jewish fingers; while the designs and motifs of pieces could be Muslim or from some other, possibly long-forgotten, source of inspiration. This practice continued throughout the Muslim world, from Spain to China. Jewish dyers coloured the brilliant silks which Muslim weavers in Central Asia used to create *ikat* velvets and taffetas; they tinted the threads for the Moorish weavers of Andalusia, who made the silks desired by the Catholic courts of Europe. As Islam spread along the Silk Road and sailed across the seas, due in part to Muslim traders, faiths intertwined. Therefore, it is Khalili's fervent belief that to study the history of such craftsmanship is to study the



history of humanity. Khalili is reluctant to name a favourite object; he compares the objects to musical notes in a symphony. This 'symphony' is a cultural resource of immense importance that Khalili is keen to share.

Any collection formed by an individual makes a statement about that person; whether it be their vision, taste, or thirst for knowledge. The Khalili Collection is a work of art in its own right, and it says a great deal about the man himself. □