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
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 50 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.

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
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Nasser David Khalili
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, ‘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. For further information on the collection itself, visit www.khalili.org
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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. □