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Universality and the Art of Peace

A CONVERSATION WITH PROFESSOR NASSER D. KHALILI

FOUNDER, THE KHALILI COLLECTIONS

In a world dominated by conflict – motivated variously by hegemony, sectarianism or the struggle for freedom – the universal recipe for peace remains a prized possession. Professor Nasser D. Khalili, a world renowned scholar, collector, philanthropist and UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador, hopes he may have it. It is art that invokes humanity, he insists, and humanity is the key ingredient for peace. “Religion and politics have their own language, but the language of art is universal. That universality is desperately needed today.”

Khalili's contribution to the world of art and culture is unparalleled, and for him to be called the Medici of the 21st century is no exaggeration. Originally from Iran, he studied in the United States and then settled in the UK in the 1970s, where he continued his studies and began assembling what would become eight of the world's finest and most comprehensive art collections. Together, the eight collections now comprise some 25,000 works covering: Islamic art (700-2000), Hajj and the arts of pilgrimage (700-2000), Aramaic documents (353-324BC), Japanese art of the Meiji period (1868-1912), Japanese kimono (1700-2000), Swedish textiles (1700-1900), Spanish damascene metalwork

Professor Khalili showing former US President Bill Clinton his collection



(1850-1900) and enamels of the world (1700-2000). These eight collections are being catalogued with the help of eminent scholars in each field in 88 volumes, out of which 70 volumes have already been published. While extremely diverse, all pieces in these collections have an overarching theme: they represent harmony and humanity. Khalili reminds us that “major artists, major poets and all human beings that shine in any field in history, do not belong to any religion, colour or nation... they all belong to humanity. The artists and the art they have produced become spokesmen for humanity.”

The value of the Islamic collection, which includes priceless manuscripts of the Holy Qur'an, illustrated and illuminated manuscripts, decorative arts (ceramics, carpets, textiles, jewellery, carved stone and wood, glass, lacquer and metalwork) as well as arms, armour, coins, scientific instruments and seals, is almost inconceivable. Khalili himself has been ranked as one of the wealthiest men in England, but he maintains that money was the last thing on his mind while assembling the collection. In fact he is frustrated with the market-driven, excessively money-oriented art industry of today: “during my period of collecting, we collected art for the sake of its beauty and its historical or cultural significance. Nowadays, some people collect art as a commodity. Art to people today is no longer a passion but a dollar sign.” His appreciation of art, unlike most collectors today, is sincere and profound. “In many ways the artist and artisans put their souls into the objects they produced, and I want to be remembered as a person who became the guardian of the souls of the artists who have produced these magnificent objects.” For him, being a collector entails important responsibilities: he sees it as his duty to conserve, research, publish and exhibit as well as collect.

What makes Khalili's story an especially remarkable one is the simple fact that as a Jew, he is probably doing more than anyone to promote Islamic art and culture worldwide

It is true that Khalili as an individual has done far more than many governments to promote the art and culture of the East in the West. In sharing his passion with the wider public, selections from his collections have been shown in over 40 major museums worldwide such as the British Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum and Somerset House (London), the State Hermitage Museum (St Petersburg), the Alhambra Palace (Granada), the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York), Portland Art Museum (Oregon, USA) and the Van Gogh Museum (Amsterdam), amongst many others. All exhibitions have broken attendance records and received excellent reviews from the press, the public and the art community.

What makes Khalili's story an especially remarkable one is the simple fact that as a Jew, he is probably doing more than anyone to promote Islamic art and culture. Indeed leaders of Muslim countries themselves have often referred to him as the ‘cultural ambassador of

Islam'. How has he earned such acclaim? For one, Islamic art has been given a central place in the Khalili Collection. With holdings of more than 20,000 objects documenting the range of artistic production of the Islamic lands over a period of some 1400 years, the Collection now ranks among the best in the world and represents a new generation of Islamic art. Khalili's fascination with Islamic art comes from a firm understanding of Islamic history: "as Islam conquered almost half of the known world at one point in history, the fusion of culture between the conqueror and the conquered created the diverse and beautiful art that we see today."

As a major patron of Islamic scholarship he founded in 1989 the Nasser D. Khalili Chair of Islamic Art and Archaeology at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, the first of its kind in the world devoted to the decorative arts of Islam, and commissioned The Nasser D. Khalili Collection of Islamic Art – an unprecedented 27 volume series (comprising of 33 books) of which 17 (21 books) are now published; when completed, the series will form the most comprehensive survey of the history of Islamic art to date. When he is asked why, as a Jew, the promotion of Islamic art and culture is so important to him, he simply responds: "Why not? They are my cousins."

Khalili's contribution to the promotion of Islamic art and culture could not be more timely. Much of the Islamic world today – namely Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Mali, Somalia or Sudan – is ravaged by perpetual conflict, caused both from within and without. Islam as a culture and worldview has been hijacked by handful of extremists and simultaneously demonised by ignorant

Professor Khalili with Pope Francis



outsiders. The misconceptions that come as a result, particularly in the West, are what the likes of Khalili seek to neutralise: "Without the knowledge of the past, the future becomes bleak," he says. Most Westerners are unaware of the tremendous contribution the Islamic world had on Western art, culture, science and philosophy. Despite globalisation, our educational curricula, media coverage, and history books remain incredibly Eurocentric. "The West can learn about the diversity and the beauty of Islamic art and realise that its influence can be seen in every household. My suggestion to people from the West is to be more observant and try to analyse what is around them; that is how they would discover the immense contribution of Islamic art and culture to the West."

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Khalili's work has been recognised and hailed by authorities in all three of the Abrahamic faiths. He has received Knighthoods from two Popes, is a Trustee of the City of Jerusalem and has been applauded by many leaders in the Islamic world. Realising his unique position to be able to bridge religious divides, he established the Maimonides Interfaith Foundation (named after the brilliant 12th century Jewish polymath), a charitable foundation aimed at promoting peace and understanding between the three great monotheistic faiths. "Only true dialogue can discover what is in our minds, because with true dialogue, grievances and differences of opinion can be heard and amicably solved," he maintains. "When nations of different opinions, beliefs and traditions come together they either fight and lose or trade and win." The Maimonides Interfaith Foundation launched the Interfaith Explorers programme in 2012. The programme, which is supported by UNESCO, is being rolled out to over 18,000 primary schools in England and Wales. Plans are underway to work with UNESCO's network of 13,500 schools around the world. Significantly, it has the support of the UN General Secretary Ban Ki-moon and Irina Bokova, Director General of UNESCO. After having himself studied many of the world's religions, he concludes that there is far more that unites us than divides us as human beings. In every case, he identifies the essential messages as being the same: love compassion, peace harmony, unity and respect.

Through his unparalleled campaign to promote art, culture and interfaith dialogue, Khalili seeks to become a master of the most difficult of arts: the art of peace. He consistently strives to use art as a basis to appeal to the innate humanity in everyone, asserting that "art is inseparable from humanity." The net result, he contends, is a greater dialogue, empathy and understanding between people – and therefore a victory of peace over conflict. **F**

For further information:

www.khalili.org – www.maimonides-foundation.org



Clockwise (from top left): Silver inlaid casket with remains of a combination lock, Jazira, northern Iraq, early 13th century; Outer kimono for a young woman in silk and metal thread, Japan, 1840-70; Tapestry carriage cushion cover, Sweden, 1800-50; Iron shrine, with gold and silver, to the Virgin and Child by Plácido Zuloaga (1834-1910), Spain, 1880; Silver-gilt and enamel bread and salt dish by Pavel Ovchinnikov, Russia, 1882-3; Silver figurine of a dragon with gilding, shakudo, copper and crystal ball by Kuninori, Japan, c. 1900; Letter from Akhvamazda to Bagavant, by the scribe Nurafratara, in ink on leather, Bactria, mid-4th century BC; Ivory figurine of a camel and rider, Iraq or Syria, 8th-9th century

