

Gstaad

Insider's Guide



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Nasser David Khalili

Healing The World with Art

Call him a latter-day Renaissance man, a polymath or simply a genius or what you will because **Professor Nasser David Khalili** - referred to by FIRST Magazine as "the Medici of the 21st century" - has blazed a trail in his life that no one has ever encountered. He is a mega-collector of world art - a collector of collections - and is the only billionaire whose fortune derives predominately from art.

Moreover he is a philanthropist, a real estate investor, founder of an interfaith charity and a world-renowned scholar of the history of art. But it would be reasonable to settle for genius. After

all, he wrote a book about the 233 geniuses in the world when he was just 14 years old. Also he conforms to the definition of a genius by another author, Isaac D'Israeli, the father of the Prime Minister D'Israeli who wrote a book on the men of genius which he defined as "native intellectual power of an exalted type." (The History of The Men of Genius, published in 1818).

His collections are divided into Islamic Art, with artefacts dating from 700 to 2000; Hajj and the Arts of Pilgrimage from 700 to 2000; Aramaic Documents from 535 BC to 324 BC; Japanese Art of the Meiji Period from 1868 to 1912; Japanese Kimonos from 1700 to 2000; Swedish Textiles from 1700 to 1900; Spanish Damascened Metalwork from 1850 to 1900 and Enamels of the World from 1700 to 2000. Together, they comprise some 35,000 works of art, many of which have been exhibited at prestigious museums and institutions worldwide. Each work of art has been meticulously conserved, researched, catalogued and published as part of what is considered to be one of the most ambitious art scholarship projects in modern history. Seventy-two of over a hundred planned volumes have already been published, led by David Khalili and with contributions from the world's leading experts in each respective field.

Nasser David Khalili was born in the Iranian city of Isfahan to a family of Mizrahi Jews. David was exposed to art and Islamic artefacts at an early

age because his father was a trader in these objects. From the age of eight he began to accompany him on buying trips over a number of years. When he was a teenager he was given his first piece, a 19th century Qajar lacquer pen box (which remains in his collections), by a collector who spotted the enthusiasm in the young Khalili's eyes. After completing his service as a medic in the Iranian army, he left in 1967 for the US to study at Queens College, City University of New York where he gained a bachelor's degree in computer science. He began buying art in diverse fields while in the city. As he was the first in a market with a scarcity of buyers and having acquired a deep knowledge in each field, he was able to snap up the best objects.

His philanthropic work included the endowment of Chairs in Islamic art at his alma mater, Queen's College in New York, and at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London, where he was awarded his PhD. He also endowed the Khalili Research Centre for the Art and Material Culture of the Middle East at Oxford University.

In 1978, he moved to London after meeting his wife, Marion, who was working in an antiques centre and it was love at first sight. His real estate ventures include many major commercial and residential properties in the UK. In the early 1990s, he bought 18 and 19 Kensington Palace Gardens which were the former Russian and

Egyptian embassies. Then he embarked on a renovation programme to change the buildings into a palatial equivalent to the White House and he imported the same inlaid and carved marble from the Agra quarry that was used on the Taj Mahal. As the most expensive house in the world at the time, it was later sold to the Indian steel magnate Lakshmi Mittal. Another important acquisition and redevelopment project was Bath House on Holborn Viaduct, which became the UK HQ of Amazon.

"I'm very democratic towards my family that consists of my wife Marion, our three sons, Daniel, Benjamin and Raphael," he said. "Whenever you are in a crowd and do not know where to go, put a child on your shoulder and they will tell you where to go."

All along he has had a spiritual approach towards art and life. He is insistent that his collections belong to humanity and if there is any praise it is not for him but rather for the souls of the artists who produced such magnificent work.

"Ownership is a myth; we are only temporary custodians of what we think we own," he insisted. "My mission is to share the art with humanity". This is why Irina Bokova, former Director-General of UNESCO has referred to him as one of the most active UNESCO Goodwill Ambassadors.

This attitude has also been recognised by the Catholic church. As a result he



The Khalili Collections' Japanese three-piece garniture.

has received knighthoods from two Popes. Pope John Paul II honoured him as Knight of the Pontifical Equestrian Order of St Sylvester (KSS) and Pope Benedict XVI further elevated him to Knight Commander in the said order (KCSS) for his work in the pursuit of peace, education and culture amongst nations. In fact when Pope Benedict XVI awarded him with the honour, he said Khalili had the combined wisdom of three religious leaders: a chief rabbi, a cardinal and a grand mufti. And yet he remains incredibly humble: "Glory belongs to God and humility belongs to man," he said.

"My philosophy is the same as Maimonides," he continued. "It's the need to learn about other people's ways of life. By learning about it we

will find there is more that unites us as human beings than divides us. We must move beyond mere 'tolerance' and learn to respect each other's world views."

It is not surprising, therefore, that the Khalili Foundation has been at the forefront of interfaith dialogue for over three decades, and that one of the key projects – the Maimonides Interfaith Initiative – has been focused on interfaith cohesion through art, culture and education. His powerful partnership with the Commonwealth (Faith in the Commonwealth) has facilitated grassroots peace activism that has reached some 16,000 youth in countries across Africa, South Asia and the Caribbean.

The list of honours he has received is substantial, but to name a few he is Trustee of the City of Jerusalem, a recipient of the High Sheriff of Greater London Award and was an Honorary Board Member for the INTERPOL Foundation for a Safer World (2018-2019). He has also received the rank of Officier in the National Order of the Legion of Honour by the French President François Hollande at the Elysée Palace, who said of Khalili on the occasion that "he is a man who works for peace."

The number of serious collectors can be counted on one hand, such as the David Collection in Copenhagen, Sheikh Nasser al-Sabah of Kuwait, Chester Beatty and the Rockefellers. But some experts deem that it's the sheer depth as well as breadth of Khalili's art holdings which rivals that of the Getty or the Gulbenkian.

This is why Google place his collections as "among the most impressive" and Wikimedia have hailed him as "one of the world's great preservers of global cultural heritage".

In fact Susan Moore, of the Financial Times and Apollo Magazine, placed him in a class of his own: "David Khalili puts most collectors to shame," she said. "In an age in which many rich men call themselves collectors and seem more interested in displaying their wealth than the art they have acquired through it, Khalili has done rather more than simply raise a paddle in the sale room."

My hunt for objects is adventurous," he said. "I once was in restaurant in the US and I spotted a Japanese enamel vase that I recognised as being the missing piece of a huge eight foot tall 3-piece garniture made specially for the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, which attracted 27 million visitors."

Dubbed at the time 'the largest examples of cloisonné enamel ever made' the garniture took five years to complete and was commissioned by Shin Shinwoda, the Special Councillor for Arts of the Imperial Commission to the Exposition. The manufactures were Shirozayemon Suzuki of Yokohama and Seizayemon Tsunekawa of Nagoya. The greatest imperial court artists of the period were employed in their creation – with an all-star team of the most celebrated artists including Araki Kampo (1831-1915) and Oda Kōsai (1845-1912) overseeing the designs. Upon completion, the Emperor of Japan had subsequently reviewed them ahead of the exposition.

"The vase I'd spotted in the restaurant was purchased in Chicago by Frank Spenger," he continued, "and brought to the California Midwinter International Exposition of 1894, which explains how it eventually made itself to Berkeley, California. Finally, in February 2019, I purchased the last missing vase from an auction house in Auckland, California."

After over 120 years of separation, the famous three-piece garniture had

finally been reunited in Khalili's Japanese Art of the Meiji Period (1868-1912), finding their rightful place in what is considered, alongside the Japanese Imperial Collection, to be the world's most significant collection of its kind.

This marked the latest achievement in a long history of separated artworks (originally belonging together as a unit or a pair) being reunited by David Khalili. His remarkable stories of acquisition are endless. "One of my most notable acquisitions is a written history of the world by Rashid al-Din from the early 14th century, commissioned by Mongolian Emperor Mahmud Ghazan (1295-1304) and completed for his successor Oljeytu (1304-1316)," he said. "I bought it for a fortune in 1990 from a collector who had bought it at a Sotheby's auction ten years earlier. It is called *Jami' al-Tawarikh* or *Compendium of Chronicles*, which includes the earliest purely landscape miniature of any known manuscript and today is considered priceless."

David Khalili is a household name within the areas that he collects in, and is particularly well regarded among the elite of the art world. But unlike many other billionaire collectors he doesn't buy for self-indulgence or monetary gain. His aim has always been to reach out and share these treasures with others as his motivations are humanistic and educational. Selected objects from his collections have been shown in several major museums and been displayed as part of international

exhibitions such as the British Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum and Somerset House (London); the State Hermitage Museum (St Petersburg); the Moscow Kremlin Museums; the Alhambra Palace (Granada); the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York); Portland Art Museum (Oregon, US); and the Van Gogh Museum (Amsterdam) among others. In fact, his collections have been the subject of over 120 exhibitions worldwide that have been visited by millions of people so far. David Khalili views philanthropy differently to other philanthropists. For him, collecting must itself be an act of cultural philanthropy, whereby the true collector fulfils five essential criteria: collect, conserve, research, publish and exhibit. What's more, he has now added 'digitization' to this robust criteria, and his partnership with Google – which is designed to use cutting-edge technologies to optimise viewer experience online – and Wikimedia shows that he is ahead of the times, as he always seems to have been.



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