



Doris



Duke's



Shangri La

*Sharon Littlefield*

*Introduction by Carol Bier*

HONOLULU ACADEMY OF ARTS

DORIS DUKE FOUNDATION FOR ISLAMIC ART

PUBLISHED BY  
Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art  
4055 Papu Circle  
Honolulu, Hawai'i 96816  
Tel: 808 (734-1941)  
E-mail: www.ddcf.org

IN ASSOCIATION WITH  
Honolulu Academy of Arts  
900 South Beretania Street  
Honolulu, Hawai'i 96814-1495  
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ISBN 0-937426-57-1  
LCCN 2002111968

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Shuzo Uemoto, of the Honolulu Academy of Arts, provided copystand work for illustrations on pages 35, 41, 47, 58.

Designed and produced by Barbara Pope  
Book Design

Printed in Japan

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*From "Ode to a Garden Carpet," by an unknown Sufi poet, c. 1500, quoted in Survey of Persian Art, vol. 14 [1967], 3184-85.*

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## Acknowledgments

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*Joan Spero*

*President  
Doris Duke Foundation  
for Islamic Art*

*Deborah Pope*

*Executive Director  
Shangri La*

Many people have contributed to fulfilling Doris Duke's wish to open Shangri La to the public. We take pleasure in thanking James F. Gill, Chair of the Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art, and all the Trustees for their leadership and support, with special thanks to the late J. Carter Brown III. For their partnership in the public opening of Doris Duke's collection of Islamic art we thank George Ellis, President and Director of the Honolulu Academy of Arts, Samuel A. Cooke, Chairman of the Board, and the Academy Trustees. For their roles in early planning efforts, thanks to Barnes Riznik, Jim Stubenberg, and Foundation staff Patrick Lerch, Betsy Fader, and Alan Altschuler. Thanks also to Marianna Shreve Simpson, who oversaw curatorial and conservation efforts from 1997 to 2001; Sharon Littlefield and Anne Hayashi, who catalogued the collections; conservator Laura Gorman; and Don Hibbard, whose architectural history of Shangri La has guided much of our recent work.

During 2001 and 2002, preservation and repairs were overseen by Mason Architects, Heath Construction Services, Shangri La building and grounds manager Brian Groelsma, and their able crews. Collections manager Owen Moore oversaw extensive work on the collections and coordinated the often Herculean efforts of conservators Laura Gorman, Ann Svenson Perlman, Larry Pace, Greg Thomas, and collections technicians Simonette de la Torre, Sahra Indio, Linda Gué, and Mike Jones.

Curator Sharon Littlefield's research and writing has shaped our understanding of Shangri La, the collections of Islamic art, and Doris Duke as a collector, themes she develops in this book. In her Introduction, Islamic scholar Carol Bier brought clarity and insight to the significance of Shangri La in the life of Doris Duke. Atiqa Hachimi assisted with translating inscriptions on artwork. Photographers David Franzen and Shuzo Uemoto and book designer Barbara Pope have captured the essence of Shangri La. Thanks to Doris Duke Charitable Foundation archivists Elizabeth Steinberg and Chris Carden and to the staffs of the Bishop Museum Archives and the Hawai'i State Archives for facilitating research.

Finally, we thank Doris Duke's Hawai'i friends and former employees, who helped us enter her world and understand her passion for Islamic art and Hawai'i. Special thanks to Jinadasa de Silva, Violet Mimaki, Johnny Gomez (1908–1999), Emma Veary, Jim Nabors, and Jason Ferreira for their aloha and generosity.







*by Carol Bier*

*Doris Duke in Hawai'i,  
c. 1936–37.*

## Introduction

**S**HANGRI LA, the most intimate of Doris Duke's residences, is the one that today offers the best view into the private domain of a public celebrity. What it reveals about Doris Duke presents a strong contrast to her well-publicized persona as a tobacco heiress, born to wealth, who liked to frolic. Observe the house, spilling down terraces of Ka'alāwai toward the sea; contemplate its well-considered vistas and its polished black lava, white marble, and coral limestone surfaces. Admire the architectural features shipped from abroad and installed on site; experience the gardens with their towering trees, sparkling water chutes, and placid walkways. It might seem that the public appearance is merely reinforced by such extravagant splendor. But look again at the collections of Islamic art glistening in the sun or peeking through mottled shade in the courtyards and columned porticos, and you may catch a glimpse of Doris Duke's passion for beauty that is pure form, whether in nature or in art.

Doris Duke had a penchant for privacy, and she found privacy in Hawai'i. Arriving for the first time in 1935 in the final stop of an around-the-world honeymoon voyage, Duke decided to stay awhile. Four months later she returned to the mainland, but fond recollections of the climate and relaxed lifestyle of Hawai'i drew her back to what would become a lifelong interest in fashioning an environment in which to enjoy quiet relaxation and private reflection amid her collection of Islamic art set within Hawai'i's gentle breezes and tropical foliage. Doris Duke was extremely reluctant, even fearful, to share aspects of her personal life. She reportedly learned early on, perhaps from her father, the stern dictum, "Trust no one." As a result, perhaps, she has been characterized as misanthropic, a view to which she undoubtedly contributed on occasion. But one aspect of her personal life emerges clearly: that Shangri La was her special place of retreat, where she could keep the world at bay.

We do not know what sparked Doris Duke's interest in Islamic art. The startling juxtaposition of Islamic tile panels, glass vessels, metalwork, and luxurious textiles with Hawai'i's luscious flora at first seems to be an anomaly. Duke herself explained it as a coincidence, a sort of falling in love twice at once—with Hawai'i and with arts of the Middle East and India. Her initial exposure to Islamic art may have come through visiting exhibitions in Europe with her father, James Buchanan Duke, who died when she was twelve years

opposite  
*Doris Duke at Shangri La,*  
1966.

*Horst/Vogue, Condé Nast  
Publications Inc.*

old. Together, they may have traveled to the trend-setting international expositions in London or Paris, which fed a taste for the exotic. Doris undoubtedly also accompanied her parents on visits to their neighbors, families of New York's high society whose residences held, in addition to European paintings and sculpture, the more exotic yet fashionable Moorish rooms (the Tiffany family), Islamic glass (the Moores), Hispano-Moresque ceramics (the Havemayors), Persian rooms (the Rockefellers), Moroccan ensembles, and Turkish corners. These families were also major donors to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, whose Islamic collection opened to the public in 1932 across the street from Doris Duke's family residence. The grandiose Burlington House exhibition of Persian art in London took place in 1931, when Doris was there with her mother. That exhibition was orchestrated by Arthur Upham Pope, a man known both for his charismatic personality and for his vigorous promotion of Persian arts and culture. He encouraged visitors to the immense display to partake of beauty, ignoring the particulars. Trained in philosophy with an interest in aesthetics, Pope was a forceful advocate for the understanding of Persian art as an art of pure form, articulating "tidal rhythms" that transcended cultural specificity.

What we do know is that soon after her honeymoon and before her Iranian sojourn in 1938, which was organized by Pope, Doris Duke was already predisposed to Persian architectural forms in planning the construction of her new home in Hawai'i, which was soon dubbed Shangri La. The seventeenth-century palace of the Chihil Sutun ("Forty Columns," of which twenty were reflected in the adjacent pool) in Isfahan, Iran, inspired the design for the Playhouse. A nearby palace in Isfahan is that of Ali Qapu, whose name in Persian sounds like the Hawaiian Hale Kapu (Tabu House), which reputedly is the first name Duke bestowed upon her idyll in the Pacific. Shangri La is an imaginary distant land, the hidden paradise, in James Hilton's novel, *Lost Horizon*, which was published to critical acclaim in 1933 and appeared as a film in 1937. The fantastic sets included a tiered lamasery (Tibetan monastery) descending a steep hillside with terraces, which may have captivated Duke, who was an aficionado of new movies. The public response to *Lost Horizon* was so great that "Shangri La" came to evoke a paradise on earth, or an area whose name or location is unknown or kept secret. The name "Shangri La" conjures up a mythical place of perfect living, inaccessible to others—and not inconsistent with Duke's personal inclinations.

The banyan tree and date palms, still seen today, were among the earliest plantings. Offering privacy, the high walls and shade trees may themselves express Persian conceptions of the enclosed garden, solitude, and beauty. But they also contributed to the mystique surrounding the celebrated life of Doris Duke. The ambiguity





of the blending of Hawaiian and Islamic forms is reinforced by the intimate and magical ways in which exterior and interior contrast and combine. Duke herself characterized the interior decor as a “sort of Arabian Nights.” In truth, it is a rather fantastic amalgamation of artifacts drawn from India, Iran, Turkey (Istanbul), Syria (Damascus), Egypt (Cairo), Spain, and North Africa. A critic once described the residence as far smaller than the sum of its parts, claiming that it represented nothing more than ostentatious spending. Others consider the whole to be far grander than the sum of its individual components. The sequence of L-shaped rooms, interlaced with courtyards and patios, contributes to a sense of surprise and delight, enhanced by the careful placement of a set of Persian tiles here, or a Moorish hearth there. The niches lined with rich silks and velvets lend a sense of opulence and luxury within which objects of glass and metalwork glint and glisten in the sun, capturing the effects of light. The oversized leaves, the play of light and shade, and the sounds of trickling water against the backdrop of waves breaking on the shore below all contribute to the total atmosphere and stunning visual effect. In a sense, the house, the gardens, and the collection form a unified whole in which each category is inseparable from the others.

Doris Duke seems to have selected objects quickly but carefully with a vision toward the whole, the details of which changed over time, while the overall conception remained the same: to immerse herself in beauty. What she created is a confection that defies cultural specificity except in the broadest sense that it is Islamic in style, and one that addresses fundamental human concerns with forms of the imagination, evoking times long past and distant lands. She was not reluctant to drape contemporary fabrics from the bazaars of the Middle East and India in rooms resplendent with antiques and historical artifacts. She methodically retained all receipts for purchase, shipment, restoration, and installation of objects, but she did not see fit to label the works with historical or cultural data, as in a museum installation. Nor did she have any reservations about re-creating architectural features to complement those she imported (columns, fountains, floors, ceilings) and to build them into the structure of her home. It is a fabricated environment, unconstrained by the taxonomies and organizing principles of museum exhibitions and academic disciplines. The groupings of objects respect the integrity of historical cultural traditions only in the broadest general sense. There is an Orientalist quality to her efforts, which reveal the perspective of an outsider to the Islamic tradition, external to the meanings these objects may have held within the Islamic world itself, and sometimes contradictory—as in the case of the *mihrab* (prayer niche), used to orient Muslims in prayer, installed at Shangri La for its aesthetic interest. But the blending of past and present, of Islamic cultural artifacts with

opposite  
The Damascus Room  
at Shangri La.

David Franzen

Qur'an Stand (*Kursī*).

CAIRO, EGYPT, LATE NINETEENTH OR EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY. Brass, engraved and pierced with inlaid silver, 86.0 x 47.0 cm (33½ x 18½ inches), Living Room, 54.136.1.

*This hexagonal stand may originally have been used to support the Qur'an as it was read. For protection, the Qur'an could be stored inside the stand by opening the small doors and placing the text within.*

Shuzo Uemoto





Folio from the Qur'an,  
Sura 9, "Repentance"  
(al-Tauba), verses 31–32.

NORTH AFRICA OR NEAR EAST,  
c. 900. Ink and watercolor  
on parchment, 10.5 x 15.6 cm  
(4 1/8 x 6 1/8 in), Master Bedroom, II.25.

*Calligraphy (beautiful writing) has been a preeminent Islamic art since the seventh century, when the Qur'an was revealed to Muhammad and recorded in the Arabic language. Muslims believe that the Qur'an is the literal Word of God, and the written word, because of its association with the copying of this sacred text, has acquired special significance. Controlled, angular lettering called Kufic script was commonly employed in early Qur'ans.*

Shuzo Uemoto

Hawai'i's volcanic seascape, may also be seen as a distant expression of the early modernism that was evolving in the 1930s on the American mainland and in Europe. One architectural historian cites the then-current style of "Romano-Spanish-Moorish" as "neither this nor that, but it is modern." The awe-inspiring engineering feats and mechanical devices at Shangri La, such as the retractable glass wall of the living room, the suspended doors to the bedroom, and the diving board with its hydraulic lift, clearly speak of Duke's fascination with new possibilities of industrial applications, perhaps inspired by exhibits at world's fairs.

This was not her only engagement with modernism, nor was the eclectic display of Islamic art her only engagement with the beauty of pure form. Other of her enduring passions suggest that Doris Duke relished being at the front line of cultural trends, even at her far-off Hawaiian retreat: she loved playing jazz piano, she studied many traditional forms of dance and meditation, and she expressed dedicated horticultural interest in the breeding of orchids. The vast collection of Islamic art at Shangri La suggests that Doris Duke was a collector, but she may never have considered herself as such, except in hindsight. We do know that she prided herself on recognizing both quality and value, a trait shared with her father, whom she adored. Although we don't know what first inspired her

to acquire Islamic art, once she began, her purchases were extensive and deliberate. The huge ceramic, luster-glazed *mihrah* from Veramin, Iran, was purchased in 1941 from a New York dealer. Her earliest purchases were made in India, and later she bought from dealers in Teheran and Damascus, introduced to her by Arthur Upham Pope.

Throughout her adult life, Duke not only acquired large quantities of materials, but she was also intimately involved in decisions pertaining to their installation and display. Frequently, she would hire local craftsmen to reconstruct traditional techniques, as for the setting of tile or the cutting of marble. Nearly every year, her time in Hawai'i would involve relocating and reinstalling works of art throughout the residence and engaging the design of new additions for recent purchases. The pace of her acquisitions was known only to a privileged few, who must have staunchly honored wishes for confidentiality, for her amassing of Islamic art over six decades remained a very well-kept secret even when measured against the standards of a characteristically secretive art world.

Shangri La remained the private domain of Doris Duke for as long as she lived. She died in 1993, leaving a will in which she stipulated the establishment of a foundation for Islamic art for the study of Middle Eastern art and culture—a broad mandate to share her accumulated wealth, as well as to extend the range of understanding of the cultural meanings of these works of art. Architectural features, such as fountains, pavilions, pools, painted ceilings, and courtyards with columned porticos, may bring to mind royal palaces and pavilions of the Islamic and pre-Islamic Near East, but they also may evoke images of Paradise, vividly described in the Qur'an, the book of recitations considered by Muslims to be divine revelation conveyed to the Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century of our era, as well as in Persian lyrical poetry of later centuries. Was Doris Duke conscious of these architectural, religious, and literary allusions? Just how culturally aware was she in the careful selection, placement, and juxtaposition of objects from the Near East of her own time and the far distant past? Did she intentionally make reference to culturally specific meanings and metaphors of Paradise to frame her life, even though these were so far from her own reality?

Perhaps we will never know the answers to these questions, but today's visitors to Shangri La may find apt the oft-quoted final lines of a poem by one of Persia's great poets: "If there be a Paradise on Earth, it is here, it is here, it is here!"

**overleaf**

*For generations of Hawaiians, Shangri La has been seen only from this ocean vantage point. Though prominently located along a popular public beach, the estate is concealed by a lava rock-veneered seawall and by dense vegetation that surrounds the unobtrusive buildings nested in the terraced hillside.*

David Franzen