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S H A N G R I L A

## **A Brief History of Shangri La**

**Early Travels in the Islamic World.** In 1935, Doris Duke (1912 – 1993) and her husband James Cromwell embarked on a honeymoon tour of the world, which included the Middle East, India and south Asia. It was a trip that profoundly affected the rest of her life. Traveling through many Muslim countries and parts of India, she was captivated by Islamic cultural traditions, art and architecture. A visit to the Taj Mahal inspired Duke to commission a marble bedroom and bathroom suite from an architectural firm in New Delhi, which was intended for a house she planned to build in Florida but which eventually became the nucleus for the house she built in Hawaii.

**Doris Duke in Hawaii.** In August 1935, Duke and Cromwell arrived at their final honeymoon destination – what was then the U.S. Territory of Hawaii. Struck by Hawaii’s natural beauty and relaxed outdoor lifestyle, the couple extended their stay by four months. In the company of the multitalented Kahanamoku family and a small circle of local friends, Doris Duke traveled throughout the Islands and learned to surf, paddle canoes, sail and play Hawaiian music. Duke particularly appreciated the privacy and informality of life in Hawaii. Within months of returning to the United States mainland, Duke purchased a 4.9-acre piece of oceanfront property in an area east of Diamond Head, traditionally known as Ka’alawai. She decided to build a home in Honolulu and fill it with Islamic art. This pairing of cultures became her “Shangri La,” the most private of personal retreats.

**Design and Construction.** Duke engaged the architectural firm Wyeth and King of New York and Palm Beach, Florida, to design her Hawaiian home. Marion Sims Wyeth and supervising

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architect Drewry Baker traveled to Hawaii to view the property and begin designing. Duke worked closely with them, providing sketches and photographs of buildings and architectural details she had seen during her travels. By February 5, 1937, final drawings with foundation and floor plans were completed. Duke and Cromwell approved the plans and construction began on March 29. The estate included a 14,000-square-foot main house that was built around a central patio; the Playhouse, which had two guestrooms and a central living space and was modeled after the Chihul Sutun, a royal pavilion built in Isfahan, Iran in 1647; a caretaker's cottage; and a 75-foot swimming pool, water terraces and tropical gardens.

**Collecting and Commissioning Islamic Art.** With the design and construction of Shangri La underway, Duke and Cromwell traveled to Europe and the Middle East for four months in 1938 to purchase furnishings for their new home. Duke's approach was careful and deliberate. In Paris, she met with Moroccan designer Rene Martin and commissioned numerous pieces for Shangri La, including two carved and painted ceilings, doors, wooden grilles and screens, roofing tiles, furniture and design schemes for the living room. For a five-week period in March and April, the Cromwells traveled through Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Iran and Turkey, following an itinerary proposed by Arthur Upham Pope, a well-known authority on Persian art. Mary Crane, a graduate student at New York University, served as a guide and art advisor to Duke on this trip. Duke and Crane took detailed photographs and made sketches of architectural features such as columns, capitals, painted ceilings and roof details and sent them to the architects to guide them in the final detailing of the house. They also purchased ceramics, antique tile panels, textiles, brass hanging lamps and commissioned large mosaic tile-works to ship to Hawaii. From these early beginnings, when Duke was still in her mid-20s, began a passion for collecting and living with Islamic art, a creative endeavor she sustained for nearly 60 years until her death in 1993.

**Shangri La: Doris Duke's Private Retreat.** After several visits to Hawaii to inspect and make revisions to the building and landscaping plans, the Cromwells finally moved into the main house on Christmas Day in 1938. Completed at a cost of \$1.4 million, Duke's estate was at the time the most extensive residential project in the Territory of Hawaii. Sometime in 1938, the name Shangri La was adopted, possibly inspired by James Hilton's novel *Lost Horizon*, which was published in 1933 and inspired a popular film that was produced in 1937. The name

Shangri La came to evoke a paradise on earth, a place whose location is unknown or kept secret: meanings that describe Duke's lifelong relationship to her Honolulu estate.

**Transforming Shangri La.** Shangri La continued to evolve as Duke energetically and creatively designed and redesigned her home and gardens. Renovations were often inspired by the acquisition of new art or architectural features. One of the first renovations was the installation in the mid-1950s of an 18<sup>th</sup> century interior from Syria, including carved and painted walls, cabinets, doors and ceiling, into what had formerly been a guestroom off the entry foyer. Known as the Damascus Room, it continued to serve as the only guestroom in the main house, used exclusively by intimate friends and family members.

In the 1960s, when Duke was well into her 50s, she transformed her dining room, which was originally Hawaiian in décor, to a distinctly Islamic interior. A draped fabric ceiling, cloth wall coverings, and window shades with Egyptian and Indian appliqué panels create the impression of an elaborate tent. At a low dining room table made from an Indian bed, guests sat on poufs (cushions) beneath an elaborate Baccarat chandelier made in France for export to India. A large 17<sup>th</sup>-century mosaic tile panel and an Ottoman-style fireplace complete the room. The combination of such diverse cultural traditions within a single room is typical of Shangri La and Duke's sense of aesthetics.

In the early 1980s, as Duke turned 70, she oversaw another major renovation at Shangri La. She had recently acquired a mid-19<sup>th</sup> century room interior from Damascus, composed of carved and painted wood panels, doors and niches, inlaid stone blocks and other large architectural fragments. The interior was originally from the home of the Quwwatlis, a prosperous family who had lived in Damascus for seven centuries. In the 1920s, the Quwwatlis sold the interior, which passed through the hands of several dealers and individuals and eventually was acquired by Duke. At Shangri La, it became known as the Turkish Room, a name that both distinguished it from the Damascus Room and referred to the many ceramic and glass pieces she added that originated from the Ottoman Empire, which had its capitol in Istanbul.

The creation of the Turkish Room required major structural renovations, including removal of a billiards room, bathroom and office to raise the ceiling and lower the floor. To supplement the pieces of the Quwwatlis interior, Duke and her staff designed, cut and laid marble floor tiles: one of many examples of Duke's "hands-on" approach to collecting and designing.

**Planning for the Future.** In 1965, Duke made a codicil to her will directing her executors to organize a foundation to manage and maintain Shangri La for the study and understanding of Middle Eastern art and culture. At the age of 52, in the midst of renovating her dining room and creating a Mughal Garden inspired by those in Lahore, Pakistan, Duke had a clear vision of the future of Shangri La as a place with educational value and importance beyond that of her private home and personal collection. The Turkish Room, installed in the early 1980s, is more display than living space: evidence of a shift in Duke's thinking of Shangri La as a place for exhibition and study. She continued to collect and install significant artworks until a year before her death in 1993, always deeply engaged in refining, embellishing and creating Shangri La.

**Doris Duke's Legacy at Shangri La.** Duke's final will created the Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art "to promote the study and understanding of Middle Eastern art and culture" and to manage Shangri La. Duke's legacy at Shangri La is far greater than just an elegantly designed house with inspiring views of the dramatic Hawaiian landscape. It is her discerning eye as a collector and designer that truly defines her legacy – her embracing of all forms of art, from ceramics to textiles to paintings to metalwork, from the courtly arts to tribal and folk arts. Her legacy is also the ingenuity that led her to install entire rooms, fabricating on site what could not be obtained from original sources. As a collector and an individual, Duke was unconventional, eclectic, idiosyncratic: the very qualities that fed her bold vision and allowed her to devote nearly 60 years of her life to a creation that few would see or appreciate in her lifetime. Perhaps most importantly, Doris Duke's legacy is found in her appreciation and understanding of the Islamic world and its diverse cultures, art and architectural forms; and through her gift of this extraordinary resource to the public for educational purposes.