



Shangri La

Islamic Art in a Honolulu Home



Sharon Littlefield



Creating Shangri La

Doris Duke was only twenty-two years old when she envisioned Shangri La. It was 1935, the same year she married and embarked on a honeymoon tour of the world, a trip that profoundly affected the rest of her life. She traveled to eastern destinations such as Egypt, India, Indonesia, and China for the first time and became fascinated by the rich cultural traditions, in particular the Islamic ones, she encountered. In the course of the trip, Duke began to collect works of art for the Florida home she and her husband, James Cromwell, expected to occupy. But the young couple's final stop on their honeymoon, in what was then the U.S. Territory of Hawai'i, made an equally powerful impression. Indeed, the newlyweds extended their stay in Honolulu by several weeks, so pleased were they by the friends they made and the landscapes they viewed. Within months of returning from her honeymoon, inspired by her travels, Duke decided to build a home in Honolulu, where she felt comfortable and relaxed, and to fill it with Islamic art and architecture, the aesthetics of which she so keenly admired. Together, this pairing of cultures was her "Shangri La," and her estate came to be called by this name, which evokes an idyllic world.

Duke's interest in Hawaiian and Islamic cultures was far removed from the East Coast social circle in which she was raised. Born in New York City on November 22, 1912, Doris Duke was the only child of well-known entrepreneur James Buchanan Duke and Nanaline Holt Inman Duke. By the time his daughter was born, J. B. Duke had already amassed an enormous fortune, as a founder of the American Tobacco Company and Duke Energy Company. His financial success propelled the Dukes into the society of the Vanderbilts, Astors, and other wealthy families of the industrial age. Doris Duke's position was one of privilege, and her life was, consequently, of great public interest. It was said that, as her father's primary beneficiary, she would be the wealthiest heir in America. The prediction was tested sooner than anyone expected. J. B. Duke died in 1925, when his daughter was still a young girl, and she did indeed inherit the bulk of his estate.

The press dubbed Duke "the richest girl in the world" following her father's death, a sobriquet of both sympathy and censure. Yet this new identity provided Duke with a rare independence for a woman of her time. With financial freedom and control of her life,

*Doris Duke at the
Moti Mosque in Agra,
India, c. 1935.*



Doris Duke.

JOHN DE TOSTA, NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND, 1924. Oil on canvas, 165.1 x 128.9 cm (65 x 48 in), Newport Restoration Foundation, 1999.653.

Doris Duke was twelve when she unenthusiastically posed for this portrait at her family home, Rough Point, in Newport, Rhode Island. Required to sit for the artist each day, Duke was unable to indulge in her passion for swimming in the ocean and building sandcastles on the beach. Her love for the ocean and for living outdoors contributed to her decision to build a home in Hawai'i.

Newport Restoration Foundation, Newport, Rhode Island

she chose to move beyond such social rituals as debutante balls and galas. She traveled extensively, made friends around the world, and built Shangri La, a home that would serve as her place of retreat and creative self-expression.

Duke's youthful passions for Islamic art and for Hawai'i proved enduring. She maintained her love of living in Honolulu, and she continued to collect Islamic art for Shangri La until her death in 1993 at the age of eighty. A philanthropist at heart, Duke provided in her will for the creation of the Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art to own Shangri La and to "promote the study and understanding of Middle Eastern art and culture" and to "make this property available to scholars, students and others interested in the furtherance and preservation of Islamic art and make the premises open to the public."¹ Today, under the shadow of Diamond Head, Shangri La's doors are open.

Inspiration and Construction

Duke appeared at many of the social events in which a young woman of means was expected to participate. Through them she met James Cromwell, whose mother, Eva, had married into the socially prominent Stotesbury family of Philadelphia. In 1935, after a five-year acquaintance, Duke and Cromwell were quietly married in the living room of her New York mansion. The couple boarded an ocean liner for a ten-month honeymoon tour of the world.

According to letters written by Cromwell during the couple's trip, Duke was thoroughly intrigued by her visit to India. In particular, she was excited by her visit to the Taj Mahal, the mausoleum built in the city of Agra under the patronage of the fifth Mughal emperor, Shah Jahan, c. 1631–47. James Cromwell wrote that his bride "had fallen in love with the Taj Mahal and all the beautiful marble tile, with their lovely floral designs with some precious stones."² Duke's reaction was so profound that she immediately commissioned a marble bedroom and bathroom suite for herself, inspired by the techniques and designs of the Taj Mahal. The suite included numerous carved marble doorways, door and window *jalis* (lattice screens), and wall and floor panels from C. G. and F. B. Blomfield, a British architectural firm based in New Delhi.

Doris Duke and James Cromwell in Honolulu, Hawai'i, c. 1935.

Nate Farbman/Hawai'i State Archives



The Taj Mahal in Agra, India, was a major destination for Doris Duke and her husband on their honeymoon tour of the world in 1935. The legendary tomb captured her imagination so strongly that it spurred a lifelong passion for Islamic art and architecture.

Doris Duke





Like the Taj Mahal itself, Duke's white marble suite was inlaid with semiprecious stones, including lapis lazuli, jade, and malachite.³ Her appreciation of the surface detailing on the Taj characterizes her appreciation of Islamic art in general. She was less attracted to the building's romantic legends, domes, and arches than to the beauty of its inlaid ornamentation and the play of light across its marble surfaces. As architectural historian Kazi Ashraf has noted, "if Miss Duke was enamored by the Taj Mahal, it was a sensible and sophisticated gesture on her part that she did not opt for the form, in a sort of naive fantasy in Brighton or Iranistan fashion, but for the sensuality and tactility of marble, its aura in the interior, with the nuanced lighting behind the marble screens."⁴ Throughout her life, Duke seems to have been drawn especially to the surface patterns, textures, and light characteristic of Islamic art.

The Cromwells departed India soon after placing their sizable order, but they maintained a close watch on the designs Blomfield produced in the subsequent months, and they frequently requested amendments to his proposals. While in Singapore, Cromwell wrote to Blomfield, "Mrs. Cromwell was disturbed about the panel design of the jalis shown on your rough sketch as she wanted them without panels like the jalis surrounding the [tomb] of Mumtaz at the Taj."⁵

opposite
Arch and basin.

NEW DELHI, INDIA, c. 1935.
Carved marble, Master Bathroom,
41.50.2.

David Franzen

below
Doris Duke's bedroom and bathroom suite features floral motifs similar to ones found at the Taj Mahal and other buildings created during the reign of the Mughal dynasty (1526–1857). In Duke's bathroom, sliding window jalis filter the sunlight and allow breezes to enter. Each jali is carved with a different floral design.

David Franzen





Inspired by her visit to the Taj Mahal, Doris Duke commissioned a bedroom and bathroom suite that echoed the surface patterns found on the seventeenth-century tomb. The suite includes arched doorways, jalis, and wall panels carved from white marble and inlaid with semi-precious stones.

David Franzen

Doris Duke intended to install her marble suite in El Mirasol, the mansion owned by the Stotesbury family in Palm Beach, Florida. Her mother-in-law, Eva Stotesbury, hired architect Maurice Fatio to design the addition, and plans were already unfolding by August 1935, when the young couple arrived at their final honeymoon destination, Honolulu. They planned to stay only for a few weeks, but they extended their visit to four months. As the *Honolulu Advertiser* reported on September 19, 1935:

Both [the Cromwells] are enthusiastic about Honolulu. "It's the most delightful place we've found in our seven months of honeymooning around the world," they declared. This is the first place they have visited where they chose to remain beyond their usual stop-over for sightseeing. . . . Honolulu has made a hit with the Cromwells—because it has left them alone.⁶

Indeed, the quiet Hawaiian social scene proved so appealing that Duke decided to build an estate on O'ahu instead of adding on to El Mirasol. She later explained:

The idea of building a Near Eastern house in Honolulu may seem fantastic to many. But precisely at the time I fell in love with Hawaii and I decided I could never live anywhere else, a Mogul-inspired bedroom and bathroom planned for another house was being completed for me in India so there was nothing to do but have it shipped to Hawaii and build a house around it.⁷

Plans for the design and construction of Shangri La began almost immediately. In April 1936 Duke purchased a spectacular, 4.9-acre piece of oceanfront property at Ka'alāwai with dramatic, sweeping views of Diamond Head and the Pacific Ocean. It was the same spot where, during their honeymoon, she and her husband, together with their new Hawaiian friends the Kahanamoku family, had spent pleasurable days picnicking, surfing, and swimming.⁸ By May the architectural firm Wyeth & King had been retained to design the estate and its grounds. James Cromwell wrote in a letter that the house would "more or less copy the Hispano-Moresque style" of the Stotesbury mansion in Palm Beach.⁹ Duke, architect Marion Sims Wyeth, and design supervisor Drew Baker made the long sea voyage to Hawai'i to create and revise renderings for the estate on site.

In February 1937 the final plans were approved, and construction began the next month. The scale of the building project received considerable attention in Hawai'i's newspapers.¹⁰ According to the *Honolulu Star Bulletin*, about one hundred fifty workmen were involved in the construction of Shangri La.¹¹ The cost of the project,

Shangri La was built in an area traditionally known as Ka'alāwai. Literally translated as "the water basalt," the name refers to the porous stone that characterizes this lovely stretch of the O'ahu coast. Doris Duke's friend Anna Furtado Kahanamoku once described Ka'alāwai as "quite a large place on the beach. There wasn't a house there then, just a little shack. Before she built her home, she used to go out there to picnic. There was just grass and trees and she was planning to build her home there."





Doris Duke, James Cromwell, and David Kahanamoku fish in the ocean below Shangri La in 1939.

Martin Munkácsi

opposite

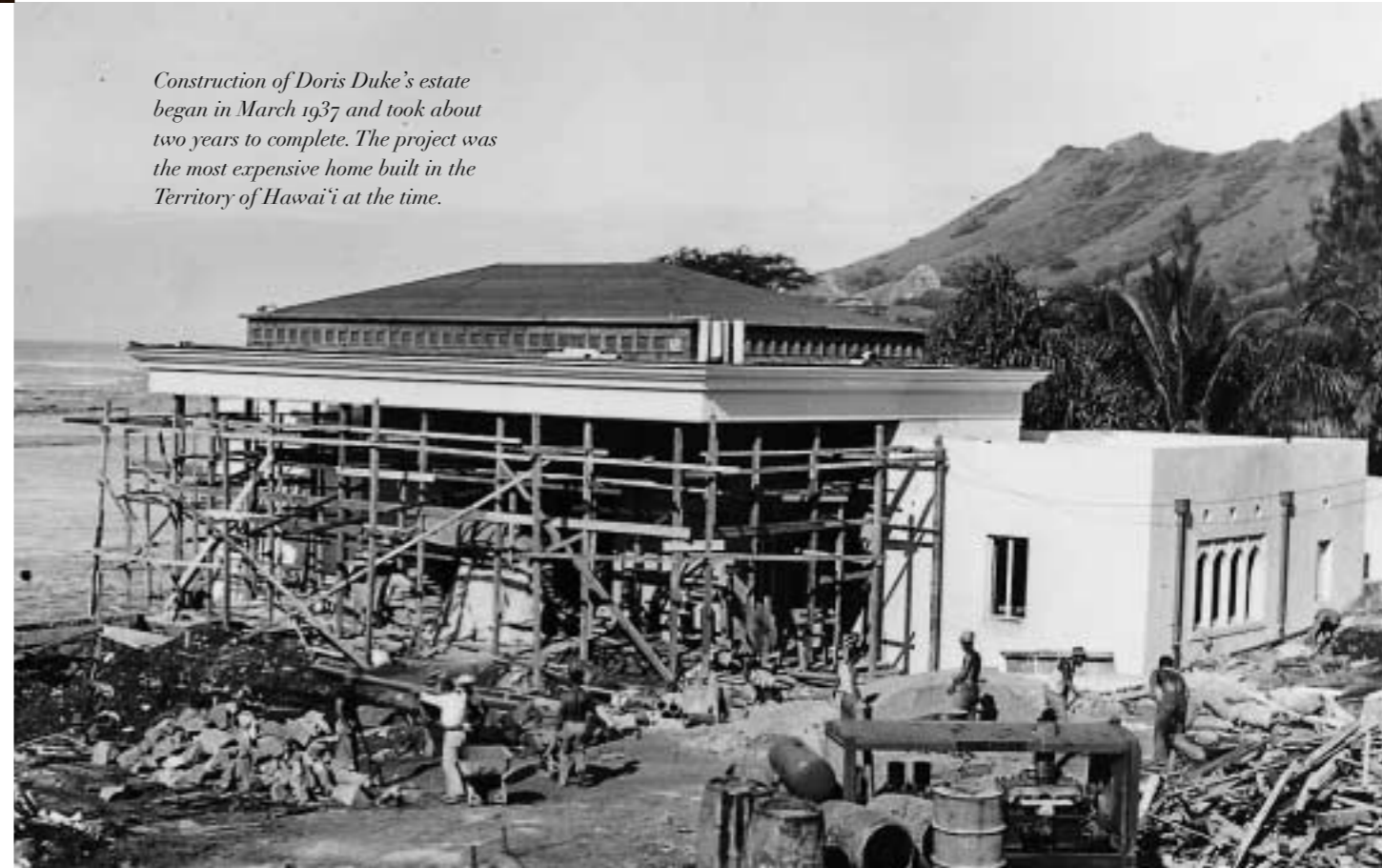
During her honeymoon stay in Hawai'i, Doris Duke became fast friends with the multitabled and athletic Kahanamoku family. They formed the nucleus of her social circle for many years. From left: Shangri La's architect Marion Sims Wyeth, Bill, Anna, and Sam Kahanamoku, Doris Duke, David, Bernice, and Duke Kahanamoku, and an unidentified woman, c. 1937.

\$1.4 million, may seem modest by today's standards, but was impressive for Hawai'i at that time.

By 1938 Shangri La was essentially built, and Duke and her husband moved in on Christmas day. Duke, separated from her husband in 1940, used Shangri La as a seasonal home thereafter and was typically in residence during the winter months. For the rest of the year, she divided her time among other residences. Duke had inherited several homes from her father, including a mansion in New York City, Rough Point in Newport, Rhode Island, and Duke Farms in Somerville, New Jersey. Later, she acquired Falcon Lair in Beverly Hills and an apartment in New York, after donating her Fifth Avenue mansion to the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University. Of all her residences, Shangri La seems to have had a unique place in Duke's life. It was the only one she built from the ground up and filled from the inside out.



Construction of Doris Duke's estate began in March 1937 and took about two years to complete. The project was the most expensive home built in the Territory of Hawai'i at the time.



Doris Duke with the six Kahanamoku brothers, c. 1937. With them, she surfed, paddled canoes, sailed, sang and played Hawaiian music, and explored the islands. From left: Sargent, Louis, Sam, Bill (seated), Doris, David, and Duke.



opposite top
Doris Duke and friends on an outing, c. 1939. Back row, from left: unidentified man, Marian Paschal, unidentified woman, Anna Furtado Kahanamoku, Doris Duke, and Sam Kahanamoku. Seated, from left: Sargent Kahanamoku, unidentified child, David Kahanamoku, and Johnny Gomez.



opposite bottom
Posing with giant 'ape leaves, Sam Kahanamoku and Doris Duke ham for the camera, c. 1939.



