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### **For Immediate Release**

SHANGRI LA OPENS 18th CENTURY DAMASCUS ROOM TO THE PUBLIC  
HONOLULU, HAWAII ( June 25, 2012) – The Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art at Shangri La announced today that it will open the historic Damascus Room, one of the highlights of the Islamic art collection, to the public for the first time on Saturday, July 7 following several years of conservation work.

The Damascus Room dates from the late 18th century and includes an elaborately painted and gilded wood ceiling and similarly ornamented wall panels with doors, vitrines, cabinets, and cartouches adorned with gold calligraphy. It was acquired by collector and philanthropist Doris Duke in the early 1950s from dealers in Damascus, Syria, and subsequently installed at Shangri La as a guest room. Luxury trade items such as Turkish ceramic plates and silk velvets, Iranian and European glassware, and North African hanging enameled lamps are on display, much as they would have been in affluent homes in Damascus under the rule of the Ottoman Empire. Visitors will be encouraged to enter and sit in the room and peruse exhibits about the history of the interior and the story of its conservation.

“The Damascus Room is a highlight of the Islamic art collection that Doris Duke assembled at Shangri La,” said Keelan Overton, Curator of Islamic Art, Shangri La. “In this space, visitors can appreciate a hallmark technique of late Ottoman Syrian architectural decoration: ‘ajami – the raised and painted decorative surfaces that cover the walls and ceiling and characterize many of these rooms.”

Shangri La is one of few museums worldwide that exhibit Syrian interiors; others include the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Cincinnati Museum of Art, the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin, and the Robert Mouawad Private Museum in Beirut. In recent years, approximately 600 homes, the majority of which date to the late Ottoman period, have been surveyed in Damascus. Most of these residences were originally built for prominent merchants, religious figures, and politicians and many were later transformed into foreign consulates, research institutes, craft workshops, hotels, schools, and restaurants. Today, some notable homes are being conserved in situ by international organizations such as the Aga Khan Trust for Culture.

“Especially given the current civil unrest in Syria and reports of damage to cultural sites, we hope the Damascus Room will open a window on the country’s extraordinary cultural heritage, specifically the arts of 18th century Damascus,” said Deborah Pope, Executive Director of Shangri La.

**At Home in Damascus, Syria.** Renowned for its ancient history as a prosperous trade center and regional marketplace, Damascus was a provincial capital under the rule of the Ottoman Empire at the time that the wooden paneling of Shangri La’s Damascus Room was created. In the densely occupied old city, wealthy residents adopted the latest fashions and styles from Istanbul, Europe and Asia and blended them with older artistic traditions.

The ceiling and walls of the Damascus Room were originally part of a series of polychrome reception rooms (known as qa‘a in Arabic) used to receive guests in an atmosphere of wealth and luxury. Elaborate floral and geometric patterns decorate every surface of the Damascus Room with brightly colored paints, metal leaf, and raised gesso ornament (a technique known in Arabic as ‘ajami). The overall effect is a glittering, jewel-like atmosphere that originally set the stage for social entertainments enhanced by music, hookah-pipe smoking and culinary delicacies. Portions of the Damascus Room’s ‘ajami walls are also decorated with Arabic calligraphy, executed in gold paint, naming some of the Prophet Muhammad’s companions. A similar Damascene interior was

described in 1812 by an Englishman, who wrote: “On entering, the eye was struck by the glitter of the walls and ceiling, resembling the description of fairy palaces. Mock precious stones, mirrors, gilding and arabesque paintings covered it everywhere...”

**Bound for Honolulu.** Doris Duke became interested in acquiring a historic Syrian interior in the early 1950s. She soon approached the Damascus-based art dealers Georges Asfar and Jean Sarkis with whom she had worked in the late 1930s. Duke placed an order with Asfar and Sarkis for “one old Damascus Room made of old painted panels of wood,” which the firm had acquired in 1938 from “Mohamad Khayat,” believed to be Muhammad ‘Ali al-Khayyat, a Damascene craftsman specializing in the restoration and creation of ‘ajami rooms. Duke had a specific space in mind at Shangri La for her pending purchase—the guest room adjoining the foyer—and she provided the dealers the dimensions of the space. As documents in Shangri La’s archives confirm, the wood panels required considerable retrofitting to be accommodated in their new home. Examination of the ceiling and walls of the Damascus Room suggest that architectural elements from several separate structures were brought together to form the current room as it stands.

In August 1954, Asfar & Sarkis sent Duke photographs of the reconfigured interior, outfitted with some of the furnishings she had purchased, including braziers, tables, yards of silk fabric and four colorful enameled lamps that still hang from the painted ceiling today. Shipped from Beirut in nine cases in November 1954, the Damascus Room arrived in Honolulu in January 1955, accompanied by detailed drawings and written “instructions for rebuilding the paneled room.” At Shangri La, the room was installed as a guest room by 1958, serving a practical use while still evoking the mood and ambiance of the old city of Damascus in the 18th century.

**Conserving the Damascus Room.** Conservation of the Damascus Room began in 2004 following the repair of a roof leak that caused losses to the ceiling paint and gesso surfaces. Conservators and graduate conservation interns from the Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation carried out the work in a phased approach over

the course of three consecutive summers. Phase 1 involved documenting the current condition of the room, including recording past restorations, current losses and unstable areas. Phase 2 included consolidating the room's unstable elements (such as flaking paint and friable gesso) to preserve the overall aesthetic of the room. In Phase 3, visible areas of loss were painted and heavily discolored areas were toned back so that all of the design elements appeared unified. The goal of conservation was to stabilize and unify the decorative surfaces without attempting to make the room look new.

### **Public Programs and Reservations**

The following programs are open to the general public in celebration of the opening of the Damascus Room.

- On Saturday, July 7, 2012 special tours of the Damascus Room and Syrian Room are offered at 9:00 a.m., 10:30 a.m. & 12:00 p.m. Open house and light refreshments will follow each tour. Advance reservations are required, and attendance is limited. All tours originate at the Honolulu Museum of Art. An admission fee of \$20 for Hawaii residents, \$25 for non-residents includes the tour, open house and roundtrip transportation from the Honolulu Museum of Art. Reservations can be booked by calling (808) 532-3685 or by email at [shangrilatickets@honolulumuseum.org](mailto:shangrilatickets@honolulumuseum.org)
- Beginning Wednesday, July 11, the Damascus Room will be included in Shangri La's guided tour program. Advance reservations are required, and attendance is limited. All tours originate at the Honolulu Museum of Art. An admission fee of \$20 for Hawaii residents, \$25 for non-residents includes a guided tour and roundtrip transportation from the Honolulu Museum of Art. Reservations can be booked by calling (808) 532-3685 or by email at [shangrilatickets@honolulumuseum.org](mailto:shangrilatickets@honolulumuseum.org)
- On Thursday, July 12, Dr. Keelan Overton, Shangri La's Curator of Islamic Art, will present an illustrated lecture The Biography of a Syrian Interior: Shangri La's Damascus Room at 6:00 p.m. at the University of Hawaii at Manoa Department of Art and Art History Auditorium, 2535 McCarthy Mall. Admission is free.

**Other Programs.** To coincide with the public opening of the Damascus Room, the Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art will host an interdisciplinary colloquium "The

Damascus Room in Context: Acquisition, Furnishings, and Conservation,” with an invited group of international art historians, historians and conservators, June 27-28. The workshop-style convening will include papers on domestic interiors in late Ottoman Damascus; discoveries of preserved ‘ajami interiors in Syria; Duke's lifelong interest in Damascus and the acquisition of the Damascus Room; the four phases of conservation efforts on the room by the Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation (WUDPAC); and the conservation challenges for portable vessels and textiles selected for display. Confirmed speakers include Jim Grehan, Associate Professor, Department of History, Portland State University; Anke Scharrahs, independent conservator; Keelan Overton, Curator of Islamic Art, Shangri La; Mary McGinn, Paintings Conservator and Adjunct Associate Professor, Winterthur/University of Delaware; Ann Svenson, independent textile conservator, Amanda Phillips, Fellow at the Institute of Iranian Studies at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland; and Kent Severson, Conservator, Shangri La. Videos of the presentations will be posted to Shangri La's website in the near future.

Amanda Phillips is Scholar in Residence at Shangri La from June 23 – July 15. She is conducting research on Shangri La's collection of brocaded silk velvets to examine how popular consumption of luxury goods shaped the material and visual culture of the early modern Ottoman Empire. In addition to speaking at the colloquium, Dr. Phillips presented a lecture Ottoman Luxury Velvets, 1600-1750: Quantity, Quality and Innovation in Material, illustrating the relationship between the consumption and production of Ottoman silks. Phillips received her doctorate in Islamic Art and Archeology from Oxford in 2011. She is currently a Fellow at the Institute of Iranian Studies at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland.

### **About Shangri La**

[www.shangrilahawaii.org](http://www.shangrilahawaii.org)

Shangri La was conceived by the 23-year-old Doris Duke in 1935, after her honeymoon with James Cromwell, which took her through Islamic countries for the first time and concluded with an extended stay in Hawai'i. Deeply impressed by the cultures she had

encountered and by Hawai‘i’s temperate climate and outdoor lifestyle, she purchased a five-acre property near Black Point on the south east coast of O‘ahu in 1936 and commissioned a home to be designed by American architect Marion Sims Wyeth (1889–1982). Wyeth was known for his work on many notable Palm Beach, Florida, mansions (including the exterior of the Marjorie Merriweather Post estate, Mar-a-Lago) and was later to design the Norton Museum of Art in West Palm Beach.

Taking an active role in developing the plans for Shangri La, Doris Duke directed Wyeth to incorporate architectural styles from Iran, Morocco and Mughal India. While the house was under construction, she and her husband traveled to Egypt, Syria, Iran and Turkey to visit, photograph and film historic sites and monuments that deeply influenced Shangri La’s design; and to collect and commission new work for the house. Duke continued to collect for more than 50 years, embedding much of the collection—carved and painted ceilings, ceramic tiles, painted doors and decorative wood screens—into the structure of the house, and periodically undertaking major renovations to accommodate new acquisitions.

Terraced into the hillside overlooking the Pacific, Shangri La integrates a 14,000 square foot house, a Playhouse and a pool with courtyards, lanais, landscaped gardens and numerous water features. In addition to Wyeth and his supervising architect Drew Baker, architects, designers and craftsmen in India, Morocco, Iran and Syria created designs and work for the house. The original landscape was designed by Catherine and Robert Thompson and Richard Tongg of Hawai‘i. The collection displayed throughout the house ranges from early medieval Islamic art to early 20th century commissions and is particularly strong in ceramic tiles and vessels and material from the 17th through 20th centuries.

Shangri La was opened to the public in November 2002 as a center for Islamic arts and culture. It is owned and operated by the Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art (DDFIA), which Doris Duke created in her will to promote the study, understanding and preservation of Islamic art and culture. DDFIA is an operating foundation supported by

the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation. Shangri La offers public tours, and presents lectures, performances, symposia and other special programs at the property. Since 2004 it has maintained scholar-in-residence and artist-in-residence programs on site. Through the New York-based Building Bridges Program, the DDFIA also supports the use of the arts and media to increase Americans' understanding of Muslim cultures.

## **About Doris Duke**

### **On the Centenary of Her Birth**

Born on November 22, 1912, in New York City, Doris Duke was the only child of John Buchanan (J. B.) Duke, a founder of the American Tobacco Company and Duke Energy Company. Upon his death in 1925, his fortune was divided between Doris, who was then only 12 years old, and the Duke Endowment—a foundation he established to serve the people of the Carolinas

Intelligent, daring, and independent, Doris Duke used her wealth to pursue her personal interests, many of which were considered unconventional during the period but today reveal her prescience as a free-thinking adventurer. Among other things, she was an environmentalist long before it was fashionable; a war correspondent in Italy during World War II; a horticulturist who bred a new hybrid of orchid; a bold experimenter who surfed when it was still a male-dominated sport; and an early funder of AIDS research

Doris Duke's many interests also extended to foreign cultures. She developed a lifelong engagement with the arts and cultures of the Islamic world. Purchasing on her many travels, at auction, and through commissions from living artisans, she assembled a collection of over 2,500 objects, many of which are now on display at Shangri La. Duke was also a patron of and a participant in the performing arts, actively pursuing arts such as jazz piano and composition as well as modern dance—which she studied with celebrated dancer and choreographer Martha Graham.

A lifelong philanthropist, Doris Duke also contributed to a variety of public causes, including medical research and child welfare. When she was just 21, she established a

foundation called Independent Aid, through which she gave away the equivalent of hundreds of millions in today's dollars—often as anonymous contributions. At age 56, she established the Newport Restoration Foundation (NRF) to save the rapidly disappearing 18th-century architecture in Newport, Rhode Island. Finally, through her will, she established her ongoing legacy by calling for the creation of the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation (DDCF), which has to date awarded more than \$1 billion in grants. ([www.ddcf.org](http://www.ddcf.org))

### **Admission**

Admission to Shangri La is by guided tour and advance reservations are required. All tours start at the Honolulu Museum of Art (HMA) at 900 South Beretania Street, between Victoria Street and Ward Avenue. Visitors are transported to Shangri La by van. Tickets are \$25, which includes van transportation from the HMA to Shangri La, as well as admission to the Museum's permanent exhibitions. Discounted tickets are available for \$20 to Hawaii residents with proof of local residency. On the first Wednesday of each month, Hawaii residents may tour Shangri La free of charge.

### **Reservations**

Please call the reservation office at the Honolulu Museum of Art at 866-DUKE-TIX (866-385-3849.) Local callers may call 532-DUKE (532-3853.)

If the voice mail system answers, please leave a message with your name, phone number and time zone and a ticket agent will return the call.

Payment must be made at the time of reservation using a major credit card.

Inquiries should be directed to [shangrilatickets@honoluluacademy.org](mailto:shangrilatickets@honoluluacademy.org).

### **Days and Hours of Operation.**

Shangri La tours are offered Wednesday through Saturday. Shangri La is closed to the public throughout the month of September and on New Year's Day, Fourth of July, Thanksgiving Day and Christmas Day. March 1, 2012