In the late 1930s, heiress Doris Duke built Shangri La, her Honolulu home, on five acres of property overlooking the Pacific Ocean and Diamond Head. Shangri La incorporates architectural features from throughout the Islamic world and houses Duke’s extensive collection of Islamic art. Collecting and living with Islamic art became a lifelong creative endeavor, one that Duke sustained and that in many ways sustained her for nearly sixty years.

One of Hawai’i’s most architecturally significant houses, Shangri La was also the most private of homes, a retreat and sanctuary for a woman who valued privacy above all else. Hidden from view by a high sea wall and tropical vegetation, Shangri La and Duke’s passion for collecting Islamic art were known to only a few. In her will, Duke herself set in motion plans to open Shangri La to the public as a place for the study of Islamic art and culture.

Published to coincide with the opening, this book introduces Shangri La: the house, the gardens, the collections of Islamic art. It also offers a glimpse of the person behind the public image of “wealthy heiress”, an independent woman with an adventurous spirit, a deep interest in other cultures, and the imagination and discipline to envision and create Shangri La.

Sharon Littlefield, curator of Shangri La, has been working with the collections of Islamic art since 1999. She served as curator of the permanent exhibition Arts of the Islamic World at the Honolulu Academy of Arts in 2002. She previously served as associate curator and research associate at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Department of Indian and Himalayan Art.

Carol Bier is research associate at The Textile Museum in Washington, D.C., where she served as curator for Eastern Hemisphere Collections from 1984 to 2008. She serves on the faculty of the Maryland Institute College of Art and teaches about Islamic art at Johns Hopkins University.
Shangri La

Sharon Littlefield

Introduction by Carol Bier


Doris Duke at Shangri La, c. 1939. Martin Munkácsi.

Doris Duke and Sam Kahanamoku in front of the Playhouse at Shangri La, c. 1938–39.

Among the technical innovations at Shangri La were a hydraulically operated diving board and a diving platform, c. 1938.

Doris Duke and Sam Kahanamoku play guitars at Shangri La in 1939. Martin Munkácsi.

Doris Duke and James Cromwell pose by the Jali Pavilion at Shangri La in 1939. Martin Munkácsi.

Doris Duke and her crew await the start of a canoe race, c. 1936–37. From left: Sam Kahanamoku, Doris Duke, Bill Kahanamoku, Sarge Kahanamoku. Nate Farbman/Hawai‘i State Archives.
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 Bismik, Jim Stubenberg, and Foundation staff Patrick Lewey, Betsy Fader, and Alan Alschuler. 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 Grolena, 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 Svensson 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. Aiga Hachimi assisted with translating inscriptions on artwork. Photographers David Francis and Shozo Iizumoto and book designer Barbara Pope have captured the essence of Shangri La. Thanks to Doris Duke Charitable Foundation archivists Elizabeth Steinberg and Chris Gardin 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 (1908–1995), Emma Vear, Jim Vahors, and Jason Ferreira for their aloha and generosity.
SHANGRI 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'alawai 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 listening 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
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 Havemays), 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 Ghulat Sultan, “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 Kapi‘olani 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 riches 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 mihrāb (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
to acquire Islamic art, once she began, her purchases were extensive and deliberate. The huge ceramic, luster-glazed mihrāb 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 revelations 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!”

Folio from the Qur’an, Sūra 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, 11.25.

Calligraphy, beautiful writing, has been a prominent Islamic art since the seventh century, when the Qur’an was revealed to Muhammad and revealed 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.

Shuizo Uemoto

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Hawai‘i’s volcanic seascape, may also be seen as a distant expression of the early modernism that was evolving in the igles 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

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Shangri La

Islamic Art in a Honolulu Home

Sharon Littlefield
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 Hawaii, 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 still a young girl, 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,
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.” 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.

Duke’s youthful passions for Islamic art and for Hawaii’s 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. 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.” Today, under the shadow of Diamond Head, Shangri La’s doors are open.
Like the Taj Mahal itself, Duke’s white marble suite was inlaid with semi-precious stones, including lapis lazuli, jade, and malachite. 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 Kari Annas 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 Iranian fashion, but for the sensuality and tactility of marble, its aura in the interior, with the nuanced lighting behind the marble screens.” 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.”
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.

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'alawai 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. 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. 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. According to the Honolulu Star Bulletin, about one hundred fifty workmen were involved in the construction of Shangri La. The cost of the project, Shangri La was built in an area traditionally known as Ka'alawai. Literally translated as “the water basin,” 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'alawai as “quite a large place on the beach. There wasn’t a house there then, just a little shack. Before she built her house, she used to go out there to picnic. There was just grass and trees and she was planning to build her house there.”

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-overs for sightseeing. Honolulu has made a hit with the Cromwells—because it has left them alone.”

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:
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 1935, 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.


Posing with giant ‘ape leaves, Sam Kahanamoku and Doris Duke ham for the camera, c. 1939.
Duke chose to live unconventionally by blending traditions from the East Coast, Hawai‘i, and the Islamic world, and the design of Shangri La reflects this idiosyncratic blend. Shangri La has no imposing entryway, no grand façade of the type one might expect to see at the home of one of America’s wealthiest individuals. The estate cannot be seen from the road at all, and only tantalizing glimpses are offered to those who surf, sail, or swim along the spectacular coastline that Shangri La overlooks. The main house is approached by descending a sloping driveway that ends at a courtyard with a large, old banyan tree. The façade here presented to the visitor is deceptively humble with its simple plaster walls and ceramic tile roof. It reveals little about the size or layout of the house. Were it not for the smiling stone camels that flank the doorway, one might not know that this approach was indeed the proper mode of entry into the house.

Stepping from outside to inside, guests are presented with startling juxtapositions: from a plain façade to a highly ornate interior; from a tropical Hawaiian landscape to refined Islamic elegance. The effect is heightened by the diversity of Islamic artistic traditions displayed in the foyer. Guests are surrounded by an array of colors produced by six hundred iznik tiles from Turkey, eighty-four colored glass, Spanish-style windows complemented by hints of sunlight and lamps, and opulent textiles, urns, and wood chests.
with a diving board and diving platform. The buildings and the
pool run parallel to a high sea wall with a lava rock veneer, which
protects the estate from the surf just beyond. A sinuous jetty was
built into the ocean to shelter a yacht. On a secluded section of
the property, separated from the residential areas by a tennis court,
stand a modest caretaker’s cottage and garage. The rest of the prop-
erty is appealingly landscaped with gardens, fishponds, grass, palm
trees, and other lush vegetation.

The design reflects Duke’s love of swimming, surfing, sailing,
and outdoor living in general. Instead of a movie theater, bowling
alley, or large reading room, Shangri La features outdoor sporting
opportunities: the large pool, direct access to the ocean, and tennis
courts, for example. In 1939 Life magazine described Shangri La
as “a stately concrete structure of Morocco-Persian architecture
[which] stretches white and gleaming along the ocean ... make it an ideal playground. In it, some four or five months a year, the Cromwells find a haven of quiet retreat....A n d here, within earshot of the surf, the quiet, level-headed girl who is
one of the richest heiresses in the world, fishes, swims, reads, pre-
fers simple healthy living to social splendor.”

Though idiosyncratic, the plan of Shangri La does follow three
main principles, all of which show sensitivity to the beauty of the
surrounding Hawaiian landscape. First, the house is a design which
ensures that the built environment does not overwhelm the natural environment. Like the grounds,
A mihrab is a recess or niche in a wall that indicates the direction of Mecca, and therefore the direction of prayer. At Shangri La, Doris Duke chose to locate the mihrab on an east wall, rather than in a north-western orientation, which would be the proper direction from Hawaii to Mecca. Although this placement indicates that Duke did not use the mihrab for religious purposes, her decision to install it in one of the most prominent locations at Shangri La underscores her awareness of its widely acknowledged aesthetic and historical value.

David Franzen
The living room at night.

Duke had special lighting installed throughout Shangri-La to ensure that her collection could be viewed to best advantage day or night.

David Franzen

opposite

The view of the Playhouse, Diamond Head, and the Pacific Ocean is unforgettable.

David Franzen
the main house is terraced across the property to provide variety in its appearance. Second, the rooms and wings of the main house radiate around an interior, central courtyard. This courtyard-and-wing plan provides most rooms in the house with ocean views. Third, the main structures follow the orientation of the coastline, resulting in a strong axis that visually connects key areas of the property to the Hawaiian locale by the view just beyond. Diamond Head, the Playhouse, the pool, the living room, and a magnificent mihrab (prayer niche) that is considered Shangri La’s most important work of art are all aligned on this axis. The glass wall on the west side of the living room, also on the axis, descends into the basement. When the glass wall is down, the axis is reinforced, for one can then walk through the living room onto a grassy terrace, stroll past the enormous pool, and arrive at the Playhouse, all the time admiring the sweeping ocean and mountain views beyond. A writer for the Honolulu Star Bulletin described Shangri La in 1938:

“There is nothing massive about the place: nothing that impresses by mere size. It is more like a perfectly cut gem with a flawless attention to detail, with a certain restraint in design that sparkles nonetheless. Its low, rambling architecture nestles against the hill behind it, its white walls sharpen the blue and green of the ocean, landscape and sky: its great brown stone retaining wall is in restful harmony with the sea that curls below it.”

In addition to being a home of beauty, Shangri La was also a home of technical marvels, of which the descending glass wall in the living room is perhaps the most remarkable. It is operated electrically by an Otis Elevator system. Both conceptually and technologically, a descending wall composed of an enormous glass pane was innovative at the time it was installed at Shangri La. The use of glass ensures that the beauty of the surrounding landscape, as well as the Playhouse and pool, are visible regardless of the wall’s position. When the wall disappears, a dynamic blending of interior and exterior spaces occurs that is typical of much of Shangri La’s design. Another innovation Duke implemented at Shangri La was the use of sliding jalis. These lattice-carved screens with floral and geometric motifs were part of the marble bedroom set that Duke commissioned in India. Though based on the jalis seen in Mughal...
architecture in South Asia, those at Shangri La are unique because they are not fixed in place. Instead, they and the glass doors behind them slide open or shut to provide varying degrees of light, ocean breezes, and privacy. Duke explained:

I tried to keep the house in character, using original Near Eastern pieces, but in order to make it livable as well, it was often necessary to adapt them to uses for which they were not originally intended. Thus in my Indian bedroom, carved, cutout marble jalis or screens, which were formerly used by Indian princes to keep their wives from other eyes, have a new purpose: they are not only decorative, but a means of security, for they can be locked without shutting off the air, and when not wanted can be pushed back into the wall.

Various principles of Islamic domestic architecture may be seen in the plan and appearance of Shangri La, such as the unassuming façade, central courtyard, and abundance of gardens. Though Duke and her husband originally called for a “Hispanic-Moresque”-style home, Shangri La’s design resonates with Islamic domestic architecture from a larger sphere, especially the Middle East and North Africa. In crowded urban centers such as Cairo, for example, family homes, processions, and lifestyles were shielded from street life by presenting a simple façade to the public. Inside, however, rooms were as elaborate as a family could afford. These urban homes were often built around inner courtyards that permitted sunlight, air, and vegetation inside. The courtyard plan was practical, for it separated female spaces from male ones and the family’s private spaces from those of guests.
At Shangri La also, the courtyard separates guest areas from private quarters. Wings, such as those leading to Duke’s bedroom and the staff quarters, extend off the central courtyard, but are fitted with lockable doors to limit access. In contrast, rooms intended for guests’ use, such as the Turkish Rooms, living room, and dining room, are connected directly to the central courtyard. The idea of separating guest areas from the owner’s private spaces resonated with Duke. Her husband wrote:

Doris is planning to construct a very large pool where the present pool is situated, and is also planning to have a sort of combination guest-house and boat-house Cabana arrangement, built on or just above the swam pool. This guest-house would probably have double guest rooms with a jaini, for each, a miniature kitchen and sports-room connected to the pool. We got this idea from India and the purpose, of course, is not to have our guests continually in our hair, and vice versa!

The buildings at Shangri La surround, and are surrounded by, gardens and other landscaping, another feature characteristic of Islamic architecture. The Moon Garden is located at one corner of the estate. Along the length of an upper terrace is another garden, Duke’s interpretation of a Mughal garden. In between the two lie the lush central courtyard, gardens near the pool and Playhouse, and a private garden adjacent to Duke’s bedroom. Each area features a unique combination of still or moving water, vegetation, trees, grass, and fishponds.

To walk from one room to another, one usually traverses both interior spaces and covered exterior spaces. The numerous gardens play an important role in enhancing the exterior parts of the journey, as do particular works of art that Duke displayed outdoors. The close relationship between internal and external spaces at Shangri La is characteristic of upper-class Islamic domestic architecture and is well suited to the tropical climate of Hawai’i.

Although the main house demonstrates principles of design found within Islamic cultures, the façade of the Playhouse provides the most direct reference to a specific example of Islamic architecture. It was adapted from the Chehel Sutun, a seventeenth-century pavilion built in Isfahan, Iran, under the patronage of the Safavid emperor Shah ‘Abbas II. Duke herself traveled to Isfahan in 1938 and took photographs of the Chehel Sutun to assist Marion Sims Wyeth with the design details. Mary Crane, a graduate student of Islamic art history at New York University’s Institute of Fine Arts, provided extracts from seventeenth-century travelogues that described the appearance of the Chehel Sutun. Crane also reviewed manuscript illustrations from the era in search of inspiration. Over a period of six months, the two women exchanged letters reporting on their findings.
Duke’s estate was never truly finished. When her longtime friend Johnny Gomez was asked what year Shangri La had been finished, he laughingly replied, “Never was finished, never. There was no such word as finished.” Shangri La continued to evolve over the years as Duke energetically and creatively designed and redesigned her Hawaiian home whenever she acquired works of art. Sometimes her designs led to large-scale renovations that required relocating monumental works of art, such as a ceramic tile panel measuring 7 feet by 26 feet, which was once displayed outdoors but was eventually moved inside. No physical challenge was too daunting; the end product had to suit her sense of aesthetics.

In the 1960s, when Duke was in her fifties, she transformed her dining room, which was originally Hawaiian in inspiration. She described the room’s original decor:

I used marine life as the decorative motif: tanks for the brilliant fish that abound in these waters are built into one wall, and a shell collection is displayed in a second. The other two sides overlook the ocean.

The appearance of the remodeled dining room was completely different; the room now drew upon Islamic forms, like the rest of Shangri La. The large windows with their sweeping views of the ocean and Diamond Head were retained, but the tanks and shell collection were removed. They were replaced with a large, seventeenth-century mosaic tile panel and an Ottoman-style fireplace. Duke furnished the renovated dining room with Egyptian and Indian cloth panels, and also selected a fabric covering for the ceiling and walls, giving the room the impression of an elaborate tent. The room evokes those Islamic cultures that favor a nomadic lifestyle and prefer portable architectural structures, such as cloth tents, to permanent buildings composed of stone or brick.

In the early 1980s, as Duke turned seventy, she oversaw another major renovation at Shangri La. She had recently acquired a mid-nineteenth-century room interior from Syria, composed of carved and painted wood panels, doors, and niches; carved and inlaid stone blocks; and other large architectural fragments. The interior had once belonged to the Quwwatlis, an aristocratic family that had resided in Damascus for seven centuries. In the 1920s, the Quwwatli family had sold the interior to the firm of Asaf & Sarkis, which

Transformations

The Turkish Room at Shangri La
David Franzen
the Shangri La house staff. The last elements installed were the wooden wall panels and ceilings, whose lavender wood frames were not originally part of the Quwwatli interior, but were purchased separately. The frames were retouched and reglided as needed, and Duke herself took an active part in some of this restoration work. Estate employee Jin de Silva remembers how Duke and her artisans would sit around a table in the courtyard, working in an assembly-line manner and consulting one another about their respective tasks. When the interiors were in place, ceramics, glass, metalwork, and other objects were brought from around Shangri La to the Turkish Rooms for display in the niches. Like other areas of the estate, these rooms continued to evolve. Duke enjoyed viewing, critiquing, and rearranging the portable objects in them whenever she was in Hawai‘i.

In the initial stages of Shangri La’s conception and construction, both Duke and Cromwell were involved in planning the estate. In the succeeding years Cromwell’s influence decreased as the couple experienced marital problems; they separated in 1936 and were divorced in 1940. Architect Marion Sims Wyeth, design supervisor Drew Baker, and others also provided Duke with input. Baker was the on-site supervising architect, who remained in residence in Hawai‘i for the duration of the construction. Duke, however, always relied on her own needs and tastes when reviewing designs submitted by professionals. She frequently requested amendments to ensure that the estate evolved to coincide with her vision. In her own words, “it isn’t the product of any one person, but a number of architects and decorators from all over the world, finally put together by me.” In 1935 Robert Oliver Thompson, who jointly served as the landscape designer of Shangri La with his wife Catherine Jones Richard Thompson, met Doris Duke. When asked to describe Duke’s involvement in the creation of Shangri La, he replied that she “was constantly on the job and took great interest in every tree, every leaf, twig, shrub. She certainly did. I have never seen a girl take the interest that she did and she knew what she wanted.”

Perhaps the most successful aspect of Shangri La’s design is its understated architectural plan. Together, Wyeth and Duke decided that there should be few structural and decorative details, except for an frozen pool and a fountain to set down. Though both contain historic marble panels, they consist mainly of panels designed and cut by Duke and

later resold it to another dealer, Hagop Kevorkian. Both were dealers whom Duke often patronized. The Kevorkian Foundation later gave this and another interior as gifts to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and to the Kevorkian Center for Near Eastern Studies at New York University. Duke’s room was part of the Kevorkian Center interior, and became known at Shangri La as the Turkish and Baby Turkish Rooms.

What had previously been a billiards room, a bathroom, an office on the floor above, and a ceiling in between was demolished to make room for the large interior. Duke determined that the new room ought to be sunk slightly from the adjacent central courtyard, so the existing foundation was excavated to permit a step down into the room. Dirt was piled up along the east wall as the foundation for a large marble platform that would be used as the main seating area.

Once the structural renovations were completed, marble flooring and a fountain were set down. Though both contain historic marble panels, they consist mainly of panels designed and cut by Duke and

In the early 1930s, Doris Duke renovated her dining room. The original Hawaiian theme was altered to one that mimicked an Islamic aesthetic, as seen in this photograph of the dining room as it looks today. Using Egyptian and Indian textiles, Duke created an environment suggestive of a tent.

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Because the preexisting spaces could not accommodate all of the wood and ceiling paneling that were part of the Quwwatli interior, Doris Duke decided to outfit two adjacent rooms at Shangri La rather than rebuild the existing structure. She named these rooms the Turkish and Baby Turkish Rooms. Though the interiors are actually Syrian in origin, Duke was probably referring to the Ottoman dynasty’s rule of Damascus from their capital in Istanbul, Turkey.

David Franzen
Collecting Islamic Art

Over a period of about sixty years, Doris Duke purchased approximately thirty-five hundred objects for Shangri La. The majority can be classified as Islamic works of art. The size of her collection is considerably larger than most Islamic art collections at museums in the United States. And, unlike a museum, nearly all of the collection at Shangri La is on display. Also, Duke decided to install works of art with particular architectural functions, such as ceramic door spandrels, door frames, and fireplace surrounds, in the structure of Shangri La, providing a befitting context within which to understand the original functions of the objects.

Taken as a whole, the collection underscores the diversity of Islamic cultures. For example, it includes objects produced from the early period of Islamic expansion in the seventh century, to works produced in the twentieth century. Regions such as South and Central Asia, Europe, the Near and Middle East, and North Africa are represented by the works of art, as are different lifestyles including court, city, and village. Further, a great variety of media—a celebrated aspect of Islamic art—is juxtaposed in nearly every room: wood, paper, precious and semiprecious stone, glass, ceramic, metal, and fiber.

Duke favored particular types of Islamic art, especially ceramics, which abound in both interior and exterior spaces at Shangri La. Ceramic vessels and tile panels constitute about one-fifth of the Shangri La collection. Mina’i-type bowls made in medieval Iran, fifteenth-century lustreware vessels from Spain, and Iznik plates produced in sixteenth-century Turkey are among the highlights of the ceramic collection. Large Iranian storage jars made as early as the eighth century are located in the central courtyard, adjacent to numerous Iranian tile panels including one hundred molded tiles from the thirteenth century and over two hundred underglaze-painted tiles from the seventeenth century.

The single most important work of art Duke purchased for Shangri La is also ceramic: the monumental mihrāb, or prayer niche, made in Kashan, Iran, for the tomb of Imamzada Yahya at Veramin, Iran. This mihrāb is significant not only for its size, but also because it is signed by the well-known potter ‘Ali ibn Muhammad ibn Ahi Tahir, and dated 663 a.h. (1265 a.d.) in the inscription near the bottom. After long and persistent negotiations, Duke purchased the
Chinese blue-and-white ceramics were enthusiastically collected at the Ottoman court. Local potters, particularly in the town of Iznik, soon began to produce comparable vessels. They experimented with design, shape, color, and materials, and ultimately produced a unique ceramic tradition that itself came to be imitated by others.

Shuzo Uemoto

An unusual work of art, this bowl features two different potter’s techniques: lustre and mina’i. Lustreware, named for the metallic sheen of its surface, is seen in the calligraphic band around the sides, while at center mina’i (a name derived from the Persian word for “enamel”) is used for the figure on horseback. Both techniques were popular in medieval Iran, but were rarely combined on the same object because of the complexity of the technical processes.

Shuzo Uemoto

Iznik, late twelfth or early thirteenth century. Stone-paste, overglaze-painted luster and polychrome, gilding. 8.3 x 18.7 cm (3 1/4 x 7 3/8 inches), Mihrab Room, 48.328. An unusual work of art, this bowl features two different potter’s techniques: lustre and mina’i. Lustreware, named for the metallic sheen of its surface, is seen in the calligraphic band around the sides, while at center mina’i (a name derived from the Persian word for “enamel”) is used for the figure on horseback. Both techniques were popular in medieval Iran, but were rarely combined on the same object because of the complexity of the technical processes.

Shuzo Uemoto
work from Hagop Kevorkian in 1940.28 The mihrab was installed not long before the bombing of Pearl Harbor—after which it was quickly uninstalled and stored in the basement for safety. It was reinstalled after World War II. The mihrab stands in one of Shangri La’s most prominent locations, at the start of the central axis that extends through the living room, across the pool, down to the Playhouse, and up to Diamond Head. As Duke herself explained, “The high spot, the focal point of the house, . . . is the thirteenth-century luster tile mihrab, which is as important historically as it is artistically.”29

In addition to ceramics, Duke’s collection is strong in objects dating from the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries. Predominant are courtly, aristocratic, and religious works of art made during the reigns of wealthy and influential Muslim dynasties, such as the Ottomans, Mughals, Safavids, and Qajars. No room at Shangri La is dedicated solely to the arts of a particular era, but some favor particular dynasties. Duke’s bedroom recalls Mughal India, the Playhouse is replete with arts of Qajar Iran, and the central courtyard suggests Safavid Iran. The Turkish, Holy Turkish, and Damascus Rooms are largely composed of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century architectural interiors originally made for homes in Ottoman Syria.

Overall, Duke did not employ a chronological or regional display scheme when situating objects in rooms, or even in deciding which objects should be displayed in a given room. Instead, she combined and recombined the works of art into a kind of assemblage of Islamic cultures—a mixture that suited her aesthetic sense. The resulting display juxtaposes colors, media, and scale, allowing each
object to be seen for its individual merits at the same time that it
contributes to the overall mood of a room.

In 1938, during Shangri La’s construction, Doris Duke traveled
to Iran, Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Egypt to acquire works of art for
her estate. Her tour was arranged by Arthur Upham Pope, one of
the most distinguished scholars of Persian art of the time. Pope
was intrigued by Duke’s plan to build an Islamic-style house, and
he wrote letters suggesting approaches to its design. His influence
was limited, though, for construction was well under way by the
time he became aware of the project. Still, he performed an insalub-
rious service by facilitating Duke’s 1938 travels and introducing her
to several dealers, including A. Rabenou of Tehran and Paris, and
Asfar & Sarkis of Damascus. Rabenou sold Duke numerous ceramic
tile panels during her visit to Iran, among which was a figuative
fireplace surround depicting scenes of nineteenth-century Qajar
court life. Duke purchased most of the seventeenth-century tiles
in the central courtyard from Rabenou, who had acquired them
from a private home in Julfa, a suburb of Isfahan. From Asfar &
Sarkis, she purchased inlaid furniture, and later the historic inte-
rior installed in her Damascus Room. Into her mid-seventies, Duke
continued to travel in the Islamic world, visiting such destinations
as Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Morocco, India, Egypt, and Indonesia.

In addition to purchasing objects abroad, Duke also bought
from dealers, galleries, and auction houses, mostly in New York City.
For example, she purchased numerous monochrome ceramic ves-
sels and lustre star tiles from H. Khan Monif. At the Hearst sales
in the 1940s, she bought Spanish and Syrian furniture, ceramics,
and carved stone capitals, among other items. Eight Zand and Qajar
oil paintings and a large Qajar ceiling came from various New York
sales. Adolpho Loewi of Venice provided her with over six hundred
Iznik tiles. Duke bought an ornate chandelier made by Baccarat in
France for the Indian market from Vesbi, Inc., which had purchased
it from the former owner, Salar Jung of Hyderabad, India. A sub-
stantial portion of the collection was purchased at Parke-Bernet
Galleries in New York City.

Although Duke had the resources to collect whatever was avail-
able, her vision of Shangri La was not limited to whatever happened
to be for sale. Indeed, her approach to creating Shangri La was re-
makably active and carefully considered. What she could not buy
ready-made, she ordered custom-made. For example, in the initial
stages of Shangri La’s construction, Duke commissioned numerous,
large-scale architectural installations from three sources: René Martin
of Rabat, Morocco; Rabenou, who also sold her historic works of art;
and the Blomfield architecture firm in New Delhi, which oversaw
production of the master bedroom and bathroom suite.
Duke met René Martin through a mutual acquaintance in
November 1937 while visiting Antibes, France. She made inquiries

An original receipt docu-
mients Duke’s purchase
of three bureaus from the
dealers Asfar & Sarkis in
Damascus. At the bottom
of the receipt, Sarkis wrote,
“7850 Syrian Piasters at
the rate of 78.50 Syrian
Piasters at the rate of
the rate of the Syr. piast.
per dollar (exchange rate
of 18 Aug. 1939),” add-
ing, “Only: Forty three
Dollars & 60cts.”

Qur’an Stand (Kursi) (detail).
Carved wood, late nine-
teenth or early twentieth
century. From, originated and
purchased with inlaid silver.
Living Room, 54.136.1.
Shuzo Uemoto.
confirming the quality of the work produced in his studio and soon placed a substantial order. Shangri La’s ceramic roof tile, the enormous ceiling and doors in the living room, the ceiling in the foyer, plaster archways in the living room and foyer; Cromwell’s bedroom suite; and several large wood screens in the central courtyard, living room, and the Damascus and Moroccan Rooms were all commissioned from Martin. His designs appear to be based on motifs, techniques, and aesthetics popular in Moroccan palaces during the nineteenth century. Martin provided preliminary sketches of his work to Wyeth, so the elements could be incorporated into the overall design of Shangri La. As she had been with Blomfield, Duke was an active patron. She met with Martin in Paris in February 1938 to request changes, and he also sent photographs to her recording the work in progress.

In a telegram to Rabenou, Pope wrote,

*Mrs. James Cromwell arriving Paris probably twenty seventh calling on you shortly thereafter very wealthy important client building house Persian style much interested midst the both spandrels total business should be large.*

René Martin painted this watercolor to show his vision of the living room and the architectural features he would create.

Doris Duke largely followed Martin’s design, as shown in the early photograph opposite. However, as with all work she commissioned, Duke modified aspects to suit her own aesthetic sense. For example, she eliminated Martin’s proposed woodwork above the fireplace, and moved the large wood doors from beside the sofa to the doorway that frames the mihrab.
Although Islamic art is often thought to be devoid of figural representation, many works of art made in the Islamic world do feature figures. Their use tends to be restricted to secular arts, such as this painting depicting Qajar court life. In contrast, religious arts—prayer rugs, mosque ornamentation, and the Qur’an—feature geometry, nature, and calligraphy.

In addition to purchasing historic tile panels from Rabenou, Duke also commissioned newly made ones. An enormous tile panel in the central courtyard was made in 1930s Iran, but based on two seventeenth-century tiles that flank the portal of the Shah Mosque in Isfahan. Duke also commissioned large tile panels for the exteriors of the living room and Playhouse. Several photographs were taken in Iran during the production of the Shangri La tile panels, and a traveler affiliated with the American Institute for Iranian Architecture filmed the activity. In February 1940, in spite of the troubles of World War II, 138 cases of tiles arrived in Hawai‘i and were soon installed around Shangri La.

The process of shipping such fragile goods to Honolulu from the far corners of the earth was complicated. Obtaining permits, passing customs, and contracting sea passage required many hands and resulted in many delays. Rabenou’s tiles are a good case in point. They were completed in June 1939, and it took five men more than thirty days to pack them. The boxes of tiles were driven by truck to the port city of Bushire on the Persian Gulf, a trip that typically took three days but was extended to ten to avoid damaging the cargo. By the time the tiles arrived in Bushire and the shipping permits were secured, the plan to ship them to Marseilles was abandoned. War had broken out, and commercial transport was no longer viable across the Mediterranean Sea. Faced with the
possibility of storing the tiles indefinitely, Duke sought alternative forms of transport. Eventually the tiles were shipped from Iran to India, where they sat for a month in Bombay until space could be found on a ship sailing to Honolulu—by way of New York. 35

Among the twentieth-century architectural works Duke commissioned for the estate, some were made abroad in India, Iran, and Morocco. Others, however, were custom-made in Hawai‘i to resemble Islamic forms. The fiberglass ceiling in the living room of the Playhouse was painted in Hawai‘i, but in an Islamic style convincing enough to prompt a well-known auction house to misidentify it as "19th century Persian" in an appraisal. The Shangri La house staff, none of whom had formal artistic training, helped make most of the Islamic-style marble floor tiles in the Turkish Rooms and the private hallway to Duke’s bedroom.

The Playhouse is not the only example of a large Islamic architectural form at Shangri La that was built in Hawai‘i. Across an upper terrace of her estate, Duke envisioned re-creating a Mughal garden. Taking her cue from Shalimar Garden in Lahore, Pakistan, she designed her gardens as a long, narrow pathway with a water channel running down the center, plantings on either side, and chinikhānās (niches for oil lamps) at one end. At night, with electric candles lit in the chinikhānās, a magical effect was produced when water cascaded in front of lights and into the channel below. A series of lotus-shaped fountains runs the course of the water channel, providing additional water flow. Duke’s Mughal garden mimics the four-part garden scheme typically employed in Mughal gardens in South Asia, but on a much smaller scale.

Unconventional, eclectic, idiosyncratic: these words could all be applied to Doris Duke as a collector, for she not only acquired historic works of Islamic art, but was also a patron of Islamic art, and even a creator of Islamic-style art. It is difficult to place her patterns of art collecting within a broader framework, for they correspond neither to her East Coast social circle nor to other twentieth-century collectors of Islamic art. Many successful industrialists of the age, such as J. P. Morgan, Andrew Carnegie, and A. W. Mellon, and their heirs collected art. Most purchased European art, including Old Master paintings, to fulfill time-honored notions of culture and gentility. Many donated their private collections to prestigious public museums, a gesture that was both philanthropic and self-interested. Duke’s decision to collect the relatively unknown art of the Islamic world and to display it in her remote Hawaiian home, where few would observe it during her lifetime, suggests a very different relationship to art.

From the perspective of many Islamic art collectors, much of Duke’s collection lies outside the canon of what is typically considered a masterpiece. She had the means to acquire acknowledged masterpieces if that had been her ambition, yet Duke was not
The Iranian dealer A. Rabenou not only sold historic works of art to Doris Duke; he also oversaw the creation of tile panels custom-made for Shangri La. He sent photographs of the work in progress, and penned notes on the reverse sides. On this photograph he wrote that he was overseeing the tile work as it was proceeding on March 20, 1939, in Isfahan.

Tile panel (detail).
David Franzen.
compelled to collect what others deemed worthy. Instead, her primary concern seems to have been to create Shangri La as a home first and foremost, a haven within which she could comfortably retreat from the pressures of celebrity. In some deeply personal way, the beauty of Islamic art filled her need for peace and solitude. Duke collected works of art for the pleasure they gave her, not for their potential social prestige or monetary value.

Duke did acquire a number of masterpieces along her aesthetic journey. Taken as a whole, however, the Islamic art collection at Shangri La calls for a multifaceted interpretation, one that includes but is not limited to the assessment of apparent masterpieces. For example, the collection advocates study of the relatively unknown period of art production and patronage in the early twentieth century. Also, because Duke took an “assemblage” approach in displaying diverse works of Islamic art and architecture, Shangri La exemplifies the assemblage of cultures that are often included in the monolithic term “Islamic art.” Since Duke followed her own ideas of what to collect, and not just what others or the art market deemed worthy, her collection is unlike any other available for study. It includes Islamic court arts, yet it also includes less familiar objects, such as those made for noble and consumer classes. The quality of these works invites discussion and evaluation of what constitutes “Islamic art.” Although Shangri La could be studied as an Orientalist monument, Duke’s decision to collect objects made in Europe for Muslim consumers suggests that the collection might just as fruitfully be studied for insights into “Occidentalism.”

Shangri La offers scholars and connoisseurs of Islamic art and art history an opportunity to look with fresh eyes at what is studied and how it is interpreted. Taking a wide-ranging approach to understanding the collection is rather like Duke’s own inclusive approach to building it.
Deciphering the Layers of Shangri La

As a place for the study of Islamic art and culture, as mandated in Duke’s will, Shangri La presents a complex set of challenges, including intellectual, interpretive, and aesthetic ones. What can be said of a young American woman, herself not a Muslim but a keen admirer of Islamic cultures, and her dream to collect Islamic art in the 1930s? What can be said of her designing and building a house in Hawai‘i, using architectural principles and art forms from throughout the Islamic world? Further, what is meant by the monolithic term “Islamic world” – a simple phrase that can obscure a diversity of cultures, traditions, and aesthetics – and how does Shangri La help us to understand such diversity? In a way, Duke herself addressed this last question by variously calling her home “Near Eastern,” “Hispano-Moresque,” and even a “Spanish-Moorish-Persian-Indian complex.” She most likely recognized that all these identities are part of Shangri La – as they are of the Islamic world itself.

Visitors to Shangri La may find that the site prompts more questions than it provides answers. It offers several layers of possible inquiry. In addition to Islamic architectural traditions, other styles are discernible. The estate demonstrates principles of modern architecture, a movement gaining currency at the time Shangri La was built. Various levels of floor changes and the integration of the house into the environment are reminiscent of Frank Lloyd Wright’s homes; the descending glass wall recalls Mies van der Rohe’s Tugendhat House; the overall asymmetric plan and the low, geometric structures are all characteristic of the modernist ethos. Yet the house also demonstrates aspects of Spanish-Mediterranean Revival styles in the overall sprawl of the buildings and gardens, the white walls, and the use of roof tiles and balconies. Part of Shangri La’s cultural identity is most certainly Hawaiian. Its physical location, its landscaping, and its ocean and Diamond Head views continually remind visitors that this is no place but Hawai‘i. Although there is currently little on display that reminds one of the maternal culture of Hawai‘i, at one time Duke incorporated Shangri La’s locale into her design of the dining room. Surfboards, painted hardware, shell necklaces, and other locally produced objects can be found at Shangri La, but they are stored in the basement, in cupboards, and in drawers. Duke used these functional objects in her daily life, rather than using them as decoration in the house.
American Orientalism. Duke was born in an era when ideas of the "Orient" were increasingly available to American consumers through movies, international expositions, advertising, imported goods, and even architectural design. To what extent was Duke affected by these visual representations of the "Orient"? How do her travels compare to the experiences of American artists, such as Frederic Church and Louis Comfort Tiffany, whose visits to the East in the nineteenth century also gave rise to a lifetime of creative responses? Shangri La can shed considerable light on the phenomenon of visual culture and American Orientalism from the 1930s forward, which has so far received little critical attention.

Finally, and perhaps most important, Shangri La must be seen as a product of Doris Duke herself. Although analyzing objects and formulating theories may contribute to an understanding of Shangri La, in the end its creator must be carefully considered in any interpretation. She decided to build, she determined which objects would be purchased, and she decided how they should be displayed. Architects and artisans contributed to Shangri La’s appearance, but Duke was the only constant contributor throughout its sixty-year development. What did she seek to accomplish at Shangri La? Why did she decide to build a home of Islamic art in Hawai'i? Such questions may never be fully answered, for Duke left little in the way of personal writings to provide clues. However, Shangri La itself provides visual clues about Duke’s motivation, and her staff and friends provide insights as well. For example, in walking around Shangri La and listening to her staff share memories,

Shangri La can also be seen as a product of American upper-class culture whose extremely wealthy citizens, particularly at the turn of the twentieth century, built sensational seasonal homes for themselves. Typically these homes were located in socially sanctioned resort towns, such as Newport, Rhode Island, and Palm Beach, Florida. Shangri La was a seasonal home for Duke, and in some ways it reflects the idea of re-creating foreign architecture on American land. Well-known examples of this trend can be seen in Newport (the Vanderbilts’ Italian-style villas, The Breakers, and their French-style mansion, Marble House), and in Palm Beach, where the Stotesbury built the Spanish-style El Mirasol. Duke’s preference for the relatively remote location of Honolulu and a breadth of Islamic architectural traditions, not just Spanish, suggests that she partly accepted and partly rejected the formula established by her peers.

Shangri La can also be interpreted from the perspective of...
one gains a strong impression of Duke’s love for being engaged with life, for learning new skills, and for improving her mind and abilities. With both Islamic art and Hawai’i, Duke probably saw an opportunity to immerse herself in new cultures. Shangri La allowed her to test her creative skills and collaborate with professional artisans, architects, and others whom she admired.

As it was envisioned, built, and inhabited during Duke’s life, Shangri La probably supported all of these interpretations, and our understanding of it need not be limited to just one. In fact, to do so is something of an injustice to the fluidity of its creation and evolution, and to the numerous hands that were involved in producing it. As Shangri La moves into a new phase and opens to the public and academic community, it will generate more identities and interpretations, including, as Duke herself wanted, an identity as a place for educating people about Islamic art and culture.

Doris Duke’s last will and testament charges the Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art, which owns and manages Shangri La, with promoting and encouraging the study of Islamic art. Can a site imagined and created by a wealthy young American woman accomplish just that? Despite the fact that Duke was not Muslim herself, Shangri La does provide a thought-provoking introduction to Islamic cultures. For example, it demonstrates a variety of architectural contexts within which to understand Islamic art. While religious spaces are less well represented, numerous domestic ones are present. The Mughal-style garden, the Playhouse, and the teahouse-dining room — although created on site by Duke — provide immediate visual tools for understanding garden, palace, and nomadic architectural forms found throughout the Islamic world. Examples of Islamic urban architecture are present through the estate’s courtyard plan and the historic interiors that adjoin it. The collection boasts objects from Spain, Morocco, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Turkey, India, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, and China, among other countries, from the earliest periods of the religion into the present. The presence of numerous beautifully made architectural forms from the twentieth century confirms that the superb artistic traditions of the past are vigorous and dynamic in the modern world. Doris Duke appreciated this fact, and participated in this tradition. Her legacy is Shangri La, a place that reveals the breadth and diversity of Islamic art.
Notes

2. Letter probably to Eva Stotesbury from James Cromwell, April 1935.
3. Letter to James Cromwell from F. B. Blomfield, July 4, 1935. Blomfield writes, “The floral design superimposed on the jali work will be different in each window. These floral designs are taken from the dado panels in the main entrance to the Taj.”
4. Kazi Ashraf, review of Don J. Hibbard’s manuscript on Shangri La, Honolulu, February 2002.
8. In the caption to the photograph of the undeveloped property at Ka‘aloa, the quotation from Anna Furtado Kahanamoku comes from a legal motion in the case of Doris Duke Cromwell vs. James Henry Roberts Cromwell, cited in Don J. Hibbard’s “Shangri La: Doris Duke’s Home in Hawaii,” unpublished manuscript (November 2001), 246.
10. See, for example, Honolulu Star Bulletin, August 6, 1936; December 3, 1936; February 20, 1937; and May 15, 1937; and Honolulu Advertiser, August 9, 1936; May 12, 1937; and June 27, 1937; and Honolulu Star Bulletin, September 6, 1937, cols. 4–6.
12. The only comparable example was used in Mies van der Rohe’s Tugendhat House of 1930 in Brno, Czechoslovakia.
15. Scarce, Domestic Culture in the Middle East, 25–43.
16. Letter to Doris Duke and James Cromwell from Mary Crane, June 14, 1938; letter probably to Doris Duke from Mary Crane, September 24, 1938.


Kevorkian’s gift to the Metropolitan Museum of Art is known as the Nur al-Din Room.


Letters to Doris Duke and Marian Paschal from Mary Crane, June 22 and 30, 1940, and July 28, 1940.


Receipt for James Cromwell from C. J. Baban, Charsoo St., Julfa, Isfahan, Iran, April 13, 1938.

See, for example, Mikhail B. Piotrovsky and John Vrieze, eds., Earthly Art and Heavenly Beauty: Art of Islam (Amsterdam: Lund Humphries Publishers, 2000), 155.

Western Union cablegram to A. Rabenou from Arthur Upham Pope, January 14, 1938.


Translation of a letter to William Dodsworth from A. Rabenou, June 18, 1939.


1. Foyer
2. Turkish Room
3. Dutch Turkish Room
4. Mihrab Room
5. Library
6. Dining Room and Lunae
7. Living Room
8. Courtyard
9. Private Garden
10. Bath and Dressing Rooms
11. Redroom
12. Men’s Dressing Room
13. Bannana Room and Room
14. Service Wing

Shangri La

1. Private Garden
2. Bath and Dressing Room
3. Men’s Dressing Room
4. Swimming Pool
5. Tulip
6. Ladies’ Dressing Room
7. Living Room
8. Tennis Court
9. Servant’s Cottage
Visiting Shangri La

In cooperation with the Honolulu Academy of Arts, Shangri La is open for educational tours by reservation only. Small group tours begin at the Academy with a visit to the exhibition *Arts of the Islamic World*, featuring art from the collections of the Academy and the Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art. Visitors are then transported to Shangri La by minivan.

On behalf of Shangri La, the Academy offers a wide range of educational programs on Islamic art and culture including temporary exhibitions, films and performances, festivals, lectures, and workshops.

For tour and program information, call the Honolulu Academy of Arts at (808) 532-3853 or visit the Academy website at: www.honoluluacademy.org.

Shangri La

*The handsome wide border is the garden wall

Protecting, preserving the Park within

For refuge and renewal: A magic space

For concourse, music, and rejoicing,

For contemplation’s lonely spell,

Conversations grave, or lover’s shy disclosure

Eyes hot-seared by desert glare

Find healing in its velvet shade.

 Splashing fountains and rippling pools

In cool retreats sore-wearyed limbs restore,

And tired hearts awake with joy once more.