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 miḥrāb, or prayer niche, made in Kashan, Iran, for the tomb of Imamzada Yahya at Veramin, Iran. This miḥrāb is significant not only for its size, but also because it is signed by the well-known potter ‘Alī ibn Muhammad ibn Abī 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

A bowl. Iran, late eleventh or early twelfth century. Stoneware, overglaze-painted luster and polychrome, gilding. 8 1/4 x 18 7/8 in (21 x 47.5 cm), Mihrab Room, pl. 38.

An unusual work of art, this bowl features two different potter’s techniques: luster and mina’i. Lusterware, 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.

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work from Hagop Kevorkian in 1939. 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.”

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, Baby 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 invaluable 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 figurative 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 interior 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 vessels and luster 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. Adolphe 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 Vesel, Inc., which had purchased it from the former owner, Salar Jung of Hyderabad, India. A substantial portion of the collection was purchased at Parke-Bernet Galleries in New York City.

Although Duke had the resources to collect whatever was available, her vision of Shangri La was not limited to whatever happened to be for sale. Indeed, her approach to creating Shangri La was remarkably 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...
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.31 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 Rabenau, 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 middle both spandrels total business should be large.32

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 figurative 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 a Persian court scene.

In contrast, religious arts—prayer rugs, mosque ornamentation, and the Qura'an—feature geometry, nature, and calligraphy.

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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 1930 in 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 Persian 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.

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 fibreglass 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 halfway 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 garden as a long, narrow pathway with a water channel running down the center, plantings on either side, and chinikhānas (niches for oil lamps) at one end. At night, with electric candles lit in the chinikhānas, 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
opposite
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.

above
Tile panel (detail).
Isfahan, Iran, c. 1939.
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 solace: 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 “Orientalism.”

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.