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 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,
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 tent-like dining room—all created on-site by Duke—provide immediate visual tools for understanding gardens, palaces, 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.