

Delving into Shangri La

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One of the largest collections of Islamic Art will be open to the public for the first time in October 2002. Shangri La, the lavish Hawaiian estate of American heiress Doris Duke, is a testament to Duke's collecting passions beginning in the 1930s. Its architecture, gardens and extensive art collections can be studied to learn more about issues of early American Orientalism and the role of patronage and collecting in the appropriation of an Islamic aesthetic in the West.

By Sharon Littlefield

The American heiress Doris Duke (1912-93) was an avid, if little known, collector of Islamic arts. Her interest was sparked in 1935 during a honeymoon tour of the world. In the course of her eastern travels, the first of her life, Duke began to collect objects and even commission architectural interiors for the home she expected to occupy in Palm Beach, Florida. However, she found her final honeymoon destination, Honolulu, so appealing that she decided to build her home in Hawaii and design it around the Islamic works of art she had begun to collect. What began as youthful enthusiasm became an enduring passion. For several months of the year Duke lived in her Honolulu estate and she continued to collect Islamic art for it until her death in 1993.

In her last will and testament, Duke decreed that her Hawaiian estate, known as Shangri La, should be opened to scholars and the public for the purpose of educating about Islamic art and culture. For the first time in its private life, Shangri La's doors will indeed open to the public this fall. Beginning October 2002, Duke's collection will become a new resource for historians of Islamic art. It will also become an important resource for researchers interested in issues such as display, Orientalism, cross-culture encounters, and the geography of culture.

Shangri La is located on 4.5 acres of oceanfront property in a quiet residential neighbourhood not far from Waikiki's most familiar landmark, Diamond Head. With its vast views of the Pacific Ocean and lush mountain landscapes, Shangri La's location is utterly Hawaiian. Rather than compete with this environment, the buildings on the estate were sensitivity designed to complement it. The facades are relatively simple and there is minimal external ornamentation. The buildings show a variety of architectural styles including Modern, Spanish/Mediterranean revival, and Islamic. They are essentially single-story, whitewashed structures which are surrounded by hidden gardens, a large terraced lawn, fountains, *koi* ponds, and tropical vegetation. Overall, the structural environment is restrained, enabling the beauty of the surrounding landscape and Duke's art collection to take centre stage.

Doris Duke acquired about 3500 objects for Shangri La during nearly sixty years of collecting. Predominantly, they are works of art from the Islamic world, making this one of the largest collections of Islamic art in the United States available for study. And unlike most museums, nearly all of the objects are on display. Taken as a whole, the objects show the diversity of Islamic cultures that are usually included in the monolithic term Islamic art. Objects produced from regions such as South Asia, Central Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa can be found throughout the house and grounds. They range in date from the eighth through twentieth centuries and embrace a variety of media including among others: ceramics, textiles, metalwork, paper, canvas, precious stones, glass. They also demonstrate a variety of lifestyles such as court, urban, and village. The collection at Shangri La is especially strong in objects from the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries, and ceramics from Iran.

In addition to portable objects, Duke also collected architectural elements such as two historic room interiors made in late-eighteenth century Ottoman Syria. But her interest in large architectural works was not limited to what she could purchase. Duke was also an active patron. She commis-

Luster mihrab made in Kashan, Iran for the tomb of Imam-zadeh Yahya in Veramin, Iran, signed 'Ali b. Muhammad b. Abu Tahir', dated Shawwal the Great 663Ah (May 1265 AD)



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sioned, for example, inlaid marble wall and floor panels, painted wooden ceilings, and large ceramic tile panels from artisans in 1930s India, Morocco, and Iran respectively. Duke also hired local Hawaiian artisans to craft 'Islamic forms' for Shangri La. Among them are a replica of the seventeenth-century Chihil Sutun in Isfahan, Iran and a Mughal-style garden inspired by Lahore Gardens in Pakistan.

While individual objects at Shangri La will provide the field of Islamic art history with much visual material for analysis, the house as a whole and the manner in which Duke chose to display her collection within it will likely prove equally thought-provoking. While some works of art are displayed in vitrines, others, especially furniture, were used for everyday life. In addition, Duke opted to have architectural works with particular functions imbedded into the structure of her home. Thus tiles intended as fireplace surrounds, doorframes, and spandrels are installed to reflect their original intent. Each room is outfitted with diverse works of art, for Duke chose to juxtapose different media, time periods, and cultures rather than organize around a single theme. Even so, some rooms are heavily weighted towards particular Islamic dynasties. The central courtyard is replete with ceramic tiles from Safavid Iran, the master bedroom evokes Mughal India, and Duke's version of the Chihil Sutun, called 'The Playhouse' showcases the arts of Qajar Iran. She also purchased several *mihrabs*, which she chose to orient in numerous directions around the house, rather than all towards Mecca. Her notions of display were both historically and personally motivated.

As a wealthy young American woman who decided to build a home with Islamic art in what was then the American territory of Hawaii, Duke created a cultural product that supports a great variety of approaches and prompts a host of questions. To what extent is Shangri La both a product and evidence of American Orientalism in the 1930s and/or the American phenomenon of building grand seasonal estates? What did she seek to accomplish in creating a home filled with Islamic art in Hawaii? How can diverse Islamic cultures be understood with her vision? Duke's particular history has much to offer when exploring notions of identity and art, patronage and collecting, and even how such categories are conceived. Architecture, for example, is typically studied as the most public of the visual arts, a suitable medium for transmitting public statements. But for Duke, the built environment of Shangri La was a highly private undertaking, and few were invited to view her statement. Ultimately, the home she chose to build, the art she decided to collect, and the way she chose to display it will likely deepen our understanding of what Islamic art is and how its meanings may be appropriated and reconstructed to redefine an entirely different era and culture. ◀

The 'Playhouse' at Shangri La, completed in 1938, was modeled on the Chihil Sutun in Isfahan, mid-seventeenth century.



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