

Abu Dhabi is hosting the most comprehensive exhibition of Islamic art ever staged in the Middle East. It is drawn solely from the great collection of David Khalili, who explains to **Susan Moore** how it has been put together like a piece of music. Portraits by **Stephen Colover**.

David Khalili puts most collectors to shame. In an age in which so many rich men call themselves collectors and seem more interested in displaying their wealth than the art they have acquired through it, Khalili has done rather more than simply raise a paddle in the saleroom. During the almost 40 years in which he has been buying works of art – his collection now runs to some 25,000 pieces, including the world’s largest and most comprehensive holding of Islamic art in private hands – he has pursued a policy of acquisition, conservation, exhibition and publication.

‘To be a collector you need time, patience, knowledge, understanding and passion, and a feel for colour, form and shape. But that is only the first step,’ Khalili tells me: ‘You have to make sure you give each object its identity – so you research it – but you only make that identity permanent by publishing it and you give an object life by showing it.’ We meet in the palm-fringed Emirates Palace Hotel in Abu Dhabi, on the eve of the opening of the latest – and largest – show drawn from the collection: ‘The Arts of Islam’.

The exhibition is, astoundingly, the first major comprehensive display of Islamic art ever seen in the Middle East, as well as the largest Islamic show staged anywhere. An extended version of a show staged at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney last year, it has – revealingly – been chosen

The works of art illustrating this article are reproduced by courtesy of the Khalili Family Trust 1 David Khalili with works from his collection in his London office: on the left, a Chinese Song Dynasty (960-1127 AD) marble bust of a Lohan; on the right, a 4th-century BC Egyptian granodiorite falcon 2 Calligraphic composition in the form of a lion signed by the calligrapher Ahmed Hilmi, Ottoman Turkey, dated 12 Jumada 1 1331 AH (19 April 1913). Ink and watercolour on paper, 26.5 x 38.8 cm



by the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture & Heritage as the exhibition to launch Abu Dhabi’s entry onto the international arts exhibition circuit. Under the patronage of HH Sheikh Mohammed Bin Zayed, it marks the ‘soft opening’ of the extraordinary, visionary cultural initiative of Saadiyat Island, just off the coast, which will transform the capital of the United Arab Emirates into an architecturally thrilling global cultural hub. The first of its museums, which include Frank Gehry’s outpost of the Guggenheim, Jean Nouvel’s Louvre Abu Dhabi, Tadao Ando’s maritime museum, Foster + Partners’ Sheikh Zayed National Museum, as well as a performing arts centre designed by Zaha Hadid, are set to open in 2012-13.

To date, Ottoman art from the Khalili Collection has been exhibited in Geneva, London and Jerusalem, as well as 13 American museums. Decorative arts from Meiji-period



AN ISLAMIC SYMPHONY

DAVID KHALILI TALKS ABOUT HIS COLLECTION



3 Chess piece in the form of a seated man, identified on the brim of his hat as Sultan Tughril II, Iran (Kashan), AD 1143-44. Fritware, painted under colourless glaze, ht 40.5 cm

4 Cushion cover, south-west Sweden, before 1800. Interlocked tapestry, 48 x 51 cm

5 Incense-burner or pomander in the form of a lynx, Iran, late 12th-early 13th century. Copper alloy with engraved and openwork decoration, ht 27 cm

Japan in the collection have similarly toured Europe, the US and Japan; the collection of Swedish textiles has been shown in Malmö, while the Spanish damascened metalwork opened at the Victoria and Albert Museum before touring Spain. As to the task of researching and publishing the extensive collections, 17 out of the projected 27 volumes have been completed by a team of international scholars, and all have been published by the Khalili Family Trust's Nour Foundation. Documenting the collections has cost around £5m. As well as a chair in Islamic art and architecture at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London, Khalili has also endowed the Khalili Research Centre for the Art and Material Culture of the Middle East at the University of Oxford.

What has become a vast and highly focused enterprise sprang from modest roots. 'I had no idea what I was doing when I began collecting,' muses Khalili. With characteristic linguistic flourish he continues: 'I was a dreamer. I started off with a pack of seeds thinking I might have a nice garden. I had no idea it would grow into a forest.' He could also never have imagined the part this forest would come to play in furthering the understanding between East and West. However, his early life provided a key, for Nasser David Khalili grew up a Jew in a Muslim country. He was born in 1945 in Isfahan, Iran, into a dynasty of antiques dealers, and from the age of eight would accompany his father on buying expeditions. In 1967 he left for New York to take a degree in computer science. He spent a great deal of time looking at Islamic material in museums and began to deal, keeping the best objects for himself. After he met his future wife, Marion, he moved to London in 1978, where he began channelling profits into property. He gave up dealing long ago (and took a PhD in Qajar lacquer), but his acumen in buying both art and property has propelled him up the world's rich lists.

Khalili is nothing if not prescient. When he began buying Islamic art in the 1970s it was inexpensive and there were few rivals. Serious buyers could be counted on one hand: Sheikh Nasser Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah of Kuwait; the David Collection in Copenhagen; London-based Edmund de Unger; Kuwaiti Jasim al-Homaizi; and the Iranian oil magnate Hashem Khosrovani. Prices were brought still lower by the Iranian revolution in 1979 and a dip in



the Turkish art market, and Khalili bought deeply – and discreetly. The fabulously rich Sultan of Brunei, whom he has advised, entered late into the fray, as did Sheikh Saud al-Thani of Qatar, whose high-profile, multi-million-pound spending sprees sent prices for Islamic art spiralling in the mid '90s.

Even within the Islamic field, Khalili was always buying ahead of fashion, and his other collections also feature works that were 'overlooked and misunderstood'. Most notable is that of the technically astounding but – to many – aesthetically challenging 19th- and early-20th-century metalwork, enamels, lacquer and ceramics from Imperial Japan. Comprising over 2,000 pieces, it is the greatest collection of Meiji decorative art in the world, published in nine volumes in 1995-96. There followed the only extensive collection of Swedish flatweaves (Fig. 4) outside the country, and an unrivalled collection of the Spanish damascene metalwork of the Zuloaga family.

'There was no point in collecting anything like Old Masters, porcelain or modern art', Khalili explains. 'These areas have all been covered already and with all the money in the world you could not create anything exceptional. I buy something because it is displaced from history and deserves to be recognised.' He has a knack of buying material that only subsequently makes sense as a group. His latest coup is a group of textiles in exceptional condition relating to Mecca and Medina, which, with pieces acquired decades earlier, now form an even more important holding than that at the Topkapi Palace.

The scale of his buying also allows for novel and sweeping overviews, and the collector-magician is about to pull one more rabbit – the last, he claims – out of the hat: enamels of the world 1700-2000 (Fig. 6). True to form, not a word of the project was breathed until it was deemed to be approaching completion. The collection was begun some 25 years ago: the 1,200 pieces cover all major areas of enamel



production. It is to be covered by another pioneering catalogue, written by 16 scholars and due out later this year. An exhibition of 300 highlights will be shown at the Hermitage in St Petersburg in 2009.

One suspects, however, that Islamic art remains Khalili's abiding passion. What makes this collection unique is its extraordinary breadth and depth. It ranges from the 8th century to the early 20th (Khalili does not 'do' contemporary – for him 'the greatest critic of art is time'), spans the globe from Moorish Spain to China and includes every conceivable medium. It also runs the gamut from the masterpiece to the workaday. 'The collection is like a symphony', he says. 'Every object has its note and the combination of them all makes the music. There is not much point just having the lead violin and the piano.' As this exhibition vividly reveals, the lion's share of Islamic art is secular rather than religious and, contrary to popular misconception, these secular objects often took figural forms. Illustrating this perfectly is a group of spirited metalwork ewers, incense burners, pomanders and the like in the form of pet lynxes (Fig. 5), lions, elephants and geese as well as a 13th-century Kashan pottery chess piece representing the Sultan Tughril II (Fig. 4).

The appeal of these objects is immediate as well as universal. Khalili emphasises that he did not begin to collect Islamic art because it was Islamic but because it was beautiful – and was incredulous so few others thought so. From the first, his publications and exhibitions had a kind of proselytising zeal: they posed a challenge to the traditional Eurocentric view of art history in which Islamic art was marginalised as a 'minor' art. He now realises that the Trust's books and exhibitions can play a small but more critical role on a wider stage. 'Everything changed after 9/11', he tells me. 'There was a realisation in the West that people needed to know more about the world of Islam. Out of 193 countries recognised by the UN, over 50 are Muslim – that is some 22 per cent of the world's surface and around 1.3bn people. Now all the major museums of the world want to have Islamic art



6 Presentation charger by Pavel Ovchinnikov, Moscow, 1899-1902. Silver-gilt, champlevé enamel, cabochon emeralds, sapphires, amethysts, turquoise, smoky quartz and citrine, diam. 74.2 cm

7 *Jonah and the Whale*, fol. 59 from the Khalili portion of the *Jami' al-Tawarikh* ('Compendium of Chronicles') of Rashid al-Din, Tabriz, Iran, 1314-15. Ink and watercolours on paper, 12 x 25.5cm



exhibitions or new or enhanced Islamic galleries, and the Islamic world, too, has realised that Islamic culture can give them a voice.'

One of the revelations of this show, both in Sydney and Abu Dhabi, was Muslims' thirst for their own culture and the realisation that so many had little knowledge of their contribution to world culture – whether in science, medicine or art. Next month, the Khalili Family Trust is donating 20,000 copies in arabic of Khalili's own general history, a 'Timeline' of Islamic art and architecture, to the countries of the Arab League for distribution to schools and universities. He has also slashed the price of his books on Amazon.

As to the future of this still-growing collection – he added around 200 pieces last year – nothing yet is decided. In 1992, Khalili's offer to lend his Islamic art collection to Great Britain fell on deaf ears – a separate museum bearing his name was not to be funded by the taxpayer. He has not given up hope – not least because his wife and three sons are British – but now realises that any museum will have to come with a building and an endowment of at least £100m. 'Once I am in this position, I will decide what to do', he muses. 'If the opportunities are right, I will do it in London. If not, I will do it elsewhere.' What is clear is that he will never relinquish control over his beloved collection. It is also clear that even if anyone had the time and the money – and hundreds of millions of pounds would clearly be needed – no one could put together such a collection ever again.

'The Arts of Islam: Treasures from the Nasser D. Khalili Collection' is at the Emirates Palace Hotel, Abu Dhabi, until 22 April. www.artsabudhabi.com