Duke’s modernist-Islamic shrine

Shangri La conjures up eternal youth and paradise in some exotic location. On more earthly grounds, in 1957 Doris Duke (1913–1966) built a house near Diamond Head in Honolulu with her first husband, James Cromwell, named it Shangri La, and decorated it as if it might have been built by a Sultan who lived in 15th century Spain or 17th century India. A recreation of that home by using large photographs, interior decorations borrowed from the house and architectural sketches of this exhibition. Round the world is the work of six contemporary artists, whose work in response to Shangri La as they understood it when they were part of her artist-in-residence program.

The name Doris Duke has special significance in Durham. Her parents were Nanahwine Holt izman and James B. Duke, the founder of Duke University, and her grandmother was Washington Duke, who was 13 when she died and she became one of the richest people in the world. We know very little about her life until she married at age 22. We do know her mother refused to let her go to college and instead took her on the grand tour of Europe. It is also a matter of record she sued her mother during those years to stop her from selling some of the family assets. As cavalier as she seemed about friends and money, she was an astute business woman and the trust grew sizably throughout her life. From an early age she established charitable foundations and before she died, she carefully set up the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation to carry on her interests in the arts, environment, medical research and child abuse prevention.

The Nasher’s assistant curator, Katie Waddick, walked me through the exhibition, pointing out how the galleries had been rearranged into smaller spaces to simulate a home environment. A wall-size photograph in a lightbox welcomes us to the exhibition; it is a picture of one of the sitting rooms. Other photographs pop out from the wall of each gallery, adding to the feel we are walking through three-dimensional space. It is difficult to separate the Duke who generated sensation headlines from the very young American woman who went on an around-the-world honeymoon and fell in love with Islamic art. The exhibition focuses on this hero as rich, but hands-on, with a keen aesthetic eye and a determination to turn Islamic architectural ideas into a real place where quiet beauty and tranquility abound.

India was one of the first of the honeymoons she went on around the world. She immediately decided to design a bedroom and bath for her new home (which was originally planned for Florida) in marble with motifs she saw in the decorations that collected during this glorious monument. Newlly married, Duke was one of the richest people in the world, but she was not just a shopper. She had a good eye and was in tune with other rich Americans who were collecting exotic art, although only a handful were interested in things Islamic.

Duke, however, was not looking for museum-quality things to buy. Things to live with. And, in most cases, she was commissioning ceilings, walls and doors crafted by contemporary artisans. In an interview on NPR with Frank Stasio, Deborah Pope, the executive director of Shangri-La, said that the Duke and telling her that for some of the objects Duke collected, but would also pass by others, because they were “bazaar” art. The point was made over and over: Duke bought what she liked and lived with it and while the house might sound like a hodgepodge it was a beautiful blend of objects across the Islamic world.

In her foreword to the exhibition catalogue, she wrote that Shangri La melds 1950s modernist architecture with “traditions from India, Morocco, Iran, Syria and a large collection of Islamic art.” Duke called it a “Spanish-Moorish-Peruvian-Indian complex.”

As we walk through the rooms there are rugs and old fabrics in cases on the walls, lighting fixtures hanging from the ceiling and various objects that were originally arranged throughout the house, either to be used or to been seen from some wall niche. There is much to look at and walk through wall labels for those who want to know more. Everything deserves a stop. My favorites include a delicate “Kurssi (quran stand),” Egyptian 1900s; a 19th century Indian hand mirror; a pair of gold Indian festival plaques carved with rubies and diamonds; and two magnificent door panels of filigree ivory. One of the very few representations of a human form is the Persian painting “Woman with a Cat,” late 18th century; the wall text labels it “late, decadent, and

This image of a mosaic tile panel in the form of a gateway, Iran, probably 19th century, is on view through Dec. 29 at the Nasher Museum of Art.

European influence.

Duke was a woman of great taste, a keen sense of business but also poor judge of people. And so there is the Doris Duke of the book. Her second husband, Porfirio Rubirosa, a Dominican, had such dubious connections the American government insisted he sign a prenuptial agreement to protect the estate in the case of her untimely death. That marriage ended within the year. Duke covered a $5 million bail bond for her friend Imelda Marcos who, with her husband, was under indictment for having spent $100 million of the Philippines.

Along the way she became a follower of Hare Krishna and met a young woman whom she legally adopted only to later renounce the adoption. In a tragic accident, she ran over and killed her interior decorator who was opening the gate to the driveway, and finally she left her butler in control of her trusts. For those who

This is an image of a bathroom in the Mughal Suite at Shangri La, the Hawaiian home of Doris Duke. The exhibit is on view at the Nasher Museum of Art through Dec. 29.