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New Doris Duke exhibition brings

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Green lamps dangle from a ceiling framed by ornate carvings. The tirelessly detailed patterns, eclectic and timeless, continue along the walls, arched windows and crevices. The colors, some rustic and some pastel, rise in contrast to the floor with its shiny off-whiteness and large geometric designs. Oil lamps, water pipes and perfume bottles tastefully adorn tables and shelves. Golden Arabic calligraphy panels the walls above, and the photograph (seen left) is taken in such a way that you feel as if, with a single step, you could enter into the “Syrian Room.” Tim Street-Porter’s large and backlit photograph welcomes viewers into the Nasher’s newest exhibition Opening Thursday, August 29: Doris Duke’s Shangri La: Architecture, Landscape, and Islamic Art.

Doris Duke is somewhat shrouded in mystery. She’s consistently hailed as an American heiress and philanthropist, yet she never kept any journals for modern scholarly reference. She was a private person—private enough that rumor and scandal, even now, manage to work their way into the mainstream’s perception of her. In the same way, Islamic art, despite its deep tradition and history, is a sort of vague novelty to the Western canon. This will be the first major opportunity for the Nasher to expose its audiences to Islamic art.

Shangri La is Doris Duke’s mansion, commissioned and envisioned entirely by the heiress. The massive property is simple—even austere—on the outside, but the interior flourishes with Islamic art, furniture, jewelry and architectural elements curated by Duke herself.

“It was her living space,” said Mary Samouelian, former Doris Duke collection archivist. “She interacted with the objects and she lived in those spaces. It was probably her favorite home; it was hers, designed and built from the ground up.”

Duke lived in New York City right beside the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where it is speculated her love for art originated. For her honeymoon in 1935, Duke traveled across the world and fell in love with the Taj Mahal. Already attracted to art and architecture, she was inspired by what she dis-
Islamic art to Nasher Museum

covered. Her second trip in 1938 was to the Middle East. Flying over in a propell-
er plane and shipping over a car, she em-
arked throughout several countries over the
course of six weeks with one goal: to
furnish and decorate Shangri La.

“It’s important to think about this as
[works of art] that Doris Duke owned
and cared for,” said Katie Adkins, coor-
dinating curator for the exhibition. “She
embraced Islamic architecture and that
went into the whole idea of the house
and how she would set the work up.
When doing a show about an art collec-
tor like Duke, it always gets at the fact
that someone lived with, someone loved
and someone chose this art.”

What distinguishes this exhibition is
that it is inseparable from its context;
the house and the art are symbiotic.
Groupings and rooms were used to cre-
ate the essence of a home and also an
educational platform for Islamic art.
Each space serves a purpose. Documents
and works of art, whether from the Rare
Manuscript Library or the Doris Duke
Foundation for Islamic Art, are meth-
dically spaced throughout.

Visitors will see elegant vases and hardy
bureaus alongside a small model of the
property and old architectural sketches.
One particularly iconic portrait is that of
Doris Duke in a fashionable, Islamic-style
dress (displayed alongside the photo-
graph) as she looks on fiercely.

The final room of the exhibition fea-
tures a grouping of contemporary art-
work. These include “There is Nothing
Like Him,” ink and gold on Turkish
ahar paper in talik script, and the mas-
ive “Heart Axe,” a sheer sheet of poly-
ethylene with thousands of tiny cutouts
to compose a design similar to those
on the walls of Shangri La.

It seems obvious that an exhibition
with works compiled by the only daugh-
ter of James B. Duke would be on display
at Duke University. What is less apparent,
however, is what this exhibition reveals
about Doris Duke—the side that is rarely
portrayed by the media or by posthumous
biographies, much of which focuses on
distorted and often inaccurate accounts of her
life and its associated scandals.

“Enough time had passed where people
really needed to understand who the real
Doris Duke was,” said Samouelian. Duke’s
collection and her home, then, are the
venues by which viewers can discover what
Duke was really like as a person.

“[Duke] spent her time with artists and
people from all walks of life,” continued
Samouelian. “She was very interested in
and accepting of other cultures. In the
same way, she was not an elitist about art.
There is a huge range of art that might
have caught her eye.”

The greatest legacy left behind by Doris
Duke and Shangri La extends beyond the
collection. In the 1965 version of her will,
she stated that she wanted Shangri La to
become a place of study for Islamic art
and culture. Her vision came true: every
year, artists and scholars have the opportu-
nity for residency in Shangri La, and the estate
is now open for public visitation. This ex-
hibition furthers what she had envisioned,
presenting the chance to discover Islamic
art and understand the culture behind it.

“The hope is for others to also develop
a love for Islamic art,” said Adkins. “This
exhibition gives [viewers] the opportu-
nity to see these works and think about what
it’s like to have an art collection, what it’d
be like to live with these works in particu-
lar and what that means.”

Doris Duke’s Shangri La opens at the Nash-
 er Museum of Art at Duke University on Aug.
29 and runs until Dec. 29. For more infor-
 mation and associated events, visit http://nasher.