

# Treasures of an Heiress From a Personal Paradise

Sept. 6, 2012

## Art Review



A lunette, from Iran, part of a mosaic panel. David Franzen, 2011, Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art, Honolulu

The 1930s modernist home at the center of "Doris Duke's Shangri La: Architecture, Landscape and Islamic Art," at the Museum of Arts and Design, is a masterpiece of refined eclecticism. Designed for its site in Honolulu by an architect from Palm Beach, Fla., and filled with treasures from the Islamic world, it unites diverse styles and periods with great taste and, it must be said, great wealth.

Duke referred to Shangri La as a "Spanish-Moorish-Persian-Indian complex"; whatever you call it, it looks magnificent in this [show](#) and the accompanying book. Both combine sparkling new color shots of the

home and gardens taken by Tim Street-Porter; architectural documents and vintage photographs with pieces of the collection; and projects by contemporary artists who had residencies at Shangri La (which has served, since Duke's death in 1993, as the [Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art](#), and was opened to the public in 2002).

After its New York run the exhibition will travel to six other institutions, including the Norton Museum of Art in West Palm Beach (designed by the architect of Shangri La, Marion Sims Wyeth) and the Honolulu Academy of the Arts, not far from the estate. It has been organized by Donald Albrecht and Tom Mellins, guest curators, who manage to convey the expansive glamour of Shangri La within the New York museum's small footprint (and also take care to acknowledge the architects, dealers, art historians and craftsmen who realized Duke's vision).





A cotton appliqué panel of a tent from 19th-century Cairo. David Franzen, 2006 Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art, Honolulu

The show is certainly one of the best places to see Islamic art in New

York right now, beyond the permanent collections of the Brooklyn and Metropolitan Museums. The Met's recently reinstalled [galleries](#) for the Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia and Later South Asia have a lot in common with Shangri La; they incorporate whole historic interiors like the Damascus room and newly commissioned ones like the [Moroccan Courtyard](#), and generally privilege geography over chronology.

How did Duke, a tobacco heiress brought up in a Beaux-Arts mansion on Fifth Avenue and in English Manor-style homes in Newport, R.I., and Hillsborough, N.J., come to build a Hawaiian retreat filled with Islamic art and architecture? She probably acquired a taste for it early on, through exposure to the collections of Charles Lang Freer, Edward C. Moore and H. O. Havemeyer, among others. But it was an around-the-world honeymoon in 1935 that laid the foundation for Shangri La.

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With her new husband, James Cromwell, she visited the Taj Mahal and other landmarks of Mughal India, as well as Morocco, Egypt and Indonesia. While in India they had plans drawn up for a Mughal-style addition to Mr. Cromwell's house on the Palm Beach estate of his mother-in-law. It was to include a bathroom, a dressing room and an area for Mr. Cromwell's cars. (Locals called the proposed construction the "garage mahal.")

A North African lamp. David Franzen, 2008, Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art, Honolulu

But when the couple reached Honolulu, the last stop of their tour, they decided to fold the plan into a new Hawaiian home, a refuge from the Palm Beach-Newport circuit, the gossip columnists and the in-laws. Drawings in the exhibition show how their design scheme evolved from a theatrical Pan-Asian look, with minarets and murals of Isfahan, to an

Islamic-modernist hybrid that emphasized abstract patterns. Carved marble "jalis," painted tiles and other feverishly decorative elements — some original, some commissioned reproductions — were laid out along the clean, rectangular lines of the International Style.

The contrast is most pronounced in the living room, with its elaborately carved Moroccan ceiling and retractable, hydraulics-powered glass wall. (With a push of a button its panels descend into the basement, creating an indoor-outdoor space.)

The dining room too was glass — until Duke redid it in the 1960s, with tented blue-striped fabric, an Iranian tile mosaic, and an enormous chandelier (made in France for export to India). She kept working on other parts of the house too, adding a wood-paneled Syrian Room that rivals the [Damascus Room](#) at the Met. (Unlike the Met's room, however, it includes 16th-century Turkish ceramics and 19th-century glass from Iran.)

A star tile from Iran. David Franzen, 2011, Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art, Honolulu

At Shangri La collecting and designing were essentially the same activity; Duke acquired pieces with an eye to placing them in the house. In the show objects from her collection are anchored by large, backlit photographs that show them in situ: 15th-century Spanish luster chargers flanking the living room fireplace, 19th-century carved ivory doors from India opening onto the bathroom suite.

It takes some time, and a little bit of label reading, to appreciate the diversity of the collection; it spans territory from Spain to the Philippines and time from the early first millennium B.C. to the 20th century. The sampling on view here includes a 19th-century suzani (embroidered textile) from Uzbekistan, a 15th-century North African religious manuscript and an unusual 18th-century Persian painting of a woman with a cat.

Interspersed among these artifacts are works by six former artists in residence at Shangri La, who process its fusion of Islamic tradition and 20th-century modernism in ways cerebral and material. The Lebanese Walid Raad, for instance, delivers a cryptic text and a subtle intervention in one of the display cases; both, he says, are part of a larger conceptual project about the impact of war on art in the Arab world.

The New York-based Iranian artist Afruz Amighi contributes delicate hanging sculptures made of thin silver chains; they read as lanterns but are based on missiles and rockets. And the Turkish artist Emre Huner, who splits his time between Amsterdam and Istanbul, manipulates fragmentary maquettes of the home and garden in an evocative video that seems to slip back and forth, like Shangri La itself, between a romanticized past and a pragmatic present.