

Doris Duke's Shangri La: Architecture, Landscape And Islamic Art At Norton Museum Of Art

By: Stephen May

WEST PALM BEACH, FLA. — Located amid five acres of interlocking terraced gardens and pools overlooking the Pacific Ocean and Diamond Head in Honolulu, Doris Duke's fabulous Shangri La is one of America's most beautiful residences. Reflecting the heiress's passion for Islamic culture, the estate incorporates unique architectural features, such as carved marble doorways, decorated sliding panels (known as jails), gilt and coffered ceilings and various ceramic tiles. The interior weaves together such brilliant artifacts as Islamic silk textiles, jewel-toned chandeliers and rare ceramics, many collected during Duke's extensive international travels.

This extraordinary place and its contents are featured in a dazzling exhibition, "Doris Duke's Shangri La: Architecture, Landscape and Islamic Art," on view at the Norton Museum of Art through July 14. Organized by guest curators Donald Albrecht and Tom Mellins for the Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art and already seen at New York's Museum of Arts and Design, it will travel to five additional venues. The first comprehensive traveling exhibition showcasing Shangri La's wonders, it features furnishings and objects, photographs of the site, vintage photographs and films, original architectural drawings, documentation of the estate's construction and ephemera exploring Duke's role in collecting and commissioning works for this special place.

The celebrated Doris Duke (1912–1993) was born in New York City, the

only child of John Buchanan (J.B.) Duke, founder of the American Tobacco Company and Duke Energy. Dubbed at birth "the richest little girl in the world," she grew up in a Fifth Avenue mansion and in homes in Newport, R.I., and Hillsborough, N.J. Upon her father's death in 1925, his fortune (estimated at between \$60 and \$100 million) was divided between 12-year-old Doris and the Duke Endowment — a foundation established to serve the people of the Carolinas. Doris Duke later maintained additional residences in Manhattan and Beverly Hills, Calif., as well as Hawaii.

Twice married and divorced, Duke enjoyed a colorful, often racy, private life that was seldom out of the gossip columns. But she was also intelligent, adventurous and independent, using her wealth to pursue a variety of personal interests, many of which were considered unconventional at the time, but today are recognized as prescient and daring. She was an environmentalist well before it was fashionable; a horticulturalist who bred a new hybrid orchid; a war correspondent in Europe during World War II; a competitive surfer (coached by surfing champion and Olympic swimmer Duke Kahanamoku) before the sport became known outside Hawaii and an early funder of AIDS research. She studied dance with the famous choreographer Martha Graham and actively patronized and participated in performing arts, including jazz piano and modern dance.

During a lifetime of philanthropy, Duke supported medical research and child welfare causes, and through a foundation called Independent Aid gave away millions, often anonymously. In the late 1960s, she established the Newport Restoration Foundation, which made special contributions to the heritage of that Rhode Island city by saving much of its rapidly deteriorating Eighteenth Century architecture. Finally, in her will, she ensured her continuing legacy by launching the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, which to date has awarded more than \$1 billion in grants.

Fascinated with foreign cultures, Duke was particularly interested in the societies and arts of the Islamic world. On her travels through these regions starting with her 1935 honeymoon (with James Cromwell) around the world, she acquired countless treasures, most of them destined for display at Shangri La. (She divorced Cromwell in 1943 and, was famously married to a playboy from the Dominican Republic, Porfirio Rubirosa, from 1947 to 1951.)

Shangri La itself was conceived by the 23-year-old newlywed after her first honeymoon, during which she was exposed for the first time to Muslim countries, and which concluded with an extended stay in Hawaii. Impressed by the cultures she had observed and seeking a safe haven for the Islamic art she had acquired, Duke scrapped plans to build in Florida, opting for a dream house on the island, away from the paparazzi. She commissioned a home in Honolulu to be designed by Marion Sims Wyeth, known for his work on Palm Beach mansions, including the exterior of Marjorie Merriweather Post's Mar-a-Largo estate, and later designer of the Norton Museum.

Duke took an active role in developing plans for Shangri La, intending that the architecture be influenced by Islamic artworks and artifacts she had collected, and envisioning a growing trove that would be shaped in turn by the architecture. She called it a "Spanish-Moorish-Persian-Indian complex." For the remainder of her life Duke continued to collect Islamic objects and commissioned works specifically for Shangri La. As catalog essayist Linda Kamaroff observes, she "demonstrated supreme confidence in her choices and decisions."

Three historic structures by Wyeth occupy the five-acre property, including the airy, opulently decorated, 14,000-square-foot main house and the spectacularly sited playhouse with a large pool overlooking the Pacific. Huge colorful, sparkling photographs by Tim Street-Porter bring Shangri La — inside and outside — to life in the exhibition.

The tastefully furnished living room features an elaborately carved Moroccan ceiling, Islamic wall hangings and carpet, painted cedar doors and a carved stucco spandrel from Morocco, a Thirteenth Century Spanish fireplace flanked by Fifteenth–Sixteenth Century luster chargers and a retractable glass wall. A large, U-shaped sofa with red bolsters and brightly colored pillows forms an inviting conversation pit.

The dining room, breathtakingly redone by Duke in the 1960s, includes tented blue-stripe fabric, a densely decorated Iranian mosaic tile panel, a massive glass chandelier and a table holding a glistening silver service. Colorfully detailed Moroccan mosaic tiles, probably dating to the Nineteenth Century, form a spectacular gateway to the outdoors from the dining room lanai (veranda).

The wood-paneled Syrian Room features Sixteenth Century Turkish ceramics, Eighteenth Century Iranian glass and an alluringly shiny mosaic-tiled floor.

“It was quite bold of Doris Duke to so passionately embrace Islamic art and architecture when she did,” says Museum of Arts and Design director Holly Hotchner. “The images and objects in this exhibition demonstrate just what an active and synthetic sense of objects in time and space she had.”

As Deborah Pope, executive director of Shangri La, observes, “Duke recognized Shangri La’s fluid identity, paying homage to a pan-Islamic world while simultaneously embracing modern style and innovation. Those juxtapositions and paradoxes are the essence of Shangri La, part of what makes it so uniquely beautiful and so provocative and intriguing today.”

The diverse selection of art and objects from Shangri La range in dates from the early first millennium BC to the Twenty-First Century, and span Spain, North Africa, the Middle East and Central and South Asia. The

collection is particularly strong in material from the Seventeenth through the Twentieth Centuries and in ceramic tiles and vessels.

Among the dazzling array of ceramics are vessels and tiles from Eleventh to Twentieth Century Iran, including a star tile with phoenix from the Ilkhanid period, a molded bottle with a courtly scene from the Safavid era and a mosaic lunette from Isfahan commissioned for Shangri La in 1938. There are standout enameled gold and gemstone bracelets, necklaces and earrings from Mughal India.

Textiles include Egyptian tent panels, silk velvets from the Ottoman Empire and embroideries from Uzbekistan. Even more spectacular are intricately beaded bindalli wedding dresses and clothes from late Nineteenth Century Turkey.

Throughout Shangri La, as documented in large photographs in the exhibition, are inlaid wood and mother of pearl furniture from India, Iran, Spain and Syria, highlighted by a large pair of elaborately carved doors from Nineteenth Century Northern India.

The exhibition makes clear that, as co-curators Mellins and Albrecht put it, "what began as a secluded place of rest was energized by the owner's restless imagination. Shangri La thus proves to be no mere folly; it is a house forged by Twentieth Century trends in architecture and place-making, as well as by Doris Duke's own aesthetic drive and seriousness of purpose."

In steadily declining health toward the end, Duke died in Beverly Hills at age 80, leaving a fortune estimated at \$1.3 billion largely to charity. In accordance with her will, her ashes were spread over the Pacific Ocean.

Today, Shangri La is owned and operated by the Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art, supported by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation. Promoting the study, understanding and preservation of Islamic art and

culture, it opened to the public in 2002.

The exhibition does full justice this remarkable woman's taste in Islamic art and architecture and her eye for landscape and interior design. It fulfills Pope's "hope that the story of Shangri La and Duke's transformative engagement with the Islamic world will inspire a new appreciation of Islamic arts and cultures." The overwhelming splendor of Shangri La whets one's appetite to visit this island paradise.

After closing at the Norton, the exhibition will travel to the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, the University of Michigan Museum of Art, the Nevada Museum of Art, the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery and the Honolulu Academy of the Arts.

The 232-page, fully illustrated catalog, edited by curators Albrecht and Mellins, contains essays by several experts, and a portfolio of photographs by Street-Porter. Published by Skira/Rizzoli, it sells for \$55.

The Norton Museum is at 1451 South Olive Avenue. For information, www.Norton.org or 561-832-5196.