Delving into Shangri La

By Sharon Littlefield

One of the largest collections of Islamic Art will be open to the public for the first time in October 2002. Shangri La, the lavish Hawaiian estate of American heiress Doris Duke, is a testament to Duke’s collecting passions beginning in the 1930s. Its large and extensive art collections can be studied to learn more about issues of early American Orientalism and the role of patronage and collecting in the appropriation of an Islamic aesthetic in the West.

The American heiress Doris Duke (1912-93) was an avid, yet little-known, collector of Islamic arts. Her interest was sparked in 1935 during a honeymoon tour of the world. In the course of her eastern travels, the first of her life, Duke began to collect objects and even commission architectural interludes that she expected to occupy in Palm Beach, Florida. However, she found her final honeymoon destination, Honolulu, so appealing that she decided to build her home in Hawaii and design it around the Islamic works of art she had begun to collect. What began as youthful enthu-
siasm became an enduring passion. For several months of her life Duke lived in her Honolulu estate and she continued to collect Islamic art for it until her death in 1993.

In her last will and testament, Duke decreed that her Hawaiian estate, known as Shangri La, should be opened to scholars and the public for the purpose of educating about Islamic art and culture. For the first time in its private life, Shangri La’s doors will indeed open to the public in the fall. Beginning October 2002, Duke’s collection will become a new resource for historians of Islamic art. It will also become an important resource for researchers interested in issues such as display, Orientalism, cross-cultural encounters, and the geography of culture.

Shangri La is located on 4.5 acres of oceanfront property in a quiet residential neighborhood not far from Waikiki’s most familiar landmark, Diamond Head. With its vast views of the Pacific Ocean and lush mountain landscapes, Shangri La’s location is utterly Hawaiian. Rather than compete with this environment, the buildings on the estate were sensitivity designed to relate to it. The adobe, which are relatively simple and there is minimal external ornamentation. The buildings show a variety of architectural styles including Modern, Spanish/Mediterranean revival, and Islamic. They are essentially single-story, whitewashed structures which are surrounded by hidden gardens, a large terraced lawn, fountains, koi ponds, and tropical vegetation. Overall, the structural environment is restrained, enabling the beauty of the surrounding landscape and Duke’s art collection to take centre stage.

Doris Duke acquired approximately 3500 objects for Shangri La during nearly sixty years of collecting. Predominantly, they are works of art from the Islamic world, making this one of the largest collections of Islamic art in the United States available for study. And unlike most museums, nearly all of the objects are on display. Taken as a whole, the objects show the diversity of Islamic cultures that are usually included in the monotheistic term Islamic art. Objects produced from regions such as South Asia, Central Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa can be found throughout the house and grounds. They range in date from the eighth through twentieth centuries and embrace a variety of media including among others: ceramics, textiles, metalwork, paper, canavs, precious stones, glass. They also demonstrate a variety of styles such as court, urban, and village. The collection at Shangri La is especially strong in objects from the seven-
teenth through nineteenth centuries, and ceramics from Iran.

In addition to portable objects, Duke also collected archi-
tectural elements such as two histori-rooms interiors made in late-eighteenth century Ottoman Syria. But her interest in these large architectural works was not limited to what she could purchase. Duke was also an active patron. She commis-
sioned, for example, inlaid marble wall and floor panels, painted wooden ceilings, and large ceramic tile panels from artisans in 1930s India, Morocco, and Iran respectively. Duke also hired local Hawaiian artisans to craft ‘Islamic forms’ for Shangri La. Among them are a replica of the seventeenth-
century Chihil Sutun in Isfahan, Iran and a Moghal-style gar-
Under the ownership of Doris Duke, the Shangri La estate in Honolulu became a private collection of Islamic art and culture. It was later opened to the public in 2002. (Photo: Louvermiloh made in Kishain, Iran for the tomb of Imam-Abu Tahir’, dated Shawwal the Great)