

I first became aware of Sheikh Nasser in 1983 with the arrival of a grand invitation to the opening of the Kuwait National Museum. At the time I was working at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, curating the Islamic art collection and only just becoming aware of collections being formed in the Middle East. What struck me immediately was how generous Sheikh Nasser and Sheikha Husa were to invite lowly me and include airplane tickets, hotel and several days in Kuwait with a full schedule of cultural activities. When my boss, Pratap Pal, and I boarded the plane from LA to London, little did we realize that we would be joined by a panoply of historians, art historians, collectors, dealers and others connected to the world of Islamic art. Now, so many years later, I do not remember the sequence of events, but the opening of the museum is imprinted on my mind. There Sheikh Nasser and Sheikha Husa greeted the hundreds of guests, who then filtered through the galleries, each with extraordinary works of art. I marveled at how by the age of 35 Sheikh Nasser had acquired such important works from old European collections, Indian maharajas, dealers in London, Paris and Kuwait and auction houses. Clearly he was knowledgeable, energetic and persuasive and knew where to look for his treasures.

Years passed until I met Sheikh Nasser again. In the interim the Iraqi army had invaded Kuwait in 1990 and stolen his collection, which they moved to Baghdad. Fortunately, most of it survived and was returned to Kuwait after the war. However, the museum had been burned and most of it remained closed pending reconstruction. By the late 1990s Sheikh Nasser and curators Manuel Keene and Sue Kaoukji had conceived a traveling exhibition called “Treasury of the World: Jeweled Arts of India in the Age of the Mughals”, consisting of the astounding collection of Mughal jeweled objects Sheikh Nasser had amassed. They approached the British Museum which became the first venue of a show that traveled the world for a decade. As in-house curator of the show at the BM, I was detailed to go to Kuwait to view the collection, discuss the schedule and other details and meet Sheikh Nasser to discuss some aspect of its financing. As much as I looked forward to seeing Sheikh Nasser, I dreaded having to deliver the usual museum message – no can do without more money – or whatever I was sent to say. What I found was a man who was willing to discuss the request and come to a decision without inflicting pain or causing awkwardness. As a result, the exhibition debuted at the British Museum in May 2001.

That opening was the last time I saw Sheikh Nasser. It was one of the most festive British Museum receptions I ever attended. It was dry but had the most delicious hors d’oeuvres. Everyone was in a terrific mood, thrilled to see Sheikh Nasser and Sheikha Husa, astounded by the collection, and happy to meet many old friends from all over the world. As with the opening in Kuwait, Sheikh Nasser’s generosity brought great pleasure to his guests, and the exhibition was a great success.

In my subsequent visits to Kuwait my path never crossed that of Sheikh Nasser. Nonetheless, his presence was strong, whether in an exhibition of his antiquities from Central Asia at the Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyya or the plans for reinstalling the renovated National Museum. While he was lucky to build his collection when he did, his vigor, eye, intelligence and passion are what guided him. I am grateful for our acquaintance and for his enduring contribution to the fields of Islamic and ancient art.