

I never met Sheikh Nasser, or better, I was introduced to him twice at some official event, but never liaised directly, unfortunately. Having said that Sheikh Nasser was throughout my professional life a sort of recurring myth, a supernatural being, a benevolent djinn, acquiring all the most extraordinary works on the market, appearing and disappearing at auctions and galleries, miraculously putting together one of the foremost collections of Islamic art and magically creating out of the desert a unique museum crammed with treasures, well before anybody else in the Middle East. Whenever a great work appeared on the market scene his name was always the first to be invoked, repeated like a mantra. Sheikh Nasser was a constant presence for me, an example of resolve, vision and a true Lover of Beauty.

My tale started in Milan, when I was in my mid twenties and my father with whom I was working asked me to travel to Munich to view an important Star Ushak carpet belonging to a local collector. I was very proud to have the assignment but also anxious, it was my first professional rite of passage. Upon arrival I was taken to a hotel suite where the carpet was lying in darkness. The room was badly lit, the carpet incredibly impressive, well drawn, in full pile, but the flaming colours I was longing for above everything else were subdued, dead. I feared it could have been a late copy and I knelt caressing the carpet apprehensively in case it would whisper some reassuring words. But there was only silence in that empty room. And then, suddenly, I noticed the "lazy lines" in the structure which are a technical device typical of this family of carpets! I was suddenly relieved and elated.

I acquired it immediately and returned to Milan feeling heroic, but wondering who I could offer it to when, after a short time, an elderly gentleman, enveloped in cigar smoke (another spirit?), an agent for Sheikh Nasser by the name of Monsieur Lefevre, appeared on the scene, promptly acquired the carpet which swiftly disappeared to reappear months later in all its beauty, ablaze with deep reds and saffron yellows!

The magical, cleansing powers of a good wash!

I have followed this Star Ushak in many of Sheikh Nasser museum exhibitions around the world, rediscovered it in books and catalogues, still enchanted, always thrilled by the fact it had ended up in the Kuwait Museum collection. This is why Sheikh Nasser is so connected to my early enthusiasm for carpets and the mystique of Islamic art, despite my later different professional interests.

In the early eighties Sheikha Husa unexpectedly visited our gallery in Milan enchanting my wife Fausta and myself with her intelligence, grace and spiritual elegance. She kindly invited us to visit the Collection and later on also to the opening of the Museum, but somehow we never succeeded in visiting Kuwait. Maybe, somehow subconsciously, I preferred to hang on to the belief Sheikh Nasser was a supernatural entity! Now that alas he is transformed into a real spirit and I will never be able to make his proper acquaintance, I have promised Fausta and myself to commit to a pilgrimage to the Museum in order to honour both Sheikh Nasser and Sheikha Husa for the extraordinary legacy they have donated to the world.

John Eskenazi

