

For the Family of the Great, the Unique, Sheikh Nasser Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah

In the areas of his greatest interest, Sheikh Nasser was the most gifted collector of the finest works whom I have been privileged to know. Thus, it was indescribable to be so fortunate as to work with him for decades on building further what was already a world-unique collection of Islamic art when I first came to know it in 1982.

The most fundamental and irreplaceable factor in his collecting was a simply phenomenal set of talents for recognizing, appreciating, internalizing and remembering the unique qualities of objects of art, from those valued such as to be affordable by almost anyone, through the gamut of the upper end of values in the fields concerned. And he exuded enthusiasm for individual objects which occupied positions at all of the levels concerned.

At the same time, he ardently valued the opportunity to make such range of works of art available to the people of Kuwait, which he knew would engender pride and interest in the history and art-history of the immediate region, and radiating outward. Such can only positively affect the culture and outlook of the succeeding generations, locally and regionally, at the same time broadening awareness of the world and its culture in an endless and peace-building sense of world brother- and sisterhood.

Anyone working with him in a curatorial role found themselves in need of focusing on the art and divesting themselves of egotistical stances, whatever their previous achievements or reputation, since his 'mental database' often included things of types which had never been published, and extended to individual gemstones! But whatever self-excuses one might have, it was always a learning experience, but within a congenial atmosphere: 'Manuel, you don't remember that?' 'No, sir, I have to say that I don't.' But it should be emphasized that even in areas of collection which interested him less than others, when his esteem and trust for a specialist was established, he would extend to them the confidence which has allowed some unique and uniquely unparalleled bodies of types of art. I think here especially of Central Asian jades which are neither Islamic nor Chinese, and which will ultimately bring further unique fame to the Collection.

And lest anyone get the impression that everything connected with him and an art historian was just focused on art objects, it should be emphasized that his company was always pleasant, and encompassed all kinds of interests, from cooking a meal for his guests to watching the training of falcons, to listening to classical Indian music to ...

This tribute, occasioned by Sheikh Nasser's passing, and a relation of his occupation with building the fabulous art collection, cannot be left without acknowledging the crucial role which his wife Sheikha Hussah played in it all. Sheikha Hussa and Sheikh Nasser, in the earlier part of their married life, were involved in the collection of contemporary art, a matter which should be mentioned as part of the context of their lives' accomplishments. When the Islamic collection became of such magnitude that they wanted to share it, Sheikha Hussah increasingly became involved as its representative, a role she has continued to play up to the present. And from its opening as an entire building of the Kuwait National Museum, she was its Director, sponsoring publications, internationally-involved lecture series, and so forth. Despite the Iraqi invasion, removal of the Collection to Iraq, and return of the Collection via the auspices of the United Nations, she has continued to represent and promote the Collection up to the present time. Let us hope that, despite her grief, she will be able to carry on with its care, promotion and well-being into the future.

Dear Sheikha and All, please accept my tribute, and especially my condolences, on the passing of your beloved, uniquely esteemed and uniquely blessed by his love and assemblage of the most unparalleled combined collection of Islamic, Ancient Near Eastern and Central Asian art in the World. He was blessed in his talents, and the world is blessed in his life's achievements.

Take comfort, despite your otherwise near-unbearable grief, in the certainty that we all must pass from this world and must strive to be an agent for goodness and beauty while we are here. Sheikh Nasser's life is singular for his achievements in very many areas, and especially those briefly and inadequately mentioned above.

In sha' Allah, yusa'idkum wa yubarak fikum,

Manuel Keene

Curator with The al-Sabah Collection since 1982, retired 2013