

A Weekend with Sheikh Nasser

It was the summer of 1984 (?), a year or so after the extraordinary Al-Sabah collection of Islamic art had been inaugurated in Kuwait, when Sheikh Nasser asked me to come to his office in London to discuss some inlaid marble panels from Gujarat. During a lively conversation about life and art, Sheikh Nasser suddenly said that he was flying to Kuwait on Friday and would I like to come along and see the panels in person at the museum. Delighted to get away from London, I accepted his gracious invitation and early Friday morning the two of us took off on his private jet.

I had never spent much time alone with Sheikh Nasser but I soon found he was a great travelling companion and easy to talk to. I remember that he seemed interested in the fact that I was born on the banks of the Mississippi River and that my grandfather had built a log cabin in the Ozark Mountains of Missouri where I had spent every summer of my childhood. He also wanted to know why I had chosen to spend my life in India researching and reviving traditional Mughal arts and crafts.

Suddenly, the plane descended and we landed in Geneva. Perhaps, for refueling or for Sheikh Nasser to meet someone. In any case, just as we were about to continue our journey, we were summoned to the airport Customs Office. Two smiling Swiss officials greeted us and they rather ceremoniously poured out the contents of a leather pouch onto the desktop which they had discovered in a briefcase on the plane. I was astonished to see a small mound of sparkling flat cut diamonds. I recognized them immediately as 'polkis', as they are known in India, where they are used in the traditional setting of jewellery, arms and armour and works of art. The officials politely asked Sheikh Nasser what they were.

They only spoke French and Sheikh Nasser asked how fluent my French was. I said it's pretty rusty but I'll give it a try and began explaining that the stones were antique flat cut diamonds from Mughal India, more than four hundred years old, and that they were part of Sheikh Nasser's personal collection and that he was taking them home to have them set into pieces of jewellery for the family. That seemed to satisfy them and we got back on the plane and took off for Kuwait, amused but also relieved to be on our way. My weekend adventure had begun.

Arriving in Kuwait in the early evening, I was dropped off at the hotel excited about the next morning's visit to see the inlaid panels and the legendary collection. At nine, an official car arrived spot on time to take me to the museum. The first few hours were spent wandering from one aesthetic shock after the other...so many treasures from the earliest roots of Islamic art and culture and the centuries that followed. I also got to examine the inlaid panel and had a rather spirited discussion with one of the curators about their date which often happens when two people who each think they know more than the other collide. It was mid-afternoon when I made the ill-considered decision to return to the hotel to get my camera which I had forgotten. I thought I'll just slip out and grab a cab without bothering anyone.

On leaving the museum, I was nearly blinded by the glaring light of one of the hottest days of summer and started walking down the wide avenue. I soon noticed that every building was closed and there were no cars, no taxis and no shade on the street. I kept going but the 55 degree temperature soon began to take its toll and I started to feel more than a little disoriented and dehydrated. I had gone too far and don't think I could have made it back to the museum. I began to lean against a traffic light at a major intersection when a car pulled up and a foreign lady, seeing my state, barked, 'Get in the car'! Unquestioningly, I obeyed and welcomed the blast of cool air as I squeezed in. She asked where I was staying and why I was wandering around at this time of day like a madman and proceeded to drop me off at my hotel. I never got her name or nationality but to this day, I'm forever grateful for being rescued.

I returned to London the next evening on a commercial flight and on my way to the airport, I dropped by Sheikh Nasser's office to thank him for his gracious Kuwaiti hospitality. He laughed heartily when I told him how I had almost passed out on the streets of the city and told me to be more careful next time.

As they say so eloquently in Persian, 'his place is empty'. Indeed, Sheikh Nasser will be missed on so many levels and by so many people. They don't make them like that anymore, and I will always treasure the memory of 'My Weekend with Sheikh Nasser'!

Mitch Abdul Karim Crites
Delhi, 14 January 2021

