

I met Sheikha Hussa and Sheikh Nasser in Istanbul with my friend Esra Jah when my husband was Consul General of Greece in the early eighties. I had heard about them and had seen many of the objects they were buying in London as most of their dealers were also our friends.

Their joy of life, love of family and friends as well as their commitment to knowledge and their efforts to communicate the manifestations of Islam's achievements through its visual arts was unravelled at the opening of their museum in Kuwait. We had such fun and we learned so much during our few days in Kuwait. I thought their museum was truly fantastic, the best of its kind in the world. The objects were beautifully displayed and clearly explained. The Metropolitan Museum had just opened its new Islamic galleries but Hussa and Nasser's museum was even more exciting as many objects were unknown and opened new horizons into Islamic culture. This stimulating aesthetic experience was paired with a joy of life that we all experienced at dinner at their home. My dear friend Maryam Massoudi and myself can never forget the elegance of movements in Hussa and Sheikha's dancing dialogue, which we tried to imitate but not as successfully. Nasser was talking to all his guests accepting the compliments with an amazing modesty. Tragically, the vandalism and destruction of the museum during the Iraqi invasion destroyed Hussa's and Nasser's vision, and the world was poorer in values and humanity.

But Nasser never gave up. He had such a belief in life and its mysteries and the betterment that art could bring to our lives that he continued to collect, guided by his refined sense of beauty and the ability to find or recognise an object or a fragment of historic or aesthetic importance.

He kept adding new finds to his magnificent Islamic collections which Hussa would take on and organise with her team in a rational manner, so that their historical importance and their beauty would do what art has always done: improve our lives, give us dignity, joy, beauty and respect for humanity. Nasser had an instinctive sense of these values which he was decoding through his collections. Soon Islam was accompanied by the cultural influences of its origins as Nasser branched out to include Sassanian, Achaemenid and finally Greece in Asia. The aesthetic and human values of these contribuant cultures to Islam were hidden in the objects he discovered in places like Kirghizstan, or some oasis on the Silk Road. Fragments and objects that had lost their identity and past which he and Hussa were about to revive.

I used to see Husa a few times a year. Some years more than others. Nasser was rarely present. I would hear the echoes of his travels and discoveries from Husa and from Sue, and would often be privileged to admire the new arrivals to their collections.

With Nasser I always had unexpected encounters, in the lobby of a hotel or at a dealer's hide away or shop in a bazaar, somewhere in Syria, Istanbul, Delhi or Jaipur. He was always pleased to see me as he knew that I loved the same things he did. He would instantly open his bag that was always carried by someone near him to show me the 'catch' of the day. What exactly the fragments he so lovingly collected was not yet clear. Nasser instinctively knew that he was holding a 'treasure' that will add an idea or belief to our understanding of a culture.

He was holding yet another pebble in the multicoloured mosaic of human history.

While in Delhi during the days my husband was posted there as Ambassador I would bump into Nasser at Padma's or Bharany's at Sunder Nagar. He would never call to say he would be arriving and would never accept invitations. What he enjoyed was to be the Nomad of the World. In one of these unexpected encounters at Padma's he was considering a beautiful ruby necklace with melon shaped beads which he immediately put around my neck, telling me how wonderful it would look on Husa and he was right.

Nasser did not appreciate formalities. He was someone you might come across during your travels and, though happy to see you, he just as unexpectedly moved on. His retreat would always leave a 'carved' almost tactile memory of his passage which was always full of 'light' and wonder as you never knew where he came from or where he was going.

I will miss Nasser. I consider myself truly blessed to have met him.

Dr Helen Philon  
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