



## The Museum Calouste Built

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Imagine for a moment that you had the chance to assemble a collection of world art which would include masterpieces in every medium from every period and every culture. Imagine further that the works were to be in perfect condition, absolutely authentic, and only the best examples of any given artist or workshop. Finally, imagine that you had at your disposal a virtually unlimited amount of money.

The secret dream of every museum director? The reverie of a handful of fabulously wealthy men? Perhaps, but this is in fact the reality behind the Gulbenkian Museum in Portugal, founded by an extraordinary Armenian who made his fortune in oil and personally brought together the roughly 5,000 pieces in the collection.

Undoubtedly the most mysterious and perhaps the greatest oil magnate of them all, the richest man in the world in his time, the

first billionaire in the days before world inflation, Calouste Sarkis Gulbenkian, sometimes called after his most famous deal "Mr. Five Percent," died in Lisbon in 1955 at the age of 86. According to the terms of Gulbenkian's will, his entire estate, including his magnificent art collection, was to serve as the nucleus of an international foundation for charitable, artistic, educational and scientific purposes to be located in Lisbon.

The art collection was at first temporarily housed in the famous Palácio Pombal outside of Lisbon on the coast toward Estoril. However, Gulbenkian had expressed his wish that as much as possible of his art be permanently exhibited according to a chronological and geographical scheme, and though the Palacio was a particularly attractive setting, it was too small to accommodate all the treasures. Thus an ultra modern concrete and glass structure, harmoniously attached to the architecturally similar headquarters of the foundation, was inaugurated in October 1969.

The entire complex faces the broad Avenida de Berna, close to the heart of Lisbon in the midst of a 20-acre wooded and landscaped garden-park which was formerly St. Gertrude Park and is now more appropriately Calouste Gulbenkian Park. In a continuous single-level exhibition area the visitor can travel from Pharaonic Egypt to 20th-century Paris, passing through Mesopotamia, the Islamic Near East, China, Japan, and medieval, Renaissance and modern Europe on the way. The Gulbenkian Museum is among the newest and most striking in the world and it houses one of the greatest art collections of all time, a collection patiently assembled over half a century, the eternal fulfillment of a single man's artistic conception.

Eternal because, by the terms of Gulbenkian's will, the collection is to remain exactly as he formed it; no pieces to be sold, no new acquisitions to be made. Yet, despite the imposing size of the new museum with its nearly 60,000 square feet of display area, only part of the total can be publicly shown at any one time. The display space is divided into two wings—one for Western art, the other for Oriental art—which, though they have separate entrances, organically flow into each other near the middle of the building.

Calouste Gulbenkian's aesthetic interest and his money marched side by side. It is generally believed that by the turn of this century, while he was still in his 30's, the aspiring oil magnate had already made his first million. And as his fortune continued to grow during the following 50 years he used it to indulge his already well developed passion for art and collecting.

Gulbenkian was fond of relating the following episode from his childhood. At age 14, because of good marks at school, his father Sarkis gave him the not unimportant sum of half a Turkish gold pound, hoping to instill in the youth the virtues of thrift. Young Calouste, already a frequent habitue of the antique bazaars of Istanbul, secretly purchased some ancient coins. Having mentioned in passing the acquisition, he was severely reprimanded by his father for being prodigal. Little could the elder Gulbenkian foresee that this was the foundation of a collection which would bear his own last name into history for generations to come. Those few pieces were eventually to inspire one of the best and most beautiful collections of Graeco-Roman gold and silver coins in the world.

A man who shunned any kind of publicity, Gulbenkian quietly went about acquiring chefs-d'oeuvre of all kinds with the

constant requirements of fineness, faultlessness and authenticity. Perhaps his greatest coup was the remarkable package deal of art works belonging to the Hermitage Museum in Leningrad which he bought from a Soviet government hard pressed for cash in the bitter post-revolutionary years of the 20's. He devoted much time to his collection, systematically studying the general development of art, concentrating on the artists and periods which he most aggressively purchased. In so doing he became an ardent museum and gallery frequenter, and friend and intimate of the most famous dealers, scholars and museum curators. He also built up a 30,000-volume library which now serves as the core of the art research library housed on the lower level of the Gulbenkian Museum.

Gulbenkian's collection has been internationally known for decades, thanks mostly to its extraordinary masterpieces of Western painting, the finest of which were on loan for many years to the National Gallery in London and afterwards to the National Gallery of Art in Washington. Rembrandt and Rubens, Degas and Van Dyck, Gainsborough, Guardi, Hals, Monet, Manet, Renoir are some of the artists whose canvases rest carefully and comfortably in the new museum.

But it was not just painting he collected; there were no real boundaries to the extent of Gulbenkian's interests: sculpture, furniture, illuminated manuscripts, textiles and carpets, glass and jewelry, coins, ivories, rare bindings, tapestries, tiles, costumes, silver, ceramics—all the best in their category, all in perfect condition, all strikingly beautiful. He collected for his pleasure. He loved his works of art; he called them his children. Never just an accumulator or hoarder of art, Gulbenkian was a connoisseur. With excellent judgment and discrimination, he would often

replace a fine work of art by a finer one if the opportunity became available.

Though it is less known and appreciated, Gulbenkian's collection of Islamic art is as remarkably rich and carefully chosen. With its oriental splendor, accentuated by extravagant colors and fecund designs, this was the section to which Gulbenkian was particularly attached. His own deep feelings for and associations with the area, his Armenian ancestry, his youth and early manhood in Constantinople, the trips to Caucasian and Middle Eastern oil fields, all contributed toward creating a special affinity for Near Eastern art.

The vast gallery of Islamic art is probably the most striking room in the museum, not just because of the richness of the items displayed, but also because of its extremely handsome physical layout. Piercing the walls along the entire length of the room are successive glass bays cut vertically through the concrete, admitting floods of light from the surrounding landscape. The sober illumination of the interior is enhanced by brilliant streams of natural light causing mirror-like reflections of the brook, trees and rolling hills without, on the glass cases housing the multicolored profusion of ceramics, glassware, textiles, illuminated manuscripts and precious bindings within.

Most of the objects in the room are from Persia and Ottoman Turkey; only a few works originate from other parts of the Islamic world: ceramics from Raqqa in Syria, some Mogul carpets and miniatures from India, and less than a dozen pieces of Mameluke glassware from Aleppo, Syria. Toward the rear of the room, in a small vitrine, are the only ostensible examples of

Armenian art, consisting of four 17th-century illuminated manuscripts and a couple of pieces of Kutahya pottery. These, along with some Caucasian rugs, are seemingly the only items from Gulbenkian's own artistically rich heritage which are displayed in the museum.

The ceramics collection is one of the world's best (*Aramco World*, July-August, 1974). It includes fine specimens from the famous late 12th- and early 13th-century Persian manufacture of Rayy, a city whose ruins are near the modern city of Teheran. Among those are the so-called "Minai"—polychrome and gold overglazed painted pottery producing an effect remarkably close to miniature painting—and lustre painted wares. Various types of wall tiles are also represented; an outstanding one is a late 13th-century example of the technique known as Kashi after Kashan, the great center in eastern Iran, in the form of a rectangular, highly embossed blue and turquoise green metallic lustre tile, adorned with a *mihrab*, or prayer niche, and Koranic inscriptions.

Gulbenkian seemed to be especially fond of the ceramics of the Asia Minor city of Iznik, ancient Nicaea. The museum displays faultlessly beautiful specimens of three characteristic types from this center: late 15th-century ware exclusively in blue and white; early 16th-century ware, to which are added turquoise, sage green, manganese purple and black; and finally, mid-16th-century faience pieces with the famous tomato-red color called *bol d'Arménie*, applied so thickly that it created a high relief.

The Islamic gallery also exhibits fabrics and brocaded costumes from the period of Safavid rule in Iran (16th to 18th centuries),

chiefly from the centers of Yazd and Bukhara. An exceptionally exquisite and decorative silk brocade fragment bears a mirror-image, double portrait of a young man wearing a turban, with wine bottle and cup in hand, seated in an exuberant flower garden. This piece matches similar fragments in the collections of the Textile Museum in Washington, the Detroit Art Institute and the Moore Collection of Yale University.

In splendid individual glassed recesses set along the entire width of the back wall of the gallery are displayed a large number—perhaps too large—of Ottoman brocades and velvets of the 16th and 17th centuries. These works, from Bursa and Istanbul, are dominated by stylized designs of the "four classical flowers"—tulips, hyacinths, carnations and roses—in very lush and deep tones of red.

Most of the carpets in the collection belong to the classical period of Persian rug manufacture, the 16th and 17th centuries. All the major court factories, where the carpet industry reached its apogee, are represented: Tabriz, Isfahan, Herat. Because of their fragility, carpets woven of silk are displayed in glass wall cases, while the more sturdy woolen ones lie majestically spread throughout the spacious room on specially mounted platforms raised a few inches off the floor.

Arthur Upham Pope, the great authority on Persian and Islamic art and founder of the Asia Institute, once wrote to Gulbenkian about a 16th-century silk carpet, most probably woven at the royal workshops of Tabriz. "This rug should be in your collection . . . which I have the greatest desire to see enriched and consolidated. You are today the only person in the world

capable of making a collection of carpets worthy of the name. For, the formation of a collection with a purpose is not a matter of checkbooks .... I do not care how much money a man has in the bank; unless he had character, taste and intelligence, it is impossible for him to assemble a true collection." Gulbenkian did assemble such a collection, of course, and in it is the same carpet Pope wrote him about. Decorated with an unusual pattern of human masks and animals in a floral setting around a cartouche containing a delicate Persian inscription, it is thought to have come from the famous tomb of Imam Reza at Mashed in northeastern Iran. A similar example is found in the Cincinnati Art Museum.

Due to a disastrous flood in and around Lisbon in 1968 (just one year after the ruinous Florence flood), only a few of the many important oriental manuscripts in Gulbenkian's collection are on exhibition. The others are being painstakingly restored by trained experts in laboratories built and equipped specifically to rehabilitate the large number of manuscripts, Renaissance prints and other art objects submerged in the mud and water which inundated the Palácio Pombal while the new museum was still under construction. These modern facilities are already serving as a central restoration center for the many other important museums and art collections in Lisbon and the rest of Portugal. Those manuscripts which are currently on display are mostly Persian works of the 15th to 19th centuries from the schools of Shiraz, Herat and Bukhara, and include a special group commissioned by the Safavid ruler Shah Abbas I.

Accompanying the manuscripts is a selection of precious bindings in wrought and gilded or filigreed leather, as well as fine examples of lacquered *papier mâché*. Some of the bindings are separated from their manuscripts while others still cover the

original texts they were fashioned for, such as the binding of the *Anthology* of 1410-11 prepared for Sultan Iskandar in Shiraz with an elaborate blind-tooled arabesque cartouche.

There is a very special area, adjacent to, but still part of, the main Islamic gallery, giving onto an inner garden-court of the museum by means of an entire wall of glass. Appropriately, it is devoted totally to 10 perfectly preserved 14th-century enameled and gilded glass receptacles from Aleppo. Representing one of the high points in the history of glass making, seven lamps, a large cylindrical beaker and two spherically bellied bottles, richly decorated with blazons, flowers, fabulous animals (some of a distinctly Chinese inspiration), shimmer under the play of natural light which immerses this section. The whole room has an ethereal quality produced by the greenish blue transparency of these objects against the verdant foliage and open sky of the court.

Finally, if one were to try to pick a single object from among the many extraordinary works in this impeccable treasure of Islamic art, one might choose the small (six inches high) white jade ewer with a slight pale green cast. Its translucent neck is carved with an Arabic inscription which tells us it was made for the Timurid prince Ulugh Beg, probably in Samarkand during the first half of the 15th century. Defying classification, it is of a material rarely used in the Islamic tradition for a jug, and must be considered as being something between a piece of pottery, though not potted, and a precious jewel.

Calouste Gulbenkian did not strive to form a didactic or museum collection of Near Eastern art, one which traces all important

periods and geographical areas in the various media which came under that art's authority. There are none of the famous Islamic metalworks, no early pottery, hardly any woodwork. Rather, he was interested in those objects which gave him pleasure, and for him this was manifested by the perfection of artistic form rather than the historical importance of a work. He demanded palpably beautiful creations, the high points of royal manufacture. Thus, thanks to Gulbenkian's love for Islamic art, there is brought together under a single roof in Lisbon an overwhelming array of aesthetically and technically superior examples of the Muslim artistic tradition.

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#### **Calouste Gulbenkian: Mr. Five Percent**

Calouste Sarkis Gulbenkian was born in 1869 of a well-to-do Armenian merchant family in Istanbul. After studying engineering at King's College, London, he was sent by his father, who among other things was in the lamp oil business, to inspect the oil fields around the Caucasian city of Baku in southern Russia. Thus, at 21, he was launched into a career in the petroleum industry which would last more than six decades.

Although the Gulbenkians left Turkey for England after the Armenian massacres in 1896, they were able to maintain influential business and government connections which eventually enabled young Calouste to secure a concession for the British-owned Turkish Petroleum Company to explore for oil throughout the Ottoman Empire, which at the time included Iraq and parts of Arabia. Gulbenkian himself had a 40 percent interest in the company, which in 1928, following the war and the breakup of the Ottoman Empire became the Iraq Petroleum Company (I.P.C.). In the new company four large national oil interests—British Petroleum, Royal Dutch Shell, Compagnie Française des Petroles and the U.S. companies Esso and Mobil—each controlled 23.75 percent. Gulbenkian himself managed to retain five percent, although he had to fight to protect this interest as oil's importance increased during the inter-war years.

Gulbenkian insisted that his share of I.P.C.'s profits be paid in cash rather than in crude oil. Refusing the offer of one British penny per ton of crude, he held out for one shilling. When he won that battle he capped his victory by demanding the shilling not in paper but in gold. For many years before he became known as Mr. Five Percent, he was called Mr. Gold Shilling.

As the years went by the public saw or heard little of Gulbenkian, for he treasured his privacy, quite unlike his son Nubar, who became an international celebrity, fostering a bizarre public image with his tinted beard, monocle, gourmet appetite and the ever-present fresh orchid in his lapel. But those among Calouste's business or art collecting associates who came to be his friends regarded him as intelligent, industrious, meticulous, careful about how he spent his money, a strong persuader and an excellent listener. In his own family he was considered the model of an Armenian patriarch.

During the Second World War, when the Nazis occupied France, Gulbenkian moved to Lisbon. There, in the elegant Aviz Hotel, he spent most of his last 13 years. Even with his total involvement in the oil industry there always seemed to be energy left for art, his life-long passion. Gulbenkian long thought of establishing a charitable and cultural foundation with a museum to keep his money and art together. He wanted to start and supervise it while still alive, but was only able to prepare a will, which provided for an international foundation based in Portugal. Gulbenkian died in 1955, and today the Fundacao Calouste Gulbenkian, established in Lisbon, sponsors in the name of a remarkable businessman and lover of art, the Gulbenkian Museum, as well as nearly every other type of educational and charitable activity in Portugal and much of the world.

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