



## Transformations

*The Turkish Room  
at Shangri La.*

*David Franzen*

Duke's estate was never truly finished. When her longtime friend Johnny Gomez was asked what year Shangri La had been finished, he laughingly replied, "Never was finished, never. There was no such word as finished."<sup>21</sup> Shangri La continued to evolve over the years as Duke energetically and creatively designed and redesigned her Hawaiian home whenever she acquired works of art. Sometimes her designs led to large-scale renovations that required relocating monumental works of art, such as a ceramic tile panel measuring 7 feet by 26 feet, which was once displayed outdoors but was eventually moved inside. No physical challenge was too daunting; the end product had to suit her sense of aesthetics.

In the 1960s, when Duke was in her fifties, she transformed her dining room, which was originally Hawaiian in inspiration. She described the room's original decor:

*I used marine life as the decorative motif: tanks for the brilliant fish that abound in these waters are built into one wall, and a shell collection is displayed in a second. The other two sides overlook the ocean.<sup>22</sup>*

The appearance of the remodeled dining room was completely different; the room now drew upon Islamic forms, like the rest of Shangri La. The large windows with their sweeping views of the ocean and Diamond Head were retained, but the tanks and shell collection were removed. They were replaced with a large, seventeenth-century mosaic tile panel and an Ottoman-style fireplace. Duke furnished the renovated dining room with Egyptian and Indian cloth panels, and also selected a fabric covering for the ceiling and walls, giving the room the impression of an elaborate tent. The room evokes those Islamic cultures that favor a nomadic lifestyle and prefer portable architectural structures, such as cloth tents, to permanent buildings composed of stone or brick.

In the early 1980s, as Duke turned seventy, she oversaw another major renovation at Shangri La. She had recently acquired a mid-nineteenth-century room interior from Syria, composed of carved and painted wood panels, doors, and niches; carved and inlaid stone blocks; and other large architectural fragments. The interior had once belonged to the Quwwatlis, an aristocratic family that had resided in Damascus for seven centuries. In the 1920s, the Quwwatli family had sold the interior to the firm of Asfar & Sarkis, which



*In the early 1960s Doris Duke renovated her dining room. The original Hawaiian theme was altered to one that mimicked an Islamic aesthetic, as seen in this photograph of the dining room as it looks today. Using Egyptian and Indian textiles, Duke created an environment suggestive of a tent.*

David Franzen

later resold it to another dealer, Hagop Kevorkian. Both were dealers whom Duke often patronized. The Kevorkian Foundation later gave this and another interior as gifts to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and to the Kevorkian Center for Near Eastern Studies at New York University.<sup>23</sup> Duke's room was part of the Kevorkian Center interior, and became known at Shangri La as the Turkish and Baby Turkish Rooms.

What had previously been a billiards room, a bathroom, an office on the floor above, and a ceiling in between was demolished to make room for the large interior. Duke determined that the new room ought to be sunken slightly from the adjacent central courtyard, so the existing foundation was excavated to permit a step down into the room. Dirt was piled up along the east wall as the foundation for a large marble platform that would be used as the main seating area.

Once the structural renovations were completed, marble flooring and a fountain were set down. Though both contain historic marble panels, they consist mainly of panels designed and cut by Duke and

the Shangri La house staff. The last elements installed were the wooden wall panels and ceilings, whose lavender wood frames were not originally part of the Quwwatli interior, but were purchased separately. The frames were retouched and regilded as needed, and Duke herself took an active part in some of this restoration work. Estate employee Jin de Silva remembers how Duke and her artisans would sit around a table in the courtyard, working in an assembly-line manner and consulting one another about their respective tasks.<sup>24</sup> When the interiors were in place, ceramics, glass, metalwork, and other objects were brought from around Shangri La to the Turkish Rooms for display in the niches. Like other areas of the estate, these rooms continued to evolve. Duke enjoyed viewing, critiquing, and rearranging the portable objects in them whenever she was in Hawai'i.

In the initial stages of Shangri La's conception and construction, both Duke and Cromwell were involved in planning the estate. In the succeeding years Cromwell's influence decreased as the couple experienced marital problems; they separated in 1940 and were divorced in 1943. Architect Marion Sims Wyeth, design supervisor Drew Baker, and others also provided Duke with input. Baker was the on-site supervising architect, who remained in residence in Hawai'i for the duration of the construction. Duke, however, always relied on her own needs and tastes when reviewing designs submitted by professionals. She frequently requested amendments to ensure that the estate evolved to coincide with her vision. In her own words, "it isn't the product of any one person, but a number of architects and decorators from all over the world, finally put together by me."<sup>25</sup> In 1937 Robert Oliver Thompson, who jointly served as the landscape designer of Shangri La with his wife Catherine Jones Richard Thompson, met Doris Duke. When asked to describe Duke's involvement in the creation of Shangri La, he replied that she "was constantly on the job and took great interest in every tree, every leaf, twig, shrub. She certainly did. I have never seen a girl take the interest that she did and she knew what she wanted."<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps the most successful aspect of Shangri La's design is its understated architectural plan. Together, Wyeth and Duke decided that there should be few structural and decorative embellishments. This approach allows Shangri La's two "stars," the surrounding landscape and Duke's Islamic art collection, to shine. Indeed, it is the Islamic works of art embedded within the estate—and the way Duke chose to display them—that truly define Shangri La's unique character.

*Detail of the decorative niche (maşab) from the Quwwatli interior, now part of the Baby Turkish room. A prominent feature of historic Syrian interiors was an elaborate wall niche where cherished objects could be displayed. The niches were often highly ornate themselves, an effect created by juxtaposing different media such as wood, marble, and ceramic.*





left and above  
*Details of the carved and painted wood panels originally in the Quwwatli house, now in the Baby Turkish Room.*

Shuzo Uemoto

*The Quwwatli home in Damascus, c. 1920, pieces of which became part of the Turkish and Baby Turkish Rooms at Shangri La. The Quwwatlis were among the richest merchants in Damascus and owned at least four homes within the walls of the old city:*



*Because the preexisting spaces could not accommodate all of the wood and ceiling paneling that were part of the Quwwatli interior, Doris Duke decided to outfit two adjacent rooms at Shangri La rather than rebuild the existing structure. She named these rooms the Turkish and Baby Turkish Rooms. Though the interiors are actually Syrian in origin, Duke was probably referring to the Ottoman dynasty's rule of Damascus from their capital in Istanbul, Turkey:*

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