

Sheikh Saoud bin Mohammed bin Ali Al-Thani

AN HOMAGE TO A VISIONARY BUILDER OF COLLECTIONS

Qatar is an astonishing country. Barely the size of a piece of confetti in a geographical atlas, its influence and standing is global. Its ruler and its leaders strive for excellence and demand high accomplishment in the governance of their land, qualities that have become all too rare in the Western world.

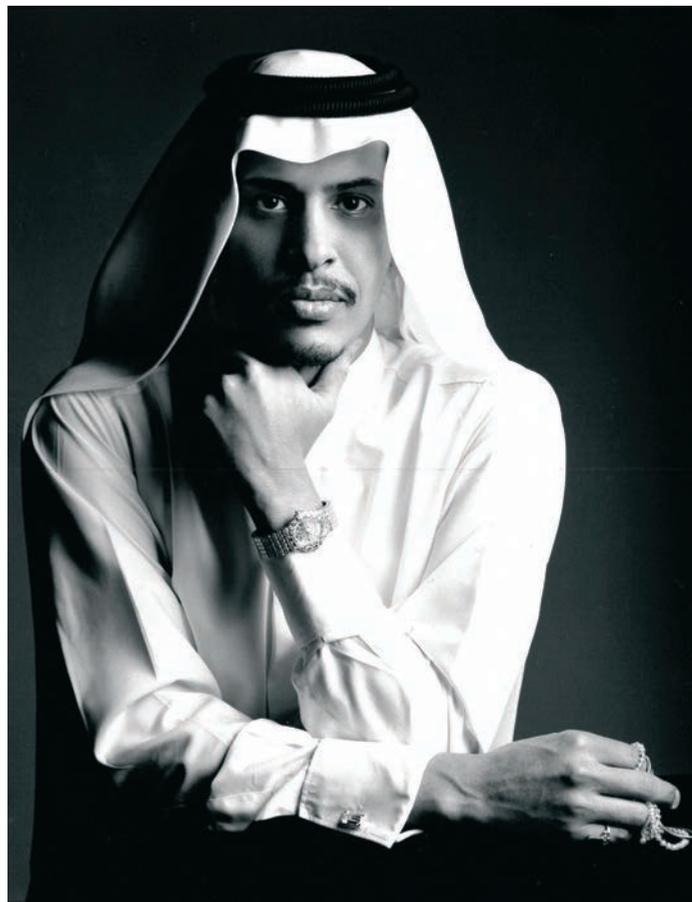
Sheikh Saoud, a close relative of the current emir, was the perfect realization of this spirit. He had a true gift, a vocation even, and one can say without exaggeration that he was entirely absorbed by it. He lived for art and was unquestionably the greatest collector of his time. But he was far more than that. All too often, private collections are ephemeral creations that ultimately go nowhere and are dissolved when their owners pass on. Sheikh Saoud, on the other hand, leaves great achievements behind, but his sudden and premature disappearance means that some of his work remains unfinished.

The colossal means put at his disposition by the Qatari nation during the time he directed its Ministry of Culture combined with his innate talent and the speed with which he made decisions made it possible for Sheikh Saoud to assemble major collections of global significance in record time. These were intended to serve as the foundations for the creation of museums that would have made Doha the unrivaled cultural center of the Middle East. Unfortunately 2005 marked the end of his official position, and a freeze was put on the many extraordinary and unique cultural projects he had initiated. In his vision for these, he was a universalist and his activities and knowledge extended to all areas of human creativity, from the civilizations of antiquity to contemporary art. He was a notable autodidact and quickly learned the many details of the various fields he immersed himself in. His memory, particularly his visual memory, was infallible. He was a tireless worker and a great creative spirit.

His magnum opus is probably the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, the collection of which, in a veritable tour de force, he assembled in barely eight years. He was personally involved in all of its projects, and, to give credit where credit is due, it was Sheikh Saoud who provided Chinese-American architect I. M. Pei with the source of inspiration for the museum's edifice, that being the ablution fountain at Cairo's Ibn Tulun mosque, the purity of line and subtle volumes of which the Sheikh, a great lover of architecture, found especially pleasing. Doha also has him to thank for the Jean-Nouvel-designed Burj Doha—certainly one of the most significant high-rise buildings in the Gulf States—which faces the museum on the city's waterfront promenade.

Yet another major project he was active in bringing to fruition was the Al Wabra Wildlife Preservation, which he modestly referred to as his "farm." This is a world-class scientific center in the middle of the desert where some of the world's foremost zoologists, veterinarians, and ornithologists work on ways of saving animal species threatened with extinction and developing means of reintroducing them into their native habitats.

Sheikh Saoud had a passionate interest in all branches of the natural sciences, whether botany, mineralogy, or paleontology. Open as he was to so many disciplines, he was eminently accessible to all those who shared his passion for art, whether they were humble or wealthy. He had a great sense of humor and a keen mind, and he was a faithful friend and altruist, although he was sometimes reclusive and melancholic, like eagles who soar far above the rest so often



are. He was extremely discrete and far more preoccupied with his work than with the promotion of his image. If he made a serious mistake, it was in this. The international media did not understand the man and utterly failed to recognize his motivations. Avid as they always are for the sensational, they treated him harshly when they should have lauded the nobility of his undertakings. Qatar and its domestic affairs have nothing to do with London, Paris, and New York, and it was easy for them to be spiteful.

Despite what some have said, it is a fact that Sheikh Saoud always paid his bills. It was only a question of time. A buyer of this caliber, who supported entire markets, deserved more respect than was often accorded to him. Especially some major auction houses that took so much advantage of his passion for art, driving him to the highest bids, could have been more lenient and patient. One should not kill the goose that lays the golden eggs.

Sheikh Saoud was working on the creation of an ethnographic museum in Doha—a first for his country. Will this museum ever see the light of day? His exceptional collection survives him, a reflection of this unusually gifted man's vision and taste. It represents a fabulous and significant patrimony that it is hoped the nation of Qatar will look after. Perhaps the Sheikh's children will pick up the torch and carry on their father's work. This young and brilliant Qatari generation has been educated at the best universities and is well equipped to manage such an important cultural heritage, so anything is possible.

There is hope for the future.

Jacques Billen