

## Sheikh Mohammed Rashid Al-Thani on His Mission to Bring Arab and Islamic Art to NYC

by [AMANDA RANDONE](#)

*Sheikh Mohammed Rashid Al-Thani's mission to bring Arab and Islamic art to New York City goes beyond the walls of his downtown space.*

In the window of a designer boutique located on a quaint sidewalk in lower Manhattan, flanked by the arteries of city traffic that flow up and down Sixth and Seventh avenues, hangs a Moroccan *djellaba*. Its silky material and gradient colorway – fading from blue to green to white – catches the eye of New Yorkers as they stroll by. The garment appears perfectly placed in its fashionable setting while also visibly from elsewhere. It's no coincidence that across the street is the recently opened Institute of Arab and Islamic Art (IAIA), an independent, non-profit hub that fosters an artistic and cultural dialogue between New York City and the Arab and Muslim worlds.

“It’s a beautiful thing to be present in New York,”

says Qatari-born Sheikh Mohammed Rashid Al-Thani, IAIA’s founding director. Al-Thani

opened the organization’s permanent space on Manhattan’s historic Christopher Street late last year with the mission to expose international audiences to the depths and complexities of cultures at risk of being oversimplified. This is accomplished through multidisciplinary art exhibitions (on view over the summer was work by the late abstract and gestural Iranian painter Behjat Sadr) and public educational programming (this includes visits from university students and professors, Rumi poetry readings in both Farsi and Arabic, self-publishing workshops, and more).

But it’s the *djellaba* in the window across the street that best illustrates the institute’s ambitious *raison d’être*. Though Al-Thani is shy to admit it – he is an observant and humble 30-something member of the Qatari royal family, wary of diverting attention away from the IAIA – he designed the garment himself under the label Qaafla (which translates to caravan, the main form of trade at the height of Muslim civilization). Al-Thani explains that he travels to great lengths sourcing fabrics from Italy, France, Japan and beyond, which he brings to artisans in Marrakech, who then produce traditional *djellabas* and kaftans with a modern twist. A handful of them are displayed when you enter the institute, alongside books, accessories, and decorative objects such as authentic Fayoum pottery and handcrafted mules from Egypt. To see his mission transcend these four walls and reach a local boutique, or the homes and closets of inspired visitors, reminds Al-Thani of why he started this



venture: “A lot of stereotypes are that art from the region is either decorative or political. It doesn’t have to be either.”

Al-Thani is a graduate of Georgetown University and the University of London Institute in Paris where he wrote his dissertation on Fauvism and Cubism. He was a curator at the Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, and the Museum of Islamic Art, both in Doha, and has published books on Arab and Islamic art. Al-Thani was initially inspired to bring his professional passions to New York back in 2014 when he noticed that although there were commercial entities elevating the talents of Arabs and Muslims (he cites the Leila Heller Gallery on the Upper East Side as an example), there was not a lot being done on an institutional level. With guidance from industry veterans like Simon Castets of the Swiss Institute, art dealer and gallerist Jeffrey Deitch, and contemporary media artist Walid Raad, Al-Thani launched the IAIA’s temporary location in 2017 in the downtown neighborhood of Little Italy. That same year, America’s infamous Muslim Ban was put into effect, prohibiting travel and refugee resettlement from predominantly Muslim countries, further highlighting the need for a place like the IAIA, which relies entirely on the support of donors to operate.

“There are so many people from the Muslim community who are active participants in a greater America... so many people who come from a civilization that I am part of, and they are very much American because they were born here or their parents were born here. So to see that there was all of a sudden this ban and this division happening on a larger platform was tough,” he recalls. “For it to happen that we opened [the IAIA] at that time – even better, so people can understand that we’re not any different from them. We’re humans.”

Five years later, Al-Thani opened the doors to the institute’s current West Village home. Even the facade has been turned into a work of art, constructed from a series of aluminum panels with cut-out patterns designed by Brooklyn-based sculptor Pooneh Maghazehe. At the center of this fixture is the image of a horseshoe encircling a portrait of Seabiscuit, the champion thoroughbred. The motif pays homage to the building’s history as the former carriage house where blacksmiths made shoes for the legendary racehorse. It’s also a symbol of good luck for the building’s future as the new site of the IAIA. Once this exterior was complete, the location’s inaugural exhibition honoring the late Indian artist Rummana Hussain began, part of which was an installation of rusty iron objects and tools forming Arab and Urdu-like calligraphy on the wall. Among those objects, by spine-tingling chance, was a horseshoe.

“That show was beautiful,” Al-Thani says. “The questions that [Hussain] asks about the role of women in society and how they’re continuously sidelined, and how a lot of decisions are made on their behalf by men, these issues are also happening in the US. It also showcased that, it might be in India, or Beirut, or Qatar, but we live in these parallel universes where so much of what we go through as a community is very similar to what other marginalized communities go through in larger western nations. So that was really impactful.”

Shortly after the opening, three older Jewish women visited the institute and were stunned by an excerpt shared from one of Hussain’s performances titled, “Is it what you think?” The text is a bold exploration of the artist’s own identity as a Muslim woman that speaks more broadly to the experience of being female in modern society.

“They read it and they were so moved by it. They were like, ‘This is now, this is us.’ So these things keep you going, that educational component and how we are influencing people’s perspectives and changing them. It’s so special,” Al-Thani says.

Prior to its Christopher Street move, the IAIA hosted memorable shows and artworks, such as never-before-seen drawings and kaftans by the Lebanese artist Huguette Caland in 2018. Meanwhile, a 2017 exhibit delved into the influential relationship between geometry and Islamic architecture through pieces by Indian artists Zarina Hashmi (known professionally as Zarina) and Nasreen Mohamedi, along with Palestinian-Saudi artist Dana Awartani, and the Iranian artist Monir Farmanfarmaian. The institute’s unbridled celebration of these female figures is perhaps a testament to Al-Thani’s upbringing surrounded by strong women. He speaks proudly about his six sisters, sharing that one of them just started her PhD at the University of Southern California in education development. Another holds a senior position at QatarEnergy. Another works for the Ministry of Defense. He can go on, but stops himself to turn the attention back, as always, to the institute.

This work requires Al-Thani to be mostly in New York, which is thousands of miles away from where he grew up in Qatar (Al-Thani spent many holidays with his maternal grandmother in Abu Dhabi as well). When asked how this shapes his idea of home, Al-Thani reaches for a book from the display area by the entrance to answer the question. He opens it to an image of Zarina’s *Home is a Foreign Place*, which depicts 36 woodcut prints drawn from old floor plans. This is him in a nutshell, Al-Thani asserts with a hint of melancholy in his voice, adding that Zarina created the piece while being evicted from her New York apartment. “I have a home here, I have a home in Doha with my family, but I’m part of a larger civilization. When I walk in Delhi or in Agra and see those remarkable examples of Islamic architecture, that’s home. When I’m walking the streets of Egypt, it feels like home. The call for prayer is also home. When you’re in Istanbul, or you’re in Indonesia, and you see veiled women walking, these things evoke this idea of home in you.”

In New York, however, Al-Thani believes that home is what he makes of it. When visitors come to his private residence, they are welcomed by their host donning one of his Moroccan-made kaftans. They smell *oud* mixed with the aroma of Arabic coffee brewing. They eat dates. This is the warm culture that Al-Thani seeks to introduce to the city in more public ways, and being unattached to any particular place has proven helpful in the pursuit of this goal. “In the work I’m doing, it’s important. Maybe I started this because I have this capacity to be sensitive and to feel I’m part of a community even if I don’t live there. This idea of belonging is so central when you’re part of this larger Islamic civilization. It’s a beautiful thing.”