



GULBENKIAN, CALOUSTE

GULBENKIAN, CALOUSTE (b. Constantinople, 23 March 1869; d. Lisbon, 20 July 1955; [Figure 1](#)), Armenian oil financier, art collector, and philanthropist.

Calouste Gulbenkian was the eldest son of Sarkis, an importer-exporter, and Dirouhi, who was said to have descended from Persian Armenians. His father's standing in Ottoman society offered young Calouste an excellent education in Armenian, French, and English. In 1883, he studied in Marseille before moving to London to study applied sciences at King's College, London, from 1884 to 1887.

In 1888, Gulbenkian took a formative trip to [Baku](#), a center of oil production in the Russian Empire. He collected his impressions of the nascent [oil industry](#) and techniques for oil production, refinery, and transport in an article called "La Transcaucasie et le pétrole russe," which appeared in *Revue des deux Mondes* in May 1891. Later that year, the article was expanded into a book, *La Transcaucasie et la péninsule d'Apchéron: souvenirs de voyage*. In addition to his examination of the oil industry, Gulbenkian included a chapter on the carpets and textiles of Persia, Turkey, and the Caucasus, foreshadowing an element of the extensive art collection he would amass later in life.

In the late 1890s, Gulbenkian may have been offered the oil [concession](#) in Persia, but considering the investment too uncertain, he declined the offer, leading [William Knox D'Arcy](#), who became the founder of the [Anglo-Persian Oil Company](#) (APOC), to take the concession in 1901 (Hewins, pp. 67-69). The early twentieth century was a time of tremendous growth for the oil industry,



because of the increasingly more widespread use of oil for [lighting](#) and the automobile. Gulbenkian's interest lay in helping those fortunate enough to have struck oil find the capital necessary to exploit their claim commercially, either by putting them in contact with private investors or by helping them launch new companies on the London stock market. Although he had a close working relationship with Henri Deterding of Royal Dutch-Shell from the early 1900s until 1925, Gulbenkian retained his independence and was never a salaried employee of any oil company (Yergin, p. 202).

Although his oil interests extended to the United States, Mexico, Romania, and Venezuela, the most significant of his orchestrations came in 1912 with the creation of the Turkish Petroleum Company (TPC), a consortium of banks and oil companies—Deutsche Bank, Royal Dutch-Shell, and the National Bank of Turkey, which Gulbenkian had founded in 1909—that secured exclusive oil exploration and development rights over Mesopotamia (Yergin, p. 187). In 1914, Gulbenkian agreed to reduce his share in the TPC to five percent so as to ease the entry of the APOC into the TPC consortium. The arrangement was later enshrined in the Red Line Agreement of 1928, a landmark in the history of the international oil industry. When oil finally flowed in 1935, Gulbenkian became known as “Mr. Five Percent” (Hewins, p. 137).

Gulbenkian's career as a diplomat developed in tandem with his commercial interests. In 1909, after a coup d'état overthrew Sultan 'Abd-al-Ḥamid II, he became the financial advisor to the Ottoman legations in London and Paris. In 1920, he took on a similar role as the economic counselor to the Persian legation in Paris. This appointment formed part of France's attempt to secure the North Persian oil concession for itself. Although Gulbenkian liaised between French aspirants and Persian ministers, such as Prince [Firuz Mirzā Noṣrat-al-Dawla Farmānfarmā](#) and Timurtāš, his plans for a Franco-Russian-Persian consortium for North Persian oil never materialized (interviews).

During World War II, Gulbenkian, in his role as economic counselor to neutral Iran, followed the Iranian legation to Vichy France. Once Iran entered the war on the side of the Allies in 1942, Gulbenkian's position in Vichy France was compromised and he was forced to leave with the Iranian legation. He fled to neutral Portugal in April 1942 (Perdigão, p. 201).

Gulbenkian kept his position as advisor to Iran until 1951. A year earlier, the shah had sent 'Ali Sohayli, the Iranian ambassador to France, to Portugal to ask for Gulbenkian's advice on nationalizing the oil industry. Gulbenkian



convinced the shah that collaborating with, rather than resisting, the world's leading oil companies was the right approach for the country. The following year, however, Moḥammad Moṣaddeq came to power, nationalized the oil industry, and dismissed both Gulbenkian and his son Nubar, the economic attaché to the Iranian embassy in London, from their positions (N. Gulbenkian, p. 228).

Gulbenkian's association with Iran was not limited to oil and diplomacy. Over the course of his life, he assembled a private collection of over 6,000 pieces of art: painting, sculpture, furniture, tapestry, ceramics, silverwork, and coins from antiquity to the twentieth century. From 1927, he housed his acquisitions in Paris at his home at 51, Avenue d'Iéna (Perdigão, p. 179).

He also boasted many pieces of Persian art, including a significant collection of manuscripts and bindings. Gulbenkian was particularly interested in Persian brocades, faïence, ceramics, textiles, and velvets, as well as in Persian and Indo-Persian carpets (Baetjer and Draper, pp. 52-84; Goffen, pp. 161-79). Highlights from his collection of Persian art include a sixteenth-century silk carpet from the imperial workshop in Tabriz, believed to be from the tomb of [Imam Reżā](#) in Mašhad; illuminated drawings, miniatures, and printed books from the twelfth to the twentieth century from [Shiraz](#), Tabriz, [Herat](#), and [Bukhara](#); and the *Anthology*, a manuscript composed of thirty-six works of prose and poetry, which were copied in 1410 and 1411 for Eskandar Solṭān b. 'Omar Šayḳ b. Timur, grandson of Tamerlane (Perdigão, p. 148).

Calouste Gulbenkian's entire art collection is now housed at the Calouste Gulbenkian Museum in Lisbon. The museum is part of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, established in 1956, to support charity, arts, education, and science initiatives in more than seventy countries (Conlin, 2010, p. 287). In Iran, the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation worked to preserve the cultural heritage of the Armenian community of New [Julfa](#) in the late 1960s until 1979 and founded the country's only department of Armenian Language and Literature, at the University of Isfahan in 1974 (see [ISFAHAN xv. EDUCATION AND CULTURAL AFFAIRS](#)).



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