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La peinture persane: Une introduction by Oleg Grabar

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Oleg Grabar, *La peinture persane: une introduction*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1999, 172 pp., 16 black-and-white illustrations, bibliography, and index.

In his most recent book, Oleg Grabar turns to the subject of Persian painting from the period between the twelfth and the late seventeenth century. Although book painting is his focus, Grabar also examines other forms – the codex-format album and the single-sheet painting or drawing – and media – ceramics and wall painting. True to the brief for the series titled *Islamiques* (edited by Dominique and Janine Sourdel and François Déroche) described on the book's jacket, the author's objectives are to present an art tradition in a concise synthesis, to propose new methods of approach, and to frame questions for the art tradition's study. Hence two kinds of reader are envisaged: the non-specialist eager to learn about an art tradition, and the specialist who will respond to the intellectual charges defined by its author. Despite the series' tight constraints on length and illustration and the demand for a wide scope, Grabar succeeds in introducing a medium that has continued to attract scholarly attention since the early years of the twentieth century and that has since grown in many new directions of inquiry. Grabar's book is lively and readable; it will surely pique the interest of both intended sets of readers.

The book is conceived as a collection of thematic essays. This is an innovative approach for the history of a visual tradition whose introductory volumes – for example Basil Gray's *Persian Painting* (1961), Norah M. Titley's *Persian Miniature Painting and Its Influence on the Art of Turkey and India* (1983), B. W. Robinson's *Fifteenth-Century Persian Painting* (1991), and Sheila R. Canby's *Persian Painting* (1993) – typically arrange their material by geographical region and a chronology which follows a dynastic sequence. Although Grabar's choice of objects does not stray too far from a corpus of works made canonical through repeated publication, he asks highly original questions of them. His decision to structure the book as a series of thematic essays, a shift of balance from all comparable introductions to Persian painting, affords him the opportunity not only to review the major historical lines and subject matters of painting (Chapters Three and Four) culled from a rich body of scholarship but also to address other dimensions of the material.

One of those other dimensions is the historiographic, and it is considered first. Here Grabar turns to factors that may have fostered the increased interest in Persian painting, *viz.* its aesthetic appeal to European artists of the vanguard in the late nineteenth through the early twentieth centuries and the rise of the private collector. He sketches

the social milieu of early collectors and describes how a ground swell of interest was transferred to the public forum by means of the exhibition. The forces of collector and exhibition, when triangulated with the market, produced the forward movement that sustained a relatively continuous visibility of Persian painting and the arts of the book. Another implication of this socioeconomic formation is that the exhibition's organization reproduced the market's ordering of material, mainly its insistent emphasis on taxonomy. Grabar is able to identify the continuation of taxonomic method, made manifest by connoisseurship (presumably used in the sense of close visual analysis), until the present day. The shortcomings of this method and the problems its practitioners confront when they try to describe their complex visual analysis through general statements lead Grabar to criticize them gently and then move on to define what he considers the field's new priorities to be, which he terms archaeological, semiotic, and historical/aesthetic. The archaeological might be reduced to the physical and material elements of the painting and its book, basically an expansion of a codicological method. He also calls for many more monographic studies of single manuscripts or of groups of like texts (*e.g.*, the *Shāhnāma* of Firdawsi and the *Khamsa* of Nizami). By semiotics, Grabar refers principally to studies of word and image, a subject of growing interest, but one still very much in need of the literary historian's collaboration. The promise of semiotics lies in the development of a language by which Persian painting might be discussed and understood. The union of the archaeological and the semiotic allows for a true historical/aesthetic analysis, one that would locate the practice and reception of Persian painting in relationship to other cultural practices.

The second chapter, covering sources and resources, is a further meditation on the shape and culture of the field. Grabar uses an intriguing description of an encounter with a Persian painting as a way to introduce factors that place limitations on a painting's visibility, including its small size, minutely executed detail, indeed, its very location in the pages of a book where a painting is uncovered or discovered in the process of turning pages. The object's fragility similarly circumscribes its exposure and use. Some of these physical elements and the ways in which they constrain access are no less true today despite changes in the historical and social context of viewing the book. By addressing recurring private and intimate aspects of experience across history, Grabar hints at other forces which have placed constraints on the study of Persian painting. If one were to list these forces, some of them would be the translation of a private viewing experience into a private language in the

process of writing; institutional and sociopolitical factors; the momentum created by particular intellectual pursuits and methods. These issues are not identified to make an explicit criticism, but rather as a necessary step towards a deeper awareness of how Persian painting was and is studied. This goal of increasing a methodological consciousness is echoed by the chapter's principal content, an overview and assessment of materials available for the art historical study of Persian painting. Here Grabar reviews the various archaeological sites relevant to the study of wall painting (a subsidiary theme throughout his book), different textual sources, the manuscripts, and the collections in which they are housed. Each section, particularly the one on textual sources, merits a significantly expanded treatment. In the case of texts, further studies would not only flesh out the methodological issues and describe the literary nature, historical context, and interpretative limits of such sources, but would also suggest the untapped potential of under-utilized or entirely unexamined sources – there is a strong tendency to return to a small group of well known written sources – in addition to alternate ways of thinking about the entire corpus.

The final chapter, after the historical and contextual overview laid out in Chapter Three and the identification of the great themes of Persian painting presented in Chapter Four, deals with what is at present a fairly new line of questioning. It is the topic of an aesthetics of Persian painting, one addressed directly in very few scholarly articles.¹ Grabar has a long standing interest in aesthetics and has published two articles in recent years on this specific subject.² Here he explores two aspects of aesthetics, firstly, the objective of defining the formal characteristics of the painting tradition, a language that might be used to describe visual phenomena, and secondly, the concept of contemporary judgments, of a culture's internal views about art, of its language and criteria of appreciation and criticism.

Most interesting for this reviewer is the division of the final chapter into two basic parts, titled "constraints" and "values." Under "constraints" Grabar's major concern, although there are subsidiary ones as well, is to chart the forces which govern the visual outcome of a given painting, the various ways in which we might understand the terms and concepts of tradition, the role of materials, and the methods of training and transmission between successive generations of practitioners. Still other elements turn more directly toward the aesthetic, especially the linking of calligraphy to depiction (painting and drawing), a cultural concept whose manifold implications have been treated in recent years by several scholars. Each of the constraints

Grabar offers can be used to define the aesthetic characteristics, formal attributes, and physical properties of Persian painting, and hence to move toward a definition of the visual tradition's salient elements. The following section on values describes those concepts internal to a culture to which one could ultimately link the aesthetic qualities observed in the paintings. Thus Grabar builds a method into the chapter's structure, a means of bridging the gap between painting and the enigma of its historical context.

Perhaps the most important question to run throughout the book is one that turns on a paradox; it merits separate discussion here because the proper content of some of the book's chapters directly addresses it. Early on Grabar writes, "The power of Persian painting lies in the fact that in its greatest masterworks it could become universal, while at the same time deeply embedded in its own culture."³ Among the marks of its universality during the twentieth century are the collection and exhibition of Persian painting. Persian painting might also be understood to be "universal," although this is not explained by Grabar, because of its representational nature, because it involves figuration and the depiction of stories, stories whose specific content may elude us but whose storytelling visual components are unmistakable. But despite its exposure and perhaps even its curious appeal, and whichever visual features of the paintings are held to be characteristic of it in the popular imagination, somehow it has not entered the lexicon of a general history of art. In Grabar's words, Persian painting remains "poorly known"/"unrecognized" (*méconnu*), and at a later point in the book, he writes, "Finally, this painting has still not secured its place in the history of art. There are very few art historians who have made use of Persian painting in thinking about the arts."⁴ This is a large problem for a small book, but many of Grabar's questions, if not directly then tacitly, lead toward it. One could argue that the whole book is given form through the paradox.

The perceived asymmetry, or imbalance, between a painting tradition that is known to a wide public and the inability of its historical study to become global in disciplinary terms begs all kinds of other questions. Again, Grabar is quite restrained in pointing out the full range of potential causes for the discrepancy, but to be sure, the chapters on historiography and sources/resources do indeed explore some of its aspects. The advantage, in strictly disciplinary terms, of finding a place for the study of Persian painting under the umbrella of a history of art is clear. But the goal requires further thought from the art historian and a rephrasing of the question. Just how could a history of Persian painting be brought from its relative isolation into the

light of a wider intellectual consciousness? What are some of the problems that arise when one attempts to do so? In the bid to make a visual tradition accessible, what strategies should be used and choices taken to make the paintings familiar, within reach?

The perils of that project are clear enough, especially if we re-read the lines of early students of Persian painting, those who wanted to bring Persian painting up to par with the European tradition by emphasizing the Persian tradition's masters – and comparing them to the likes of Memling and Raphael – and by organizing its material into schools. The results were borrowed conceptual paradigms and methods of inquiry almost always inappropriate to the particular historical circumstances under which Persian painting was made and viewed. While those paradigms were subjected to a slow and gradual critique at their source, they were rarely questioned when applied to the study of Persian painting. Perhaps now there is a way to make this visual tradition comprehensible while still maintaining the vigor of its difference, its historical and cultural peculiarities, in writing about it? The full promise of Grabar's book will be realized through the responses of researchers and, one hopes, by Grabar himself, to the questions that he raises in it.

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- 1 For example Armenag Sakisian, "Esthétique et terminologie persanes," *Journal Asiatique* 226, 1 (January-March 1935), 144–50; A. S. Melikian-Chirvani, "The Aesthetics of Islam," in *Treasures of Islam*, ed. Toby Falk (London: Sotheby's/Philip Wilson Publishers, 1985), 20–24; and Yves Porter, "From the 'Theory of the Two Qalams' to the 'Seven Principles of Painting': Theory, Terminology, and Practice in Persian Classical Painting," *Muqarnas* 17 (2000): 109–18.
- 2 Oleg Grabar, "Toward an Aesthetic of Persian Painting," in *The Art of Interpreting*, ed. Susan C. Scott, Papers in Art History 9 (University Park, Penn: Department of Art History, Pennsylvania State University, 1995), 131–62, and a second version, "Persian Miniatures: illustrations or paintings," in *The Persian Presence in the Islamic World*, ed. Richard G. Hovannisian and Georges Sabagh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 199–217.
- 3 "La force de la peinture persane réside dans le fait que dans ses plus grands chefs-d'oeuvre elle a pu devenir universelle, tout en restant profondément ancrée dans sa propre culture" (p. 3).
- 4 "Enfin, cette peinture n'a pas encore acquis un droit de cité dans l'histoire de l'art. Rares parmi les spécialistes de ce domaine ont été ceux qui ont utilisé la peinture persane dans leurs réflexions sur les arts" (p. 38).