

IN MEMORIAM: OLEG GRABAR (1929–2011)

The Islamic art and architecture community mourns the loss this year of one of the field's most influential and insightful scholars. Oleg Grabar, professor emeritus of the School of Historical Studies at the Institute for Advanced Study, and Aga Khan Professor, Emeritus, at Harvard University, passed away at his home in Princeton, N.J., on January 8, 2011, at the age of eighty-one. Grabar, who taught at the Harvard Department of History of Art and Architecture for twenty-one years (1969–90), was instrumental in founding Harvard's Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture, and there are few, if any, Islamicists who have not profited from the scholarly contributions of this extraordinary man, larger than life. He was the first Aga Khan Professor of Islamic Art at Harvard (1980–90), and, upon retiring from that position, joined the faculty of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, where he remained until his second retirement, in 1998. He was the founding editor of *Muqarnas*—the first nine volumes (1983–92) of which were edited by him before I inherited this responsibility in 1993 as the second Aga Khan Professor. It is thus especially befitting to commemorate Professor Grabar in this volume. We owe him an enormous debt of gratitude for his many contributions to the field at large.

Two special festschrift volumes dedicated to the founding editor of *Muqarnas* have been published thus far, each accompanied by his bibliography until the respective publication dates of those volumes. The first one, volume 10, published in 1993, was edited by Margaret Ševčenko, with whom he so much enjoyed collaborating. Subtitled *Essays in Honor of Oleg Grabar, Contributed by His Students*, that volume paid tribute to his retirement from Harvard. The second one, volume 25, published fifteen years later in 2008 and entitled *Frontiers of Islamic Art and Architecture: Essays in Celebration of Oleg Grabar's Eightieth Birthday*, was co-

edited by myself and Julia Bailey. That honorary volume, a testament to his continuing post-retirement intellectual productivity and inspirational status, also commemorated the thirtieth anniversary of the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture. To lend unity to its contents and demonstrate Grabar's resounding impact on expanding the scope of the Islamic field far beyond its former spatial and temporal limits, we asked his students and colleagues to submit articles that would directly engage with his scholarship and interests. In the present volume we pay yet another tribute to Oleg Grabar by publishing his last lecture, delivered on November 25, 2010, soon after he received the Chairman's Award from the Aga Khan Award for Architecture in Doha (November 23, 2010). This award acknowledged and celebrated his lifelong contributions to the study of the Islamic world's rich architectural heritage. It also recognized his commitment to greatly enhancing the understanding of that heritage by emphasizing its geographical and chronological diversity, as well as contextualizing it within its political, social, economic, and cultural settings.¹ An updated bibliography of Professor Grabar's publications since 2007 appears after this Editor's Foreword; the text of his lecture can be found in the "Notes and Sources" section, on page 283.

In addition to publishing his last lecture and bibliography, presenting a brief biographical memoir is in order.² Oleg Grabar was born on November 3, 1929, in Strasbourg, France, where his father (who emigrated from the Russian empire) taught art history at the University of Strasbourg. As the son of the formidable André Grabar, the eminent historian of Byzantine art who published over thirty books, he was raised almost from the cradle to be an art historian. Thanks to his upbringing, he savored throughout his career a special fascination with the Byzantine and late antique heritage of the Mediterranean world. This lifelong fascination

extended to his explorations of early Islamic art at the beginning of his career, with seventh- to eighth-century Umayyad architecture forming the core of his scholarship, even when it broadened later on to embrace a much wider spectrum.

Professor Grabar's initial schooling was in France, where he attended the Lycées Claude Bernard and Louis-le-Grand in Paris, and received three *certificats de licence* from the University of Paris, the first in 1948, in Ancient History, and the other two in 1950, in Medieval History and Modern History. After moving to the United States in 1948, when his father was appointed to Dumbarton Oaks, the center for Byzantine studies in Washington D.C., he also earned an A.B. *magna cum laude* in Medieval History from Harvard University, graduating in 1950. The impact of the French educational system, however, would never leave him. As he told me on one occasion, he was taught early on that one should be able to make any argument, regardless of content, through the structured tripartite composition of an essay, with an introduction, argumentation, and conclusion. It has been noted that this method made a lasting imprint on his lectures and publications, which were often arranged in three parts, with various points and arguments. As a fluent native speaker of French and Russian, he fruitfully interacted with scholars from those countries, even though he was based in the United States for the rest of his academic and professional life.

Grabar continued his higher education at Princeton University, where he began to develop a passion for Islamic art, obtaining his M.A. (1953) and Ph.D. (1955) in Oriental Languages and Literatures and the History of Art. He taught at the University of Michigan from 1954 to 1969, first as an instructor (1954), and then as Assistant Professor of Near Eastern Art and Near Eastern Studies (1955–59), Associate Professor (1959–64), and Professor (1964–69). During those years, he served as Honorary Curator of Near Eastern Art for the Freer Gallery of Art of the Smithsonian Institution (1958–69); Director of the American School of Oriental Research in Jerusalem (1960–61), subsequently becoming the School's Vice President (1967–75); director of the excavations at Qasr al-Hayr al-Sharqi sponsored by the University of Michigan and Harvard (1964–72); and Near Eastern editor of *Ars Orientalis* (1957–70). In 1969,

Grabar joined the Harvard faculty as Professor of Fine Arts and was the first ever to teach Islamic art at the University. He later served as Chairman of the Department of Fine Arts (1977–82) and held the then newly created Aga Khan Professorship of Islamic Art from 1980 until his retirement from Harvard, when he joined the Institute for Advanced Study.

Grabar was the author of over twenty books (many of them translated into diverse languages) and more than 120 articles, eighty-three of which were reprinted in the four-volume collection *Constructing the Study of Islamic Art* (2005–6). He was primarily a medievalist, and his publications covered a wide variety of subjects, including early Islamic architecture, the architecture of Jerusalem under Islamic rule, Arabic and Persian painting, and Islamic ornament. Among his best-known books are *The Formation of Islamic Art* (1973), the collaborative two-volume *City in the Desert: Qasr al-Hayr East* (1978), *The Alhambra* (1978), *Epic Images and Contemporary History: The Illustrations of the Great Mongol Shahnama* (co-authored with Sheila Blair, 1980), *The Illustrations of the Maqamat* (1984), *The Art and Architecture of Islam 650–1250* (co-authored with Richard Ettinghausen, 1987; with a revised second edition published in 2001), *The Great Mosque of Isfahan* (1990), *The Mediation of Ornament* (1992), *The Shape of the Holy: Early Islamic Jerusalem* (1996), *The Dome of the Rock* (with Saïd Nuseibeh, 1996), *Mostly Miniatures: An Introduction to Persian Painting* (2000), *The Dome of the Rock* (2006), and *Masterpieces of Islamic Art: The Decorated Page from the 8th to the 17th Century* (2009).

Grabar's unpublished Princeton dissertation on the architecture and ceremonial of the Umayyad court exemplified his contextual approach to material culture, which was informed by his primarily historical training, at a time when the field of Islamic art was represented in the United States by a single luminary, Professor Richard Ettinghausen. Grabar's seminal work, *The Formation of Islamic Art*, is perhaps the masterpiece among his innumerable publications and a classic. On a personal note, I would like to point out that while I was a junior at Wesleyan University majoring in the history of late medieval and Renaissance art, this book captivated my imagination and was the sin-

gle most important factor that triggered my conversion to this newly budding field of inquiry. This sophisticated and inspired work, which evolved from the Baldwin Lectures Grabar delivered at Oberlin College in 1969, grew from his dissertation and early articles on the origins of Islamic art. In one obituary, it was judged “more a work of cultural than art history,” springing as it does “from a deeper familiarity with the thought-world of early medieval Islam than any of today’s Islamic art historians possess,” and revealing that he was “more interested in ideas and context than in the close-focus study of surface detail or indeed the objects themselves as works of art.” The same can be said of the majority of the eighty-three articles he chose to reprint as the cream of his oeuvre, in four volumes (the aforementioned *Constructing the Study of Islamic Art*) that “will arguably constitute his most influential legacy.”³

I should add that Grabar prided himself precisely on this particular approach in my first meeting with him years ago, in 1979, at his Fogg Museum office, when he was chairman of what was then the Fine Arts Department at Harvard University. Having just been accepted to the doctoral program there and at the Institute of Fine Arts, I was a novice trying to figure out which program might be more suitable to my interests. He helped me make up my mind with just a few words encapsulating the differences in methodological approach between himself and Professor Ettinghausen, whom he always admired, having collaborated with him for nearly thirty years in the preparation of their highly influential survey of Islamic art and architecture. He said: “If you wish to start with ideas and then choose relevant objects, come here to Harvard; but you should go to the Institute if you prefer to move from objects to ideas.” This succinct formulation convinced me that he was to become my mentor. Interestingly, the differences in approach diminished later on, as Grabar increasingly became fascinated with the aesthetics of Islamic art and its universal appeal, regardless of contextual specificity, an approach exemplified in *The Mediation of Ornament* and in his final book, *Masterpieces of Islamic Art*.

Through the originality and wide range of his prolific publications and almost five decades of teaching, Oleg Grabar was hugely influential in shaping and leaving an enduring mark on the fields of Islamic art, archi-

ture, and archaeology. He was one of Harvard’s most brilliant and cherished emeritus professors, and the academic world has lost one of the greatest and most charismatic teacher-lecturers of all time. His pioneering and pathbreaking scholarship was recognized through numerous prestigious awards, including the Giorgio Levi Della Vida Medal of the University of California, Los Angeles (1996); the Charles Lang Freer Medal (2001); the College Art Association Distinguished Lifetime Achievement Award for Writing on Art (2005); and, most recently, the Chairman’s Award of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture (2010). Grabar was a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the American Philosophical Society, and the Medieval Academy of America. He was also an honorary member of the Austrian Academy, a corresponding member of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres of the Institut de France, and a corresponding fellow of the British Academy. Preferring not to limit himself solely to the academic pursuits of teaching and publishing, he always engaged with what was going on in the world and sought to popularize the field of Islamic art through lectures, interviews, and films. He contributed to the “Orientalism” debate raised by Edward Said, with his balanced position that recognized the rigors and glories of earlier scholarship in the old-fashioned sense, but distanced himself in principled manner from the Orientalist legacy. Serving on the annual steering committee of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture over the years provided him with the chance to learn about contemporary Islamic architecture and to interact with architects, planners, and conservation specialists.

The global reach of Professor Grabar’s scholarly achievements had an impact not only on his own field but far beyond as well. He had a very special talent for making Islamic art and architecture seductive and attractive to non-specialists, thereby vastly broadening the recognition of the field within the two disciplines of Art History and Islamic Studies. He boldly posed sweeping questions and speculations about the nature, meaning, and dynamics of Islamic art at a time when so little was known about this languishing subject, due to the traditional bias in favor of “Western art.” In addition to cultivating world-class advanced scholarship and



Figs. 1 and 2. Professor Oleg Grabar delivering his lecture “On Knowledge and Education” after receiving the Chairman’s Award from the Aga Khan Award for Architecture in Doha, November 25, 2010.

research in the field of Islamic art, he asked questions that often challenged Euro-American perspectives. As many have noted, he used to teach graduate seminars on under-studied subjects, which then formed the basis of several books, such as those on the *Maqāmāt*, the Great Mongol *Shāhnāma*, and the Friday Mosque of Isfahan. It was also his habit to publish rapidly and move on to new subjects, for he did not at all mind changing or revising views that he had expounded in previous publications. His creative approaches made the field appear wide open to hugely exciting questions of cultural and social history and aesthetics, captivating the minds of generations of scholars and amateurs alike. Later in his career, he would become particularly enamored of the pure visual pleasure of objects. Such was his vivid imagination and playful mind that he hardly subscribed to a single method or subject. He was truly a Renaissance man.

Grabar’s mental agility and nondogmatic flexibility made him an extraordinarily inspiring mentor. He would encourage graduate students to work on entirely unexplored subjects because he was deeply concerned about shaping the parameters of a field whose rapid expansion both pleased and worried him. He expressed some of these mixed feelings in his last lecture, in which he addressed how information on Islamic art and architecture has exploded over the past thirty-five years, to such an extent that nobody can anymore claim to know about all Islamic art, and few dare to inquire about commonalities among “Morocco, Uzbekistan, and Malaysia.” In this lecture, he ruminated about the nature of knowledge, the systematic means of facilitating access to information with new technologies, and the dissemination of knowledge through different levels of education in the hope of transcending the “parochialism” of “local nationalisms” and promoting the “global human-



Fig. 3. Professor Grabar with four of his former students during the panel held after his lecture: (from left to right) Dr. Glenn D. Lowry, Director of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA); Renata Holod, College for Women Class of 1963 Professor, Department of the History of Art, University of Pennsylvania; Gülru Necipoğlu, Aga Khan Professor of Islamic Art, Department of History of Art and Architecture, Harvard University; and Dr. Mohammad al-Asad, Founder and Chairman of the Center for the Study of the Built Environment (CSBE) in Amman.

ism” he wished to preach. Titled “On Knowledge and Education,” the lecture he presented at the Aga Khan Award for Architecture ceremony in Doha soon before he passed away ended with the remark that the field poses an “exciting challenge” for those under fifty (figs. 1 and 2). As part of the award program, immediately after the lecture Professor Grabar was joined by four of his former students—Glenn Lowry, Renata Holod, Mohammad al-Asad, and myself—who engaged him in a conversation on the implications of his thoughts and on the subject of knowledge and education in general (figs. 3 and 4). I find it particularly appropriate to publish this final lecture in the present volume as a lasting memorial of Grabar’s parting thoughts on both the past and the future of the ever-growing field of Islamic art and architecture.

The last correspondence I had with Professor Grabar after the Doha meeting poignantly testifies to his unceasing interest in the future of the field and his own legacy, even as he was haunted by the fatigue and fear brought about by his failing heart. His words upon receiving volume 27 of *Muqarnas*, a few weeks before his demise, indicate his usual generosity, openness to criticism, and passionate enthusiasm for novel scholarship until the very end of his life:

Thank you for the new *Muqarnas*. You are really managing this beautifully and this volume illustrates new views on old issues, early Islam, Palermo, the muqarnas, and Akbar. I have only seen the titles and look forward to slow reading over the weeks to come. I see that my own views on the Dome of the Rock are being challenged... it is time for new generations to take over the field...



Fig. 4. Professor Grabar with Professor Necipoğlu and Dr. Al-Asad during the panel held after his lecture.

I had to give up our planned trip to Egypt, because I am too tired and lack the energy for reasons which are not clear and a bit frightening” (December 19, 2010).

As student, colleague, and successor of Professor Grabar, a mentor who touched all stages of my adult life, I experienced firsthand his profound and far-reaching impact on our field; he trained hundreds of students, many of whom went on to become leading scholars, educators, and curators around the world, particularly in the United States. He brought passion and vision to his work, and his expansive personality, generosity of spirit, collegiality, conviviality, and humor were truly infectious. I consider it a privilege to have learned from and interacted with him. I cannot find enough words to express my indebtedness to and affection for this remarkable individual, who never ceased to be my nourishing mentor, as well as my sharpest critic. His untimely departure was a brutal shock to us all and caused a great

sense of loss, depriving the field of one of its strongest advocates. It is through the lasting legacy of his works and our shared remembrances that he shall continue to live, guide, and inspire us for years to come. A public memorial service and reception organized by the Aga Khan Program at Harvard University and the Historians of Islamic Art Association took place on Saturday, April 23, at The Memorial Church in Harvard Yard, and the personal remembrances presented by family, students, and friends on that occasion are posted on the AKPIA website.⁴ Professor Grabar shall be greatly missed and the field will not be the same without him.

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NOTES

1. For the Chairman's Award citation and Grabar's biography, see *Implicate & Explicate: Aga Khan Award for Architecture 2010*, ed. Mohsen Mostafavi (Baden, Switzerland: Lars Müller Publications, 2011), 304–35.
2. I have consulted several published obituaries, including the most comprehensive one, found on the website of the Institute for Advanced Study: "Oleg Grabar 1929–2011 (Princeton, NJ–Monday, January 10, 2011)," <http://www.ias.edu/news/press-releases/2011/01/10/grabar>.
3. Obituary, Oleg Grabar, *Times of London*, January 2011, available online at <http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=H-Islamart&month=1102&week=c&msg=ZHwJ3PumVkywI225Kwqqpw>.
4. <http://agakhan.fas.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=k69205&pageid=icb.page409372>; for further remembrances, see <http://memoryog.tumblr.com/page/2>.

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