

*Robert Hillenbrand*

**Obituary**

**Oleg Grabar, Distinguished Historian of Islamic Art**



The passing of Oleg Grabar marks a sea-change in the history of Islamic art, for he was its last renaissance man. He did more than anyone else in post-war times to secure widespread recognition for this field in the community of art historians, with its stubborn, indefensible but unrepentant bias in favor of western art. He did so by lectures aimed at general as well as specialist audiences, by charismatic teaching, by a continuous flow of publications over a period of almost sixty years and by sheer force of personality. And he had plenty of charm; he knew how to get along with all sorts of people and find common ground, so that it was a pleasure to be in his company. His range of contacts outside his chosen field was formidable and mirrored the catho-

lic scope of his intellectual interests. His personality was expansive and generous; he was above all gregarious, and collegial to young and old alike. Not for him the proconsular manner. His conversation fizzed with ideas, many of them brilliant, profound and mind-expanding; and if some of them fell flat, there were plenty more to come. You always knew when he was in the room.

His particular genius was for teaching. Please read those six words again, or you are liable to miss the essence of the man. For his achievements as a teacher are liable to be unfairly overshadowed by his prodigious productivity as a publishing academic from the age of 23 onwards. He was a natural performer, perhaps not so much as a lecturer—though few scholars could more easily fill an auditorium—but rather in the free and easy atmosphere of a seminar or a general discussion, when he could turn on a sixpence and lead the debate into a totally unexpected direction. He had a well-developed sense of mischief, and was adept at deflating pomposity by a humorous aside. His giggle was infectious; there was often something of the little boy about him. He loved to bounce ideas back and forth and had a way of making students feel that they were equal partners in an intellectual adventure, and that what they had to say was worth hearing. The destination was not important; it was the journey itself that mattered. Every university student, one feels, should have a taste of this intoxicating intellectual excitement, and yet it is a depressingly rare experience. It was Grabar's playfulness, his intellectual agility and his generosity of spirit that captivated generations of students, many of whom took a course in Islamic art on the off chance and suddenly found themselves hooked. It was as if, almost before they knew what they were doing, they were launched on a doctorate—and Grabar supervised over sixty PhD theses.

This is yet another achievement that is hard to parallel, and it is worth asking how he did it. One after another of his doctoral students has reported in private or in public—most recently on the internet—what a pleasure and privilege it was to be taught by him. And since the relationship between supervisor and student is so often, it seems, made not in heaven but in hell, that is quite an achievement. Other supervisors might subject every sentence of a thesis to close scrutiny, red pen poised to skewer a mistake. Not Grabar. His *forte* was to inspire his students, to give them the sense of embarking on an exciting intellectual adventure. No spoon-feeding; he did them the honor of treating them as grown-ups. He could sketch the entire outline of a research project in a few visionary and beguiling sentences, spotlighting possibilities galore for future research and perhaps passing on, without fanfare, his own notes and references on the subject. Small wonder that many a student left the room walking on air. He had the priceless gift that is common to all great teachers, that of imparting self-belief, and hence self-confidence, to his students. That is a profoundly unegotistical achievement, and its impact can last a lifetime. People who have had such teachers—and many of us have had that experience at least once in the course of our schooling—never forget them.

Naturally enough, his students responded to him in kind. On occasion they expressed their appreciation for a memorable seminar by producing a one-off souvenir. Thus his seminar on Sasanian silver in the mid-1960s yielded a hunting plate with

Oleg's face superimposed on that of the royal horseman, while the beasts he was chasing bore the faces of the students themselves. Similarly, his legendary seminar on the Great Mongol *Shahnama* in the mid-1970s yielded a mock-up of one of the most celebrated images in the manuscript, Iskandar (Alexander the Great) before the Talking Tree, whose fruit was talking heads. The faces of the students in this seminar replaced these heads; Oleg's own face was superimposed on that of Iskandar; and a serendipitous metrical similarity between his name and that of the world conqueror allowed the text of the page to be adapted so that each reference to "Iskandar" was made to read "Ograbar." Later still, well into the 1980s, an Ottoman seminar resulted in the image of an Ottoman medal depicting a well-fleshed sultan being unobtrusively doctored so that on closer inspection it turned out to bear the familiar Grabar profile. These touching, light-hearted leg-pulls tell their own story of the affectionate interplay between Oleg and generations of his students.

For him, knowledge was a gift to be shared, not a possession to be hoarded. And that is how his vast fund of experience, his international network of contacts and the fruits of a lifetime of reading and research could in an instant be put at the disposal of a neophyte student—and thus change the whole trajectory of his or her professional life. And this was yet another area in which his success rate was phenomenal. Over the years he had the satisfaction of seeing dozens of those students finding employment in universities, museums and galleries across the world, particularly in the United States. No other scholar of Islamic art has come close to exerting this degree of influence on the development of the field, and doing so in such a personal way. And he nourished these relationships. He was brought up by his father to answer his correspondence by return, and he kept that impressive habit to the very end.

Although Grabar spent almost his entire professional life in the United States, taking degrees at Harvard and Princeton, he was born in Strasbourg, in northern France (3 November 1929) and his schooling was in that country, with two qualifications from the University of Paris in 1948 and 1950. Indeed, he never lost his slightly exotic accent. His writing bore the marks of the severe French educational system, with a typically tripartite arrangement of the argument, topped and tailed by introduction and conclusion: *thèse*, *antithèse*, *synthèse*. As a native speaker of French, moreover, he had effortless access to French academic circles, and indeed was as much a European as an American. He also spoke Russian easily, and happily mixed with Russian scholars. His father André had fostered this gift of tongues—Oleg described once how the languages spoken at the dinner table at home switched from one day to the next. Such anecdotes reveal that he was almost destined by birthright to be an art historian, though they also suggest that it was not plain sailing to have the doyen of Byzantine art historians for a father. At all events, the apple fell not far from the tree, and Oleg Grabar retained all his life an instinctive feel for Byzantine art. Indeed, that intuitive familiarity may have played its part in his choice of the Umayyad period, and hence the birth of Islamic art in the Near East, as the subject for his PhD at Princeton (completed in 1954 and surprisingly enough never published). It was a fateful choice that would determine the principal long-term trajectory of his scholarly career, from his first great article in 1959 on the Umayyad Dome of the Rock—a precocious mas-

terpiece that made his reputation—to a trio of books on the same subject published in the course of his last fifteen years. He matured early. Already by 1972 he was an absolute star. His lecture that year on the Kharragan tomb towers (which he never published) at the Oxford Congress of Persian Art was a sell-out, with scholars falling over themselves for a piece of him.

When one considers his career as a whole, it is the variety of his achievements that compels admiration. His was a restless spirit. Not content with an exceptionally full life as a teaching and publishing academic, he eagerly embraced unusual challenges that came his way, to all of which he brought his customary efficiency and people skills. These tasks included heading a college house at Harvard for a while, editing the two major journals in his field for many years, running an Umayyad dig in Syria for seven years, making films, mounting an ambitious exhibition of pre-Mongol Persian art, editing the work of other scholars or ensuring that their work was published, and serving on the panel of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture. This last responsibility catapulted him into a world remote from academe, and he reveled in the opportunity it gave him to learn about modern Islamic architecture and to see how it flourished in the most out-of-the-way corners of the Muslim world. He valued the interaction with architects and planners, bankers and conservationists that the annual cycles of the Award brought.

His most lasting legacy is of course his published work, and it is worth reflecting on how it was that he achieved so much across such a wide range—a range that made him unique among Islamic art historians. That field has seen such exponential growth over the last thirty years that to keep up with its literature is now too much to expect of anyone. But the resultant increase in specialization inevitably entails the loss of those wide horizons over which Grabar presided so comfortably, indeed apparently without effort. He had an eagle eye for a promising but still under-researched subject, and it was his practice to publish his findings as soon as possible after he had done the necessary work. This can be seen for example in his book on the coinage of the Tulunids, the fruit of a busy summer at the American Numismatic Society in New York. He often chose for a graduate seminar a topic that promised well for a major publication; examples include the Friday mosque of Isfahan, Sasanian silver, the *Maqamat* and the Great Mongol *Shahnama*. Again and again he picked up a subject which might have seemed sufficiently familiar at the time—such as the Alhambra or the whole issue of ornament—and trained a searchlight on it that quite transformed its character and revealed unsuspected riches. It seems that he never tried to write the definitive book on a topic, but instead typically summarized current scholarship, noted its weaknesses and took the subject a quantum leap further; and the way he did so left plenty of room for others to come after him. In contemplating such an output, one can only heave a sigh of relief that he never seriously pursued his ambition to write a book on the causes of the First World War.

In retrospect, the masterpiece among his books is perhaps *The Formation of Islamic Art*, a difficult book that takes no prisoners and is more suitable for a graduate than an undergraduate readership. Supple and sophisticated, dense in argument and rich in allusion and reference, it is more a work of cultural than art history. It springs

from a deeper familiarity with the thought-world of early medieval Islam than any of today's Islamic art historians possess, and it should be required reading for Islamic historians. Its foundations were laid not only in the work for his doctorate but at the outset of his teaching career, when the University of Michigan, making a fabulously far-sighted investment, gave him three years of very light duties so that he could immerse himself in an ambitious program of academic reading. He said later that those years laid the foundations for his entire scholarly career. He himself had a particularly soft spot for his book on the thirteenth-century illustrated manuscripts of the *Maqamat*, that masterpiece of salty and picaresque medieval Arabic literature. This monograph was the culmination of three decades and more of thinking, research and teaching on this remarkable body of material to which the legendary Kurt Weitzmann had directed him while he was still a graduate student. Grabar wrote several pioneering articles on this material, but his book of 1984 takes the discussion a good deal further and opens wide horizons. Unfortunately it was produced in an uninspiring format and a small print run by Chicago University Press, and (even worse) was distinctly decaffeinated on the visual side, in that its illustrations were on microfilm only, in black and white. The look of the book did no favors to these paintings, raucous and colorful evocations of street life in medieval Baghdad. He was justifiably disappointed that it caused so little stir among specialists in the field.

But then Grabar, for all that he wrote on aesthetics, for example in the two volumes on book painting that he produced in his seventies, was more interested in ideas and context than in the close-focus study of surface detail, or indeed in the objects themselves as works of art. The same could be said of most of the eighty-three articles that he chose to reprint as the cream of his oeuvre in that form. They fill four volumes and will arguably constitute his most lasting legacy. They show him at his most distinctive: as a creative thinker who consistently anchored his speculations in a specific historical context, and who instinctively knew just how high to fly his kites. He tended to use lectures as a vehicle for floating ideas that he might well reject at a later stage, and he was careful not to commit his more baroque ideas to print until he had assembled clinching evidence. By contrast, he used articles to bring the thinking on a topic further forward. In no field is that more true than in that of the Umayyad palaces, perhaps a topic that came his way in his earliest encounters with Islamic art and architecture in France before he was 22. He also wrote happily on demand, especially a number of op-ed pieces on the nature of Islamic art, for he was well aware of the need to reach a wider public than merely his colleagues in the field. Yet he refused to reprint such pieces in his collected articles, which as a result represent less than half of his published output in the form of articles or short occasional pieces.

Grabar was married to Terry, herself a professor of English literature, for fifty-nine years. They had two children: Nicolas and Anne-Louise. The lingering death of their daughter in 1988 was an agonizing experience and it kept Grabar away from what he termed "gatherings of the tribe" for a long time. But he assuredly found some solace in his work. After fifteen years at the University of Michigan (1954–69) he moved to Harvard, and when he retired from that university in 1990 he settled at the Institute of Advanced Study at Princeton, where he remained until his second retirement in

1998. But age could not wither him, nor custom stale his infinite variety. His schedule remained as packed as ever, and he was producing books and articles to the very end, which came in Princeton on 8 January 2011. His library, possibly the best private collection in the world, went to the Getty; one may hope that this priceless resource will inspire future generations of Islamic art historians on the west coast. Two compendious *Festschriften*, dedicated to him by his students, were published in 1993 and 2008 respectively; that long goodbye bears collective testimony to the deep loyalty and affection that he inspired. And so the curtain falls on an almost unimaginably rich and productive professional life.

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