

OBITUARY

Ülkü Ü. Bates

OLEG GRABAR (1923–2011)

Professor Oleg Grabar, a luminary historian of Islamic visual arts and culture, died on 8 January 2011 at his home in Princeton, N.J. He was a much respected and beloved professor and mentor of generations of undergraduate and graduate students who were inspired by his generous spirit, his probing mind, and his intellectually challenging questions about the nature of culture, art, and history. He was invited to lecture widely in many countries, and he authored more than thirty books—several of which have been translated into multiple languages—as well as over one hundred essays in international journals.

Oleg Grabar was foremost an educator; he saw his mission to be, in his own words, “learning and then transmitting to others, in lectures, seminars, and writing whatever I had learned and understood.” He believed that knowledge should be used “in intellectual and moral ways.”¹ Oleg Grabar’s teaching and published work had a profound and far-reaching influence. More than fifty students across several generations received their doctorates under his guidance; they have become instructors, writers, curators, archaeologists, and researchers who specialize in various aspects of Islamic art in the United States and beyond and who are working to broaden the scope of Islamic art. He introduced his students not only to the discipline of art history but also to new systems of imagination, connections, and interdependencies, and to a whole new procedure of thinking and learning about the visual cultures of the Muslim world. The outstanding quality of his teaching was his generosity as a mentor.

Grabar leaves a prolific legacy in Islamic studies. His first book was *The Coinage of the Tulunids* (New York: American Numismatics Society, 1957), followed by the pioneering study *The Formation of Islamic Art* (New Haven, Conn., and New York: Yale University Press, 1973), which was translated into Arabic, Turkish, French, and German. The results of excavations in 1964–72 at Qasr al-Sharqi, an Umayyad agricultural and trading town in central Syria, were published by him and his collaborators as *City in the Desert* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Middle Eastern Monographs, 1978). Co-authored with Sheila Blair, *Epic Images and Contemporary History: The Illustrations of the Great Mongol Shahnama* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1980) was his early foray into miniature painting and its interpretations, and a model for reconstructing a dispersed manuscript. An indispensable textbook for the students of Islamic art is *The Art and Architecture of Islam, 650–1250* (Pelican

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History of Art Series, 1987), co-written with Richard Ettinghausen, which had been in preparation since the early 1960s. The second edition, with a third co-author, Marilyn Jenkins-Madina, appeared in 2001 (New Haven, Conn., and London: Yale University Press, 2001). A book that is widely read and appreciated by art historians as well as the practitioners of art is *The Mediation of Ornament* (Washington, D.C.: The National Gallery of Art, 1989; Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992). It is an investigation of ornamental and decorative motifs.

Oleg Grabar returned many times, beginning in his graduate student years, to the study and interpretation of one of the earliest monuments of Islam, the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. The study appeared in two books: *The Shape of the Holy: Early Islamic Jerusalem* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996); and, with Said Nuseibeh, *The Dome of the Rock* (New York: Rizzoli, 1996). His recent investigations of miniature painting came out in two publications: *Mostly Miniatures: An Introduction to Persian Painting* (Princeton, N.J. and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000); and *Masterpieces of Islamic Art: The Decorated Page from the 8th to the 17th Century* (Munich, Berlin, London, New York: Prestel, 2009). Eighty-three of his scholarly articles on a wide range of subjects were collected in four volumes under the title *Islamic Art and Beyond: Constructing the Study of Islamic Art* (London: Ashgate Publishing Co., 2005–06).

Oleg Grabar was the editor of *Art Orientalis* from 1957 to 1970 and the founding editor of the scholarly journal *Muqarnas*, devoted to Islamic art and architecture, from 1979–90. His prolific contributions to the discipline were recognized with many honors and awards, including the Charles Freer Medal in 2001, the College Art Association Distinguished Lifetime Achievement Award for Writing Art in 2005, and the Chairman's Award at the Aga Khan Award Ceremonies in Doha, Qatar in November 2010. He was also honored by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the British Academy, the Institute for the Study of the Middle and Far East in Rome, the German Archaeological Institute, and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., among other institutions.

Grabar was born in Strasbourg, France on 3 November 1929. His father André Grabar was a celebrated scholar of Byzantine Art. Oleg Grabar received a *certificat de licence* from the University of Paris in 1948, and graduated magna cum laude with a B.A. in medieval history from Harvard University in 1950. He continued his studies at Princeton University, obtaining a master's degree in 1953 and a PhD in 1955 in Oriental Languages and Literatures and the History of Art, writing his dissertation on the ceremonial arts of the Umayyads. Fluent in English, French, Russian, Arabic, and Persian, he began his teaching career at the University of Michigan (1954–69) and continued at Harvard University, where he was named the first Aga Khan Professor in 1980. He joined the School of Historical Studies at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton in 1990 and remained in Princeton after his retirement in 1998, continuing with his prodigious scholarly activities. Oleg Grabar died at the age of eighty-one. He is survived by his wife of fifty-nine years, Terry Grabar, a retired professor of English; his son Nicolas; daughter-in-law Jennifer Sage; and grandchildren Henry, Margaret, and Olivia. His daughter Anne-Louise predeceased him in 1988.

NOTE

¹The quotations are from the last public speech by Oleg Grabar, recipient of the 2010 chairman's award, at the Aga Khan Award for Architecture Ceremony, in Doha, Qatar, 24 November 2010, <http://www.akdn.org/Content/1037> (accessed 22 February 2011).