

# Oleg Grabar

## 1929–2011

Oleg Grabar, whose research over the past six decades has had a far-reaching influence on the study of Islamic art and architecture, died at the age of eighty-one on January 8.

Grabar, Professor Emeritus in the School of Historical Studies at the Institute, documented, interpreted, and extended the significance of Islamic art and history through extensive archaeological expeditions and research trips across the Islamic world in Africa, the Middle East, and Muslim Asia. The originality and range of his research and teaching made an enduring impression on the study of Middle Eastern culture, a field in which he posited questions that challenged Western perspectives. He was largely responsible for the growth in numbers of historians specializing in the history of Islamic art in the United States.

“Oleg Grabar was a profound, prolific, and influential scholar who has been an essential part of the Institute community throughout the last two decades,” Peter Goddard, Director of the Institute, noted. “We will greatly miss his generosity of spirit, playful humor, and vital presence.”

Giles Constable, Professor Emeritus in the School of Historical Studies, who was a classmate of Grabar’s at Harvard University and a colleague both at Harvard and the Institute, commented, “Oleg Grabar was an admired colleague and beloved friend, whose far-ranging mind, vivid character, and strongly held views contributed to any discussion in which he took part. He was in every sense a life-enhancing personality. Through his teaching and publications he left an indelible mark on almost every aspect of the study of Islamic art and architecture. The Institute, and Princeton, will not be the same without him.”

Grabar’s appointment to the Faculty of the Institute in 1990 brought Islamic studies to the School of Historical Studies, and over the past two decades he drew both emerging and established scholars to the Institute. In November 2010, he was awarded the Chairman’s Award by the Aga Khan Award for Architecture for his lifetime achievement in widening and enriching the understanding of the Islamic world’s architecture, emphasizing its geographical and chronological diversity, as well as positioning it within wider political, social, cultural, and economic contexts.

Grabar was born in Strasbourg, France, on November 3, 1929. His father André Grabar was an international expert of Byzantine art who published over thirty books on the early and medieval art of Bulgaria, Crete, France, Italy, and Turkey. “Intellectual activity came almost with the cradle,” Grabar recalled in 1995, “and throughout my formative years I was surrounded by books.” Grabar received a *certificat de licence* in Ancient History from the University of Paris in 1948. In 1950, he graduated magna cum laude with a B.A. in Medieval History from Harvard University and received two additional *certificats de licence* from the University of Paris in Medieval History and Modern History. Grabar continued his education at Princeton University, where he developed his interest in Islamic art, obtaining an M.A. (1953) and a Ph.D. (1955) in Oriental Languages and Literatures and the History of Art.

Upon earning his Ph.D., Grabar obtained a teaching position at the University of Michigan, where he became a full Professor in 1964. He was Honorary Curator of Near Eastern Art for the Freer Gallery of Art of the Smithsonian Institution (1958–69) and Director of the American School of Oriental Research in Jerusalem (1960–61), where he later served as Vice President (1967–75). In 1969, Grabar was appointed Professor at Harvard University, where he taught for twenty-one years. He was Chairman of the Department of Fine Arts from 1977–82 and held the post of Aga Khan Professor of Islamic Art and Architecture from its inception in 1980 until 1990, when he retired from Harvard to join the Faculty of the Institute.

Grabar was the author of some twenty books and more than one hundred and twenty articles in leading journals. His first book, *The Coinage of the Tulumids* (1957), focused on the

ninth-century dynasty in Islamic Egypt. His landmark study *The Formation of Islamic Art* (1973), which has been translated into German, Spanish, and Turkish, with expanded editions in French and English, presented an original and imaginative approach to the complex problems of understanding Islamic art.

Grabar traveled extensively throughout the Islamic world and was Director from 1964–72 of the excavations at Qasr al-Hayr al-Sharqi—a medieval Islamic town partially buried under the sands of Syria in a region previously not thought to have had a significant history of human habitation. Work at the site resulted in a number of articles and ultimately a collaborative two-volume book, *City in the Desert, Qasr al-Hayr East* (1978), with Renata Holod, James Knustad, and William Trousdale. The research resulted in a groundbreaking interpretation of the original constructions, dating from the first half of the eighth century.

*Epic Images and Contemporary History: The Illustrations of the Great Mongol Shahnama* (1980), coauthored with Sheila Blair, marked the first publication of an early fourteenth-century manuscript, which was meticulously reconstructed by Grabar and Blair. In 1987, nearly thirty years of collaboration between Grabar and Richard Ettinghausen was published in the highly regarded survey *The Art and Architecture of Islam 650–1250*.

During his time at the Institute, Grabar was able to devote himself fully to research, writing, and travel, and he published prolifically within the realm of Islamic art, architecture, and culture. In *The Mediation of Ornament* (1992), he examined the role of decoration as mediator between the viewer and the object itself. His *The Shape of the Holy: Early Islamic Jerusalem* (1996) employed computer modeling to present a detailed architectural history of the city in a new way. That same year, *The Dome of the Rock* (with Saïd Nuseibeh) was published as a comprehensive visual documentation of one of the holiest places for Muslims, Christians, and Jews (this structure was an ongoing source of intrigue for Grabar, who in 2006 published a book of the same title). He was remarkably prolific even after his retirement in 1998, continuing to write or edit more than ten volumes. With Glen W. Bowersock, Professor Emeritus in the School of Historical Studies, and Peter Brown of Princeton University, Grabar edited *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Post-classical World* (1999), which quickly became a standard resource for scholars and the general public alike. *Mostly Miniatures: An Introduction to Persian Painting* (2000) provided a thorough historiography of Persian painting. Much of Grabar’s scholarly output was captured through eighty-three articles gathered in four volumes under the title *Constructing the Study of Islamic Art* (2005–06). His final book, *Masterpieces of Islamic Art: The Decorated Page from the 8th to the 17th Century* (2009), elucidated a wide range of illuminated manuscripts from museum collections around the world and was awarded the World Book Prize for the Book of the Year of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 2011. (For Grabar’s personal reflections on his sixty years of scholarship, see the fall 2010 issue of the *Institute Letter*.)

Grabar’s work earned wide recognition throughout his career, including the College Art Association Distinguished Lifetime Achievement Award for Writing in Art (2005), the Charles Lang Freer Medal (2001), and the University of California, Los Angeles, Giorgio Levi Della Vida Medal (1996). From 1957–70, Grabar was Near Eastern Editor of *Ars Orientalis*, a scholarly journal on Asian art and archaeology, and he was founding editor of the journal *Muqarnas* from 1979–90. He was a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the American Philosophical Society, and the Medieval Academy of America; an honorary member of the Austrian Academy; a corresponding member of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres of the Institute of France; and a corresponding fellow of the British Academy.

Grabar is survived by his wife of fifty-nine years, Terry Grabar, a retired professor of English, and his son Nicolas, daughter-in-law Jennifer Sage, and grandchildren Henry, Margaret, and Olivia of New York. His daughter Anne-Louise predeceased him in 1988. ■



Oleg Grabar (left) at the Institute’s eightieth anniversary celebrations in November



Oleg Grabar was remarkably prolific and engaged in the life of the Institute even after his retirement in 1998. He is pictured at left at a seminar in 2008, center at a public lecture in 2008, and at right at a School of Social Science seminar in November with Member Rita Chin (left) and Joan Wallach Scott, Harold F. Linder Professor (center).





The excerpts below are from a blog ([memoryog.tumblr.com](http://memoryog.tumblr.com)) created in Oleg Grabar's memory.

*Working for Oleg was a pure delight. Not only was it intellectually stimulating, but also fulfilling and rewarding on the personal level. He made me feel I was working with him rather than for him. He was supportive, understanding, and encouraging. He gave credit where credit is due. He took on his share of the work, and made sure to never overload those working for him with chores. No task was beneath him so as to relegate to an assistant. I often found myself asking him to give me more work.*

Mohammad al-Asad, Center for the Study of the Built Environment; Research Assistant, School of Historical Studies, 1991–93



*Oleg, of course, can be described and praised at endless length as an incomparable scholar, teacher, and mentor. Everybody in the field of Islamic art and culture owes him. But he was much more than that for many of us. For beyond his almost prophetic intellectual aura, he had this extremely rare quality: generosity, an immense generosity of himself. His capacity of loving people and understanding them in their profound nature in a disinterested manner was incredible, particularly in a professional world that favors egocentrism and self-promotion.*

Valérie Gonzalez, École Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture de Marseille; Member, School of Historical Studies, 1996–97



*On December 10, 2010, Oleg and I spent a delightful afternoon in Princeton, belatedly celebrating the publication of the Paris *Kitab al-diryaq* facsimile. We chatted for a while in his home office before heading out for lunch at the Institute for Advanced Study. I congratulated him on his recent lifetime achievement award, whereupon he handed me the presentation volume published by the Aga Khan Foundation. As we flipped through the collection of photos in the chapter devoted to his life's work, Oleg provided a running commentary. He was largely silent on the subjects of career milestones, publications, and professional accolades. Instead, he reminisced about his students and their shared adventures.*

Jaclynne Kerner, State University of New York at New Paltz



*When he began to introduce us to the mysteries of art history, of Islam, of Muslim cultures, of complexity of societies and their history, and asked what seemed to be extraordinary questions, we were awoken to new systems of imagination, of connections and interdependencies, in short, to a whole new procedure of thinking and learning. . . . It was not just Prof. Grabar's academic teaching and guidance in the visual culture and history of art of the Muslim world; he also taught us a whole new relationship between teacher and student, one filled with humanity and bigheartedness.*

Ülkü U. Bates, Hunter College



*As your research assistant at the IAS for two years (1998–2000), I suddenly had the sort of resources and time at my disposal that I had not had since finishing my dissertation late in 1995, AND I had the office next door to you. And you were always available to chat or to have tea or take me to lunch, or to discuss the lecture we had just heard at lunch. . . . None of this that I have said, of course, communicates the sheer, day-to-day pleasure of sticking my head into your office and chatting about this or that, scholarly or not, of sharing jokes and gossip and observations about things both lofty and mundane . . . in short, of the enjoyment (and, of course, the inevitable taking for granted) of the company of a dear friend.*

Cynthia Robinson, Cornell University; Research Assistant, School of Historical Studies, 1998–2000