

Oleg Grabar: the scholarly legacy

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Valediction

It is safe to say that the flood of reminiscences, obituaries,¹ and various kinds of public necrologies that have marked the death of Oleg Grabar are quite without parallel in the history of Islamic art history.² They complement the numerous appreciations of him that were published in his lifetime,³ and indeed his own reflections on his career.⁴ In the months following his death in January 2011 a

¹ For a selection of these, see William Grimes, *The New York Times*, 13 January 2011, A23; Anon., *The New York Times*, 10 January 2011; *Dictionary of Art Historians*, s.v. 'Oleg Grabar' [<http://www.dictionaryofarthistorians.org/grabaro.htm> accessed 06.04.2012]; Linda Stein, *The Trenton Times*, 12 January 2011; Anon., *The National*, 15 January 2011; Anon. [Robert Hillenbrand], *The Times*, 17 February 2011; Anon., *The Daily Telegraph*, 14 March 2011; Anon., 'Oleg Grabar 1929-2011' – a notably full and even-handed account from the website of The Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton [<http://www.ias.edu/news/press-releases/2011/01/10/grabar> accessed 06.04.2012]; Ülkü Ü. Bates, *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 43(4), 2011, 777-8; Gülru Necipoğlu, 'Editor's Foreword. In Memoriam: Oleg Grabar', *Muqarnas*, 28, 2011, vii-xiii; and Robert Hillenbrand, 'Oleg Grabar, Distinguished Historian of Islamic Art', *Iranian Studies*, 45(1), 2012, 139-44. Further anonymous obituaries can be found on the internet.

² First and foremost, it is a pleasure to acknowledge how much I owe to Terry Grabar for tactfully putting me right on several details, and – a great encouragement, this – for her whole-hearted support in this sometimes delicate enterprise. I should also like to express my heartfelt thanks to Marianna Shreve Simpson for her swift, frequent and comprehensive help with this paper, which involved her in a lot of work. In particular, she pointed me in numerous directions that I would never have discovered on my own. It is not often that one encounters a colleague ready to provide such extensive, imaginative and selfless help. I shall also long treasure a wonderfully extended and open discussion with Alexis Grabar, Oleg's nephew, about his much-loved *poncle*. And this is the place to say a big 'thank you' to the numerous students and colleagues of Oleg who responded to my plea for their views. The sheer volume of that response is a tribute all the more impressive for being offered in private.

³ Such as Milo Cleveland Beach's 'Introduction', *Eleventh Presentation of the Charles Lang Freer Medal*, 5 April 2001, 4-7, and the introductions to the two *Festschriften* published in *Muqarnas*, 10, 1993, vii-ix ('Introduction') and *Muqarnas*, 25, 2008, vii ('In Tribute to Oleg Grabar'), or John S. Bowman, *The Cambridge Dictionary of American Biography*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995, 285.

⁴ The first place to look is the set of prefaces and introductions to each of the four volumes of his reprinted articles, since these are crammed with illuminating anecdotes and virtually add up to an autobiography: Oleg Grabar, *Early Islamic Art, 650-1100: Constructing the Study of Islamic Art volume I*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005, xiii-xvii and xxi-xxviii; *Islamic Visual Culture, 1100-1800: Constructing the Study of Islamic Art volume II*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006, xxv-xxxvi; *Islamic Art and Beyond: Constructing the Study of Islamic Art volume III*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006, xix-xxv; and *Jerusalem: Constructing the Study of Islamic Art volume IV*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005, xix-xxxi. See also 'The Practice of Islamic Art History', interview conducted at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, by Richard Candida Smith, transcribed by the J. Paul Getty Trust, 2000 (Research Library, J. Paul Getty Research Institute, accession no. 940109, box I/45) as part of the ongoing project *Interviews with Art Historians, 1991-2002*; 'From the Museum to the University and Back', *Eleventh Presentation of the Charles Lang Freer Medal*, 5 April 2001, 9-30; 'Sixty Years of Scholarship in the History of Art', *The Institute Letter*, Princeton:

series of meetings was convened at which scholars spoke about his work,⁵ and the anniversary of his death was marked by a symposium in Istanbul to celebrate his

Institute for Advanced Study, Fall 2010, 7; and the presentation volume published by the Aga Khan Foundation on the occasion of his receipt of the 2010 Chairman's Award for lifetime achievement, including a collection of photographs illustrating the chapter devoted to his life's work. Of particular interest is a long and reflective account of how the field of Islamic art has changed in his lifetime, and how it is set to change still further, in the speech he made on that occasion, at the Aga Khan Award for Architecture 2010 Award Presentation Ceremony (at Doha, Qatar) on 24 November 2010, less than two months before his death. It can be read as an extended valediction. An energetic, visionary, optimistic openness to the future, and to the opportunities brought by new technologies, an embracing of the relevance of other disciplines, permeates this speech, but it is also shot through with darker undertones. Its sober warnings about the dangers of ignorance and nationalism – one wonders what the impact of his early adolescence in German-occupied France had on the later man – show him in unusually prophetic mode ('I preach' comes strangely from him). But this serious tone is appropriate, since his theme was knowledge itself and how to use, cherish and nurture it. The text can be found online [<http://www.akdn.org/Content/1037> accessed 06.04.2012].

⁵ It will be convenient to tabulate these in chronological order:

- (a) A panel at the College Art Association meeting in New York on 10 February 2011, entitled 'The Other Middle Ages: The Medieval Mediterranean as Theater of the Arts', had been due to feature concluding remarks by Grabar. Its members (organizers William Tronzo and Caroline Bruzelius, and panellists Elisa Foster, Amity Law, Ruggero Longo, Kathryn Moore and Lara Tohme) announced that [we] 'will dedicate the session to him and all that he accomplished in his lifetime ... to honor the memory of a great scholar and a wonderful mentor, colleague and friend'.
- (b) Presentations at his memorial service, held at the Memorial Church at Harvard on 23 April 2011, by William Graham, Gülru Necipoğlu, Lisa Golombek, Renata Holod, Nasser Rabbat, Nicolas Grabar, Neil Levine, Marianna Shreve Simpson, Giles Constable, with Massumeh Farhad reading excerpts from the *Shahnama* in English translation. Thomas Lentz added his tribute at the reception that followed, where Professor Richard Frye – so Shreve Simpson tells me – also held forth extemporaneously and with great verve about his old friend. These are the place to start: deeply felt, carefully considered valedictory reminiscences that, taken together, give much of the measure of this multi-faceted man. The texts have been compiled and presented online at the website for the Aga Khan programme for Islamic architecture at Harvard: 'In memoriam Oleg Grabar, November 3, 1929 – January 8, 2011' [http://agakhan.fas.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic888988.files/Oleg_Grabar_Remembrances_04-23-2011_.pdf accessed 06.04.2012].
- (c) A gathering held under the auspices of the Historians of Islamic Art Association (HIAA) took place on 2 December 2011 at the Middle East Studies Association conference in Washington DC, at which, under the rubric 'Remembering Oleg Grabar', 'friends and colleagues, led by Jere Bacharach and Jacob Lassner', were 'invited to celebrate the life and contributions of MESA Founding Member and Honorary Fellow, Oleg Grabar'.
- (d) A full-scale session at the MESA conference on 3 December 2011, also organized by HIAA and entitled 'Oleg Grabar's contributions to the cultural history of the Near and Middle East' (chair: Renata Holod; discussant: Nasser Rabbat). The speakers were: Prudence Harper, '"Brilliant Impressions": Sasanian Silver Revisited'; Richard Bulliet, 'Perspectives on Grabar's *Formation of Islamic Art*'; Benjamin Z. Kedar, 'Oleg Grabar's Vision on the Past, Present and Future of Jerusalem's Old City'; and Stephen Humphreys, 'Grabar and the Socio-Political Milieu of Art Production'.
- (e) A special session at the CAA meeting on 23 February 2012 in Los Angeles, again organized by HIAA and entitled 'Oleg Grabar's impact on the practice and history of art'. Noting that Grabar's death 'inevitably leads to reflections on his immense intellectual legacy, including his contributions to and impact on both the practice of art and the study of art history beyond his own areas of specialization', this session was planned to examine 'selected aspects of Professor Grabar's myriad contributions to the discipline writ large, with presentations by a prominent artist and three leading art historians influenced by his ideas

contributions to the understanding of Turkish Islamic art.⁶ Other great figures in the field of Islamic art have had their full meed of honour, with memorial services⁷ and colloquia,⁸ and tributes from the great and the good, as well as obituaries not only in academic journals, where one would expect to find them, but also in broadsheets.⁹ But the reaction to Oleg Grabar's death has been at once more widespread and more profound than this. The sense that an era has ended runs through many of the comments made in both public and private.

The obvious question – 'why?' – does not have a single obvious answer. It has several, and at times they may seem to contradict each other. Most of his younger colleagues have emphasized above all the unforgettable impact of his colourful and multi-sided personality, and more than one of them has noted that it was hard, on reflection, to disentangle his personality from his output.¹⁰ For while he expressed himself with equal ease in both the spoken and the written word, it was talking that was essentially his instrument of suasion. That was what made his

and scholarship'. Chaired by Marianna Shreve Simpson, with Larry Silver as discussant, the panel featured papers by Larry Nees, 'Border Problems: Oleg Grabar and Medieval Art in the Western Mediterranean'; Nancy S. Steinhardt, 'Domes of Heaven Reconsidered'; and Margaret Olin, 'Oleg Grabar in Conversation about Ornament with Alois Riegl, E.H. Gombrich and Me'. A fourth projected paper, by Philip Taaffe, 'Oleg Grabar and Contemporary Art: A Painter's Perspective', was not delivered; instead Simpson and Silver 'performed' excerpts of an interview between Grabar and Taaffe published in 1994.

- (f) A specially convened session of the American Oriental Society held on 17 March 2012, organized and chaired by Renata Holod and sponsored by HIAA, with presentations by Judith A. Lerner, 'Oleg Grabar and the Lure of Sasanian art'; Deborah Klimburg-Salter, 'Zones of Transition: Reconsidering Early Islamic Art in Afghanistan'; and Jacob Lassner, 'Oleg Grabar and the legitimization of Islamic art and architecture in the American Academy'.

It is also relevant to mention that a campaign, inaugurated by an HIAA committee (comprising Massumeh Farhad, Renata Holod and Marianna Shreve Simpson), has been launched to raise funds for the Oleg Grabar Memorial Fund to support grants and fellowships. So far it has raised over \$150,000; further information can be found online

[<http://www.historiansofislamicart.org/Home/Oleg-Grabar-Memorial-Fund.aspx> accessed 06.04.2012].

⁶ This symposium was entitled 'Oleg Grabar's Contributions to the Study of Turkish Islamic Art and Architectural History' and was held on 8 January 2012. According to its organizers, who drew attention to the fact that Grabar had served on the Advisory Board of Sakıp Sabancı Museum when the museum was being founded, it featured 'lectures by leading academicians and museum curators who are his former students', namely Esin Atıl, Ülkü Ü. Bates, Ayda Arel, Gülru Necipoğlu, Tülay Artan, Scott Redford, Oya Pancaroğlu, Çigdem Kafescioglu and Barry Wood.

⁷ For example, the memorial services held for Richard Ettinghausen in Princeton in May 1979 or for Ernst Grube in London in October 2011.

⁸ Such as that held in memory of Ettinghausen at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, on 2-4 April 1980, planned and organized by Carol Bier and later published: Priscilla Soucek, ed., *Content and Context of Visual Arts in the Islamic World*, University Park and London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988.

⁹ For example, Ernst Grube (*The Times*, 13 July 2011) and Edmund de Unger (*The Daily Telegraph*, 16 February 2011).

¹⁰ As Eva Hoffman noted: 'You ask about his scholarship "not just his personality". In Oleg's case, I am not sure if the two are divisible. His intellectual excitement, his ability to give students the benefit of the doubt and the breathing space to be creative and adventurous – these are the tangible, lasting models of "scholarship" that he imparted' (personal message).

lectures so memorable;¹¹ but perhaps it worked best in free-ranging one-on-one conversations. For the period of that conversation you knew you had his unflagging attention. And you left the meeting with a full tank. That is quite some gift for a teacher – and a colleague – to possess.¹²

His scholarly output: general reflections

But of course most Islamic art historians alive today did not know Grabar personally,¹³ and it is here that what he wrote ought in theory to come to the fore.¹⁴ The purpose of the present paper is precisely to try to assess more what he wrote than what he was – though the sheer weight of personal reminiscence from those who knew him has made that a difficult task. There is, moreover, a further obstacle to that apparently simple project thanks to the many listings of his achievements: the honours, awards and prizes heaped on him, the films he made, the exhibitions he curated, his membership of prestigious academic societies across the world, his key work as editor of the major journals in his field,¹⁵ the positions of responsibility that he held, the institutions or enterprises that he directed and – above all else in its direct human impact – the students he taught and the practical ways in which he encouraged so many of them to stay in the field. While it is thoroughly appropriate to celebrate these multifarious successes, they can easily have the unintended effect of casting his publications into the shade. And yet for decades past, and especially outside the United States, it has been his written work that has propelled him to pole position on the international stage among Islamic art historians. In his own words, set down a few months before his death, that

¹¹ Ed Keall gives an impression of Grabar's teaching in 1967: 'Sometimes he was difficult to follow because his thoughts were going so fast that his words could hardly keep up with the ideas he wanted to express. Above all I had never encountered anyone before who wanted to challenge long entrenched ideas and so went back to the basics, starting with the textual evidence' (personal message).

¹² Thomas Lentz has brought out very well his distinctive qualities in this respect: 'As a teacher, he was fair, honest, demanding and a possessor of a powerful work ethic. He was, above all, a person of absolute transcendent curiosity—he was seemingly interested in everything ... He had the remarkable ability to seek out the individual strengths and interests of each of us and to nurture them. I never once saw or heard him be dismissive of other students; as someone genuinely interested in cultivating young minds and critical faculties, he produced a staggering array of students with interests as wide and varied as the Islamic world itself' (footnote 5[b] above).

¹³ But he remained a magnet for colleagues young and old until the end, not least in his office at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, and his indefatigable travels to what he himself termed 'the gatherings of the tribe', coupled with his natural gregariousness and affability, led to informal meetings beyond count. At the HIAA 2010 symposium at the Freer/Sackler, for example, he was constantly surrounded by young people, including MA students.

¹⁴ As Eric Broug, who has written at length on geometry in Islamic art, wrote: 'he helped me make a lifetime commitment to Islamic art and architecture, for which I will be forever grateful, and indebted to him'. *Remembering Oleg Grabar (1929-2011)* [memoryog.tumblr.com accessed 06.04.2012].

¹⁵ He was in fact the founding editor of *Muqarnas*, currently the principal journal dedicated exclusively to Islamic art. And volumes II-VII of *Ars Orientalis*, which are overwhelmingly Islamic in content, and were produced under his editorship in the Michigan years, are a monument not just to his industry but also to his ambition for the field to develop and to his ability in attracting scholars of stature to contribute important articles.

written work comprised, apart from material that had not yet appeared,¹⁶ 'some twenty books, several of which were translated into at least seven languages, and over one hundred and twenty more or less significant articles'.¹⁷ That latter number, incidentally, represents a very severe judgment on his part of the long-term value of a good deal of his published articles, chapters, and occasional pieces. And since the material he selected for republication in the four volumes of his 'collected' – it should be 'selected' – articles comprises only eighty-three items, it follows that he rejected a third even of those that he himself regarded as 'more or less significant'.¹⁸ He was thus a harsh critic of his own work, particularly of his shorter and general papers.¹⁹

Some of his books, like some of his articles, were admittedly of uneven quality and depth, especially in his later years.²⁰ But they had an impressive reach. Nor should one underestimate their cumulative impact. The translations of *The Formation of Islamic Art* and of *The Alhambra* in particular gave those works a truly international readership,²¹ while in other cases he either published a work first in French and then reworked it in English, or vice versa.²² This practice showed, as it

¹⁶ He noted then that 'there are still now two or three studies in the process of being printed or ready to appear on the Internet' (Oleg Grabar, 'Sixty Years of Scholarship in the History of Art', *The Institute Letter*, Princeton: Institute for Advanced Study, Fall 2010, 7). Something very close indeed to a full bibliography of his work can be constructed by putting together the bibliographies found in the two *Festschriften* produced in his honour: *Muqarnas*, 10, 1993, ix-xiii and *Muqarnas*, 25, 2008, viii-x, supplemented by *Muqarnas*, 28, 2011, xv. A significant missing item here is 'Al-Mushatta, Baghdad and Wasit', in James Kritzeck and R. Bayly Winder, eds, *The World of Islam (Studies in honour of P.K.Hitti)*, London: Macmillan, 1959, 99-108. See also footnote 48 below.

¹⁷ Grabar, 'Sixty Years of Scholarship', 7.

¹⁸ The raw count of his articles and contributions to books, excluding one-page introductions and book reviews (some of which were substantial essays in their own right), is 199. Material which appeared after his death or is still in press brings that total to over 200. So his 'collected' articles represent significantly less than half of his *oeuvre* in that format. It almost goes without saying that some much-admired pieces do not make it into the final cut.

¹⁹ Renata Holod called him 'fiercely critical' and Thomas Lentz praised 'his fundamental honesty' and rigour (footnote 5[b] above), a reminder that Grabar's judgment on his own work should be final.

²⁰ A student of mine, Katherine Rose, whom it is a pleasure to thank for her help with this paper, wrote a fifty-one-page Edinburgh University undergraduate dissertation in 1999 entitled *Ornament or Art? An Examination of Oleg Grabar's Challenge to the Boundaries of Islamic Art History*, and sent a copy to Grabar. In a letter to her dated 23 December 1999 (the day before Christmas Eve!), Grabar noted 'My last two major books (*Mediation* and *Shape*) are at the same time the most flawed and the most exciting' and wrote of *Sasanian Silver* 'There are few books I enjoyed putting together as much as that one' (see Grabar, *The Mediation of Ornament* [*The A.W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts*, 1989], Bollingen Series XXXV 38, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992; *The Shape of the Holy: Early Islamic Jerusalem*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996; and Oleg Grabar and Martha Carter, *Sasanian Silver: late antique and early mediaeval arts of luxury from Iran*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Museum of Art, 1967).

²¹ Oleg Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973, 1987; and *The Alhambra*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978. The absence of translations into Arabic is noteworthy. It suggests that regrettably there still does not exist a significant arabophone readership for his work – and by extension, that of the wider community of Islamic art historians. In this respect Iran and Turkey are well ahead of the Arab world.

²² For example Oleg Grabar, *Peinture Persane: une introduction* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1999) and *Mostly Miniatures: An Introduction to Persian Painting* (Princeton: Princeton University Press,

were, his dual intellectual citizenship. It seems that certain trains of thought, and idioms,²³ came to him more easily in French. But if ever there was a truly international scholar, it was he. It is telling that he described himself as a man without a country, except for academia.²⁴

As in what he said, so in what he wrote one may discern a wide range of registers. It seems that he was as happy writing op-ed pieces about the nature of Islamic art, or popular surveys,²⁵ or quasi-philosophical *tours d'horizon*, as he was with the close-focus treatment of a source, an event and its implications,²⁶ an object, or a monument. Whatever the register, he delighted in stretching his

2000; see the judicious review article by Bernard O'Kane: 'Lifting the Veil from the Face of Persian Painting', *Oriental Art*, 48(2), 2002, 55-60, and those by Yves Porter (*Iranian Studies*, 36[3], 2003, 393-5), with important comments on aesthetics; David Roxburgh (*Artibus Asiae*, 60[2], 2000, 349-51), on the French version of the same book, again with perceptive remarks on aesthetics; and Sylvia Auld (*Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 66[1], 2003, 98-100, who comments that 'the many references within the text to studies by others in the subject read almost like a report on Grabar's abilities as a teacher, for most of the new generation he quotes learned their craft at his feet'); or the complex interrelationship between *The Mediation of Ornament* (1992), *L'Ornement: Formes et Fonctions dans l'Art Islamique* (Paris: Flammarion, 1996), and *Penser l'Art Islamique: Une Esthétique de l'Ornement* (Paris: Institut du monde arabe, 1996). He himself described the latter book in a letter (footnote 20 above) as 'an introduction with a twist'. An article in German is also relevant here: 'Das Ornament in der islamischen Kunst', *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, supplement 3(1), 1977, xli-liv.

²³ For some examples, see Marianna Shreve Simpson (footnote 5[b] above). Scott Redford adds another: Grabar – who was, he thought, 'worn down by the many teaching and other demands on his time' – confessed to him in 1982 that he was 'tournant en rond' (going round in circles) at the time (personal message).

²⁴ Personal communication from Terry Grabar. Note too the astute observation of his son Nicolas, who terms him 'this citizen of everywhere and nowhere': 'His lifelong *modus operandi* was to be an outsider, finding a vantage point outside any specific culture, or beliefs, or allegiances. So as a child among the French he was a Russian, and as an adult among the Americans he was a European, and of course his professional life was devoted to a culture that was fundamentally not his own. His only *patrie* or fatherland was the academy, and I'm quite sure the only uniform he ever put on – literally, or figuratively – was cap, gown and doctoral regalia' (footnote 5[b] above).

²⁵ His compact survey of the entirety of Islamic art ('Islamic Peoples, Arts of,' *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th ed., 1974, 952-1011), has regrettably attracted very little notice; but this piece has particular value as his principal attempt – undertaken early on in his very full teaching career – to distil that teaching experience and to highlight the core characteristics of Islamic art. Interestingly enough, in the very same year he published a shorter digest of one aspect of the same subject: 'Architecture', in Joseph Schacht and Clifford Edmund Bosworth, eds, *The Legacy of Islam*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974, 244-73. It is possible that parts of these two contributions were deliberate drafts for Grabar's section (namely architecture) of the Pelican volume commissioned by Nikolaus Pevsner. This may suggest that it was Ettinghausen rather than Grabar who was responsible for the long delays in the latter project. The article for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* is worth closer study than the one for *The Legacy of Islam* not only because it is very much longer but also because the brief to which he worked was clearly to cover the ground methodically. That closed off the option of omitting areas that did not interest him, or doing a 'think piece'. Here, then, are his views on how Islamic art as a whole developed.

²⁶ Such as the sack of the Fatimid treasuries in 1069 ('Imperial and Urban Art in Islam: The Subject-Matter of Fatimid Art', in André Raymond, J. Michael Rogers and Magdi Wahba, eds, *Colloque International sur l'Histoire du Caire*, Gräfenhainichen: 1973, 183-6), or the mutilation of a Christian image by an early Muslim iconoclast ('Islamic Art and Byzantium', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 18, 1964, 69).

readers,²⁷ and to that end questions galore filled the pages of his books and articles.²⁸

Grabar himself suggested rather different categories for his writings, and characteristically divided them, like Caesar's Gaul, into three parts, a division that was also, as he saw it, chronological. The latter is a crucial observation. First came 'traditional research based on the publication of documents, the excavation of new documents, and the significance of these documents within relatively strict chronological and spatial limits'.²⁹ He acknowledged that such work had a limited audience. For many scholars, of course (though emphatically not for him), that is a matter of no concern whatever. Second came work that 'seeks a larger public, as it tries to interpret works or periods of Islamic art as historical, aesthetic, social, or cultural models whose meanings extend beyond their specific context; it deals with issues like new forms, ornament, and aesthetics'.³⁰ The third category, largely published in the course of a remarkably productive Indian summer that lasted from his retirement from Harvard until his death, embraced 'reactions to requests for introductions or conclusions to the publications of others, or remarks about the work of others reflecting the current fad of colloquia and multi-authored publications', and he freely admitted that these pieces were of variable quality. On the other hand, he noted – with regret, but not, I think, waspishly – 'they do fit with a contemporary mood that is less concerned with exploring new things than with stating appropriately old ideas and recalling well-known monuments of art'.³¹ And out of this third category developed, again in his own words, an interest in both 'historiography ... the importance of past scholarship and the often strange characters of past scholars',³² and, following the need to impose order on his personal papers, 'personal historiography' which 'has now led me to study the

²⁷ As Jane Jakeman put it: 'he always made one jump forward trying to keep up!' (personal message).

²⁸ Glenn Lowry reflects on 'his unique ability to frame a question, to probe an idea, and ultimately to posit an interpretation and reveal a narrative that was not immediately apparent – a methodology that was not circumscribed by his own areas of expertise. It is not surprising to me that many of his students ended up outside the academy because the way Oleg approached a problem taught us all how to think through questions regardless of subject' (personal message). Cf. Stephennie Mulder's comment: 'he was much more interested in the question and in provoking a reaction than in finding any definitive answers' [memoryog.tumblr.com accessed 06.04.2012].

²⁹ This kind of research, he wrote, 'dominates the first half of my creative years' but the output of such works 'has clearly diminished with time, even though their scientific quality (or weakness) tends to remain steady over the years' (Grabar, 'Sixty Years of Scholarship', 7).

³⁰ Grabar wrote that this 'is a smaller group than the first one and does not really flourish until the seventies of last century, but it attracted the attention of historians of art and other scholars in many different areas and helped to strengthen the notion that, when one deals with the arts, approaches and conclusions can be extended from one culture to other traditions'. He noted that the resultant globalization of Islamic art had attracted some criticism (Grabar, 'Sixty Years of Scholarship', 7).

³¹ This trend had 'dominated the past twenty years', i.e. 1990 to 2010 (Grabar, 'Sixty Years of Scholarship', 7); it may be significant that it begins with his retirement from active teaching.

³² His published writings on this subject are all too rare. For a few examples, see his contribution to the memorial service for Richard Ettinghausen held at Princeton in May 1979 (privately printed) and the obituary cited in footnote 76 below; 'K.A.C. Creswell and his Work', *Muqarnas*, 8, 1991, 1-3; his obituary of Robert Hamilton (*The Independent*, 6 October 1995); 'Michael Meinecke and his Last Book', *Muqarnas*, 13, 1996, 1-7; and 'Jean Sauvaget', in Eric M. Meyers, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East*, 4, 1997, 495-6.

history of my family and ancestry'.³³ His astonishing range of contacts of course made him the obvious person to undertake a serious study of the historiography of Islamic art, but he never did so and indeed consistently adopted a notable discretion in discussing colleagues of his own generation and the one immediately preceding it.³⁴ This could be exquisitely frustrating: he knew, and had opinions about, far more than he would divulge in print.

These, then, are the broad divisions of his scholarly output. And, no matter how one chooses to categorize his written work, from now on it is plainly his writings, not his larger-than-life personality, that will constitute his major heritage.

Grabar's range and skills

But neither his personality nor his writings tell the whole story or are quite enough to explain the sense of loss, the sense of an era that has ended, that I mentioned at the outset of this paper. And indeed several scholars have highlighted the indefatigable intellectual curiosity that drove him to investigate the highways and byways of a world which to him was one and in which all kinds of aspects were potentially of interest. *Nihil islamicum mihi alienum puto*,³⁵ he might justifiably have said. His range was astonishing, and perhaps it is not strange that so few scholars have sought to follow that example. Of course he was formidably equipped for his scholarly role by birth, by upbringing, by his severe French education, by his languages and – perhaps more intangibly – by his air of European sophistication. And his intuitions were very sharp. He knew how far to go. So he was a hard act to follow. That range meant that it was no surprise that he was interested in the interplay between the Islamic world and other cultures, from Europe to China; that he had a taste for the latest intellectual fashion or theory; that he embraced the impact of new technologies on the field of Islamic art; that he threw himself into the work of the Aga Khan Award, which catapulted Islamic architecture into the here and now and where he relished the interaction between academics of various stripes and architects, planners, bankers, administrators and heritage specialists. For his colleagues and his students there was something exhilarating and inspiring in being able to connect with such broad sympathy, which could act like an electrical charge in the instant intellectual energy that it generated. The habit of 'thinking outside the box' came to him as naturally as breathing;³⁶ he tried to teach it to his students, many of whom have put it to exemplary use in their roles as, for

³³ See the comments of his son Nicolas at the memorial service (footnote 5[b] above).

³⁴ Perhaps that was just my own experience; apparently he spoke more freely in interviews taped by Betsy Sears and Marianna Shreve Simpson in 2005 and 2007. And of course he loved to gossip. Giles Constable hints as much: 'He was also a marvellous conversationalist and raconteur, though not all his stories would bear repetition here' (footnote 5[b] above).

³⁵ A paraphrase of Terence: *nihil humanum mihi alienum puto* ('I consider nothing that is human alien to me').

³⁶ This is a phrase that so many people have used of him that it must be regarded as a kind of trademark.

example, museum directors.³⁷ So it is the sense that an eager, questing intellect – nourished by many decades of thinking, study and debate, and ready to turn its power onto any number of issues and problems – is now no more that has left so many people forlorn.

It is worth stressing that even among his teachers, scholars who for the most part had been born in the nineteenth century, when the field of Islamic art scarcely existed as an intellectual construct, that kind of wide-ranging sympathy was not the norm. Look at Creswell, for example, for whom the doors of Islamic architecture shut with a clang at the Iraqi-Iranian border. Or Marçais, king of Maghribi architecture but of nowhere else. Or Gabriel, the grand old man of Turkish architecture alone. Or Migeon, who wrote on the decorative arts but for whom architecture was invisible. Or Gray, of whom the same could be said. Even the greatest of Grabar's immediate predecessors, Sauvaget and Herzfeld, devoted most of their mental capital to architecture, and pre-eminently to the Near East, and the occasional excursus that they made into the so-called minor arts, though illuminating,³⁸ remains teasingly isolated in their *oeuvre*. The foremost historians of Spanish Islamic art remained both physically and mentally immured in their native country, with a consequent loss of perspective that is incalculable. Specialists in the architecture of India and of Central Asia offer further examples of this melancholy phenomenon. The great exception, of course, was Richard Ettinghausen, of whom more anon.

And it is an unfortunate but ineluctable by-product of such specialization that it leads to a jealous consciousness of turf, and thence, often enough, to vicious practices. This reaction is peculiarly inappropriate in a field as young as Islamic art, where there is more than enough research material for all, not only in the present generation but even far into the foreseeable future. Grabar managed to suggest that there was a huge banquet table laid out before the budding scholar: an intoxicating and liberating prospect. Will that attitude continue to thrive? Not if turf wins. Where turf is guarded, the instinct is to repulse interlopers rather than to welcome visitors. One of the many charms of Oleg Grabar was that he was blessedly uninfected with this disease. So he gave the best of examples to his students and colleagues alike. The way that he encouraged others to disagree with him about the Dome of the Rock is an example of this easy affability and open-mindedness.³⁹ He welcomed outsiders.⁴⁰ He did not take it ill when students

³⁷ Thomas Lentz, a museum director himself, quotes a true gem from the treasury of Grabar humour: 'we used to send all the dummies into museum work, but that might be changing' (footnote 5[b] above).

³⁸ Jean Sauvaget, 'Remarques sur l'art sassanide: questions de méthode à propos d'une exposition', *Revue des Études Islamiques*, 12, 1938, 113-31; Ernst Herzfeld, 'A Bronze Pen-case', *Ars Islamica*, 3, 1936, 35-43.

³⁹ Larry Nees tells me that when his book on early Islamic art in Jerusalem is finished, he will dedicate it to his wife, first and foremost, and to Grabar 'even though he knew I would be introducing material about the Dome of the Rock that he had simply overlooked, and ultimately suggesting interpretations rather different than his own. He was not just accepting of this situation, he was actually excited about it!' (personal message).

⁴⁰ Larry Nees (footnote 5[e] above): 'He liked having an outsider's perspective, and even asked me to review the chapters on early Islamic art in the manuscript of the revised Pelican History of Art

challenged him.⁴¹ That lack of a proprietorial instinct meant in turn that he did not invest undue emotional resources in this or that theory or body of material. This practice created in him a certain tranquillity or equability that robbed even harsh criticism of its full bite. It is instructive to note that only his first major book, *The Formation of Islamic Art*, triggered a certain degree of opposition (see below). Nor is that surprising. In 1973, at forty-three years old, he was still the coming man, and could thus expect to take his fair share of negative criticism. With the passing of the years, however, his position as doyen of the field gradually became impregnable, and this certainly shielded him to some extent. Such immunity is well understood as one of the perks of power. But I can testify from personal experience that he really was able to take negative criticism in good part.

His particular skill – and one that practically never failed him, since he was constantly honing it on new material – was to remain undaunted before the sheer, smoothly polished cliff-face of conventional wisdom and to detect tiny fissures, cracks and hand-holds in it. He was thus able almost literally to climb up and over this kind of obstacle to original thinking and then to suggest hitherto untried approaches even to long-familiar material. He was equally capable of ignoring conventional wisdom altogether and casually proposing some radically new approach. He had the poet's capacity to spotlight the links between apparently unconnected, disparate ideas.⁴² It was continuously exciting to see him exercise this faculty – he did it smoothly, without apparent effort but also not in a facile manner. And above all, such unexpected felicities, insights or angles of approach arose naturally out of the discussion that was taking place. These were not carefully polished *aperçus* prepared well in advance. Among his books, one may mention *The Alhambra* and *The Great Mosque of Isfahan* as examples of how his broad sympathies and his profound erudition in cognate, collateral fields could bring these over-exposed masterpieces to life in unexpected ways, for he saw them so to speak through the other end of the telescope.⁴³ That position revealed insights

volume. He was unfailingly encouraging to me, and I think to other non-Islamicists who for one reason or another came to teach the material so close to his heart. He was never one to patrol borders, and was as conscious of the dangers of specialization as he was ... of too-easily adumbrated comparisons or linkages.'

⁴¹ Scott Redford, for example, found that some of Grabar's 'theories that were spun out of very little often took on the weight of truth once they had entered the literature. So, I became the more pedantic scholar that I am. When writing my dissertation, he and I several times had cordial disagreements about this, with Oleg always insisting on the need for "trajectory" of an argument or another of mine that he found too timid. I responded on one occasion that an argument is like a chain, only as strong as its weakest link' (personal message). It is worth remembering that a good French dressing needs vinegar as well as oil; in the same message Scott Redford pays tribute to how Grabar's 'teaching and scholarship taught me the value of ideas, and the need to communicate to a larger audience what was exciting about the field, and I strive for this, but try to document and substantiate more firmly my points'. It was typical of Grabar to quote against himself a comment made by Claude Cahen *à propos* his 1959 article on the Dome of the Rock: 'C'est très intéressant, mon cher Oleg, mais il me faut un texte'. There speaks the historian who cannot see a monument as a text.

⁴² Cf. the comment of Larry Silver: 'Grabar's own ability to perceive relationships between the specific and the general, between the creation and the creating society, endured as the hallmark of his own work' (footnote 5[e] above).

⁴³ Oleg Grabar, *The Alhambra*, 1978; and *The Great Mosque of Isfahan*, London: I.B. Tauris, 1990. Giles Constable recalls that Grabar was well aware 'that his ideas on western Islamic art might seem to

denied to scholars who knew these buildings far more intimately than he did,⁴⁴ but could not contextualize them so richly.⁴⁵ No wonder that his lectures were packed by ‘embryonic scholars from many disciplines listening with rapt attention’.⁴⁶ His messages were beamed at wider audiences than the tightly-knit community of historians of Islamic art, even if his impact outside that field was not as powerful as he deserved.⁴⁷ But within it he well knew where to concentrate his fire-power and what to avoid.⁴⁸

The classic case of his rare capacity to transcend conventional wisdom is his precociously magisterial article on the Dome of the Rock, published in 1959.⁴⁹ It is worth remembering that his dissertation was not about that building, so this was

some readers too tentative and unclear, “but they will have fulfilled their purpose (he wrote) if they inspire or irritate others to come up with alternative ones”. This is vintage Oleg – to inspire or irritate – and expresses the essence of his qualities as a conversationalist, and also, no doubt, as a scholar and a teacher’ (footnote 5[b] above).

⁴⁴ As Sheila Canby notes:

Grabar concentrated more on determining whether the monument and its decoration were typical of palace architecture across the Islamic world or if the monument is unique. In the process of treating this problem, he provides a description of the monument and interpretations of its form and decoration. Neither here nor in his other publications does he claim to present the definitive answer to all the questions about the subject at hand, in this case the Alhambra. Yet, by discussing its inscriptions and placing them and the rooms in which they appear in the broader context of Islamic architecture, he leads us to logical conclusions about the uses and meaning of this palace.

(Personal message.)

⁴⁵ Larry Silver compares him to Otto von Simson on Gothic cathedrals, or Rudolf Wittkower on Renaissance Italian architectural principles, in his ability ‘to situate wider cultural resonances of architectural symbolism in Islamic legends of power, going back to biblical King Solomon himself’ (footnote 5[e] above).

⁴⁶ As Larry Silver wrote; he goes on to explain that Grabar stood high on the ‘list of must-reads’, for ‘He ... refashioned – and greatly expanded – the range of questions and methods we all could employ one day as tools, regardless of period, regardless of field’ (footnote 5[e] above).

⁴⁷ Cf. Larry Nees, (footnote 5[e] above): ‘Oleg Grabar’s impact on the development of scholarship about medieval art in western Europe has been more indirect, and more difficult to trace and assess, than might be expected ... Probably most important has been the influence of his teaching, not only upon those who would continue to study Islamic art but also upon the many others who studied with him but concentrated in other areas, notably the arts of medieval Spain and southern Italy’.

⁴⁸ Cf. Nancy Steinhardt’s comment (footnote 5[e] above): ‘one of Oleg’s countless strengths was that he chose research problems that were conceptually and intellectually worthy of him’. As to what he avoided, he was (justifiably, as it turned out) cagey about the *Andarz Nama*, a faked illustrated manuscript that purported to date from the eleventh century: ‘Remarks’, in Arthur U. Pope and Phyllis Ackerman, eds, *A Survey of Persian Art from Prehistoric Times to the Present. Volume XIII – Fascicle. Addendum A – The Andarz Nama. Proceedings of the IVth International Congress of Iranian Art and Archaeology, April 24 – May 3, 1960, Tehran, London, New York and Tokyo: Asia Institute of Pahlavi University, 1968, A/64-A/65* (another item not to be found in his published bibliography). Similarly, he avoided any detailed engagement with the Buyid silks and the Alp Arslan salver. He devotes a few sentences to the silks (‘whose authenticity ... seems to me to have been in recent years proved for the majority if not all of the known fragments’: see ‘The Visual Arts’ in R.N. Frye, ed., *The Cambridge History of Iran. Volume 4. The Period from the Arab Invasion to the Saljuqs*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975, 359), and even less to the salver, which he uses to illustrate the proposition that in the history of Iranian art the position of securely dated pieces produced between 1050 and 1150 is quite unclear: ‘The Visual Arts’, in J.A. Boyle, ed., *The Cambridge History of Iran. Volume 5. The Saljuq and Mongol Periods*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968, 643-4.

⁴⁹ Oleg Grabar, ‘The Umayyad Dome of the Rock’, *Ars Orientalis*, 3, 1959, 33-62.

fresh research. It was a piece that became legendary, and beyond doubt it has been the most widely cited article in the entire forty-three volumes of *Ars Orientalis*. Who would have thought that there was so much still to say about the Dome of the Rock, which in 1959 was the most widely published single building in all of Islamic architecture? Yet here was a big new article about a big old building. How revealing that Creswell, whose bibliographical mania was a byword, managed to find no room for this seminal article in his exhaustive bibliography of scholarship on the Dome of the Rock, published ten years after Grabar's article and running to 334 titles ending in 1964.⁵⁰ A back-handed compliment indeed. Nor could one argue that it had somehow slipped past his guard, for it is cited by Creswell himself in his great bibliography: *A Bibliography of the Architecture, Arts and Crafts of Islam to 1st Jan. 1960*, London and Beccles: The American University at Cairo Press, 1961, col.421. And Grabar went on mining this mother-lode for the rest of his career, with articles galore; appropriately enough, his very last single-authored book was devoted to that same building,⁵¹ and it is the centrepiece of his last edited work.⁵²

Areas of lesser interest to Grabar

What of the inevitable gaps? While no one could dispute the sheer range and depth of Grabar's expertise, or doubt that his restless curiosity led him down all manner of byways, some of which were inevitably blind alleys, it is worth reflecting on the areas that he tended to leave relatively unexplored. The word 'relatively' is important in this context, for the many occasions on which he wrote in general terms about the nature of Islamic art ensured that he made some comment or other even about those areas of the field that had never captured his enthusiasm. Carpets, for example, seem to have left him cold, and perhaps he never fully engaged with Iznik ware or Mughal painting.⁵³ You can't like it all.

But perhaps the major perspective which, while not altogether missing, is nevertheless markedly underdeveloped in his work is the impact of religion.⁵⁴ This may sound like a paradoxical comment to make about a scholar who wrote so

⁵⁰ K.A.C. Creswell, *Early Muslim Architecture*, 2nd ed., 1(1), Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969, 124-9.

⁵¹ Oleg Grabar, *The Dome of the Rock*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008.

⁵² See Oleg Grabar and Benjamin Z. Kedar, eds, *Where Heaven and Earth Meet. Jerusalem's Sacred Esplanade*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009.

⁵³ But see his paper 'About two Mughal Miniatures', *Damaszener Mitteilungen*, 11, 1999, 179-83.

⁵⁴ I am grateful to Yasser Tabbaa for some penetrating remarks on this topic. He notes, as Grabar himself did, that few of his students came from Islamic studies, and goes on: 'This is not surprising, for throughout his career Grabar favored secular or humanistic interpretations over ones emanating from Islamic beliefs and ritual practices. His early formulations of "court ceremonial," "symbolic appropriation," "ideological warfare" dealt far more effectively with questions of secular power and authority than with concepts of faith and theology. Not surprisingly, he had very few Muslim students early on' (personal message). Cf. also Barbara Brend's review of *Mediation*, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 58, 1995, 362: 'Grabar is chary of allowing too great an influence to Revelation'.

widely and so often, even in book form, on mosques⁵⁵ and on buildings whose very *raison d'être* was largely religious, like the Dome of the Rock or, more generally, funerary architecture.⁵⁶ It is paradoxical also in a more personal sense, for several tributes to him have noted that he did possess a profound religious side,⁵⁷ found solace there, and was particularly drawn to the rituals of the Orthodox Christian faith.⁵⁸ He did not fail to acknowledge the religious impulse behind so much Islamic art; and he was capable of sensitive analyses of the thinking behind the use of specific Qur'anic verses in specific locations within a building, as is repeatedly evident in his book on the Isfahan *jami'*.⁵⁹ But such insights, revealing as they are, do not invalidate one's basic impression that he did not make it a high priority to probe in depth the religious impulse in Islamic art.⁶⁰ It is striking that the list of his publications does not contain a single article or book devoted exclusively to a Qur'anic manuscript,⁶¹ or to a general study of religious inscriptions, or to extended reflections on the nature of Shi'i art. And the only extensive treatment of calligraphy (a field which is dominated by Qur'ans) in his entire *oeuvre* is a general chapter in *The Mediation of Ornament*.⁶² And there is still more to be said on this issue. Given that his father wrote a monograph definitive in its own time on the theme of iconoclasm,⁶³ it is not strange that the son should briefly have taken up this very subject a few years later.⁶⁴ But this did not lead him

⁵⁵ For example, Grabar, *Formation*, chapter 5; *The Great Mosque of Isfahan*; and 'The Mosque in Islamic Society Today' in Martin Frishman and Hasan-Uddin Khan, eds, *The Mosque: History, Architectural Development and Regional Diversity*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1994, 242-5.

⁵⁶ 'The Earliest Islamic Commemorative Structures, Notes and Documents', *Ars Orientalis*, 6, 1966, 7-46.

⁵⁷ Of those in the public domain, the comments of his son – 'I think my father came to care very much about belonging... late in life, to his church – a development that certainly took me by surprise' – and of Renata Holod (see footnote 5[b] above) are important here; and I am grateful to Marianna Shreve Simpson for further insights on this matter.

⁵⁸ Giles Constable has noted that he 'was one of the few people I have known who appreciated the form more than the content of religious rites, though the content was also important to him and helped to shape the form' (see footnote 5[b] above).

⁵⁹ Grabar, *The Great Mosque of Isfahan*, 32-3, 39-40, 48 and 50.

⁶⁰ Yasser Tabbaa argues that the difference between himself and Grabar 'rests squarely on the impact of religion on architecture, not as an essentialist force but as a social construction that interacts with social and historical factors. Grabar would not – perhaps could not – see it that way, holding true to the very end to his secularist-humanist ideals as a corrective against the excesses of religious dogmatism. Even his later publications on Jerusalem, which replace "ideological warfare" with the more irenic and universal views of secularization and accommodation, still attempt to neutralize religion' (personal message).

⁶¹ Nevertheless, his review of David Storm Rice's short but meaty study of the epoch-making Ibn al-Bawwab Qur'an (David Storm Rice, *The Unique Ibn al-Bawwab Manuscript in the Chester Beatty Library*, Dublin: Emery Walker, 1955; reviewed in *The Art Bulletin*, 39, 1957, 240-2) is well worth reading. See also Grabar, 'The Qur'an as a source of artistic inspiration', in Fahmida Suleman, ed., *Word of God, Art of Man: The Qur'an and its Creative Expressions*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, 27-39.

⁶² Yet he taught at least one seminar in this subject.

⁶³ André Grabar, *L'iconoclisme byzantine*, Paris: Collège de France, 1957.

⁶⁴ Oleg Grabar, 'Islamic Art and Byzantium', 69-70; and 'Islam and Iconoclasm', in Anthony Bryer and Judith Herrin, eds, *Iconoclasm*, Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 1977, 45-52. See also Grabar, 'From the Icon to Aniconism: Islam and the Image', *Museum International*, 218, 2003, 46-55. A rounded if generalized treatment of the subject can also be found in *Formation*, chapter 4, 2nd ed., 72-98.

to produce a nuanced assessment of the vexed question of the Islamic attitude to images, a theme for which his peerless range of expertise would have fitted him particularly well.⁶⁵ More generally, one senses that his particular configuration of interests led him to downplay the overwhelmingly religious motivation of so much Islamic art, especially Qur'anic manuscripts, sacred architecture and the impact of *waqf*. The advantage of this innate tendency was that he explored further than any scholar before him the secular drive of certain areas of Islamic art, and developed new frameworks for their study. Chief among these was the so-called 'princely cycle', essentially a Grabar construct although he never laid it out formally as such, or indeed attempted a history of this recurrent group of courtly images. But above all, he never grappled in full detail with the many-layered impact of the Qur'an on Islamic art and the people who produced it.

Grabar's travels

In the course of his career, and especially after his involvement with the Aga Khan Award for Architecture developed from the late 1970s onwards, Grabar's travels took him into some of the remotest parts of the Islamic world. He was the modern version of the medieval wandering scholar. With the partial exception of some African countries, he acquired first-hand experience of almost every Muslim country from Morocco to Indonesia. And he visited many of them repeatedly. These travels, many of them exciting adventures, created an ever-expanding reservoir of visual impressions and insights which fed his research in often unexpected ways. On a personal level they deepened his understanding of, and sympathy for, Muslim culture in the widest sense and of course for the people of those countries he visited. And they responded in kind. But even so, there can be little doubt that it was the Arab world that first captured his heart and for which he felt the deepest affection. And of all the cities in that world he had the closest affinity with Jerusalem, the still centre of his turning world, so much so that one of the four volumes of the articles he chose to republish bears the name of that city. The original spur for this preference is plain enough: in 1953-54, in the course of his graduate studies, he received a one-year fellowship from the American School of Oriental Research, and he chose Jerusalem as his base. He came back there as Director in 1960-61. Not surprisingly, the city cast its spell over him, and he wrote movingly about these formative experiences.⁶⁶ Moreover, the relatively relaxed political situation at the time allowed him to travel freely to neighbouring countries, so these *Wanderjahre* laid the foundations for his lifelong commitment to the art of the Umayyads. They also set the pattern for his later journeys. Thus his famous never-to-be-completed project on Khurasan⁶⁷ involved a long trip, part of

⁶⁵ A major and comprehensive book by Finbarr (Barry) Flood on this topic is imminent.

⁶⁶ Grabar, *Jerusalem*, xix-xxxv. See too Renata Holod's affecting reminiscences on this theme (footnote 5[b] above).

⁶⁷ See Grabar, *Early Islamic Art, 650-1100*, xxvi-xxvii. Scott Redford recalls another such never-to-be realized project, 'a book idea he had (one he never worked on, alas, as far as I know) in which he wanted to compare various border societies – Norman Sicily, medieval Anatolia and the Caucasus, Spain – in the medieval period' (personal message).

which he made in the company of Janine Sourdél-Thomine, her husband Dominique and Oliver Watson (in 1971 or 1972). As the latter tells the story,⁶⁸ he sat in the car and listened to the excited conversation of Oleg and Mme Sourdél, likening the theory-building that took place between the two of them to constructing houses of cards. One would propose a theory, only to have the other object, flattening the house of cards, but, undaunted, either Oleg or Mme Sourdél would immediately begin to construct another over-arching theory, another house of cards. Then it was her husband 'Dominique who, otherwise silent, would bring them crashing down with a few quiet and pithy comments'.⁶⁹

Mentors and models

Any assessment of Grabar's written work requires some discussion of the scholars, including close colleagues, who exerted an influence of one kind or another upon him. The key person was of course his own father. André Grabar set the gold standard for his son from an early age: his field was cognate with that of his son, and he showed the way in rescuing a neglected field of art-historical scholarship and bringing it into fashion. I have written elsewhere of other aspects of this relationship,⁷⁰ and this is in any event a delicate subject best left to those much better informed about it.⁷¹ But his father's prodigious productivity was surely a spur.⁷² And Jane Jakeman is right, when reviewing the book of Oleg's 1989 Mellon

⁶⁸ Scott Redford comments that the story 'wonderfully encapsulates the hunger he [Grabar] had for interesting ideas'. Oliver Watson fleshes out the story by recalling how the Iranian driver (distracted by the intellectual high jinks?) narrowly avoided hitting a herd of camels, but drove the car into a ditch, thereby wrecking its suspension. He then departed to Mashhad in search of another car:

leaving us in the dark on our own. With great aplomb, Oleg strides back to the stricken car, opens the boot, and within that his suitcase, and produces a bottle of whiskey and some small glasses. He insists we all need a shot to calm our nerves. Oleg, Janine and I toast our luck ... Oleg was always very generous with the young. He really wanted company on his visit to Iran then, so invited me - in my early postgrad BIPS fellowship - to accompany him through Khurasan, and later into Azerbaijan, and chatted and discussed things with me as though I had something useful to say.
(Personal message.)

⁶⁹ Oliver Watson (personal message).

⁷⁰ See the obituaries listed in footnote 1 above.

⁷¹ For example, Grabar expressed to me his reservations about my assessment of the impact of exile on Ettinghausen (Robert Hillenbrand, 'Richard Ettinghausen and the iconography of Islamic art', in Stephen Vernoit, ed., *Discovering Islamic Art: Scholars, Collectors and Collections*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2000, 171-81).

⁷² Neil Levine notes 'I will never forget his remark that one should publish a book every three years and three articles a year. But I also remember that he never applied that yardstick to anyone but himself. Thank God, and thank Oleg' (footnote 5[b] above). Henry Maguire writes of André Grabar that '[t]hroughout his career he was extremely prolific ... He once said that a scholar should publish a book every five years ... In this age of specialization, the range of his scholarship seems extraordinary ... writing some thirty books in all, ... he was both willing and able to share his knowledge and his insights with the wider public beyond the confines of the academy ... always concerned with the integration of works of art into their cultural contexts ... a scholar who made pictures his texts, and who looked for ways to make images produced by a society speak to the historian with as much impact and clarity as its written documents' ('André Grabar 1896-1990', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 45 [1991], xiv-xv). So the apple fell not far from the tree.

lectures (which was dedicated to his father), to recall that his father gave the Mellon lectures in 1960 and to salute the pair of them: 'The Grabars, father and son, belong to that rarest group of art historians, the bridge-builders'.⁷³

Next in line is Richard Ettinghausen, Grabar's most important predecessor as an Islamic art historian in the United States and his principal mentor there. Ettinghausen previously held the Michigan job that Grabar made so much his own, and was also the editor of the first journal dedicated to Islamic art history, *Ars Islamica*. So the parallels were plain, although Ettinghausen, twenty-three years Grabar's senior, safely belonged to an older generation. His skills and qualities were complementary to those of Grabar – for example, Ettinghausen almost never wrote about architecture, and his absorption in objects, and his capacity to analyze them minutely in search of their meanings, was different in kind from Grabar's approach, though the latter certainly learned from Ettinghausen's example here. But there can be little doubt that the older man presented – by force of personality, by his long-established reputation, and by the range, depth and number of his publications – a challenging role model for his younger colleague, and that there were complex aspects to their relationship. As things turned out, Ettinghausen's later career lay firmly in the museum world, in Washington DC and New York, while Grabar's was fixed on that of the university, at Ann Arbor and at Harvard. But they maintained more than a merely collegial relationship.⁷⁴ Grabar fondly recalled how Ettinghausen kept a watching brief on his career, which involved not only regular phone calls and letters but also periodical progress reports sent to Grabar's father.⁷⁵ From 1958 to 1969 Grabar also held an honorary curatorship at the Freer Gallery of Art, where Ettinghausen was in charge of the Islamic collection; and they collaborated closely on the projected Pelican handbook on Islamic art. Grabar delivered a generous appreciation of the older master at Ettinghausen's memorial service, with a fuller obituary published in the same year.⁷⁶

These two men, then, were probably the two living scholars who exerted the major formative influences on his scholarship, and they set the bar high. But one should also not forget Philip Hitti⁷⁷ and the cadre of Princeton Arabists like Bayly Winder who gave Grabar his grounding in Arabic. However, for all his facility with languages he was not an old-style Orientalist philologist.⁷⁸ He never

⁷³ Grabar, *Mediation of Ornament*, reviewed by Jane Jakeman, *Ars Orientalis*, 24, 1994, 152.

⁷⁴ Among the written comments he made on the draft of a paper I had prepared on Ettinghausen (see footnote 71 above) was the simple statement 'I was fond of R.E.'

⁷⁵ Grabar, *Islamic Visual Culture*, xxxi-xxxii.

⁷⁶ Grabar, 'Richard Ettinghausen', *Artibus Asiae*, 41, 1979, 281-4.

⁷⁷ Nor did Grabar: 'Philip Khuri Hitti', in Patricia Marks, ed., *Luminaries: Princeton Faculty Remembered*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996, 119-24.

⁷⁸ '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' (see my obituary in *The Times*, footnote 1 above). Reflecting in 2004 on what he had learned in his years of interaction with the varied cast of characters at the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, he reflected mischievously that he remained 'regretfully convinced that a juicy footnote with quotes in six languages is a greater contribution to knowledge than a fancy meeting to discuss environmental development. Or is it?' (Grabar, *Islamic Art and Beyond*, xxv). The humorous self-mockery and the gleeful deflating of pomposity in that quotation epitomizes his charm.

engaged seriously with Persian or Turkish, and despite occasional excursions into Arabic textual studies,⁷⁹ he never again used Arabic as intensively as he had done in his doctoral thesis,⁸⁰ and more and more over the years he turned himself into a cultural historian rather than a text-based one. It was not these men who stimulated him intellectually at Princeton, but rather the art historians, for example Kurt Weitzmann, who started him on the road that led eventually to his *Maqamat* book, and Baldwin Smith, with his late antique and medieval background and his fascination with architectural iconography.⁸¹

The Michigan and Harvard years

Grabar's first academic post was at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, where he began as an instructor in 1954 and where he spent fifteen happy and fruitful years.⁸² At Michigan, Grabar benefitted in many ways, as he himself generously acknowledged, from the vision and imaginative support of the chairman of the Art History Department, George H. Forsyth Jr, who besides helping to fund Grabar's expensive field trips to the Middle East also contrived to give this junior scholar three free semesters in his first four years of teaching.⁸³ Grabar later said that this freedom to read widely at such an early stage was foundational for his entire career. He was free to teach Islamic art in whatever way he wanted and also to present it to large audiences of undergraduates in the context of a general survey of art history. He responded to that freedom with gusto, and was rewarded with a fine cadre of students from both America and abroad in those years, many of whom went on to become serious scholars in the field.

But when he moved to Harvard in 1969, the situation changed. New responsibilities came his way, new resources – principally through the newly-founded Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture, whose first professor he became – and many new opportunities of all kinds. Naturally enough, the reach of his influence widened. And in teaching, too, things were not quite the same. Islamic book painting had long been taught there, admittedly on an *ad hoc* basis – for there was no established post in that field – by Eric Schroeder, a scholar of serious stature with important things to say about architecture as well as painting, but who unfortunately died two years after Grabar's arrival, and, since 1956 (as honorary assistant keeper of Islamic Art at the Fogg Museum of Art), by Stuart Cary Welch.⁸⁴ Welch was as much a collector and a connoisseur as a scholar and

⁷⁹ Notably 'Upon Reading al-Azraqi', *Muqarnas*, 3, 1985, 1-7; cf. too 'The story of portraits of the Prophet Muhammad' (with Mika Natif), *Studia Islamica*, 96, 2003, 19-38.

⁸⁰ Note, however, that among his many and varied seminar offerings at Harvard there was one on inscriptions and epigraphy.

⁸¹ In the roll-call of eminent scholars whom Grabar cites as role models (*Early Islamic Art*, xxi) not one is a card-carrying Orientalist or philologist.

⁸² Scott Redford suggests perceptively that Grabar viewed 'the high point of his teaching as a series of seminars he held when he was still teaching at the University of Michigan' (personal message).

⁸³ For Grabar's reflections on his Michigan years, see *Islamic Visual Culture 1100-1800*, xxxiii-xxxv.

⁸⁴ See the anonymous obituary of 8 September 2008 on the College Art Association webpage [<http://www.collegeart.org/obituaries/stuartcarywelchjr> accessed 06.04.2012], and M. Fox, 'Stuart

teacher,⁸⁵ and eventually also took on further responsibilities as special consultant (1979-87) in charge of the Department of Islamic Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. While Welch specialized in later Persian manuscript painting and in the arts of Islamic India, fields in which Grabar never showed a significant research interest, there was no absolutely tidy division of teaching between them; indeed, they regularly co-supervised doctoral students. So it was not the case that Grabar left the teaching of Persian book painting to Welch; it was at Harvard in the mid-1970s that Grabar taught his legendary seminar on the Great Mongol *Shahnama*. Grabar focused on architecture,⁸⁶ archaeology and almost the entire gamut of the so-called 'minor' arts. But Welch taught notable scholars in his special areas of expertise: Anthony Welch, Glenn Lowry, Thomas Lentz, Michael Brand, Sheila Canby and John Seyller among others. In their personalities, in the range of their interests and in their approach to scholarship Grabar and Welch could scarcely have been more different.⁸⁷ Not surprisingly, to a certain extent two camps developed, and students who elected to study with both of them could sometimes feel caught in the middle.

How the field changed from 1953 to 2011

A good way to assess Grabar's contribution to the scholarship on Islamic art is to consider what the field looked like when he entered it with his first publication in 1953, and what it looked like at his death almost sixty years later.⁸⁸ In those two generations momentous things happened, and Grabar himself played nothing less than the key role in those changes.⁸⁹

First of all, the centre of gravity in the field shifted from Europe to the United States. As the key European figures died – Herzfeld and Sauvaget slightly earlier, in 1948 and 1950 respectively, Diez in 1961, Marçais in 1962, Kühnel and Erdmann in 1964, Gabriel in 1972, and Creswell in 1974 – their places were not quickly filled. The German presence shrank, with no senior university post to act as a magnet for younger scholars. There was no chair at an English university. With the loss of French political control in the Maghrib and the Levant, the opportunities for fieldwork and employment diminished. And the Islamic world itself was not yet producing a sufficient cohort of major scholars. Above all, no

Cary Welch, Scholar and Collector of Islamic and Indian Art, Dies at 80', *The New York Times*, 10 September 2008. He retired from Harvard in 1995, five years later than Grabar.

⁸⁵ The CAA obituary notes that in 1960 he taught the first course in Near Eastern art at Harvard.

⁸⁶ As Nancy Steinhardt writes (footnote 5[e] above), 'Monuments that he could intellectualize are, I think, what drove him'.

⁸⁷ Walter Denny tells me 'I've always maintained that if you put them both in a pot and boiled them down to make one art historian, you would have had the perfect historian of Islamic art'.

⁸⁸ Nasser Rabbat succinctly summarizes the process of change: 'a field that had not been totally weaned from its antiquarian, orientalist, and archaeological wet-nurses when Oleg came on the scene' which Grabar 'set ... on solid foundations that he cemented by his teaching and supervising of several generations of Islamic art historians who today occupy important positions in universities and museums around the world' (footnote 5[b] above).

⁸⁹ For an assessment of Grabar's role in a wide perspective, see Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom, 'The Mirage of Islamic Art: Reflections on the Study of an Unwieldy Field', *The Art Bulletin* 85(1), 2003, 156 and 172. This is perhaps the fullest historiographical survey of the field.

established framework was in place anywhere in Europe in the 1950s and 1960s for the next generation of scholars to receive a thorough grounding in the field, with government or university funding for fellowships, fieldwork and doctorates. Islamic art had to be studied in an *ad hoc* way. It was America, with its rigorous training programmes and substantial funding and fellowship possibilities, that gradually showed the way forward.⁹⁰ It was here that a cohort of doctoral students began to form from the early 1960s and where these students, once they had gained their doctorates, began to find employment.⁹¹ Grabar was at the very centre of this process, first in Michigan,⁹² then in Harvard, and by the end he had supervised a staggering number of doctoral students, about seventy by his own count, a record that would be very hard to beat.⁹³ That bald statistic highlights a cardinal fact: that his students were central to his life.⁹⁴ Many of them sensed that – hence the affectionate nicknames they bestowed upon him, like ‘Poppa Bear’⁹⁵ – and eloquently gave thanks for it, not least in the prefaces to their dissertations and books.

Next, the languages of continental Europe gradually but decisively lost their privileged status in the field of Islamic art history. English steadily supplanted them. To have undertaken the specialized study of Islamic art before the 1939-45 war without a good command of German would have been professional suicide. That was the language of most of the handbooks, of key

⁹⁰ The context is sketched with sure strokes by Jacob Lassner in an unpublished lecture, in which he writes ‘young Oleg, *without a degree in art history* [italics mine], shouldered almost the entire burden of developing the field of Islamic art’ (footnote 5[f] above). I have some fellow-feeling here, for I too do not possess such a degree.

⁹¹ Lisa Golombek remembers (footnote 5[b] above) that in 1962, when she came to Michigan to study Islamic art with Grabar, ‘no one else in North America was teaching this subject full-time’. In 2012 it takes an effort of the imagination to picture that situation. The word that recurs in her reminiscences is ‘adventure’. It is the *mot juste*. He made his field sound like an adventure, and adventurous spirits leaped into it at his urging, or maybe just by the force of his example.

⁹² I quote Jacob Lassner again: ‘... in Ann Arbor Oleg was one of the princes of the university and as such had immediate access to the power brokers in the administration. He exercised that influence time and again on behalf of his students and colleagues. He was absolutely fearless when it came to knocking on doors’ (footnote 5[f] above).

⁹³ I am grateful to Terry Grabar for this information.

⁹⁴ Lisa Golombek put it memorably (footnote 5[b] above): ‘We, his students, colleagues and friends, are his enormous legacy that will carry on in his spirit’. A similar thought was expressed by Shaikha Hussah Sabah al-Salem al-Sabah: ‘he’s left a legacy that will grow far into the future: young scholars that share his vision and his passion’ [memoryog.tumblr.com]. Or as Esin Atıl put it to me: ‘we, the students -- past and present -- formed a bond of collegiality and shared research materials ... Oleg’s greatest contribution was to individually nourish each and every one of his students ... We still feel that we are a part of the same “medrese”.’

⁹⁵ Jack Renard kindly told me this. It brings to mind a reminiscence of Jaclynne Kerner from 10 December 2010: ‘After lunch, Oleg brought me to his office at the IAS. He had some offprints and career advice to give me. As we said our goodbyes, he told me the story of a mismatched trio of teddy bears sitting on his credenza. The largest bear symbolized Oleg, while the smaller pair represented the two students who had given him these gifts. Technically, Oleg explained, the students were not his. Both attended MIT, but as they presented the bears to Oleg, they told him that they considered themselves his students, too’ [memoryog.tumblr.com].

monographs on Islamic cities,⁹⁶ Islamic building types,⁹⁷ schools of architecture,⁹⁸ and the other major media.⁹⁹ It was in that language, too, that the key theoretical debates about the origins of Islamic art were conducted before the 1914-18 war. French was not far behind. Most of the early scholarship on Islamic painting was in French; with the establishment of the French mandate in Syria and Lebanon, the scholarship on Islamic art and architecture in that area, as in the Maghrib, was largely francophone, as were the journals that served that scholarship, notably *Syria* and a clutch of outlets for the study of the Maghrib. And the first serious journal to cover the Islamic art of the Mashreq, *Athar-e Iran*, was in French. Van Berchem, who for some thirty years had the field of Islamic epigraphy almost to himself, wrote largely in German and French. Most of the literature on the art of Central Asia was in Russian.

Now, seventy years later, the landscape of scholarship looks very different. Conferences in Germany whose participants are largely German are conducted in English, and this is symptomatic of a trend that has swept Europe in the last couple of decades. Nowadays, to write in German or French (let alone Italian, Spanish, Russian or any of the languages of the Islamic world) is to risk losing an audience. And paradoxically enough, in the scholarship of Islamic art the time of the Islamic languages – Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Urdu – has, on the whole, still not come as yet except for native speakers of those languages. That said, this situation is changing fast, with the volume of scholarship on Turkish and Iranian art, in that order, growing at a dizzy rate and absolutely demanding international attention. Nevertheless, the major historians of Islamic art from those countries still turn more naturally to English for their key publications. For Grabar's entire career, the principal audience for his work was the Western world, and English has been, and for the immediately foreseeable future will remain, the preferred medium of instruction and scholarship.

A further significant change was the shift from an amateur to a professional mindset. As Constable remarked, 'a self-taught artist is one taught by a very ignorant man'. Much of the groundwork in Islamic art has been carried out, from the nineteenth century onwards, by dedicated amateurs. Many of them had quite catholic sympathies – Pascal Coste, for example, spent significant time

⁹⁶ Karl Wulzinger and Carl Watzinger, *Damaskus. Die islamische Stadt*, Berlin and Leipzig: Wissenschaftliche Veröffentlichungen des deutsch-türkischen Denkmalschutz-Kommandos 5, 1924; Max van Berchem and Josef Strzygowski (with a contribution by Gertrude L. Bell), *Amida*, Heidelberg and Paris: C. Winter, 1910 and E. Leroux, 1910.

⁹⁷ Hermann Thiersch, *Pharos, Antike, Islam und Occident. Ein Beitrag zur Architekturgeschichte*, Leipzig and Berlin: B.G. Teubner, 1909; Friedrich Wetzel, *Islamische Grabbauten in Indien aus der Zeit der Soldatenkaiser, 1320-1540*, Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1918.

⁹⁸ Friedrich Sarre and Ernst Herzfeld, *Archäologische Reise im Euphrat- und Tigrisgebiet*, 4 vols, Berlin: Reimer, 1911-20; Friedrich Sarre, *Denkmäler Persischer Baukunst*, Berlin: E. Wasmuth, 1910.

⁹⁹ Ernst Kühnel, *Miniaturmalerei im islamischen Orient*, Berlin: B. Cassirer, 1922; Philipp Walter Schulz, *Die persisch-islamische Miniaturmalerei*, Leipzig: K.W. Hiersemann, 1914; Friedrich Sarre, *Sammlung F. Sarre. Erzeugnisse islamischer Kunst. Bearbeitet von Friedrich Sarre mit epigraphischen Beiträgen von Eugen Mittwoch. Teil 1 – Metall*, Berlin: 1906; Friedrich Sarre and Hermann Trenkwald, *Old Oriental Carpets*, tr. A.F. Kendrick, Leipzig: A. Schroll 1926-29 (a translation of two fundamental surveys in German that had appeared in 1892 and 1908); and Otto von Falke, *Kunstgeschichte der Seidenweberei*, 2 vols, Berlin: Wasmuth, 1913.

recording the monuments not only of Iran but also of Cairo. Others, like Creswell, lacked the security of a permanent position and perforce had to train themselves. But with the establishment of graduate training programmes, first in the United States and then elsewhere, prospective specialists in Islamic art have had access to training in art history, in the relevant languages, and in Islamic studies as a prelude to undertaking a doctoral dissertation. As the number of such professionally trained specialists has grown, so more and more hitherto neglected areas of the field have been revealed. The cumulative growth of understanding and expertise has been remarkable.

Finally, the field of Islamic art as a whole has developed a greater theoretical sophistication. This is directly related to the much greater number of scholars in that field, which makes for a corresponding increase in competition, since neither the number of posts nor the number of outlets for publication has kept pace with that exponential growth in the number of participants. Description and the accumulation of data are no longer enough. Grabar himself pointed the way here to some extent, for example, *inter alia*, in his attention to semiotics,¹⁰⁰ structuralism, linguistic theory and the importance of Bakhtin,¹⁰¹ and he played a large part in changing accordingly the direction of the Harvard department that he chaired for some years.¹⁰² He also frequently spoke of the need to respond to technological advances in the processing of information. But at base his forte was speculation rather than theory, and he was consistently drawn to explore the meaning of works of art in their own time. In the field of architecture in particular, this led him far beyond much of earlier scholarship. Nevertheless, his major books and articles, while dense with information and analysis, and brimful of ideas, are cast in fairly traditional mould.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Grabar, 'Are Pictures Signs Yet?', *Semiotica*, 25, 1979, 185-8.

¹⁰¹ Yasser Tabbaa comments:

Oleg had a nimble mind, and he knew before others when a methodology had run aground and could no longer support or advance his expanding horizons in Islamic art. The switch to aesthetics and semiotics—already at hand in *The Alhambra* (1978) and fully central in *The Mediation of Ornament* (1992)—was not simply 'fashionable,' as some had proposed then, but was motivated, I believe, by the increasing aridity of studies of patronage and the social history of art and by Grabar's increased involvement with architectural practice. This methodological transformation attracted many students to Grabar, more theoretical and less archeological than his earlier students, and included a higher proportion of students of Arab or Middle Eastern descent.

(Personal message.)

¹⁰² And these interests had a much wider field of operation, for they impacted directly on how art history was taught at Harvard, as Neil Levine notes: 'a strengthening of the department's own coherence as a faculty devoted to a wide range of historical areas including African, Islamic, ancient Near Eastern, and Southeast Asian as well as a focus on critical theory and new and diverse methodological approaches, which Oleg's broad interests and wide-ranging enthusiasms had inspired in us' (footnote 5[b] above).

¹⁰³ Barry Flood kindly responded as follows to my invitation to define what the distinctive contributions of Grabar's scholarship were. His response was so powerful that I make no apology for citing it *in extenso*:

Oleg's 1959 *Ars Orientalis* article on the Dome of the Rock ... illustrated the way in which a single powerful intervention can shape a discourse, determining its parameters for decades to come, and establishing scholarly orthodoxies ... [it] reminded me of how important Oleg's

But for all these manifold changes, and despite Grabar's frequent reiteration of his belief that new technologies and new ways of seeing would transform the field of Islamic art from within, it remains the case that the views of individual scholars, well thought out and well expressed, lie – as they have done for many decades past – at the centre of Islamic art history today, as is the case with the humanities in general. The computer and the internet are still ancillary to the action of the mind. And Grabar himself is the best example of that principle.

Early work and *The Formation of Islamic Art*

It is time to turn to a closer scrutiny of his books. As it happens, it is useful that among the very few somewhat challenging reviews that his books received, two of the longest and most serious assessed what to many people is still his major work: *The Formation of Islamic Art* (1973).¹⁰⁴ This is the book that made his reputation in a

life-long interest in the Umayyads was to many of our intellectual formations ... [he was able] to relocate the Umayyads within an extended late antiquity rather than outside its upper limits, calling into question the very idea of the Umayyad period as a watershed ... A second thread running through his scholarship ... is his insistence on looking beyond the obvious for comparative material, especially during periods of social or political change that foster enhanced levels of transregional mobility ... [this] alerted me to the need to think "outside the box" ... The third aspect of Oleg's scholarship that has left an enduring mark is his engagement with experimental methodologies and openness to theoretical frames drawn from other fields within the discipline of art history, or even outside ... his ability to move from a coin, fragment or shard to an entire universe of dynamic ideas was dizzyingly exciting ... [he had] an excellent "nose" for topics with the ability to engage and excite the discipline of art history as a whole ... In some ways his ability to anticipate trends within the broader academic world was uncanny - especially so, when one recalls that he published two key articles on images of the Prophet only a year or two before the subject erupted onto the global scene in such an unfortunate way. The final, and certainly the most important, lesson I learned from Oleg's scholarship was the absolute need to forge dialogues across the discipline of art history, not only in a spirit of collegiality or intellectual exploration, but to ensure the very survival of the field itself. In short, he realized the need to resist attempts to allot the study of Islamic art its corner as an exotic sub-field of the discipline, and the need for historians of Islamic art to be actively involved in the ongoing process of shaping the discipline ... he did this in three ways: by speaking and writing on topics well-chosen for their intrinsic interest or their ability to raise major questions of an interpretive or theoretical nature that resonated beyond the study of Islamic art; by his adoption of and experimentation with theoretical frames that enabled the "translation" of specific problems across the discipline, engaging colleagues working on the art of wildly divergent times and places; by his ability to frame even rather abstract questions in ways that made their import readily comprehensible to an audience well beyond a small clique of Islamic art historians.

(Personal message.)

¹⁰⁴ These are by Erica Dodd and Michael Rogers. The first review (in *The Art Bulletin* 57[2], 1975, 267-70) contains mildly couched criticisms that focus on her perception that Grabar downplays the impact of the built environment of pre-Islamic Syria and of the Oriental Hellenistic heritage in particular, and that he has a less than sure touch on matters to do with religion, notably the mosque and the *mihrab*. The second is essentially a fourteen-page review article (in *Kunst des Orients* 9[1-2], 1973-74). Recognizing that the book is based on a series of public lectures, Rogers follows that schema in his chapter-by-chapter response to it. He acknowledges many of the strengths of the book whilst pointing out areas where Grabar could have gone further or is, in his view, mistaken. The tone is vigorous and the range of comment is wide-ranging. But the review is not really a sustained attempt to engage with the broader horizons of the material. Instead it can be seen as a series of penetrating

wider circle, beyond the narrow constituency of Islamic art historians.¹⁰⁵ It is by now well established as the book of choice to be cited by scholars who, from the specific viewpoints of their various disciplines, engage with a notoriously complex phenomenon¹⁰⁶ – the transition from late antiquity to early medieval times – and who wish to draw attention to the Islamic dimension of that process.¹⁰⁷ This book is a testament to his early maturity. For many of his own students, it had the force of revelation, a breath of fresh air after the stodgy handbooks to which students had previously been consigned.¹⁰⁸ And it demanded a re-appraisal of what was

insights or counter-arguments (often interesting and suggestive in themselves) that are marshalled against this or that passage in the book.

¹⁰⁵ This was best recognized by Michael G. Morony, who wrote the most searching review of all, packed with information and ideas (*International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 6[4], 1975, 514-20), and who notes (514) that the book 'goes a long way towards bridging the gap with other disciplines by putting art in its historical and intellectual context'. Similarly, Ira Lapidus, in *The American Historical Review*, 80(1), 1975, 146-7, recognizes that here 'the art historian becomes a cultural historian'. James Allan, in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 37(2), 1974, 463-4, acknowledges that 'Grabar has done much of the thinking for us', while Howard Crane, recognizing that 'what is desperately needed in the study of Islamic art and architecture is an intellectual framework which will give meaning and value to a mass of individual phenomena', hails the book for providing exactly that (*Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 33[1], 1974, 82-3). In a generally favourable review, Ernst Grube challenges Grabar's assertion of 'the almost total absence in early Islam of a meaningful iconography' (*Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 97[1], 1977, 44-7). There is the occasional rather petulant complaint; thus Lucien Golvin, in an outburst of windy rhetoric, reproaches Grabar for not facing up to the implications of the absence of any Islamic art for the first fifty years after the death of Muhammad (*Arabica*, 22[1], 1975, 91-3), while Godfrey Goodwin, reviewing the second edition of the book, dismisses it on the grounds that 'because it used mainly familiar signposts ... it was not pioneering', a jaw-dropping assertion (*Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1989, 144-5). For other reviews see Basil Gray (*The Burlington Magazine*, 116[858], 1974, 542-3); Priscilla P. Soucek (*Iranian Studies*, 8[4], 1975, 248-63, where a short factual review is overshadowed by a fascinating excursus on the Solomonic resonances of Khirbat al-Mafjar); and Howard Crane's assessment of the second edition (*Iranian Studies*, 21[3-4], 1988, 120-2). Sylvia Auld notes that 'his book on the *Formation of Islamic Art* occupies a similar position for the new student of Islamic art to Ernst Gombrich's *The story of art* for those starting to study Western art' (*Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 66[1], 2003, 99).

¹⁰⁶ Gülru Necipoğlu pinpoints how this book 'made Islamic art appear wide open to hugely exciting questions of cultural history, captivated my imagination and was the single most important factor that triggered my conversion to this newly budding field. Indeed, Oleg had a very special talent for making Islamic Art seductive and appealing to non-specialists; thereby vastly broadening its recognition within the two disciplines of Art History and Islamic Studies' (see footnote 5[b] above).

¹⁰⁷ As Sheila Canby says, this text 'not only poses questions about the essential nature of Islamic art but also explores the context in which it was produced. In fact, the societies of the central Islamic lands are the starting point for Grabar's discussion, rather than the monuments or works of art.'

¹⁰⁸ For example, Thomas Lentz:

It was undoubtedly the analytical and contextual framework he managed to place over an array of fundamental issues and questions that was his lasting legacy. No work better epitomizes that approach for me than *The Formation of Islamic Art* -- and I say that as someone whose primary interests stood far away and much later than his focus in that book ... it is in many ways more important for its questions than answers, but it instilled in the reader a deconstructive mindset that was then carried to other subjects and issues, and at the time struck me as quite different than other approaches to Islamic art (at least to my young and untutored mind). For me, it was both revelatory and liberating to have a complement to the descriptive and taxonomical approaches that made up so much of the field at that time. (Personal message.)

meant by the term 'Islamic art'.¹⁰⁹ In all sorts of ways, it set new benchmarks in the field.¹¹⁰

It is in fact his first real book,¹¹¹ for the slim volume on Tulunid coinage published in 1957, the fruit of an intensive but brief course of study at the American Numismatic Society in New York, is an apprentice work of carefully limited scope cast in the familiar numismatic mould of the ANS mini-monograph. It ticks all the correct technical boxes, it does what it says on the tin, it is an early signal of his virtuosity; and one would think that its subject matter forbids just those flights of creative, well-grounded speculation that were to become Grabar's trademark. Wrong. No less an authority than Sir Hamilton Gibb, doyen of British Arabists in his generation, praised the way that this book supplemented the existing literary evidence with that drawn from archaeology (or what would nowadays be called 'material culture'). That latter evidence, he notes, was largely neglected by historians; but 'more than once in this study, it raises problems to which neither it nor the literary evidence supplies a clear answer'.¹¹²

The book on Tulunid coinage is significant in a wider sense in that it shows how early Grabar formed the habit of publishing his results as soon as possible after he had garnered the necessary data. Not for him the endless neurotic polishing of a text in a doomed bid for perfection, where the law of diminishing returns dictates a steadily decreasing yield for each hour of effort. Nor did he spend valuable time in trying to accumulate *all* the available data before

¹⁰⁹ Glenn Lowry concludes: 'For me *The Formation of Islamic Art* remains the quintessential book because Oleg was able to ask a series of questions that led to a theory of Islamic art that was exhilarating even if it was not necessarily always right' (personal message). Sheila Canby adds: 'Grabar broached the conundrum of how art historians could call the art of places separated by thousands of miles and several centuries "Islamic" without defining the qualities that unify such works and also differentiate them. Questions such as this continue to dog the field today, but the discourse on this subject would be far more incoherent had Grabar not confronted it in 1973' (personal message).

¹¹⁰ As Yasser Tabbaa notes: 'Reading *Formation* was especially significant for me, for it led me to think of questions of social history and patronage for my dissertation on Nur al-Din ... *Formation* remains his most important book, marking as it does a decisive shift in the field from product to process and from focusing on the object to examining its contextual relations' (personal message).

¹¹¹ Neither the Michigan exhibition catalogue of 1959 (Oleg Grabar, *Persian Art Before and After the Mongol Conquest*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Museum of Art, 1959) nor *Sasanian Silver* (1967) can be regarded as single-authored monographs, the first because it was a catalogue and the second because it was co-authored (with Martha Carter). For the first, see the review by Janine Sourdel-Thomine (*Arabica*, 7[2], 1960, 214-5), in which she admires the way that he seizes on the core distinctions between Saljuq and Ilkhanid art, thoroughly contextualizes the objects in the societies which produced them, and shows how the paintings of the Great Mongol *Shahnama* contain the creative sap which the previous period exploited in far more varied ways. For the second, see the review by Ernst Grube (*Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 95[2], 289-91), which hails the work as 'unquestionably the most intelligent, penetrating, and ... most stimulating piece of writing on "Sasanian silver" that has appeared in print'.

¹¹² Oleg Grabar, *The Coinage of the Tulunids*, New York: American Numismatic Society, 1957; review by Sir Hamilton Gibb in *Speculum*, 34(3), 1959, 468. Cf. the biting review of David M. Lang, who complains that 'the commentary...greatly exceeds in size the modest corpus' and is irritated by the number of unanswered questions (*Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 21, 1958, 631) and the review of Dominique Sourdel (*Arabica* 5[3], 1958, 305-6), who congratulates Grabar for his use of the numismatic evidence to clarify historical problems.

committing himself. It was as if he had instinctively realized, when he was still only in his twenties, that the very best is the enemy of the very good. Of course, all this is closely linked to personality; what perfectionist could ever consider the opportunity cost of hunting down that very last footnote, or question that only perfection will do? Grabar's spacious attitude to footnotes was proverbial; he was quite frank about it, and unrepentant when the need for footnotes was pointed out to him, even going so far as to suggest that they were a waste of time. Rank heresy or common sense? And in this respect he did on occasion practise what he preached, in that sometimes he made no serious effort in his own work to ensure that they were consistently full or even accurate.

Let us return to *The Formation of Islamic Art*. This is emphatically not the book-of-the-thesis; indeed, Grabar never published his 330-page thesis in book form, nor even any of its chapters as discrete articles. But it was not put aside or forgotten; indeed, it worked like yeast on his imagination. Its looming presence can be sensed in many places in *The Formation of Islamic Art*, especially chapter six, and the hard-won evidence of the thesis of 1954 lends bulk, authority and conviction to the book of 1973. The best part of two decades lay between those two achievements, and in that time he had grown exponentially in stature as a scholar. He had also left the alluring problems of Umayyad art, not just for Tulunid coinage but also for Sasanian metalwork¹¹³ and the Seljuq art of Iran, and so he came back to those problems thoroughly refreshed by his excursions into other fields. This trajectory enabled him to sidestep the principal danger which the modern academic climate poses for the young scholar: to publish the thesis as soon as possible, without the luxury of taking a long break from it so as to come back to it with a changed and much less pressured mind-set and examine it from a different perspective. And nowadays if such young scholars do indeed take that break, it puts their tenure applications into jeopardy, while if they continue to work on the thesis without that interruption so as to make a book out of it, they run the risk of becoming stale and narrow-minded just at the age when they should spread their wings. Grabar came to maturity much more naturally, in a more spacious and less policed age.

So *The Formation of Islamic Art* provides solid intellectual fare; it is *durchkomponiert*, with an enviable suppleness and a width of reference which bespeaks Grabar's solid grounding in Islamic studies and which, to speak frankly, is simply beyond the grasp of any of today's historians of Islamic art.¹¹⁴ In that sense, he was the last of his kind. This work is anything but a picture book, and the illustrations, all in black and white, have low production values with no pretensions to glamour. It is as if the subliminal message were that this book is not about art, but more widely about culture as seen through the prism of art. And this was a new approach, a much more ambitious one than that followed in earlier

¹¹³ Prudence Harper writes: 'His real contribution to Sasanian studies was his ability to articulate significant questions and propose hypothetical answers some of which he stuck with others of which he discarded ... but the gift was the incredible skill in sifting through the data and coming up with thoughtful points that needed investigation ... The result was that he inspired everyone to stretch their minds a bit and reach for the broader understanding' (personal message).

¹¹⁴ His facility with European languages had much to do with this.

handbooks.¹¹⁵ With its publication Grabar consolidated his emergence from the ranks of the *jeunesse dorée* and became definitively a force to be reckoned with, a scholar who had momentous things to say about momentous issues.

Nor is this the whole story. Since Islamic art history had first announced itself as a discipline at the end of the nineteenth century, the key question that had fascinated scholars and was the main bone of contention concerned the origins of Islamic art. *Orient oder Rom?* thundered Strzygowski, a born polemicist. That question was typically posed in the general context of late antique art rather than the particular one of Islamic art, although Islamic art was quickly commandeered into the discussion,¹¹⁶ and those who debated that question before the 1914-18 war shared a background in which Greece and Rome took centre stage as if by right. Trained from early boyhood (they were all men) in the classical languages, the scholars of the time naturally saw things from that perspective. Yet it blinkered them. In assessing Byzantine art, that was no great disadvantage. But the tools furnished by an intensive classical education were inadequate to explain the earliest Islamic art. Indeed, they were liable to misrepresent it. The detailed knowledge which such scholars possessed of the Semitic and Iranian components of Western Asian culture dating from the first millennium CE lagged almost absurdly far behind their knowledge of the Graeco-Roman world.¹¹⁷ The Arabian background, especially the impact of the Qur'an, scarcely entered the picture. Grabar's great book is the long-delayed counterblast to the feverish pre-1914 theorizing about the emergence of a recognizably Islamic art. And its title is carefully chosen, echoing as it does the single epoch-making contribution of that pre-1914 generation, Ernst Herzfeld's precocious masterpiece on Mshatta and the origins of Islamic art.¹¹⁸

How is Grabar's riposte configured? Paradoxically (given the title of the book) the argument is not framed in principally art-historical terms. Instead, the reader is treated to a panorama of early Islamic civilization. It is these beguilingly wide perspectives that give the book its muscle: the visual material is firmly integrated into a fully realized society. In this respect the book is a world away from the perfunctory summaries of political history which preface the chapters of the handbooks available at the time. In such books one can sense the author's impatience to get to what he regards as the real meat of the matter – the art itself – not the history, the society, the faith, the entire thought-world, that encompasses the art and out of which the art grows. Grabar did not see art as something self-contained in that way. For him it was just one of the many ways that a given society expressed itself, its concerns, its beliefs, its view of the world. It is worth

¹¹⁵ Such as those of Dimand, Talbot Rice, Kühnel, Diez, Marçais – to name only those handbooks published around the 1960s and which were, therefore, the ones to beat.

¹¹⁶ Especially in the context of Qusayr 'Amra; see Robert Hillenbrand, 'Creswell and Central European Scholarship', *Muqarnas*, 8, 1991, 25.

¹¹⁷ An important exception must be noted here: those scholars with a Jewish background who had an early training in Hebrew and Judaica.

¹¹⁸ Ernst Herzfeld, 'Die Genesis der islamischen Kunst und das Mshatta-Problem', *Der Islam*, 1, 1910, 27-63 and 105-44.

remembering that his first degrees, at the universities of Paris¹¹⁹ and Harvard¹²⁰ respectively, were in ancient, medieval and modern history. And a historian he remained to the end. Historians of Islamic art often find their métier by a knight's move from disciplines as varied as philosophy, philology, classical studies, literature, architecture or the social sciences, among others; Grabar's route, first and last, was history.

From *Shahnama* to *Maqamat*

History is at the very heart of a short but major book that came out of the Harvard seminar on the Great Mongol (or 'Demotte') *Shahnama* held in spring 1975.¹²¹ Grabar co-authored this with Sheila Blair,¹²² one of the participants in the seminar.¹²³ Its title proclaims its audacious scope: *Epic Images and Contemporary History. The Illustrations of the Great Mongol Shahnama*. It is a perfect example of how a single key book can trigger an avalanche of publications, as if indeed there had been a pent-up body of information and speculation that had found no previous outlet.¹²⁴ The book is packed with protein. In retrospect, it is clear that almost all earlier publications on this acknowledged masterpiece of early Persian painting had signally failed to take its measure.¹²⁵ So this is a quantum leap. Grabar himself had published a dry run for part of this book eleven years

¹¹⁹ Certificat de licence, Ancient History, University of Paris (1948); Certificats de licence, Medieval History and Modern History, University of Paris (1950).

¹²⁰ BA (magna cum laude), Harvard University, Medieval History (1950); he gained his MA and PhD at Princeton University in 1953 and 1955 respectively, in Oriental Languages and Literatures and History of Art.

¹²¹ He had held two earlier seminars on the manuscript at the University of Michigan in 1958 and 1959 (Oleg Grabar and Sheila S. Blair, *Epic Images and Contemporary History. The Illustrations of the Great Mongol Shahnama*, Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1980, ix).

¹²² Apart from books of collaborative authorship or editorship, Grabar published articles with other former students of his (Renata Holod, on Iranian architecture) or younger colleagues (Mika Natif, on images of Muhammad; she also did a great deal of work on preparing the four volumes of his collected articles). And he collaborated less formally with many more (see the comments of Muhammad al-Asad [memoryog.tumblr.com]).

¹²³ The first chapter – a *tour de force* of patient but imaginative detective work in reconstructing the many vicissitudes that the manuscript had undergone – is evidently hers, the second his; the exact degree of collaboration between them in the later part of the book remains unclear.

¹²⁴ See the reviews by Carol Bier (*Iranian Studies*, 17[1], 1984, 126-32), Priscilla Soucek (*Ars Orientalis*, 12, 1981, 73, with a note *à propos* the suggested patronage of the vizier Ghiyath al-Din 'that a quite different recension of the *Shahnama* was produced at his instigation by Hamd Allah Mustawfi'), David Morgan (*Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 45[2], 1982, 364-5, which dismisses the book's suggestions as to date and patronage as 'fascinating guesswork') and Jerome W. Clinton (*Speculum*, 57[4], 1982, 891-3). The latter review is generally favourable; it identifies areas that need further work, including 'the use of book painting to record and comment upon sensitive political events ... contemporary literary evidence ... the historical role of the *Shahnama* in court society ... the nature of patronage and the organization of the atelier'. It expresses the hope 'that their work will have the happy effect of making art history more interesting to Islamic historians and history a more compelling interest for students of Islamic art'.

¹²⁵ With the exception of a magisterial article by Eric Schroeder, 'Ahmed Musa and Shams al-Din: A Review of Fourteenth-Century Painting', *Ars Islamica*, 6, 1939, 113-42.

previously in article form.¹²⁶ That outline, somewhat further developed, remains the core of the book's second chapter. But that is merely an *hors d'oeuvre* for the third and fourth chapters, which take the discussion onto a new plane of sophistication and subtlety for which no precedent in the scholarship on Islamic book painting springs to mind. The sense of intellectual excitement here is palpable; you feel you are in the engine room itself. At long last the historical context is not perfunctory, not mere window-dressing, but rather integral to the argument. The dovetailing of separate nuggets of historical information with specific images justifies a truly radical proposal: that these paintings gave the ancient *Shahnama* stories a topical Mongol slant. Sixteen years later, Abolala Soudavar gave chapter and verse in support of this theory.¹²⁷ This book, then, opened a new window in the scholarship of Persian manuscript-painting. And it was a team effort, with Grabar as the conductor of the orchestra.¹²⁸ As one of the seminar members describes it, Grabar's intellectual energy was the glue that held this communal enquiry together; he knew the right place to put each individual contribution so as to make best sense of it.¹²⁹

Grabar's interest in the *Maqamat* of al-Hariri began in his salad days at Princeton, when he took classes on medieval manuscripts with Kurt Weitzmann. He returned to the theme at intervals over the next thirty years, producing a series of teasing, thought-provoking investigations of this exceptional corpus of illustrated Arabic manuscripts, almost all of thirteenth-century date and of Iraqi or Syrian provenance. He responded with gusto to the salty, raucous atmosphere which one gifted artist in particular (Yahya al-Wasiti) conjured up from these picaresque narratives, with their cast of streetwise, disputatious characters often on the wrong side of the law. Indeed, Grabar had a particular fondness for the Paris manuscript of 1237 CE, with its unsparing exposure of the seamy side of Islamic urban society, its vignettes of rural life and its unashamed flights of fancy. Eventually he wrote a long introduction to a facsimile edition of this masterpiece.¹³⁰ In 1984 he published what was for him the definitive study of the entire genre, which tackled head-on some of the basic problems that it posed: the reasons for the brief but intense fashion for illustrated versions of the *Maqamat*, and the interrelationships between the manuscripts and the sources of the illustrations. In this text he surveys the manuscripts in detail one by one, while the longest chapter deals with the illustrations themselves, and the messages that they carry. The framework for this discussion is the close study of the illustrations for

¹²⁶ Grabar, 'Notes on the Iconography of the "Demotte" Shahnama', in Ralph Pinder-Wilson, ed., *Paintings from Islamic Lands*, Oriental Studies 4, Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, 1969, 32-47.

¹²⁷ Abolala Soudavar, 'The Saga of Abu Sa' id Bahador Khan. The Abu Sa' idnamé', in Julian Raby and Teresa Fitzherbert, eds, *The Court of the Il-khans 1290-1340*, Oxford Studies in Islamic Art, 12, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, 95-211.

¹²⁸ The names of the participants are duly listed and handsomely acknowledged in *Epic Images*, xiv. Marianna Shreve Simpson recalls: 'Years later Oleg described this group as "an extraordinary team working together"'. All of us still remember this as one of the great moments of our lives' (footnote 5[b] above).

¹²⁹ My thanks to Jack Renard for this.

¹³⁰ Grabar, 'Introduction', *Maqamat Al-Hariri: Illustrated by Y. Al-Wasiti* (facsimile edition of Bibliothèque National de France, ms. ar. 5847), London: Touchart, 2003, 1-62.

each of the forty-eight *maqamat* in turn. But once again, as with *Epic Images*, he was let down by the poor production values of Chicago University Press. The decision to publish all 789 images on microfiche – which seems to have entailed a corresponding absence of any printed illustrations in the book – condemned interested readers to hunting out laboriously, in front of humming projectors, the images that especially interested them. So the crucial visual dimension gets lost. At all events, Grabar was disappointed by what he perceived as a lack of response to a book he had pondered and worked towards for decades.¹³¹

The Mediation of Ornament

Of all his books, it is *The Mediation of Ornament* – an enigmatic title, this¹³² – that has attracted the widest response, much of it from outside the charmed circle of Islamic art historians, as shown by the many reviews it received.¹³³ The reason is not far to seek. Ornament is part of the universal language of art. Most art historians have to come to grips with it to some extent. So it marks an area of overlap where it is indeed possible to learn something from scholars far outside one's own field. Perhaps Grabar was led to think about ornament across the whole spectrum of Islamic art by Gombrich's famous book on the subject, with its emphasis on naturalism and its adoption of a perspective which, though notionally global, is really confined to Europe, leaving non-Western traditions, including the Islamic one, with no more than a bit part to play.¹³⁴ So *Mediation*, whose inherently cross-cultural scope won many plaudits, may have been Grabar's response to a perceived challenge.¹³⁵ At all events, this is a deeply considered examination of the very heart of Islamic art, and it is clearly the work

¹³¹ Note, for example, the lukewarm review by Nabil Safwat in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 50(1), 1988, 351-2. Walter Denny (*Speculum* 61[3], 1986, 659-60) found the work 'strikingly tentative', while Estelle Whelan (*Ars Orientalis*, 16, 1986, 175-6), besides noting that the microfiche illustrations 1A9 and 1A12 were mislabeled, felt that Grabar did not explain either the source of the new popularity of images in the later thirteenth century, nor how non-court artists could have found access to Christian images.

¹³² See the review by Barbara Brend in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 58(2), 1995, 361. The longer, teasing title of the Mellon lectures on which the book is based (*Intermediary Demons, Towards a Theory of Ornament*) is briefly discussed by Sylvia J. Auld in a review in *Art History*, 17(1), 1994, 138.

¹³³ In addition to the reviews cited in the previous footnote, see Margaret Olin in *The Art Bulletin* 75(4), 1995, 728-31; Rudolf Arnheim in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 53(2), 1995, 218-9; Catherine Kapikian in *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*, April 1994, 224; John Rhodes in *Speculum*, 69(4), 1994, 178-9; Carole Bier, 'Ornament and Islamic Art', *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin*, 28(1), 1994, 28-30 – the excellent closing paragraph of this review cites Grabar's own assessment of the book: 'a conscious and deliberate departure from traditional scholarship in the study of Islamic art' (*Mediation*, xxii); Jane Jakeman, *Ars Orientalis*, 24, 1994, 151-2 (which says a great deal in a few words); Rose, *Ornament or Art?*, 30-43; and Marianna Shreve Simpson, 'Oleg Grabar, Intermediary Demons: Toward a Theory of Ornament', in *The A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts, Fifty Years*, Washington DC: 2002.

¹³⁴ Ernst H. Gombrich, *The Sense of Order. A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art*, London and Ithaca, New York: Phaidon Press, 1979.

¹³⁵ Sussan Babaie hails it as 'a key intellectual resource for ... exploring transcultural notions in art' (personal message).

of a scholar at the zenith of his powers, capable of approaching this complex subject from any number of angles. That said, it has an impish quality well illustrated by its tongue-in-cheek (and tongue-twisting) neologisms (calliphoric, terpnopoeitic, chronotopic, monoptic and optisemic), perhaps created as a way of signalling that the author is entering uncharted territory. The theme is a grand and difficult one, but Grabar rises to it and goes well beyond earlier treatments of geometry, writing and architecture; even the much-studied arabesque takes on new dimensions and reveals new subtleties under his scrutiny.¹³⁶ His profound and nuanced treatment shows up the stale and threadbare clichés that characterize the perfunctory discussions of these topics in much earlier scholarship. Above all, he takes on the challenge of explaining how it is that these abstract categories become vehicles for expressing not only abstract concepts but also emotion and, most contentiously of all, an Islamic view of the world. But it is still, as many reviewers noted, a difficult book with some inherent contradictions:¹³⁷ to map out so much new territory took its toll.¹³⁸ The book's forty pages of notes bear testimony to the range and depth of his enquiries.¹³⁹

The Shape of the Holy

The Shape of the Holy was, of all his books, the one that Grabar was born to write.¹⁴⁰ The idea of it had probably been at the back of his mind for well over forty years. Again and again in that time Jerusalem had called him, and the preface to the book explains why. It is a walk down memory lane. A palpable nostalgia, a sense of *ubi sunt?*, runs like a powerful current through the whole book, creating a Jerusalem of the mind that takes shape alongside the physical Jerusalem of Umayyad and Fatimid times that this study seeks to recreate. This is the long-delayed but natural sequel to all his early work on the Dome of the Rock in that it attempts to provide a detailed physical as well as historical context for that remarkable building. That

¹³⁶ See Alois Riegl, *Problems of Style: Foundations for a History of Ornament*, tr. Evelyn Kain, with annotations and introduction by David Castriota, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992; Ernst Herzfeld, 'Arabesque', *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (1st ed.), vol. 1, 363a-367b; Ernst Kühnel, *Die Arabeske*, Wiesbaden: Dieterich'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1949, *The Arabesque: Meaning and Transformation of an Ornament*, tr. Richard Ettinghausen, Graz: Verlag für Sammler, 1977; and James Trilling (another beneficiary of Grabar's support), "'Meaning" and Meanings in Ornament: In Search of Universals', *Raritan*, 12, 1993, 52-69.

¹³⁷ Particularly Arnheim, Jakeman, Olin and Brend.

¹³⁸ The lectures and book, moreover, took shape at a time of devastating personal bereavements: his daughter, Anne-Louise, and his father.

¹³⁹ Though this wealth of annotation, which was not typical of his later work, may have something to do with the research assistants mentioned in *Mediation*, xx-xxi.

¹⁴⁰ See the reviews by Walter Denny (*Journal of Architectural Education*, 52[2], 1998, 127), who admires 'its meditative approach' and especially its closing essay, 'certainly one of the most movingly written and visually oriented passages in his considerable oeuvre'; the Jerusalem aficionado Andreas Kaplony (*American Journal of Archaeology*, 104[1], 2000, 154-6), who usefully summarizes its contents and then adds a list of errors; Robert Schick (*Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 120[1], 2000, 108-9), who also summarizes its content, though more briefly, and who deplores the over-use of computer-aided-design images; and Yasser Tabbaa (*Ars Orientalis*, 28, 1998, 115-6), who incidentally concurs with this but has also produced the most considered and insightful of these reviews and convincingly re-asserts the profoundly Islamic character of the Dome of the Rock in particular.

involved scrutinizing the Aqsa Mosque, the Dome of the Chain, the Haram and its various gates and subterranean structures – in short, the whole project of the Umayyad refashioning of the heart of the city. The explorations and adventures of his youth, when he had clambered over and under and through these buildings, sometimes at risk of life and limb, had given him not only hands-on experience but, more intangibly, a feel for them. And in true Grabar fashion, he seized here the opportunity of exploiting up-to-date technology, in this case computer-aided design programmes overseen by Mohammad al-Asad and Abeer Audeh, to create a simulacrum of how the city might have looked at various times in the period of Muslim rule. These diagrams, supplemented by superlative colour photographs taken by Said Nuseibeh, made it possible to present the pre-Ayyubid city (and in particular its major monuments) in excitingly new ways. But the core of the book remains its text, in which Grabar nimbly deploys decades of research and thinking to reveal, bit by bit, the grandiose Umayyad vision of a Jerusalem in which (as in the Qur'an itself) a final revelation – this time taking physical, architectural form – set the seal on the earlier incomplete ones of Judaism and Christianity. Above all, this book has authority. He had an intuitive grasp of the Umayyad period which he had built up the hard, old-fashioned way. That, incidentally, explains why the best parts of *Formation* are the Umayyad, not the 'Abbasid ones.¹⁴¹

Grabar's articles

Grabar produced many other books, but this is not the place to assess them one by one. Rather is it time to consider, however briefly, his articles. A few preliminary remarks are perhaps in order. It is of course far too early to assess the full range and impact of Grabar's legacy. Only time will tell which of his works will remain most fresh for future generations. But it would not be appropriate to end this survey of a wonderfully productive academic career without giving some thought to the example which that career sets, and here the articles are every bit as crucial as the books. For Grabar's legacy is a good deal more than the sum total of his publications, or indeed of the vibrant personal memories that he has bequeathed to hundreds of students and colleagues. Of their very nature, such memories are bound to fade. But his example is something else again. It is built into the fabric of what he wrote. And the message is clear: do not imprison yourself in a narrow field of specialization.¹⁴² If you do, each trip to the well will mean a little less water in your bucket. The danger is that we know more and more about less and less, and it stunts the mind. The endless subsets of Islamic art – and, for that matter, of art history as a whole – should not be kept in hermetically sealed compartments.

¹⁴¹ This helps to explain an otherwise puzzling fact – that so few of his students went on to specialize in the Umayyad period. Maybe they hesitated to trespass on his turf, even though a less turf-conscious scholar is hard to imagine. But turf works both ways. And Grabar's command of this period was truly formidable.

¹⁴² Cf. the remarks of Thomas Lentz: 'I saw him then [the late 1970s] and still do as a kind of exotic, straddling older European scholarship while embracing new methodologies, one of the last generalists in a domain soon to be dominated by specialists' (footnote 5[b] above).

They impact on each other and are thereby enriched. And what is true of the art itself is equally true of those who study it.

It may seem perverse to insist on the value of the articles when books such as *The Formation of Islamic Art* and *The Mediation of Ornament* clamour for attention. Grabar's finest books demonstrate his capacity to tackle a big subject in the round. They also showcase his versatility. But the articles do so to an even greater degree. They often show him flying kites, true; but oftener still they illustrate his capacity to absorb detail and then triumphantly invigorate that detail by giving it an unexpected context or application, thus enabling it to play its part in a wider narrative. Taken as a whole, it is they, rather than the books, that give the full measure of the man. The choice of articles in the four volumes published in 2005 and 2006 was carefully, even painfully, made and thus repays close scrutiny.¹⁴³ Eighty-three articles, many of them of significant length, is an impressive total in itself, independent of the astonishing range of topics covered in them. They take their place as of right beside the similar monuments to the life's work of his two principal mentors: his father André Grabar,¹⁴⁴ and Richard Ettinghausen.¹⁴⁵

It would take far too long to cherry-pick the key articles in this selection, but it is worth noting that while 'The Umayyad Dome of the Rock', whose title conjoins two of the fixed points of his scholarly life, is cited by many as the epitome of his scholarship, others have highlighted a much shorter piece:¹⁴⁶ 'An Art of the Object', which was triggered by the revamping of the Islamic galleries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.¹⁴⁷ The impact of this article gives the lie to those who maintained that Grabar was not primarily interested in objects *qua* objects. The truth was more complex.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴³ See footnote 4 above. For the sake of completeness, it is worth mentioning that a preliminary collection of fourteen of his articles appeared much earlier under the title *Studies in Medieval Islamic Art*, London: Variorum, 1976.

¹⁴⁴ André Grabar, *L'Art de la Fin de l'Antiquité et du Moyen Age*, 3 vols, Paris: Collège de France, 1968 (ninety-four articles).

¹⁴⁵ Myriam Rosen-Ayalon, ed., *Richard Ettinghausen: Islamic Art and Archaeology. Collected Papers*, Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag, 1984 (fifty-eight articles).

¹⁴⁶ Such as Thomas Lentz and Marianna Shreve Simpson. The former has commented: 'He was not, for example, a "museum person," yet his 1976 Artforum article ("The Art of the Object") was a profoundly insightful meditation on the conundrums presented by the display of Islamic art in museum spaces. It remains a touchstone for the field' (footnote 5[b] above). The latter describes how she developed the theme for a round-table discussion at HIAA's Second Biennial Symposium in Washington in 2010: 'Oleg sat in the back of the Freer auditorium and, in typical fashion, whispered comments to his neighbors all through the session'. One might add that his whispers tended to be echoing stage whispers and to create an alternative focus of interest in the room.

¹⁴⁷ Oleg Grabar, 'An Art of the Object', *Art Forum*, 14, 1976, 36-43. Gülru Necipoğlu recounts how, when she was undecided about where to undertake graduate work, Grabar 'helped me make up my mind with just a few words encapsulating the differences of methodological approach between himself and Professor Ettinghausen, whom he always admired ... If you wish to start with ideas and then choose relevant objects, come here; but you should go to the Institute if you prefer to move from objects to ideas ... Interestingly, later in his career, these differences in approach diminished, as Oleg increasingly became enamored of aesthetics and the visual pleasure of objects' (see footnote 5[b] above).

¹⁴⁸ Glenn Lowry remarks: 'Some of his peers accused him of not liking objects but that was wrong – he was fascinated by them, but not because of their aesthetic qualities but because of the stories they told' (personal message). But see the previous note.

How his students and colleagues view his legacy

Most of this paper has tried to answer an apparently simple question: what is likely to matter most among Grabar's writings now that the man himself is gone? The comments made above on that issue are of course merely one person's view – and not just that, but the view of someone outside that North American scene which Grabar bestrode like a colossus.¹⁴⁹ So it seemed sensible to canvass opinions among those who knew him at first hand as a teacher and then as a colleague.¹⁵⁰ But the result of a fairly extensive straw poll among his former students and some of his colleagues, designed to elicit answers to that same apparently simple question, is intriguing. What emerges is virtually a hagiography. The majority of those who replied continue to stress the impact of his personality,¹⁵¹ and it is really quite extraordinary, and very heartening, to realize how the human face of Islamic art history reveals itself as they do so. For some, the encounter was life-changing.¹⁵² They remember his helping hand at a crucial time, for example at career crossroads;¹⁵³ the way he remembered *them* after decades;¹⁵⁴ and his challenging questions.¹⁵⁵ 'What do you think the person, for whom this was made, thought of it?'¹⁵⁶ They have kept personal letters which reflect his sympathy at a bereavement or other crises, or his readiness to give career advice. They stress the

¹⁴⁹ In the luminous phrase of Jacob Lassner, he was 'the Godfather of Islamic art history in this country'. See footnote 150 below.

¹⁵⁰ I should particularly like to thank Jacob Lassner, Larry Nees and Nancy Steinhardt for letting me see, in advance of publication, their own extended reflections on Grabar. I have tried (though not with complete success) to resist the temptation to plunder these fascinating texts here, but together they provide an indispensable context for my own assessment, and in so doing have filled in numerous gaps in my knowledge. I should add that I deliberately left reading them to the very last moment before submitting this article to the editors, for I wanted to write it as much as possible from my own more distant perspective, as one whose career was on the other side of the pond and who had never studied or worked with Grabar.

¹⁵¹ Thus Esin Atıl writes: 'It was his charismatic lecturing style and enthusiastic approach to presenting Islamic civilizations that attracted me' (personal message).

¹⁵² For example Valerie Gonzales [memoryog.tumblr.com] or Gülru Necipoğlu: 'he touched all stages of my adult life' (see footnote 5[b] above).

¹⁵³ From Cynthia Robinson: 'thanks to you, I stuck with academia'; she then details one example after another of his readiness to offer help and crucial advice [memoryog.tumblr.com].

¹⁵⁴ Ed Keall, who studied with Grabar in 1967-69, looks back: 'when there was a celebratory event in Harvard for him (retirement maybe?), I opted to fly in to see him. When he saw me enter the Faculty Club to the over-packed event he came over and gave me a huge bear hug and said "Good god, I never expected to see you at an event like this." I am so glad I went' and – though emphatically an archaeologist, not an art historian – he acknowledges 'my eventual own style of teaching and research was immensely influenced by his style' (personal message).

¹⁵⁵ Sheila Canby notes: 'His writing challenges the reader to find answers that are rarely offered in full. Instead Grabar presented a range of possibilities. Even when arguing forcefully for a particular interpretation, Grabar rarely rubbished other points of view. He simply marshalled the literary, historical and inscriptional evidence to support his points. This methodology, when practiced carefully and thoroughly, is one of the greatest of Oleg Grabar's contributions to scholarship' (personal message).

¹⁵⁶ Lisa Golombek, on being shown a *mina'i* plate depicting a seated prince (footnote 5[b] above). Cf. Sussan Babaie, who remembers him saying that the most fascinating question about the Isfahan murals was not what they were about but that they were there at all! (personal message).

impact of his teaching: generous,¹⁵⁷ opening wide perspectives,¹⁵⁸ utterly captivating,¹⁵⁹ mesmerizing,¹⁶⁰ mentoring and mind-expanding,¹⁶¹ and – a frequent memory – they loved being treated as intellectual equals.¹⁶² They relished his sense of humour, and recall his giggle (or gurgle) with affection. What a gift – to make learning fun! They celebrate his love of the good things of life.¹⁶³ But for all this outpouring of happy memories, many of them did not draw attention to a single piece of his written work.¹⁶⁴ The implication is inescapable: even after his death he is being remembered vividly, by those who knew him, not for what he wrote but for what he was. For many of his students, he was a father figure or a favourite uncle. And there is little doubt that this emphasis will continue for a long time to come. It will therefore have its impact on a new generation of Islamic art historians who will never have encountered him personally but for whom he will come alive through the memories, the anecdotes and the example of their teachers. In a longer perspective, no doubt, his written work, winnowed by the impartial hand of time, will eventually come into its own. But there is something profoundly satisfying about the thought that, for now at least, it is the heart and spirit of the man, rather than the written products of his intellect, that remain a cherished memory. It is a reminder, and a celebration, of the crucial human dimension of what we as scholars do.

¹⁵⁷ Ülkü Bates: 'I must underline "generous" because that was the outstanding quality of his teaching' [memoryog.tumblr.com].

¹⁵⁸ Lisa Golombek: 'I found the seminars more interesting than the books ... I feel that his greatest contribution was to open doors ... rather than ... the counting of stitches' (personal message).

¹⁵⁹ Barry Flood, who heard him teaching in French (personal message).

¹⁶⁰ Perween Hasan: 'I, like all the others was totally mesmerized by his lectures' (personal message).

¹⁶¹ From Perween Hasan:

He encouraged wobbly-kneed students such as myself to be bold and assertive, float new ideas that you automatically learned to defend. That was how Oleg influenced me most, to look at art history in the broader context of cultural history, where continuities as well as new ideas must be understood ... He ... brought out a rickshaw painting that had been a quirky retirement gift from me, reiterating that he loved it. It was of a kurta-pajama clad Oleg sitting on a lotus in front of the Taj Mahal with his hands in the 'abhaya' (fear not) mudra. I believe that was his most amazing gift to his students: not to be afraid to air new ideas.

(Personal message.)

Cf. Jaclynne Kerner's description of Grabar's delight in this image, one 'of the treasured objects sharing Oleg's office space' [memoryog.tumblr.com].

¹⁶² 'In the classroom Oleg encouraged his students to speak up, throw wonderful new ideas and argue. I wondered if this amused him, letting us "pretend" that we were on the same intellectual plane' (Perween Hasan; personal message).

¹⁶³ One after another remember working lunches made memorable by his 'expansive personality, generosity of spirit, love of food and conviviality' (Gülru Necipoğlu; see footnote 5[b] above). Cf. Stephennie Mulder: 'He loved life, elegance, good food and good company, but most of all he loved to be in the middle of something, stirring things up. He could be alternately brilliant and infuriating, one moment full of earnest intellectual urgency, the next, his eyes sparkling with some academic mischief' [memoryog.tumblr.com].

¹⁶⁴ Though a leitmotif of the responses has been an idea expressed succinctly by Judith Lerner: 'his writing also influenced us and not only its content' (personal message).

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