VARIORUM COLLECTED STUDIES SERIES

ISLAMIC ART AND BEYOND
Oleg Grabar, 1983, in Geneva, developing theories for today
Oleg Grabar

Islamic Art and Beyond

Constructing the Study of Islamic Art, Volume III
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Beyond the usual objectives of prefaces to thank those who helped in the preparation of these books and to identify the technical idiosyncrasies of their appearance, this particular preface is also meant to explain and justify these four independent volumes given the general title of *Constructing the Study of Islamic Art, 1954–2004*.

These volumes include eighty-three articles published during a period of half a century. These articles constitute about two thirds of the contributions I made over the years to periodical literature, encyclopedias and collective books of one sort or another (with some exceptions noted below). Almost all book reviews have been eliminated, as have articles which contain major mistakes or which lead to incorrect conclusions without the redeeming value of useful reasoning or of otherwise unavailable data. Chapters or sections in historical or art-historical surveys or in introductions to Islamic culture have been excluded for the most part. Most of these, like those written for volumes 4 and 5 of the *Cambridge History of Iran*, for *The World of Islam* (London, 1976, with many subsequent editions), for the Larousse *Histoire de l’Art* (Paris, 1985), the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Chicago, 1974), or the *Grove Dictionary of Art* (New York, 1996), are reasonably valid summaries of the state of knowledge at the time of their appearance, sometimes a generation ago. But they are dated by now and make better sense in the context of the volumes in which they appear rather than as contributions to scholarship. And, in any event, nearly all of them are available in most reference libraries.

Just as with any retrospective, there is an element of self-centered vanity for any author or artist to present anew his or her achievements. The usefulness of the task lies, primarily, in making accessible items which were often spread in many different and sometimes inaccessible places and, secondarily, in reflecting the evolution of a field and of a person during decades of many changes in the academic as well as political and cultural spheres. Even this large selection reflects only part of the energies and efforts of a life of learning and of teaching. Large numbers of files, photographs and hand-written notes have been preserved in the archives kept under the names of André and Oleg Grabar at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles. Some documents were passed on to former students and colleagues or given to a few institutions in places with restricted facilities for learning or to young scholars who could profit from them immediately. In providing
such gifts, I followed, more modestly, the example of Eric Schroeder (1904–71), curator of Islamic art at the Fogg Museum of Art, Harvard University, who, when he knew that his days were numbered by a fatal disease, passed on to me and to a few other young colleagues some of his books and notes. What he gave me is now, duly inscribed by him, at the Getty Research Institute or in the possession of younger scholars. And there is something soothing in continuing in this manner to preserve the use of resources for scholarship.

The first decision to be made, after selecting the articles to be included, was how to organize them. One way could have been according to the different methodological directions taken by these studies. Such an approach could have been justified by the two directions suggested in a couple of short articles written when I was in my early twenties, which are not included in this selection. One is a precise and detailed presentation of two unusual and until then unpublished bronze coins of the early thirteenth century minted by a minor ruler of the northern Jazirah, the upper Mesopotamian valley now in Turkey; their analysis led to comments on the meaning of the word sultan as a title. The other one is the hypothesis that a verse attributed to an Umayyad caliph can explain a very fragmentary painting in the bath of Qusayr ‘Amrah, even though there is no reason to believe that the verse or its author had anything to do with the painting. In the first instance, all references are to written or numismatic evidence from the time of the coins involved, in the second one none are (even the verse is only known from a later source), and much of the bibliography deals with arguments around the representation of royal power. The information in the first article has by now been superseded and the second one was incorporated in a later book, *The Formation of Islamic Art*.

Alternately, the articles could have been put in the chronological sequence of their appearance, which would have illustrated the development of an individual’s scholarly thinking and interests and of the ways in which that thinking and these interests were affected by new information and by changing intellectual fashions. But we finally settled on a compromise: two volumes reflecting the history of the Islamic world and of its art, and two others with a thematic focus.

There is, first, the early Islamic period, these first centuries which transformed an enormous area into a primarily Muslim one. Then there is the Islamic visual culture which overwhelmed these territories and which is still the dominant one from Senegal to the Philippines. But then, no one dealing with Islamic art can avoid explaining to himself or herself and to


others what it is that characterizes that art in contrast or as a parallel to other traditions, especially, for the medievalist that I was as a student, to Christian art with many of the same sources. The search for verbal formulas to explain visual phenomena or for the ideological bases of the arts is an endless pursuit that often has to respond to new challenges of thought and of political and cultural events. Furthermore, the unique ways of Islamic art as it formed itself and as it developed lead to important issues of the history and criticism of art. In the late 1970s, I began a long and fruitful association with the Aga Khan Foundation and I was introduced to contemporary activities in art and architecture, as well as in the complex operation of cultural policies. Thus a third volume is devoted to general ideas on Islamic art up to our own time and to the theories derived from it or applied to it. And then, partly by accident, I began my acquaintance with the Islamic world and with the Near East in Jerusalem, and I have devoted much time and effort to understanding its monuments and their meaning over the centuries. A whole volume is devoted to that extraordinary city and it includes one totally new contribution, a lengthy response and reaction to the many works on Jerusalem which have appeared during the past fifteen years.

This division is an interpretation of fifty years of scholarly activities. But I hope that it will be of better use for other scholars than a purely chronological one would have been or the artificial one of various poles of scholarly procedures. Yet it is not entirely possible to separate the shadows of one’s scholarly life from one’s written accomplishments. For this reason, short introductions to each volume seek to recall the atmosphere surrounding many of the works and especially the people and institutions who over the decades created a context for learning and for growing which is almost impossible to imagine in the academic world of today. For Volume I, I shall introduce the archaeologists and archaeological institutions which helped and inspired me, especially in the 1950s and 1960s. In Volume II, I shall mention the teaching and research institutions that became my home for nearly forty years and the fascinating evolution that took place in the ways students and colleagues in the United States and elsewhere became involved in the study of Islamic art. For Volume III, I shall sketch out the festival of ideas that accompanied so much of my academic life and some of the non-academic activities which, from the late 1970s, played an important role in the processes of my learning. Finally, when dealing with Jerusalem, I shall sketch the unique circumstances of working in the Holy City during the 1950s and 1960s.

The initial division of the articles was proposed as early as the late 1990s by Professor Cynthia Robinson, who first assisted me in sorting them out. But I had too many other commitments to fulfill at that time and could not manage to concentrate on the project in suitable fashion. Then, in 2001, the Institute for Advanced Study agreed to support the project of a retired professor and the Mellon Foundation provided the funds needed for a full-
time assistant. Mika Natif, a finishing graduate student at the Institute of Fine Arts of New York University, took on the job. She helped in making the final choice of publications to be included, devised and proposed the arrangement of articles found in these volumes, and undertook the tasks of scanning articles published in many different journals into a single format, of gathering illustrations, and, in general, of keeping the project going. Her sharp and critical mind was essential in transforming what could well have become a disorganized exercise into a reasonably coherent whole for future scholars and critics. Without her energy, dedication and commitment, these books could not have been completed and I owe her a deep debt of gratitude for having stuck with the life and works of an older generation than hers. Additional help was gracefully and intelligently provided by Elizabeth Teague, the copy editor, and I am most grateful to her.

Thanks are also due to two institutions. One is the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, which contributed to the publication of these books through ArchNet, a branch of the Aga Khan Program in Architecture at Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. I was involved in the early creation of the program and am grateful to Dr Shiraz Allibhai, manager of the program, and to Dr Luis Monreal, the head of the Trust in Geneva for having continued to support my work so many years later. The second institution is the Institute for Advanced Study from whose School of Historical Studies I retired in 1998. Two successive directors, Dr Philip Griffith and Dr Peter Goddard, supported all aspects of the work involved in preparing these volumes and in making available to Mika Natif and to me the technical facilities of the Institute and the expertise of its staff, in particular to Julia Bernheim, who compiled the index for all four volumes. A special word of thanks is due to Rachel Gray, Associate Director of the Institute, through whom all needs and requests were channeled. A last expression of gratitude goes to John Smedley from Ashgate Publishing, who, I suspect, did not quite know what he was getting himself into when he agreed to consider the publication of the eighty-odd articles found in these volumes. His gracious help and patience and the quiet efficiency of Celia Hoare were essential to the completion of the work. The following institutions gave permission to reproduce articles and pictures published under their copyright: Pennsylvania State University Press, Dumbarton Oaks, E. J. Brill, Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, New York University Press, Ukrainian Research Institute, Harvard University, Metropolitan Museum of Art, State University of New York Press, Israel Exploration Journal.

A number of editorial decisions were made to ensure consistency across all four volumes, to simplify the task of publishing them, and to facilitate the use of the books. Diacritical marks and macrons were given up altogether. The hamza is shown as ‘ and the ‘ayn as ‘. The date and place of the original publication of each article are indicated with an asterisk on the first page of each article. All notes are put at the bottom of pages. References to the
original pagination are given in square brackets. Not all original illustrations have been included. Some prints or negatives could no longer be located and scanning or photographing anew a mediocre print seemed senseless. At times substitutions were found and in a few instances original illustrations were simply omitted. Typos were corrected whenever we noticed them and minor emendations were made to the original texts to ensure clarity of expression. Bibliographical notes were not brought up to date, except when works announced in the notes were actually published.
Acknowledgments

The chapters in this volume were first published as follows:

VIII “Islamic Ornament and Western Abstraction,” Markus Bruderlein, ed., Ornament and Abstraction (Basel, 2001), pp. 70–73.
We would like to thank all individuals, publishers and institutions for their permission to reproduce articles and illustrations published under their copyright. Every effort has been made to trace the copyright holders, but if any have been inadvertently overlooked the publisher will be pleased to make the necessary arrangement at the first opportunity.
Introduction: Beyond scholarship

As far as my professional and personal lives were concerned, the decade between 1964 and 1974 was occupied, for the most part, by the yearly months of excavating in Syria and by my move from the University of Michigan to Harvard. But it was also a momentous decade in the story of academic life in the United States as well as in continental Europe. The male-centered, elitist, scholarly club-like atmosphere of academic life was challenged from many directions. There were political challenges issued from the Vietnam War in the United States, from social discontent in Europe and especially France, and, particularly important for those of us involved with the Near and Middle East or the Muslim world in general, the 1967 war between Israel and its Arab neighbors. There were social challenges, as discriminatory rules or practices against women and minorities were questioned, modified or even abandoned. There were intellectual or academic challenges, as a cult for “relevance” and the search for the broad implications of learning sapped the smugness of old-fashioned scholarship, fostered justification of one’s work in the face of new and younger constituencies, and required frequent self-analysis as well as occasional orgies of methodological discussion. There were, finally, cultural challenges, as the social arrogance of classical Orientalism, involving a small selection of mostly Western men studying a Muslim past, was relegated to the newly defined and pejorative Orientalism popularized by Edward Said, unless it also involved the living descendants of the long-departed Muslims I had studied for so long.

None of these challenges appeared yet in violent or even politically charged form within the quiet world of art history, archaeology, medieval history, or even Near Eastern studies, but they were a pervasive presence all around me. This volume reflects some of the various ways in which I responded to these challenges.

Some of these chapters are traditional in spirit in the sense that they reflect the old scholarly practice of identifying and explaining the importance or originality of one’s field when compared to other fields (notion of “legacy” illustrated by Chapter XI) or within the area of Islamic studies (Chapter XVIII). There is an assumption behind these essays that, in one way or another, as complements to other sources or as illuminations of these sources, the arts of the Islamic world are important for scholars and for general culture. This importance may have been ignored or neglected in the past,
but present circumstances make it essential that it be acknowledged, because
these arts are the material culture of the rulers, writers and thinkers of the
past and because they have aesthetic qualities accessible to all men and
women.

A second approach or trend in these contributions derives from two
aspects of the field itself. One is that the contingencies of Islamic art,
historical or doctrinal ones, compelled the unique development of certain
formal concerns over others. Such were the questioning of representation
and the development of geometry and calligraphy or, in a more general way,
ornament, all concerns that are present, in various degrees, in all artistic
traditions. It is legitimate to wonder what lessons the study of Islamic art
brings to queries that are not bound to Islamic culture. The other aspect is
more or less the opposite of the first. As the twentieth century progressed, a
new Muslim elite began to notice that the study of Islamic art seemed to be
the preserve of Western collectors and scholars and that little attention was
given to the Islamic specificity of that art. Seminars, colloquia, pronounce-
ments of all sorts were dedicated to what is or was “Islamic” about ways of
building and of making or using architecture and objects (very little about
painting in those days). I participated in or volunteered for a number of
such occasions and expressed various and often changing views illustrated by
several chapters in this volume (II, V, VII, XIII, XVII, XXI).

Both of these two activities – the traditional Orientalist one and the more
flexible comparative universal one – were sharpened by two events that were
not, to my knowledge, related to each other, but whose timely appearance
indicated that the issue of the relevance of Islamic art was widely spread.

One event was the 1975 Festival of Islam throughout Britain, with many
publications by major Muslim as well as Western artists, architects, scholars
and critics and with a fabulously rich, if disorderly, exhibition of Islamic art
that managed to put together, for the first time since 1910, an astounding
array of works from many lands, both celebrated and little known. The
second event, in 1976, was the reopening to great critical acclaim of the
Islamic galleries of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. They
contain the richest collection of Islamic art in the world and were superbly
redesigned under the directorship of Richard Ettinghausen. The first event,
the Festival of Islam, was a noisy one, but, for reasons unknown to me, it
failed to meet all the expectations surrounding it and to generate continuous
activities. It may have been too ambitious and somewhat underfunded, but
some of the books it underwrote remained standards in the field for quite a
while. And to those like me who visited the exhibition and took part in
some of the activities, the presence of so many objects together, with little
guidance in the exhibition halls or in the catalog, made a lasting impression.
Retrospectively, I suppose that it was far too “Western” a show, failing to
meet the new kinds of challenges that were arising in the understanding of
Islamic art by both Muslims and non-Muslims. The exhibition had no
succession, no follow-up. As a contrast, the galleries of the Metropolitan Museum of Art remained more or less unchanged for nearly thirty years. Little was written about them (Chapter II is a rare exception) but they were constantly cited and in many ways imitated in new museums, especially in the richer centers of the Muslim world. The impact of these galleries on visitors was great, but it is less clear that it was equally effective with scholars. They were not criticized, except in details, and very few studies can be said to have derived from them. It was a striking monument of classical museology: to make beautiful and important items visible and accessible and to let viewers do with them whatever they wished. As opposed to the boisterous Festival of Islam, which bombarded its visitors with books on all sorts of topics and with masses of brochures and lectures, here there was no ideological or even formal message other than pride in the quality of the works of art.

In whatever shape they came, the important point of these intellectual and social activities proclaiming the relevance of Islamic art for the general public and for historians of art is that they compelled me to face the contemporary world. I needed to identify the thoughts, ideas, prejudices or presumptions that might have colored my own attitudes or those of the Western public in museums, and I also needed to understand the world of living Muslim societies and the ways in which they dealt with their past. Compared to the Middle Ages, which I had lived with for twenty-five years, these were formidable new worlds to meet. There are so many different and almost incompatible ways of defining one’s own ideological world of the arts. How could I distinguish between those ideas which really affected me and the range of ideas that might have affected an American-based European scholar of my age? I realized then that my academic training had protected me from the contemporary world, even from contemporary thought on the arts. Only structuralism and, more vaguely, Marxism had attracted my attention, neither of which had been seriously considered by any of my mentors at that time. Matters were even more complicated when one approached the contemporary Muslim world. For a few years, thanks to my excavations, I was deeply immersed in the intensely parochial culture of the central Syrian steppe, and occasional encounters gave me a few impressions of intellectual concerns in Cairo, Beirut, Damascus, Jerusalem, Amman, Tehran or Tashkent. But these impressions were all fleeting ones, anecdotes that led nowhere. And, since I did not practice reading Muslim intellectual periodicals of the time, I could not claim any significant knowledge of contemporary Islamic views of the arts.

This relatively peaceful ignorance was shattered by my encounter with His Highness Karim Aga Khan, the imam of the Isma’ili community, and eventually by some twenty years of involvement with what became the Aga Khan Trust for Culture and its more specialized branch, the Aga Khan Program for Architecture.
The beginnings were quite mundane. One day in the early spring of 1976 I was invited to have lunch with two people I had never met: Professor William Porter, then Dean of the School of Architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Garr Campbell, a landscape architect working for one of the large architectural firms in the Boston area and, although I did not know it at the time, deeply involved in the landscaping of the huge estate the Aga Khan had just acquired north of Paris to be the headquarters for his numerous activities. I was asked by Bill Porter and Garr Campbell whether I would be interested in joining a small group of people in Paris to advise the Aga Khan on a project involving past and present architecture in Islamic lands. I agreed to consider the matter and shortly thereafter met in the still unfinished headquarters with the Aga Khan himself, a few members of his staff, and a small group of other outsiders like Sir Hugh Casson, the quiet and sensible British architect who constantly made wonderful drawings in his note-books during our meetings, and Charles Correa, the elegant, articulate, imaginative, and at times tempestuous architect from Bombay. A bit later, the group, known by then as the Steering Committee, was enlarged to include the inventive Iranian architect Nader Ardalan, the celebrated Egyptian architect Hasan Fathy, and two young coordinators, convenors as we decided to call them, Dr, now Professor, Renata Holod from the University of Pennsylvania and her assistant, and later convenor himself, the Pakistani architect Hasan ud-Din Khan. During this and a large number of subsequent spirited meetings of this group of highly original and immensely creative people, something quite extraordinary happened. A spiritual Muslim leader’s slightly inchoate vision was transfigured into a series of programs and institutionalized activities which are now part and parcel of the academic scene in Cambridge, Mass., London, Geneva, Karachi, Mombasa, Zanzibar, Afghanistan, Kashmir and Tajikistan, and in architecture schools all over the Muslim world and beyond it.

As he related it to me in an interview in 2001, the Aga Khan had become concerned with what he called a “process of cultural erosion” in the Muslim world, in which values, including aesthetic ones, were drowned in a sea of thoughtless modernity. One cause, he thought, for this erosion was that the educational institutions of the Muslim world dealing with the environment had lost touch with their own traditions and had espoused Western technologies without assessing their implications. At the same time, Western, and especially American, institutions, where growing numbers of students from the Muslim world came to study, were remarkably ignorant of these centuries-old traditions. At best, they saw in the newly wealthy countries, especially oil-rich ones, a source for lucrative building contracts.

And so, during the second seminar organized by the newly created Aga Khan Award for Architecture and held in Istanbul in 1981, the Aga Khan called Dean Porter and me to have breakfast with him in a room with a wonderful view overlooking the Bosphorus. He told us then that he felt that
there were not enough architects, young or old, who knew the culture from
which they came and in which they were supposed to practice their skills or
who would be sensitive to local needs. He would be amenable, he said, to a
proposal from our two institutions, Harvard and MIT, to remedy the matter.
Six months or so later, Dean Porter and I arranged a meeting in the St
Botulph Club in Boston between the Aga Khan and the presidents of our
institutions, Derek Bok and Jerome Wiesener. This is where the Aga Khan
Program for Architecture was born, whose further history and growth,
successes and failures, are not my subject in this essay. What I do want to
emphasize is the sense of pride and elation that affected the small community
of Muslim students in the Humanities and in Architecture from both
universities. They recalled the words used to me by a high official in the
Egyptian Ministry of Housing during the first Aga Khan seminar held in
Gouvieux and Paris in 1979 or 1980. He had attended, he said, many
international meetings on the needs of the built environment, but here for
the first time he was proud to come from a Muslim land.

It is difficult over twenty years later to describe the enthusiasm, energy
and excitement with which I approached successive committees of the Award
to which I belonged, the deliberations of the Master Jury which I joined
once, the more or less annual gathering at seminars from Granada to Jakarta,
the organization of programs at Harvard and MIT, visits by scholars and
architects or artists from all over the world. These experiences modified,
indeed revolutionized, my professional life. Graduate students from Malaysia,
Bangladesh, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Syria, Turkey, Pakistan, Jordan, Kuwait and
Egypt altered the profile of the student body with which I dealt, and visiting
professors from Bangladesh were not always easy to incorporate into the
operative patterns of Harvard and MIT. But it was all exhilarating, as was
the feeling that the Program was involved in accelerating the changes in the
perception of its visual culture that was spreading among the professional
classes of the Muslim world and in modifying the knowledge of that world
by Western academics and architects. The change was not quite what might
have been expected from the example of similar enterprises. It was not the
raising or the waving of a new cultural flag, but the acknowledgment of
quality within a multiplicity of ethnic, social, confessional, regional and
other orders that constitute a Muslim community. It is a community which
flourishes not only in Arabia or in Iran, but in parts of Arizona and in large
American and European cities. The fact that this acknowledgment seems
less commonly accepted now (2005) than it was twenty years ago should not
detract from the fact that the diversity is real. It can, in fact, be viewed on
the Internet, thanks in many ways to the Aga Khan Program in Architecture.

And so a whole new dimension was added to my nearly thirty years of
relatively quiet academic life. Some of my older students resented that
intrusion, which was perhaps an improper call away from the true pursuits
of scholarship. In the world of government leaders, financiers, socialites, jet-
setters or actual decision-makers (a term I first heard during these years, one that endows with a semi-divine aura of authority the most mundane deliberations when carried out by certain people), I was at best an unexpected adjunct, a man of thought and knowledge in the midst of practitioners of the “real” world. What did I learn from it, beyond an irreversible taste for first-class travel and luxurious hotels? It did make me aware of the immense variety of the contemporary Muslim world, often far distant from the well-known Near and Middle Eastern centers where I had worked before and where Islam first developed. I learned about Senegal, Zanzibar, Malaysia, Sinkiang, eventually the Tatars of the Volga area or of the Crimea. It made me try on the one hand to secure and explain the uniqueness of individual places, regions or cities, not to see each one as just an example of a single larger entity. And, on the other hand, it compelled me to be more subtle than I had been in identifying such modern forms or approaches to art as can be called “Islamic,” if they indeed exist, and then to find a place for them in discussing older history. Such thoughts in turn made me wonder about the more general procedures of thinking about the arts and about the ways in which differences can be explained and generalities elaborated.

More specifically, I became aware of the occasional discovery of Islamic art by Western artists and architects and also of the often fortuitous conjunction of traditional Islamic art with contemporary Western ways. My encounters with the visual creativity and the built environment of the late twentieth century brought me back to some of the theories that Marxism and structuralism had presented to me earlier. In meeting them again through the peculiar circumstances of the Aga Khan programs, I found these theories less abstract; they became associated with the warmth of a living culture. It was no longer the culture of the disinherited nomads and settlers of the Syrian steppe. It was a world that had power and could influence decisions. There was something obviously attractive in feeling, quite wrongly of course, that I shared in this power and was part of a decision-making process. For a while I could see this power and smell its pleasures.

In short, the twenty years or so of my involvement with the Aga Khan transformed my academic life and gave to my Harvard years a patina which was certainly not scholarly. Nor was it a normal step up in the ladder of university achievement, except perhaps that it provided a lowly humanist with a style in which connections and trips began to be more important than scholarly colleagues and readings in the library. All this may have been very good for Harvard and MIT, but its effects were not favorable for true learning. Yet, even if I am critical of a process of engagement with the “real” world that is damaging to institutions of higher learning, I gained two things from it. One was the glimpse I obtained of the contemporary features of the world of power which had always been the main patron of the arts and which I had studied all my life. The other was the encounter with Karim Aga Khan, a truly remarkable figure, whose ways were sometimes
surprising, but whose vision and generosity are unmatched in their originality and in the effectiveness of their results.

The articles in this volume reflect therefore an uneasy equilibrium between three poles: the ways and procedures of art historians in general, the restrictions and expectations that provided Islamic art with its originality, and the visual junctions between contemporary Western and traditional Islamic arts. None of these poles is yet very steady, and much thought and research is needed for them to become properly anchored. This, I feel, is a job for a new generation of historians and critics. It was time, by the early 1990s, for me to return to my old passion for historical research, richer perhaps for all that I had learned and could contribute to the learning of others, but also 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?