IN MEMORIAM

# OLEG GRABAR

NOVEMBER 3, 1929 – JANUARY 8, 2011

## THE MEMORIAL CHURCH
HARVARD UNIVERSITY

*Saturday, April twenty-third, two thousand eleven*
*two o'clock in the afternoon*

PLEASE TURN OFF CELLULAR PHONES UPON ENTERING THE SANCTUARY OF THE MEMORIAL CHURCH.

## ORDER OF SERVICE

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|---|---|---|
| PRELUDE | "Nimrod" from the *Enigma Variations* | Sir Edward Elgar<br>(1857–1934) |
| INVOCATION | | William A. Graham |
| REMEMBRANCES | | Gülru Necipoğlu<br>Lisa Golombek<br>Renata Holod<br>Nasser Rabbat |
| INTERLUDE | *Fugue in C Major* (BWV 545) | Johann Sebastian Bach<br>(1685–1750) |
| REMEMBRANCES | | Nicolas Grabar<br>Neil Levine<br>Shreve Simpson<br>Giles Constable |
| READING | from Firdawsi's *Shahnama* | Massumeh Farhad |
| POSTLUDE | "Toccata" from *Organ Symphony No. 5* | Charles-Marie Widor<br>(1844–1937) |

RECEPTION TO FOLLOW THE SERVICE AT ADOLPHUS BUSCH HALL,
27 KIRKLAND STREET, WITH REMEMBRANCE BY THOMAS W. LENTZ

The service is held under the auspices of the
Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at Harvard University
and the Historians of Islamic Art Association.

ORGANIST:
Christian M. Lane

SEXTON:
Richard D. Campbell

USHERS:
Julia Bailey, Joseph A. Greene, Eva Hoffman,
David J. Roxburgh, and Irene Winter

## William A. Graham

### Opening Remarks

It is my great privilege and honor to convene this memorial service for Oleg Grabar. I do so not as one of his students or colleagues in the history of art and architecture, but as his longtime Harvard colleague in Middle Eastern and Islamic studies—for the first eighteen years of my own service on the faculty here and the last eighteen of his luminous teaching career among us. He was not only a brilliant and creative historian of the Islamic tradition as evidenced in his varied publications, but a dynamic presence at the lectern and the seminar table. I never tired of hearing and learning from his lectures in several general education courses on Islamic civilization that we shared in teaching in the 1970s and 80s. He gave sage and generous advice to younger colleagues like myself as well as to his own students. He was unfailingly supportive of me and others in our own scholarly work, and he and Terry offered warm hospitality to many of us at their gracious Concord home. In so many ways, we have all been diminished by the loss of a Grabar presence here in Cambridge the past two decades.

I would now like to call upon all gathered here to join with me in a moment of silence, whether in meditation, prayer, or simply loving memory of this remarkable husband, father, grandfather, scholar, teacher, and friend.

In remembering Oleg today, I would finally recall a nineteenth century dictum of Albert Pike: "What we have done for ourselves alone dies with us; what we have done for others and the world remains and is immortal."

It is good to remember today how much Oleg did for others and the world.

## Gülru Necipoğlu

Thank you all for being here to celebrate the life of our beloved Oleg Grabar through the personal remembrances that bind us together. It is especially befitting that we are gathered here, in The Memorial Church, to honor one of Harvard's most brilliant and cherished emeritus professors and an alumnus of the College as well. The university and the academic world has lost one of the greatest charismatic teacher-lecturers of all time, whose pioneering and path breaking scholarship was recognized by numerous awards. He was instrumental in founding Harvard's Aga Khan Program of Islamic Architecture, and there are few, if any, Islamicists who have not profited from his contributions. He brought passion and vision to his work, and trained generations of students as the leaders of the field.

There will be other occasions to appraise more substantively the global reach of Professor Oleg Grabar's enormous scholarly impact. Therefore, I shall use these few minutes, to reminisce about what it was like to have had the privilege of learning from and interacting with this remarkable individual. My remembrances of Oleg are far too many to recount, as he touched all stages of my adult life: First, as his graduate student; then as his junior colleague; and finally as his successor as Aga Khan Professor of Islamic Art. My earliest encounter with Oleg was through his seminal book, *The Formation of Islamic Art*. At that time, as a junior at Wesleyan majoring in late Medieval and Renaissance art history, I was feeling a bit constricted by the weight of tradition in these overworked areas of study. The creative approach of his fascinating book, which 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.

My second encounter was with the real man, somewhat larger than life. The meeting took place in 1979 at his Fogg Museum office as Chairman of what was then the Fine Arts Department. Having been accepted to the doctoral program here and at the Institute of Fine Arts, I was a novice trying to find out which program might be more suitable. He 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. Here is what he said: 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. This succinct formulation convinced me that Oleg was to be my mentor. Interestingly, later in his career, these differences in approach diminished, as Oleg increasingly became enamored of aesthetics and the visual pleasure of objects. Such was his vivid imagination

and playful mind that he hardly subscribed to a single method or subject. He was truly a "Renaissance man."

Oleg's mental agility and non-dogmatic flexibility made him an extraordinarily inspiring mentor. He encouraged graduate students to work on entirely unexplored subjects because he was concerned about shaping the parameters of a field, whose rapid expansion both pleased and worried him. He used to share these mixed feelings with me after I became his colleague and successor. I fondly remember our regular work lunches at the basement of the Faculty Club, where both of us would bring along little pieces of paper scribbled with agenda items, so as not to be carried away in conversation. His expansive personality, generosity of spirit, love of food and conviviality was truly infectious. He never ceased to be my nourishing mentor and my sharpest critic. I cannot find enough words to express my indebtedness and affection for dearest Oleg. My sense of loss is great and his untimely departure is a brutal shock to all of us. It is through the lasting legacy of his works and our shared remembrances that he shall continue to live and guide us for years to come.

## Lisa Golombek

Let's turn the clock back to 1962…this reminiscence will be in four parts:

### Part I. The Match

How did I find Oleg? Quite simply, there was no choice. When I told Prof. Porada I wished to study Islamic art, she said: "You must go to Michigan." No one else in North America was teaching this subject full-time.

I'll have to admit that before I went to Michigan I had never heard of Oleg Grabar. His 'Dome of the Rock' study had not yet made it into the Columbia syllabus. When I heard the name "Grabar" my associations went immediately to Oleg's father, André, the renowned historian of Byzantine and Early Christian Art. The confusion was not dispelled until I came face to face with Oleg the summer before I came to Ann Arbor in 1962.

You can imagine my astonishment when I walked into Oleg's office and found this young, rather dashing, fellow, with great big eyes and a warm handshake. I realized I had made a mistake—it was the old "bait and switch" game! How was I going to wriggle out of this? I did not want to study with a neophyte professor whom nobody knew!

"What particularly interests you in Islamic art?" he began. I thought about the work I had done at the Met for Ernst Grube as a volunteer and hoped it might impress him. "Minai pottery!" I declared.

Then he opened a book with pictures of Seljuq pottery. Butterflies began to dance in my stomach, as I thought he might start quizzing me about which ones came from Kashan and which from Rayy. No, he had something else in mind. Pointing to a minai plate showing a prince enthroned, he asked: "What do you think the person, for whom this was made, thought of it?" …an astonishing question for that time!

That question became the underpinning of all my subsequent research. Context, context, context! I was so happy that my initial expectations had fallen through—who wants to study with some elderly distinguished professor!

## PART II: TAPPEN HALL AND THE ISLAMIC ART SEMINAR

Tappan Hall, which houses the Dept of the History of Art, was a creaky, old but lovable, Romanesque building. Oleg had persuaded the department to devote a whole room to a library of Islamic art, which became our haven. Oleg himself chose (I like to think it was his choice) a tiny attic room, accessible only up its own narrow staircase.

Oleg stocked the Seminar not only with the usual suspects—Creswell, the Survey of Persian Art, etc., but all kinds of books from other disciplines, such as semiotics, as well as publications in Russian from Soviet Central Asia. He taught us that everything one learns can be of use at some time

Whatever subject Oleg touched, new insights poured out of his mouth. Marvin Eisenberg, the department Chair, used to say that Oleg could give a lecture on Carolingian cookie-cutters and it would be fascinating. This commitment to the adventure of research led us, to believe that even we, his students, could make discoveries that excited him. This feeling became addictive.

I feel very privileged to have been there, on the ground floor, so to say, when the circle of students was still quite small. We had Oleg's complete attention and were nurtured by his kindness and generosity of spirit. We were building something very new and special together.

## PART III: THE SEND-OFF

When the time approached to come up with a thesis proposal, I first chose Kalilah wa-Dimnah illustrated manuscripts. No, said Oleg, Sofie Walzer is still working on that. Okay, well, how about Timurid painting? No, that field was already dominated by others. Okay, I'll go for something no one has worked on for a long time—Timurid architecture. In reviewing the literature, I discovered that in fact so little was really known that I would have to go have a look for myself. Was that possible?

"You should be able to do that easily," he said, meaning travel around by myself in Iran, Central Asia, and Afghanistan. "You just go to the travel agent in town and have her write you a ticket that includes all of the internal flights you will need. Then you buy a meter tape and a good camera, a light meter and a tripod. Voilà!" Of course, I was to work on the languages as well—Persian and Russian.

"And one more thing," he added. "Go to Abercrombie and Fitch and buy a safari jacket with lots of pockets."

He gave me a lot more advice, but the most critical thing he gave me was the confidence that I could do it! When I think about it now it was a crazy idea! What single female at that time had gone to Herat without knowing anyone? Or to Iran? But it was a fantastic trip, and what I learned was that you don't have to have every move planned because, in life, no matter how much you plan, you cannot predict what will happen. This was exactly the adventure for which Oleg's mentorship had prepared me.

## PART IV: THE AFTERLIFE

In a sense, I lost Oleg many years ago—when I received my doctorate. Not that he lost touch but I could no longer run ideas by him as frequently as I wanted to. I therefore developed a mechanism which allowed me to imagine how Oleg would have looked at the problem. I conjured up his image and listened to that distinctive voice walk through my arguments.

Over the years I became aware how broad his reach had become, how he had developed the field almost single-handedly and yet remained so approachable. There was truly none like him. We, his students, colleagues and friends, *are* his enormous legacy that will carry on in his spirit. Oleg, you were a large presence in our lives—we miss you!

## Renata Holod

How to remember a person whose energy buoyed up all, and whose capacity for sustained work was legendary; a person whose sympathetic ear and wise advice cloaked an unwavering eye and fiercely critical core; a person whose quips and light-hearted stories were just a surface to deeply-felt convictions and complexities?

It is, perhaps, fitting that we gather here on Easter Saturday. Oleg's favorite part of the eastern Christian calendar were the Jerusalem Matins, a time for pause after the Good Friday services, a time when the longest Psalm is sung, and a time for deep reverie, summing –up and quiet remembrance. Church-going may not have been the best known aspect of Oleg's personality, and one that he only undertook with increasing regularity in later life, but one that gave him solace and one that looped back to his initial experiences in Jerusalem.

For him, Jerusalem was the starting block of his career, and a place to which he returned in work, thought and concern again and again, exploring human religiosity as it manifested itself in good ways and bad in that complex place. He often recalled these times early in his career, residing both as student and as director in American School in Jerusalem: how he explored the tunnels of the Temple Mount and the surface of Haram al-Sharif, how he climbed the dome of the Aqsa Mosque, how he took part in the Easter procession at the front carrying a cross, and how he witnessed both the anathemizing of the Soviet ambassador by the nuns of the Russian convent on the Mount of Olives, and the joyous danced Ethiopian celebration of the Resurrection.

All these stories, sublime and ridiculous, we heard first of all in his lectures, but even more so in extended conversations that field-work allowed. Thus, my remembrance must include that failed city of eighth century Umayyad Syria whose name may have been Zaytuna, aka Qasr al-Hayr al-Sharqi. By asking me to serve as the married chaperone for an unmarried woman photographer who could come to his excavation for the price of a ticket from Ankara, Oleg changed the tack of my own interests. He took me out of the comfortable confines of library and museum to a direct and continued exploration and confrontation of the past in the present in that complex region called variously western Asia, the Middle East, the Arab world, the Persianate realm, the near end of Silk Road and the Islamic world.

And so it was, that upon my first arrival in Damascus in 1966, Oleg sent me out to the Great Suq, armed with undergraduate classical Arabic and a shopping list for expedition supplies, picks, shovels, trowels and the like. The shopkeepers charitably did not burst into laughter at my attempts to explain that 'implements for digging' were needed. Whether there was any question in Oleg's mind

that I was capable of undertaking such a task, he never said. What he did convey was his expectation that I could and would complete any task necessary on the expedition, whether it was counting sherds, organizing ever-increasing teams of 10, 20, and then 50 workers, behaving with decorum at Bedouin feasts, surveying the waterworks, challenging his program and explanations for the site itself, and writing chapters in the final monograph.

His expectations transferred from this instance to others over the years: continuing my graduate studies at Harvard with a complex program of my own prior to his arrival there; undertaking explorations of Central Asian, Afghan and Iranian sites and buildings alone; starting up an archaeological project in Morocco, and completing one in Tunisia; training students of my own; and working to organize our field itself.

And last but not least, undertaking to understand even further the complex process of architecture-making. At his suggestion that an interview with the Aga Khan about organizing an award in architecture might be interesting, I again changed the tack of my interests. I learned about contemporary building practices, tastes, ambitions and dreams because there was a challenge to be undertaken, that of imagining a past with a present and a future; and thus, the Aga Khan Award for Architecture.

When a great-souled individual leaves us bereft, it is almost impossible to imagine how to continue without him, without frequent conversations and arguments, and without notes in crabbed tiny script, without questions and discoveries, " You must come to see me, I have things to show you."

Careful teacher that he was, he left us a legacy because his works are expectations also. In them, there is an invitation to answer his questions, and to challenge his formulations and conclusions.

For in the end, he was a professor's professor.

**Nasser Rabbat**

Oleg Grabar was the nestor, the paragon, and the imam of our field. He would have liked these three labels, one Latin, one possibly Greek, and one Arabic, for he was decidedly a classicist in the broad sense of the word. He revered the cultural heritage of the Late Antique Mediterranean and reveled in its visual, ethical, and literary fruits. But he was also a reformer, or a *mujaddid*—to use an apt Islamic term—of a field that had not been totally weaned from its antiquarian, orientalist, and archaeological wet-nurses when Oleg came on the scene. With brilliant analytical skills and an unmatched interpretive acumen, he set the field of Islamic art 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, and of whom a fair number are present here.

I was one of those lucky students. To me, Oleg was a sheikh indeed. But he was not a typical sheikh, distantly handing down his knowledge from a high podium. He was a personable teacher. His method was first and foremost Socratic, though modified to accommodate his expansive knowledge and subtle Gallic charm. For the more than a quarter century I knew him, he was paradoxically yet effectively a soliloquary conversationalist. He had a way of simultaneously engaging himself and his interlocutor in debates that he concocted, argued, and concluded with gusto. His purview was vast and his curiosity boundless. He will launch on a discussion of a book, deconstruct it, compare it to a host of other books fished out of his prodigious memory, then give his judgment. He will do the same with works of art or architecture, with theories, and with the works of persons we knew. Nothing was immune to his sharp critical eye and power of interpretation.

Our conversations, however, were never limited to Islamic art, or even to art history or Islamic studies. Since the beginning of our relationship, we discovered that we were both political junkies of sorts. We debated political and international issues, especially those related to the region whose love we shared. We also shared something else: we both traced our intellectual roots to humanism, and we still believed, perhaps naively, in its redemptive potential.

In the last ten years, Oleg increasingly felt that he wanted to do something to repay the places that welcomed him as a student, especially Palestine and Syria. He also became wary of the state of affairs in the Islamic world and its relationship to the West, especially after 9/11. He expressed exasperation at the ignorance of the so-called Middle Eastern experts, and attempted to rebuke them. But he never lost his humanistic belief in a better future. Alas, he died on the eve of that future erupting. His soul, I am sure, is now rooting for all the revolutions in the various Arabic countries for whose culture he so deeply cared.

## Nicolas Grabar

I believe I am the family speaker. So it falls to me to say welcome, and to thank you all for being here, on behalf of my mother and my own family. I will also thank the organist, Mr. Lane—you should all admire his skill, but for repertoire you should blame me. To some of you the last piece he will play, after the speakers finish, may seem a bit bombastic, but that's just why I'm sure my father would have liked it.

In general, as you know, my father did not especially prize moderation. On many topics his enthusiasm was unlimited, and one of these was his grandchildren. He was immoderately proud of them—of course they deserve it—he devoted himself to winning their affection—with unqualified success—and their grandfather would be as delighted as I am to see them in their splendor here this afternoon. This is a good time to remember that my father believed deeply that one has a duty to honor one's parents, and I guess I will commend that position to at least three people among you this afternoon.

While I am speaking of family, I will add that the fact that my mother declined to speak on this occasion provides yet more evidence of her sagacity and her good judgment. My mother has the gift of remaining silent when there is no need to speak; this is a talent that is generally in short supply, and as you all know my father had almost exactly the opposite quality. I can only hope that my remarks will not provide too much support for her position on the question of speech versus silence.

I grew up with an eccentric father. In part it was just that he liked to be silly—he rejoiced in undermining his own dignity. Because you all know what I'm talking about, I'll just give you one example. Driving up Route 2 from Cambridge to Concord, my father—who was one of nature's bad drivers—crashed his car. I asked him what happened, and he said he wasn't sure, because he had been thinking of something else: he was pretending he was a World War One fighter pilot.

But there was more depth to his eccentricities. When I was in third grade I proposed to join the Cub Scouts, which seemed to offer exactly what I wanted in the way of proto-masculine camaraderie and access to junk food. My father absolutely refused. He told me the Cub Scouts were a paramilitary organization, which was about as complete a condemnation as he could offer. Or consider his approach to watching sports, which, perhaps incongruously, he enjoyed very much. I find him watching a baseball game, with the Red Sox leading the Yankees 5-3. I ask him: "Whom are you rooting for?" And he says, "I'm rooting for the Yankees. I hope they catch up." Half an hour later, I come in and the Yankees have taken the lead, and he says, "Now I'm rooting for the Red Sox. I

hope they catch up." That was his system: he always rooted for whichever team was behind. Then if they took the lead, he would change sides and root for the other team to catch up. From an ethical point of view, this approach has a lot to be said for it, but of course it very rarely leads to a satisfying outcome.

These superficial stories relate to a deeper question my father worried about a lot and talked about a lot. I'll use the word belonging. He sincerely mistrusted the seduction of belonging to things—as much as he loved watching military parades he wouldn't see the point of the Cub Scouts, or of having a favorite baseball team. Patriotism, too, was a sentiment he was very suspicious of, although he believed in citizenship (he was a republican, in the French sense)—so that for example, he took great pride in doing his own taxes and in speaking respectfully to the police.

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.

And yet strangely enough, this citizen of everywhere and nowhere was concerned with roots. He was always moved by people who had been uprooted or displaced. His father left Russia as a young man and never returned; his mother left Bulgaria and returned only once, briefly, for a seaside vacation on which my father always claimed he almost drowned in the Black Sea. Many of his students lived in some form of exile, and of course many of you experienced his intense sympathy for that complicated situation. One of you here wrote to my mother that Oleg helped her accept the loss of Iran and then taught her to understand, love and appreciate it—a gift from a self-imposed exile to a real one.

He was fascinated by the question of where one belongs, and late in life he worked very hard at investigating his own roots. (He even dug into my mother's history with far more interest than she has ever had.) One of my fondest memories of him is the day in 2005 when we finally made it to Pogar, the totally insignificant town in the Ukraine where his father spent the summers at the dawn of the 20th century. Pogar is in the actual middle of nowhere, a marketplace of 2,000 souls. Wandering around the town, we arrive at a kind of log cabin with a little sign saying "Historical Museum of Pogar." We knock on the door, and a wizened old caretaker emerges, who later proves to be the town policemen and the caretaker of the cemetery as well. My father introduces himself, and to our amazement the little man claps his hands and says, "At last! We weren't sure when you would come! Please come in—I must show you your great-uncle's portrait!"

I think my father came to care very much about belonging. To the academy, of course, and to the community of scholars he helped to build. To his own history and to the history of his family. And late in life, to his church—a development that certainly took me by surprise.

I'll tell you one last story. You know my parents went through a long ordeal after my sister Anne Louise fell ill, more than thirty years ago, and they cared for her with great devotion at a time in their own lives when they should not have had to do such a thing. One day in this period I came upon my father sitting in his car, in the driveway in Concord, in great turmoil and distress. I asked him what was wrong, and he told me he thought he had an opportunity to be appointed to the very chair at the Collège de France that his own father had held. It was the most perfect fantasy of professional and filial success. And he had realized that he couldn't pursue it, that the life he himself had made, the work he had done, the family he was devoted to, were different from the dreams he had nourished himself with.

That was very hard for him to accept. But on the other hand it also provided an answer to the question of belonging that troubled him so much. For you belong to your own story, to the work that you do and the students you teach. You belong to the people you love, and to the ones who love you, and who will remember you when you are gone.

## Neil Levine

First, let me say how honored I am to speak at this service and to thank those responsible for thinking of me. I especially want to thank Terry Grabar for remembering how much Oleg meant to me and, by extension, to the Department, then known as Fine Arts, whose chairship I inherited from him and tried, as best I could, to develop along the path-breaking lines he had originally set out. Others have and will speak of Oleg as a teacher, a mentor, a scholar, and a father. I shall therefore confine my remarks to my relationship with him as a colleague who changed forever the departmental culture of the teaching of art and architectural history at Harvard.

When I arrived at Harvard in the fall of 1973, as an Instructor without having completed my dissertation, a number of the members of the Fine Arts faculty went out of their way to befriend and help me. Among the older generation was John Coolidge; among the middle and younger were Jim Ackerman, John Rosenfield, and Oleg Grabar. Oleg had himself only relatively recently arrived. John Coolidge was, I thought, the most adventurous and open-minded of the older group. He constantly spoke to me about how great an addition to the faculty Oleg was. In supporting Oleg's appointment, he clearly understood the changes that this would bring to the department, and Oleg did not disappoint him.

I do not remember precisely when Oleg became chair of the department. What I do remember clearly and with enormous gratitude, however, is how Oleg took me under his wing and shepherded me through the various stages of promotion, leading finally to my receiving tenure in 1980. He gave advice and encouragement of the most generous sort. It seemed as if he always had time to discuss things, be they intellectual, professional or personal. Whatever one said, he found a way to push the issue in a new and different direction, thus opening up unexpected possibilities and perspectives.

I never for a moment thought Oleg was grooming me in any deliberate or conscious way to take over for him as chair of the department, but I did directly succeed him in that capacity. And I fully embraced the program he had begun to lay out for the department's future. (Some may have thought I even went too far in certain directions.) Oleg saw the need to expand the scope of our teaching and research well beyond the traditional areas of Western and East Asian Art with which the Fogg, as the department was then commonly referred to, had been associated through its imbrication with the eponymous museum. He also wondered aloud, much to the dismay of others, often in significant positions of power, whether a university museum with such holdings as Harvard's should remain in private hands when there already existed in the city a major public collection like the Museum of Fine Arts. He himself had his office, at least for a time, outside the Fogg Museum, in the building that was to be torn down to create the Sackler; and it was he who

gave me the idea to move the department from the Fogg into the Sackler when it was eventually built. With that move came 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. While the department today is neither solely nor completely Oleg's creation, its character and sense of progressiveness would not have been the same without his contribution.

I would just like to end with a few more personal remarks. Oleg was a model to me as a scholar and a thinker—for his power of intellect, his breadth of interests, his great enthusiasm for the life of the mind, and, no less, for his sense of human difference and frailty. While prodigious in his output, he could accept those who were much less so. 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.

## Marianna Shreve Simpson

The last time that many of us saw Oleg was at a symposium of the Historians of Islamic Art Association held at the Freer and Sackler Galleries in Washington this past October. The symposium theme was Objects, Collections and Cultures, and the program addressed many issues central to Oleg's life-long intellectual interests and concerns. So it was particularly gratifying for the meeting's co-chairs—namely Massumeh Farhad and myself—to receive a note from Oleg some months in advance complimenting us on the program and alerting us of his plan to attend. At the symposium's opening reception he was in great spirits and reveling, as was invariably the case at such events, in the attention of several generations of former students, colleagues, and friends constantly clustered around him. During the symposium sessions themselves, he again was true to form, providing a whispered, running commentary about the presentations to his neighbors in the back rows of the Freer auditorium. (I could see this from the front, but couldn't actually hear anything). That some of his comments were positive and others more critical was borne out later when he wrote that while it was "a very successful meeting... the absence in our field of 'deep' thought was made apparent." As if to rectify this, he offered to summarize his impressions for the symposium proceedings, and to send us an essay this spring. Sadly, that contribution was not to be, but we can imagine that it would have been classic Grabar: structured in three parts, and identifying thorny problems, raising provocative questions, signaling innovative methodologies, and teasing out novel interpretations. We will greatly miss his insights and exhortations, but the projected symposium publication, a volume of the journal *Ars Orientalis* in which Oleg published many important articles and for which he served as Near Eastern editor for many years, will bear his imprint (if not literally his imprimatur) and be dedicated to his memory.

We all know that Oleg was a great word-master, and in several different languages. He used some evocative French expressions that have long stuck with me. (I think some originated with his mother.) "Pis-pis de chat," for something inconsequential; "maintenant ça devient sérieux," when a student (moi) finally came up with a worth-while idea, and my all-time favorite, which doesn't easily translate: "Elle comprend vite, mais on faut lui expliquer longtemps."

I learned that Oleg had died while in Mumbai for a conference on the *Shahnama*, the great Persian Book of Kings that celebrated its millenium in 2010. It was distressing to be so far away at that time and yet fitting to be at such a gathering since my own interest in epic texts and epic images began during an exhilarating seminar on a 14th century illustrated *Shahnama* manuscript—the so-called great Mongol *Shahnama*—that Oleg taught at Harvard in the spring of 1975 and that involved eight students, several of whom are here today, including Sheila Blair who co-authored with Oleg the pioneering publication that resulted from the seminar. 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." In keeping with long-standing practice, I had planned to call Oleg after returning to the States to report on the Mumbai conference, which was a very idiosyncratic affair. That too was an unfulfilled expectation, so I'd like to use the present occasion to say: Adieu, mon cher maître.

## NOTES

**1.** OG to MSS, e-mail 30 October 2010

**2.** Oleg Grabar and Sheila Blair. *Epic Images and Contemporary History: The Illustrations of the Great Mongol Shahnama*. Chicago and London, 1980.

**3.** *AKP Newsletter* 2/2 (Summer 1990): 7.

## Giles Constable

I want to speak this afternoon about Oleg not as a scholar and colleague—though he was both—but as a friend, an old friend, since we were classmates at Harvard and knew each other there, though not well. We never attended a reunion together, nor so far as I know apart, but we joked about attending our hundredth reunion—whether when we both a hundred or a hundred years after our graduation, I am uncertain—pushed in wheelchairs at the head of a procession by our grandchildren or, who knows, by then our great-grandchildren. We referred to this anticipated event, indeed, when I last saw Oleg a few days before his death. He was a man with whom one could have a long-standing joke, giving it new twists, without its going stale. He believed in traditions and ceremonies and was one of the few people I have known who appreciated the form more that the content of religious rites, though the content was also important to him and helped to shape the form. He wanted to require—another long-established joke—processions with silken banners at the Institute for Advanced Study, and above all uniforms for different academic ranks and positions, with stripes, epaulets, and medals for books and memberships in honorary societies. All a joke, but, like the best jokes, not without a core of seriousness.

Pat and I travelled on several occasions with Oleg, once with Nicholas and his family in Jordan and Israel, and once with Terry to Istanbul. He and Terry had planned to go with us to Egypt last December, but they had to cancel at the last minute on account of Oleg's health. But we felt his presence, partly through Nicholas, who had planned the trip, and especially when looking at the Islamic monuments in Cairo. He was a great travelling companion, full of observations and insights as well as knowledge and learning. One never saw a monument or work of art with him—including those he did not like—without coming away enriched both historically and aesthetically. His enthusiasms—pro and con—brought them to life.

He was also a marvelous conversationalist and raconteur, though not all his stories would bear repetition here. He had a wide range of interests and was ready to defend a variety of points of view. In the preface to his book on the Alhambra, which I reread last year before visiting Granada, he wrote that his ideas on western Islamic art might seem to 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. Hardly a day goes by that Pat and I do not say, while talking with each other or with friends, "Let's ask Oleg that" or "Let's discuss that with Oleg." It is a great sadness that we can no longer do so, but his spirit remains as an abiding source of ideas, humor, and from time to time (to use his own word) irritation.

## THOMAS W. LENTZ

My first encounter with Oleg Grabar was as a graduate student at Berkeley in the late 1970s. A visiting professor from UCLA, Katharine Otto-Dorn, one day told me that, if I was serious about studying Islamic art, I needed to go to Harvard to study with Oleg Grabar. It was a name I was only vaguely familiar with since, as a beginning graduate student, I was still struggling to come to terms with the vast visual inventory of 1400 years of Islamic art history.

After applying and being accepted, I was told that Oleg would be speaking at a spring conference in San Francisco. I arrived late, took my seat and slowly had it dawn on me that between his indeterminate accent and conceptual approach I could understand virtually nothing he was saying. He would bridle at this description, but I saw him then 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. I approached studying with him that fall with great trepidation.

Yet studying with Oleg was both liberating and inspiring. He taught me how to read, think and look critically. Somewhat surprisingly, he worked closely and methodically with me through my dissertation, alternately probing, provoking and always encouraging. He urged me to see as much of the Islamic world and its art and architecture as I could—and generously provided departmental support for travel and research. 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. I remember coming out of a restaurant with him in Cambridge and he began to analyze, and did so for the next ten minutes, a crumpled bag and other assorted trash in the gutter—what it meant about the city, its political and economic systems, civic and cultural traditions and an ever-spiraling stream of overlapping systems of meaning. I'm sure anyone who knew him has similar stories.

One of his most admirable traits as a teacher was his relationship with his students. 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—and ultimately reflective of his own wide-ranging thinking about Islamic visual creativity. 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.

I still remember with frequency some of the things he said, statements or asides in both public and private contexts that speak to his fundamental honesty and humor, traits often forgotten amidst his formidable intellectual production. After a typically rigorous deconstruction of an issue, he surprisingly commented that "if we art historians were truly honest with ourselves, we would admit that we just like being around beautiful things." At a welcoming reception for incoming graduate students, he greeted the assembly with "Welcome future high school teachers of America"—a remark many of us found funny and irreverent, but which infuriated others. And my favorite as a museum director: "we used to send all the dummies into museum work, but that might be changing."

He will be deeply missed.

Compiled by the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at Harvard University