
The book under review has been published under the auspices of the Center for Near Eastern Studies, University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). The editor, Irene A. Bierman, has included in it five papers presented on the occasion of “The Giorgio Levi Vida Award and Conference” held in 1996 to confer the award on Professor Oleg Grabar. A brief introduction to the conference, the award committee, and the recipients of the Award is provided at the beginning of the book. An introductory note about the contributors is given at the end.

All the contributors are either Europeans or have been living in the West for quite some time and their papers reflect their assessments of Islamic art and culture and their estimates of its influence on European art culture. Each contributor has given ample examples in his/her paper to support his/her argument, drawing the reader’s attention to the impact of Islamic culture on the non-Islamic world. The work is a commendable academic effort on the part of the contributors to the volume.

The first paper is by the recipient of the award, Oleg Grabar and is titled: “The Experience of Islamic Art.” It represents a summation of his life experience with Islamic art and architecture. He is perhaps the last of the old generation of European Orientalists who have made significant contributions to the study of Islamic art and culture, who have highlighted the jewels of Islamic art, and have thereby tried to foster a better understanding between the East and the West. These contributions to the understanding of Islamic art and architecture are and will remain a source of inspiration for the generations to come.

Oleg Grabar has very successfully covered the art and architecture of the whole Islamic world as well as its impact on the art and architecture of the West. He has drawn attention to quite a few important buildings and works of art in the West that are either direct copies of the Islamic art or inspired by it. These are the following: 1. The Islamic Art Gallery at the Metropolitan Museum, New York; 2. The Museum of the Institute du Monde Arabe, Paris; 3. Berlin Museum which has clothes and shrouds of bishops and saints, of monks and patriarchs made of fancy textiles produced in the Islamic world for the aesthetic appreciation of the sheer beauty of the objects involved; 4. A Harvard Art Museum which, in its collection, has a painting called Bric-a-brac with Safavid candlestick in the midst of other pretty things; 5. A palace in the
hills of Tuscany built in the nineteenth century in which the orgy of colourful
ornaments reproduces most of the effects of Alhambra and even of Moroccan
architecture barely known at that time in the West. The building is highly
eccentric and includes a fascinating use of writing — poetry, moral aphorisms,
names of people — in the spirit of Islamic monuments, and was probably
inspired by them; 6. The Belfast opera house decoration, done at the turn of
the last century, was taken directly from the drawings in Seville or Granada,
but this is only one of the myriad examples of Islamic motifs in the decorative
arts of Western architecture; 7. Finally, Grabar notes that the exhibition of
1910 on Islamic art held in Munich and Paris, as well as the relative ease of
travelling to North Africa, had a significant effect on a small number of Paris-
based painters, Matisse in particular. Grabar adds that the analysis of these
relationships in painting still awaits an investigator and probably requires the
establishment of a hitherto unavailable vocabulary for dealing with artistic
connections in order to avoid the simple-minded redundancies of establishing
parallel designs.

The first point of these examples is obvious. Over the centuries and all
over the world, men and women have experienced works of Islamic art — or
works perceived to be so — and have reacted to them in a variety of ways.
Most of the examples Grabar has given are positive in the sense that something
concrete and interesting came out of the encounters. There were negative
reactions as well, as for instance from the aesthetes and critics, but the writer
notes that we don’t know how to deal intelligently and intellectually rather
than passionately with negative reactions to the arts so as to extract from such
reactions something about the character of those arts.

To turn to the positive reactions or experiences, it would be interesting to
sort out the categories of thought involved in any analysis of artistic
relationships. We may be dealing with copying, imitation, impact, influence,
borrowing, adaptation, deliberate or accidental parallelism and probably
different kinds of relationship between forms. And beyond the visible
relationship there lies the even more complicated world of motivations — the
psychological, emotional, ideological or other sources of action or inspiration
that led non-Muslims to bury their holy men and women in silks with secular
or religious Islamic themes, or a contemporary painter like Frank Stella to call
his paintings from the 1970s Baghdad, Samarra or Darabgird, all names of
cities in Iraq and Iran associated with Islamic art.

Grabar goes on quoting several examples of Islamic art which are the
source of inspiration for buildings such as Cappella Palatina and the Mantle of
Roger’ II. His observations on Islamic arts reflected in the quoted examples are
well recorded and are duly supported with black and white plates in the book.
The editor, Irene A. Bierman, has summarized all the five papers in the introduction of this book which are presented below in a somewhat abstracted format as the following:

Oleg Grabar is one of the most productive scholars in Islamic studies in the second half of the twentieth century. Since his first article appeared in 1953 in the American Numismatic Society’s Museum Notes, many more than 140 articles have followed in edited volumes world wide. His publications suggest the remarkable range of his work, from architecture and archaeology, manuscripts and objects, to theoretical and methodological issues. Writing readily in English, French, German and Italian, he has reached a wide international audience. In addition to his articles, more than 18 books confirm the breadth of his scholarship. His studies have galvanized the field of Islamic art history by questioning the basic understanding of how visual forms are meaningful in their historical environment, as well as in the context of twentieth-century scholarship. (See p. 1)

On May 10, 1996, Oleg Grabar was given the Giorgio Levi Delia Vida Award at UCLA. He selected “The Experience of Islamic Art” as the theme for that year’s Conference. The theme was intended to inspire the exploration of the varied perceptions of artifacts, buildings and history where Islamic and other cultures meet. The sub-theme, “On the Margins of Islam,” focused attention on how people in border areas perceived visual forms, how they talked about them, and how the same forms might have been perceived differently. “The Experience of Islamic Art on the Margins of Islam” is also about contemporary scholarship and our perceptions of the objects of our study.

Robert S. Nelson, Zeynep Celik, Richard M. Eaton and Richard H. Davis were invited to present new studies engaging the issues set by Professor Grabar. Norman Sicily, Byzantium and the medieval Mediterranean, nineteenth- and twentieth-century Algeria and medieval to modern India represent the margins, the permeable borders, and serve as the focus of these scholarly explorations. Reshaped with the advantage of discussions during the conference, these papers are now presented with the full scholarly armature of footnotes and figures, forming the chapters of this book.

Grabar’s linked essays on “Modes of Experience,” “The so-called Mantle of Roger II” and “The Ceiling of the Cappella Palatina” form the first chapter of the book. His paper is a wide-ranging intellectual autobiography at once very serious, often humorous, and deeply engaging. He has woven together what he identifies as five modes of his experience of Islamic art — academic, archaeological, architectural, restrictive and aesthetic — and the pattern produced shows the intellectual strengths of a method that extracts,
synthesizes and analyzes patterns in the past and their relationship with the present. Grabar brings the experience of Islamic art to bear on two specific case studies, the so-called Mantle of Roger II and the ceiling of the Cappella Palatina, both fashioned in twelfth-century Norman-ruled Sicily. Discussing its materiality, imagery and motifs and the functions of the building as a whole, Grabar assesses the lived experience of Roger II's Sicily, the visual choices and the probable meanings.

Robert Nelson’s “Letters and Language/Ornament and Identity in Byzantium and Islam” is a two-part study that expands the exploration of cultural perceptions of visual forms. Focusing mainly on the functions of writing, letters and letter-like forms, his chapter explores the trans-cultural perceptions of the use of colour hierarchies in medieval Mediterranean societies and of our own sense of turning artifact into art. The first section, “The Feast of the Presentation,” examines the moment when a Mamluk tray — deemed appropriate by the Byzantine patriarch for serving a ritual pastry in the presence of the emperor — was transformed by circumstances into an object so inappropriate as to be an apparent reason for the patriarch to resign his post. In this transformation, the writing in Arabic letters on a tray that had served as a luxury object was suddenly perceived as an ornament of evil. The letters which once represented the language of the Egyptians were instantly transformed into letters of the language of the Agarene, Muslims who look to the Prophet Abraham [Ibrāhīm], his wife Hagar and their son Ishmael [Ismā‘īl] and to the Ka‘bah in Makkah, rather than to Abraham, his wife Sarah and their son Isaac [Ishāq] and to Jerusalem, as Christians do. An object at one moment appropriate for use in a Christian/Byzantine ceremony, as part of a shared culture of luxury objects, became an intrusion representing another, totally unacceptable religion.

Nelson continues the discussion in his second section, “The Presentation of Ornament.” Here the artifacts are the codex format, the Blue Qur’ān and several lectionaries and gospels. Nelson leaves us with some provocative questions about the perception and role of writing in the ruling societies of the medieval eastern Mediterranean. He points out what he terms as asymmetry in the uses of writing within and across cultures. Arabic letters and Arabic-like letters were regularly used as ornaments in Byzantine visual culture, notwithstanding the momentary case of the change in the perception of the Arabic writing on the tray. Pseudo-Arabic letters ornamented manuscripts, buildings and images of buildings. Yet while Arabic writing as ornament was a trans-cultural vehicle, Greek letters were not used as ornament within the traditions of the lands ruled by Muslims. This intriguing issue could be expanded to the lands where Latin letters were used. There too, around the
same time, Arabic and Arabic-like letters were used to adorn churches and religious paintings. Significantly, the letters of the Latin alphabet did not function trans-culturally for ornamental purposes.

The third contributor, Celik Zeynep discusses in her paper titled “Islamic Art and Architecture in French Colonial Discourse: Algeria, 1930” the French academic scholarship, colonial discourse, governmental projects, the founding of museums, the texts of guidebooks and the professional assessments of architects to detail the complex shifts in French discourse evaluating Islamic art in Algeria. In contrast to Nelson’s instantaneous transformation at the Feast of the Presentation, Celik’s moment is the year-long celebration (1930) of the centennial of the occupation of Algeria which coincided with, and perhaps was a vehicle for, the consolidation of the idea of la plus grande France. Celik argues that the “new” perception of Islamic architecture was unchanged from the nineteenth century onwards.

Celik notes that Ethnography is the discipline of analysis, and female ethnographers entered domestic spaces throughout Algeria to study form, spatial arrangements, and lighting. Through the vehicle of scholarly ethnographic discourse, French colonial practitioners were able to gain access to realms previously unavailable to them. The form of the vernacular house and its spatial arrangements were understood as quintessentially Islamic. With such an understanding the colonial government could reconstitute and recycle these forms in large housing developments aimed at promoting the appropriate moral life for Algerians. The functional fluidity found within the domestic space was rendered static in the transposition to large-scale housing. Aesthetically, French practice and discourse eschewed the ornamented complex forms of the urban environments, preferring instead the cubical whitewashed forms of the vernacular. The notion that these were the aesthetically pure forms of Algerian Islamic architecture was promoted through paintings, postcards, and movies.

The fourth and fifth essays of Richard Eaton and Richard Davis respectively shift the cultural margins from the Mediterranean region to the Indian subcontinent. Eaton begins his chapter on “The Articulation of Islamic Space in the Medieval Deccan” by questioning historiography’s “Maginot line” in the medieval Deccan. He states that most contemporary historians of India take the Krishna River in the Deccan plateau as the dividing line between the Muslim Bahmani Kingdom in the north and the Hindu Vijayanagara Kingdom in the south. He asks whether this perception of difference along religious lines was in place in the fourteenth through the seventeenth centuries, or whether this barrier relates more to today’s political tensions and academic conventions. Eaton argues that the medieval southern Deccan, just like the
Sicily of Grabar’s discussion, was a cosmopolitan cultural zone that was “Islamicate.” According to him, the Deccan was a cultural zone where non-Muslim presence was essential. Islamicate culture is a collective culture based on or inspired by the socio-political-aesthetic practices of Islam, but where Muslims need not dominate, either as a ruling group or in terms of numbers. Certainly the Muslims ruled the kingdoms north of the river, and Hindus ruled in the south, yet Eaton argues for a consciously shared Islamicate culture of rule.

To support his argument he explores structural similarities between the Bahmani and Vijayanagara states. He points out similarities in the wording of the moral ideals of statecraft in texts, (one in Persian, the other in Telugu), popular in each domain. He reminds the reader that the expression of the moral concept of rule was Islamicate, in the sense that no comparable statement can be found in classical Sanskrit texts on governance. He explores shared institutions (such as *iqṭā‘* which had its origins in realms ruled by Muslims), and the terminology used in both the kingdoms (such as sultan). Likewise, courtly dress and comportment originating in the practices and customs of Muslim rule were shared in the south. Having argued for similarities, Eaton turns to fundamental contrasts between the two kingdoms in their notions of sacred space. He presents the notion of sacred space for the Bahmani Kingdom as multi-layered. He quotes the historian Juzjānī, writing in 1260, to show that India was perceived as the “focus” (the refuge) of the Muslim community after the Mongols sacked Baghdad and killed the caliph. India was portrayed as the stable heart of *Dār al-Īslām* (the Abode of Islam). What gave this Islamic space legitimacy, Eaton argues, was the role of the Chishti shaykhs who legitimized the Bahmani rule. He notes that the Sufi shaykhs were mobile, not fixed in one locale, and posits this mobility in contrast to the notion of sacred space in the Vijayanagara Kingdom which was fixed in a specific site, that of an ancient shrine dedicated to a river goddess.

Issues of remembering as well as forgetting the past are taken up by Richard Davis in his chapter on “Memories of Broken Idols.” He begins with a brief description of the modest Babri Masjid and then details the ways in which British historians used it to illustrate their own narrative history of India and, in the process, legitimized local myths. For Davis, the Babri Masjid and its destruction in 1992 are emblematic of all “Islamic” buildings in India as well as of the discourses and political actions that have led to the current overarching perception of Muslim holy places.

Beginning with the twentieth century, Davis leads us past the extreme discursive positions — such as positing the Taj Mahal as a Rajput palace — and brings us to consider how Islamic sacred sites have come to be seen as “alien
intrusions” and destruction seen as a fundamental practice of Islam. Turning to the medieval chroniclers such as al-‘Utbi, he examines the rhetoric of their portrayal of the military campaigns of Maḥmūd of Ghaznah who entered the Indian landscape in the eleventh century. Davis argues that plundering the territory of defeated enemies was understood and practiced by all rulers as a legitimate and productive aspect of warfare. He details the destruction and re-use of each other’s sacred sites by warring Hindu chieftains and discusses the plundering of Hindu sites by Muslim rulers. The author draws our attention to the acts which took place at the court of Maḥmūd of Ghaznah. From conquest being equated with might, the metaphor shifted to conquest as an act of iconoclasm. Maḥmūd’s own court eulogist equated his conquests with the act of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be on him) in cleansing the Ka’bah of idols. While Maḥmūd did not remain in India long enough to appropriate and reuse the sacred sites as the Prophet (peace be on him) had done in Makkah, later Muslim conquerors did so and their actions fit the metaphor more comfortably. Davis offers as an example the well-known Might-of-Islam Mosque in Delhi where stones from temples were reused in such a way as to show the old architectural order subverted by the religion of Islam.

Davis’s account posits as a contrast the destruction and re-use of the sacred site of Somanatha by opposing Hindu rulers of the past, and mid-twentieth-century political involvement there. He carefully points out the rhetoric and metaphors in which these acts of remembering and forgetting the past are cast and through which we perceive them. These acts of destruction and rebuilding at Somanatha are cast in a very different light from the acts of Mahmud. Davis asks, more pointedly than Eaton, how we deal with metaphor, hyperbole and acts of destruction by rulers today. How can we understand similar acts, rhetorical paradigms of the past, and be responsible for the experience of Islamic art in India in the present?

Situated at the margins where Muslims and others meet, all there studies raise issues of changing perceptions about artifacts, and buildings, about Islamic art and architecture. The studies in this book also raise issues about the uses of such discourses: who writes the words, who hears and reads them, and what are the languages of those discourses? (See p. 9)

The book is a treat to all lovers of Islamic art and architecture and a befitting tribute to Oleg Grabar’s remarkable contribution to a better understanding of Islamic art and architecture.

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