Half a Century in the Study of Islamic Art

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An essay on a presentation made by Oleg Grabar to Diwan al-Mimar on October 9, 2003. (1)

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Introduction
Describing his presentation, Grabar stated it is a mixture of an exercise in "vanity" and the result of a number of accidental events he came across over recent months. One of these is that he is preparing four volumes that will include eighty-seven articles he has published over the past fifty years. He added that as he started preparing for the publication of those volumes, he came across the frightening realization that many of the enterprises in which he had been involved were connected to people who are no longer alive. The republishing of these articles is one way of bringing those people back to life.

Grabar also mentioned that he has reached a time in his life where he is going through and cleaning up his notes, letters, and souvenirs of one kind or another. This also is the right time to discuss with his descendants what they want and what they do not want of his belongings, and to think about what he should do with the belongings they do not want.

Grabar moved on to talk about what he did professionally to become more or less who he is now. He stated that beyond the aforementioned personal and rather emotional information lay some practical details that are of use. He began by providing a description of the world of the early 1950s. It was a time when the United Nations had around 50 members instead of the almost 200 members it has today. The only way to cross the Atlantic was by boat. There were small planes connecting Beirut to Amman, but they were unreliable, and so one usually traveled between the two cities by car. There were camels and donkeys all over the place. Most typewriters were manual, and there was not enough electricity for sustained periods of time to support electric typewriters. There were no computers and word processing programs. There was no direct telephone dialing, and Grabar mentioned how he would call Paris from Jerusalem back in 1960 through a process that included calling from Jerusalem to Amman, Amman to London, and finally London to Paris. This was the world he knew when he was about thirty years old.

Grabar added that things have changed so enormously and spectacularly since then that we often forget what the world was like before those changes. These changes, according to Grabar, may be seen as either bad or good, but they remain significant. One cannot do the same things or think the same way as one did before.

The Enlightenment Project
One way to begin explaining what has been is to consider the so-called "Enlightenment project." In the eighteenth century, there was the creation in Western Europe of a notion that it is possible to know everything; that knowledge of everything is equal, and there are no distinctions between different kinds of knowledge; that everything will explain everything; and that once one knows

everything, he or she will achieve high levels of wisdom and morality. Grabar added that this idea initially was a European one, but it spread elsewhere. One of the early "memorials" of this idea is the *Description de l'Egypte*, published between 1808 and 1828. In the volumes of this extraordinary work, a group of French scholars, who had not set foot in Egypt before they accompanied Napoleon on his 1798 French expedition to that country, documented much of Egypt's geography and cultural heritage. The volumes of this publication still constitute the only resources where a complete text of specific Arabic-language inscriptions is published. The range of use of these volumes, according to Grabar, is only limited by the competencies of their readers.

Grabar believes one can make similar parallels to literature in that almost every major writer between 1780 and 1830 wrote about various aspects of Islamic culture, although these writers knew neither Persian nor Arabic. Therefore, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749 - 1832), recognized as one of the greatest writers of the German tradition, wrote about Persian poetry. Aleksandr Sergeyevich Pushkin (1799 – 1837), one of the greatest Russian poets of the nineteenth century, wrote a great poem on prophecy entitled *The Prophet*, which is based on the account of the first revelation to the Prophet Muhammad. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), two of the leading German-language philosophers of their time, both wrote on Islamic art without having even seen any examples of it, but they heard that it incorporated geometry, and it became important to them in their various theoretical constructions. Victor Hugo (1802-1885), one of the most important French Romantic writers of the nineteenth century, states in his 1829 poem *Les Orientales* what is to the effect that the nineteenth century started out as Classical but has become Orientalist. Thus, adds Grabar, one can imagine that around 1830 there was an extraordinary "romantic" scheme of knowledge to which all parts of the world fit within a sort of "egalitarian vision."

Grabar mentioned that if one would move to the present, such an egalitarian vision no longer worked. The fields of study with which we are dealing, those belonging to the humanities, are in constant decline, at least if one judges by budgetary allocations to such fields by governmental organizations, the availability of jobs in teaching institutions, and so forth. Grabar believes that most of the world's languages today are taught only if they lead to jobs, especially in intelligence and police work. Therefore, an enormous interest suddenly has emerged in teaching Arabic in the United States recently, yet this is not for the love of Islamic culture, but an outcome of the events of September 11, 2001. This even applies to the English language in one way or another. English has become the dominant language of communication, but it is a very restricted computer-based English with a little bit of Hollywood culture attached to it that is being learned and communicated. It is hardly an English language that would allow one to read William Shakespeare or Charles Dickens. It is useful, but it is not of cultural significance. Furthermore, national, ethnic, or religious prejudices affect the topics that are being investigated today. One no longer can publish a book without somebody questioning the political or cultural motives behind writing the book.

Grabar's Early Involvement in the Study of Islamic Art
Grabar went on to review what has replaced the Enlightenment's idea of universal knowledge, and to look into the impulses, hopes, and expectations that can be imagined for the future. He started by describing his early involvement in the study of Islamic art, which he has pursued over the last fifty-five years. He described how he and a few colleagues of his started learning Arabic back in 1948 at Harvard with a Scottish professor named William Thompson. There was no Arabic grammar book written in English, but only an English translation of a book originally written in German by an Arabic writer. First, they were taught the Arabic alphabets, and how letters differ in shape according to their location within the word. They next were taught verbs, particularly the three-letter verbs represented by the verb *fa'ala* (to do), for the purpose of studying verb conjugations. Since the verb *fa'ala* includes the letter *'ayn* in the middle, which Grabar and his colleagues could not pronounce correctly, they replaced the verb with *kataba* (to write) and started learning the different conjugations of that verb. They then were taught the genitive, nominative, and accusative cases, and they learned about infinitives. From there, they were required to read the last six *sura*s (chapters) of the Qur'an as an assignment. Their professor explained to them some of the grammatical problems they were facing, and then read to them the *tafsir* (interpretation) of those *sura*s. Grabar mentioned that by the time he had three years of Arabic, he knew the *tafsir* of the Qur'an relatively well. However, he could not say a word in colloquial Arabic, not even a simple word such as *marhaba* (hello). However, by learning the *tafsir*, he began to gain a decent knowledge of the classical culture of Muslims.

Speaking of the reasons why he started learning Arabic, Grabar mentioned that a key reason was that as a child he always was fascinated with travel books. He used to pick up travel books and wanted to visit the places described in those books. He always had an attraction to "exotic" things. He even tried to learn Chinese on his own, but failed. In addition, he was born to an academic family, for which the notion of continuously learning new things was deeply instilled. It was a family that paid much attention to learning; a family for which learning was an essential ingredient of life. Although it sometimes was hard growing up in such an environment, Grabar is grateful for it and considers himself fortunate to have belonged to a world that viewed learning a necessity that one could not live without. Grabar added that in his family everybody had to know at least four languages, and the practice of speaking a different language each day at home was normal.

Grabar moved on to describe how his own life as a scholar serves to demonstrate the importance of fortune. At a very young age, he was lucky to receive the trusted support of a number of major scholars who believed in his abilities. Another example is when at a later stage of his career he was trusted enough and allowed by the Syrian Department of Antiquities after the 1967 Arab-Israeli War to continue excavation work in Syria, at a time when the United States had no diplomatic representation in that country. Grabar considers himself fortunate to have traveled through much of Afghanistan just before the country started collapsing in 1973. In addition, he was lucky to have spent some time working in Iran before the 1979 Iranian Islamic revolution. Grabar considers all of this true luck, for if he had started his career at a later point in time, he would not have been able to do all of that. Finally, Grabar believes he is lucky to have retired in Princeton, where there are first-rate academic libraries, even though he believes it is a perfectly boring place in which to live.

Methodological Directions in the Study of Islamic Art

Building on his long involvement in the study of Islamic art, Grabar moved on to identify what he refers to as seven strands, impulses, attitudes, or methodological directions in the practice and theory or assumptions regarding the study of Islamic art. These are Orientalism, archaeology, collecting, history of art, history of architecture, the social sciences, and contemporary creativity.

Orientalism

The first strand in the study of Islamic art is "Orientalism," which Grabar believes was essential in his becoming what he is. The term has received bad press, especially after the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978). According to Grabar, there is much truth in Said's depiction of the negative image of Islam and Muslims provided by many of those who have written about the Muslim world, and in the connection of those writings to issues of political and cultural control. However, Grabar believes there is another side to Orientalism. Orientalists also were a group of men and women committed to learning the languages and cultures of people other than themselves. They did it because they were committed to knowing others.

According to Grabar, Orientalists did what they did for two main reasons. The first is to understand other cultures, because it is good to know and understand others according to their own terms. To Grabar, this makes one feel good, and he mentioned that he has no shortage of stories of how good it felt to have somebody understand him in the middle of the Syrian desert. The second reason is that it is good to explain these other cultures to one's own world, and this is part of the "Enlightenment project." If one knows something, it is a major responsibility for that person to pass on this knowledge to others. Therefore, it is important in the Orientalist tradition to produce manuals, translations, text editions, atlases, encyclopedias, publication of monuments, etc. To most people, CIA refers to the United States Central Intelligence Agency. However, to many Orientalists, CIA is the *Corpus Insciptionoarum Arabicarum*, a multi-volume work on historical Arabic inscriptions compiled beginning in 1894 by the Swiss scholar Max van Berchem and others. These volumes, which exist only in a very small number of libraries today, are one extraordinary achievement of Orientalism.

Grabar added that the Orientalist world transcended nations. It was not nationally oriented, and it saw cultures rather than nations. The Orientalist definitions of cultures are very revealing and lead to very interesting discussions. This is because these definitions may be linguistic, as with Arabic or Turkish speakers; they could be ethnic, as with Kurds or Berbers; they could be religious or sectarian, as with Sunnis or Shias; they could be historical, as with the 'Abbasids, Ayyubids, or Mamluks; and they could be geographic, as with Egypt, Central Asia, or Morocco. These are different taxonomic categories that have been adopted by Orientalists, but they did not usually include national divisions since such divisions are modern inventions that do not necessarily reflect historical realities.

Grabar added that there are, however, two difficulties with Orientalism. The first is its deep concentration on the past. There is a tendency for Orientalists to present anything that is modern as dreadful, that history stops around 1700 A.D. and that

anything that has happened since then is of secondary importance. Another corollary is a certain "clubism" and exclusivism. Orientalists had institutions that more or less functioned as clubs, all of which have lost much of their significance (and some even have disappeared), as with the American Oriental Society, the Société Asiatique in Paris, and the School of Oriental and Asiatic Studies. In these "clubs," Orientalists preferred to meet with colleagues who learned Chinese than with people from China.

Archaeology

Grabar went on to discuss the second direction regarding the study of Islamic art, which is "archaeology." He mentioned that by the time he became a university student in the late 1940s and early 1950s, archaeology had begun to acquire the reputation of being a restrictive and tedious technique in which one endlessly counts shreds, drills little holes, and uses toothbrushes to clean excavated materials. However, archaeology still maintains and cultivates traces of older and much more exciting activities. One of these is travel. There always has been a wide range of extraordinary travelers who went to different places, saw different things, were afraid of very little, and whose travel accounts are often amongst the most exciting subjects about which one can read. These include people such as Gertrude Bell (1868 – 1926), Robert Byron (1905 – 1941), Nelson Glueck (1900 – 1971), Alois Musil (1868 - 1944), and Sir Aurel Stein (1862 - 1943), to mention a few. Another activity is the fascination with great monuments that initially concentrated on those of ancient Egypt. The fascination with great monuments is obvious for example in Johann Bernhard Fischer von Erlach's 1721 book *Entwurff einer Historischen Architektur* (Outline of Historical Architecture) on the general history of architecture. The work, which was translated to English in 1730 under the title *A Plan of Civil and Historical Architecture*, is considered the first universal history of architecture and the first book to include representations of Islamic architecture from Egypt, Persia, and Turkey. Although von Erlach's illustrations of monuments from the Orient were extremely fanciful, the work did have considerable influence as a general work on the history of architecture.

Grabar added that the novelty of archaeology in the 1950s was the development of departments of antiquities in different countries of the Islamic world, which initially were often run by Europeans. The role of those departments primarily was to maintain monuments. It is their work that has resulted in the preservation of the Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, which was completed during the reign of the Umayyad caliph al-Walid (r. 705 - 715), but was subjected to many interventions since then; the Tomb of Oljaytu in Sultaniyya in Iran (1306 -1312); the monuments of Cairo; etc. There are masses of other activities in which those departments of antiquities also have been involved. They carried out surveys. Grabar mentioned as an important example the surveys that Robert McCormick Adams, the former Director of the Oriental Institute in Chicago, former Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, and author of the *Land Behind Baghdad* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), carried out in southern Iraq. However, Grabar believes that the most remarkable examples of these surveys are found in the ex-Soviet Union. There are surveys carried out in Central Asia during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s that kept track of every remain, every site, and every village. They provide a remarkable body of work, and one can reconstruct the topography of huge areas through those works. These works did include excavations, but the excavations had always posed problems because there is no

critical number of sites for the development of criteria of classification and judgment, as opposed to prehistoric archaeology where such a critical number of sites exists.

Grabar added that archaeology also has posed practical problems. One is the low level of publication. Archaeologists generally do not publish excavations. This is because although excavations are fun to carry out, ninety percent of what excavators find is of no interest to the vast majority of people. In addition, the cost of archaeological work has become very high. Grabar mentioned that as a young scholar he could get by on small budgets that simply would be unthinkable today. To a student or a young scholar, archaeology offered, and still offers, a unique opportunity to do two things. The first is to acquire total knowledge about a place, in the sense that one excavates a place and therefore knows everything about that place. Thus, one is entitled to draw conclusions that most probably will not be contradicted. The second is the contact with the land and its people. When an archaeologist excavates, he or she enters into the life of the place in which he or she does the excavation, whether a village or a small locality of two or three villages, and one is able to "feel" a country or an area. This, according to Grabar, explains why a number of archaeologists were used by intelligence services. Archaeologists often have a better knowledge of the countries they study than do the inhabitants of those countries. Grabar added that the OSS (the United States Office of Strategic Services), which is the predecessor of the CIA, partially was created by archaeologists of the 1930s and 1940s. On a related note, he mentioned that during that period many American diplomats in the Islamic world seemed more concerned with archaeology than with political issues. For example, at the time when Grabar first came to Jordan in the 1950s, the American ambassador to Jordan used to automatically represent the American Archaeological Society and what was then the Palestine Archaeological Museum in Jerusalem. This has changed today, and most ambassadors would have very little knowledge of archaeology, and little interest in getting involved in such archaeological institutes.

Grabar added that, as in Orientalism, archaeology also had its "clubism." This was represented by either French or British institutions. The Germans were not present in archaeological activities in the Middle East at that time since they had just been defeated in World War II. In Beirut and Damascus, there were French institutes; in Jerusalem, there were British, American, and French institutes; and in Baghdad, there was a British institute. In Iran, there were British and French institutes; and in Turkey, there was a French institute in Istanbul and a British one in Ankara. There was a kind of informal agreement that archaeologists always would help each other. If somebody carried out an excavation, he or she would take a colleague for a week to help in the digging. If somebody had a four-wheel drive vehicle, he or she would take others for a trip. If somebody wanted to go and see a strange monument, he or she always found a group of people to accompany him or her. That was a kind of collective of people interested in seeing things together. Grabar pointed out that the defect in the practice of archaeology in the region was that archaeology was still a world from which, with a few exceptions here or there, the locals were absent except as granters of permits. They were not part of the team.

Grabar believes that modern archaeology poses problems in terms of cost effectiveness. It is expensive to do archaeological work, and it also is useless to do it unless it is done on a large scale in the Islamic world. For Grabar, whether

archaeology is worth doing today or not is questionable. One has to question the importance of such work, and to ask how important is the knowledge it provides as small pieces in the puzzle of reconstructing the past?

Collecting

The third feature that Grabar mentioned in the context of the study of Islamic art is "collecting." According to Grabar, collecting is an important part of dealing with Islamic art. It began in the Middle Ages when works of Islamic art were expensive items, the rich objects included in Western Christian and royal collections. It was also part of the internal Muslim system. The notion of "*'Aja'ib*" (wonders), the strange works that exist, was part of traditional Muslim culture. He added that there is a wonderful, extraordinary book entitled "*Kitab al-Hadaya wa al-Tuhaf*" (The Book of Gifts and Rarities), which originally is believed to have been written during the eleventh century, and includes a list of treasures and the strange things that people owned. Caliphs, rulers, and princes constantly gave each other gifts, and this is a medieval history of gift giving and collecting. (2)

Grabar mentioned that collecting can be accidental, a side interest, or a focus. Some people collect ceramics, rugs, or decorative arts, usually paintings and manuscripts. Collectors usually have been rich people. Many of them were jewelers and artisans in the West who collected because they liked beautiful things. The best collections, such as that of the Parisian jeweler Louis Cartier, were put together by people who made jewelry themselves.

Grabar added that a variant of collecting consists of the mixed, national, regional, ethnic, cultural, and universal museums that have sprung around. Every country has to have its national museum. What goes into these museums is a very interesting phenomenon, and so is the way they are organized. One problem with collecting is the distinction between private and public collecting, and also accessibility. Who has the right to collections? Does everybody have the right to see a work of art, or do collectors only have such a right? According to Grabar, there is a moral problem in collecting. Does a collected item become a document for something else or somebody else than the collection or the collector? How does one transform a collection into an account history? If one does an exhibition, he or she usually is saying: This comes from collector A, this comes from collector B, this comes from collector C, etc. In other words, one often starts thinking of the collector more than of the collected items.

History of Art

The fourth direction Grabar mentioned relating to the study of Islamic art is "the history of art." Here, Grabar discussed the issue of where Islamic art is placed in the manuals and books of the history of art. Sometimes it is not included at all; sometimes it is placed after Byzantine art, but before "real" art begins with the Renaissance; and sometimes it is presented as an example of Oriental art, along with Chinese art. In other words, Islamic art has not entered into that "automatic system" by which the West analyzes or explains the arts. One of the major activities that Grabar has carried out over the past twenty years has been to make Islamic art acceptable to the rest of the field of art history. He mentioned there are several techniques that have been developed to handle this issue. One technique Grabar calls the "me too" syndrome. Every time somebody says "we have beautiful buildings,"

the other says “we have beautiful buildings too”; every time somebody says “we have beautiful ceramics,” the other says “we have beautiful ceramics too.” There always is some reason to say “I have that too.” In this context, Grabar gave the example of the argument in Nikolaus Pevsner’s *An Outline of European Architecture* (Hammondworth: Penguin Books, 1942), where he states there is a history of Italian architecture, but there is no Bulgarian architecture. Grabar believes such an opinion to be unfortunate and strange to hear from an otherwise remarkable man. Grabar added that every large enough group of people has its architecture. It may not be great and exciting, but everybody has architecture.

Another technique Grabar mentioned for handling the problem of excluding Islamic art from the field of the history of art is that of “automatic inclusion.” According to Grabar, automatic inclusion is something in which publications coming out of the Soviet Union used to specialize. Nobody pays attention to Soviet scholarship anymore, but Soviet scholarship had been a very interesting phenomenon for about fifty years. This is because their rules required everybody to have an art. Whether one liked it or not, one always had an art. In Soviet books on the history of art, there is, for example, something on the architecture of Uzbekistan in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. Because everybody had architecture, the Russian authorities compelled their scholars working on art history to look for examples of such an art, even if there seemed to be nothing there. For example, a book was published about forty years ago in the Soviet Union that provided an art history for Libya. The book even has a chapter dedicated to Libyan art in seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Grabar added that the third attitude he has tried recently is that of the “selected topic,” in the sense that each culture has its own special problems. If one is to do a history of landscapes, there is not much point to worrying about Umayyad landscapes, because Chinese and Western landscapes include so many more exciting things. On the other hand, if one talks about ornament, the art of the court, or attitudes towards images, Muslim culture has very unique experiences. Thus, it is important to identify those features of Muslim cultures that are particularly strong. Although other cultures may have had traditions of iconoclasm, Muslim examples give particularly strong and interesting characteristics to this phenomenon. Another interesting phenomenon is that Muslim culture is the only one in which small objects are as important as paintings and other relatively large works of art.

History of Architecture

The fifth direction Grabar mentioned in the context of the study of Islamic art is the “history of architecture.” Grabar stated that the problems with handling Islamic architecture are almost similar to those one faces in dealing with the history of Islamic art. However, the study of Islamic architecture had entered the general streams of history of architecture at an earlier date, although not always successfully. This, according to Grabar, is apparent in Sir Banister Fletcher’s 1896 *A History of Architecture*, and the 10-volume *Histoire de l'art dans l'antiquite*, authored by Charles Chipiez and Georges Perrot, and published between 1882 and 1914. Both publications do not provide a "history," only an annotated list of monuments. In more recent times, however, Spiro Kostof’s *A History of Architecture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985) has brought Islamic architecture within the mainstream of architecture with no difficulty.

The Social Sciences

The sixth direction Grabar mentioned concerning the study of Islamic art is the "social sciences." Grabar considers this direction the most "curious" and the most "prized" direction. He mentioned that to him, and at least to people of his age, one of the great creations of the mid-twentieth century was the codification of major approaches and principles of the social sciences in anthropology, sociology, economics, etc. This codification aimed, and still aims, at creating a framework within which one can understand and explain human behavior and human creativity. For Grabar, the social sciences are the same as the DOS (Disc Operating System) was to computers when they first appeared. Computers would not work unless the DOS was installed in them; and social sciences created a DOS through which we understand and feel so many phenomena.

Grabar added that he spent many years of his life thinking about the relation of the social sciences to art, and that he wrote many pages of unpublished writings about issues such as how to carry out an "anthropology of art" or a "structuralism of art." Grabar wonders whether it is worth pursuing such attempts to understand art. In this context, he gave some examples of how the social sciences affected, and may affect, the study of art. For example, one can explain the whole history of art through a "structuralist theory" of anthropology, according to which artifacts are perceived as being derived from underlying systems of laws, which makes it possible to reproduce new artifacts similar to already existing ones that still would be considered authentic. One of the main principles of structuralist theory is the emphasis on the meaning of a certain artifact rather than on its material entity, i.e. artifacts are treated as signs. According to this theory, a sign has no meaning by itself, but derives its meaning through its participation in a system of relations. Therefore, structuralists look for relational patterns between artifacts, such as parallelism, opposition, inversion, etc. The most important pattern of relationships for structuralists is binary opposition.

In addition, through sociology, and also Marxism in part, art has become a "product," in which many material aspects are involved. Expressing admiration for a piece of art by saying "how beautiful it is!" or "how gorgeous it is!" no longer is the only way of seeing art. Art has become a product that costs X amount of money to be paid for the materials through which it is made and for people who make it. Here, Grabar commented that the cost of things is something art historians have never worried about in earlier times.

Psychology is another field of inquiry that has a bearing on art. According to Grabar, for a long time, the artist's pleasure had been a "Victorian" term about which people did not talk. Through psychology, however, pleasure has become a subject deserving attention and study. In addition, one has the right to say that something is beautiful and something is not. Today, this can be "proved"; people can discuss together what is beautiful and what is not beautiful, and not do so simply because they like or dislike certain things. There now are different ways in which one determines what the pleasure of seeing and the pleasure of feeling are.

Linguistics is another branch of knowledge that affects the way people see and understand art. Grabar mentioned that this involves the phonetic division of structure, which is easier to accomplish with architecture than with other arts. For example,

architecture may be discussed as phonemes, as with bricks and stones; as morphemes, as with a vault or a courtyard; or as sentences, as with a house or a palace. Thus, there are meaningless elements of construction, meaningful elements, and also compositions. For years, Grabar had thought this to be of use, but he has given up on it. Grabar added that languages carry out this division all the time, and there are techniques of carrying it out. This is clear in the difference between poetry and prose. He, however, feels uncertain as to whether we can employ such techniques in art and architecture.

Grabar added that a more recent science that may affect the study of art is gender studies, which have been extraordinarily important in identifying approaches to use and taste. This partly is about asking how a work of art was used: Was it used by men or by women? Is there a difference between how a building or a work of art was used by men and women? Grabar commented that gender studies have revolutionized our sense of how buildings and objects operate.

According to Grabar, the social sciences have provided us with a possibility for developing a vocabulary of thinking about the arts, be they Islamic arts or other arts. The point here is to know whether it is important that these theories and approaches be used for the study of Islamic art. Perhaps they illustrate something that was not seen otherwise. Perhaps works and tendencies of Islamic art demonstrate the validity and usefulness of such approaches. However, it also is possible that such theories and approaches are not important for the purpose of the study of Islamic art. Maybe the incorporation of some of these theories into the study of Islamic art makes no sense, and is done simply to "join the crowd." Maybe carrying out a gender study on mosques, for instance, is of no use. However, Grabar believes these are the kind of issues that should be raised and investigated.

Contemporary Creativity

The seventh and last direction Grabar described concerning the study of Islamic art is that of "contemporary creativity." Grabar mentioned that until the late seventies, he was "blissfully" ignorant of the existence of contemporary art in the Muslim world, except for occasional notices about activities in Beirut and Tehran. He knew a little bit more on architecture, because of Hassan Fathy (3), who interested him at some point, but he still did not know much about contemporary architecture in the Muslim world. Here, Grabar noted that this ignorance of his was not particular to the Muslim world, as he also knew very little about his own culture's contemporary art. Grabar added that all of this changed in the late seventies with his involvement in the Aga Khan Award for Architecture and the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and he always will be grateful for that. He began to discover architecture, architectural education, and then other arts as they are being carried out today. Grabar added that he realized there is an extraordinary vitality in the contemporary artistic and architectural production of the Islamic world, and even though this production often initially has been brought out of western traditions, it often has taken on a very interesting life of its own.

In this context, he mentioned the story of a contemporary Indonesian painter he has come across. This painter studied in The Netherlands, where he learned about Abstract Expressionism and the techniques of contemporary painting, and painted accordingly. He received a grant to go to New York during the 1960s. When he went

to New York, an exhibition of contemporary Japanese art was taking place. He found at that exhibition how Japanese artists were doing contemporary art that is not Abstract Expressionism, and realized that they were drawing their inspiration from their own art. He decided to do the same, and he went to the Islamic section at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York to find out what Islamic art is, and came to the conclusion that Islamic art primarily is about writing. He therefore dropped Abstract Expressionism, and spent considerable time and effort copying religious quotations and objects. Grabar noted that this is not a unique phenomenon, and it is the responsibility of art historians to show how much there is to Islamic art as a source of inspiration for contemporary artistic production.

Grabar added there are more important issues to consider when dealing with contemporary art. One such issue is that of demarcating geographic and chronological boundaries for artistic production in the Islamic world. He illustrated this point through a development that took place about twenty years ago, which is the publication of the 37-volume *Dictionary of Art* (London: Macmillan Publishers, 1996), in which he was involved. The editors decided that the arts in this publication would be categorized by nationality, i.e. French art, German art, Russian art, Chinese art, etc. However, this categorization could not be carried out for the Muslim world, because most of the nations of the Islamic world did not exist before the twentieth century. For instance, what would one do about Jordanian art in the seventeenth century? The editors therefore decided to use a different system of taxonomization for Islamic art, separating it from national art except in the twentieth century and the pre-Islamic period. Accordingly, in the case of Persia, there was Persian art under the title of Persia or Iran until the Islamic conquest, and then it is included under Islamic art until the twentieth century, when it goes back to Persian contemporary art. In other words, as with the Turks who cut themselves off from their past by giving up the Arabic script, there was a break; a break was artificially created in those volumes. Grabar added that perhaps this was not the most suitable approach to dealing with Islamic art, but he is not sure which approach would be more suitable.

According to Grabar, whether there was or should be an Islamic dimension to arts coming out of the Muslim world is something that has two “tricky” corollaries. The first is whether such an Islamic dimension restricts the study of Islamic art to Muslims. If the answer is affirmative, then non-Muslims would not have the right to deal with Islamic art because it is a restricted endeavor. The second corollary is whether principles and ideas identifiable as Islamic in the past, such as calligraphy and geometry, should remain dominant today. Grabar added that one may assert an evolution by which one even may have a “non-Islamic” Islamic art, which is logical in countries that primarily have Muslim populations. Thus, in spite of what generally is written, one may consider Coptic art as the Christian art of Islamic Egypt. Also, some Jewish manuscripts of the Middle Ages are very "Islamic" in appearance. This would apply if one sees Islamic art as primarily a feature of Islamic culture. However, if one sees Islamic art as primarily an artistic expression, then its “archaeological” component of being Islamic becomes secondary to traditional issues of art history, such as form, composition, arrangement techniques, etc.

Here, Grabar noted that he is not quite sure as to what one should do in this regard. He believes this is a problem for the younger generation of art historians in the Muslim world to resolve. One should ask himself or herself whether it is important to

maintain the difference between what may be referred to as Islamic art and other categories of art, and if so would create contemporary differences that distinguish what may be referred to as Islamic art. If it is art that matters, the fact that it is Islamic or non-Islamic becomes of no significance. What becomes significant is whether the art is good or bad, usable or unusable, expensive or cheap, etc. According to Grabar, it is interesting to note that today's contemporary concerns regarding art history are parallel to concerns affecting other fields like philosophy and the history of science, where a Muslim domination in the Middle Ages led, and is still leading, to studies that seek to locate Muslim contributions within philosophy and science in general. Grabar added there have been some recent interesting developments regarding the study of Islamic art history. In such cases, one tries to find something that is unique or peculiar about a tradition, and may decide to declare it Islamic or may not, but the fact that it is Islamic is secondary. In this context, Grabar mentioned the recent work of Jose Miguel Puertas Vilchez, *Historia del Pensiamento Estetico Arabe* (Madrid: Akal, 1997), which he considers a truly major work. Also in this context, Abdelwahab Meddeb, a Tunisian living in France, has written excellent works such as *Islam and its Discontents* (London: William Heinemann, 2003). Another figure is Maroun Aouad, a Lebanese living in France, who has written more scholarly and less poetical works than Meddeb, including *Commentaire moyen a la Rhetorique d'Aristote* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 2002). There also are important scholars from outside the realm of art history such as Mohammad Arkoun (4), whose thoughts vary from time to time, and 'Abd al-Hamid Sabra (5), although he tends to avoid great theories.

Grabar concluded his presentation by mentioning that he does not know how to answer the questions relating to the issue of whether it is important to maintain the difference of Islamic art from other arts. This is the moment when he is giving up attempts at answering such questions, and believes the task should be left for a new generation.

Questions and Answers

An audience member, who has been teaching history of Islamic art and architecture for over twenty years, raised the issue of the uses of teaching art history. He mentioned there are nationalistic reasons for the teaching of this subject, in the sense that learning one's own history makes one proud of his or her heritage. In addition, studying art history serves to help one understand that heritage. He mentioned that there also are economic reasons for the study of art history in that historical works of art and architecture often have a very high material value, and can generate considerable economic movement through activities such as tourism. This audience member added, however, that he would rather use art to question heritage and to facilitate the process of the transformation of the Islamic heritage. He moved on to ask Grabar as to what degree the work of historians of Islamic art resonates with contemporary audiences, and what effects it may have on them.

Grabar responded that, unfortunately, he does not have an answer to this question, although having such an answer would definitely affect many issues relating to the study of Islamic art history, particularly access to grants and fellowships. He mentioned that he did not discuss in this presentation the nationalistic dimensions of the study of art history, and he would be dealing with it in a meeting that will take

place in Paris a month or so after this presentation. Grabar believes that the politics of art are very interesting in the Muslim world. In very recent years, countries and governments have discovered that art has a value. They therefore started creating exhibitions, which usually are of an archaeological nature, and intended to display the history of a certain nation and its unprecedented inventions and discoveries. He added that the success of contemporary artistic production in the Islamic world would be when the Museum of Modern Art in New York arranges an exhibition on the arts of the Muslim world or the Arab world. Grabar mentioned that he suggested the establishment of such exhibitions in Kuwait several years ago since he saw some wonderful paintings there. Unfortunately, the Kuwaiti authorities did not respond positively to the suggestion.

Another audience member raised the hypothetical issue of how the social sciences may affect the study of Islamic art. He asked whether Grabar would have looked at Islamic art and architecture from a completely different perspective than what he has so far if the advances in the social sciences that took place during the second half of the twentieth century had taken place at the beginning of the twentieth century. The audience member also inquired as to how the developments in the social sciences have affected Grabar's view of Orientalism and his stance on the critique of Orientalism made by Edward Said.

Grabar replied that he could argue that he ultimately has been disappointed by the social sciences, which have failed to bring him what he expected them to bring. The social sciences are useful for understanding the production of art, as with the economics of art or the social uses of production, but not for aesthetic judgment or taste. However, Grabar added that this may change. On a related note, he mentioned that he believes the application of structuralist theories to the study of art has failed. Grabar himself has tried to provide a structural analysis of works of art, but does not believe it has worked. He mentioned, however, that it is possible that the experiment simply was not carried out correctly. Linguistics is another science that Grabar referred to in this context. According to him, linguistics also has failed as a discipline to be of value to the study of art. Grabar mentioned that one cannot explain a work of art or architecture through a system of morphemic or phonemic structures. (6)

Grabar added that he found the theory of "pleasure" absolutely fascinating. According to him, this is an area where there is a deep study by social scientists regarding what pleasure is, and how one makes judgments regarding pleasure. Grabar mentioned that we make judgments relating to taste all the time, as when we pick our clothes, for instance. What art historians mostly miss is specific "helping devices" regarding why we make such judgments, and how we make the decision as to whether such judgments are true or false. Grabar mentioned that the social sciences have analyzed certain things, such as food, with considerable detail, and that there are books and manuals that discuss and analyze food. However, there is nothing on judgments that we carry out more frequently. Grabar added that he is tired of looking at works of art, and wonders whether this matter has something to do with age, in the sense that if he was younger he could spend more energy trying to see many more things.

Commenting on the question of how his understanding of Edward Said's critique of Orientalism is related to developments in the social sciences, Grabar pointed out that

what makes this matter difficult for him is that he knew Edward Said fairly well, and he thinks that factors other than intellectual study were involved in Said's "brilliant gesture of anger." According to Grabar, it was a passionate gesture, and a scholar always should be aware of passion. Grabar believes that although one can be passionate as a scholar and can deal with passion in scholarship, one cannot always be passionate in deciding why he or she studies a certain subject.

Another audience member asked Grabar to elaborate on Mohammad Arkoun's view of not writing the world "Islamic" with a capital "i". Here Grabar replied that it is a problem in a way that is difficult for a non-Muslim to talk about. Arkoun wanted to present Islam as a philosophical religion that one may discuss philosophically with philosophers of religion without the need to believe in it. In this sense, the word Islam would be written with a small "i". Grabar added that he agrees with Arkoun's point of view in this regard, and believes it is a valid construct, but it has not worked because once a term has been written with a capital "I", it cannot be "demoted."

A questioner inquired how Grabar would look at monuments that were built by non-Muslims within the Muslim world. Here Grabar brought the story of Hassan Fathy who was very proud of the fact that in his New Gourna Village project (constructed between 1946 and 1953) he asked a Coptic architect to build the village's church. He believed that only a Muslim can build a mosque, and only a Christian can build a church. For Grabar, a good architect can make anybody's architecture; one does not have to be of a certain religion to build religious monuments dedicated to that religion. Grabar added that he views the idea of restricting the design of a religious building to the believers of that religion to be wrong. What matters, according to Grabar, is whether such buildings were designed by people who were competent or not. Grabar does not think that the issue of the religion of the architect is significant in determining the quality of a work of architecture. However, the religion of the architects of such buildings has become a significant issue in contemporary politics. In this context, Grabar mentioned that he always has wondered about who carried out the beautifully executed inscriptions of the seventh-century Umayyad Dome of the Rock. He wonders whether there were enough Muslim mosaicists with the competence to carry out such first-grade mosaics after three generations of the appearance of Islam. He added it therefore is possible that Christian mosaicists might have done some of these mosaics. For Grabar, religion plays no role in the character or quality of the work of art, and it is odd that in modern times an association is made between technique and religion.

A follow-up question was how Grabar classifies churches or synagogues that were built under Muslim rule, and whether he considers them works of Islamic art or not. Grabar answered that he absolutely considers works such as the thirteenth-century synagogue of El Transito in Toledo and the Armenian churches in Julfa near Isfahan as works of islamic art - with a small "i". He added that one cannot consider such monuments as works of Islamic art with a capital "I", but they totally fit within Islamic culture. Grabar mentioned that it is interesting to consider the opposite proposition; how one would look at a building that was made by a Muslim outside the Muslim world, for example the Contemporary Arts Center (completed in 2003) that the Muslim Iraqi architect Zaha Hadid (1950 -) designed in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Here an audience member commented that when Michele Piccirillo published his article “The Umayyad Churches of Jordan” (*ADAJ*, no 28, 1984, pp. 333 – 341), he gave it a misleading title. The title gave the impression that the Umayyads were building churches, but the article talks about churches which were built within the Umayyad period.

Grabar was asked whether the focus at the time when a work of art was produced in the Muslim world was on the religious aspect of that work, i.e. whether the produced art was meant to be Islamic or not. Grabar answered that this is one of the areas where contemporary pseudo-political thought, particularly that of Sayyid Hussein Nasr, has played a very negative role since Grabar believes that mysticism was secondary most of the time and cannot be used to delineate a culture. Grabar added that art was carried out because people needed a space, a house, a pot … etc.; everybody needed that. Grabar believes most of what we refer to as Islamic art is secular. The exceptions to that statement are mosques, mausoleums, and artistic inscriptions of the Qur’an. He added that conservative Muslims often do not agree with this opinion. In this context, Grabar mentioned an incident where UNESCO had prepared during the early 1980s a series of a few hundred slides of masterpieces of Islamic art to be sent to high schools around the world. The idea of using the term "Islamic art" however was vetoed by the overly religious Iranian representative, who said there was no Islamic art since Islam and art did not fit together. This representative insisted that those slides be referred to as “pictures of works done within the region from Mauritania to Afghanistan and Indonesia” instead of “Islamic art.” This person thought that the search for beauty and pleasure is against Islam, and that visual pleasure is not Islamic. He was absolutely adamant about the idea that the physical beauty of things is wrong. Grabar added that many in the Islamic world clearly disagree with this Iranian representative. In this context, one should keep in mind the work of someone such as the great Persian *sufi* teacher and mystical poet Jalal al-Din Rumi (1207 - 1273), who believed that everything done by man is beautiful. (7)

Grabar added that he even would argue that mosques have a secular function, since they may host secular activities. According to Grabar, it is for the wrong reasons that Hubert Lyautey, the head of the French protectorate in Morocco between 1912 and 1925, forbade non-Muslims to go into mosques. He did so because he did not want to have political incidents, as with uncouth French soldiers misbehaving in the midst of worshippers praying in mosques. However, with this, he created a "terrible" precedent. Grabar noted that mosques were never meant to be places from which non-Muslims are excluded. They are free places; one goes there to perform prayers, and to do other things such as meet with acquaintances and study. According to Grabar, mosques are unlike churches where one goes for a sacrament. Even in churches, one does not have to participate in a communion; one may only watch what other people do. Grabar commented that the later designation of mosques as merely sacred places is an unfortunate development.

Here, an audience member commented that Grabar presented two groups of people who consider Islamic art “non-Islamic.” The first is a “progressive” group, which sees Islamic art more secular than sacred, and the second is a very “conservative” group, which believes there should be a disjunction between Islam and art. According to this audience member, both perspectives are unjustifiable. He believes not only did

Islamic art create spaces that served utilitarian functions, but also created them for enhancing spirituality, facilitating meditation, and reinforcing rituals. According to this audience member, the problem is not so much that Islam does not reside within art, but that we have accepted an overly unified rigid perspective of Islamic art that has been strongly reinforced, especially since the 1970s. He added that there are many books on the splendors, unity, or common principles of Islamic arts, but not much has been done to highlight diversity among these arts. This audience member concluded it is time to end the emphasis on unity, and to look at differences, diversity, disjunctions, and controversies within Islamic art. Here, Grabar commented that the religious explanations of Islamic art that this audience member has mentioned are true of architecture. However, it is a little tricky when it comes to art as other arts are much more affected by masses of common currents of thought and behavior.

Another questioner inquired about the "seven strands" relating to the study of Islamic art that Grabar mentioned in his presentation: Orientalism, archaeology, collecting, history of art, history of architecture, the social sciences, and contemporary creativity. The questioner mentioned that for most of these strands he may think of very specific conditions whether anecdotal, theoretical, or others that apply to the Islamic world. However, he could not think of special conditions that would link the social sciences to the Islamic world. He added that in his presentation Grabar talked about the fascinating way in which one can study history of art or history of architecture through anthropological, psychological, or gender models. The questioner wondered whether there is anything unique about the study of Islamic art using such models. In other words, he asked as to what connects Islamic art and architecture to these fields in the social sciences.

Grabar responded that on the one hand, he may state that Islamic art is art, and the fact that he has looked into the effects of social sciences on Islamic art is just an "accident," because he happened to deal with Islamic art and he could have dealt with some other kind of art. In other words, whatever the art is, it may be analyzed as a product, as a structure, as pleasure, etc. On the other hand, Grabar added that one could say there are directions that exist in the Islamic world around which one could develop a kind of "Islamic social science" of the arts. One of these directions is related to poetry and the poetic. There is a mysticism that exists and that sees ambiguities, emphasizes ambiguities, and recognizes contradictions. This matter is more obvious to Grabar in Persian culture than it is in Arab culture. It is very obvious in the *Zahir-batin* (exoteric-esoteric) concept of mysticism. Grabar added that the Persian traveler and poet Nasir-i Khusraw (d. c. 1078) wrote interesting things in this regard, and is known for an extensive use of symbolism and polarities of meaning. Based on the *zahir-batin* concept, one would for instance accept and acknowledge that there are ways in which certain forms of the French painter Henri-Emile-Benoit Matisse (1869 – 1954) can have two simultaneously dissimilar meanings. Grabar added that Vitruvius (active 46 – 30 BC) and Leon Battista Alberti (1404 – 1472), as well as other Western theoreticians of architecture would go against this polarity of meaning. However, Wassili Kandinsky (1866 – 1944), who played a very important role in the development of abstract art, or someone of similar thought, may already have possibilities for this approach of thinking, which also is a very modern one.

Thus, Grabar argued that the Muslim tradition represented in mysticism was a very early tradition that makes Islamic art very contemporary. The issue here is the one

Arkoun has argued so often, which is that you cannot most of the time use the past to deal with the present without becoming "retardataire" and being left behind modern culture. On the contrary, one may say it is precisely in Islamic art that this possibility of assigning multiple meanings to the same forms was developed, without having a group of priests telling the viewer what to think, i.e. without having an obligatory system by which to interpret those forms, but by providing each individual with the freedom to decide how to see art.

Grabar believes there is an interesting possibility in the issue of polarity of meanings. However, he is not sure whether any writings of that kind had existed in the medieval period. He mentioned that the writings on aesthetics of which he is aware do not deal with the topic of assigning multiple meanings to a certain form. However, the new Spanish-language book by Vilchez (mentioned above) on the aesthetic philosophy of the Arabs might be of relevance. Grabar added that, for example, there are several ways to interpret the image of an object. Thus, one can say the central part of a design is the black or the central part of the design is the white, and one can interpret it either way. The artist does not tell the receiver of the work which one is the right way, and the receiver has the write to make a choice. According to Grabar, of all the major artistic traditions only Islamic art provides such freedom, and that could be exploited. Grabar believes that this freedom is not due to religious reasons.

An audience member commented that when Western architecture is discussed it is almost never termed "Christian." Instead, it is referred to as Romanesque, Gothic, Baroque, etc. It is dealt with as an encompassing architectural tradition that includes various chronological periods and differing formal characteristics. The “packaging” of Western architecture as "Christian" is weak. This audience member wondered why architecture in the Muslim world, which also belongs to different periods of history, should be seen within the generalized term “Islamic architecture” instead of being referred to as Fatimid, Ayyubid, Mamluk, etc.

Grabar mostly agreed with this view. He believes the use of the generalized term “Islamic architecture” is related to the manner people in the West (where the terms Islamic art and Islamic architecture were coined) are educated. He mentioned that one develops his or her knowledge regarding most cultures in high school, and that knowledge regarding Islamic culture is extremely weak and general in the consciousness of Westerners. Therefore, most people in the West do not know, for example, the difference between Mamluk and Ayyubid. Grabar mentioned that the culture of Westerners should stop people from being satisfied with the simply generalized term “Islamic architecture.” They should start questioning to what era a certain work of architecture belongs: Is it Mamluk architecture, Ottoman architecture, etc.? This, according to Grabar, requires a culture that makes people aware of the existence of such different eras, just as the differences between Romanesque and Gothic have become significant to Westerners. Here, the questioner commented that the term “Islamic architecture” seems a product of the Western world seeing the Islamic world from a distance, a position with which Grabar agrees.

The last questioner asked Grabar what he would think of dividing the architecture of the Muslim world regionally. Grabar responded that the regional division of architecture in the Muslim world might provide a reasonable replacement for the term “Islamic architecture.” Here, one would need to decide on regional boundaries and to

discuss each regional entity at different chronological points of its evolution. Grabar added that the problem that often would arise would be deciding on the borders of the various regional units. Although it is easy to decide on Egypt, for example, as being one regional unit, it might be more difficult to deal with Syria or Jordan, which historically belonged to *Bilad al-Sham*, but did not exist as individual entities until the creation of these states in the modern period. Establishing such a new system for categorizing the architecture of the Muslim world would require a kind of agreement about reasonable frontiers. Grabar mentioned that although such an agreement may not be easy to reach, it is not impossible to do so.

Grabar added that by using a regional system of categorization for the architecture of the Muslim world, the word "Islamic" could be restricted to religious matters that deal with the interpretation of Qur'an, the *Shari'a* (the rules and regulations that are derived from the Qur'an and the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad, and govern the live of Muslims), and other similar issues, but would not be used in other cultural issues. However, that goes against deeply engraved beliefs of many Muslims, both conservatives and others, who strongly believe that Islam is more than merely a religion, but a whole ethos that defines a unique way of life.

One audience member commented on Grabar's view saying that regional divisions make sense as long as there is a level of agreement regarding them. However, there also is the fact that history has changed the borders of such divisions. For example, the Ottoman Empire was a vast entity that no longer exists as a single geographic unit. Grabar concluded by mentioning that although it is true there would be problems with using regional borders for categorizing the architecture of the Muslim world, he still thinks it can be a very appropriate manner of categorizing this architecture. For Grabar, using the term "Islamic architecture" to refer to the architecture of the Muslim world is confusing, and an alternative term needs to be developed.

Prepared by Majd Musa and Mohammad al-Asad

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Notes

(1) Oleg Grabar is Professor Emeritus at Harvard University and the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton. Many view him as the most influential historian of Islamic art and architecture of our day. His many publications include *The Shape of the Holy: Early Islamic Jerusalem* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); *The Mediation of Ornament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); *The Great Mosque of Isfahan* (New York: New York University Press, 1990); *The Art and Architecture of Islam: 650 – 1250* (Harmondworth: Penguin Books, 1987; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001); *The Formation of Islamic Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987); *The Illustrations of the Maqamat* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); and *The Alhambra* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978).

(2) See *Book of Gifts and Rarities, Kitab al-Hadaya wa al-Tuhaf*, translated and annotated by Ghada al-Hijjawi al-Qaddumi (Cambridge: Harvard Middle Eastern Monographs, 1996).

(3) Hassan Fathy (1900 - 1989) is an Egyptian architect and writer on architecture. He is best known for his work on traditional design and construction methods and materials. His New Gourna Village project (constructed between 1946 and 1953), which is considered his most important project, is representative of his work methodology. The project was documented thoroughly in his book *Architecture for the Poor: An Experiment in Rural Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973 & 2000).

(4) Mohammad Arkoun (1928 -) is an Algerian philosopher, educator, and writer specializing in the history of Islamic thought. He is Emeritus Professor of the History of Islamic Thought, La Sorbonne (Paris III). He has written extensively on contemporary issues of Islam and modernity in French, English, and Arabic. His most recent books include *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought* (London: IB Tauris & Saqi, 2002; & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), *L'Immigration: Défis et Richesses* (Paris: Bayard Press, 1998), and *Rethinking Islam: Common Questions, Uncommon Answers* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1994).

(5) 'Abd al-Hamid Sabra is an Egyptian scholar and Emeritus professor of the history of Arabic science at Harvard University. He is the recipient of the 1987 Kuwait prize in the field of Islamic studies. His focus is on Arabic-Islamic science and philosophy, particularly the study of aspects of Arabic science in the context of Islamic civilization. He has published on subjects including Arabic astronomy and logic, theories of light and vision from the eleventh to seventeenth centuries, and the cultural contexts of Arabic-Islamic science. Among his many publications is *The Optics of Ibn al-Haytham* (London: Warburg Institute, 1989), a multi-volume edition and translation of the seven books of Ibn al-Haytham's eleventh-century *Optics*.

(6) In spite of Grabar's skepticism regarding the usefulness of linguistics for the study of art, it should be mentioned that he has provided highly lucid explanations of how structural systems from linguistics may be applied to works of architecture. See Oleg Grabar, "Symbols and Signs in Islamic Architecture," in *Architecture and Community: Building in the Islamic World Today*, edited by Renata Holod and Darl Rastorfer (New York: Aperture, 1983), pp. 25 – 32. The article may be downloaded from http://archnet.org/library/documents/one-document.tcl?document_id=6130.

(7) In this context, it may be useful to examine a discussion of figural representation that Rumi presents in his Mathnawi poem:

And if you say that evils too are from Him, [that is true], but how is it a defect in His grace?
[His] bestowing this evil is even His perfection: I will tell you a parable [in illustration], O respected one.
A painter made two kinds of pictures – beautiful pictures and pictures devoid of beauty.
He painted Joseph and fair-formed houris, he painted ugly afreets and devils.
Both kinds of pictures are [evidence of] his mastery: those [ugly ones] are not [evidence of] his ugliness; they are [evidence of] his bounty.
He makes the ugly of extreme ugliness – it is invested with all [possible ugliness] –
In order that the perfection of his skill may be displayed, [and that] the denier of his mastery may be put to shame.
And if he cannot make the ugly, he is deficient [in skill]: hence He [God] is the Creator of [both] the infidel and the sincere [faithful].
From this point of view, then, [both] infidelity and faith are bearing witness to Him: both are bowing down in worship before His Lordliness.

(Source: Reynold A. Nicholson, trans., *The Mathnawi of Jelaluddin Rumi*, II (Cambridge, England: E.J.W. Gibb Memorial Trust, 1926), pp. 352. Quoted in Richard Ettinghausen and Oleg Grabar, *The Art and Architecture of Islam: 650 -1250* (Harmondworth: Penguin Books, 1987), pp. 330.)