

In Memory of

Oleg Andreevich Grabar

[Олег Андреевич Грабар]

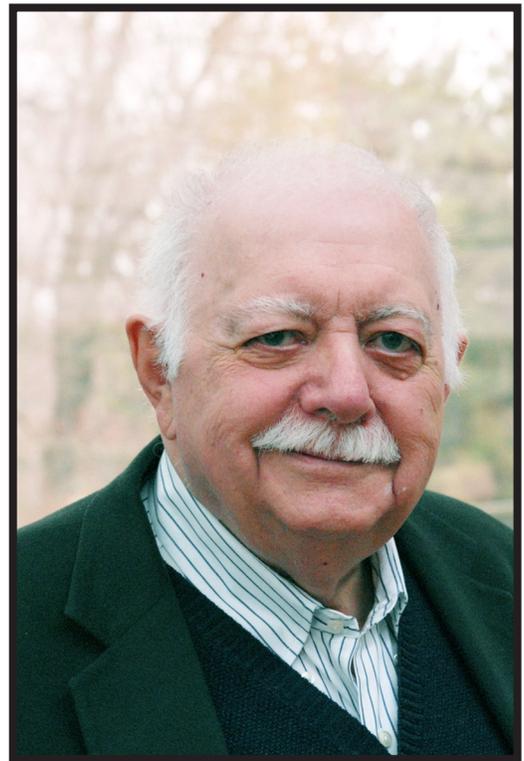
(3 November 1929 – 8 January 2011)

by

L.A. Beliaev [Л.А. Беляев]

Oleg Andreevich Grabar died on 8 January 2011 in Princeton, New Jersey. He was an eminent scientist and pioneer of the archaeology and history of the arts of Islam. A Russian, born and educated in France, he spent the majority of his life in the United States, and, because of all this, he felt at ease in all three realms.

In an official obituary, it is difficult to report the emptiness caused by this loss, the loss of this person as well as this scientist. The point is not that even a “short” list of the honorary degrees and honors of Oleg Andreevich is too long to give in full, nor that he was at ease with communicating with prominent people on this earth, nor that his prestige in Eastern countries would be envied by eminent politicians. Rather, the point is an exceptionally bright and purely Russian concord of deep intellect and force, together with gentle humor and a love of the simple joys of life, an absolute absence of pride concerning his status and accomplishments, and his openness and readiness to come to help and to share his abilities.



Oleg Grabar was born in Strasbourg on 3 November 1929. His father André (Andrei Nikolaevich) Grabar was a very well-known scholar in Byzantine studies. He was one of the creators of the archaeology of the arts of Byzantium, recognized equally in Russia and the West. Forced to leave his native country during the Civil War, he followed a customary itinerary of such emigrés, first to Bulgaria, then to Serbia, and finally to Paris. André Nikolaevich Grabar became a French professor, but remained a Russian historian and individual. Oleg Andreevich often recollected episodes of his youth during the years of the Nazi Occupation of France. He emphasized his family’s compassion and keen attention to the fight taking place in the East, as well as to the difficulties of life during wartime, even in France. (Throughout his life, he was accustomed to start his day with a dish of borscht, to the astonishment of his rather American family).

As a child, Oleg was surrounded by the world of intellectual activities and inquiries in the humanities. He absorbed that very special atmosphere created by the confluence of literary texts with engravings, and of music with paintings — an atmosphere wherein the past continues to live as an obligatory and vital part of the present. He was taught art history in the Lycée Claude Bernard and the Lycée Louis-le-Grand, and completed his studies at the University of Paris (*Certificat de licence*, 1948), with a major in Ancient History. Pursuing his education, he obtained a *Certificat de licence* (1950) in Medieval History in that same university and a Bachelor of Arts *magna cum laude* (1950) at Harvard University in the U.S.A.. He continued with the specialization of “Oriental Languages, Literature, and History of Art” at Princeton University (M.A., 1953). This specialization he refined in Jerusalem at the American School of Oriental Research (ASOR) in 1953–1954.

Full of confidence, he steadily progressed in his academic career in the U.S.A. He received his Ph.D. from Princeton University (1955). At the University of Michigan, he was Instructor (1954–1955), Assistant Professor (1955–1959), Associate Professor (1959–1964), and Full Professor (1964–1969). At Harvard University, he was Professor (1969–1980), Chairman of the Department of Fine Arts (1977–1982) “Aga Khan Professor of Islamic Art and Architecture”¹ (1980–1990), and subsequently Emeritus Professor. He spent the last twenty years of his life at perhaps the most famous research institution in the U.S., the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, as Professor (1990–1998) and Emeritus Professor (from 1998). By the end of his life, Oleg Grabar had become a member of many scientific associations in Europe (France, Britain, Austria) and in the United States and the recipient of many awards, such as the Giorgio Levi Della Vida Medal of U.C.L.A. (1996), the Charles Lang Freer Medal of the Smithsonian (2001), the Distinguished Lifetime Achievement Award of the College Art Association (2005), and the Aga Khan Chairman’s Award (2010) in acknowledgment of “the valuable contributions in the expansion and enrichment of our understanding of the Islamic world’s architectural production, emphasizing its geographic and chronological diversity, as well as positioning it within the wider political, social, cultural, and economic contexts.”

Of course, one can see the details of the scientific endeavors of O. A. Grabar by consulting his extensive Curriculum Vitae and bibliography, which appeared in Wikipedia and on the website of the I.A.S. However, more important for us is to explain the essence of his scientific legacy.

The researches of Oleg Grabar have had profound formative influence upon the study of the fine arts, architecture, and archaeology of Islam, especially in the U.S.A., through his books: the very early ones (for example, *The Formation of Islamic Art*, New Haven and London, 1973), those of his mature period (for example, *The Mediation of Ornament*, Princeton, N.J., 1992), and the latest, including the work on the early Islamic architecture of Jerusalem (*The Shape of the Holy: Early Islamic Jerusalem*, Princeton, N.J., 1996) and the collaborative work, together with G. Bowersock and P. Brown, amounting to an advanced course on Late Antiquity which plugged a “gap” in historiography at the intersection of the worlds of the Classical Mediterranean, early Byzantium, and Islam (*Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Post-Classical World*, eds. G. Bowersock, P. Brown, and O. Grabar, Cambridge, MA., 1999). Besides writing those books, he did major field work and “research” travels through the whole Islamic world, Africa, the Near East, the Middle East, and Indonesia. An indefatigable traveler, Oleg Andreevich visited every visitable place in the Islamic East. The list of his journeys, comprising years and countries alone, is as long as that of a professional traveler. The list of scientific and editorial projects is important as well (it suffices to mention his founding of the annual journal *Muqarnas*). At the same time, there was no division, for Oleg Andreevich, between *haut genre* and *bas genre* in his cherished domain: he would write with the same brilliance, whether publishing an accompanying text for an album of photographs for covered-cupola markets, or the article for a catalogue of Islamic antiquities in Kuwait (“Patronage in Islamic Art” in *Islamic Art & Patronage: Treasures from Kuwait*, ed. A. Esin [recte E. Atıl], New York, 1990).

Oleg Grabar was perhaps not an archaeologist in the usual meaning of the word, but, having in his youth declared the necessity of developing the archaeology of Islam, he has done so very much that its accomplishments nowadays in the West are due largely to Oleg Andreevich's achievements. Grabar was deeply interested in archaeological subjects, and often his articles were based upon archaeological materials. One could point to the direct contribution of Oleg Andreevich to fieldworks conducted in the East: it was he who in the years 1964–1972 directed the expedition of Harvard University which discovered a town of the Omayyad period, Qasr al-Hayr al-Sharqi, in the sands of Syria, in a region where no one expected permanent habitation. Here were discovered buildings of the first half of the eighth century, which fundamentally changed views of early Islamic building construction (O. Grabar, R. Holod, J. Knustad, and W. Trousdale, *City in the Desert: Qasr al-Hayr East*, Cambridge, MA, 2 volumes, 1978. Harvard Middle East Monographs, Nos. 23–24).

Of course, more important than the excavations by themselves is the actual “archaeolo-centrism” of O.A. Grabar, which is explicit in his approach to objects of study, even in those cases with no need for any excavations or measurements. His attention to details and his love of exactitude, and even more, of dry statistics (which are characteristic of the French school of historians, but are not so frequently found in the realm of art historians); the interest in reconstructing a whole based upon the surviving parts; and the inclusion of the most up-to-date methods of work, above all digital (for example the 3D-reconstruction of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem) — all of this reveals the approach of an archaeologist more than of an art historian.

It is worth noting that Oleg Grabar understood very well the defining character for global history of culture, of such studies as that of ornament and of the architecture of monuments in their social context — which understanding and preferences are rare among art historians, but very natural among archaeologists. This does not mean that Oleg Andreevich did not study the fine arts — his works on Oriental miniatures are well known, and are not less important than the architectural component of his legacy (O. Grabar and S. Blair, *Epic Images and Contemporary History: The Illustrations of the Great Mongol Shahnama*, Chicago, 1980; O. Grabar, *Mostly Miniatures: An Introduction to Persian Painting*, Princeton, NJ, 2000; and O. Grabar, *Masterpieces of Islamic Art: The Decorated Page from the 8th to the 17th Century*, Munich, Berlin, London, and New York, 2009).

Nevertheless, the researches of O.A. Grabar, like no one else's, fit the traditional classification of disciplines, still widely accepted in the U.S.: this is a standard feature of the combined “archaeology and art history” (which remained in use in Russia until recently through the school of the Byzantinist N.P. Kondakov² and which in its time had the name of “artistic archaeology”).

What else remains to be said? Four volumes, which containing eighty-three selected articles, with the very accurate title *Constructing the Study of Islamic Art* (Aldershot, Hampshire, 4 volumes, 2005–2006), speak for themselves. They can stand appropriately alongside the well-known three-volume collection of articles by Grabar's father, devoted to the early Christian and Byzantine arts. The works of the son continued and extended the researches of the father in their chronological, historical, and cultural aspects: André Nikolaevich Grabar placed within the *avant-scène* the history of art and archaeology of Byzantium, following those of the Early Christian period. Oleg Andreevich became one of the founders of the historiography of the arts and archaeology of Islam.

In the last decades of his life, Oleg Andreevich — prominent, round-headed, with a bristly moustache and slightly projecting eyes — somewhat resembled a majestic walrus, confident in his own great force, vivacious, and also gifted by a boundless sense of humor. Everywhere where he appeared, there spread a warm friendship and familial coziness which were incomprehensibly joined with an atmosphere of impatient study and the opposite of indifference. The scientist devoted more and more attention to Russia, traveled on the trans-Siberian express, visited his ancestral land, the city of Pogor in the Briansk district, brought his son there, and dreamed of restoring a house of his ancestors. He studied his family history and prepared the publication of the memoirs of his grandfather, Nikolas Stepanovich (President of the Kiev District Court, one of the leading prosecutors of nineteenth-century Russia, and a member of the Senate), from a manuscript which he [*i.e.* O.A. Grabar] had brought from Paris. All this was left unfinished. But there remain twenty fundamental monographs, one hundred twenty essential articles, and, most important, many students, colleagues, and readers, with whom Oleg Andreevich generously shared the delights of studying the art and archaeology of Islam.

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Notes

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1. Aga Khan (the Persian could be translated as “Master Khan”) is the hereditary title of the Iman of the [largest branch of the] Ismi‘īlī followers of Shī‘a Islam. He lives permanently in the United Kingdom. Among his obligations is the development of spiritual life of Shī‘ite Islam. The special Aga Khan Development Network funds programs for the development of historic cities, for education, and for culture. Among its major subdivisions are the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at Harvard and at the Massachusetts Institute of Archaeology [*recte* Technology], programs to promote the development of museums, etc. The Aga Khan Prize is probably the most important prize for architecture in the whole world. Five hundred thousand dollars US have been awarded every three years since 1977.

2. Translators’ Note: His lectures were attended by André Grabar while studying at the University of Petrograd in 1915–1917.