

Early Islamic Art: Between East and West: 650-750 AD

Welcome by the Deputy Head of Department, Dr Frank Salmon

On behalf of the Department of History of Art and its Head, Professor Deborah Howard, I welcome you warmly to the 2008-9 Slade Lectures in Fine Art. Set up in 1869, today the lectures form a central plank in the intellectual life of the Department, enriching and extending the teaching and research of its staff and students. However, the lectures are given for the benefit of the entire University – and this year it is a pleasure to welcome, in particular, colleagues and students from the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies to this series on *Early Islamic Art: Between East and West: 650-750 AD*.

Interest in all aspects of the Islamic world is, of course, growing rapidly in this country – but not so rapidly that Islamic art and architectural history are taught in more than a handful of University art history departments. Given the continuing dominance of western art, of European art even, it is especially stimulating that this year's lectures will not simply concentrate on the art of Islam as an *alternative* to the traditions of the west, but will specifically consider the relationships between the inherited traditions of Mediterranean classicism and the new art brought about by the new Muslim religion.

We are fortunate indeed that Robert Hillenbrand, already the author of five major books on Islamic art and architecture and curator of the one of the largest exhibitions ever held on Persian miniature painting, should have chosen to share his new research project first with us here in Cambridge. In a sense Professor Hillenbrand is returning to the fold, since he read English as an undergraduate at Trinity College here before taking his DPhil at Oxford. He has just retired after 37 years teaching at the University of Edinburgh, where he was made Professor of Islamic Art in 1989. He has given numerous distinguished lectures and won many academic prizes, including the 1996 Hitchcock Medallion of the Society of Architectural Historians of Great Britain for his book *Islamic Architecture: Form, Function and Meaning*. He is a Fellow of the British Academy and, in 2006, established (with a £5million grant from four different funding bodies) the Centre for the Advanced Study of the Arabic World, a Centre shared between the Universities of Edinburgh, Manchester and Durham. It is clear,

then, that we could have no better qualified speaker to deliver a series of lectures on this subject.

In an earlier book, I see that Professor Hillenbrand says that the geographical range brought about by the rapidity of the Islamic conquests over the century following the death of the Prophet Mohammed in AD 632 might, and I quote him, “lead one to expect a somewhat parochial quality in the earliest Islamic art, and also a certain timidity or lack of purpose. Yet this is not so.” And, he goes on, “if Islamic art was slow to start, it was quick to gather speed.” Over the next eight weeks we look forward to joining him on that accelerating journey, beginning with his first lecture this evening: ‘How Islamic Art Adapted the Mediterranean Heritage’.

Ladies and Gentlemen, please join me in welcoming the 2008-9 Slade Professor of Fine Art, Robert Hillenbrand.