

## INTERVIEW: A CONVERSATION WITH RENATA HOLOD

Emily Neumeier (Temple University) recently sat down for an interview with her former PhD supervisor, Renata Holod, Professor Emerita in the History of Art Department at the University of Pennsylvania and Curator in the Near East Section in the Penn Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. They discussed Dr. Holod's experiences as a mentor in the field, having recently been awarded the Mentoring Award from the Middle East Studies Association (MESA).

**Emily Neumeier [EN]:** *I know that you have played a key leadership role in HIAA from its very inception in 1982. How would you say the organization has grown and changed throughout the years?*

**Renata Holod [RH]:** First of all, HIAA now has a membership all around the world. This was originally not the case. In the beginning, the group was called the North American Historians of Islamic Art [NAHIA], and then, over the years, it has greatly expanded. But this was an important moment because there was not any kind of professional organization before then.

Another important feature of HIAA is that it includes members who both teach in higher education and work in the museum world. And we are now also able to come together during bi-annual meetings in different locations. Personally, I like to work collaboratively – you begin to understand what other people are doing and what their interests and capabilities are, and, on the basis of this, you can develop productive partnerships.

The membership of HIAA has also come to represent the full range of visual and material culture in the Islamic world, from the 7th century right up to the contemporary moment, including the study of both individual objects and a wider range of territory through the built environment and archaeological work. I would say my own experience organizing the Aga Khan Award for Architecture really prompted me to begin looking at modern and contemporary material.

**EN:** *On the occasion of your receiving the 2020 MESA Mentoring Award, what would you say are the core tenets of your mentoring approach?*



Photograph of Renata Holod

**RH:** First and foremost, one gives students the possibility of developing their own voice. After all, why go to university? Why go to graduate school? Well, because, in the end, you are the one that has to develop your own special set of skills. This is why we have seminars. This is why people make presentations, because it's their work. Yes, the instructor will help students fix this or that, but the point is that in the end they own it.

One of my uncles was a medical doctor, and at the hospital they had interns – graduate school is basically a professional internship. You learn all kinds of things with more specificity and more detail. And you have not only your main advisor but also a whole additional group of mentors on whom you model yourself. The point is, however, that you are not supposed to be a carbon copy of any of these instructors. And the key issue is to be able to convey exactly that – your own point of view – by the time you have finished the program.

It is also important that students find opportunities to learn as many languages as possible. This is one of the challenges for many people who grow up in the United States – it's basically mono-lingual here. The earlier you take up whatever languages or technical skills that are necessary, the better off you are.

My first graduate students were actually pursuing their Ph.D.s in architecture. And there I was, having just completed a dissertation that dealt with 14th- and 15th-century architecture and urban expansion in the south of Iran. So, I had to sort of learn on the fly and expand my knowledge to extend into the 19th and 20th centuries. The process made me even more cognizant of the fact that the world did not stop with the coming of the Mongols! I have been lucky to be able to work on material ranging from the early Islamic, early modern material, and contemporary periods. Also, I get bored...sometimes it helps to move from one topic to something that is completely different.

*EN: So, would you say mentoring and research are related endeavors?*

**RH:** Certainly. And this begins in seminars, which are essentially a cooperative endeavor. Each participant selects and presents on a topic, and by the end of the seminar, the participants are teaching each other as much as you teach them. And I have learned from my own students as much as I have advised them. Each of their particular projects has taught me some valuable things.

What's more, students can and should be incorporated into any research project. It's one thing to tell people how to do something. It is another thing to model it. One student can work on this, and another can work on that, and, all together, the project becomes a sum of these parts, which is better and more multi-dimensional than somebody working on their own. You know, a lot of people don't like collaborative work – I love it. But that's me. It's definitely a different approach. The point is you always learn something from your colleagues. The process of developing a project is as important as doing the thing itself. If you work on a team, you learn how to share and also to accept other people's opinions and even corrections. This is the first level of critique or peer review, because you argue it out, all while having a mutual aim.

The truth is you never really stop learning.

*EN: Who are some of your most influential mentors? What did you learn from them?*

**RH:** Ilene Forsyth, because she showed me that women could succeed in academia. When I was at the University of Toronto as an undergraduate, all of my instructors were men. So here was Forsyth at the University of Michigan, where I did my Master's, a very tall, elegantly dressed woman who was a Byzantinist. She was the first woman

professor that I had, and in many ways, she was modeling how to operate in the academy. When I came to Penn, I was the first woman faculty member of the department. The first faculty meeting was hilarious because everybody stood up when I came in. I finally said, "Listen, if you want to be colleagues, then treat me as a colleague!" Well, it was what it was, and they treated me very well.

Max Kortepeter at the University of Toronto because he took a personal concern in my interests and background. The other professors at the university were British, and they treated all of us Canadian kids as, well, colonials. And in addition, I was Ukrainian! Then along came Kortepeter – my mother was actually translating stuff for him, so he would visit our house, and I really got to know him as a person. He's the one who suggested I apply to American schools. So, I did. Also Father Kelly, the President of St. Michael's College. He was just always encouraging to do your own thing. He's the one that eventually wrote me a recommendation. These two people really launched me.

George Hanfmann because he insisted on well- prepared and well-timed presentations. He was one of my instructors at Harvard. He had a very clear idea of how to make a presentation: First, you say what you will say, then you say it, then you say what you said. Also, a lecture should not be longer than a certain amount of time because you lose your audience. All of these aspects of public speaking are really, really important. You want to leave people wanting more rather than falling asleep!

Finally, of course, Oleg Grabar because he took me on an archaeological project and allowed me to become a co-author. He also encouraged me to develop a dissertation project through which I would end up knowing more about the subject than he did.

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*EN: What do you envision for the future of HIAA? For the field of Islamic art?*

**RH:** With the membership of HIAA expanding enormously, all of a sudden you actually have a much larger number of people that are part of this association. I think it is also important that the bi-annual meetings not only be in North America; they should be organized in whatever places would be possible.

With the wide range of specializations and placement of our members—in archaeological museums, in academic institutions, etc.—one really need to think about the kinds of fellowships being offered. For example, right now, we have two fellowship categories: the Margaret Ševčenko and Oleg Grabar. It may be useful to think of another sort, like fellowships for fieldwork in another country. This kind of experience is irreplaceable.

As for Islamic art, I do not think it is one field any longer; to put it most radically. There are so many languages to learn and areas of specialization. Islamic art is very much a growing discipline, just look at where all of my former students are. They are all over the map. I think it's very exciting.

Today, as a historian of a culture, you need to know the languages, you need to access the sources. What's more, we need to create a framework to accommodate ideas, people, and objects moving around at an astonishing rate. And, long-distance trade is important, but also how you understand locality—local culture versus overall civilization. So, having connections with history and of course the languages and cultural zones is crucial.

These are all points that I think are important to consider.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Emily Neumeier** is Assistant Professor of Art History at Temple University. Her research concerns the art and architecture of the Eastern Mediterranean, particularly of the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania under Dr. Holod's supervision.

## NOTES FROM THE FIELD: CHANCING UPON THE ARCHIVES OF A BEIRUTI PATRON OF THE ARTS

**Just over a year ago, before the pandemic disrupted our lives, students and scholars enjoyed almost unfettered access to primary documents in archives around the world. Although the future of field research remains uncertain today, Sarah Sabban, a PhD candidate in Middle Eastern History at the American University of Beirut, reminds us of the thrills one experienced in the archives, especially when it came to accidental discoveries.**

Like most people, I first encountered Islamic Art in a museum before exploring the field further as a graduate student in anthropology at the American University of Beirut (AUB), then as student of Islamic art and archaeology at Oxford University. My interest in the history of Islamic art was thus woven across the interplay of questions, methodologies, and ways of knowing grounded in cultural anthropology and Islamic art history. Currently, as a doctoral student in the History program at AUB in which my research focuses on the modern Arab and Middle Eastern region, I found the virtual absence of the nineteenth century in the meta-narrative of Islamic art too conspicuous. In addressing this absence, I recalibrated my lens to focus on the history of material culture from the late Ottoman Bilad al-Sham (ca. 1860-1914), which has, until very recently, traditionally been located outside the disciplinary canon.<sup>1</sup> As the topic of my dissertation, this research into the living arts and crafts at the time of the field's constitution is not only rewarding for the history of the region itself but is equally important for a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the foundation and the formation of our discipline. In this essay, I share a few notes from my field research in the Jafet Archives and Special Collections at AUB that extends beyond my doctoral project by focusing on the history of crafts and artisans in Beirut during the early to mid-twentieth century.

When I explored various finding aids for a course on advanced historical documentation and research, in the spring of 2019, I stumbled upon the collection of Evelyne

<sup>1</sup> Key works dealing with the Arab world include: Stephen Vernoit and Doris Behrens-Abouseif (eds.), *Islamic Art in the 19th Century: Tradition, Innovation and Eclecticism* (Leiden: Brill, 2006); Hala Aujji, *Printing Arab Modernity: Book Culture and the American Press in Nineteenth-Century Beirut* (Leiden: Brill, 2016); Stephen Sheehi, *The Arab Image: A Social History of Portrait Photography, 1860-1910* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); Toufoul Abou Hodeib, *A Taste For Home: The Modern Middle Class in Ottoman Beirut* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017); Marcus Milwright, *The Arts and Crafts of Syria and Egypt from the Ayyubids to World War I: Collected Essays* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2018).