

In Memoriam



IRENE "RENIE" A. BIERMAN-MCKINNEY
(1942-2015)

Writing obituary notes is an expectation when one is as senior as I am, but when the subject is your closest friend for three and a half decades, your intellectual mentor, and your collaborator on a wide range of projects the task is very hard, very sad but necessary. This is the case for me in preparing what follows.

Born Irene Abernathy, Renie attended as an undergraduate Western College for Women, which is now part of Miami University in Ohio. She then went on to take an M.A. in Middle East Studies at Harvard and then a certificate in Arabic from AUC. Renie then went to work on her Ph.D. at the University of Chicago, which had no one in Islamic art history. In fact Renie is the only major scholar of

her generation in Islamic art history who was not trained by either Oleg Grabar at Harvard or Richard Ettinghausen in New York. This was already a clear sign of her independent mind.

By the mid-1970s she was Renie Bierman resident in Portland, OR. For the next half decade she taught courses on Islamic art at Portland State University and the University of Washington in Seattle where we met in 1977. Before I knew what was happening we had received a National Endowment for the Humanities grant to put on interpretive exhibitions of "Oriental" carpets in Portland, Seattle, Bellingham, WA, Spokane, WA, and Reno, NV with appropriate publications and public presentations. Then it was a 12 part



TV series on Islamic art shown extensively in the Pacific Northwest long before TV as an informational source became popular. All the time she was working on her University of Chicago Ph.D. which she completed in 1980.

A major change in her intellectual and professional life took place in 1981 when Renie had the opportunity to interact with a wide range of art historians as a fellow at Center for the Advanced Study of the Visual Arts, which is part of the National Gallery in Washington, DC. From there she went to UCLA for her first and only tenure track position retiring in 2012 as professor emerita. As an administrator Renie was known for her professionalism, openness and fairness and UCLA took advantage of those traits. She served as Director of their Middle East Center for 8 years and later as Chair, Department of Art History. Renie also had a reputation as an outstanding administrator based upon her service to ARCE as an interim director in Cairo. She was also the only art historian president of Middle East Medievalists (2001-2003) and during her career an active committee

member of many other academic organizations including ARCE and HIAA.

Her willingness to “think out of the box” and to create collaborative projects resulted in a number of international activities. She did an amazing job running two Getty Foundation grant in Istanbul and other parts of Turkey which included participants from over a dozen countries. As first a participant and then a co-director I can attest that under Renie’s leadership we worked hard, played hard, and even effectively got the then head of Egyptian antiquities, Dr. Zahi Hawass, to Istanbul for a major public lecture and reception.

Renie created and then ran served as co-director of an ARCE/French Institute 4-year Research project in Cairo including 3 international conferences. Her publication record included 7 authored or edited books, 25 articles, and numerous exhibition pamphlets, catalogue descriptions and project reports. As her former M.A. student and friend Nasser Rabbat wrote “Her scholarship was both historical and interpretative, solidly rooted in research and knowingly conversant

with theory. Her work on the role of public writing in Islamic iconography was path-breaking; her study of the Ottomanization of cities extremely inventive, and her understanding of the function of conservation in our understanding of cities today constructively critical.”

As a mentor to graduate students, Renie set exceptionally high standards and deliberately limited the number she would work with. As Wendy Shaw, one of her Ph.D. students, reflecting the voice of her almost dozen Ph.D.s, wrote “Renie was my first teacher in art history, and I never realized how unique she was until I entered the world and discovered the breadth with which she enabled her students to think outside of the boundaries of disciplinarity. I think she lives on in how we approach our careers as well as in how

we give shape to our work. I particularly appreciate her desire to engage students of all levels in excitement about discovering the world, her respect for the multiplicity of cultures and people in them, and her professionalism.”

For all her public career, Renie was a very private person. One day she told me that she had once published a piece of fiction for the *New Yorker*, one of the most prestigious literary journals in the United States. “Under what name did you write it?” I eagerly asked. “I forgot,” was her reply and the subject never came up again.

As one of her friends and admirers said to me “In short, Renie was a stylish, graceful, intellectual whirlwind.” May she rest in peace.

— Jere L. Bacharach