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# DUNCAN HALDANE

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(9 May 1947 – 22 August 2006)

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Duncan Haldane, a member of the Council of the Royal Asiatic Society, who died in August after a long battle with cancer, was an Arabist, a broadcaster, an arts administrator and a teacher, who made his mark in many different fields.

He was brought up and educated in Edinburgh, where he took his first degree in Arabic with English literature and later wrote his doctorate under Professor David Talbot Rice on Mamluk art in Egypt. This early research brought together for the first time examples of the Mamluk school of illuminated manuscripts, which had not previously been studied in their entirety. In the course of his studies, Duncan travelled widely, visiting Egypt and Turkey and establishing links with museums in Europe and the USA. In the process, he became the first serious historian of the Mamluk school, analysing its stylistic development during the Bahri and Burji periods, and subsequently publishing an authoritative book and a number of articles on the subject.

Duncan's early interest in the arts of the Arab world – inspired by extensive travel in the Middle East and North Africa – remained with him all his life. But his first job was in the media – not in academia. In 1973, he joined the BBC Arabic Service and within a short time established himself as a commentator on the politics of the region and as an interviewer. He particularly enjoyed some of his interviews with British politicians like Sir Alec Douglas Home or great travellers in Arabia like Freya Stark. Two years later, and newly married to Oriane, he was appointed the BBC's Middle East Representative, with the task of setting up an office for the BBC Arabic Service in Cairo. This was a managerial not a reporting job but it called on many of the qualities which were to make him a successful administrator in other fields: a positive outlook, hard work, diplomacy, a sense of context and a mastery of detail.

Duncan relished this time in Cairo, the chance to speak Arabic, to visit the great mosques and to study Muslim art and architecture at first hand. After his return, he worked for some time in the BBC Secretariat in Broadcasting House, but the appeal of the Arab world and his artistic interests soon re-asserted themselves. In 1980, he joined the Victoria and Albert Museum as an Islamic specialist. Here he spent nine very happy years as Deputy Keeper of the Library, working with Ronald Lightbown, adding to the museum's Islamic collections and putting together some very successful exhibitions. His major intellectual contribution of this period was his collation, research and commentary on the V and A's own collection of Islamic bookbindings, which he described as "one of the finest . . . in the non-Islamic world." In 1983, the V and A mounted a major exhibition of these Quranic bindings, which included some magnificent examples from the Mamluk period in Egypt as well as from Persia,

Turkey and India, with their different decorative traditions. Duncan's beautifully illustrated exhibition catalogue displays his meticulous scholarship and his detailed knowledge not only of Muslim cultural history but also of the processes of tanning, binding, tooling, stamping and gilding which went into the creation of these beautiful objects.

In 1990, Duncan left the VandA and began a new career in the world of charitable trusts. He worked first for Lord Sainsbury at the Linbury Trust and subsequently as Director of the David Cohen Family Charitable trust. Acting as a creative bridge between the trustees and the arts world came very naturally to him – whether it was commissioning new music or awarding literature prizes – but he took a particular interest in bringing art to the sick and disabled. During this period he was seconded for six months to the Chelsea and Westminster Hospital to set up a new project on the arts in hospitals. He also played a co-ordinating role at the National Portrait Gallery on a project to improve access for the blind. In 1997, while working in the Arts Department at the Roehampton Institute, he and Susan Loppert, the first Director at the Chelsea and Westminster project, organised the first international conference of its kind on 'The Arts in Health Care: learning from experience.' The scope of the conference was ambitious. It included the latest ideas in hospital design, the benefits of using artists in residence, the demands and requirements of site-specific art and "ways in which patients and staff can, and indeed should, be involved in the selection of works of art and other arts activities." Duncan was not an expert in this field himself but he played a very creative role in pushing forward the ideas of others. A volume of proceedings of the conference, to which he contributed an introduction, subsequently helped to make some of this pioneering work more widely known.

In 1997, Duncan was appointed Head Librarian and Curator at the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London, where he was responsible for building up a collection of artefacts and manuscripts illustrative of Shiah and Ismaili history. As a result of Duncan's research and recommendations, a number of important acquisitions were made which will eventually find their place in the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto, which is expected to open in 2009. While at the Institute, Duncan continued to explore his interest in Islamic bookbinding and calligraphy, and in 2003, wrote an article on Qur'ans in the Institute's own collection for a conference to mark its 25th anniversary. As a clear thinker and communicator, Duncan became a popular teacher and mentor, as many tributes from his former students testify, and he particularly enjoyed this part of the work.

Outside his professional life, Duncan was first and foremost a family man, who loved to holiday with his wife and three sons, swimming, cycling and walking in East Anglia. His death is a tragic loss for his family and for his many friends but he faced it with faith and fortitude. A service of thanksgiving for his life took place on 4 September at All Saints Church, Putney, which was attended by some two hundred friends and former colleagues.

### Books and articles

J. D. Haldane, 'Scenes of daily life from Mamluk miniatures' in *The East Mediterranean Lands in the period of the Crusades*, Ed. P. M. Holt, Aris and Phillips, Warminster, 1977.

Duncan Haldane, *Mamluk Painting*, Aris and Phillips, Warminster, England, 1978.

Duncan Haldane, *Islamic Bookbindings in the Victoria and Albert Museum*, World of Islam Festival Trust, London, in association with the Victoria and Albert Museum, 1983.

Duncan Haldane, '3 Mamluk manuscripts of al-Hariri's *Maqamat*' in *Orientalia*, vol. 16: No. 1, Jan. 1985, pp. 44–50.

*The Arts in Health Care: Learning from Experience*, edited by Duncan Haldane and Susan Loppert, in association with Lulham Art Publications, Roehampton Institute, London, King's Fund, 1999.

Duncan Haldane, 'Arts of the Celestial Pen: Qur'ans from the Library of the Institute of Ismaili Studies' This article is to appear in a volume entitled: *Word of God, Art of Man: The Qur'an and its Creative Expressions*. Selected Proceedings from the International Colloquium held in London, ed. Fahmida Suleman (Oxford, forthcoming).

DAVID PAGE