

Hein Braaksma en Robbert de Witt

A long shadow of the past

Carole and Robert Hillenbrand on the medieval Islam

Het echtpaar Carole en Robert Hillenbrand bekleedt komend jaar de Vonhoff-leerstoel in de geesteswetenschappen. Voor Hein Braaksma en Robbert de Witt was dit aanleiding om hen te interviewen over de middeleeuwse Islam en het contemporaine Midden-Oosten.

Each year at the University of Groningen there is a series of lectures which was instituted at the leave of the former Queens Commissioner in Groningen, H.J.L. Vonhoff. The subject of these lectures differs each year, which of course does not mean that there is not a central idea behind it. This idea is that a series of lectures by one of the foremost scholars in the field of the Humanities can give a distinctive impulse to the academic debate in Groningen. In the past one of the highlights was the series of lectures given by Professor Peter Burke. The title of this series was 'The social history of knowledge, 1300-1800'.¹

The subject of this years lectures is quite different. This year the Vonhoff lectures will be given by a duo, professors Carole and Robert Hillenbrand. Both are specialists in the field of medieval Islam, albeit with different focuses and different approaches. Carole Hillenbrand has focussed in her research on the impact of the Crusades on the Islamic community in the Middle East. On this subject she has published the monumental study *The crusades. Islamic perspectives*.² Her husband and co-Vonhoff-lecturer Robert Hillenbrands interest lies in the art-history of this period and he has

1 The visit of Peter Burke also led to an interview in *Groniek*. Remieg Aerts, 'Cultuur, kennis en carnaval. Een gesprek met Peter Burke' in: *Groniek* 144 (1999) 327-342.

2 Carole Hillenbrand, *The crusades. Islamic perspectives* (Edinburgh 1999).

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published on this subject his magnificent *Islamic Architecture. Form, Function and Meaning*.³

The forthcoming visit of Carole and Robert Hillenbrand was for Robbert de Witt and Hein Braaksma, both editors of *Groniek*, a reason to interview them on the subject of their lectures and their involvement with the medieval and contemporary Middle East.

Will you focus in these lectures primarily on the medieval period, or will you try to give equal attention to the more modern and especially contemporary problems, which without a doubt will still be very much in the news when you will give your lectures?

Carol & Robert Hillenbrand: 'We are both medievalists, and that makes it sensible for us to focus on the Middle Ages in the first place. On the other hand, in the Middle East the past does cast a long shadow over the present. For the art historian, for example, a building like the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem should not be understood as existing in some changeless, ideal past. It changes in appearance, and especially function, over the years and even sometimes from one generation to the next. Similarly, the Crusades - which were a medieval phenomenon - have a modern life too, in the political rhetoric of Usama Bin Laden and George Bush Jr.'

Where does your interest in the medieval Islam originate?

Carol & Robert Hillenbrand: 'Both of us became interested in the Middle Ages as students by traveling widely in those countries.'

You are both specialists on the medieval Islam, albeit on different parts, but still you have mainly the same area of research, and now you will give the Vonhoff lectures together. We were wondering how you work together, and does this imply that you both have the same views on the subject?

Carol & Robert Hillenbrand: 'While we often discuss each other's work, we have very different areas of research and also distinctively different approaches to it. One of us specializes in visual material, which can be a very rich and accessible kind of primary source. The other works in close detail on literary sources of medieval date in Arabic and Persian. In both cases the culture to be studied is the same, but it has many faces. Moreover, our Vonhoff-lectures will not be joint performances, each of us will give three lectures.'

3 Robert Hillenbrand, *Islamic architecture : form, function and meaning* (Edinburgh 1994).

We read in the introductions to your books, that your aim is to reach a wider public than the small community of specialised scholars. Do you have a special goal in mind with this? Could it be the outcome of a social involvement?

Carol & Robert Hillenbrand: 'We both feel that it is an abuse of scholarly knowledge to write only for a small *côterie* of one's peers. There is a big world out there that wants to know about the Middle East and the Islam, and that is eager for more than superficialities. We want the Islamic world to get a fair hearing in the media.'

Does the contemporary political situation in the Middle-East, your area of study, have a personal impact on you?

Carol & Robert Hillenbrand: 'It is not possible to devote one's entire professional life to the intensive study of a culture without being affected by what is happening to that culture in the here and now. We cannot remain unmoved or uninvolved in recent events.'

In your book, prof. R. Hillenbrand, you write about how little evidence there is left of many buildings from the past, and you write how these were replaced by ordinary concrete buildings. In our view there might be a contrast between this and the rise of a sense of national or even Pan-Arabic identity in the last fifty years. Didn't this - supposed - rising consciousness lead to the preservation of architectural heritage?

Robert Hillenbrand: 'It is unfortunately true that, however much Pan-Arabic ideals inspire intellectuals, the fate of the built heritage depends on political and commercial factors. There has been very little success in the Middle East generally in preserving the built environment against the pressures of the building industry. The great monuments survive, but old-style domestic architecture has disappeared at a fearfully rapid rate - look at Fedda.'

*When speaking about the Middle-East, it is almost impossible not to mention the brilliant Palestinian scholar Edward Sa'id. We will not even try to avoid him. Sa'id writes in his Orientalism that in Western thought the study of the Middle East provides the Western world with a mirror, and that *Wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*, is not very relevant. This is of course a too brief summary of Sa'id's theory, but we wondered if and how this debate affects your research?*

Carol & Robert Hillenbrand: 'The old-style Orientalist, for whom the Islamic languages are as dead as Latin, is by no means dead. Sa'id was right to expose that type. It is worth remembering that Islam too had its fantastic stories, and that, like those of the West, they were located in the fabulous East. And Occidentalism is just as much a distortion and a plague, and a

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recasting of the Other according to prejudice and political fashion, as was Orientalism before it. A case of the biter bit.'

One could state that the orientalism debate got a new impulse after September 11 2001. At least that is what Ian Buruma tried to do in an article in the New York Review of Books, where he proposed that the theory of orientalism, that which Said found in the Western thought, has its counterpart in what one could call Occidentalism in non-Western thought. A concept that even more than Orientalism has a violent component. What do you think of such a theory? Prof. C. Hillenbrand, if you weren't a member of a Western society, one could, if one wouldn't open and read your book, think that your book on the Islamic perspectives on crusades fits into the theory of Occidentalism.

Carol Hillenbrand: 'I would disagree with that. *The Crusades-Islamic Perspectives* is exactly what the title says it is - an attempt to view the phenomenon of the Crusades through an entirely Islamic prism - and not as an exercise of the Western imagination, but rigorously on the basis of what medieval Muslims themselves said.'

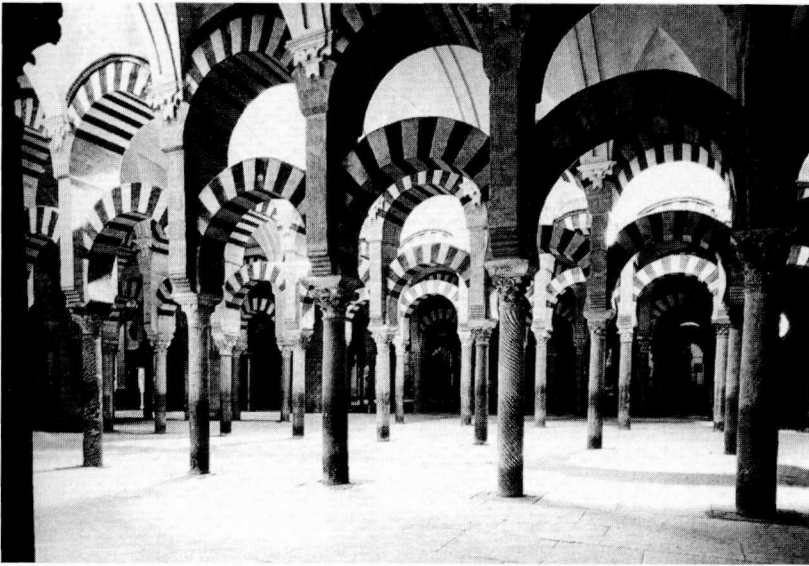
We've just discussed at some length the involvement of contemporary politics and thought in your research. Is there also a counter movement of Medieval Islamic thought entering in the modern debate or to use Foucault's word: discours?

Carol Hillenbrand: 'Medieval Islamic thought is usually kept safely in the medieval Islamic box, and does not come out to play. Of course medieval archeological sources are of absorbing interest to modern Muslims, who try to use them as evidence to reconstruct a pristine Islam, uncontaminated by the West and its ideologies.'

Does one become a different person by studying a thought that differs much from what we are used to in the West?

Carol & Robert Hillenbrand: 'It is for others to decide whether our long exposure to the Islamic world and its culture has changed either of our characters at some profound level.'

Prof. R. Hillenbrand, while reading parts of your book, we somehow had to think again and again of the story of developing modernism and modernist design in the interwar era. First of all, do you think there is a parallel in that both in most Islamic architecture and modernist design there is not only a design but also an implied way of living in order to fit the design. We were thinking of that for example in some Bauhaus chairs and especially the famous Rietveld-furniture it is quite difficult to sit comfortably, that's only possible when one adopts a very specific pose. Does the islamic design lead in a similar way to a specific art of living?



‘The emptiness of these spaces allows them to be used for all kinds of purposes, from meditation to assembly, from sleep to teaching. In their public architecture, Muslims think lean.’ Cordoba, Great Mosque. Uit: Robert Hillenbrand, *Islamic architecture : form, function and meaning* (Edinburgh 1994) 79.

Robert Hillenbrand: ‘It is true that Islamic public architecture implies a way of living -one that is deliberately simplified to the bare essentials. Spaces are uncluttered. Much use is made of water in channels or fountains or pools. The emptiness of these spaces allows them to be used for all kinds of purposes, from meditation to assembly, from sleep to teaching. In their public architecture, Muslims think lean.’

Of course there are many different ways to trace the birth of modern design, but I think one way is to trace it back to the labours of William Morris. Who was obviously very much influenced by John Ruskin and his magnificent book The stones of Venice. In this book Ruskin gives a lovely, although in the end perhaps not entirely satisfactory, view of medieval gothic building. Two things were very important for Morris . First of all the use of pure materials and the way in which the materials were able to speak for themselves. And second, connected to that was the idea that these materials were not used by labour-slaves, to put it crudely, but by almost independent artists, who worked in a great collective on great buildings. Do I say something terrible when I suggest

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that you give a comparable but more true view of the Medieval Islamic architecture? At least the stress you lay in the use of pure colours, of meaningful decorations and so on, strikes me as comparable to Ruskin.

Robert Hillenbrand: 'Islamic architecture also puts great stress on texture and color; and it is worth remembering that these buildings were sufficiently personal creations to be signed by those who built them. Medieval Islamic architecture preserves the names not of scores of architects and craftsmen, (like medieval Europe) but many hundreds of them.'

In both your books, you state that there is a great difficulty in writing the history of the medieval Islam because there are not that many texts left. This surprised us, because we've always learned that for Western thought at the end of the middle ages in Western Europe the rediscovery of ancient Greek and Roman texts was of paramount importance and that this discovery was only possible because Arabic scholars had kept, used and treasured these texts.

Carol & Robert Hillenbrand: 'Well there are hundreds of medieval Islamic texts. Each of us made a different point about them. Carol Hillenbrand noted that there were very few texts to survive which dealt with contemporary events, say, of the twelfth century from the Islamic side. Thus the events had to be reconstructed on the basis of much later sources. Robert Hillenbrand noted that, for all of the wealth of medieval Islamic literary sources, the Muslim writers said relatively little of value on matters of architectural detail.'

We once did a workshop on the cultural interchange between the Islamic and christian medieval world. We remember an essay by a fellow student quite well, not because he discovered something new, but because he stated in the introduction of his essay, that we celebrated that year the start of the crusades many ages ago. In our opinion there wasn't much to celebrate, more to commemorate. However some people go even further, when they state that we should not only commemorate the crusades, but that we should offer our apologies for what happened. Such apologies are found quite often in the discussions on slavery especially in the U.S. What do you think of this? Should the West, maybe especially the roman-catholic church, offer a wiedergutmachung to the Arabic community in the Holy Land?

Carol & Robert Hillenbrand: 'As you will know, the Pope has recently apologized for the Crusades. The relationship between Islam and Christianity is ongoing, and must be remade afresh by each successive generation. The lesson of pre-Crusader Islamic history to the modern West is that tolerance between the three great monotheistic faiths was a

generally successful policy. That tolerance was a remarkable feature also of Ottoman Jerusalem. Conflicts between Christians caused scarcely a ripple in the body politic.'

Where the attention for the religious problems in the contemporary Middle East focuses most often on the conflict between Islamic and Jewish communities, now with the siege of the Church of Birth in Bethlehem there is more attention for all the different Christian communities in Israel. One could say that before the British occupation of Palestine the prevailing conflict, if there was much of a conflict, was not between Jewish and Islamic inhabitants, but between the Christian community and the Islamic inhabitants. How did this affect Islamic life and society?

Carol Hillenbrand: 'After the Crusades ended in the Middle East, the Islamic world withdrew into itself and became defensive, even xenophobic. That led to a rejection of Western innovations, e.g. in technology, which hobbled progress in the Middle East. Parallels were drawn between the Crusades and colonialism. The hurt caused by the Crusades was not healed by the Muslim victory. Westerners have to learn that they cannot imply their way of thinking on a society with different ideals and norms.'

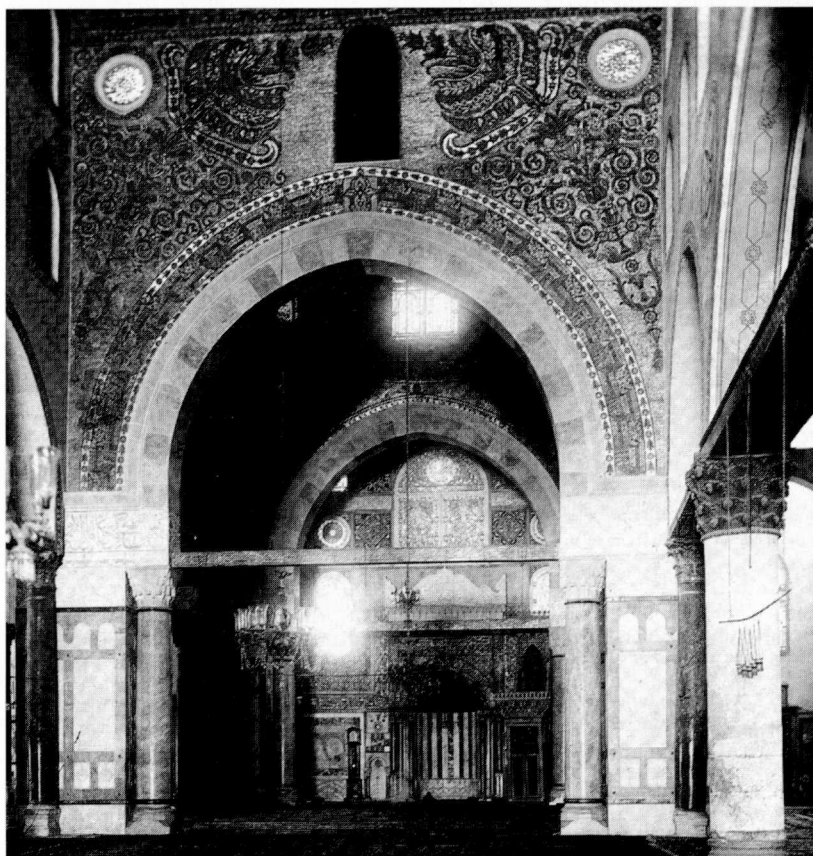
In your book The crusades. Islamic perspectives you write about the contemporary heritage of the crusades; and you state that: 'international understanding and world peace would benefit significantly from a better understanding of this issue.' Do you feel that many conflicts in the Middle East have been lingering since the crusades and that people, journalists and politicians tend to overlook this historical element in these problems?

Carol & Robert Hillenbrand: 'Muslims faced with the economic and political successes of the West have, especially in the last century, sought to re-affirm the faith which lies at the heart of their culture, and to seek refuge in its certainties. Other Muslims have tried to re-interpret Islam to bring it more into the modern age. Yet others -secularists- are happy to buy into an Islamic culture and society without cherishing a religious faith. The latter group has much in common with Western secularists.'

Many western thinkers - including people like V.S. Naipaul and David Landes - consider the Islamic culture as backward, since the occupation with the own culture, creates a culture of living in the past. They believe that the Islam did not bring forth any new ideas or thoughts, where Christianity saw for example the rise of enlightenment, capitalism, socialism and industrialization which brought wealth and in many ways domination of the world. Prof. R. Hillenbrand, does this supposed lack of new ideas and thoughts also count for

Islamic art, when compared with the many different ways western art has transformed since the Middle Ages?

Robert Hillenbrand: 'The date of 1492 symbolizes the opening of the New World for Western Europe; for the Muslims and the Jews, it marked the date of their expulsion for Europe. The gradual shift in power from East to West gathered momentum thereafter, and by the mid-seventeenth century (much earlier in some parts of the Islamic world, such as North Africa and the Levant) art and architecture had declined into staleness. It is hard not to see this as a delayed response to the political eclipse of Islam by the West after the Middle Ages.'



Jerusalem, Aqsa mosque. Uit: Hillenbrand, *Islamic architecture*, 47.