

# MEM Awards

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Remarks by the Recipient of the 2021 MEM Lifetime Achievement Award  
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Thank you, dear members of the MEM, for giving me the great honor of receiving your Lifetime Achievement Award. From colleagues, such an acknowledgement is most precious. Besides gratitude and pride, I also feel humbled by the brilliant company of the colleagues with whom I share this privilege.

There is always an element of accident in the choice of a career, as is also the case with me. My studies began in Germany at the University of Hamburg. But this was not the initial plan. My parents and I expected that, with my French school education in Egypt, I would study in France, like my Francophile father did. It turned out otherwise: in the same week I graduated from school, I married my German husband Gerhard Behrens. He had been in Cairo for his doctorate research on Islamic law and was due now to return home. It was 1964 and I was eighteen when I left Egypt with him.

My adolescent interests had been so far rather disparate. I painted, and I read all the great novels I could get hold of. My bedtime reading was French poetry, and I was also interested in genetics. But I was quite ignorant in history, which has always been one of my husband's main interests. When I began to browse in his library and I read Philip Hitti's *History of the Arabs*, I realised that something was missing in my education. In Germany at that time, the mainstream conservative press was very hostile to Egypt and to Gamal Abd al-Nasser and all that he stood for: Arab nationalism, liberation movements, and the Palestinian cause. I felt I needed to know more about the history of the Middle East. I think this was the search for identity that is quite common among young people of migrant backgrounds. I sometimes criticized myself for not having rather explored a different culture than my native one.

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In Hamburg, I joined the department of Islamkunde and Semitic Studies headed by Prof. Bertold Spuler. A student of Carl Brockelmann, Spuler was an academic giant who mastered more than twenty languages and had an enormous range of interests. Among these was Oriental Christianity. At that time the German PhD program required besides the major subject of specialization, two minor topics, one of which should be from a different department. Besides Islamic history and Semitic languages, I chose Old Testament—Genesis. My study of the Old Testament was one of the most fascinating intellectual experiences I ever had thanks to the research methodology I learned there. My husband warned me that with such topics it would not be easy to find a job afterwards.

In the 1960s the students' movement was in full action, and Spuler directly experienced the students' anger after he shouted during a demonstration that they belonged in a concentration camp. He was suspended and on that occasion a slogan was coined that eventually became famous: *Unter den Talaren Muff von 1000 Jahren* (Under the Gowns: the Stench of 1000 Years). However, I myself never had a reason to complain about him. I was one of his last students, things were changing, and at that time the department included several women who eventually made successful careers, including his then assistant Barbara Flemming.

Like many other students in the field of "Orientalistik" in the sixties, I wanted to write my PhD thesis on a contemporary subject. Although this was not Spuler's main interest, we agreed on a compromise: the history of the Copts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

I always wondered whether he expected the views I presented in my thesis, which did not fully agree with his, though he never contested them. To the present day, this critical phase in the history of Coptic-Muslim relations has been ignored in favor of the more harmonious later period of national solidarity against British occupation. Besides the thesis I published only one article on this topic, years later as a conference paper. I thought Coptic history should not be exclusive to Coptic historians, as had been the case hitherto, and that more Copts should study Islamic history, which is their history as well. This has become the case in the meantime.

In search of a suitable occupation after my PhD—we were in Frankfurt then—I went to seek advice in a counselor office that provided career guidance to new graduates. After looking at my credentials, the man in charge politely suggested to me to work as a fortune-teller. As an Egyptian woman, he told me, I had a great chance of success. Besides, there was increasing interest these days in all things esoteric, which was true. I felt lost.

The matter soon became irrelevant as we moved with our son back to Cairo where my husband was sent by the Deutsche Bank as representative in the Middle East. In Cairo, my interests took a new turn, which had some Orientalistic features. For the first time, I did what Western-educated people do in Cairo, but never anybody from my family or my Egyptian friends did: I went to discover the Islamic city, and I was overwhelmed by what it revealed to me.

With the little book *Les mosquées du Caire* by Gaston Wiet in my handbag and accompanied by my friend Christa, I used to go on regular tours of Medieval Cairo.

After we had thoroughly visited all the mosques documented in the book, I began to ask myself: “What next?” I could not teach in Egyptian universities because the German PhD was not acknowledged there at that time, but I was offered an opportunity to teach German.

The alternative was: new studies. AUC was the place where Michael Rogers, George Scanlon, and Christel Kessler taught Islamic art and architecture. Michael Rogers was very welcoming and encouraged me to join their MA program (AUC had no PhD program in this area), but I was not at all after a degree; I just wanted to learn about Islamic art and architecture and medieval Cairo.

Years later, George Scanlon told me that the fact that I applied for an MA after having already earned a PhD raised some eyebrows and that not everyone was convinced that I would fit in. Of course, adaptation was needed, but this was technical rather than social: to work visually to read objects is a different process from reading texts.

Michael Rogers introduced me to Layla Ali Ibrahim who eventually had a tremendous impact on my career and my life. She was an extraordinary character. The daughter of a prominent figure in Egyptian society and culture, and herself a private scholar, she had accumulated a unique firsthand knowledge of Cairo’s monuments and of the Museum of Islamic Art, which included her father’s collection. To foreign students and scholars who came to Cairo in the seventies and eighties to study art and material culture, a visit to Laila was a must. As a private scholar she had an original approach that added a new dimension to my conventional studies. She did not write much, but all that she

wrote or lectured on was original and enlightening.

My second graduate program was a most enjoyable experience thanks to Michael Rogers’ dissecting mind, Christel Kessler’s ability to read the stones, and George Scanlon’s eloquence and enthusiasm. I was in no hurry at all to finish, and I did not see then the possibility of a career. However, I gradually found myself writing my first articles and being asked for papers and publications. I taught an introductory course at AUC on Islamic architecture in Cairo. During those years Laila and I used to meet once or twice a week to spend the morning visiting and studying monuments. Back at home in the afternoon, our architectural chats and deliberations went on for hours on the phone.

While working on the topography of late Mamluk Cairo for my MA, I discovered a Mamluk building! The domed zawiya of the Sufi Shaykh Damirdash built in the late fifteenth century. Although it was well-known to worshippers and to the Damirdash Sufi community, the domed building had escaped the attention of art historians and the Antiquity authorities. Following my publication, it was added to the list of Cairo’s historic monuments.

One day as Laila and I were praising Christel Kessler’s newly published book on Mamluk masonry domes, I said on the spur of the moment that we now need a book on minarets. She immediately replied, “Go ahead and do it.” John Rodenbeck, the then head of the AUC Press who happened to be present, added, “And we shall publish it.” A few days later, Laila arrived with a pile of shoe boxes filled with photographs of all the minarets of Cairo. She handed them to me and ordered me to write the book.

In the seventies the waqf and court archives, which had been difficult to access in the previous decades, were reopened for scholars. The Ministry of Awqaf at the Dar al-Watha'iq at the Citadel became a regular meeting point for scholars and students from Egypt and abroad. Thanks to her means and connections, Laila managed to acquire a substantial collection of waqf documents by hiring copyists and ordering photocopies, which she generously distributed to all those interested. So far only a few Egyptian scholars had made use of waqf sources for the study of architecture and urban history. For me it was a magnificent experience to find the fifteenth-century foundation deed of the emir Azbak min Tutukh, which describes the layout of the Azbakiyya quarter. This quarter built around an artificial pond had been a landmark and a jewel of Cairo for four centuries before it vanished in the nineteenth century. While only briefly mentioned by historians, the document reveals its original design and functions. It became the subject of one of my earliest books.

Waqf documents revealed to me the connection between architecture and its assigned functions, which has always been a major concern in my research. In the 1980s a number of remarkable and innovative studies based on waqf materials shed a new light on Mamluk religious institutions and practices, and on the endowment system itself and its socio-economic impact.

The French Archaeological Institute (IFAO) provided a great academic environment in Cairo from which I enormously profited in the years between the seventies and eighties. I met there the eminent scholars André Raymond and

Jean-Claude Garcin and had the privilege to participate in events that took place in their circles, notably on social and urban studies of the Mamluk and Ottoman periods. I admired the two of them, and both in their very different ways inspired and influenced me.

Before time came to return to Germany, I decided to make use of the introductory course I had been teaching for several years at AUC, while it was still fresh in my mind, and I published my *Islamic Architecture in Cairo: An Introduction*.

Back in Germany in 1986, this time in Munich, I realized, in fact I was advised, that in order to keep connected with academic life, I needed to have a habilitation, the post-PhD thesis that that was necessary at that time to qualify for a university position. Islamic art was not strongly represented in German universities in the eighties and nineties. The topic of my thesis and title of the resulting book was *Egypt's Adjustment to Ottoman Rule: Institutions, Waqf and Architecture in Cairo (16<sup>th</sup> & 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries)*, where I used waqf and architectural patronage to document this period of transition for which chronicles and other archive sources are relatively limited. I submitted it at the University of Freiburg where I had the privilege to enjoy the support of the great Ulrich Haarmann. He was my mentor in those years, and we kept in regular touch to the end of his life. I was highly inspired by his scholarship and his broad-minded approach. His premature death was a shock. Only weeks before his death, while in hospital, he wrote me a warm-hearted letter to congratulate me for my new book *Beauty in Arabic Culture*, which was first published in German. This book was largely inspired by the scholarship done on aesthetics

in European culture, which opened my eyes to the fact that Arab-Islamic art had flourished independently from religious ideology. Based on Arabic texts of various disciplines, I wanted to emphasize this fact against recent neo-Orientalist, well-meaning misinterpretations that see sacral symbols behind every design.

With the status of *privat-dozentin* earned with the habilitation, one was entitled to teach, without salary but for a symbolic honorarium, until a call, “*der Ruf*” as they describe it in Germany, comes for a professorship. It might also not come. Visiting professorships and fellowships in those years, including at Harvard, filling in for Oleg Grabar one year and also at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, were invaluable and uplifting experiences. Although I did not exactly belong to his “school,” Grabar’s visionary and conceptual approach to the discipline impressed me, in particular his emphasis on the iconography of inscriptions. At Harvard, I often saw Annemarie Schimmel whose intellectual vitality was always a model for me. I enjoyed discovering her bon-vivant side as we met for lunch and browsed through vintage jewelery. Her scholarship began with the Mamluks, with her PhD in Bonn. Dedicated to her memory, the Annemarie Schimmel-Kolleg, headed by Stephan Conermann, has been recently a center of advanced Mamluk studies and a vibrant meeting point of Mamlukists from all over the world.

“The call” for a professorship did not come from Germany, but to my great luck and against all expectations it came from London. Michael Rogers, with whom I never lost contact and with whom I share many views, was to retire in 2000 from the Nasser D. Khalili chair of Islamic Art and

Archaeology at SOAS, which he held after years at the British Museum. He advised me to apply for his position. Apart from Michael, I did not have much contact with British universities, and therefore I never expected that this would be the place where I would feel academically and otherwise more at home than ever. I enjoyed teaching. I had interesting and stimulating students from various backgrounds. My participation in the School’s promotion committee has been an especially rewarding and memorable experience. Examining the achievements of my colleagues has been very humbling and highly stimulating.

There I had the privilege to have access to the wonderful Khalili Collection of Islamic art. One of its remarkable and progressive features is the place it dedicated to the arts of nineteenth century, which Stephen Vernoit has brilliantly documented with his book *Occidentalism*. I had the privilege to work together with Stephen on a conference and publication on Islamic art in the nineteenth century, which was meant to promote more interest in this subject. I wished that my later conference on Mamluk art would be coupled with an exhibition like Esin Atıl had done three decades earlier in Washington, but sadly this was not possible. A Mamluk exhibition remains an unfulfilled dream of mine.

After I published *Cairo of the Mamluks* and a new version of *The Minaret of Cairo*, other issues of Mamluk material culture kept stimulating my curiosity. The conference organized by Frédéric Bauden, *Mamluk Cairo, a Crossroads of Embassies*, was an eye-opener. Provoked by a recent collective publication on the culture of gifts in the Muslim world that did not refer

to the Mamluks, I found myself turning the paper I presented on Mamluk diplomatic gifts into a book, *Practising Diplomacy in the Mamluk Sultanate: Gifts and Material Culture in the Medieval Islamic World*.

I have always been intrigued by the connection between prestigious architecture and function. The incredible number of Mamluk madrasas raised questions about the material culture of teaching and the provision of books. In recent years important publications on reading practices in the Arab world and conversations with Konrad Hirschler at SOAS prompted me to explore the material aspects of the book and its market in the Mamluk sultanate, to which I dedicated a recent book, *The Book in Mamluk Egypt and Syria (1250-1517)*.

Living in London, where museums, galleries, private collections, and high expertise and scholarship in artefacts are densely concentrated like nowhere else, I could not escape dealing with objects. Mamluk metalwork, due to its rich epigraphy, is a challenging and compelling subject. In the last twenty years I have been trying to decipher poetic inscriptions

on Mamluk metal objects. It has been a tedious task which is also the reason why it has not been seriously tackled before. The small corpus of poems I collected is in my view one of the most relevant things I have ever done because it has revealed an unknown aspect of Mamluk art and culture.

It would be ungrateful not to emphasize on this occasion the pleasure and satisfaction of teaching. I think the bond between teacher and student, which I felt on both sides, is a very special one, something similar to a parental bond. I have learned from my students and their work, and, as a colleague and friend once told me, "They don't know how much we learn from them!" I cherish the friendships that developed with my former students and have continued since my retirement. In my retirement I miss teaching; however, the passion and urge for research, which are behind every scholar's career, have their own schedule.

I am grateful for the opportunity to compile this retrospective because it has reminded me that my work has been mainly a pursuit of pleasure.