Oleg Grabar, whose research over the past six decades has had a far-reaching influence on the study of Islamic art and architecture, died at the age of eighty-one on January 8.

Grabar, Professor Emeritus in the School of Historical Studies at the Institute, documented, interpreted, and extended the significance of Islamic art and history through extensive archaeological explorations and research trips across the Islamic world in Africa, the Middle East, and Muslim Asia. The originality and range of his research and teaching made an enduring impression on the study of Middle Eastern culture, a field in which he posed questions that challenged Western perspectives. He was largely responsible for the growth in numbers of historians specializing in the history of Islamic art in the United States.

“Oleg Grabar was a profound, prolific, and influential scholar who has been an essential part of the Institute community throughout the last two decades,” Peter Goddard, Director of the Institute, noted. “We will greatly miss his generosity of spirit, playful humor, and vital presence.”

Giles Constable, Professor Emeritus in the School of Historical Studies, who was a classmate of Grabar’s at Harvard University and a colleague both at Harvard and the Institute, commented, “Oleg Grabar was an admired colleague and beloved friend, whose far-ranging mind, vivid character, and strongly held views contributed to any discussion in which he took part. He was in every sense a life-enhancing personality. Through his teaching and publications he left an indelible mark on almost every aspect of the study of Islamic art and architecture. The Institute, and Princeton, will not be the same without him.”

Grabar’s appointment to the Faculty of the Institute in 1990 brought Islamic studies to the School of Historical Studies, and over the past two decades he drew both emerging and established scholars to the Institute. In November 2010, he was awarded the Chairman’s Award by the Aga Khan Award for Architecture for his lifetime achievement in widening and enriching the understanding of the Islamic world’s architecture, emphasizing its geographical and chronological diversity, as well as positioning it within wider political, social, cultural, and economic contexts.

Grabar was born in Strasbourg, France, on November 3, 1929. His father André Grabar was an international expert of Byzantine art who published over thirty books on the early and medieval art of Bulgaria, Crete, France, Italy, and Turkey. “Intellectual activity came almost with the cradle,” Grabar recalled in 1995, “and throughout my formative years I was surrounded by books.” Grabar received a certificat de licence in Ancient History from the University of Paris in 1948. In 1950, he graduated magna cum laude with a B.A. in Medieval History from Harvard University and received two additional certificats de licence from the University of Paris in Medieval History and Modern History. Grabar continued his education at Princeton University, where he developed his interest in Islamic art, obtaining an M.A. (1953) and a Ph.D. (1955) in Oriental Languages and Literatures and the History of Art.

Upon earning his Ph.D., Grabar obtained a teaching position at the University of Michigan, where he became a full Professor in 1964. He was Honorary Curator of Near Eastern Art for the Freer Gallery of Art of the Smithsonian Institution (1958–69) and Director of the American School of Oriental Research in Jerusalem (1960–61), where he later served as Vice President (1967–75). In 1969, Grabar was appointed Professor at Harvard University, where he taught for twenty-one years. He was Chairman of the Department of Fine Arts from 1977–82 and held the post of Aga Khan Professor of Islamic Art and Architecture from its inception in 1980 until 1990, when he retired from Harvard to join the Faculty of the Institute.

Grabar was the author of some twenty books and more than one hundred and twenty articles leading journals. His first book, The Cotton of the Tushanids (1957), focused on the ninth-century dynasty in Islamic Egypt. His landmark study The Formation of Islamic Art (1971), which has been translated into German, Spanish, and Turkish, with expanded editions in French and English, presented an original and imaginative approach to the complex problems of understanding Islamic art.

Grabar traveled extensively throughout the Islamic world and was Director from 1964–72 of the excavations at Qasr al-Hayr al-Sharqi, a medieval town partially buried under the sands of Syria in a region previously not thought to have had a significant history of human habitation. Work at the site resulted in a number of articles and ultimately a collaborative two-volume book, City in the Desert, Qasr al-Hayr East (1978), with Renata Holod, James Knustad, and William Trousdale. The research resulted in a groundbreaking interpretation of the original constructions, dating from the first half of the eighth century.

Epic Images and Contemporary History: The Illustrations of the Great Mongol Shahnama (1980), coauthored with Sheila Blair, marked the first publication of an early fourteenth-century manuscript, which was meticulously reconstructed by Grabar and Blair. In 1987, nearly thirty years of collaboration between Grabar and Richard Ettinghausen was published in the highly regarded survey The Art and Architecture of Islam 650–1250.

During his time at the Institute, Grabar was able to devote himself fully to research, writing, and travel, and he published prolifically within the realm of Islamic art, architecture, and culture. In The Mediation of Ornament (1992), he examined the role of decoration as mediator between the viewer and the object itself. His The Shape of the Holy: Early Islamic Jerusalem (1996) employed computer modeling to present a detailed architectural history of the city in a new way. That same year, The Dome of the Rock (with Said Nuseibeh) was published as a comprehensive documentation of one of the holiest places for Muslims, Christians, and Jews (this structure was an ongoing source of intrigue for Grabar, who in 2006 published a book of the same title). He was remarkably prolific even after his retirement in 1998, continuing to write or edit more than ten volumes.

With Glen W. Bowersock, Professor Emeritus in the School of Historical Studies, and Peter Brown of Princeton University, Grabar edited Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Post-classical World (1999), which quickly became a standard resource for scholars and the general public alike. Mostly Miniatures: An Introduction to Persian Painting (2002) provided a thorough historiography of Persian painting. Much of Grabar’s scholarly output was captured through eighty-three articles gathered in four volumes under the title Constructing the Study of Islamic Art (2005–06). His final book, Masterpieces of Islamic Art: The Decorated Page from the 8th to the 17th Century (2009), elucidated a wide range of illuminated manuscripts from museum collections around the world and was awarded the World Book Prize for the Book of the Year of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 2011. (For Grabar’s personal reflections on his sixty years of scholarship, see the fall 2010 issue of the Institute Letter.)

Grabar’s work earned wide recognition throughout his career, including the College Art Association Distinguished Lifetime Achievement Award for Writing in Art (2005), the Charles Lang Freer Medal (2001), and the University of California, Los Angeles, Giorgio Levi Della Vida Medal (1996). From 1957–70, Grabar was Near Eastern Editor of Ars Orientalis, a scholarly journal on Asian art and archaeology, and he was founding editor of the journal Magamis from 1979–90. He was a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the American Philosophical Society, and the Medieval Academy of America; an honorary member of the Austrian Academy; a corresponding member of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres of the Institute of France; and a corresponding fellow of the British Academy.

Grabar is survived by his wife of fifty-nine years, Terry Grabar, a retired professor of English, and his son Nicolas, daughter-in-law Jennifer Sage, and grandchildren Henry, Margaret, and Olivia of New York. His daughter Anne Louise predeceased him in 1988.
The excerpts below are from a blog (memoryog.tumblr.com) created in Oleg Grabar’s memory.

Working for Oleg was a pure delight. Not only was it intellectually stimulating, but also fulfilling and rewarding on the personal level. He made me feel I was working with him rather than for him. He was supportive, understanding, and encouraging. He gave credit where credit is due. He took on his share of the work, and made sure to never overload those working for him with chores. No task was beneath him so as to delegate to an assistant. If often found myself picking up something to give more work.

Muhammad al-Asad, Center for the Study of the Built Environment; Research Assistant, School of Historical Studies, 1991–97

On December 10, 2010, Oleg and I spent a delightful afternoon at the Institute for Advanced Study. I congratulated him on his recent lifetime achievement award, whereupon he handed me the presentation volume published by the Aga Khan Foundation. As we flipped through the collection of photos in the chapter devoted to his life’s work, Oleg provided a running commentary. He was largely silent on the subjects of career milestones, publications, and professional accolades. Instead, he reminisced about his students and their shared adventures.

Jocelyne Kerner, State University of New York at New Paltz

As your research assistant at the IAS for two years (1998–2000), I suddenly had the sorts of resources and time at my disposal that I had not had since finishing my dissertation late in 1995, AND I had the office next door to you. And you were always available to chat or to have tea or take me to lunch, or to discuss the lecture we had just heard at lunch. . .

None of this that I have said, of course, communicates the sheer, day-to-day pleasure of sticking my head into your office and chatting about this or that, scholarly or not, of sharing jokes and gossip and observations about things both lofty and mundane . . . in short, of the enjoyment (and, of course, the inevitable taking for granted) of the company of a dear friend.

Cynthia Robinson, Cornell University, Research Assistant, School of Historical Studies, 1999–2002

Gabriella Coleman, an Assistant Professor of Media, Culture, and Communication at New York University, is the 2010–11 Ginny and Robert Loughlin Founders’ Circle Member in the School of Social Science. Trained as an anthropologist, Coleman examines the ethics of online collaboration and institutions as well as the role of the law and digital media in sustaining various forms of political activism. Between 2001–03, she conducted ethnographic research on computer hackers primarily in San Francisco and the Netherlands, as well as those hackers who work on Debian, a free-software project.

BY GABRIELLA COLEMAN

Generally a hacker is a technologist with a love for computing, and a hack is a clever technical solution arrived at through non-obvious means (alternatively, it can mean a downright clunky and ugly solution, one, however, that gets the job at hand done). It doesn’t mean to compromise the Pentagon, change your grades, or take down the global financial system, although it can. Hackers tend to uphold the values of freedom, privacy, and access; they tend to adore computers—the cultural glue that binds them together. They are trained in highly specialized and technical arts, including programming, system administration, and security research. Many hackers use their skills at work but also spend a fair bit of time tinkering, building, and exploring outside labor demands. Some gain unauthorized access to technologies, though the degree of illegality greatly varies (and most hacking is completely legal). They tend to value playful-ness and cleverness and will take most any opportunity to perform their work through code or humor or even both: funny code.

One important aspect of hacking is the development of free and open-source software, such as Firefox and Linux. Now a techno-social movement, the hackers make the underlying directions of software, known as source code, legally accessible via novel licensing schemes, such as the GNU General Public License. Other variations have focused on cryptography and privacy. The “hacker underground” has brought into being a politics of transgression. Some gain unauthorized access to technologies, though the degree of illegality greatly varies (and most hacking is completely legal). They tend to value playful-ness and cleverness and will take most any opportunity to perform their work through code or humor or even both: funny code.

A quick review of the language hackers frequently invoke to describe themselves or make ethical claims—freedom, free speech, privacy, the individual, meritocracy—reveals that many of them unmistakably express liberal commitments. “We believe in freedom of speech, the right to explore and learn by doing,” explains one hacker editorial, “and the tremendous power of the individual.” By liberal, I don’t only mean a political party. Nor do I mean simply an identity that follows from being a card-carrying member of the ACLU or the Electronic Frontier Foundation. Here I take liberalism to also embrace a set of moral and political commitments: protecting property and civil liberties, promoting individual autonomy and tolerance, securing a free press, ruling through limited government and universal law, and preserving a commitment to equal opportunity and meritocracy. These principles are realized institutionally and culturally in various locations and contexts, including on the Internet and most especially with computer hackers. Hackers traverse a range of morally laced themes such as access, privacy, freedom, law, expressive activity, individualism, transgression, the social good, and sharing, of which free software and open source is just one example.

Hacking, however, cannot be reduced to liberalism alone, for it does not fully capture and exhaust the emotional aspects that hackers experience, most notably deep passion and hacking characterized by an odd confluence of occupational (and pretty constant) frustration and personal/collective joy. As I routinely observed during my fieldwork, hacking—whether in the form of programming, debugging (squeaking errors), or running and maintaining systems (such as servers)—is nothing but (consistently) frustrating. Computers/software are constantly malfunctioning, interoperability is often a nightmare to realize, users abuse the systems they use (and thus break them or require con- stant help), the rate and pace of technological change is relentless, and meeting customer expectations is nearly impossible to pull off predictably.

Despite the endless parade of frustrations, hackers always seem to derive pleasure from hacking (which sits in marked contrast to academics, who often seem to do everything possible to avoid writing). In its more mild form, hacker pleasure approximates Aristotelian eudaimonia, pleasure that prioritizes human flourishing through the development of skills and capacities. In pushing their personal capacities through tinkering with and making technologies, hackers experience the joy that follows from the self-directed realization of skills, goals, and talents. Hacker pleasure, however, is not always so staid and controlled. Less occasionally, but still with notable frequency, hackers experience a more obsessive and blissful state, a pleasure so complete, engrossing, and enveloping, it has the capacity to obliterate self-awareness. In native hack-jargon, this state of bliss is the “deep-hack mode.” Matt Welsh, a well-known hacker and computer scientist, characterizes this mode of “every few phenomena can pull someone out of Deep Hack Mode, with two noted exceptions: being struck by lightning, or worse, your *computer* being struck by lightning.” Because hackers often submit their entire will and being to technology—and are famous for denying their bodies sleep, at least for short periods of time, to do so—their deep hack is characterized by an almost transcendental bliss. In these moments, utility is exceeded so that the self can at once express its inner being and collapse within the objects of its creation. In the aftermath of a particularly pleasurable moment of hacking, there is no autonomous liberal self to be found.

Thus, utility is not the only driving force in hackers’ creative acts. Although they are often “chueled” about the systems they use and repeatedly affirm the artistic elements of their work. A concrete expression of technology/software as art is when source code is written as poetry or alternatively poetry is written in source code. For many free-software hackers, the act of writing software and learning from others far exceeds the simple enactment of an engineer- ing ethic or a technocratic calculus for the sake of becoming a more proficient and efficient programmer or system administrator. Software development and related technical activities are construed as valuable avenues for highly creative forms of expression, even if they openly admit to various constraints.

Evaluating hacking in terms of liberalism and pleasure gets us closer to what makes this site of ethics and technological production so intriguing. Because the joy of hacking intimately shapes the hacker desire for productive freedom, hacker pleasure forms part of the ground for adopting and extending liberal commitments. The unruly, deeply felt pleasures of hacking, which at times stray from liberal visions, hold a substantive link with them. ■