

## IN MEMORIAM

**Irene “Renie” A. Bierman-McKinney  
1942–2015**

**W**riting 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 and very sad, but necessary. This is the case for me in writing what follows. Irene “Renie” Bierman-McKinney passed away on March 8, 2015.

Born Irene Abernathy, Renie attended Western College for Women (now part of Miami University in Ohio) as an undergraduate. She went on to take an MA in Middle East Studies at Harvard and a certificate in Arabic from AUC. By the mid-1970s she was Renie Bierman and, for the next half decade, taught courses on Islamic art at Portland State University and the University of Washington, where we met in 1977. Before I knew what was happening, we had received a National Endowment for the Humanities grant for interpretive exhibitions of “Oriental” carpets in the Washington State cities of Portland, Seattle, Bellingham, and Spokane, as well as Reno, Nevada, with appropriate publications and public presentations. Then it was a twelve-part TV series on Islamic art shown extensively in the Pacific Northwest. All the time she was working on her University of Chicago PhD, 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 the Center for the Advanced Study of the Visual Arts (CASVA), which is part of the National Gallery in Washington, D.C. 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 eight years and later as the chair of the Department of Art History. Outside UCLA,

Renie served as an interim director of the ARCE in Cairo. She was the only art historian president of the Middle East Medievalists (MEM) and an active committee member of many other academic organizations including MESA.

Her willingness to think out of the box and create collaborative projects resulted in a number of international activities, including Director, Council for American Overseas Research Centers (CAORC)/Getty Foundation Professional Mediterranean Heritage Training Program, Istanbul; Co-Director, University of Washington/Getty Foundation Summer Institute in Istanbul; Co-Director and PI, UCLA/Getty Foundation Summer Institute in Istanbul; and Co-Director, American Research Center, Cairo/Institut français d'archéologie orientale (ARCE/IFAO), for a four-year research project in Cairo including three international conferences. Her publications include seven authored or edited books, twenty-five articles, and numerous exhibition pamphlets, catalogue descriptions, and project reports. As 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" (<https://networks.h-net.org/h-islamart>, 9 March 2015).

As a mentor to graduate students, Renie set exceptionally high standards and deliberately limited the number she worked with. As her PhD student Wendy Shaw wrote, reflecting the voices of her nearly one dozen PhDs, "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. She was an amazing advisor for me in knowing how to encourage me through research when I was lost, and also in helping me learn how to reign in wild ideas to more unambiguous forms of expression. She taught me how to make a discipline into a project that could interface with political expression. I feel echoes of her teaching in my own almost every day, especially now that I have my own doctoral students. In this sense, 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 [it], and her professionalism" (<https://networks.h-net.org/h-islamart>, 13 March 2015).

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

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**Peter Heath**  
**1949–2014**

**W**ith the passing of Peter Heath on 12 November 2014, we lost a brilliant scholar and administrator who spent most of his life studying Arabic literature and furthering various academic institutions dealing with Arabic culture. He considered this his mission, in both the U.S. and Arab countries, whether as student and researcher, or as educator and administrator.

Peter started his Arabic and Near East studies in 1967 at Princeton University, where I was lucky to be one of his teachers and a member of his thesis committee (BA, magna cum laude, 1971). After obtaining his PhD from Harvard (1981), he taught cultural studies at Birzeit University, West Bank, Palestine (1981–86). Later, he focused on Arabic language and literature and comparative literature at Washington University in St. Louis (1986–1998), where he was promoted from assistant to associate to full professor.

Thereafter Peter moved to the Middle East, where he spent the last sixteen years of his life; first as provost and professor of Arabic at the American University of Beirut (AUB; 1998–2008) and then as chancellor of the American University of Sharjah (2008–2014).

Peter Heath remained an active scholar all his life. In addition to two major monographs on Ibn Sina and *Sirat 'Antara*, he published dozens of articles in peer-reviewed journals, dealing mainly with Arabic literature, philosophy, folk epics, and cultural studies.

We left Princeton together in 1971, and I was lucky again to go back to AUB in the same year of his arrival as provost, and to be his colleague in the Arabic Department. To me, he remained the same Peter, with his unbelievable stamina, sharp mind, and fulgurating energy, coupled with a positive attitude in tackling the thorniest academic and administrative tasks and, above all, his generous sense of humor to cheer up earnest meetings, enliven the