

Interview with Glaire Anderson

Stacy Miller is CAA director of research and career development.

Glaire Andersen, a historian of Islamic art and a former CAA fellow, was recently appointed assistant professor in the Department of Art at the University of North Carolina (UNC) in Chapel Hill. Her position is a new one that was created to bring an Islamicist to UNC, complementing the strong medieval and South Asian art historians in the department as well as helping to fulfill the university's larger goal to strengthen its Middle Eastern and Islamic cultures programs.

In this interview, which was conducted by e-mail in late 2006, Anderson talks about her role in the department, the challenges of establishing a new area of study at her school, and her current research projects.

Can you describe your new position at the University of North Carolina?

I am an assistant professor of art history in UNC's Department of Art. My primary responsibilities are to create and teach courses in Islamic art history, to research and publish, and to perform administrative service for the university. Since mine is a new tenure-track position in the department, I am creating a group of new courses in my specialty. In addition to an introductory survey of Islamic art, I also teach undergraduate courses on early and medieval Islamic art, architecture (with a focus on the Mediterranean), and urbanism.

My department petitioned the university to create a new position for me. I had no idea when I began my job search that this sort of thing might be possible, so I should explain how it came about. My job search initially consisted of my reading the list of advertisements in my field and applying for the ones I thought I might fit. When I finished my first year on the job market without a position, I changed my approach. I spent some time seriously thinking about what I'd like my professional life to be, reflecting on issues that I hadn't considered in my initial rush to find a job. For example, would I prefer teaching in a large research university or a small liberal-arts college? What balance of research, teaching, and life outside academia would suit me best? Only then was I able to think about what I wanted from a career in art history, and to identify an institution where I'd like to begin a career.



Glaire Anderson

How did you start a new field of study, Islamic art, at the school, and how does it relate to the department and the university?

Coming in as an Islamicist, I had wonderful resources in place already. In addition to my departmental colleagues who are interested in Islamic art, UNC has strong faculty and interdisciplinary programs in Islamic and medieval studies. In many ways, these communities had already laid the groundwork for me—they've been building library and visual resources to support the study of Islamic art for some time.

My specialty complements my department's strengths in medieval European and non-Western art. More broadly, my specialization in early and medieval Islamic art fits well with UNC's programs in Islamic civilization and medieval studies.

Do you see any new developments and trends in the field of art history? How will your program evolve accordingly?

The increasing visibility of non-Western topics within the broader field of art history is one exciting trend; the recognition of early and medieval Islamic art's importance to the study of the larger medieval period is another. Both trends are reflected in my department. I feel incredibly fortunate to have specialists in crusader, late antique, South Asian, African, and Latin American art as colleagues. I've noticed that we share interests in historiography and theoretical issues that can make for interesting connections among our fields. As someone who came to Islamic art having previously focused on early modern Europe, I'm thrilled to see the level of interest and interchange between Islamicists and art historians working in other areas. I would like to continue exploring notions of interchange in my own work, and I hope my research on Islamic villa cultures in the Mediterranean is one way of doing so.

What are the challenges of your new position?

One of the most challenging and exciting aspects was the opportunity to create an entirely new group of courses in Islamic art. It didn't sink in immediately that shaping my courses was up

to me. At first I was preoccupied with the idea that I had to teach certain things, whether or not I was interested in them. Once I started thinking about how I could begin to bring my research interests into teaching, I really enjoyed the process of thinking through what I wanted to teach, and how.

My adjunct teaching experience was a great help, because I'd already created and taught an introductory survey and a seminar course. However, I didn't teach either of them in my first term! But they did give me two good courses on which to build my new offerings in Islamic art at UNC.

How did you create these new classes?

I chose the subject matter according to my research interests and experimented a bit based on my adjunct experience, or according to departmental or institutional needs. For example, I'd found that skimming through a thousand years and half the globe was a frustrating but unavoidable part of teaching an introduction to Islamic art. For my first semester at UNC, I decided to focus on the time period in which Islamic art was formed instead of teaching my usual survey course. This became my first new course, "Art in the Age of the Caliphate."

My second new course was a compromise. I was given the basic subject—Medieval Art in the Mediterranean/City as Monument—and asked to create a course. From my interest in Islamic urbanism and the historiography of the medieval Mediterranean, I invented a class that focused on medieval urbanism in the Islamicate Mediterranean, using the city of Córdoba (the focus of my dissertation) as a case study.

As an adjunct, I had also created a seminar on "Islamic Palaces, Gardens, and Court Cultures" because I was interested in the broader context of the case study in my dissertation. This is a course that I'll continue to offer and revise in the future as my research interests develop. For example, at the moment I'm writing a grant proposal to support the travel and research necessary to incorporate more North African material into both the palaces class and my other courses.

Topics for graduate seminars are inspired by interests I developed or classes I took as a doctoral student. Upcoming seminar topics include representations of Islamic architecture, Orientalism and visual culture, and the historiography of Islamic art in medieval Iberia, for example.

You are currently at work on an edited book, *Revisiting al-Andalus: Perspectives on the Art and Material Culture of Islamic Iberia and Beyond*. Tell us something about it.

Revisiting al-Andalus is an interdisciplinary volume of articles

that I coedited with a good friend and colleague, Mariam Rosser-Owen, a curator of Islamic art at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. The title alludes to Jerrilyn Dodds's catalogue for the Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition *al-Andalus: The Art of Islamic Spain* (1992), a milestone in the Anglo American scholarship in our field. Mariam and I brought together a group of international scholars of art, architectural and urban history, and archaeology to illustrate how the study of Islamic Iberia in the United States and Britain has developed in the wake of the Metropolitan catalogue. In addition to articles that explore connections between Andalusí literature and art, or domestic architecture and the processes of urbanism in medieval Iberia, we've included essays that examine cultural transfer from the Iberian Peninsula to the New World, and modern architectural and historiographical attempts to construct an Andalusí cultural identity. We're very happy that many scholars involved with the Metropolitan catalogue, as well as some of our colleagues in Spain, have participated. My contribution to the volume came from my dissertation research and discusses the architecture of tenth-century suburban villas in Córdoba, the capital of early Islamic Iberia.

My current book project also derives from my dissertation and focuses on suburban estate (*munya*) patronage in tenth-century Umayyad Córdoba. In it, I investigate the estates as a social, urban, and landscape phenomenon. This topic relates to my broader interest in notions of interchange because it adds a medieval, and an Islamic, case study to the broader history of the villa in the Mediterranean.

Now that you've completed almost a year at UNC, what issues do you see coming for your work and your department?

Most of my first semester was spent settling into a new institution and planning the courses I'll be teaching for the next few years. Now I see the real excitement and challenge beginning as I find the best way to balance my new responsibilities. I look forward to working on my book and to developing projects that have interested me since I finished my PhD. As an adjunct professor, I was surprised to discover the extent to which teaching shapes the way I think about my research. Likewise, I'm looking forward to learning from my students. I'd like to begin to repay the commitment that my department and the university have shown me as I work with committees both inside and outside my department. ■