



Glaire Anderson,
Step by Step Guide: Finding Your Islamic Art History Graduate Program
2023

WELCOME

I'm so glad you are interested in pursuing graduate study (or continuing your graduate study) in Islamic art history! I've put together this step-by-step guide to finding and choosing programs that fit your goals, priorities, and interests. If you follow the steps I've outlined here you will come out with a top three list and some backup choices as well, and more clarity around **what** you want to do as a graduate student in the field of Islamic art history, **why** you want to do it, **where** you can go to pursue your studies, and **with whom**.

Do take and keep notes as you go through these steps. Take as much time as you need to reflect on each step before moving to the next.

If it's helpful to read about me and the path I took into Islamic art history (it wasn't a direct one!), you can read about me at:

<https://glairedanderson.com/about/>

Let's get started!

1. Why do you want to go to graduate school? List as many reasons as you can think of, with a sentence or two to explain. The aim is to get very clear on why you want to do this.
2. Now I want you to do a bit of internet research and educate yourself on reasons why you might decide **NOT** to go to grad school.

- Do a Google search for "should I go to graduate school for art history" for instance, or read Thomas H. Benton's 2010 essay in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*:

<http://chronicle.com/article/The-Big-Lie-About-the-Life-of/63937/>)

- Have a look through some of the grad school-related posts offered by Dr. Karen Kelsky, in her The Professor Is In blog: <https://theprofessorisin.com/pearlsofwisdom/>

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I'm not trying to dissuade you from applying to grad school if that is your dream.

I want you in the field, and if you're a woman, someone from a Muslim-majority country or heritage, or a person of color (POC, BIPOC, or if you're in the UK, Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic (BAME)), or you identify as part of any systemically minoritized group, the academy needs you if it is going to progress and change for the better.

However, I do want you to go into your graduate school application **with clarity**, because understanding the reasons **why** you might decide grad school isn't something you want to pursue right now can save you a lot of time and headaches later.

3. Ok, now go back and look at the reasons you said you wanted to go to grad school. If you still want to do it, then great. Let's move on to the next step.
4. **Where** can you go to pursue what you want to study – which graduate schools offer programs in your area of interest? You can list as many as you like, but have a minimum of 4 to 6 programs that offer graduate degrees in your area of interest.

For example, here are a few well-known centers where you can focus on Islamic art/architectural history in the US and UK:

US

Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture, MIT:

<https://akpia.mit.edu/>

Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture, Harvard:

<https://agakhan.fas.harvard.edu/harvard-akpia>

Silsila: Center for Material Histories, NYU:

<https://as.nyu.edu/content/nyu-as/as/research-centers/silsila.html>

UK

Khalili Research Centre for the Art and Material Culture of the Middle East, Oxford:

<https://krc.web.ox.ac.uk/#/>

SOAS, University of London:

<https://www.soas.ac.uk/art/programmes/maaime/>

School of History of Art, University of Edinburgh:

<https://www.eca.ed.ac.uk/history-art>

The list is not at all exhaustive, so don't stop with those!

You may be wondering, *how do I find others?* A good first step is to explore the membership directories for the two main Islamic Art History professional associations:

Historians of Islamic Art Association

<https://www.historiansofislamicart.org/>

Association for Modern and Contemporary Art from the Arab World, Iran and Turkey (AMCA)

<https://amcainternational.org/about/>

5. Once you've found who's actively teaching in the field, consider **who** you might want to study with – at the PhD level the advisor can be more important than the institution itself. So keeping this in mind, **who would be a good potential advisor for the work that you want to do?**

One way to narrow down potential advisors is to think back on things you read in your classes. Which articles or books really spoke to you? Take a look at your bookshelf. What have you read that really sparked your interest, made you feel like *YES – that's the kind of work I want to do!* Who are the people who wrote or are writing the work that inspired you to want to pursue study in this field? If you don't have an immediate answer to this question, spend some time with recent books and articles in the field – what you're going to look for are (usually) academic books published in the last ten or twenty years. Academic books are published by university presses, and by scholarly presses such as Bloomsbury, Brill, Francis & Taylor (previously Ashgate), and so on.

If you go through this process, it should catch both mid-career scholars who will be actively recruiting prospective students, as well as senior scholars who are the big names in the field, but who aren't so close to retirement that they're no longer accepting graduate students. Yes, please keep in mind that the big names that immediately come to mind and who have written tons of books may be retired or close to retirement, so don't stop your search with those names and think you're done. Do your research. Find out who's actively writing in the field.

Consider your top three choices, and for each one write a sentence or two about why you want to go there and study with that particular scholar. Don't limit yourself to the purely academic reasons. It's equally important to think about your whole situation and your priorities as a person, not just as a graduate student. Do you want to go to program x because it's near family and you'll have support with childcare? Or do you want to go there because it's far from family and you want to stretch your wings, experience the lifestyle in a different place? Whatever your reasons are, they are all important and valid – the main thing is to be clear in your own mind of what's important to you and why.

CONTACTING POTENTIAL ADVISORS

Ok, so now you've got your targeted list of three potential advisors and programs that you would ideally want to work with. Now it's time to write to the professors that you've identified! This is one of the most important steps in the whole process and not something that you're going to want to rush. First impressions count - you don't want to

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accidentally hurt your chances by sending an ill-considered email. For this step it might be helpful to seek advice, for example:

<https://theprofessorisin.com/2011/07/25/how-to-write-an-email-to-a-potential-ph-d-advisor/>

I am not affiliated with The Professor Is In, but I have been reading Dr. Karen Kelsky's blog for many years, starting when I was an early tenure-track Assistant Professor, and in my experience her advice is accurate. So much so that I have been recommending her book and her blog to friends who are early career academics, and to all my graduate students.

ADVICE

You can expect to hear back from a prospective advisor in two weeks or even more. If you haven't heard back in two weeks do send a follow up email to politely alert them to your initial email and give them the chance to respond. Keep in mind they are busy, may be on research leave, traveling, etc. Hearing back can take some time, and for this reason you'll want to start your process early.

While you're waiting to hear back, you should be carefully reading through all the information available on your target advisor's, department's, and university graduate school websites. As you're going through this information, make a list of questions that come up, whether it's about their research, or questions about putting together your proposal, questions about funding, the logistics of moving through the program, etc.

ONCE YOU HEAR BACK

So you've heard back from your potential advisor and they've responded to let you know that they are accepting students. Wonderful! Make sure you respond and acknowledge the time they took to respond to you, and any further information or advice they may have shared. Follow up on anything they suggested in their response.

As the final step in your application process, ask the potential advisor(s) if they're willing and available to have a brief meeting virtually, or ideally in person, to discuss your background, interests, and goals. This will give you the opportunity to meet the person who's going to be your guide through your graduate school journey. It will give you the chance to get a sense of their personality and what it might be like to work with them. Remember, this is going to be one of the most important people in your journey for the next several many years, and ideally for your career beyond graduate school, so you want to get a sense of who they are and what they're like as a person – not just as a name on the cover of a book.

If you haven't already found out from the information you researched on the websites, ask whether their department has visiting days/open days for prospective students? If so, sign up for them, and any opportunity to get information from the administrators and other faculty who can advise you about the application process –if they offer this you'll likely be meeting members of the admissions team, as well as current students, and other professors in the department, and you'll want to take the opportunity to introduce yourself, chat and get a feeling for the department.

Besides getting a feel for the department culture visiting campus and speaking to the people involved in admissions will give you the very important opportunity to ask any questions you have about funding – a crucial consideration as you’re considering which graduate program you will ultimately choose! Ask about the availability of funding packages and other sources of support – are there fellowships that you can apply to, what does the program offer in terms of teaching fellowships, research assistantships, support for field research, attending and participating in conferences, and also the specific application requirements for that program.

NEXT STEPS

You’ve reached a crucial step in your path to find **your** top graduate programs - congratulations! You’ve put in the time to reflect on why you want to go, and where the people and programs are that make the most sense for your goals and priorities, and you’ve heard back from potential advisors that you would be excited to work with.

Don’t forget:

- There’s lots of good advice **available freely** on the internet for preparing proposals, applications, revising, etc. Put your research skills to work to find it.
- You may have help available to you through your previous school’s Writing Center. You may already be a great writer, but even so – writing is a skill and a craft that we all work at to improve, in graduate school and beyond, so don’t hesitate to get support if you need it. I want you to have the best chance of getting into your program, if that’s the right decision for you, so that you can get into graduate school, and get to work diversifying academia and doing the work you want to see in the world. If getting there means getting feedback, editing, or other kinds of support, know that it’s ok to get support.
- The Professor Is In* offers one-on-one assistance with grad school applications (Again, I am not affiliated with *The Professor Is In*, but I have been reading Dr. Karen Kelsky’s blog since I was a new tenure-track Assistant Professor. I find her advice accurate and consistent with my experiences in academia, and I recommend her book and blog to friends, colleagues, and my own graduate students): <https://theprofessorisin.com/graduate-school-application-assistance/>

Working with me

If you're interested in working with me, there are a few options:

- As a postgraduate student at the University of Edinburgh - see my faculty page for the postgraduate programmes in which I teach:
<https://www.eca.ed.ac.uk/profile/dr-glaire-anderson>
- Private academic/career advising - contact me at info@glairedanderson.com

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- Participate in a summer learning opportunity, internship, field trip, or event. Info on these is circulated via my personal email list and the Digital Lab for Islamic Visual Culture & Collections list, which you can join via the website forms:

<https://glairedanderson.com/contact/>

<https://digitallabivcc.com/contact/>

A FINAL NOTE

If this has been helpful and/or you have feedback to improve what I've offered here, I'd love to hear from you. Please drop me a line at glaire.anderson@ed.ac.uk.

GOOD LUCK!!

