

| Małgorzata Redlak-Zajac

(3 September 1953 – 26 May 2020)

There is no better place than the Museum.

May 2020 brought us, the personnel of the National Museum in Warsaw's Department of Oriental Art, and all Museum staff, the sad news of the death of our colleague, Dr Małgorzata Redlak-Zajac. The departure of this outstanding expert on Islamic art marks an irremediable loss for Polish Oriental studies and archaeology, and for us, her co-workers (and sometimes disciples too), it means parting with a preciously kind soul. Dr Małgorzata Redlak-Zajac was a cordial, warm person, entirely committed to the cause of disseminating knowledge on art, of educating young people and inspiring them to discover culture in all its aspects. Her educational work was of particular concern to Dr Redlak-Zajac. An extremely modest person, she never sought applause despite her extensive knowledge, and invested not only professional but also private time to popularize Oriental art in Poland.

She was the first arabist in the history of the National Museum in Warsaw. She started in 1988 at the then Department of Asian Countries' Art. Over the years, she contributed significantly to the development of what is today the Islamic Art Collection. With her characteristic perseverance, she sought out and gathered examples of Islamic art dispersed around the Museum's various collections. Her academic inquisitiveness and fluency in the Arabic language allowed her to determine the dating and place of origin of numerous items. Her activities started arousing museum professionals' interest in Islamic-culture art, which, unlike the artistic heritage of the Far East, had until then remained a peripheral subject of research. As early as 1991, she organized – together with the Department's then head curator, Prof. Tadeusz Majda – the Warsaw Museum's first presentation of Middle Eastern art. Over her twenty-six-year-long career, she was a co-author of what became acknowledged as extremely important exhibitions of Islamic art in the history of Polish museology. Among those were, notably, *Persian Art 1770–1924* and *Masterpieces of Persian Art from Polish Collections*. The presentation of Iranian art of the Qajar period (1770–1924) – a groundbreaking event not only in Poland, but in this part of Europe as well – came at a time when interest in the Persian artistic heritage of that period was only awakening among Western historians of Islamic art. *Masterpieces...*, in turn, offered the Polish public a unique opportunity to admire historical Iranian artworks in one exhibition, instead of dispersed at various museum institutions around the country. She also co-curated exhibitions abroad. The 1999 Turkish exhibition, *Savaş ve Barış* – known in Poland as *War and Peace* – echoed far and wide among historians of Ottoman art. The same was true for the exhibition commemorating six hundred years of Polish-Turkish relations, presented at the Sakıp Sabancı Museum in Istanbul in 2014.

Małgorzata Redlak was the author of numerous scholarly papers on Islamic, and in particular Arabic art. Among the most important of those were *A Sketch on the Ornament in Islamic Art*,¹

¹ Małgorzata Redlak, "Szkic o ornamencie w sztuce islamu / Notes sur l'ornement dans l'art islamique" [Notes on the ornament in Islamic art], in *Fotologia: Egipt – światło i fotosynteza. Pruszkowski / Photologie : Egypte – lumière et photosynthèse de Pruszkowski*, Dorota Folga-Januszczyńska, ed. (Warsaw, 1993), pp. 33–38.

Mameluk Revivalism – Egyptian and Syro-Palestinian Metalwares From the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries in the Collection of the National Museum in Warsaw,² or *Egyptian Imitations of Chinese Celadon from the 14th–15th Centuries Found at Kom el-Dikka in Alexandria*.³ She was also the academic editor of numerous publications, such as the Polish version of the seminal two-volume study of Islamic art by Richard Ettinghausen, Oleg Grabar, Sheila Blair et al.⁴

Dr Redlak-Zajac was also active during the excavations carried out by the Polish-Egyptian archaeological mission in Kom el-Dikka in Alexandria, where she examined ceramics finds. She devoted her doctoral dissertation to them, titled “Underglaze-Painted Egyptian Ceramics from the Fatimid Period (11th–12th Centuries) Based on Finds from Kom el-Dikka in Alexandria.” She participated in many scientific projects, that included “The Transfer of Arab Culture in Polish History,” which involved numerous scholars of Polish Oriental studies, and, despite being seriously ill, wrote two extensive published essays towards its success.⁵ In parallel with her work at the National Museum in Warsaw, she taught Islamic art and architecture at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the University of Warsaw for over a decade. Among her students, she was considered an extraordinarily gentle and kind instructor who showed a lot of understanding for youthful exuberance and its often eccentric ideas. With truly maternal solicitude, she took under her wings those who demonstrated an interest in the subject of Islamic art. Constantly stressing the value of sharing knowledge with others, Dr Redlak-Zajac facilitated contacts, introducing people to each other. She thus fostered a group of experts on Oriental artistic heritage who continue her work.

Małgosia – as we addressed her and still think of her – used to say that “there is no better place to work than the Museum.” She was convinced that it was a hugely influential institution and believed that the Museum’s supreme and unceasing reason of existence, as well as the curator’s moral duty, was to educate. She shared that conviction with every newcomer. There was something noble and touching about her existential attitude. We did not realize how great an influence her silent, quiet presence had on us and the Department’s atmosphere. We miss her kind advice, helpful cues, meticulous attention to detail, and characteristic phrases that have permanently entered our departmental vocabulary. She was also a genuinely gifted writer who possessed the ability, rare today, to express her thoughts in a language both precise

² Ead., “Mameluk Revivalism – Egyptian and Syro-Palestinian Metalwares From the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries in the Collection of the National Museum in Warsaw,” trans. Bartek Świetlik, *Journal of the National Museum in Warsaw*, no. 4(40) (2015), pp. 278–303.

³ Ead., “Egyptian Imitations of Chinese Celadon from the 14th–15th centuries Found at Kom el-Dikka in Alexandria,” *Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean*, no. 26/1 (2017), pp. 59–84.

⁴ Richard Ettinghausen, Oleg Grabar, Marilyn Jenkins-Madina, *Sztuka i architektura islamu 650–1250*, Małgorzata Redlak, ed., trans. Jolanta Kozłowska, Ivonna Nowicka, Katarzyna Pachniak (Warsaw, 2007); originally published as *The Art and Architecture of Islam 650–1250* (New Haven, CT, 2001); Sheila S. Blair, Jonathan M. Bloom, *Sztuka i architektura islamu 1250–1800*, Małgorzata Redlak, ed., trans. Jolanta Kozłowska, Ivonna Nowicka, Katarzyna Pachniak (Warsaw, 2012); originally published as *The Art and Architecture of Islam 1250–1800* (New Haven–London, 1995).

⁵ Małgorzata Redlak, “Najcenniejsze zabytki arabskiego rękodziela artystycznego z wieków VII–XVI” [The most precious examples of Arabic arts and crafts from the 7th–16th centuries], in *Wpływ kultury arabskiej na sztukę polską. Rzemiosło artystyczne, architektura i malarstwo* [The influence of Arabic culture on Polish art. Arts and crafts, architecture, painting], Tadeusz Majda, Agata S. Nalborczyk, eds (Warsaw, 2019), pp. 19–48. Transfer Kultury Arabskiej w Dziejach Polski, vol. 3; ead., “O wybranych arabskich średniowiecznych wyrobach użytkowych z VIII–XVI wieku w Kolekcji Sztuki Islamu Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie” [On selected Arabic medieval vernacular objects from the 8th–16th centuries in the Collection of Islamic Art of the National Museum in Warsaw], in *Wpływ kultury arabskiej...*, op. cit, pp. 49–93.

and beautiful. Dr Małgorzata Redlak-Zajac was probably the only person who, being superbly knowledgeable about the holdings of the National Museum's Oriental collection, knew by heart nearly all of its almost 10,000 inventory numbers.

This is the image of her – hard-working, persevering, and cordial – that we shall carry on in our memory, not only in remembrance of such an extraordinary person, but also to continue her legacy.

Joanna Bojarska-Cieślik, Anna Katarzyna Maleszko,
Magdalena Pinker, and Joanna Popkowska
Translated by Marcin Wawrzyńczak