

Fifteenth Presentation of

# The Charles Lang Freer Medal

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NATIONAL MUSEUM of  
**ASIAN ART**



Smithsonian





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**(Detail) Two demons, fettered**, Iran or Central Asia, Timurid period, 15th century, ink, opaque watercolor and gold on paper, National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution, Freer Collection, Purchase—Charles Lang Freer Endowment, F1937.25

# History of the Freer Medal

The Freer Medal was inaugurated in 1956 in commemoration of the one-hundredth anniversary of the birth of the founder of the Freer Gallery of Art, Charles Lang Freer. Born on February 25, 1854, in Kingston, New York, Freer was a devoted student and collector of American art of the Aesthetic Movement and of Asian art. On May 9, 1923, the Freer Gallery of Art opened its doors, fulfilling its founder's vision of making his gift of nearly 10,000 Asian and American works of art available to the public. The Freer Medal acknowledges scholars who have advanced Freer's commitment to research and scholarship. The medal itself was designed by the American sculptor Paulanship (1885–1966), who was much inspired by classical art.

## Previous recipients

Osvald Sirén

(1956; Chinese art)

Oleg Grabar

(2001; Islamic art)

Ernst Kühnel

(1960; Islamic art)

James Cahill

(2010; Chinese art)

Yashiro Yukio

(1965; Chinese and Japanese art)

John Rosenfield

(2012; East Asian art)

Tanaka Ichimatsu

(1973; Japanese art)

Dame Jessica Rawson

(2017; Chinese art)

Laurence Sickman

(1973; Japanese art)

Roman Ghirshman

(1974; Ancient Near Eastern art)

Max Loehr

(1983; Chinese art)

Stella Kramrisch

(1985; South Asian art)

Alexander Soper

(1990; Chinese art)

Sherman E. Lee

(1998; Asian art)



**(Detail) Portrait of a Painter**, Turkey, Istanbul, Ottoman period, attributed to Sinan Bey, 1478–81, opaque watercolor, ink, and gold on paper, National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution, Freer Collection, Purchase—Charles Lang Freer Endowment, F1932.28



# Opening Remarks

**Chase F. Robinson**, Dame Jillian Sackler Director of the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery and the Freer Gallery of Art

It is my distinct pleasure to welcome you this evening for the award of the Freer Medal for exemplary contributions to the field of Asian art and scholarship. This award, named for museum founder Charles Lang Freer, has been presented on an ad hoc basis since its inauguration in 1956. The Freer Medal honors persons who, over the course of their career, have contributed in a significant and often transformative way to the understanding of the arts of Asia. This is only the fifteenth such medal to be awarded, and its short roster of preeminent recipients testifies to the thoughtful selection of the honorees—scholars of truly extraordinary distinction. Above all, today's ceremony is a celebration of creativity and intellectual impact.

In 1923, the Freer Gallery of Art opened—America's first national art museum. In 1987, it was joined by (and conjoined to) the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery. For a century, the museum has been devoted to preserving, researching, and exhibiting Asian art objects and works of American art of the Aesthetic Movement that embody Charles Lang Freer's vision. Over that time, the National Museum of Asian Art has built its collections, expanded its physical space, and achieved a reputation for excellence through research, conservation, publications, exhibitions, and scholarly exchanges. As it enters its second century, the museum strives to reinforce its traditional strengths while also discovering ways of enhancing and amplifying its impact. Our centennial year is both a milestone and a springboard for our next one hundred years. One of the most effective means to demonstrate our commitment to scholarship is by presenting the Freer Medal to an outstanding scholar, whose work has had a profound impact on the worlds of academia and museums.

This evening we honor the career of Gülru Necipoğlu, the Aga Khan Professor of Islamic Art and the Director of the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at Harvard University. Dr. Necipoğlu's groundbreaking research spans millennia of the art, history, and geography of the Islamic world and embodies the values that the Freer Medal was intended to honor. Her rigorous inquiries into pre-modern architectural practices, the role of cosmopolitanism, the aesthetics of ornament, and the role of optics have transformed our understanding of the arts and architecture of the Islamic world. Throughout her illustrious career, Dr. Necipoğlu has repeatedly explored different facets of the complex artistic and cultural relationships of the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal empires and

their interactions with both Europe and China, countering long-held, Orientalist assumptions and reconfiguring our perception of the region and its architectural heritage. Over the years, she has taught and inspired generations of students who are continuing her remarkable legacy, both nationally and internationally.

Born in Istanbul, Gülru Necipoğlu attended Robert College, the American high school in Turkey's capital, and received her bachelor's degree in art history from Wesleyan University with a focus on late medieval and Renaissance art. She traces her interest in the arts of the Islamic world to her undergraduate years, when her intellectual curiosity was piqued by an essay assignment on Christian and early Islamic arts, a topic that has remained a lifelong passion. In 1986, Dr. Necipoğlu completed her master's and PhD degrees at Harvard University with a focus on architecture of the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal empires. Prior to graduation, she had already established her reputation in the field of Ottoman studies with a seminar paper on the Süleymaniye complex, which was published in 1985.<sup>1</sup> The article represented a break from the prevailing Orientalist notions that essentialized and exoticized Islamic architecture and framed it as static and timeless and in stark comparison with the dynamism of European art. Dr. Necipoğlu developed a synchronic approach to the art and architecture of the Ottoman empire in relation to its geographic neighbors and presented a more complex perspective, taking advantage of the wealth of largely neglected archival material both to contextualize and to offer a more layered approach to the art and culture of the Ottoman world.

Dr. Necipoğlu's "textual archaeology" also formed the foundation of her doctoral thesis "The Formation of an Ottoman Imperial Tradition: The Topkapı Palace in the 15th and 16th Centuries," for which she won the King Fahd Grand Prize for Excellence in Research in Islamic Architecture. Her thesis formed the basis of her 1991 publication *Architecture, Ceremonial and Power: The Topkapı Palace in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries*. It was printed in Turkish in 2007 and has been reprinted twice since then. A review describes Dr. Necipoğlu as demonstrating "an impressive grasp of primary and secondary sources in a variety of languages, including fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Ottoman points of view and contemporary European sources."<sup>2</sup> When reflecting on her work, Dr. Necipoğlu recalled that the documents and archival research she uncovered during her graduate research on the Topkapı Palace were a turning point for her research and continued to inform her groundbreaking publications in the years to come.

After receiving her PhD, Dr. Necipoğlu launched her academic career at Columbia University as the Mellon-David Heyman Fellow in Urban Studies and a Lecturer in the department of Art History and Archaeology. The following year, she joined Harvard's Department of Fine Arts as Assistant Professor and after just two years became the John L. Loeb Associate Professor of the



Humanities. In 1993, Dr. Necipoğlu was appointed the Aga Khan Professor of Islamic Art and the Director of the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Art in Harvard's Department of History of Art and Architecture, a position she currently holds. As she recalls, as a student there were no tenured female professors in the department, but when she joined, Dr. Necipoğlu and several other new colleagues helped pave the way toward more diverse representation.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout her career, Dr. Necipoğlu's passion to teach, mentor, and inspire students has remained a cornerstone of her career. She has supervised almost thirty PhD dissertations and is currently overseeing many others. According to her student Ünver Rüstem, now teaching Islamic art at Johns Hopkins University, "It has been the privilege of a lifetime to witness, and benefit from, the rare combination of intellectual prowess and personal approachability that distinguishes Gülru Necipoğlu, a scholar whose character is as winning as her contributions to the field." Another student, Emine Fetvacı, the Calderwood Professor in Islamic and Asian Art at Boston College, remembers that "Dr. Necipoğlu taught us to respect the scholarship of others, as well as to respect the people and artworks we study, to give credit to those who have gone before, whether it is artisans of the past or scholars of the present."

Dr. Necipoğlu has noted that one of the most rewarding experiences of her career has been serving since 1993 as editor of *Muqarnas: An Annual on the Visual Cultures of the Islamic World*. The preeminent publication and the first academic journal devoted to Islamic visual and material cultures, *Muqarnas* has transformed the field and provides a platform for both established and emerging scholars to publish their work. In the foreword of the thirtieth volume, Dr. Necipoğlu writes that one of the main objectives of the journal has been "to shed light on the underestimated complexity of Islamic art, as an antidote to its presumed 'otherness' and easily digestible simplicity."<sup>4</sup> As editor, she formulated inspiring new directions for *Muqarnas*, including the creation of special volumes devoted to the publication of critical primary sources, both written and visual.<sup>5</sup>

While teaching and serving as director at the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Art and as editor of *Muqarnas*, Dr. Necipoğlu has continued with her pioneering research and publications. One example is the cross-disciplinary and award-winning publication *The Topkapı Scroll—Geometry and Ornament in Islamic Architecture* (1995). In this seminal work, she both analyzes and contextualizes a 29.5 meter-long Timurid scroll, which had baffled scholars for centuries. In a review of the book, Lisa Golombek, curator emerita at the Royal Ontario Museum, writes of Dr. Necipoğlu, "the author's ability to meet this challenge with courage, imagination, and erudition makes this book one of the most important contributions to the understanding of Islamic art."<sup>6</sup> Throughout her career, Dr. Necipoğlu has also explored the religious and civic architecture of

the Ottoman master architect Sinan (died 1588), an interest that laid the foundation for her magisterial 2005 study, *The Age of Sinan: Architectural Culture in the Ottoman Empire*. Using her trademark “archival archaeology” approach to source material, Dr. Necipoğlu expertly details how Sinan created a layered system of mosque types to build some of his most extraordinary and celebrated structures. A review by Çiğdem Kafescioğlu, professor at Boğaziçi University, hails the book as “the most thorough ground to date of the work of this architectural genius” and writes that “[through] autobiographies of the architect, histories, treatises, Ottoman and European archival documents, endowment deeds, legal texts, ambassadorial records, travelogues, visual sources, a world of intense architectural activity becomes palpably alive.”<sup>7</sup>

In addition to her monographic studies, Dr. Necipoğlu has written over forty-five articles and edited eight scholarly volumes in addition to the annual journal *Muqarnas*. One such edited work is *A Companion to Islamic Art and Architecture*, a two-volume reader of more than fifty commissioned essays in the Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Art History series, in collaboration with F. Barry Flood, the William R. Kenan Jr. Professor of the Humanities at New York University. Commenting on their collaboration, Dr. Flood recalls, “It is difficult to overstate the contribution that Gülru Necipoğlu has made to the discipline of art history. She is, moreover, the perfect collaborator, as I discovered in our work together on the *Companion* volumes: generous, meticulous and always with an infectiously mischievous sense of humor that revealed itself at the perfect moment.” Her *Arts of Ornamental Geometry: A Persian Compendium on Similar and Complementary Interlocking Figures* was the winner of the “26th World Award for Book of the Year” of Iran’s 2019 Ministry of Culture and Book Award Secretariat. She also co-edited the monumental two-volume book in the Harvard AKPIA Publication Series entitled *Treasures of Knowledge: An Inventory of the Ottoman Palace Library (1502/3–1503/4)*. Dr. Konrad Hirschler of the University of Hamburg celebrated this as a “massive” and “ground-breaking study that will remain with us for many decades.”<sup>8</sup>

In recognition of her lifelong academic contributions, Dr. Necipoğlu has been the recipient of numerous awards commemorating her transformative research and publications. In 2021, she received a prestigious Lifelong Achievement Award for Contribution to Architecture from the Turkish Professional Architects Association. In 2014, the *Hürriyet* newspaper selected her as one of the most influential women in the history of the Turkish Republic. Dr. Necipoğlu is an elected member of the British Academy, the American Philosophical Society, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the Centro Internazionale di Studi di Architettura Andrea Palladio in Vicenza, Italy, and has served as Slade Professor of Fine Art in the University of Cambridge.

By awarding her the Freer Medal, we hope to add one more commendation to her countless accolades. An original scholar as well as an invaluable teacher and mentor, Dr. Necipoğlu's boundless curiosity, brilliant vision, and intellectual rigor have enabled her to transform the study of the arts and architecture of the Islamic world, and with it, the scholarly and public understanding of its nuances, complexities, and its interactions with and contributions to other traditions.

Please join me in celebrating Dr. Gülru Necipoğlu. Thank you.

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<sup>1</sup> Gizem Tongo, "Interview with Professor Gülru Necipoğlu," *Tarih: Graduate History Journal*, no. 1 (2009): 7, 10.

<sup>2</sup> Carol Garrett Fisher, *Turkish Studies Association Bulletin* 17, no. 1 (1993): 178, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43384418>.

<sup>3</sup> Tongo, "Interview with Professor Gülru Necipoğlu," 6.

<sup>4</sup> Gülru Necipoğlu, "Reflections on thirty years of *Muqarnas*," *Muqarnas Online* 30, no. 1 (2014): 2.

<sup>5</sup> Necipoğlu, "Reflections on thirty years of *Muqarnas*," 6.

<sup>6</sup> Lisa Golombek, *Ars Orientalis* 27 (1997): 137, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4629519>.

<sup>7</sup> Çiğdem Kafescioğlu, *Renaissance Studies* 20, no. 4 (2006): 576, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24416909>.

<sup>8</sup> Konrad Hirschler, *Journal of the Ottoman and Turkish Studies Association* 7, no. 1 (Spring 2020): 244–49.



**Folio from a *Divan* (collected poems)** by Sultan Ahmad Jalayir, Iraq, Baghdad, ca. 1400, ink, color, and gold on paper, National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution, Freer Collection, Purchase—Charles Lang Freer Endowment, F1932.33



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**Kneeling angel with cup and bottle**, Turkey, Istanbul, Ottoman period, attributed to Shah Quli, mid-16th century, ink, opaque watercolor and gold on paper, National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution, Freer Collection, Purchase—Charles Lang Freer Endowment, F1933.6