

# Material Culture/Images

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Images are depictions. What is not so simple is *perceiving* an image. We learn to perceive images, that is to recognize them with understanding, through the filter of cultural experience. Our cultural values give meaning to both the content of images and their physical form. These values change over time and place and they vary according to the position of the viewer within a society. As a result, the same image can be perceived in alternate ways by people at the same time and can also be valued differently over time. Images travel across time and space and can be interpreted many ways in various cultures at different times, too. Thus, when we analyze an image, historians pay close attention to the image itself, the context within which it was created, and to the many different ways that image may have been understood over time.



Historians vary in their approaches to analyzing the relationship between an image and its society and thus understanding its meaning. For instance, one of the first steps is to ask questions about how an image was made. What kind of ink or brush was used for a drawing? How was a shape on a ceramic vessel created and at what temperature was the glaze fired? How complex was the loom that wove a figure in a textile? And, how many pixels are necessary for a given quality of a digital image? Answers to these questions and others give information about the various technologies used in a society for making images and the necessary skill for using the technologies. They also can suggest social hierarchies of the medium in which the image is made, such as who had access to various materials and methods of creating images.

Historians also perceive meaning in the social relationships between the makers and uses of the image. We probe the social value of the image as well as its makers, sponsors, and audiences and ask the following kinds of questions: What group in the society made the image? What is the subject of the image? Under what conditions was it made? Who sponsored the making? What is the social status of the people who used it (and of those who could not)? Where was it used and for what purpose—for affirmation? deception? These questions include gender and sexual identity issues both in historical and contemporary societies.

Other historians seek to understand an image by looking at how it relates to what it represents, its aesthetic properties, and how it functions. Here the meaning of the image and its function are perceived through systems of relationships. Is the image a direct likeness of what it represents? Is it an abstraction? Is the representation a part of the whole, such as a head standing for a body or a tree for a landscape? Does the image stand as a sign or symbol for other cultural values such as religion, ethnicity, political belief, or social status? How does the style of this representation differ from that of similar images and thereby differ in meaning? How do its audiences see it?

By seeking answers to these various questions, historians begin to unpack the larger

meaning of an image—that is, the complex ways images make meanings for their audiences at given historical moments. Exploring even some of these questions helps you to develop a deeper understanding of the image you are looking at.

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Images are depictions in two dimensions. In other words, an image has length and width but not depth. An image is a *representation* of something on a flat plane: a person, animal, object, or element of landscape. Images can be simple, focusing on one element, such as a house or a person, or even alphabetic letters such as logos or calligraphy. Images can also be complex, layering and assembling individual images. Murals and landscapes



*Husrev Kutuphane*

are complex images. Often surfaces are covered with multiple images that are related to each other either in sequence or by association. Images in comic strips relate to each other sequentially.

Images are related to other images by association when putting them together creates a meaning greater than the single image. Photographs that show officials meeting together suggest a commonality of purpose by association. Likewise, images of people show modes of dress and often furnishings. The person, clothing, furnishings are associated together. The style of dress or furnishing, whether elaborate or simple, is deeply involved in the culture and communicates a meaning greater than any one element.

Images can be fashioned to give the illusion of depth. Societies have accomplished this in many different ways. Today we are most familiar with what are called single point or retinal perspective images in which objects in the distance appear smaller. Many societies understand the mathematics of creating such an image, so that depth is represented as the eye perceives it. Yet many societies have chosen to indicate depth in images in different ways, and often create devices (such as shadows and holographic techniques) to show depth.

Most common among ways of conceptualizing depth are layering—putting images of the same size in front of one another—and rows. With rows, the upper part of the image appears to be further away and the lower part appears closer to the viewer. Many medieval manuscripts from the Middle East use this technique. Color layering is a technique frequently used in billboard advertising in the 20th and 21st centuries. Bright, saturated colors are used to foreground an object, usually the item to be purchased, while other figures are depicted in shades of gray that are to be perceived as the background.

Images have material existence. They have surfaces, color, pattern, and texture. From the earliest known images to those in the contemporary world, the substance of the image is related to its meaning. Images can be static. Images can be moved, carried, and displayed by various people and to various audiences. Images can also move. Moving images, or movies, are among the most recent methods for creating and representing something visually.

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Knowing the meaning of an image is not simple. Many scientists argue that only for a short while at birth do we see a shape, an image, with a neutral reaction. After that we *perceive* an image. We learn to perceive images by comparison and association. We learn to perceive them by everyday experience and by training in schools and other social institutions. Cultural values give meaning to both what the image depicts and to its physical form.

Of course, these values change over time and place. The same image can be valued differently over time and in different cultures. Take, for example, the long journey in time and space of images and hieroglyphic writing that cover the surfaces of the coffins of mummies from Egypt. In their own period, several thousand years ago, the presence of the images and writing were an essential element in the ritual of death and burial of an important individual. These images were hidden from the view of human beings. Today, many have been removed from their ritual site and these same images are displayed in museums in Cairo, Boston, New York, and elsewhere. To the contemporary viewer these images mean something quite different. They are available for evaluation or are consumed as art and as history.



*Egyptian Mummy Coffin*

To the contemporary Egyptian museum visitor who perceives these images and their materiality (the coffin they are on and the fineness of the painting), they represent the past history of their nation. To other museum visitors, these same images on the coffin represent a fascinating ancient civilization other than their own. Still others feel that it is inappropriate for the public to view these excavated images and the bodies that they shield.

These images are also understood and valued in other ways. Visitors pay entrance fees to museums to see these images from the past. Those who do not visit the museum can see pictures of the images in books. Photographs of these images, for which copyright fees have usually been paid, are used in art books, history books, and travel guides or as posters to be hung on walls. Libraries and individuals in turn purchase the books in which the representation of the image is presented. In these many ways, the image is valued and consumed in today's societies and has multiple meanings across time, culture, and place.

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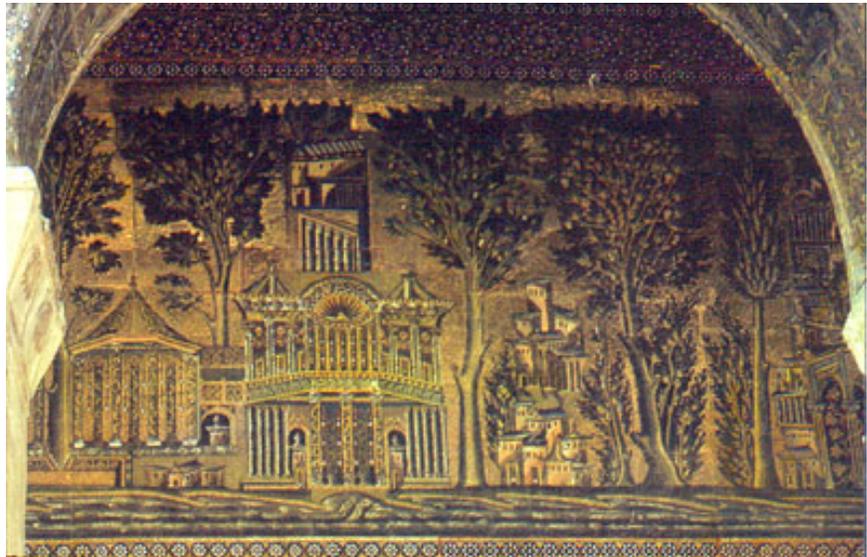
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Look at the image of a town by a stream. What this photograph shows us, and what we can know only by further research, is that this is a detail section of a much larger image known as the Barada panel.



The panel depicts many townscapes along a riverbank identified as the Barada River that flows through Damascus, Syria. The full panel measures 34.5 meters in length and 7.15 meters wide (115 feet x 23.8 feet). The panel shown here is 5 meters (16.7 feet) above ground level on the wall in the courtyard of the Great Mosque in Damascus. Knowing these details indicates to us that the original image was to be perceived from a distance and from below—not as an image in a book, as most students see it today.



The original image is created in mosaic technique. Choosing to execute an image in mosaic involves setting thousands of small pieces of glass, ceramic, or stone into mortar. In antiquity (the technique was invented in the Mediterranean basin in about the 4th century B.C.), the individual pieces used to compose the mosaic were usually of standard size. As the technique gained in popularity and spread, mosaics were often made of pieces of different sizes and shapes like the pieces of a puzzle. Mosaic is a difficult technique requiring extraordinary time and labor and can be used on the exterior of a structure, but is most frequently used on interior or partially covered areas, often to protect the mortar.

This particular mosaic was created in the early 8th century of tesserae glass mosaic, cubed shaped pieces of about 1 cm (.5in). In the Middle Ages, glass was an expensive mosaic medium, second only to precious stones. Glass provides luminous colors that reflect light, an important reason for choosing this medium as it enhanced the natural light, candle, and lamplight available in buildings of that period. The medium of the images made them visible in the minimal light of the buildings that they in turn enhanced, glowing from the reflection of the light. Today, with electric lighting, mosaics are often made of less expensive and less labor-intensive material.

When we analyze an intricate image such as this mosaic, historians often pay as much attention to the many trained artists who made this image as we do to the content of the image itself. Paying attention to the ways that a wall was transformed into a luminous landscape by the application of hundreds of thousands of glass cubes tells us much about the technological and artistic skill as well as the resources and cultural values of a given society.

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Look at this famous photograph of the Jul 1969 moon landing. It depicts the American flag, Apollo, the lunar module (LEM), and an astronaut.



*Moon Landing, July 1969.*

When we look at an image like this, historians ask not only what the image shows us, but also how the image was used and how various audiences reacted to it. On the one hand, the photograph itself represented a triumph of technology. Minimally speaking, U.S. technology met the challenge of preserving film against the high temperatures on the moon, temperatures at which film burns. Yet the

impact of this image did not rest in its technological prowess. Rather, the image of the flag of the United States was the focus of worldwide attention. Because the photograph was distributed in print media and television, it had a global audience.

Historians studying this image are careful to place it in its proper historical context. This context included other popular images of the American flag burning during anti-war riots, the use of the flag to symbolize a vision of America as a Christian nation, the increasingly common and controversial use of the flag in commercial advertising, and the flag as a symbol of American intervention abroad. Depending upon one's view about the Vietnam war, the religious nature of American society, the propriety of using a national symbol for marketing purposes, or of America's role on the global stage, the flag could be either a positive or a negative symbol. Thus, when we read an image of the American flag flying over the moon on that July day, historians are careful to see more than just a simple representation of American national sovereignty.

For example, in the United States the reaction to this photograph ranged from strong pride at the achievements of the American space program, to despair that so much money had been spent on the program when social problems were great, to the firm belief that the entire moon landing was a hoax. Reactions abroad included all of these, plus concern that the United States was asserting control over the moon in the face of the 1967 Outer Space Treaty that guaranteed the use of space to all peoples "irrespective of the degree of their economic or scientific development." Only when we are alive to these many possible reactions to just this one photograph can we begin to arrive at a more sophisticated understanding of the use of such an image.

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What does the image of an apple symbolize? How do we perceive this image? Which image of which apple?

For more than a thousand years, starting in Europe and spreading to the United States and beyond, the image of an apple has symbolized temptation. In considering the symbolic function of the apple in Euro-American culture, there are several ways to think about the audiences for whom the apple came to be represented on the one hand, and the relationship of the apple to new media on the other.



Symbolic value has been assigned to the apple as a result of its use within Christian culture of the Latin west. Its symbolism is based on the narrative of Adam and Eve found in the Hebrew Bible. In the Hebrew version, no specific fruit is mentioned. God tells Adam and Eve not to partake of the fruit of a tree in the Garden. A being of some sort offers Eve a fruit, tempting her to disobey God's command. In the 6th century, a Latin translation rendered "fruit" as "apple." In the Latin written text then, the apple functioned as a metaphor for temptation.

In the Middle Ages, the story of the consequences of disobedience to God's commands, especially as represented by the Church, was an often-told tale. Images of the story of the temptation of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden adorned Latin Christian churches, manuscripts, and religious books. The most common image depicts a serpent offering Eve an apple who in turn offers the apple to Adam. Over the centuries, the nature of the garden, the rendering of Adam and Eve, and the form of the being offering Eve the temptation have varied. What remains in Christian iconography is the appearance of the apple—round, red, succulent, and tempting to taste.

Now think about other uses of the apple to transmit symbolic meaning. Perhaps the best known is the logo of Apple Computer, Inc. Apple's graphic image of an apple, round and succulent with a substantial bite taken out of its right side, reaches an even greater global audience than any previous image of an apple.

Taking a bite of an apple is to partake of temptation. Taking a bite [or a byte] out of Apple's apple is to use the electronic tool of knowledge. When we examine images such as this corporate logo, historians pay close attention not only to what we see, but to how what we see calls up powerful associations for the audiences who are intended to see it. At the same time, we take note of the fact that this symbol of an apple is protected by copyright and so has become a commercial commodity. Thus, the apple has now become much more than a symbol of temptation—it is a commodity with tangible value in the marketplace.

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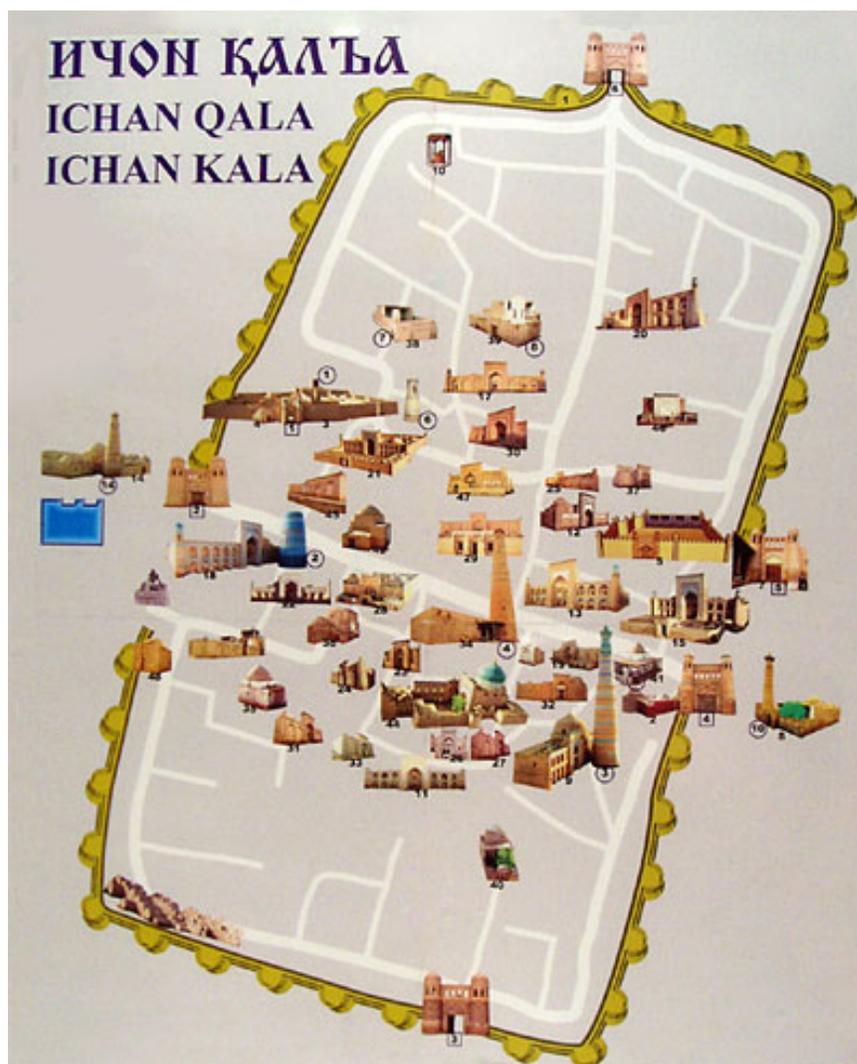
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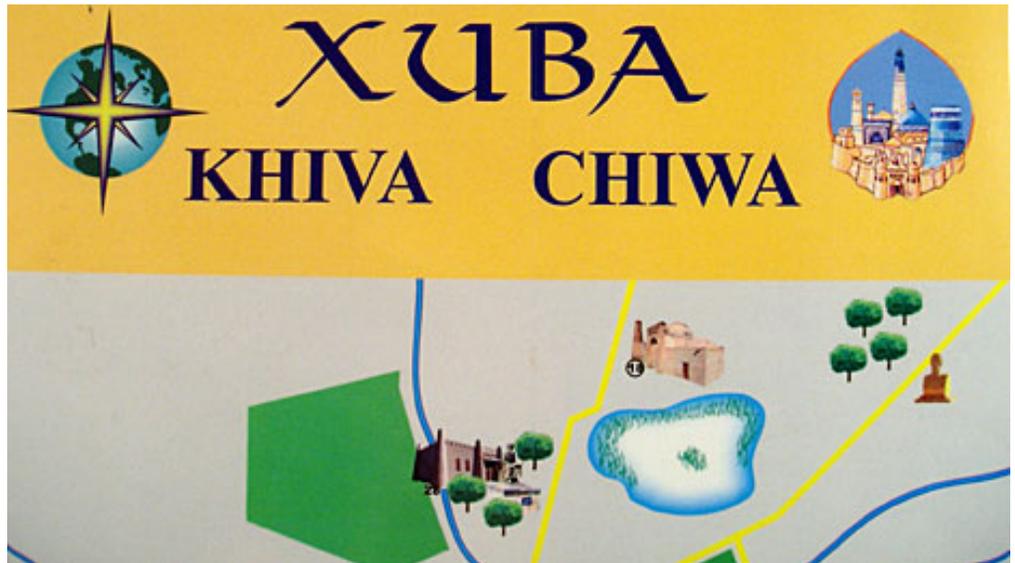
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This type of image is known as a map. Represented on this paper is the old, walled city that forms a part of the larger, contemporary city of Khiva, Uzbekistan. This image covers one half of one side of the page of the map. Looking at it closely tells us as much about contemporary material culture as it does about the old city that it represents.



A careful examination of this image reveals a great deal. The upper left hand corner displays a label of two words repeated three times. The sound of the name in Uzbek of this walled section of the city appears in two different alphabets. The first is the name written in the Cyrillic alphabet, the alphabetic letters in which Russian and several other Slavic languages are written, and in which Uzbek was written before the break up of the Soviet Union. The next two are written in Latin letters, Ichan Qala and Ichan Kala. The differences between these two may seem to be two different ways to spell the same name, but actually indicate variations in transliteration systems. The first is a transliteration system based on English language conventions for representing sounds; the second a German one.

Compare these representations of words with the label of the map that displays the name of the city as a whole, Khiva. This large label is placed on the page to the right of the representation of Ichan Qala. The largest word, placed in the center, is in Cyrillic letters. "Khiva" on the left represents the transliteration by English standards and "Chiwa" on the right, those in German.



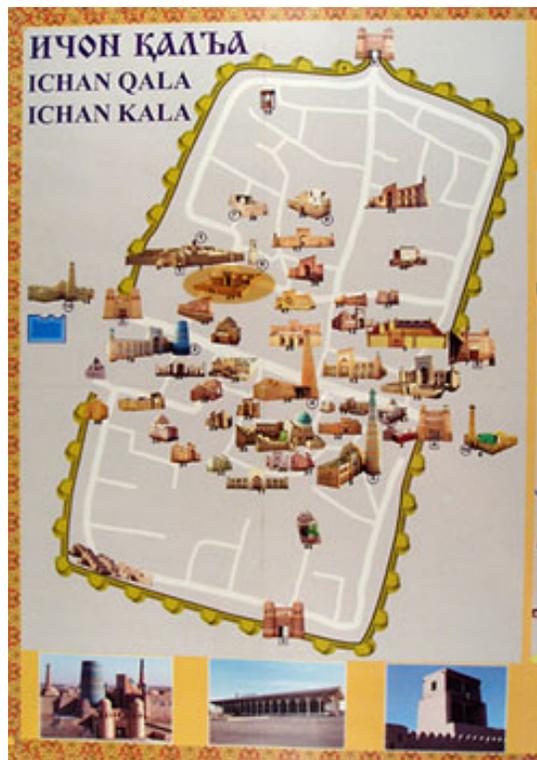
What can we understand about the intended audiences of this image of the city from the representations of alphabetic letters? The audience given primacy of place in both labels is one that reads the Cyrillic alphabet. What is interesting to note is that on this side of the map an absence occurs. When, after the break up of the Soviet Union, Uzbekistan became an independent country, it officially adopted Latin letters for its language. "Khiva" in contemporary Uzbek is spelled Xiva. Representing the name of the city in its new alphabet is present only on the other side of the map when it is fully opened. Of course, the use of Latin alphabetic letters is quite new, and most people who speak Uzbek are more used to seeing it represented in the Cyrillic alphabet. In addition, most of the adult population of Uzbekistan and the neighboring countries are also literate in Russian and thus familiar with the Cyrillic alphabet.

The other audiences to which this map is aimed are those literate in English and German. On the reverse side of this page where the Index to the numbered buildings is located, flags indicate the language by nationality. The Uzbek flag, British flag, and German flag are represented. The Uzbek section is presented in Cyrillic letters, and the English and German names are presented according to the transliteration systems in those languages, as on the front side.



Look again at the representation of the old section of Khiva, the Ichan Qala. Note the walled rectangular enclosure with gates in each of the four sides. Note the number of buildings represented within the walls with some outside them. Look at the representation of streets. All of the buildings are facing us directly or are presented so that we see the building as a whole.

For example, number 21, the khan-madrassa of Muhammad Rahim. Naturally, if we were on the street in the Ichan Qala, we would not see the building in this fashion. This image of the city shares many similarities with the images of cities that developed in the 19th century and have continued since then.

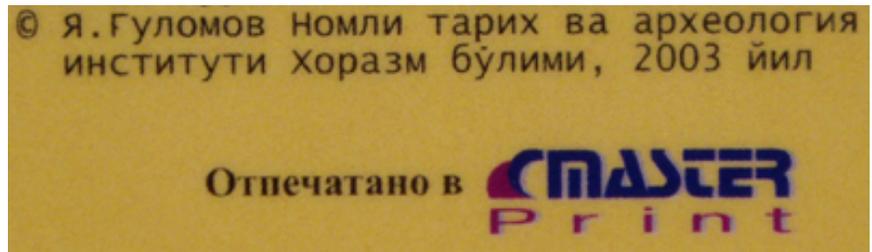


This type of mapping presents a “bird’s-eye” view of the street layout of the city, one that a pedestrian cannot see but which helps the user of the map navigate connections of streets. It promotes knowledge of the overview of a city. In the 19th century, such maps usually represented buildings by displaying their ground plans. The pedestrian, of course, would not see the ground plan as she walked through the city, but the ground plan represented an expected typology of buildings. The users of such maps are usually not local inhabitants. Such maps do not represent all buildings, but only those deemed important. The map of the Ichan Qala follows in this tradition and displays only important buildings.

Absences occur in this image of Ichan Qala. No street names appear. Perhaps the streets have no names. Scale is not represented. How large is this section of the city? Are the buildings represented to scale? No indications as to the site of the buildings are present. For example, the facade of the Shergozi kahn-madrassa,

number 11, faces the viewer, but appears to have its back to the street. How is access to the building achieved? What is the spatial relationship between buildings? In one glance, each is shown clearly to the viewer and no buildings overlap.

For whom then, and why, is this kind of image of the city made? The legend on the reverse tells us that Shams al-Din Matasulov produced this map in 2003.



In addition, the legend tells us that since 1990, the Ichan Qala of Khiva was recognized by UNESCO as a world historical monument. These words reinforce the close reading of the map. The image of the Ichan Qala serves as a visual catalogue of its monuments, a type of catalogue made possible by digital technology. The formal designation as world historic monument also helps to explain the choice of languages and alphabets used on the map. If Uzbek were written in the new alphabet, all those who were not literate in Latin letters would be excluded as an audience. Those who can read the Latin alphabet have access to most of the information through the English and German. Finally and importantly, this image of Ichan Qala produced on a computer, rendered on paper, and widely available at a modest price, places the city of Khiva in a global visual world of monuments.

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### About the Author

Irene Bierman is Associate Professor of Art History, Department of Art History, at the University of California, Los Angeles. She has been Director of the American Research Center in Egypt (2002), Director of the Gustav E. von Grunebaum Center for Near Eastern Studies at UCLA (1996-2002), and Chair of the Islamic Studies Program at UCLA. She received her MA in Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard University and her Ph.D. at the University of Chicago. She taught at Portland State University and the University of Washington before joining the faculty at UCLA. The author of numerous articles, her recent book, *Writing Signs, The Fatimid Public Text* was published by University of California Press (1998), and her forthcoming book, *Art and Islam* is being published by Oxford University Press (2005).

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