

# Art History Newsletter

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### From Massachusetts to Muqarnas

by [Annie Harris-Kornblith](#) | 10 April 2012 | [Islamic](#)

Walter Denny, senior consultant to the Met's new Islamic galleries, was my first art history professor at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. His intro class had two hundred students. Arriving the first day, I noted students clustered around the podium. Through them I could see a robust man with white hair and a bright purple laptop – the first hint of his animate persona. Although I don't remember Denny's first words to the class, I recall his ability to capture attention and respect. He said, "People often tell me I'm intimidating, but once they get to know me, they find that I'm really quite sweet." I later checked [ratemyprofessor.com](#) and found a certain amount of "Works you like a mule" and "BEWARE." Others complimented his teaching, personality and infectious passion. "Walter is really a throwback to the old-fashioned scholar," one report notes astutely. Although my impression of Professor Denny has changed over the years, one thing was made very clear on that first day: This man doesn't mess around, or stop for breath. As the note-taking began, he warned us, "Drop your pencil and you'll miss one hundred years." Still, he manages to leaven the lecturing with tales of his most recent misfortunes. "The vending machine ate my quarters!" "I walked into a glass wall!"

When I walk into Denny's office to interview him for this article, I no longer have concerns about tests or papers. As he finishes off his chocolate milk, I pull up a chair, excited to learn where he came from, how he chose Islamic art, and his impressions of working at the Met. Denny grew up in small-town Iowa where he developed interests in physics, math and music. At fifteen, his father got a Fulbright to teach physics at Robert College in Istanbul, where Denny fell in love with architecture, one building in particular: the Mosque of Rustem Pasha. He found it in a French guidebook, given to him by a friend's mother. "'It's very beautiful,' she said. 'You might want to take a look.'" Eight years later, Denny wrote his thesis at Harvard on this very mosque, whose "decoration came at a crucial moment in Ottoman Turkish art in the 16<sup>th</sup> century." Forty-three years later, this fall, he's doing an exhibition at the Textile Museum in Washington on this same period in which Turkish art changed suddenly.

Although Denny is quick to note, "I wanted to be a teacher since I was two," he has always divided his time between academia and museum-work. He's worked for the Harvard Art Museums, the Smith College Museum of Art and, for the last five years, the Met.

Every good art historian has to know something about museums because that's where the art is. They used to ask the bank robber, Willie Sutton, why he robbed banks and he said 'because that's where the money is stupid!' And it's true... There's a group of art historians today that believe that theory is their province and that they shouldn't have to deal with *things* and quite frankly that's an attitude that has come into graduate schools and it's just as wrong as wrong can be.

Denny travels from Amherst, Massachusetts, to New York every week. His involvement with the Met began nearly five years ago, when a colleague asked Denny if he had a student interested in working on the museum's Ottoman Turkish art. Denny decided that he himself was interested. He was especially excited to research a particular carpet that had been deemed fake by four art historians and warehoused. He smiles, telling me "It's one of the greatest carpets they've got and in another couple of months it'll be on display." (He'll be giving a lecture on it this week at the museum.) Denny has also worked on the Met's website, photos, educational materials, tour-guide training and audio guides.

For the new Islamic galleries, he "worked with conservators, designers, helped to write the labels, wall texts and provided photographs." He's proud of the galleries' architecture, which serves to contextualize Islamic art, he feels. The courtyard was made by Moroccan craftsmen and the Damascus room is "a room right out of a palace in the 18<sup>th</sup> century." Generally, it seems that "people really love [these areas]." Although some critics believe museums shouldn't present architectural reconstructions, Denny defends them. "The museum really told [the craftsmen] what we wanted. That is, we had art historians and professionals do all the planning and then the craftsmen executed it according to what we wanted." Denny

said that “the biggest surprise [he] had was how smoothly things went. There were so many people working on this, so many people on the team and they were so diverse. It was a very nice surprise.”

Denny’s appointment at the Met was originally planned to end with the opening of the galleries, but he was asked to stay, to help rotate the collections. Preserving the objects requires replacing silks every three months, wool every six months, and so on. The museum’s Islamic collection consists of 12,000 works, ten percent on view at a time. Accordingly, the tours, audio, and wall text must also change. So it seems that Denny will stay for years to come, studying the art of his fascination.

I asked Denny if the events of September 11, 2001 changed the museum’s plans for the galleries. As he explains,

They went right ahead with their plans and pretty much what we have there today is what they intended to have all along...I think people are more interested than they would have been, but the Met’s mission is pretty clear. The museum is careful not to have a political agenda and I think it works. These questions were all asked by reporters and Philippe de Montebello, who of course was there when I wasn’t, stated very clearly and unequivocally that this has been in our plans all along. This is not a response to political events. The museum is simply doing what the museum does.

Denny says he hopes the galleries will help to accurately inform people about Islam. He says that the department’s “new mantra is ‘from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean,’” meaning that Islamic art is not monolithic and exists in many different cultures – “Arabs, Turks, Persians, Indians, all kinds of ethnic groups, all kinds of languages.” He notes that there is secular Islamic art, not just religious, and that despite popular belief there are many human and animal figures. Most importantly, however, is the understanding we gain of the people, who as Denny explains “are just like us. Some of them are fun loving, some of them aren’t, they like to laugh, they like to have a good meal and a good time and even lift a good glass, which they’re not supposed to do. And the art helps to show this.” The galleries have been well received. In their first four months 360,000 visited, an extraordinary number for such a small section.

Still thinking about his year abroad at age fifteen, he tells me toward the end of the interview, “What really astounded me at the beginning was not how different Istanbul was from Grinnell, Iowa, because it certainly was different, but once I got to know people, how very similar they were.”