

Obituary

Oliver Hoare

The flamboyant Old Etonian who became an influential Islamic art specialist

Oliver Hoare was arguably the most influential dealer in the Islamic art world, and one who broke the mould. He died on 23 August, aged 73. An exotic character with legendary levels of wit, charm and knowledge, Hoare also had an insatiable thirst for fun and adventure, and a magical spirit that dared to pursue the improbable. This was perhaps most apparent with his achievement of one of the most unlikely deals of the 20th century: negotiating with the rulers of Iran the exchange of the 16th-century “Houghton Shahnameh” for a painting by Willem de Kooning.

Hoare's exotic streak is perhaps unsurprising: he was born in 1945 to a Russian mother and an English father who had met in Istanbul. After being sent to Eton, he studied at the Sorbonne's Institut d'Art et d'Archéologie, playing guitar in the city's cafés at night and meeting many of the colourful characters living in 1960s Paris. He had been fascinated with Persia since childhood, his father having given him some ancient coins, and he would travel there from France every summer holiday of his university years, a journey which took over a week by bus and train.

CHRISTIE'S, CHATWIN, COMMERCE

After graduating from the Sorbonne, he joined Christie's in 1967, where he was initially charged with overseeing Russian art. After spotting some carpets left lying in the warehouse corridors, remnants of some of the great European collection sales, he recognised them as Persian and was tasked with their cataloguing and sale, the success of which led to the launch of the very first Islamic Art department at a major auction house. It was during this period that he shared a flat with his great friend the writer Bruce Chatwin, whom Hoare often credited with having taught him his craft.

He left Christie's in 1975 to establish his own business and opened the Ahuan gallery in Pimlico in partnership with David Sulzberger. As a private dealer, he worked with most of the major Islamic art collectors and museums throughout the Middle East, as well as in Europe, the US and Japan. In the 1970s and 1980s, he was instrumental in building the collection of Sheikh Nasser Sabah al-Ahmed al-Sabah and his wife, Sheikha Hussah Sabah al-Salem al-Sabah, for the Kuwait National Museum, including the acquisition of Islamic art from the legendary collection of Comtesse de Beaugue. He advised the Nuhad Es-Said Collection in Beirut, one of the finest groups of Islamic metalwork in private hands, and in the 1990s started working as an advisor to Sheikh Saud bin Mohammed Al-Thani of Qatar, the greatest collector of his time, as they worked for over a decade on building museum collections for Qatar. This project came to a halt when the sheikh was placed under house arrest in 2005 amid accusations of financial misappropriation; the charges were later dismissed, but not before Hoare was caught in the confusion.

DERRING-DO AND EXHIBITIONS

Perhaps his crowning achievement took place when Hoare negotiated an exchange between the government of Iran and the Houghton Family Trust whereby Iran recovered the most significant part of the “Houghton Shahnameh”, the most important illustrated manuscript ever created in Persia, in exchange for Willem de Kooning's painting *Woman III* (1953) which was in storage in the Tehran Contemporary Art



Oliver Hoare in 2004. He worked with Islamic art collectors and museums throughout the Middle East and Europe

Museum. The negotiations were full of risk and had taken over three years when the deal finally concluded in dramatic fashion in July 1994. Hoare travelled with the Shahnameh from London to Paris where it was inspected by Iranian art experts before flying on to Vienna airport. The following day, an Iranian government plane landed and off-loaded the de Kooning, finalising the exchange on the tarmac before returning to Tehran with the Shahnameh. Hoare had just completed writing his own account of the exchange at the time of his death.

In 2012, Hoare hosted a small exhibition of items from his personal cabinet of curiosities at Jean-Claude Ciancimino's gallery in Pimlico. Encouraged by the reaction, he returned in 2015 with a much larger edition at 33 Fitzroy Square, former home of the Omega workshops. Entitled *Every Object Tells a Story*, it was the first time in decades that he had held a major exhibition and it included an eclectic array of objects ranging from antiquities to dodo bones

and erotic scrimshaw. It was accompanied by a catalogue in which he practiced his love of storytelling with entertaining and often semi-biographical notes, one of which was a moving homage to his former friend and client, the late Sheikh Saud al-Thani of Qatar, in which he gave the “other account” of the accusations which had seen the prince placed under house arrest. The exhibition welcomed thousands of visitors and the catalogue was chosen as one of the best art books of that year by the *Evening Standard*.

Another extraordinary exhibition took place in 2017, this time at Sir John Lavery's old studio in Cromwell Place where his choice of objects ranged from unicorn horns to Bactrian treasures. It gave him a chance to tell stories, and gave visitors another opportunity to experience Oliver Hoare, a private dealer with a very public persona, and an unquenchable thirst for new adventures.

Matthew Paton

Hoare had an insatiable thirst for fun and adventure, and a magical spirit that dared to pursue the improbable

IN MEMORIAM

THOMAS FRANGENBERG, a ground-breaking scholar of Renaissance and Baroque art and literature, and a prominent collector of conceptual art, died on 12 March, aged 60. Born in Cologne, Frangenberg displayed a precocious interest in the arts, developing a particular taste for the Baroque; he enjoyed going to opera, ballet and museums. He studied art history, archaeology and early Christian archaeology at the University of Bonn and took his PhD from the University of Cologne. In 1981 he moved to London, where he soon developed an intermittent association with the Warburg Institute. He was appointed Reader in Art History at the University of Leicester in 1990. His many publications include *The Rise of the Image* (2003) and *The Lives of Leonardo* (2013), both with Rodney Palmer, and *The Beholder: The Experience of Art in Early Modern Europe* (2006) with Robert Williams. His contemporary art collection included works by Angela de la Cruz, Ana Genovez, Brian Griffiths, John Hilliard, David Musgrave, Elizabeth Price and Amikam Toren. He was made redundant by the University of Leicester in 2017, a blow from which he never recovered.

ERICH LESSING, the photojournalist and member of Magnum, died on 29 August, aged 95. Born in Vienna, he fled with his mother and grandmother to Israel in 1939. Returning to Austria in 1947, he was hired by the Associated Press and, in 1951, was invited by David ‘Chim’ Seymour to join Magnum. His photographs in 1956 of the Hungarian revolution and its suppression by Soviet troops were seen worldwide. His portraits included Dwight D. Eisenhower, Nikita Khrushchev and Oskar Kokoschka and his works appeared in *Life*, *Paris Match* and *Picture Post*. In later life he specialised in art and art-historical subjects.

MARY JANE LONG, the American architect who designed the British Library, died on 2 September, aged 79. Long studied at Smith College, Massachusetts, and took a graduate degree in architecture at Yale. She moved to England in 1965, where she worked with the architect Colin St John Wilson whom she married in 1972. Colin St John Wilson and Partners had been contracted in 1962 to carry out the British Library project and, from the time she joined the firm, she became the principal architect partner. The project was completed in 1997. Meanwhile, she designed purpose-built artists' studios for Peter Blake, R.B. Kitaj and Frank Auerbach, among others. In 1994 she set up, with Rolfe Kentish, their own firm, Long and Kentish, which won the £3m commission to design a library for Brighton University and to build the Pallant House Gallery.

DAVID WATKIN, the architectural historian and scholar, died on 30 August, aged 77. Born in Salisbury, Watkin went up to Trinity Hall, Cambridge, where he took, under the direction of Michael Jaffé, a first-class degree in the university's then newly established fine arts tripos. His doctoral thesis, under the direction of Nikolaus Pevsner, was on Thomas Hope, the arbiter of Neo-Classical taste, which was published to acclaim in 1968. He became a Fellow of Peterhouse in 1970 and ascended the academic ladder from the librarianship of the fine arts faculty in 1967 to the professorship of architecture in 2001. He will no doubt be best remembered for his polemical book, *Morality and Architecture* (1977), a well considered attack on the dogmas of Modernism and its historiographical biases. But his contribution to scholarship was considerable and his magisterial works on C.R. Cockerell (1974), Sir John Soane (1996), and his historical survey, *A History of Western Architecture* (1986), will long remain standard works of reference.