

Dr Jonathan Michael Adrian Thompson 23 March 1938 - 23 January 2020



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Sadly, in Jon Thompson's demise we have lost one of our most knowledgeable textile specialists, who has contributed numerous memorable lectures at SOAS during the course of his career. To mark this sad event we invited several friends and colleagues to put their thoughts on paper to share their stories on this enigmatic character. In the course of this process we discovered that Jon was such a private person that there is no CV for him in circulation!

Textile expert Steven Cohen wrote:

Jon Thompson was undoubtedly one of the world's leading authorities on historical oriental carpets and the last genuine expert of his generation. Many of the following biographical details were provided by his own brief notes which appeared in a Sotheby's auction catalogue (New York Dec. 16, 1993) of Turkoman carpets from his highly specialised private collection. Jon's grandfather was a silversmith and his father's early career began as a colonial officer in British India. Thompson Sr. was evidently a talented sculptor, but whether that was as an amateur or professional is unclear.

In 1956 at the age of 18 Jon was doing his National Service in Cyprus which is where his lifelong fascination with Asian culture began. After Cyprus he enrolled at Cambridge but then took the equivalent of a "gap year" in Turkey in 1959, teaching English at the American School of English and Commerce in Istanbul while beginning to learn Turkish and scouring the Grand Bazaar in search of antique carpets. Jon's interest in the philosophy and practices of G.I. Gurdjieff stemmed from his parents, somehow he had also rather furtively introduced Gurdjieffian philosophy at his boarding school too; but certainly when I first met him in London at David Black and Clive Loveless's carpet shop in Holland Park in the late 1970s he was already one of that circle's Gurdjieffians. After Turkey he returned to the U.K. to study medicine.

Jon received his medical training at the London Hospital, qualifying in 1964 and practised as a clinical diagnostician at St. Thomas's Hospital and Lecturer in Medicine at University College Hospital until severe rheumatoid arthritis made the continuation of that occupation too painful and difficult. When I asked, he was sarcastic about Hugh Laurie's character "House" but that ability to diagnose conditions that mystified other doctors was evidently one of Jon's greatest talents. It cannot be coincidental that an ability to identify unusual medical conditions by recognising obscure symptoms later manifested itself as a remarkable talent to identify carpets, especially the Turkoman carpets whose categorization Jon will always be associated with, by recognizing obscure but significant physical features discovered through structural analysis. Jon Thompson had long been acknowledged as an authority on oriental carpets and his ability to structurally analyse them and even more crucially to intelligently interpret that information was respected and internationally recognised.

He became the first May Beattie Fellow in Carpet Studies at Oxford (2001-2006) and it was under his supervision, assisted by archivists and staff at the Ashmolean Museum, that what arrived as a disparate collection of cardboard boxes evolved in to "The Beattie Archive". He had been a prominent speaker at international carpet conferences for decades, the recipient of prestigious awards, the author of many influential papers and carpet books: Bogolyubov, AA, (revised and translated by Jon Thompson from the 1908 Russian edition), *Carpets of Central Asia* (1973); Louise Mackie & Jon Thompson, eds, *Turkmen: Tribal Carpets and Traditions* (1980); *Oriental Carpets: From the Tents, Cottages and Workshops of Asia* (1988); *Silk Carpets and the Silk Road*, Tokyo (1988); *Carpets: From the Tents, Cottages and Workshops of Asia* (1993); *The Nomadic Peoples of Iran* edited with Richard Tapper (2002); *Hunt for Paradise: Court Arts of Safavid Iran 1501–1576*, edited with Sheila Canby (2003); *Milestones in the History of Carpets* (2006); and many other articles and contributions to auction catalogues, including an article entitled 'Late Mamluk Carpets: Some New Observations' in Doris Behrens-Abouseif's volume entitled *The Arts of the Mamluks in Egypt and Syria – Evolution and Impact* (2012).

Jon was a friend and mentor. He was the first person to teach me the fundamentals of carpet structural analysis and as we had been neighbours in North London for the last thirty-five years, we often discussed Indian carpets and textiles and would consult with one another over questions of provenance and technique. I wish that I had asked him more questions, more often. His wife, Barbara predeceased him; he is survived by a son, David, and daughter, Anne Cotton.

Heather Elgood, Course Director of the SOAS Postgraduate Diploma in Asian Art wrote:

Jon has been my friend and colleague for the last 30 years. I always turned to him to give the programme of carpet and textile lectures on the Postgraduate Diploma. Jon was passionate about the sharing of this knowledge with the students. He taught them to recognise not only Islamic court and nomadic carpet styles, but also to understand the technique and process of carpet making. Jon loved to invite all the class to his house where he would pull out several of his own collection and get them to handle and question him informally. What expresses Jon so well is a story I was told - that Jon having trained as a Dr went to small villages in Iran and nomadic groups and offered them medical help in exchange for them to teach him about carpets. He wanted to learn first-hand from a practical not just an academic perspective. He will be sincerely missed.

Pirjetta Mildh, former colleague in the Ashmolean wrote:

Jon Thompson - the character of a great man

Some of the best moments of my life have been spent sitting at a desk next to Jon, working together. This we did, first for several years in the lovely big Eastern Art Print room of the dear old Ashmolean; then for a short while in their temporary set-up in the old Radcliffe Infirmary and, finally, for almost a decade, in his library in Islington where he continued to help me with the intricacies of May Beattie's handwriting and where I went on to catalogue his library.

Jon was the best example I have known of something my father taught me long ago: that irony is not a type of humour, it's a type of intelligence. Whatever the subjects that came up during our hours of working side-by-side, he was sure to approach them at an angle and with profound irreverence so that they would be revealed in an unexpected and startling light.

In his total inability to suffer fools gladly Jon surely rivalled Prince Philip. This was of great help to me in my journeys through the thicket of lectures and conferences available in Oxford. After a particularly dry-as-dust performance it would cheer me up considerably to hear Jon explain that the lecturer in question was a known buffoon who had been giving the same lecture for thirty years and had never got anywhere interesting with it. What a relief!

We had some long-running debates, the most intense perhaps on the subject of whether Finnish and Turkish were related - both being agglutinative languages.

Like many Turkophiles Jon was arguing for the motion whereas I, as the proper Finno-Ugric that I am, was opposed. This conundrum will now remain forever unsolved.

But it does illuminate perhaps the most remarkable aspect of Jon Thompson's life and character: his immense range of knowledge. We live in times when, especially in the world of academia, one must specialise in order to advance. Jon scorned this world view. His was a wide-ranging lateral expertise; although he was known as a leader in carpet studies, his true interests lay in understanding cultures in their entirety. His was a passion for a vast geographical region and for all aspects of the lives of the peoples found there. Carpets were simply the most tangible physical manifestation of those cultures.

Several years ago, I remember Jon lamenting the passing of an acquaintance, a famous linguist who apparently spoke some two dozen languages. Jon pointed out the tragedy of lost knowledge: how a man spends his entire life learning, experiencing, thinking, inventing - and then, in the end all those riches cannot be transferred to a younger individual but will die with him and the next generation will have to start the process all over again.

I have been thinking of this a great deal since Jon's death. An immeasurable treasure trove of knowledge has been lost with him; an interconnecting web of histories, religions, languages, craft skills, art works. I very much doubt that there is anyone amongst the younger generations who will be up to the task of picking up the baton Jon Thompson has now relinquished.

Scott Redford, Chair, Steering Committee, Islamic Art Circle

I arrived at SOAS and joined the Islamic Art Circle only in 2014, but my own interest in carpets and kilims (modest compared to his) had me meeting Jon Thompson soon thereafter. We had friends in common, and found out we were neighbours in Islington. I was privileged to be invited for tea and a slice of fruitcake one Sunday afternoon two years ago, at which time we spent several hours talking textiles and touring the house. His library was his pride and joy, but also he was worried about what would happen to it, and to Islamic textile studies in the UK in general.

When, as it turned out, I saw him for the last time at an Islamic Art Circle lecture last autumn, he reiterated an invitation to supper one evening. It is a great regret of mine I never spent more time with him; I often think of what we would have talked about at the meal that never took place. The Islamic Art Circle has lost a brilliant lecturer and a loyal member.

I am grateful to Rosalind Wade Haddon for compiling the memories of Jon by friends and colleagues who knew him better and longer than I did, and to all the contributors. My deepest condolences to his family.