



GRAY, BASIL

GRAY, BASIL (b. 21 July 1904; d. 10 June, 1989; ; [Figure 1](#)), art historian and the keeper of Oriental antiquities at the British Museum (1946-69). He was the younger son of a surgeon in the Army Medical Corps. He was educated at Bradfield School and at New College Oxford, where he studied classics and modern history.

His initiation into eastern art, for which there was then no provision at any British university, came in 1928, when he worked for a season on the excavations at the great palace of the Byzantine emperors in Constantinople, followed by study in Vienna under Josef Strzygowski, who was, however, already sunk deep in diffusionism. Predictably, Gray only lasted three months, which put paid to his hopes of pursuing an advanced degree. Instead he joined the Department of Printed Books in the British Museum late in 1928, transferring in 1930 to the sub-department of oriental prints and drawings (from 1933 the Department of Oriental Antiquities), under Laurence Binyon, the poet and distinguished orientalist. Work on the Persian exhibition of 1931, to which for the first time the great libraries of the East had lent extensively, was well advanced. The catalogue of the Persian paintings lent to it, *Persian Miniature Painting* (London, 1933), by Binyon, James Vere Stewart Wilkinson and Gray, has become a standard work. By the outbreak of World War II, his writings covered the whole field of eastern art, Islam, India, China, and Japan. Though he continued to write on all these subjects right up to his death in 1989, his abiding interest was the relations between China and Islam, especially in Persia – Tang and Song exports to the Middle East; the Mongols in



Persia, particularly the copying and illustration of Rašid-al-Din Fażl-Allāh's monumental *Jāme' al-tawāriq*; and chinoiserie in the arts of the Timurid and Turkman courts in the late 14th and 15th centuries, particularly as it is manifested in the famous albums in the libraries of Istanbul and in the manuscripts patronized by the Timurid ruler, Eskandar Solţān (q.v.) at Shiraz. The culmination of that work is his important contribution, as editor and joint author, to *The Arts of the Book in Central Asia, 1307-1506* (UNESCO, 1979), which definitively analyzed the role of princely patronage in the painting of eastern Islamic cultures.

During his long keepership of the Department of Oriental Antiquities, Gray strengthened it with a series of carefully chosen talented younger specialists. He had an unerring eye for quality, and through the generosity and public-spiritedness of such great collectors as George Eumorfopoulos, Oscar Raphael, Sir Bernard Eckstein, Sir John Addis, and the Misses Godman, whose confidants he became, the oriental collections in the British Museum (and what, since the secession of the British Library, is now the Department of Oriental Manuscripts and Printed Books), were richly augmented. In 1968 he was appointed Acting Director and Principal Librarian of the British Museum.

Gray's outstanding achievement was recognized by his election as fellow of the British Academy in 1966. He was closely associated with the foundation of the British Institutes of Persian and of Afghan (later South Asian) Studies, advocating major excavations at Sirāf and at Qandahār. His chairmanship of exhibitions of Islamic art in Cairo (1969) and Beirut (1974) culminated in the exhibition, *The Arts of Islam* at the Hayward Gallery (The Arts Council, 1976), the most important of its kind since the Munich exhibition of 1910. He was president of both the Third International Congress of Turkish Art (Cambridge, 1967) and of the Sixth International Congress of Iranian Art and Archaeology (Munich, 1976). Because of subsequent events in Persia, this turned out to be the last of the series, but his distinguished contribution to the study of Persian art was marked by his election as first president of its successor, the *Societas Iranologica Europaea* (1983-87).

In 1933 Gray married Nicolette, daughter of Laurence Binyon, herself a distinguished mediaevalist, designer of inscriptions, and the author of important monographs on lettering. Her *Lettering as Drawing* (London and New York, 1971) is an acute discussion of the practicalities of writing not only Greek and Latin but also Arabic scripts. Their eldest daughter, Camilla (d., 1971), the historian of the Russian avant-garde, married the son of the



composer Sergei Prokofyev.

To a generation dominated by specialization and research projects, the all-rounder museum man, like Friedrich Sarre or Ernst Kühnel, may appear outmoded, even suspicious. Basil Gray was certainly fortunate in beginning his career in the pre-war years: travel was easier, and the world of scholarship infinitely smaller and less dispersed. His lack of oriental languages was offset by close friends who included Mojtabā Minovi and Vladimir Minorsky; and the novelty and vast scope of his material favored general treatment rather than detailed study. Notwithstanding, most of the conclusions advanced in his *Persian Painting* (Skira, 1961) still stand and are a tribute to his good judgment, as his museum collecting was to his connoisseur's eye.

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Author's private information and personal knowledge.