

NASSER RABBAT

MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

Laila ‘Ali Ibrahim, 1917–2002

Laila ‘Ali Ibrahim passed away July 14. She was 85. Many students of Mamluk art and architecture have come to identify Laila with Cairo: she was the “Godmother” of the city and the guardian of its monuments.

Laila learned her metier informally through exposure to the best minds concerned with the fate of historic Cairo in the 1940s and 1950s. These included her father, Dr. ‘Ali Ibrahim, a major Islamic art collector whom she adored, and K. A. C. Creswell, the eccentric Briton who spent most of his working life studying the Islamic architecture of Cairo. But she had one thing that most scholars of Cairo of her time did not have: total devotion to her subject. This showed not only in her publications, public lectures, and participation in countless organizations promoting the safeguarding of the monuments of Cairo, but also in her tireless efforts to gain new converts to the study and appreciation of Cairo. To that end, she taught the history of Cairo at the American University of Cairo (AUC) and made herself available to any researcher, Egyptian or foreign, interested in studying Mamluk Cairo.

Laila’s articles and one published book are solid, carefully researched, and clearly written pieces. She seemed to have focused mostly on little-studied aspects of Cairene architecture that lesser scholars avoided. She took special interest, for instance, in Mamluk residential architecture, about which she published a number of erudite articles. She also delved into writing on little-known or ruined monuments, such as the *khānqāhs* of Amir Qawsūn and of Zayn al-Dīn Yūsuf or the madrasah of Badr al-Dīn al-‘Aynī. Her book on Mamluk building terminology, published in 1990 and coauthored with the late Muḥammad Muḥammad Amīn, is an indispensable source for all students of Cairo. It is the distillation of the expertise of these two irreplaceable scholars: Laila with her intimate and extensive knowledge of the historic buildings and Amīn with his profound familiarity with the legal documents related to them.

Laila spent more than half a century studying, teaching, and speaking for and on behalf of the architecture of Cairo. But she shunned all ceremonial social events and was interested only in constructive ones. Her admirers, however, managed to put together a collection of essays in her honor, *The Cairo Heritage*, which was edited by Dr. Doris Behrens-Abouseif and published by AUC Press in

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Article: http://mamluk.uchicago.edu/MSR_VII-1_2003-Obituary_pp235.pdf

Full volume: http://mamluk.uchicago.edu/MamlukStudiesReview_VII-1_2003.pdf



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2001, although Laila unfortunately was unable to read it. Laila left a small but extremely valuable library that I hope will find an institutional home where it could be open to all researchers from all over the world. This is how Laila herself would have liked it to be.