

Stanley Insler
American Oriental Society Medal of Merit
March 2017

It is with tremendous pleasure that the American Oriental Society awards the Medal of Merit for his exceptionally distinguished contributions to scholarship and for his dedicated service to the Society to Stanley Insler.

The last time the Medal was awarded was fifteen years ago, and the three most recent Presidents of the Society, the Board of Directors, and the entire membership delight in being able to recognize our friend in this special way. As all who attend our annual meetings are aware, Professor Insler is more than a great American and a great Orientalist; it is no exaggeration to say that he embodies the Society, being a wellspring of information about our institutional past, an indefatigable supporter of our present, and someone who safeguards our financial future while regularly expressing skepticism about nearly all deviations from how things have hitherto been done. Our colleague Jack Sasson's wonderful line bears repeating that Professor Insler is responsible for gracefully leading the AOS into the nineteenth century; at the same time, a twenty-first century meeting of the Society without him hardly seems like a meeting at all, as those of us know who were present in Boston last year, when for the only time in memory this unaging, guffawing, brown briefcase-toting expert in the older Indo-Iranian languages was unable to attend.

The opening of the *laudatio* for Professor Insler in his Festschrift, published in 2002 in (of course) a number of the *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, reads as follows: "Stanley Insler was born in New York City, as he surely had to have been, for he shares the city's best characteristics: cosmopolitan, resilient, creative." To this we may add that he has worked his entire life in New Haven, as he surely had to have done, for the fortunes of our Society are, and since the nineteenth century have been, intimately tied up with the fortunes of Yale University. True, Professor Insler received his undergraduate degree from Columbia University in 1957, at the age of not quite 20, and spent the following year working for the American Institute of Physics while continuing to contribute to New York's vibrant musical scene. But in 1958 he enrolled in the Graduate School at Yale, and with the exception of a few years of study abroad in Tübingen and Madras, he has never left, moving without pause in 1963 from a dissertation on Patañjali to an Instructorship in Sanskrit — and onward and upward to the Edward E. Salisbury Professorship of Sanskrit and Comparative Philology, which he occupied with great distinction for nearly forty years before retiring in 2012. The author of numerous linguistic and philological studies of Vedic and Avestan above all, but also of Classical Sanskrit, of Pāli, and of the Prakrits, Professor Insler is still often to be found in 329 Sterling Memorial Library, a glorious room for the Society's glorious collection of books, to which Professor Insler has devoted such care since becoming Secretary-Treasurer in 1976, a position he took over from his Yale colleague Hugh M. Stimson, a Sinologist, who had in turn taken it over from another Yale colleague, the Assyriologist Ferris J. Stephens.

But to return to the nineteenth century ... Professor Insler has much in common with Salisbury, who was appointed Professor of Arabic and Sanskrit at Yale in 1841, one year before the

founding of our Society, and also with the great William Dwight Whitney, who took over the Sanskrit part of Salisbury's position in 1853 and with whose uncompromising grammar of that language Professor Insler instructed generations of undergraduates and graduate students, using his charm and larger-than-life personality — that inimitable combination of dry humor and belly laugh — to illuminate a work that no ordinary teacher would ever use as a textbook. Salisbury, Whitney, and Insler all published in *JAOS*; they all held the office of Secretary — or, as it once was, Corresponding Secretary — of the Society; and they all rose to the highest position. Professor Insler's first publication in the *Journal* was in 1968, when he was but an Assistant Professor; he was Secretary-Treasurer from 1976 to 1982, Treasurer from 1982 to 1986, and has been Finance Director since then; and in 1997–98 he was our elected President.

If we combine the seal of our Society, which emphasizes light, with the motto of Yale University, we arrive at *Ex oriente lux et veritas*. In his scholarship and in his devotion to the Society, Stanley Insler, born in New York but matured in New Haven, has pursued light and truth with exceptional passion and exceptional success. Without his efforts in times of crisis, it is quite possible that the AOS would not have made it to the twenty-first century, and his continuing legacy is safe thanks to the many students he has trained, who are working hard to ensure that we are still here in the twenty-second. We his many admirers — students, colleagues, friends — hope that he is as pleased to receive the Medal of Merit of the American Oriental Society as we are to bestow it on him.