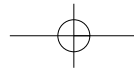
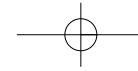


### III. THE ART OF THE BOOK





Dickran Kouymjian

### III. Armenian Medieval Illumination

#### Introduction: A Christian Art

The term 'medieval Armenian miniatures' is mostly the 'history of medieval Armenian painting'. Surviving examples of Armenian illuminations date from an early Gospel fragment with four miniatures from c. 600 (cat. 1), followed by a gap of two and a half centuries, then a continuous tradition from the mid-ninth century to the end of manuscript production around 1700 with a few tenacious practitioners until about 1750. In the broadest understanding of painting as pictures executed on a flat surface, maximalists also include frescoes, mosaics, icons, ceramics, painting on textiles such as altar curtains and canvas painting. Information, illustrations, and further bibliography on painting in these media can be found in a number of standard sources (Der Nersessian 1978, Kouymjian 1992, Durand et al. 2007, Mutafian 2007). The term medieval must be understood to cover the entire period, skipping the notions of Renaissance and Baroque, because the art of illumination in the Armenian tradition was continued to the end, mainly within the walls of monasteries where manuscript arts were continued in accordance with time-honoured tradition even 250 years after the start of printing in Armenia. Nevertheless, contradictions or exceptions occur regularly in the history of Armenian illumination; for instance, certain elegant manuscripts of the late thirteenth century commissioned by Armenian royalty are regularly compared in style, colour and iconography to that of the great Italian masters of the early Renaissance. Furthermore, Armenian artists were remarkably open to artistic trends in Byzantium, the Latin West, the Islamic Near East and even Central Asia and China. Motifs were not just copied, but usually integrated into the dynamic diversity of Armenian art.

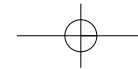
The principal medium of Armenian painting is illumination in manuscripts. The subject matter of this art is also singular: with a few exceptions to be discussed below, it is based on Christian narratives. Three quarters, if not more, of all miniature paintings are devoted to the Life of Christ. The overwhelming majority of not only narrative miniatures, but also decorative illuminations and portraits are contained in Gospel manuscripts: the writings of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke, John. It was not only the most important text of liturgical worship and spiritual devotion, but the one most often copied. Statistically, about 20% of the estimated 31,000 extant Armenian manuscripts are Gospels; if we add to these complete New Testaments and Bibles, the figure rises to 24%. Adjusting the figures further by only counting manuscripts produced up to the year 1700, the number of Gospels is close to 50%. With few exceptions, illustrated Armenian manuscripts dated before 1300 are Gospels; the exceptions are a manuscript of the poems of Surb Grigor Narekatsi (Saint Gregory of Narek) dated 1173 (M1568) with four portraits of Grigor, a series of Bibles (the earliest from the thirteenth century), illustrated psalters, lectionaries, hymnals, ritual books, and Lives of the Fathers, all from the late thirteenth to fifteenth centuries. Before examining Armenian Gospel illumination, a few remarks about images in non-religious texts are in order.

#### Illumination of Secular Texts and the *History of Alexander the Great*

The earliest illustrated secular works date from the same period, but they are very rare. These include an illustrated *History* by Agat'angeghos of 1569 (M1910; Kouymjian 2007), and scenes from the Battle of the Avarayr (451) as narrated in Yeghishē's *History*, but illustrated in hymnals (M1620 of 1482), medical and scientific texts, illustrated zodiacs and astrology, a book on *devs* or evil spirits. By far the most illuminated secular text is the *History of Alexander the Great* by Pseudo-Callisthenes though the text was given a Christian slant through the *kafas* or moralizing poems by Khach'atur Kech'aretsi (1260–1331) (Kouymjian 1999, Traina et al. 2003, Maranci 2003–4).

Artistically the most important and beautifully illuminated Alexander, the Venice Mekhitarist codex (V424), is also the oldest illustrated example of a secular work. We know neither the artist nor the place

Portrait of Prince Levon II,  
(c. 1236–1289), son of King  
Het'um I (d. 1271),  
Matenadaran, MS 8321  
(cat. 25)





of execution of this manuscript of circa 1300–20. Localization of the scriptorium has ranged from Cilicia to Trebizond to Greater Armenia, of which the latter is the most convincing. The damaged paper codex still preserves 115 full or fragmentary images of what must originally have been a cycle of 130. The script in black ink of the scribe Nersēs (*kafas* in red ink seem later) points to the early fourteenth century (Maranci 2003–4). Twelve other illuminated Armenian Alexander codices are known of, which date from 1535 to the nineteenth century, with equally long cycles, often different in subject, style and iconography from that of Venice (Kouymjian 1999). The source of the iconography remains a deep mystery, since such large pictorial cycles are unknown among Byzantine, Latin, or Armenian texts before the late thirteenth century. These largely unstudied Armenian examples should provide a key to the artist riddle.

**The Organization of a Painted Gospel Manuscript**

Gospel books were organized and illuminated following a pattern that dates to the fourth century. Thanks to the universal use of the colophon or memorial among Armenian scribes, illuminators and binders, we know a good deal more about the creation of Armenian manuscripts, illustrated or not, than we do for any other medieval tradition. The largest group of commissioners were the clergy, often themselves scribes and artists. Sumptuous manuscripts were patronized by the aristocracy, nobility or higher clergy for presentation or personal use. Merchants and other members of the bourgeoisie were active patrons after the thirteenth century, increasing in number as the nobility disappeared after the fall of the Cilician kingdom and the upper clergy led less privileged lives.

Illuminated Gospels were composed of 1) Canon Tables; 2) portraits of the Evangelists accompanied by a decorated incipit; 3) miniature paintings, both symbolic and narrative, including donor portraits; 4) marginal illuminations (Kouymjian 1996). Scholars believe that a general decorative system was in place already in the fourth century when Christianity was accepted by the Roman Empire, which controlled southern Europe, North Africa, and much of the Middle East, including at times Armenia. Though no illustrated Gospels survive from the fourth or fifth centuries, a handful are preserved from the sixth, including the oldest complete, illustrated and precisely dated specimen, the Syriac Rabbula Gospels of 586 (Florence, Biblioteca Mediceo Laurenziana, Plut. I, 56) with classicizing artistic features (Cecchelli et al. 1959). The oldest complete Armenian Gospels are of the ninth century and, like those of neighbouring countries, followed the standard arrangement.



*Baptism, New Testament, fragment (c. 600), Matenadaran, MS 2374, fol. 229v*



*Saint Gregory preaches to King Trdat transformed into a boar from the History of Agathangeghos, Bitlis (1569), Matenadaran, MS 1920, fol. 55v*

*Alexander and Nectanebo from the Alexander Romance (c. 1300–20), San Lazzaro, MS 424, fol. 27*

*Bucephalus, Alexander's Horse from the Alexander Romance (1535–36), St James, Jerusalem, MS 437, p. 28*

*T'oros Roslin, Dedication, Second Gospel of Constantinople, Hromkla (1260), St James, Jerusalem, MS 251, fols. 13v–14*



*Sagittarius, Zodiac (1461 and 1478), Matenadaran, MS 3884, fol. 121*



*Hovhannēs Protospatharius presents the Gospel to the Virgin, Gospel of Adrianopolis (1007), San Lazzaro, MS 887, fol. 8*

**The Eusebian Apparatus: Layout and Decoration**

Gospel manuscripts begin with Canon Tables, a concordance-index developed in the fourth century by Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea in Palestine. His explanation of this system was formulated in a letter, always included just before the Canons. The individual Gospels were divided into numbered episodes, brought together in a series of ten tables arranged in vertical columns. They were placed under decorative arches, assembling episodes in combinations of four, three, two, or single columns depending on how many and which Evangelists related a particular episode (Nordenfalk 1951; Kouymjian 1996 for details). Both the *MLk'ē* Gospels of 862 (V1144), the oldest dated Armenian specimen, and the Echmiadzin Gospels of 989 (M2374) have elaborate Canons. Carl Nordenfalk, who pioneered the study of Greek, Latin, Syriac, Armenian, Georgian, and Ethiopian Canon Tables, was convinced that the Echmiadzin Gospels and three other early Armenian examples related to it, were the closest survivors to Eusebius's original arrangement and their decoration (Nordenfalk 1938).

By 1100 nearly all sets of these concordances in Armenia were uniformly presented in a ten-page unit, five sets of facing folios, one for the Letter and four for the Canon Tables, in pairs of arcades often with mirror image ornamentation. Medieval Armenian treatises on the decoration of canon tables, one of them by Nersēs Shnorhali (Russell 1991 for Eng. trans.), have survived, but artists seemed not to have followed them literally. Nevertheless, placing peacocks above the first arch of the series has been universally maintained.

From the beginning, artists used the Eusebian apparatus for painting secular scenes, at times even with fabulous creatures; the *MLk'ē* Gospel is a good example. Within an artistic tradition entirely devoted to the decoration of the Holy Scriptures, painters had no outlet to render imaginative scenes or those from everyday life. The neutral support of the Canon Tables – nothing more than an index – was apparently an acceptable medium for non-religious images.

The Canon Tables were decorated in an ever-evolving manner though the essential columnar form remained constant. Through decorative variations, artists demonstrated their skills and styles in diverse regions of Armenia in different epochs. The complexity of Canon decorations of the eleventh-century Trebizond Gospel (V1400) or the elegant beauty of those of Cilician Gospels, demonstrate that the most commonplace support can serve as a vehicle for brilliance and innovation.

Nordenfalk already suggested that the architectonic arrangement of early Canon Tables were inspired by an imagined basilica: the arch of the Eusebian Letter as the entrance into the nave followed by a series of arcades of the Canons terminating in the sanctuary. Six Armenian Gospels of the tenth–eleventh centuries survive with the Canons terminating with a full-page sanctuary-like rotunda, representing the columned shrine built by the Emperor Constantine over the Holy Sepulchre, the tomb of Christ, in Jerusalem (Nordenfalk 1938; Underwood 1950; Buschhausen 2001; McKenzie 2007).



### Portraits of the Evangelists

In a classic study on Byzantine Evangelists portraits, A.M. Friend considered the Armenian and Syriac as the most fertile artistic traditions after the Byzantine. He observed that Armenian manuscripts of the pre-Cilician period almost exclusively used the standing Evangelists portrait void of any background, as opposed to seated Byzantine Evangelists shown against a background of classical architecture (Friend 1927-9; Kouymjian 1996).

Five of the seven pre-eleventh-century Armenian manuscripts show the Evangelists standing. The exception is the *Mlk'ë* Gospels, which, like the Syriac *Rabbula* Gospels, has two sitting and two standing. Furthermore, the *Mlk'ë* Gospels, painted in a refined classicizing style, is the unique surviving Armenian example before the year 1000 in which each Evangelist is pictured on a separate page. Of the three Armenian portrait types – bust, sitting, standing – the last is the most productive.

In the eleventh century, only four of the fifteen Gospels with portraits of the Evangelists present them seated on separate pages; three of these are attributed to Hovhannēs Sandkhavanetsi (M3793, M10099, M7736, see Izmailova 1986); the fourth is the *Trebizond* Gospels (V1400). All four are of a higher quality than the nine manuscripts depicting the Evangelists together on a single folio at the end of the preface cycle. The prevalence of this ensemble portrait in the Armenian tradition underlines artistically the harmony among the Four Gospels. It is a theological statement. Only later, starting in the Cilician period, do individual Evangelist portraits become the rule, when they are almost always shown seated.

The source for the minority seated group of eleventh-century Evangelist portraits is clear: Byzantine models, since all such miniatures show classicizing features and bear identifying Greek inscriptions. Of the eleventh-century manuscripts, only manuscripts with seated Evangelists plus the noble *Adrianople* Gospels show them in the expected upright position. All others lack Greek inscriptions and show the Evangelists standing, but painted across the height of the page (Kouymjian 1981). For this early period then, most Armenian Gospels are painted in a provincial style; those which can be considered luxury manuscripts or ones displaying a classicizing style sometimes show Byzantine influence in iconography and style.

### Narrative Miniatures in Armenian Gospels

Miniatures, whether symbolic (a cross) or narrative (events from Christ's life), were painted in Gospels from the beginning. Their number and position vary by century, location, and artist. In the earliest period they were mostly full-page in size and grouped together at the beginning, just after the Canon Tables but before the Evangelists' portraits. The narrative miniatures formed a so-called festive cycle, a grouping of the principal events in Christ's life that correspond to the major feasts of the church. Old Testament scenes, especially the Sacrifice of Abraham, are sometimes found in older Gospels as parallels to New Testament episodes.

Unlike the twelve-feast cycle, the *dodecaorton*, of middle Byzantine art (Weitzmann 1967), the Armenian Christ cycle never had a fixed number of episodes. Up to the end of the eleventh century the scenes varied from the four to fifteen. The oldest cycle, four scenes on two leaves of parchment from a lost manuscript dated by formal and stylistic considerations to circa 600, were bound into the *Echmiadzin* Gospels of 989 (M2374); their subjects are two Annunciations (to the High Priest Zachariah and to the Virgin), Presentation of the Magi (Nativity), and Baptism. This latter miniature offers a convenient excuse to discuss the complexity and early eclecticism of Armenian painting, and how it integrated the artistic environment of early Christian art and its iconography. The Baptism, like the other images, shows a clear mixture of classical and oriental elements. The faces are rendered frontally with dark almond-shaped eyes, thick eyebrows, and small mouths. The figures are hieratic, far removed from classical naturalism seen in architectural background of direct classical inspiration in the first three miniatures.

Of this series, only the Baptism is painted within a frame. In each of its four corners is a male bust, the four Evangelists. As we have seen, in early Armenian Gospels the opening set of miniatures terminated with portraits of the Evangelists. The wide frame has a repetitive design of a jewelled chalice on a paten. A bird with a pink body and a bluish head and wings is perched on its rim, identified as a pelican (Der Nersessian 1964, Mathews 1982). A second-century Greek work called the *Physiologus* (Muradyan 2005), translated into Armenian probably by the early sixth century, which describes animals and gives each an allegorical interpretation, says that when in hardship and there is no other way to nourish her young, the pelican will tear pieces of flesh from her own breast to feed her chicks. The blood from her torn flesh drips into the chalice, the wine cup of the Last Supper, when Christ said "drink, this is my blood". Clearly the pelican represents the future sacrifice of Christ. In early Armenian theology, such as the Teachings of St. Gregory incorporated in *Agat'angeghos*, baptism was a necessary condition for salvation, thus there was no need to depict the Crucifixion and Resurrection. To make sure the Baptism was understood as the end of the cycle, the artist painted the Evangelists in the corners. This earliest of examples shows the complexity



*Letter of Eusebius, Gospel of Mk'ë* (862), San Lazzaro, MS 1144, fol. 2



*Temple, Gospel of Echmiadzin, Noravank' (989), Matenadaran, MS 2374, fol. 5v*



*T'oros Roslin, Nativity with Saint Matthew, Second Gospel of Constantinople (1260), Hromkla, fol. 15v*



*The Four Evangelists, New Testament, Tarōn or Vaspurakan (?), 1038, Matenadaran, MS 6201, fol. 8v*

of early Armenian iconography, very much attuned to Christian parallels in classical patristic texts, with an artistic style reflecting classicizing modes, but mixed with a native Oriental manner. This openness toward artistic motifs from East and West would remain constant.

About twenty Armenian manuscripts to the year 1100 have figural or narrative miniatures, but only two of these, the *Vehap'ar* Gospels (M10780, named after its donor Catholicos Vazken I, 1955-94) and that of king Gagik-Abas of Kars (J2556), have miniatures scattered throughout the text. In the twelfth century and after, cycles dispersed throughout the Gospel texts became more popular, though grouping miniatures at the beginning remained the most common right to the end of manuscript production. Miniatures varied in size, from full-page (the majority) to small column-size rectangles to marginal vignettes. The preface cycle could have any of the following scenes: Annunciation, Visitation, Presentation, Baptism, Transfiguration, Raising of Lazarus, Entry into Jerusalem, Last Supper, Washing of the Feet, Betrayal, Crucifixion, Descent from the Cross, Entombment, Harrowing of Hell, Women at the Empty Tomb, Ascension, Pentecost, Assumption of the Virgin, Christ in Glory, Last Judgement. Scenes like the Visitation or the Assumption were rare, while one would seldom find the two expressions of the Resurrection – the Descent into Hell and the Empty Tomb – in the same cycle or both the Last Supper and the Washing of the Feet. Tenth-century Armenian manuscripts often began the cycle with the Old Testament Sacrifice of Abraham, because of its parallel to the sacrifice of the Crucifixion. The Sacrifice of Abraham became popular again around Lake Van starting in the early fourteenth century, perhaps due to the influence of the early tenth-century Church of Aght'amar (Der Nersessian 1965), which had the scene sculpted on its façade. Artists of the same region of Van-Vaspurakan were also inclined toward including miracles other than the Raising of Lazarus in their cycles, for instance, Christ Healing a Paralytic. The longer series and the unique frieze cycle Gospel (M7651) illustrated scores of major and minor scenes, running in some cases to over 200 miniatures.

### The Bagratid-Artzruni Period (Ninth to Eleventh Centuries)

During the first part of the eleventh century, a period of prosperity under the Bagratids, Artzrunis, and other dynasties, there are about forty surviving illustrated Gospels or fragments, some fifteen have one or more narrative miniatures, thrice the number of the two previous centuries, five with preface cycles of seven to fifteen miniatures. Scenes such as the Visitation, Last Supper, Betrayal of Judas, Descent from the Cross, Entombment, the Women at the Empty Tomb (Resurrection), and Pentecost, make their first appearance (Kouymjian 1993).

As already stated, two manuscripts from the middle of the eleventh century have very extensive cycles of large and small miniatures of major and minor episodes scattered throughout the text of the Gospels rather than at the beginning. One is the partially mutilated Gospels of King Gagik-Abas of Kars (J2556), of great artistic beauty and in style very dependent on Byzantine court art. The other, the *Vehap'ar* Gospel (M10780),



*Dragon and Phoenix (detail), Lectionary of Prince Het'um, Hromkla (1286), Matenadaran, MS 979, fol. 334*



perhaps executed in Artsakh, is painted in a provincial Armenian style, far removed from classical elegance (Matevosyan 1978, 2000). When, after the devastation of the Seljuk Turkish invasions, manuscript production started again in the second half of the twelfth century, both methods of illustration – grouping narrative miniatures at the beginning or continuously illustrating the text with an expanded cycle – were practised.

#### Cilician Period (Twelfth to Fourteenth Centuries)

The wealth of the new Armenian kingdom of Cilicia (1198–1375), situated in the mountains in the extreme north-eastern Mediterranean, allowed the aristocracy and high-ranking clergy to fund the creation of luxury Gospels. Thirteenth-century Cilician painting is certainly the most refined moment in the entire history of Armenian manuscript illumination (Der Nersessian 1993). Contact with Central Asia and China through a treaty with the Mongols and the West through the Crusades and Italian merchants also contributed to the creation of a highly sophisticated and eclectic art. Several Armenian manuscripts, including illuminated Gospels, were actually executed in Italy in this period (Korkhmazyan 1971). The decline of Cilician art was rapid after the sack of the capital Sis in 1292 by the Mamluks of Egypt, though patronage allowed continuation into the middle of the next century.

The most distinguished artist of Cilicia was indisputably T'oros Roslin (active 1256–68), who during the 1260s headed the scriptorium at the catholical see of Hromkla. Seven of his signed (he was also a distinguished scribe) and illuminated manuscripts have survived. His art is characterized by a delicacy of colour, a very fine classical treatment of figures and their garments, an elegance of line, and an innovative iconography (Der Nersessian 1973a, 1993). The works that have come down to us are all extremely luxurious and use gold copiously for backgrounds and details. Roslin's decorative skills, as seen on Canon Tables and headpieces, are also rich and varied (Evans 1983).

Toward the end of the century, the delicate rendering of Roslin gave way to a more nervous, mannered style; several manuscripts display this highly charged style, but all of their artists remain anonymous. The most remarkable is the superb Lectionary of Prince (later King) Het'um II dated 1286 (M979) with more than 200 miniatures of varying size (Drampian 2004, Rapti 2008). Among the most striking features of this manuscript are several pages on which unmistakable artistic motifs from China, probably transiting into Armenia through the Armenian-Mongol alliance of circa 1250 and after. Two decorated incipit pages reveal the extraordinary integration of Chinese Fu dogs, lions, dragons and phoenixes into the repertory of Armenian, Byzantine and Western art, once again underlining the agility of Armenian painters, especially under royal patronage, to absorb the latest international artistic trends, often much faster than either the neighbouring Islamic and Byzantine-Crusader craftsmen (Kouymjian 1986, 2006, 2008b).

In the next century the name of Sargis Pitzak dominated artistic production. Though very prolific (dozens of manuscripts), he greatly reduced the artistic conventions of the best of the Cilician artists (Ghazaryan 1980, Der Nersessian 1993). His figures are smaller and much less well drawn; his colours are bright but lacking the subtlety and echo of Renaissance art of the third quarter of the thirteenth century.

In Greater Armenia, especially in the northern monasteries of Siunik' during the second half of the thirteenth century, a number of fine artists followed a distinctly different way of illustrating Gospel books, though influences from Cilicia can be detected. An important miniaturist of the fourteenth century working in Greater Armenia was T'oros of Tarōn. His manuscripts, most famous of which is the Gladzor Gospels (UCLA 1) painted by several hands, are artistically of very high quality and iconographically very interesting, as underlined by the remarkable study devoted to it (Mathews and Sanjian 1991). After the thirteenth century, Armenian miniature painting flourished simultaneously in a variety of regions of the Armenian diaspora, each with a characteristic style.

#### Regional Centres and the Colonies

##### Crimea

In Crimea, a region of heavy Armenian settlement by immigrants from Ani and surrounding regions, miniature painting was strongly influenced by the Byzantine classicizing style, with emphasis on naturalism. In a short time, newly established Armenian monasteries produced a steady stream of manuscripts, many of them finely illustrated (Korkhmazyan 1978, Buschhausen – Korchmasjan 2009).

##### Van-Vaspourakan and Artsakh/Karabagh

In the fourteenth century, a flourishing in manuscript production occurred around Lake Van, featuring a naive style probably of native Armenian inspiration. Figures with very round faces and large eyes with dark pupils were usually drawn against the unpainted white of the paper (Hakobyan 1976, Zakarjan 1980, Leyloyan-Yekmalyan 2009). The iconography was often quite different from that of Greater Armenia or Cili-



T'oros di Tarōn, *Crucifixion*, Gospel of Gladzor, Gladzor (1300–1307), UCLA, MS 1, fol. 561



*Washing the Feet*, New Testament, Vostan, Tzerun (1391), Matenadaran, MS 8772, fol. 11



Mik'ayēl, *New Testament*, Nor Avan, Sebastia (1668–73), Freer Gallery of Art, MS 36.15, fol. 8



*Last Supper*, New Testament, Artsakh (1224), University of Halle, MS Arm. 1, fol. 5

cia, displaying echoes of an ancient tradition and at times an imaginatively original interpretation of the text; notable among many talented artists were Tzerun at the end of the fourteenth century and Khach'atur of Khizan in the mid-fifteenth century (Der Nersessian 1973b). Pictorial art from Artsakh/Karabagh is known essentially from fewer than twenty manuscripts of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, as indicated in surviving colophons or attribution through stylistic or other criteria (Hakobyan 1989). Iconographically, the art is closely associated with that of the neighbouring Armenian provinces of Siunik' and Van/Vaspurakan. The art is monastic or provincial rather than courtly; naïf and primitive rather than classicizing. The paintings are full of innocent charm. They are immediate in their appeal. The subjects are often rare, sometimes unique, and the inspiration at times dates back to the palaeo-Christian art of Syria and Palestine and the apocryphal Infancy Gospel (Leroy 1964). The pictures in the Gospels, whatever their ultimate sources, display a freshness and beauty that delight all viewers. They are full of surprises and enigmas, which, along with those of Vaspurakan, reveal a popular art, but one that is both original and sophisticated (Kouymjian 2012).

##### Julfa–New Julfa

At the end of the sixteenth century, a talented school of miniaturists developed at Julfa on the Arax River, a rich merchant city whose adventurous traders established Armenian commerce from Amsterdam and Venice to Aleppo and India. After the city's destruction by Shah Abbas in 1604 and the forced migration of its inhabitants to the newly created suburb of New Julfa adjacent to his capital Isfahan, artists from old Julfa with their distinctive style gave an impetus to illumination that continued throughout the seventeenth century (Der Nersessian 1986, Taylor 1995, Arak'elyan 2011).

#### The Seventeenth Century and the Challenge of Printing

The copying and illuminating of manuscripts steadily progressed, though the early sixteenth century bore witness to a general decline in production and in artistic creativity in general. The seventeenth century witnessed a major renaissance in miniature painting, especially in what are now called diasporan communities. Constantinople's Armenian community was greatly augmented by refugees fleeing the long Safavid-Ottoman wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; in time it became the artistic centre of national life. A flow of manuscripts, some of distinction, continued in the seventeenth and well into the eighteenth century before being totally replaced by the new technology of the printed book. Western iconography often intruded in these later illuminations, often via North European engravings used in early imprints of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by Armenian publishers in Europe.

In the seventeenth century, in Constantinople, Crimea, New Julfa and other centres, there was a conscious revival of the elegant Cilician miniature style. Leading artists understood that painting had greatly declined in the fifteenth and especially the sixteenth centuries, and often consciously copied miniatures from the best Cilician Gospels available rather than the widely available refined images of Western woodcuts and engravings. The best example of this is Gospels of 1668–73 (Freer 36.15) copied from the 1262 Gospels of T'oros Roslin (Walters Art Gallery, no. 539) by Mik'ayēl son of Bargham. Manuscript production continued in Armenia into the late eighteenth century, even though Armenian book printing had begun in 1511–12. The publication of the first Armenian Bible in 1666 in Amsterdam by Voskan did not halt the copying in the distant monasteries of Armenia because Voskan's Bible with more than 80 magnificent woodcuts probably proved more expensive than that of the free labour of monks (Kévorkian 1986). It was only after the printing of very affordable Gospels in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries that manual copying of the text stopped (Kouymjian 2008a). In the first two centuries of Armenian printing, book format and decorations, including font types, imitated the design and layout of manuscripts, as was the case in the West.

The influence of Western artistic tastes became evident already after the sixteenth century with the increased involvement of Armenians in international trade. Interest in European painting grew among the wealthy in such Armenian centres as Constantinople and Isfahan/New Julfa, and artists began painting on panel and canvas. Armenian art began to include an ever-increasing quantity of larger framed paintings, consequently, despite sporadic production throughout the eighteenth century and even in the early nineteenth century, the art of the miniaturist, like that of the professional scribe or the traditional monastic binder, came to an end. Books were now printed instead of being copied by hand, were decorated with engravings rather than miniature paintings, and bound in a Western fashion as opposed to the traditional Armenian way. The miniature, a medieval art, gave way in Armenia, as it already had in the West, to framed pictures: the painter-monk was replaced by the worldly, secular "Artist" with a capital A.



## Art and Patrons

23

*Sermon Book of Mush*  
1205; Avag  
Parchment; mm 705 x 550  
Venice, Library of the  
Mekhitarist Fathers  
of San Lazzaro, MS 1614  
*Bibliography:* Dournovo 1961;  
Gevorgyan 1998; Mutafian 2007

The manuscript from which these 16 folios are taken is unique for its technical characteristics and its particularly troubled history. It is the largest Armenian manuscript in the world: it weighs 32 kilograms and comprises 661 parchment folios. The manuscript was probably copied between 1200 and 1202 at Avag Monastery and then transported to the monastery of Surb Arak'elots (Holy Apostles) in the city of Mush, in Anatolia, in 1205. It is written in three columns in capitalized writing (*yerkat'agir*) and contains a collection of sermons by a number of authors, one of whom is Saint Gregory of Nazianzus. Because of its weight, the manuscript was first divided into two parts in 1828. Having escaped the destruction of the Monastery of Surb Arak'elots during the years of the Genocide, in 1917 two survived women once again divided one of the halves into two parts and brought it with them to Tiflis. The second half was rediscovered two years later when a Polish officer sold it to a charitable Armenian

organization in Baku. The two larger sections of the manuscript were then reunited at Matenadaran in Yerevan. The 16 folios conserved in San Lazzaro, on the other hand, were rediscovered in 1845 at the Monastery of Surb Arak'elots by the Mekhitarist Father Nerses Sargisian, who spent a decade in the Armenian provinces of the Ottoman Empire and transported numerous manuscripts to Venice. It is most likely that this small section of the Sermon Book had been separated from the two larger parts at the time. Two more folios are conserved at the Library of the Mekhitarist Fathers in Vienna, whereas 45 of the folios are today considered lost. Given the impossibility of reuniting the various parts of the manuscript for this exhibition, digital copies of the missing sections are displayed alongside the 16 folios from the Library of San Lazzaro, thereby symbolically reuniting the manuscript after a century of vicissitudes. (A.S.)





### Medieval Armenian Art and Its Patrons

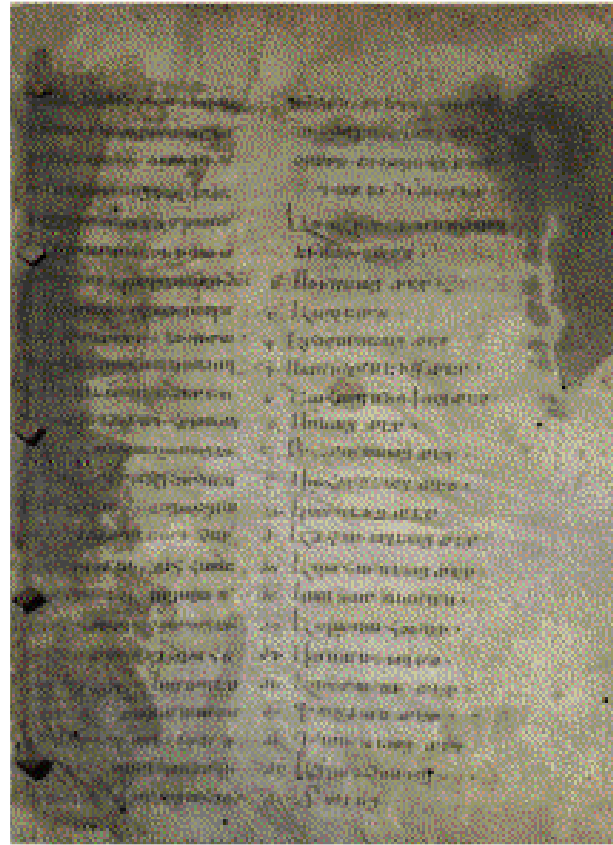
The great blossoming of art and architecture in medieval Armenia from the fifth century, was largely stimulated by the political and social system that characterized Armenian history of the period. The presence of a rigid feudal-like system called *nakharar*, similar to the Iranian models but with the unique peculiarities of the Armenian tradition, created multiple centres of power that contributed to the development in the arts and trades on the Armenian high plateau. It was the most florid period of architecture and, above all, of the art of book illumination. Important commissions were issued by the royal and princely families, who often maintained at their own expense scriptoria and skilled workers in the field of architecture, sculpture and the working of precious metals, as is attested by the magnificent reliquaries. Another fundamental element that contributed to artistic development in Armenia was the Church, with its multiple jurisdictions that on one hand contributed to the growth in the number of commissions and on the other provided for the training of workers. Many famous architects, miniaturists and sculptors were in fact members of the Armenian clergy.

24

#### *Gahnamak*

5th c. (?), before the Bagratid period  
Fragment of manuscript, parchment; cm 34.5 × 25  
Venice, Library of the Mekhitarist Fathers of San Lazzaro  
*Bibliography:* Dédéyan 1982

The feudal Armenian nobility was composed of *nakharar*, high-ranking nobles at the head of large families, who controlled vast territories of the country. In turn, the *nakharar* depended on the kings of Armenia, who periodically established the hierarchy of the nobility in the court through official documents called *gahnamak* (literally: "throne registrar"), which were long lists of the names of the families admitted. Medieval historical sources give us information of *gahnamaks* that list as many as hundreds of names of noble families. Here is a fragment from an early *gahnamak* that probably refers to the ruling order before the Bagratid period (884–1045).



25

Gospel. Portrait of Levon II  
13th c.; Hromkla, Cilicia  
Parchment; cm 15.8 × 11.3;  
356 fols.  
Yerevan, Matenadaran,  
MS 8321, fol. 15  
*Bibliography:* Gevorgyan 1982;  
Korkhmazyan et al. 1984;  
Der Nersessian 1993; Mutafian  
1999, Chookaszian 2005

This Gospel was commissioned by the Catholicos Constantine I, tutor to the prince-in-waiting and future king, Levon II (r. 1269–89). The prince is dressed in the royal Armenian tradition, with a purple mantle over gold-coloured clothing decorated with large, blue medallions bearing the effigy of the lion, the symbol of the Hetumid dynasty. The prince is flanked on either side by the inscription with his name: "Levon, son of King Het'um". He is portrayed in a stately and static pose, with iconographic elements reserved for saints. The portrait was made when he was fourteen or fifteen years old. After having been long included in another manuscript, the parchment folio on which the portrait was painted was reincorporated into the original manuscript, which is today conserved at the Matenadaran of Yerevan.

26

*The Assizes of Antioch. Portrait of Levon IV by Sargis Pitzak*  
1331; Sis, Cilicia  
Parchment; cm 16.8 × 12.5,  
214 fols.  
Venice, Library of the Mekhitarist Fathers of San Lazzaro, MS 107  
*Bibliography:* Der Nersessian 1936; Der Nersessian 1993; Zekiyani 1990; Kévoikian 1996

As has occurred on other occasions, the Armenian translation from Old French of the *Assizes of Antioch* by Smbat, the brother of King Het'um I, made possible the preservation of an important historical source whose original has been lost. It is a codex of laws in use in the principality of Antioch, a state bordered to the south by the Armenian kingdom of Cilicia. The manuscript presented here is a copy of the thirteenth-century translation embellished by a miniature by Sargis Pitzak, a famous copyist and miniaturist (see cat. 33). Pitzak's illuminated folio is doubly precious because it is the only one present in the volume and is positioned immediately before the preface to the text. The miniature depicts King Levon IV, who commissioned the manuscript, seated in the oriental style as he administers justice. His right hand indicates the standing magistrate, while his left points to the three figures in heated discussion at his feet. The manuscript was brought to San Lazzaro by Manuk Agha Aslanian in 1883.





27

*Gospel of Mlk'ē.*

The Evangelists Matthew and Luke

862; Vaspurakan (Varag?)  
Parchment; cm 35.0 × 29.5;  
455 fols.Venice, Library of the  
Mekhitarist Fathers of San  
Lazzaro, MS 1144, fols. 5v-6r  
*Bibliography:* Adontz 1936;  
Der Nersessian 1989; Durand  
et al. 2007

This Gospel is traditionally associated with the name of Queen Mlk'ē, wife of King Gagik Artzruni of Vaspurakan (r. 908–21). The two rulers were also responsible for the (lost) precious binding in gold and pearls, as is indicated in the colophons on folios 137 and 222. This is the earliest Armenian illuminated manuscript surviving in its entirety today. The parts of its decorations that have been conserved are the tables of concordance, the miniatures with the portraits of the Evangelists and a miniature of the Ascension of Christ, all of which are in keeping with the iconographic canons of the Eastern Church during the sixth century. The Evangelists are portrayed in a particularly solemn manner, an effect that is enhanced by the tapestries behind them, which resemble a theatrical backdrop.

The book was donated by the royal couple to the Monastery of the Holy Cross of Varag, where it was located until the middle of the fourteenth century, before beginning a series of journeys. From 1682 it belonged to the Church of the Virgin in K'ut'ays, before passing to Akhaltskha (Akhaltsikhe, in Georgia). Ultimately, it was donated to the Mekhitarist Congregation in 1830 by Father Grigor Nep'isian of Akhaltskha. (A.S.)

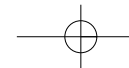






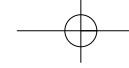
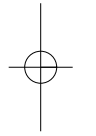
**28**  
Gospel. Temple  
10th c.  
Parchment fragment;  
cm 29,5 × 23,2  
Yerevan, Matenadaran,  
MS 9430, fol. 1v  
*Bibliography:* Kouymjian 2008

The folio exhibited comes from a tenth-century Gospel of which only two folios have survived. These contain three tables of concordance and the miniature of a temple executed in a rather classical style. Comparing the iconography of this fragment with that of the Gospel of Echmiadzin from the year 989 (Yerevan, Matenadaran, ms 2374), copied in Noravank' (Siunik') by the copyist and miniaturist, Hovhannēs, it may be hypothesized that the two manuscripts originate from the same scriptorium, though the preserved folios of this Gospel are less refined. As in the Gospel of Echmiadzin, in this manuscript the temple was probably also placed after the tables of concordance. (A.S.)



**29**  
Gospel of Trebizond.  
Tables of concordance  
10th–11th c.  
Parchment; cm 46,0 × 37,0  
Venice, Library of the  
Mekhitarist Fathers of  
San Lazzaro, MS 1925,  
fols. 3v–4r  
*Bibliography:* Gianascian 1989;  
Zekiyan 1990; Mutafian 1999

The miniatures of the Gospel of Trebizond (see cat. 7) are stylistically very close to the Byzantine models from the same period, though they demonstrate traits peculiar to the coeval Armenian miniature, as can be seen particularly well in the tables of concordance (*khoran*). The *khoran* present a mixture of Armenian and Byzantine characteristics executed with extreme refinement, in a technique that resembles the *cloisonné* used by the Byzantine culture during that period. Judging by the quality of the miniatures, it may be deduced that the manuscript was commissioned by a prince during the Bagratid dynasty. In recent times, the illuminated folios have been separated from the body of the Gospel and rebound in a separated volume. (A.S.)







**30**  
*Gospel of Evagris. The Baptism of Christ*  
1038; Vaspurakan or Tarōn  
Parchment; cm 41.0 × 32.0;  
243 fols.  
Yerevan, Matenadaran,  
MS 6201  
*Bibliography:* Der Nersessian  
1989; Thierry 2000; Durand  
et al. 2007

This manuscript, which takes its name from the copyist who created it, is written in capital letters, or *yerkat'agir*, in two columns of 18 rows each. In addition to the tables of concordance, this includes eight full-page miniatures created with simple lines that depict scenes from the life of Christ: The Baptism, the Last Supper, the Crucifixion, etc. The colophon gives its date but not its place of production. On the basis of the iconography, it is hypothesized that the manuscript comes from Vaspurakan or, more probably, the province of Tarōn. The slender figures in the scene

of the Baptism are drawn with thick lines directly on the virgin parchment. The material serves as a ground to the scene and has no architectural elements or landscapes. Some of the details, such as the wings of the archangels, protrude from the border, creating an effect of great dynamism. The scene is painted to give emphasis to the episode without constricting the figures in a mannered representation. The colours are diluted and gold is not used. The iconographic elements are set in an eleventh-century regional context comparable with the miniatures of Cappadocia. The movements of the manuscript can be partly reconstructed: in 1646 it was conserved near Erzurum; in 1851 it was in the nearby monastery of Surb Davit'; it was taken to eastern Armenia at the start of the twentieth century, and finally deposited at the Matenadaran of Yerevan between 1924 and 1936. (A.S.)



**31**  
*Gospel. Tables of concordance*  
1069; Narek, Vaspurakan  
Parchment; 224 fols.  
Yerevan, Matenadaran,  
MS 10434, fols. 4v-5r  
*Bibliography:* Kouymjian 2008

The decoration of this manuscript comprises the complete set of tables of concordance (*khoran*, which are particularly interesting for their execution) and a stylized cross at the start of the volume. In the *khoran* the reference to the canons of the Armenian-Byzantizing tradition is still evident (see cat. 29), with chromatic elements that would recur in the school of miniatures in the Vaspurakan region. The manuscript was copied in the scriptorium of the Monastery of Narek, south of Lake Van, where a century earlier the famous poet Grigor Narekatsi had lived and worked (see cat. 12). (A.S.)  
(Work not on display)



**32**  
*Gospel of Skevra. Crucifixion*  
1193; Skevra, Cilicia  
Parchment; cm 30.0 × 21.6;  
248 fols.  
Venice, Library of the  
Mekhitarist Fathers  
of San Lazzaro, MS 1635  
*Bibliography:* Der Nersessian  
1936; Der Nersessian 1993;  
Mutafian 1999; Durand  
et al. 2007

The manuscript was illuminated in one of the most important scriptoria of Cilician Armenia, that of Skevra, by the miniaturist Konstantin, having been commissioned by Archbishop Nersēs of Lambron and his brother, Prince Het'um. Illustrations of the Evangelists are not represented at the beginning of each Gospel, as often occurs in Armenian manuscripts, but an episode from the life of Christ is shown instead. Of the four miniatures originally present, only two have survived: the miniature of the Baptism of Christ at the beginning of the Gospel of

Mark, and the Crucifixion preceding the Gospel of John. Despite its small size, the latter is a magnificent miniature. Filling the miniature from top to bottom, the Cross with Christ crucified stands out against the golden background. On the left at its feet, we see the Virgin with another woman, and on the right, John with a centurion. The manuscript also contains some of the most beautiful *khoran* (tables of concordance) painted in Cilicia. The presence of the codex in Ayas (Laiazzo) is confirmed at the start of the fourteenth century. In 1851 it was in Constantinople, from whence it was sent to Venice the same year. (A.S.)







**33**  
*Gospel of Sargis Pitzak.* Portrait of the Evangelist Matthew 1331; Drazark, Cilicia  
 Parchment; cm 25.5 × 17.5; 387 fols.  
 Venice, Library of the Mekhitarist Fathers of San Lazzaro, MS 16  
*Bibliography:* Der Nersessian 1936; Der Nersessian 1993; Mutafian 1999

This Gospel was created in the ancient scriptorium of Drazark in Cilicia, by Sargis Pitzak, the most famous Armenian miniaturist and copyist from the first half of the fourteenth century. The miniature shows the Evangelist Matthew seated as he writes upon a white page. His figure occupies nearly the entire height of the folio and stands out against the gold background. Kneeling at his feet is a certain Sargis, probably Pitzak himself. An angel protrudes from the border with a hand extended as a sign of benediction in the direction of the Evangelist. Like the miniature painted for the manuscript of the *Assizes of Antioch* (see cat. 26), this one is also framed by a rectangular border decorated with floral motifs and a cross above it. With respect to other Cilician miniaturists, Pitzak's work has an unmistakable originality that is especially evident in his rendering of the human figure. (A.S.)







**34**  
*Gospel of Drazark.* Portrait of the Evangelist Matthew 1295; Drazark, Cilicia  
Parchment; cm 24.0 × 17.5; 340 fols.  
Yerevan, Matenadaran, MS 6290  
*Bibliography:* Der Nersessian 1993; Gevorgyan 1998; Mutařian 2007

This precious Cilician manuscript containing tables of concordance (*khoran*) and portraits of the Evangelists is the work of the copyists and miniaturists T'oros the Philosopher and Ohan, who were active in the Drazark school of miniatures. The portrait of the Matthew at the beginning of the Gospel is the work of T'oros. The beginning of the manuscript contains a miniature that was glued onto a folio in a later period. According to some scholars, this miniature, which refers to the apparition of "the sign of the Son of man in heaven" (Mt 24, 30), is to be attributed to the circle of the famous miniaturist, T'oros Roslin. (A.S.)



**35**  
*Gospel.* Annunciation 1297; Yeghigis, Siunik' Parchment; cm 32.0 × 23.5  
Yerevan, Matenadaran, MS 7482, f. 248v  
*Bibliography:* Durand et al. 2007; Kouymjian 2008

The miniature of the Annunciation was created in 1378 by the miniaturist and copyist Grigor Tat'evatsi, who was also one of the most famous philosophers and poets of his period (see cat. 56). Grigor entered the Monastery of Tat'ev in 1370 and studied under Hovhannes Vorotnetsi. The monastery was one of the most important in medieval Armenia and a centre for the custody and defence of the theology of the Armenian Church. Here Tat'evatsi copied and illuminated a number of manuscripts. His miniatures are distinguished by their style, typical of the Siunik' region, in which the traditionally vivid colours are enhanced by a steady and assertive stroke. This miniature of the Annunciation reveals the originality of Tat'evatsi's art, which is clearly perceptible in the pitcher placed between the archangel and Maria. (A.S.)



**36**  
*Gospel of Khizan.* Last Supper 1368; Vaspurakan cm 22.0 × 14.5; 346 fols.  
Venice, Library of the Mekhitarist Fathers of San Lazzaro, MS Kurdian 224, ff. 13v-14r  
*Bibliography:* Ter-Nersessian 1975; Mutařian 1999

The manuscript has no fewer than twenty-eight miniatures, which cover the cycle of the Life of Christ with simple iconography typical of Vaspurakan, strong and vivid colours and a simple yet exceptionally dynamic rendering of the figures. In the Last Supper, exhibited here, Christ is seated on the left holding a chalice and wrapped in a purple mantle. He faces the Apostles seated in three rows in a golden tower with a green cupola. The figure of Jude is absent. The space between Christ and the Apostles is adorned with a refined, mosaic-like decoration. Preserved in the Monastery of the Mekhitarist Fathers of San Lazzaro, the manuscript is part of the Kurdian collection composed of approximately three hundred manuscripts donated to the Fathers by Harut'un Kurdian, an Armenian collector who lived in the United States.

**37**  
*Gospel.* Last Supper 14th c.; Artsakh Parchment; cm 21.5 × 15.0  
Yerevan, Matenadaran, MS 316; f.11  
*Bibliography:* Durand et al. 2007; Kouymjian 2008

This manuscript, containing a miniature of the Last Supper, was created in the Artsakh region of Armenia, which was of great importance in the Middle Ages, partly due to the presence of the Monastery of Gandzasar founded in the thirteenth century. The archaic-style miniature displayed is enclosed by a rectangular border composed of polychromatic, geometric elements, forming an arch at the top. Beneath the arch is the scene of the Last Supper, represented by a clearly symbolic, circular structure closed by the figure of Christ. A cross-shaped element is seen at the centre of the round table, around which the faces of the Apostles can be seen. Jude is not among them, but he can be seen about to exit at bottom right. The miniature on the facing page represents Christ before Pilate.







**38**  
*The Alexander Romance.*  
The Arrival of Alexander  
in Memphis  
2nd half of the 14th c.; Cilicia  
paper; cm 29.0 x 18.5; 127 fols.  
Venice, Library of the  
Mekhitarist Fathers of  
San Lazzaro, MS 424  
*Bibliography:* Der Nersessian  
1977; Mutafian 1999;  
Mutafian 2007

The Armenian version of the  
*Alexander Romance*, created  
toward the end of the thirteenth  
century by Khach'atur  
Kech'aretsi, is based on the  
Greek text of Pseudo-  
Callisthenes, dating from the  
fifth century. The manuscript  
was probably created in the  
Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia in  
the fourteenth century by the  
copyist and miniaturist, Nersēs.  
The miniatures refer to  
explicitly Christian

iconographic motifs, as was the  
case with the other linguistic  
and cultural traditions that  
embraced the work, *in primis*  
the medieval Greek and the  
Latin. As occurred in medieval  
Europe and Middle East, this  
novel also enjoyed wide  
diffusion and fame among the  
Armenians.  
The miniature depicts the  
arrival of Alexander in  
Memphis, Egypt. During the  
welcoming banquet he saw  
a large statue in black stone,  
which he discovered to be that  
of Nectanebo, the last king, who  
fled during the Persian invasion.  
Alexander then embraced the  
statue, exclaiming, "This is my  
father, and I am his son!"  
according to the writing in  
Armenian at his side. This  
episode originated from the  
belief that Alexander's true  
father was actually Nectanebo.  
(A.S.)



**39**  
Hymnal. Miniature of the  
Story of Vardan and the  
Armenian War  
1482; region of Van  
paper; cm 12.8 x 8.8; 404 fols.  
Yerevan, Matenadaran,  
MS 1620  
*Bibliography:* Dournovo 1961;  
Der Nersessian 1973; Kévorkian  
1996; Mutafian 1999; Durand  
et al. 2007

This manuscript contains a  
miniature inspired by the  
famous *Story of Vardan and the  
Armenian War* narrated by  
Yeghishē, a fifth-century  
Armenian author (see cat. 113).  
It culminates in the battle of  
Avarayr when the Armenians  
gave battle to the Sasanians  
on 26 May 451 in an attempt  
to suppress their conversion  
to Zoroastrianism. The  
commander Vardan  
Mamikonian and his soldiers  
all died in battle and were  
therefore counted among the  
martyrs of the Armenian  
Church, though not before  
the twelfth century, and only  
at the initiative of the Catholicos  
Nersēs Shnorhali.  
The miniature displayed is the  
work of the famous painter  
Karapet Berketsi. In this hymnal  
from the fifteenth century, the  
miniature of Saint Vardan is  
coupled with the most  
traditional biblical scenes. The  
miniature on two folios depicts,  
on the left, the Persians with a  
group of elephants, and on the  
right, the Armenians, with  
Vardan leading his troops  
on a white horse.  
(A.S.)

**40**  
Manuscript binding  
1249 (manuscript), 1255  
(binding); Hromkla, Cilicia  
Binding: gilded silver on wood;  
cm 16 x 12 x 7.5  
Yerevan, Matenadaran,  
MS 7690  
*Bibliography:* Zekiyani 1990;  
Der Nersessian 1993; Mutafian  
1999; Durand et al. 2007

The manuscript was  
commissioned by the Catholicos  
Kostandin I and completed  
in 1249. The richly adorned  
binding, also ordered by  
Kostandin, as documented  
in the inscription framing the  
sacred figures, was crafted  
shortly thereafter (1255).  
Both the miniatures and the  
binding hew very closely to  
contemporary Byzantine models,  
as does the representation of

Christ with the Virgin and Saint  
John the Baptist on the front  
cover in a direct rendition  
of the traditional Deesis.  
The book was given as a gift  
by Prince Levon, son of King  
Hetum I and future sovereign  
(see cat. 25), to his sister Fimi.  
Its presence in Crimea is  
documented prior to 1621.  
It entered the Matenadaran  
collection sometime between  
1941 and 1954.





**41**  
Sevan column capital  
874, Sevan, Surb Arak'elots  
Monastery  
Wood, cm 43 × 147 × 36  
Yerevan, State History Museum  
of Armenia, inv. 227 b.  
*Bibliography:* Stepanjan –  
Chakmakchjan 1971;  
Der Nersessian 1977;  
Thierry – Donabedian 1987;  
Ghazaryan 1989; Durand  
et al. 2007

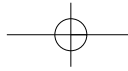
This wooden column capital  
is an extraordinary example  
of medieval Armenian wood  
carving. Made for a square  
column, it is exceptionally long  
and richly decorated.  
The tree of life is depicted in the  
centre of the capital, growing  
among the palm fronds with  
a pair of small birds in its  
uppermost branches. Two doves  
are represented to the right and  
left of the composition. The tips  
of their tails have the form of

a bird's head. Below the doves  
there are medallions with  
six-pointed stars. Clover  
and flowering branch motifs  
decorate the entire surface of  
the capital. The lower cornice  
has the form of a palm leaf  
while the upper one consists  
of a chain of triangles.  
The artefact, which was  
purchased from the State  
History Museum of Armenia  
in 1931, is originally from the  
Church of Astvatzamayr

(Mother of God), which is part  
of the Surb Arak'elots (Holy  
Apostles) monastery complex  
in Sevan. There are three other  
surviving capitals, two of which  
are now in the Hermitage  
collections in Saint Petersburg.  
(A.G.)







42

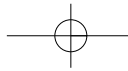
*Deesis*, two elements  
Early 14th c.; Vayots Dzor,  
Church of Surb Astvatzatzin,  
Spitakavor (Stunik')  
White felsite;  
a. cm 66 × 43 × 35;  
b. cm 66 × 46 × 33;  
Yerevan, State History Museum  
of Armenia, inv. 1325, 1324  
*Bibliography*: Hovsep'ian 1928;  
Thierry - Donabedian, 1987,  
Durand et al. 2007

The *Deesis* (Greek:  
"supplication" or  
"intercession") is a Byzantine  
iconographic theme used  
frequently throughout the  
Eastern Church. In the  
representation of the *Deesis*,  
two eminent intercessors for  
humanity address their prayers  
to Christ, who sits in Majesty in  
a central position. In most cases,  
the intercessors are the Virgin  
Mary and John the Baptist,  
the latter sometimes substituted  
by other saints or angels. In this  
particular *Deesis*, the three  
personages are carved in relief  
on separate blocks of felsite,  
which are incorporated into the  
broad masonry façade of the  
bema of the Church of the  
Virgin (Surb Astvatzatzin) in  
Spitakavor. Two of the three  
elements of this *Deesis* are  
presented here.  
The two objects entered the  
collection of the State History  
Museum of Armenia in 1936  
by means of the famous scholar  
of Armenian epigraphs,  
S. Barkhudarian.  
(A.G.)



a. The Virgin, inv. 1325  
The Virgin is the right-hand  
element of the *Deesis*. She is  
portrayed in full figure, with a  
halo around her head and her  
hands together in prayer. She  
is wrapped in a long robe that  
reaches to her feet. Her head  
is covered by a veil that  
descends to her shoulders.  
She is depicted between two  
slender columns supporting  
a vaulted ceiling adorned  
with foliage and palm leaves.

b. Saint John the Baptist,  
inv. 1324  
The left-hand element in the  
*Deesis*, Saint John the Baptist  
is depicted under an arch with  
a halo around his head.  
His right hand is raised while  
his left rests on his breast.  
His sculpted architectural  
setting is very similar to that  
in the *Deesis* element with  
the Virgin.







**43**  
Sculpture of the Madonna  
and Child  
12th c., Ani  
Agate; cm 21 × 9 × 4  
Venice, Congregation  
of the Mekhitarist Fathers  
of San Lazzaro  
*Bibliography:* Mutafian 2007

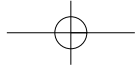
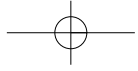
A small relief sculpture in agate portraying the Virgin Mary with Jesus, the object is another example of the art of relief work, which was widely practised in medieval Armenia. The back of the sculpture bears an inscription that is particularly difficult to decipher. It was engraved by one Alek'sanos, the artist who crafted the object. In all probability, the part with the image of the mother and child was painted. The sculpture was discovered by the Mekhitarist father Gabriel Nahapetian among the ruins of Ani.

**44**  
Reliquary. The Holy Sign  
of Khotakerats  
1300, Siunik'  
Wood panels faced in gilded  
silver and white silver, with  
stones, pearls, and glass;  
cm 42.5 × 26.5 × 4.5 (closed)  
Echmiadzin, Cathedral  
Treasure, inv. 731  
*Bibliography:* Stepanjan –  
Chakmakchjan 1971, p. 46;  
Khazaryan 1984; Der Nersessian  
1989, p. 200; Mutafian 1999;  
Durand et al. 2007

This reliquary is a masterpiece of medieval Armenian gold work. It was commissioned by Each'i, grandson of Prince Prösh of the important noble family Pröshian, patrons of the Monastery of K'arkopivank', also known as Khotakerk', i.e., "the herbivores", because of the diet followed by the hermits who settled there in ancient times. The exterior of the reliquary is luxuriously decorated. The back, in white silver, bears a dedicatory inscription with the date and place of manufacture. The front, with two doors, is crafted in gilded silver and features Christ in glory at the top centre sitting on a throne supported on a tetramorph. At either side, two angels hold two *flabella* to glorify him. The exteriors of the doors are decorated with representations of Saint Gregory the Illuminator and Saint John the Baptist. On either side of the two saints, next to the doors, we find the Virgin Mary and Saint John with the Gospel in his hand. The lower part bears Prince Each'i at the centre with his arms raised in prayer, framed in another dedicatory inscription with the apostles Peter and Paul on either side. Incredible as it may seem, the interior is even more sumptuous. An Armenian cross, bejewelled and removable, stands out against the finely tooled back with two fawns seated at its foot. The insides of the doors feature the archangels Michael and Gabriel with other *flabella* in their hands. According to tradition, the relic contained in the precious box is a fragment of the Holy Cross obtained by the monks from Emperor Heraclius of Byzantium when he passed through the area in 628.











**45**  
Reliquary of the True Cross  
of Ashot II  
Cross: 10th–11th c., Kars  
Reliquary: 1893  
Iron, gilded silver, bronze  
applications and beads;  
Cross: cm 59.5 × 35;  
Reliquary: cm 65 × 80 (open)  
Echmiadzin, Cathedral  
Treasure, inv. 889  
*Bibliography:* Khazaryan 1984;  
Thierry – Donabédian 1989;  
Durand et al. 2007

In this curious receptacle, a relic of the True Cross is contained inside another cross, which dates back to the Bagratid king Ashot II, who reigned from 914 to 928. His grandfather Ashot I (r. 885–90), founder of the dynasty of the Bagratid kings, had received from Photios I, the Patriarch of Constantinople, a relic of the True Cross, which he put into safekeeping at the Monastery of Sevan. We cannot exclude the possibility of a direct connection between this episode and the creation of the reliquary presented here.

The iron cross is outstanding for its simplicity, while nevertheless possessing a certain vividness. Another cross, small, equally linear and crafted in bronze, is affixed where the two members of the iron cross meet. It contains a fragment of crafted glass which holds the relic of the True Cross. The relic was not encased in the silver reliquary until 1893. Inside, four seraphs are gathered around the relic. On the inside of the doors we find the instruments of the Passion, while outside there are the figures of the apostles Peter and Paul.

