

**An Armenian
Liturgical
Curtain**

1763.
Present-day Turkey,
Istanbul/Constantinople (?), Ottoman period. Wool embroidered in silk and metal thread in tambour or chain stitch; 178 x 122 cm. Purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund 2014.13



EXHIBITION
Floral Delight:
Textiles from
Islamic Lands

Through June
 28, 2015,
 Holden Gallery

AN ARMENIAN LITURGICAL CURTAIN

The Cleveland Museum of Art recently acquired a medium-size 18th-century liturgical curtain, embroidered with sparkling metal and colorful silk thread on a red woolen ground. This elegantly crafted textile is in a floral style associated with the art of Asia Minor and the Ottoman period. Except for the figure of St. John the Baptist, the inscription that wraps around him, and the two crosses below it, the rest of the design suggests that it was made by Christians borrowing from the dominant Ottoman style of the time. In its overall look it more clearly resembles Ottoman carpets produced in Hereke in the early 19th century, mostly preserved in the Topkapi Palace Museum in Istanbul, with a central *mihrab* similar in shape to the niche of this cloth and usually elaborately inscribed in the borders.

A large delicate flower, sprouting from a basin at the bottom, dominates the central field within the polylobed arch. The arch's spandrels are filled with other flowers and leaves, harmoniously but not totally symmetrically arranged on each side. The main field is bordered by a triple frame of narrow inner and outer bands decorated with the same running floral design on all four sides. Within these is a wider border of elongated octagonal cartouches, each bearing bulging vases with identical flower bouquets dominated by four tulips, roses, and lilies. There are exactly twelve of these, clearly symbolizing the apostles of Christ in a subtle manner for what is finally a curtain for a church.

Of great interest is the central figure of St. John the Baptist and its unusual iconography, and the long inscrip-

tion explaining who embroidered it, where, when, and to what church it was offered. In the middle of the inscription we see St. John, known in Armenian as the Forerunner, Karapet, standing with his shepherd's robe, holding in his left hand the Lamb of God with a long staff of victory ending in a cross tucked in at the elbow. In his right hand he holds a bowl with his own head. The theme is essentially unknown in the West, but very popular in post-Byzantine Greek and Orthodox Slavic art as well as in Armenia. The story of St. John, who baptized an adult Christ in the Jordan River, and his beheading by Herod is well known from parallel passages in the Gospels of Mark (6:21-29) and St. Matthew (14:6-11). The inscription reads:

ՅԻՇԱՏԱԿ Է ՎԱՐՐԳՈՒ
 ԸՍ [sic ՎԱՐՐԱԳՈՅ] ՀԱՍԱՆ ՓԱՇԱՅ
 ԽԱՆՆ ԵՂԵ[Ա]Լ ԺՈՂՈՎՐ
 ԴՈՑՆ՝ Ի ԴՈՒԲՆ՝ Ս[ՈՒՐ]Բ
 ԿԱՐԱՊԵՏԻ ՎԱՆՔԻ
 ԹՎԻՆ՝ ՌՍԺԲ [1212=1763] ՄԱՅԻՄԻ: Ժ [10]

This curtain [is gifted] to St. Karapet [John the Baptist] Monastery in memory of the people [of the village of] Hasan Pasha Khan. In the year 1212 [=1763], May 10th.

Hasan Pasha is in the province of Bitlis in the sanjak of Mush west of the city of Bitlis. “Khan” probably refers to a roadside inn, or or near the town. Two important monasteries were devoted to St. John the Baptist, both extremely old and important pilgrimage sites. One, the Monastery of St. Karapet at Efkere (Evkere), a major center of learning some 18 kilometers northeast of Caesarea (Kayseri), had a special chapel where the relics of the Baptist were kept. The other, the Monastery of St. Karapet of Mush, was a vast walled hermitage that was totally destroyed along with all the residents of the area during the Armenian Genocide of 1915.

The curtain is reported to be from St. Karapet near Caesarea. The late Archbishop Guregh Kapikian of the Cathedral Monastery at the center of the Armenian Quarter of Jerusalem, was “90 percent certain it was from the area of Gesaria-Kayseri, most likely St. Karapet of Efkere.” It was probably used either for a side chapel, perhaps the one devoted to baptism, or very possibly for the Efkere chapel containing the saint's relics. Residents of Hasan Pasha would have normally donated the curtain during the annual pilgrimage of 1763. It is a testimony to the faith of its creators and to their memory on the eve of the centennial of their descendants' destruction in 1915.

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