

Reflections on Objects from the Pre-20th Century Diaspora with Armenian Inscriptions

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Objects, artistic, liturgical, or personal, have been inscribed from the earliest times, whether in hieroglyphs, cuneiform, Greek and Latin, Hebrew, Chinese or other languages. Within this nearly universal practice, the place of objects fashioned and inscribed in a language that is not indigenous to the region where they were crafted, that is in a diaspora is rarely considered. The interpretation of inscriptions in the languages of empires or universal religions, like Greek, Latin, or Arabic, require particular criteria, because of their formal use even by populations that seldom mastered such languages.

Among literate, historic diaspora communities, one thinks of the Jews and the Armenians, principally because they were ancient, wide spread, and used a language with a unique script. Armenians had a strongly developed habit of using their alphabet to record, often precisely, the circumstances relating to the creation of an artistic or literary work. Armenian scribes, for instance, were perhaps the most consistent of any medieval manuscript tradition in leaving a memorial or colophon with name, date of copying as well as the place and patron. A survey of surviving manuscripts established that 60% were exactly dated.¹

Armenian diasporan communities are relatively well documented from early medieval times.² Manuscripts were actively copied in Italy, the Crimea, Iran, Cilicia, as well

¹ It is extremely rare to find a complete manuscript which lacks a dated scribal colophon; when such is missing, usually it means folios at the end have been dropped or disturbed in successive rebindings. See D. Kouymjian, 'Dated Armenian Manuscripts as a Statistical Tool for Armenian History', *Medieval Armenian Culture*, eds. T. Samuelian and M. Stone, University of Pennsylvania Armenian Texts and Studies, vol. 6, Chico, CA 1983, pp. 425–439.

² A concise overview with a very pertinent bibliography can be found in L. B. Zekiyan, 'Les colonies arméniennes, des origins à la fin du XVIII^e siècle', ed. G. Dédéyan, *Histoire du peuple arménien*, 2nd ed., Toulouse 2008, pp. 425–446.

as major cities of the Byzantium and Ottoman Empire.³ Impressive floor mosaics (Fig. 1) with Armenian inscriptions from the fifth to the seventh centuries survive in the Holy Land.⁴ The first two centuries of printing with Armenian type, the sixteenth and seventeenth, were essentially a diasporan endeavour, for instance the press set up in Lwow in 1616 by Yovhannès K'armatanents'.⁵ Ceramics, bindings, liturgical objects, altar curtains, carpets- as well as the expected tombstones- were left by Armenian communities from Europe to the Far East bearing Armenian inscriptions as a kind of proof of manufacture or ownership, or a sort of trademark or hallmark.

Only a longer study could hope to elucidate the nuances involved in the how and why of these inscribed objects. It would be interesting too to compare the Armenian experience with that of other diaspora communities, which produced inscribed objects or which failed to do so. In this paper a restrained group of art works from Armenian diasporas will be examined.



Fig. 1. Floor mosaic from a funerary chapel of St. Polyeuctos with a long Armenian inscription. Jerusalem, Damascus Gate, Musara Quarter

³ Place name indexes found in catalogues of the major Armenian manuscript collections – Erevan, Jerusalem, Venice, Vienna – and in collections of manuscript colophons, are a good source to identify codices copied in different regions. For the Crimea, see H. and H. Buschhausen, E. Korchmasijan, *Armenische Buchmalerei und Baukunst der Krim*, Erevan 2009; for Cilicia, S. Der Nersessian, *Miniature Painting in the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia*, 2 vols., Washington, D.C. 1993; for Italy, *Roma – Armenia*, ed. Cl. Mutafian, Rome 1999, *passim*.

⁴ A good selection of illustrated examples can be found in B. Narkiss, M. E. Stone, A. K. Sanjian, *Armenian Art Treasures of Jerusalem*, New Rochelle 1979, pp. 21–28, figs. 32–40. An example is the Musara mosaic, late-fifth or sixth century in a funerary chapel near the Damascus gate, D. Kouymjian, *The Arts of Armenia, (Accompanied by a Collection of 300 Slides in Color)*, Lisbon 1992, no. 165, available on the internet: http://armenianstudies.csufresno.edu/arts_of_armenia/index.htm

⁵ R. H. Kévorkian, *Catalogue des « incunables » arméniennes (1511/1695) ou chronique de l'imprimerie arménienne*, Geneve 1986, pp. 30–31.

Ceramics

The oldest dated Armenian ceramics are a liturgical pitcher of 1510 (Fig. 2a-b) and a bottle of 1529 (Fig. 3a-b) both manufactured in the western Anatolian town of Kütahya.⁶ The blue and white pitcher and bottle are incidentally the oldest dated ceramics to be produced within the Ottoman Empire. Kütahya was most famous for the massive series of more than 10,000 tiles and objects produced there in 1719-21, which now decorates the Armenian Cathedral and Patriarchate of St. James in Jerusalem. At least from the fourteenth century until the Armenian Genocide of 1915, the illustrious ceramic industry of Kütahya was dominated entirely by Armenians.⁷ Among the patrons of the ceramics created for Jerusalem was Abraham Vardapet, whose monogram (Fig. 4b) was fashioned on a number of Kütahya pieces, like the dish of 1719 showing the beheading of St. John the Baptist (Fig.



Fig. 2a-b. Liturgical pitcher, inscribed in Armenian and dated 1510 on its base crafted in the Armenian-Ottoman ceramic centre of Kütahya. British Museum, formerly in the Godman Collection

⁶ The fundamental study on Kütahya ceramics remains, J. Carswell, *Kütahya Tiles and Pottery from the Armenian Cathedral of St. James, Jerusalem*, I, *The Pictorial Tiles and Other Vessels*, with an edition of the Armenian texts by C. J. F. Dowsett, II, J. Carswell, *A Historical Survey of the Kütahya Industry and A Catalogue of the Decorative Tiles*, Oxford 1972; reissued in one volume, Antelias, 2005; all pieces discussed in the following lines are illustrated and described. See also specifically on this question, D. Kouymjian, 'Le rôle des potiers arméniens de Kütahya dans l'histoire de la céramique ottomane', in : *Des serviteurs fidèles. Les enfants de l'Arménie au service de l'État turc*, ed. M. Yevadian, Montélimar 2010, pp. 64–85, figs. 35–36.

⁷ According to two Ottoman Turkish judicial agreements of 1764 and 1766 concerning the potters of Kütahya, all of the more than 150 names were Armenian. These archival documents are reproduced in: G. Kürkman, *A History of Kütahya Pottery and Potters*, Istanbul 2006, pp. 51-52; D. Kouymjian, 'Le rôle des potiers arméniens de Kütahya ...', p. 72, fig. 38.



Fig. 3a-b. Liturgical bottle, inscribed in Armenian and dated 1529 on both the base and the upper ring, crafted in the Armenian-Ottoman ceramic centre of Kütahya. British Museum, formerly in the Godman Collection



Fig. 4a-b. Decorative dish of the beheading of St. John the Baptist inscribed and dated 1719 in Armenian with the monogram of Abraham Vardapet of Jerusalem on the back, made in the Armenian-Ottoman ceramic centre of Kütahya. Venice, Congregation of the Mekhitarist Fathers, San Lazzaro.



Fig. 5a-c. Three ceramics from Isfahan-New Julfa of the early eighteenth century:
 a) large dish with monogram “Nazareth”, Venice, Congregation of the Mekhitarist Fathers, San Lazzaro;
 b) bowl with monogram “Nikoghos”, Erevan, State History Museum;
 c) small dish, with monogram “Têr Aghek’sandr” and date 1(7)06, Watertown, MA, Armenian Library and Museum of America

4a) now in the collection of the Mekhitarist Fathers of Venice.⁸ The hundreds of inscribed Kütahya pieces that have survived suggest that, at least in the first half of the sixteenth century and again from the early eighteenth the display of Armenian/Christian Writing in some spheres of a Muslim empire had become acceptable and even normalised.

Abraham’s monogram leads us to a series of Armenian ceramics, mostly undated, but probably all from the beginning of the eighteenth century from an eastern centre of the diaspora: Iran. They were most certainly potted in New Julfa, the Armenian suburb of Isfahan, the capital of the Safavid dynasty. The Armenian town was founded by refugees from ancient Julfa on the Arax, displaced and deported in 1604-5 by Shah Abbas.⁹ These monogrammed pieces (Fig. 5a-c), loosely classified as part of Safavid ceramics, are more enigmatic because Armenian was already an esoteric script in Iran, but their monogram form, makes them still more mysterious. Perhaps the most famous are the large blue and white dishes with a symmetrical design of aster flowers (Fig. 5a) in the centre of which there is the elegant monogram “Nazaret”.¹⁰ There are specimens in Venice, London, Phoenix, Boston, Russia, and elsewhere suggesting that Nazaret of New Julfa commissioned an entire personal dinner set. Other bowls and cups have the names of Nikoghos (Fig. 5b),¹¹

⁸ Kouymjian, ‘Le rôle des potiers arméniens de Kütahya...’, fig. 37. J. Carswell, *op. cit.*, pls. 17,19 reproduces all three known monograms of Abraham on ceramics dated 1718–179.

⁹ A concise history of the founding of New Julfa can be found in V. S. Ghougassian, *The Emergence of the Armenian Diocese of New Julfa in the Seventeenth Century*, Atlanta 1998, pp. 33–54.

¹⁰ P. and V. Bedoukian, T. Hazarian, *Armenian Ceramic Art*, catalogue of an exhibition, New York 1982, p. 1; D. Kouymjian, *The Arts of Armenia ...*, no. 176.

¹¹ Nikoghos, bowl, Erevan, Historic Museum inv. 8654; *Arménie: La magie d’écrit*, ed. Cl. Mutafian, catalogue of exhibition, La Vielle Chaiirté, Marseille, Paris 2007, p. 256, fig. 4.84 “pas encore déchiffré”; the illustration is upside down.

Safraz,¹² and a monogram which still remains undeciphered.¹³ Fine porcelain dishes were also commissioned by Armenians in Europe, for instance a white porcelain Dutch pitcher with the owners initials and the date of 1787 in gold (perhaps a marriage gift), and a cup with a two letter ligatured monogram.¹⁴

Among the Safavid-type pieces is a small dish, in brown and yellow colouring (Fig. 5c), typical of some ceramics from New Julfa-Isfahan; it is the only dated specimen.¹⁵ As I have argued elsewhere, evidence suggests that it was made for Têr Aghek'sander in 1(7)06, the last year that Vardapet (by then Bishop) Aghek'sander was Armenian Primate of Iran. It was probably a gift to him by the New Julfa community on his election as the Catholicos of All Armenians in Etchmiadzin in that same year.¹⁶

Bindings

Aghek'sander Vardapet was an erudite clergyman and a collector of books and manuscripts. At least six volumes survive from his library with his name carefully inscribed on the leather bindings.¹⁷ These include a Missal of 1679 probably copied in New Julfa, but bound in an uncharacteristic style (Fig. 6), I suspect by a European binder, with the inscription "Remember Aghek'sandr Vardapet and



Fig. 6. Stamped leather binding inscribed "Remember Aghek'sandr Vardapet and his family, 1680", on an Armenian manuscript of 1679 probably copied at New Julfa, Iran. Erevan, Matenadaran Repository of Manuscripts, M2673

¹² Paron Safraz (d. 1728) from New Julfa, white Safavid dish with monogram in centre, inv. 2714-1876; sand pot (?) blue and white with the same monogram, painted upside down, inv. 1248-1876; blue and white pitcher, monogram at top, inv. C. 1851977, London, Victoria and Albert Museum, for which see, Y. Crowe, *Persia and China, Safavid Blue and White Ceramics in the Victoria & Albert Museum 1501-1738*, La Borie 2002, pp. 205–206, respectively nos. 354–356.

¹³ Flared blue and white bowl, with clear but undeciphered monogram in the centre, Watertown, MA, Armenian Library and Museum of America, inv. 86.7.132; P. and V. Bedoukian, T. Hazarian, *op. cit.*, p. 255, no. 4.82.

¹⁴ P. and V. Bedoukian, T. Hazarian, *op. cit.*, p. [3].

¹⁵ Monogram in the centre, Watertown, MA, Armenian Library and Museum of America, inv. 91.197; P. and V. Bedoukian, T. Hazarian, *op. cit.*, p. 1, "so far have defied all deciphering attempts"; *Arménie : La magie d'écrit ...*, p. 255, no. 4.83.

¹⁶ The word Têr, originally 'lord', is often found associated with clergy, as earlier scholars have surmised. The number 106 has contributed to the confusion in reading the monogram, but it helps identifying the owner. By reading it as the date 1706, Têr Aghek'sander becomes an easy choice and fits perfectly.

¹⁷ For more details on Têr Aghek'sander and his library, see D. Kouymjian, 'From Manuscript to Printed Book: Armenian Bookbinding from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century,' in: *Printing and Publishing from the Middle East*, Papers from the Second International Symposium on the History of Printing and Publishing in the Languages and Countries of the Middle East, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, 2–4 November 2005, ed. Ph. Sadgrove *Journal of Semitic Studies*, Supplement 24, Oxford 2008, pp. 19–21, pls. 13–14.

his family, 1680.”¹⁸ There is also an interesting hybrid volume containing both a printed Calendar of 1669 from the Armenian press in Amsterdam and a manuscript of miscellaneous church texts, including calendars, commissioned by Aghek’sander himself in 1697–1698, bound together with the inscription: “Aghek’sandr Vardapet, 1698.”¹⁹ I have argued that in the mind of someone like Aghek’sander there was not a dramatic difference between the old technology of hand copied manuscripts, and the new one of printing; thus, binding them together was not a problem.²⁰ The inscribing of leather bindings with the use of stamping tools is a phenomenon, almost unique, to the Armenian workshops of New Julfa of the second half of the seventeenth and the early eighteenth century.²¹ The beginning of this practice corresponds to the launching of an Armenian printing press at the monastery-cathedral of New Julfa in the mid-seventeenth century; the stamping tools used for the inscriptions were recycled printing fonts. The inscriptions on manuscript covers served, at least in Aghek’sander’s case, as an early form of an ex-libris.

Zamość and Lwow House Monograms

Arriving at the Rynek, the central square of Zamość, via ul. Ormianska, Armenian Street, one meets a series of five magnificent multicoloured three-storey renaissance styled houses constructed by rich Armenians in the early seventeenth century.²² They are by far the most distinctive houses in the city. The fifth of these, starting from City Hall, or the first beginning at the very corner of the square (Fig. 7), is that of the Armenian merchant Saldan/Saltan or Sołtan Sachwelowicz, who came to Zamość from Lwow. The residence built between 1642 and 1657, is popularly called the “Under the Madonna House” because of the sculpted relief on its façade of



Fig. 7. The house named “Under the Madonna” (to the left) of the Armenian Saldan/Saltan or Sołtan Sachwelowicz with his monogram in Armenian about the windows on the second level with his initials S S in Polish above and below

¹⁸ Erevan, Matenadaran, ms. M2673; D. Kouymjian, ‘From Manuscript to Printed Book ...’, p. 296, pl. 13.

¹⁹ Antelias, Lebanon, Cilician Catholicosate, ms. Ant. 151; D. Kouymjian, ‘From Manuscript to Printed Book ...’, pp. 20–21, 296, pl. 14.

²⁰ D. Kouymjian, ‘From Manuscript to Printed Book ...’, p. 20.

²¹ D. Kouymjian, ‘The New Julfa Style of Armenian Manuscript Binding,’ *Journal of the Society for Armenian Studies*, 8 (1995, pub. 1997), pp. 13–36.

²² A surprise discovery on the eve of the conference is the source of this addition to my paper.



Fig. 8a-c. Three Armenian monograms of the seventeenth century in stucco and stone from houses in Zamość and Lwow:

- a) stucco Armenian monogram on the house of “Saldan” or Sołtan Sachwelowicz with his initials S and S in Polish above and below, Ormianska St., Rynek, Zamość;
 b) stone monogram “Avak” on the corner house at Ormianska St. and the Rynek, Zamość;
 c) detached stone with Armenian monogram perhaps reading “Vardan/Vartan”, Lwow, in a restaurant on a street perpendicular to Dovbusha St., near the Museum of the History of Religion

the crowned Virgin with sceptre standing on a menacing dragon. In the cornice above the three windows on this same second level are decorative ovals each with the identical Armenian monogram of the name Saldan/Saltan and, above and below, in Latin letters is an S, the initial of the owner (Fig. 8a).²³ This is not an isolated case because the building across Ormianska St., at the corner of the Rynek, also has a monogram- but its reading as Awag is not without problems.²⁴ (Fig. 8b) A stone fragment with an Armenian monogram was also photographed in Lwow, now inside a restaurant, the reading of which is uncertain, perhaps Vardan/Vartan (Fig. 8c).²⁵ Saldan’s monogram, repeated three times on the façade,

²³ The reading of the monogram is very difficult. The final N is nowhere to be found, suggesting Salda. The A which is clear, must be iterated twice; the classical D was also pronounced T in western Armenian, thus Saltan. One could even imagine Soldan, a more common name, but the O is also hard to justify. The Zamość Museum, housed in one of the Armenian mansions, has on display a reproduction of the monogram.

²⁴ A similar monogram for Avag (I suspect it is this very example) can be found in A. G. Abrahamyan, Հայոց գիր եվ գրչութիւն (Armenian Letters and Writing), Erevan 1973, p. 193. The reading is problematic because Awag is spell in classical orthography ԱԲԱԳ and not ԱՎԱԳ, that is AWAG and not AVAG. A look through seventeenth century Armenian manuscript colophons confirms that in rare cases there is confusion between the two letters in names.

²⁵ The stone fragment is now in a restaurant on a street perpendicular to Dovbusha St. where the Museum of the History of Religion is located. I was directed there by Jurij Smirnow author of *Katedra Ormiańska we Lwowie*, Lwow 2002, and I would like to thank him for taking me to it. Curiously, this monogram is not found among the 110, including some Armenian examples, listed at the back of W. Łozinski, *Złotnictwo Lwowskie*, Lwow 1912, pp. 164–166; I would like to thank Irina Gayuk, Conservator, Museum of the History of Religion, Lwow, for sending pages from this important work. Among this large, illustrated list of monograms, nos. 57–71 are marked as unknown, of which 61 and 71 are clearly Armenian. Two others are noted as Armenian, no. 32, Kalnik- but the clear Armenian monogram provides no reasonable possibility for such a name- and no. 85 Steczko has no discernable Armenian letters in its combination. No. 100 is identified as Wartanowicz, which can be justified by the drawing of the monogram, but with a lot of imagination. Eleven monograms from among the group of Łozinski’s ‘unknowns’ was reproduced in the recent study, J. Chrzęszczewski, *Kościoly Ormian Polskich*, Warszawa 2002; six others from Łozinski’s list are also reproduced, nos. 22, 32, 75, 85–87. Curiously no. 100, Wartanowicz, seems missing. I would like to thank Monika Agopsowicz for bring this book to my attention and introducing me to Mr. Smirnow.

is revealing because the owner wanted to make sure that Armenians and non-Armenians, who could not comprehend the Armenian symbol, understood to whom this magnificent house belonged through his initials in Polish/Latin script. This seems to be a unique case among monograms, though on tombstones, now very worn, in the Lwow Armenian Cathedral courtyard, one encounters Armenian monogram-like signs that seem to accompany the long inscriptions in Latin or Polish.²⁶

Carpets

Was the use of monograms, instead of clearly spelled out words, as we find on the ceramics or that of Sołtan Sachwelowicz on Ormianski Street in Zamość a question of discretion on the part of the Armenian merchant-magnates of New Julfa or simply a design feature? It is hard to know. The value of discretion is clearly demonstrated by an extraordinary carpet (Fig. 9a-d) woven in Isfahan or its Armenian suburb in a style that became known as “polonaise.”²⁷ These were apparently special large rugs with atypical designs that



Fig. 9a-d. a) Safavid carpet dated by style to 1620-1625; b) detail of lower left; c) detail of the name Yakob/Hakob woven in Armenian majuscules; d) drawings of the two Yakob/Hakob inscriptions. Adelaide, Art Gallery of South Australia, formerly in the William Bowman Collection

²⁶ J. Chrzęszewski, *Kościoly op. cit.*, p. 96, reproduces a tombstone in the Lwow Cathedral with a monogram (unknown) and the date 1480, perhaps one of the oldest known Armenian monograms from the region. I could not locate the actual stone.

²⁷ A discussion of these carpets with reference to earlier literature can be found in M. Wenzel, 'Carpet and Wall-Painting Design in Persia. An Armenian-inscribed 'Polonaise' Carpet,' *Apollo* (1988 July), pp. 4–11.

are believed to have been commissioned by Shah Abbas himself as gifts for western officials or aristocracy. The term “polonaise” came into use as a result of the 1878 Paris International Exhibition during which the Polish Prince Czartoryski displayed a number of such rugs from his family collection.²⁸ For a while it was believed they might have been woven in Poland. Our rug, now in the Art Gallery of South Australia in Adelaide, but thirty years ago in France, is dated by style to 1620-1625.²⁹ Within red-pink cloud bands in the upper right and lower left, the name Yakob/Hakob (Fig. 9c-d) is very finely woven in Armenian majuscule (*erkat'agir*), almost invisible to the naked eye, and in the extreme corners there appear to be two Armenian letters – Y and G – probably the initials of the weaver.³⁰ Yakob was certainly the weaver of the rug, because if he were the patron, his name would have appeared more prominently. On the other hand, it is perfectly reasonable to imagine that the rug and other “polonaise” carpets were in fact either made for Armenian merchant families in Zamość or Lvov or brought to Poland as part of their commercial dealings. In either case, some of these rugs were clearly woven by Armenians.

There are hundreds of carpets with Armenian inscriptions,³¹ including some in Polish collections,³² but most of these were woven in geographic Armenia, especially Karabagh, Siunik, Goris, and the surrounding areas. The most famous is the Guhar or Gohar carpet with a long two-line inscription in which Guhar tells us she wove the rug in 1699.³³ Very few oriental carpets bear inscriptions of any kind: these include a special group of Ottoman prayer rugs in the Topkapı collection, certain Safavid carpets from Isfahan, and some Moghul carpets. Turkish or Persian village rugs or those of the Muslims of the Caucasus do not in general bear inscriptions.³⁴ The Armenian inscribed rugs, including that of Guhar, the Yakob carpet and several other earlier seventeenth-century examples, provide very concrete evidence of Armenian rug weaving, which historical sources speak of from the earliest

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 4.

²⁹ The rug was given to the Art Galley of South Australia in 2000 by its owner, William Bowman. The Museum's website has a reproduction of the carpet with a short history: <http://www.artgallery.sa.gov.au/agsa/home/Collection/detail.jsp?ecatKey=2353>.

³⁰ The name Yakob and the initials appeared when Bowmore gave the rug for professional cleaning in London in the 1980s.

³¹ L. Der Manuelian, M. L. Eiland, *Weavers, Merchants and Kings. The Inscribed Rugs of Armenia*, exhibition catalogue, Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth 1984; D. Kouymjian, 'Les tapis à inscriptions arméniennes,' *Tapis et textiles arméniens*, ed. H. Kévorkian, B. Achdjian, Marseilles 1991, pp. 247-253.

³² B. Biedrońska-Słota, ed., *Ormianie polscy Obrebnosć i asymilacja*, Kraków 1999, pp. 60-64, nos. 44 (1900), 46 (1902), 49 (1881), 50 (1903), 51 (1894); the latter rug was in the special exhibit organized to coincide with the conference in the Zamość Museum.

³³ L. Der Manuelian, M. K. Eiland, *op. cit.*, pp. 72-73; D. Kouymjian, 'Le tapis « Gouhar » [« Gohar »]', *Arménie : la magie de l'écrit ...*, p. 278.

³⁴ J. M. Rogers, translator, editor and reviser of original Turkish text by H. Tezcan, *The Topkapı Saray Museum. Carpets*, Boston 1987, chapter 2 'The Inscription Carpets,' pp. 17-30, pls. 2-35. All these carpets with Koranic inscriptions in the imperial collection are undated. They are a unique group, assigned by some to the earlier centuries and by others to the mid-nineteenth century. They use a Persian rather than a Turkish knot, and seem to have been made in Anatolia, but there is no agreement on the locality.

times. The Yakob and Guhar rugs through their designs also help to demonstrate the probable Armenian origin of both the famous dragon and “polonaise” type carpets.

Altar Curtains

There are of course hundreds if not thousands of textiles with Armenian inscriptions created in diasporan communities: embroidered and woven textiles, liturgical garments, lace of various types, chalice clothes, and even large altar curtains.³⁵ The most impressive group of the latter is a series of stamped and painted cotton curtains with traditional scenes from the history of the Armenian Church manufactured in southern India around Madras.³⁶ These date from the late seventeenth through to the eighteenth century. They were commissioned by rich Armenian merchants, most of them native of New Julfa trading in the



Fig. 10a-b. a) Armenian altar curtain, stamped and painted in 1798 in Madras, India, with the principal motif made up of exotic trees and bushes from southern India with legends in both Armenian and the local India language, with a mounted St. George to the left (not visible), b) detail showing the coconut palm with the Armenian inscription “narglitzar”, coconut palm, from the Arabic *nargil* and Armenian *tzar*, tree. Jerusalem, Armenian Patriarchate, Church of St. T’oros

³⁵ On Armenian textiles in general, see D. Kouymjian, ‘Textiles arméniens : une riche palette’, in: *Trames d’Arménie : tapis et broderies sur les chemins de l’exil (1900–1940)*, Muséon Arlaten, catalogue, ed. D. Serena, Arles 2007, pp. 29–35. Eight altar curtains from Etchmiadzin were published earlier without description or commentary in the large album, *Treasure of Etchmiadzin*, in Armenian, Russian, and English, Etchmiadzin 1984. The large collection in the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem has never been published, but three seventeenth century embroidered figural altar frontals were included in B. Narkiss and M. Stone, *op. cit.*, pp. 134–137, figs. 179 (1619), 180 (1620), 181 (1655).

³⁶ M.-H. Guelton, ‘De l’Inde à l’Arménie la fabrication des rideaux de chœur peints et imprimés’, in: *Ors et trésors d’Arménie*, ed. M.-A. Privat-Savigny and B. Berthod, Lyon 2007, pp. 48–61.



Fig. 11a-c. a) and b) Ottoman postage stamps depicting Fenerbahçe, lighthouse of Istanbul, issues of 1914 and revised post-Genocide issue of 1920; c) (above) the line in cryptic Armenian in the 1914 version reading “mankind will worship God”. Istanbul, Orlando Carlo Calumeno Collection, courtesy of Osman Köker.

Far East, as presentation items for churches such as Holy Etchmiadzin and the Patriarchate of Jerusalem and that of Constantinople. Armenian altar curtains have not yet been thoroughly studied as a group,³⁷ but their often lavish decorations and very elaborate inscriptions make them immediately recognizable. The largest collections are at Holy Etchmiadzin and the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem, including one with lavish paintings of the trees and bushes of south India labelled in Armenian and a local Indian language (Fig. 10a-b).³⁸ Though they were manufactured by Indian craftsmen on the Coromandel Coast, their iconography and the “cartons” used for their execution were almost certainly the work of Armenians.

There is nothing esoteric about the inscriptions on the curtains. Nor is there anything enigmatic such as we find in the monograms or the Yakob carpet. Our final example, one in the category of hidden inscriptions, a sort of secret message for those who know, in this case those who can identify Armenian letters and perhaps decipher them, is a Turkish postage stamp (Fig. 11a-c) printed in London in 1914 for the Ottoman government. The engraver was an Armenian who concealed a message under the clear words “Poste

³⁷ D. Kouymjian, ‘L’art des tentures de choeur arméniennes,’ Privat-Savigny and Berthod, in: *Ors et trésors d’Arménie* ..., pp. 35; M. Martiniani-Reber, ‘Les Rideaux de choeur. Introduction : leur origine et à leur usage dans les églises orientales,’ and ‘Fonctions et symbols dans la liturgie arménienne’, *Ors et trésors d’Arménie* ..., pp. 37–46.

³⁸ For a group of 17 curtains from Etchmiadzin, see the catalogue of altar curtains in *Ibidem*, pp. 63-75.

ottoman.” At first glance a series of vertical strokes appear under these words, but at high magnification Armenian letters are evident (Fig. 11c), which read, “*martik bidi bashden zasdvatz*” (mankind will worship God). The authorities in post-Genocide Turkey discovered the ruse and in the reprinting of 1920, the surreptitious line was removed.³⁹

Conclusion

All the inscriptions have a common function: they served to identify an object of Armenian provenance, either collectively as in liturgical objects or privately as in the bindings or ceramic monograms. Often the words or letters have a decorative function as on the ceramics or the altar curtains. At times they are either esoteric or secretive as in the monograms, the Yakob rug, or the postage stamp. All were intended for a specific audience: those initiated in the mysteries of the Armenian language and its culture.

³⁹ The stamp was published on one of the postcards in O. Köker, *100 Yıl Önce Türkiye’de Ermeniler. Orlando Carlo Calumeno: Koleksiyonu’ndan Kartpostallarla*, Istanbul 2005, p. 36, postcard no. 57. The recent English version is entitled *Armenians in Turkey 100 Years Ago*, Istanbul 2008.