

III. The Art of the Book


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, malertum includes frescoes, mosaics, icons, ceramics, painting on textiles such as altar curtains and canoes, painting. Information, illustrations, and further bibliography on painting in these media can be found in a number of standard sources (Ott Peersens 1978, Kouymjian 1999, Dunand et al. 2007, Halici 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, content and iconography to that of the great Italian masters of the early Renaissance. Furthermore, Armenian arts 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 35,000 existing Armenian manuscripts are Gospels; if we add to these completed New Testaments and Bibles, the figure rises to 24%. Adjusting the figure further by only counting manuscripts produced up to the year 1788, the number of Gospels is close to 50%. With few exceptions, illuminated 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 (M1358) with four portraits of Grigor, a series of Bibles (the earliest from the thirteenth century), illustrated psalters, litanies, 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 illuminated history by Agat'angeghos of 1299 (M13122; Kouymjian 2005), and scenes from the Battle of the Avarayr (451) as narrated in Yeghishe’s History, but illustrated in hymnals (M13620 of 1482), medical and scientific texts, illustrated codices and lexicons, a book on dew, or evil spirits. By far the most illustrated secular text is the History of Alexander the Great by Pseudo-Callisthenes though the text was given a Christian slant through the kathisma or moralizing poems by Khach'atur Kecharatsi (1260–1331) (Kouymjian 1999, Traina et al. 2005, Hranitz 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
of execution of this manuscript of circa 1300–20. Localization of the scriptorium has ranged from Cili-
cicia 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 Nersës (kafas in red ink seem later) points to the early fourteenth century (Maran-
ci 2003–4). Twelve other illuminated Armenian Alexander codices are known of, which date from 1235
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 sleek mystery, since such large
pictorial cycles are unknown among Byzantine, Latin, or Armenian texts before the late thirteenth cen-
tury. 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 topos or memorial among Armenian scribes, illuminators and landers, we now
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 commissions were the liturgy, often themselves scribes and artists.
Sumpuous manuscripts were patronized by the aristocracy, nobility or higher clergy for presentation or per-
sonal use. Merchants and other members of the bourgeoisie were active patrons after the thirteenth cen-
tury, increasing in number as the nobility disappeared after the fall of the Cilician kingdom and the upper cler-
gy (red) less privileged lives.

Illuminated Gospels were composed of 1) Canon Tables; 2) portraits of the Evangelists accompanied
by a decorative incipit; 3) miniature paintings, both symbolic and narrative, including linear portraits; 4) mar-
ginal illumination (Kouymjian 1999). Scholars believe that a general decorative system was in place already
in the fourth century when Christianity was adopted by the Roman Empire, which controlled southern Eu-
rope, North Africa, and much of the Middle East, including all of Armenia. Though no illustrated Gospels
survive from the fourth or fifth centuries, a handful are preserved from the sixth, including the oldest com-
plete, illustrated and precisely dated specimen: the Syriac Rablou Gospel of 586 (Bablon; Biblioteca Matz-
ese, Drumont, Pl. I, 585) with classicalizing artifices (Checchi et al. 1959). The oldest complete Ar-
menian Gospels are of the ninth century and, like those of neighbouring countries, followed the standard
arrangement.

The Eusebian Apparatus: Layout and Decoration
Gospel manuscripts begin with Canon Tables, a concordance-index developed in the fourth century byBishop Eusebius of Caesarea in Palestine. It is explanation of this system was formulated in a letter, al-
ways 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 before decona-
trarv, assembling episodes in combinations of four, three, two, or single columns depending on how many and which Evangelists related a particular episode (Nordenfalk 1981; Kouymjian 1996 for de-
teils). Both the Milk's Gospels of 862 (V1144), the oldest dated Armenian specimen, and the Echmiadzin
Gospels of 989 (M 2274) have elaborate Canons. Carl Nordenfalk, who pioneered the study of Greek,
Latin, Syriac, Armenian, Georgian, and Ethiopian Codex Texts, was convinced that the Echmiadzin
Gospels and three other early Armenian examples related to it, were the closest survivors to Eusebian's
original management and their decoration (Nordenfalk 1981).

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 of-ten with mirror image ornamentation. Medieval Armenian treatises on the decoration of canon tables,one of them by Nersës 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 beenuniversally maintained.

From the beginning, artists used the Eusebian apparatus for painting secular scenes, at times even
with fabulous creatures; the Milk's Gospel is a good example. Within an artistic tradition entirely de-
oted 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 diverseregions of Armenia, demonstrating 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 in-
spired by an imagined basilica: the arch of the Eusebian Letter as the entrance into the nave followed by
a series of arcades, each devoted to the depiction of one Gospel - nothing more than an index - was
apparently an acceptable medium for non-religious images.
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 manuscript painters the pre-Classical period almost exclusively used the standing Evangelists portrait variant of any background, as opposed to standing 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’ï Gospels, which, like the Syriac Rabbula Gospels, have two sitting and two standing. Furthermore, the Mlk’ï Gospels, painted in a refined classicizing style, is the rare 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 Hovhannïs Sandakhvanetsi (M3793, M10099, M7736, see Surmelyan 2006) and the fourth is the Trebizond Gospels (V1400). All four are of a higher quality than the rare manuscripts depicting the Evangelists together as a single figure at the end of the prefatory cycle. The prevalence of this ensemble portrait in the Armenian tradition underlines artistically the harmony among the four Gospels. It is an archetypal statement. Only later, starting in the Classical period, do individual Evangelists 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 tenth-century manuscripts, only manuscripts with seated Evangelists plus the noble Archbishopios 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 prominent style (which can be considered a luxury manuscript or one displaying a classicizing style) and 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 ‘free 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 Feasts cycle, the depiction, 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 the fifteen. The oldest, four scenes on two leaves of the 10th-century manuscript, edited and stylistic considerations to circa 600, were bound into the Etchmiadzin Gospels of 849 (H7730); their subjects are two Aramaisms (the High Priest Zachariah and the Virgin). Presentation of the Magi (Nativity), and Baptism. This latter miniature offers a convenient excuse to discuss the complexity and early adaptability of Armenian painting, and how it integrated the artistic environment of early Christian art and its iconography. The Baptist, 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 heroic, far removed from classical naturalism seen in architectural backgrounds of direct classical inspiration in the first three miniatures.

In this series, only the Baptist 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 terminating with portraits of the Evangelists. The wide frame has a repetitive design of a jewelled chiton on a pole. A bird with a pinck body and a bluish head and wings is perched on its rim, identified as a pelican (DerNersessian 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 Agarangehos, 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 series of examples shows the complexity of early Armenian iconography, very much attuned to Christian parallels in classical paintings, 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 consistent.

About twenty Armenian manuscripts to the year 1300 have figurative or narrative miniatures, but only two of these, the Vehap’ar Gospel (M7651), named after its donor Catholicos Vazken I, 1955–94) and that of King Galgik-Aboi of Kars (M6201), have miniatures scattered throughout the text. In the twelfth century and later, cycles dispersed throughout the Gospel texts became more popular, though grouping miniature scenes 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 prefatory 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 Judgment. 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. Last Supper and the Washing of the Feet.

In the eleventh century, many manuscripts often begin 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 the thirteenth century, perhaps due to the influence of the tenth-century Church of Aghtamar (Der Frankel 1985), which had the scene sculpted on its facade. Ablinis 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 fresco cycle of Gospel (M7651) illustrated scenes of major and minor scenes, ranging 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 princes, there are about forty surviving illustrated Gospels or fragments, some fifteen have one or more narrative miniatures, almost the number of the two previous centuries, five with prefatory 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. In this period, 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 Galgik-Aboi of Kars (M6201), of great artistic beauty and in style very dependent on Byzantine court art. The other, the Vehap’ar Gospel (M7651),
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 1983). Contact with Central Asia and China through a series of Mongol and Crusader trade routes also contributed to the creation of a highly sophisticated and exotic art. Several Armenian manuscript illuminators, including T’oros Roslin, were actually executed in Italy in this period (Kokhmaryan 1971). The decline of Cilician art was rapid after the sack of the capital in 1292 by the Mamluks of Egypt, though patronage allowed continuation in to the middle of the next century.

The most distinguished artist of Cilicia was indisputably T’oros Roslin (active 1226–68); who during the 1240s headed the scriptorium at the cathedral see of Hromkla. Seven of his signed (he was also a distinguished illuminator) and illustrated manuscripts have survived. His art is characterized by a splendour of colour, a very fine classical treatment of his figures, and an elegance of line, and an innovative iconography (Der Nersessian 1973, 1983). The works that have come down to us are all extremely precious and useful for background and details. Roslin’s decorative styles, as seen on Canon Tables and head-pieces, are also rich and variable (S. Vardanyan 1983).

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Towards the end of the thirteenth century, the delicate rendering of Roslin gave way to more nervous, mannered style. Several manuscripts display this highly charged style, but all of their artists remain anonymous. The most remarkable is the superb Lecctionary of Prince (later King) Het’um I dated 1286 (Hs 797) with more than 200 miniatures of varying size (Draper 2006, Rispoli 2008). Among the most striking features of this manuscript are several pages on which unkräfte (unusable) motifs from China, probably transmuted into Armenia through the Mongol alliance of circa 1220 and after. Two decorated incipit pages reveal the extraordinary integration of Chinese Fu dogs, lions, dragons and phoenixes into the repertory of Armenian, Syriacite 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 cultures (Kouymjian 1986, 2006, 2008b).

The fourteenth century is named after St John Chrysostom, the dominant artistic production. Though very prolific (dozens of manuscripts), he greatly reduced the art forms of the Cilician artists (Chayanyan 1984, Der Nersessian 1983). His figures are smaller and smoother. The simplicity and lack of subtlety and echo of Renaissance art is the third quarter of the thirteenth century.

In Greater Armenia, especially in the northern monasteries of Surb’ Kank’ and in the southern second half of the thirteenth century, a number of fine illuminated manuscripts with a characteristic style as seen on Canon Tables and head-pieces are distinguished. An important miniature of the fourteenth century works in Greater Armenia is a Gospel in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, dated 1286 (Hs 797). This manuscript, one of the finest of which is the Metropolitan Museum of Art, is 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 Sarajian 1993). After the thirteenth century, Armenian manuscript illuminations flourished simultaneously in a variety of regional the Armenian dioceses, each with a characteristic style.

Regional Centres and the Colonies

Cilician Style

In Cilicia, as a result of heavy Armenian settlement by immigrants from Ani and surrounding regions, minia-
ture painting was strongly influenced by the Byzantine classicizing style, with emphasis on naturalism. In a short time, a number of major illuminated manuscripts were produced. In the twelfth century, the most famous is the Missal of St Vahan, a manuscript produced in the late twelfth century and executed in the late twelfth century and executed in the late thirteenth century. The influence of the miniature style of the professional painters, or the traditional miniaturist, were the most important in the thirteenth century. The figures are smaller, and smoother. The simplicity and lack of subtlety and echo of Renaissance art is the third quarter of the thirteenth century.

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Sermon Book of Mush
1205; AvagParchment; mm 570
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 tallest Armenian manuscript in the world; it weighs 20 kilograms and comprises 18 parchment folios. It is a manuscript written and copied between 1200 and 1205 at Avag Monastery and then transported to the monastery of Surb Arak’elots in the city of Mush, in Anatolia, in 1206. It is written in three columns in capitalized writing (yerkat’agir) and contains a collection of sermons by a number of authors, dedicated to the Holy Apostles in the city of Mush, in Anatolia, in 1205. It is written in three columns and contains a collection of sermons by a number of authors dedicated to the Holy Apostles in the city of Mush, in Anatolia, in 1205.

A manuscript of this type could have been used as a model for the Mekhitarists when they divided the manuscript into two parts. The first part was kept 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 manuscripts to Venice. The second part was conserved in San Lazzaro. It is most likely that this small portion of the manuscript was kept in Venice, possibly as a model for the Mekhitarist Fathers in Venice, whereas 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.
Georgian
5th c. (?), before the Bagratid period
Fragment of manuscript, parchment, cm 34.5 x 25
Venice, Library of the Mekhitarist Fathers of San Lazzaro
Bibliography: DéDéyan 1982

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

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 an enduring hierarchic system called nakharars, similar to the Iranian models but with the unique peculiarity of the Armenian tradition, created multiple centers of power that contributed to the development of this rich tradition. The presence of nakharar, high-ranking nobles at the head of large families, who controlled vast territories of the country, periodically established the hierarchy of the nobility in the court through official documents called gahnamak (literally: “throne registrar”), which were lists of the names of the families admitted to the court. Medieval historical sources give us information of gahnamaks that list as many as hundreds of names. Here is a fragment from an early gahnamak that probably refers to the ruling order before the Bagratid period (884–1045).

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This Gospel is traditionally associated with the name of Queen Mkh’ï, wife of King Gagik Artun’ of Vaspurakan (r. 908–21). The two rulers were also responsible for the (lost) precious binding in gold and precious stones, which has not survived. The scribes are the same as those of the two large evangelia, and the script is far more refined than that of Vaspurakan, which suggests that this book was produced in Constantinople. It may have been commissioned by the nobility of Vaspurakan as a gift for the church, or it may have been produced as a diplomatic gift for a foreign ruler. The manuscript was acquired by Father Grigor Nersesian of Akhaltskha in 1830 and was then acquired by the Mekhitarist Congregation in Venice. The book was donated to the Mekhitarist Congregation in 1830 by Father Grigor Nersesian of Akhaltskha.

The Evangelists are portrayed in a particularly solemn manner, an effect that is enhanced by the tapestries behind them, which resemble architectural backdrops. The book was dedicated to the royal couple at the Monastery of the Holy Cross in Vaspurakan. It was later transferred to the Mekhitarist Congregation in Venice and then to the Mekhitarist Congregation in Cairo.
The folio exhibited comes from a tenth-century Gospel of which only two folios have survived. The tables of concordance and the miniature /khoran/ are 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 the workshop of Hovhannes ‘Sarkis’, it may be hypothesized that the two manuscripts share 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 placed after the table of concordance. (A.S.)
The manuscript, which takes its name from the monk 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 miniatures and their borders are drawn directly on the surface of the parchment. The decoration of the 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 rest of Armenia in the 13th century. The manuscript was copied in the scriptorium of the monastery of Karer, 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)
Gospel of Sargis Pitzak: Portrait of the Evangelist Matthew

This Gospel was created in the ancient scriptorium of Drazarkin 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 at his writing desk on a square page. His figure occupies nearly the entire height of the page and is framed by a floral background. At his feet is a certain large probably Pitzak himself. An angel perched on the border with a scroll extended as a sign of benediction in the direction of the Evangelist. Like the miniature painted for the manuscript of the Assizes of Antioch (cat. 26), this one is also framed within a border decorated with floral motifs and a cross. With respect to other Cilician miniatures, Pitzak's work has an unmistakable originality that is clearly evident in his rendering of the human figure.
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 region. The portrait of the Matthew is the only one of the Evangels in the work of T‘oros. The miniatures of the manuscript contain images that were glued onto a skin in a later period. According to some scholars, this miniature, which refers to the last scene 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.)

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 colors and a simple yet exceptionally dynamic rendering of the figures. In the last supper, we can see Jesus in the center, clad in a tunic and wrapped in a purple mantle. The face of Jesus is reddish in three of the erotic paintings with a golden beak with a jug and cup. The figure of Judas is absent. The leap between the San Lazaro manuscript and the Drazark manuscript is evident from the nakedness of the apostles. The San Lazaro manuscript is dated about 1297 and the Drazark manuscript about 1300. (A.S.)

The manuscript, containing a miniature of the Last Supper, is one of the great miniatures of Armenia, which were used as important handwritten works in the Middle Ages and were distinguished in the_ATOMS (miniatures) and calligraphy. The Last Supper was one of the most important miniatures, which was placed on the right side of the page, next to the text. This manuscript was commissioned by the circle of the famous miniaturist, T‘oros Roslin, who was also the author of the miniature of the Evangelists. (A.S.)

The miniature of the Annunciation was created in 1378 by the miniaturist and copyist Grigor Tat‘evatsi, who was one of the most famous philosophers and poets of his period. The monastery of Tat‘ev in Armenia was one of the most important monasteries, which were founded in the eleventh century. The monastery was located on a hilltop and was the center of the theological and educational life of the region. Grigor entered the monastery in 1370 and studied under Hovhannes Vorotnetsi. The monastery was one of the most important centers of learning and culture in medieval Armenia. (A.S.)

The miniature of the Last Supper was created in 1300 by the miniaturist and copyist T‘oros Roslin, who was also one of the most famous philosophers and poets of his period. The Last Supper was one of the most important miniatures, which was placed on the right side of the page, next to the text. This manuscript was commissioned by the circle of the famous miniaturist, T‘oros Roslin, who was also the author of the miniature of the Evangelists. (A.S.)
Manuscript binding (manuscript), 1249 (manuscript), 1255 (binding); Hromkla, Cilicia
Binding: gilded silver on wood; cm 16 × 12 × 7.5
Yerevan, Matenadaran, MS 7690

Bibliography:
Zekiyan 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, is described in the description of the sacred figures, was executed 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 Hrachia to Kostandin I, and its presence in Crimea is documented prior to 1621. It entered the Matenadaran collection between 1941 and 1954.

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, known today as the “short text” of Plato. It was probably created in the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia in the fourteenth century by the copyist and miniaturist, Nersès. The miniatures refer to explicitly Christian iconographic motifs, as was the case in other linguistic and cultural traditions that embraced the work, in particular the medieval European Middle East. This novel also enjoyed wide diffusion and fame among the Armenians.

The miniatures depict the arrival of Alexander in the Persian capital, in the form of the returning banquet for the king, which he decrees to be that of Nebuchadnezzar, the last king, who died during his Persian invasion. Alexander then addresses the guests, exclaiming: “This is my father, and I am born according to the writing in Armenia at this place.” This episode originated from the belief that Alexander in the Armenian tradition is actually Khach’atur (A.S.).

38 The Alexander Romance.
The Arrival of Alexander in Memphis 2nd half of the 14th c.; Cilicia
Paper; cm 29.0 × 18.5; 127 fols.
Venice, Library of the Mekhitarist Fathers of San Lazzaro, MS 424

Bibliography: Der Nersessian 1977; Mutafian 1999; Mutafian 2007

The miniatures of the Alexander Romance, created in the mid-fourteenth century by the copyist and miniaturist, Nersès, probably created in the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia in the fourteenth century by the copyist and miniaturist, Nersès.

This manuscript contains a miniature inspired by the famous story of Vardan and the Armenian War, narrated by Yeghishé, a fifth-century Armenian author (see cat. 113). It culminates in the battle of Avarayr when the Armenians fought against the Persians with a group of elephants, and on the right, the Persians, with Vardan leading his troops on a white horse.

This manuscript was commissioned by the Catholicos Jacob II, and completed in 1482. The richly adorned binding, also ordered by Jacob II, is described in the description of the sacred figures, was executed shortly thereafter (1482). 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 Vardan to the Catholicos Jacob II, and its presence in Crimea is documented prior to 1621. It entered the Matenadaran collection between 1941 and 1954.

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This wooden column capital is an extraordinary example of medieval Armenian wood carving. Modelled 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 on its uppermost branch. Two doves are represented to the right and left of the composition. The tips of their tresses are in the form of a bird’s head. Below the doves, there are medallions with six-pointed stars, clover and flowering branch motifs decorating the entire surface of the capital. The lower corner has the form of a palm leaf, which the upper one consists of a chain of triangles.

The capital, which was purchased from the State History Museum of Armenia in 1931, is originally from the Church of Astvatsamayr (Mother of God), which is part of the Surb Arak’elots Monastery complex in Sevan. There are three other surviving capitals, two of which are now in the Hermitage collections in Saint Petersburg.

(A.G.)
The Deesis (Greek: “supplication” or “intercession”) is a distinctive iconographic theme used frequently throughout the Eastern Church in the representation of the heavens, two essential intermediaries for humanity addressed in prayer to Christ, who sits in majesty in a central position, flanked by Mary and John the Baptist, who sometimes substitute other saints or angels. In this particular instance, the three personages are celebrated in relief on an apse wall of felsite, which are incorporated into the main masonry façade of the bema of the Church of the Virgin (Surb Astvatzatzin) in Spitakavor. The sculpted architectural setting is very similar to that of the Deesis element with the Virgin.

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 draped 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 of the Deesis element with the Virgin.
This reliquary is a masterpiece of medieval Armenian goldwork. It was commissioned by Each'i, grandson of Prince Pr'yan of the important noble family Pr'yanian, 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 reliquary was discovered by Father Gabriel Hraparak among the ruins of Ani.

A small relief sculpture in agate portrays the Virgin Mary with Jesus, the object is another example of the art of relief work which was widely practised in medieval Armenia. The base of the statue bears an inscription that is particularly difficult to decipher. It was engraved by one Arak Vardus, the artist who created the diptych. In all probability, the part with the image of the father and child was painted.

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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 \times 35;
Reliquary: cm 65 \times 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 932. The relic itself, a fragment of the True Cross, is encased in this cross, which originally served as a reliquary for the True Cross.

Inside the reliquary, we find the instruments of the Passion, while outside there are the figures of the apostles Peter and Paul.