

ARMENIAN RUGS AND TEXTILES

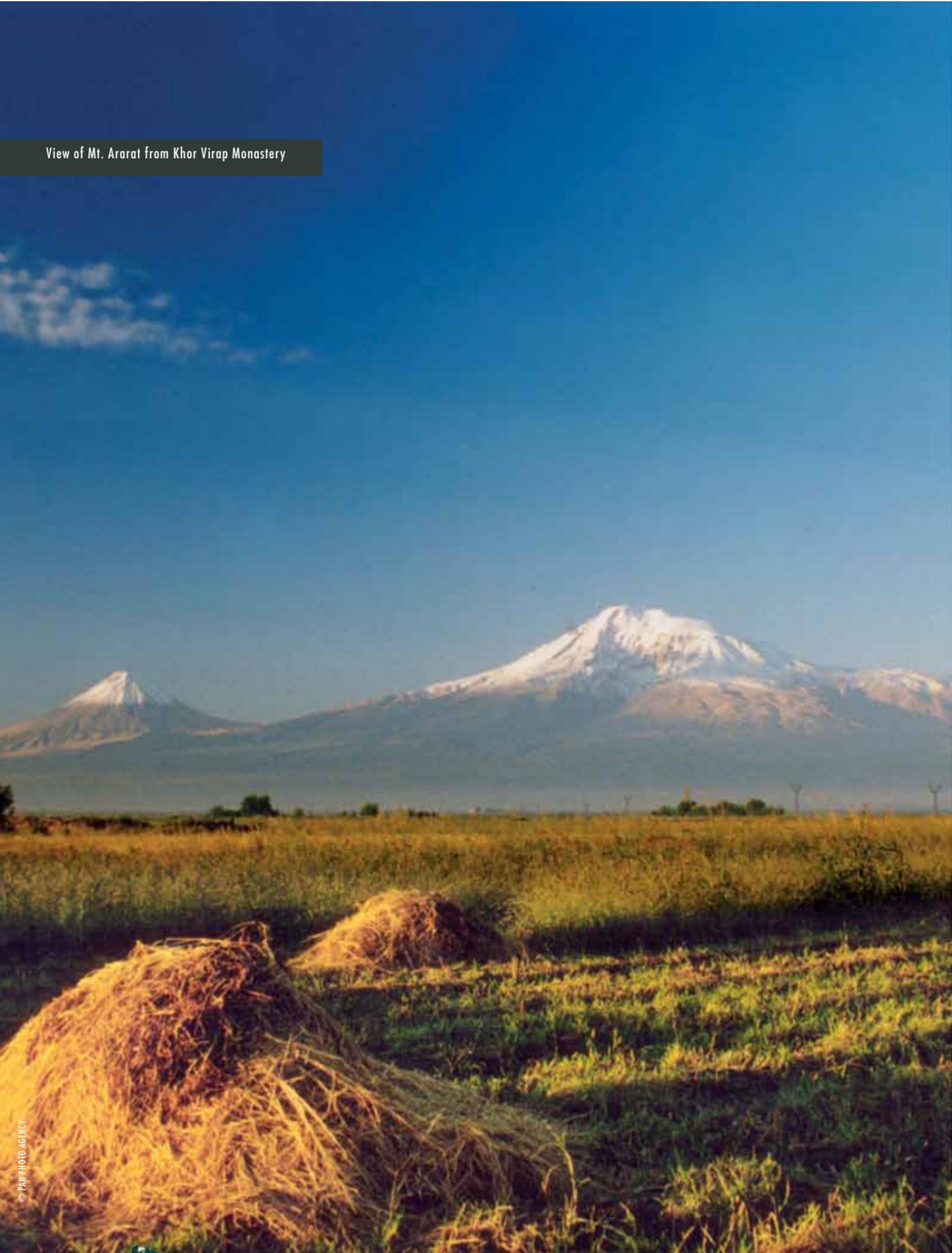


AN OVERVIEW OF EXAMPLES FROM FOUR CENTURIES

EXHIBITION CATALOGUE OF RUGS FROM PUBLIC AND PRIVATE COLLECTIONS IN THE
REPUBLIC OF ARMENIA, THE USA, FRANCE, SWITZERLAND AND AUSTRIA



View of Mt. Ararat from Khor Virap Monastery



An exhibition of Armenian textiles is fortunately no longer a curiosity, about which traditionalists, especially those interested in Oriental rugs and carpets, for many years raised questions about the legitimacy of such an expression as “Armenian carpets.” Often this reaction was directed to rugs with inscriptions in Armenian.

A carpet bearing an inscription is already a relatively rare occurrence, and to discover there are so many with Armenian letters on them, often on weaves that have designs not associated with what one might call traditional Armenian patterns (whatever was meant by that) early in the twentieth century, proved confounding. The most common response from rug specialists to this phenomenon was that such inscriptions were woven along with the rugs by Turkic, Persian or Caucasian Muslims at the command of prosperous Armenians who provided the lettered inscriptions to weave into the carpets. Perhaps the watershed for the slow deconstruction of this skeptical approach was the exhibit *Weavers, Merchants and Kings*, held first at the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, Texas, in 1984 and then at the Virginia Museum, the Worcester Art Museum, and finally, at the end of 1985 and in early 1986, at the Textile Museum in Washington D.C.¹ Carpet expert Murray Eiland and art historian Lucy Der Manuelian prepared the splendid catalogue; the rugs were from dozens of private and public collections, particularly those of Arthur T. Grigorian, James M. Keshishian, Lemyel Amirian, Harold Bedoukian, and Berg L. Garabedian. Before and after, there were other smaller exhibits and publications of inscribed Armenian carpets, including the important *Tapis et textiles arméniens* held in Marseille in 1991,² organized by Raymond Kévorkian and Berdj Achdjian around the rug collection of Arthur Grigorian, supplemented by Armenian textiles from the collection of the Achdjian family. The fully illustrated catalogue included a number of scholarly essays, including one specifically about inscriptions on Armenian carpets.³

Some years earlier, in 1980, the Armenian Rugs Society was established in the United States, bringing together collectors and scholars willing to advance the understanding and appreciation of the historic role of Armenians in textile production. A newsletter was initiated and eventually a website established⁴; one of its projects was a database of rugs and carpets inscribed in Armenian, but only a few items are currently mounted on the site.

- 1 Lucy Der Manuelian and Murray L. Eiland, *Weavers, Merchants and Kings: The Inscribed Rugs of Armenia*, Fort Worth, Texas: Kimbell Art Museum, 1984.
- 2 Raymond H. Kévorkian and Berdj Achdjian, *Tapis et textiles arméniens*, Marseille: Maison arménienne de la jeunesse et de la culture, 1991.
- 3 Dickran Kouymjian, “Les tapis à inscriptions arméniennes,” pp. 67-72.
- 4 http://www.armenianrugsociety.com/exhibitions_armenian_rugs_soci.html

Such a database is extremely important for a number of reasons, among them that statistical data can be harvested from it, especially if it contains many hundreds or thousands of items. Name and place indexes can be compiled as well as other information from rugs with longer dedicatory inscriptions. The most evident value is to date the rug and with it, the elements of design, the colors and dyes used, sizes, and innumerable other factors.

Even though it is reasonable to assume that among oriental rugs of any locality or belonging to any ethnic or language group, Armenian carpets probably have among the highest, if not the highest, absolute number with inscriptions, even though inscribed rugs represent a small fraction of those woven by Armenians. Thus, theoretically, the corpus of inscribed carpets should be an aide in dating and identifying the geographical place of weaving of non-inscribed ones. Many have cautioned about the danger of isolating inscribed Armenian rugs from the very much larger mass of production; the inscribed ones, therefore, must be regarded as tools toward understanding better those without inscription. It is also possible, as others have cautioned, that an inscribed specimen was in fact woven by non-Armenians for an Armenian clientele, but there is thus far little published research of actual instances of such a phenomenon.

Nevertheless, the Armenian habit of inscribing things carefully is extremely important. Turning to another medium of creation, manuscripts, the habit of scribes leaving a personal memorial at the end of the copying of a text, a colophon as it is called, was most widely practiced by Armenians among all manuscript language traditions, whether Greek or Latin in the West, or Arabic, Persian, Coptic, Syriac, and Hebrew in the Near East. An amazingly high rate of surviving Armenian manuscripts are precisely dated, around 60%, far exceeding other traditions in some of which it is unusual to find a date of copying.⁵ This carries over to metal and even wooden objects,⁶ especially liturgical ones (chalices, crosses, reliquaries, silver Gospel covers), to stone sculpture, including the thousands of cross-stones (khach'k'ars), and to embroidered, painted or printed textiles, such as altar curtains, chalice cloths, altar frontals, and the rich apparel of the higher clergy.⁷

5 Dickran Kouymjian, "Dated Armenian Manuscripts as a Statistical Tool for Armenian History," *Medieval Armenian Culture*, Thomas Samuelian and Michael E. Stone, eds., University of Pennsylvania Armenian Texts and Studies, vol. 6, Chico, CA, 1984, pp. 425-439.

6 Two exemplary catalogues from the scores of museum exhibitions during the 2007 Année de l'Arménie in France, provided notices of various lengths with complete inscriptions in Armenian and in translation of well over 200 objects: Jannic Durand, Ioanna Rapti, Dorota Giovannoni, eds., *Armenia sacra : Mémoire chrétienne des Arméniens (IVe–XVIIIe siècle)*, Le Louvre-Somogy, Paris, 2007; Claude Mutafian, ed., *Arménie : la magie de l'écrit*, La Vieille Charité, Paris-Marseille: Somogy, 2007.

7 More specifically, such liturgical textiles and metalwork were carefully catalogued with full inscriptions from the Cilician Museum of the Armenian Catholicosate of Cilicia: *The Catholicosate of Cilicia: History, Treasures, Mission*, Seta Dadoyan, ed., Antelias, Lebanon: Catholicosate of Cilicia, 2015, Marielle Martiniani-Reber, "Paramentique et autres textiles," pp. 123-157, Dickran Kouymjian, "Catalogue of the Liturgical Metalwork," pp. 158-295.

Thus, though it is unusual within the world of rugs and carpets to have so many Armenian examples that are inscribed, within the domain of Armenian arts and crafts, it is not at all unusual, but simply normal practice. Statistical analysis of dated Armenian manuscripts has allowed scholars to date within a quarter century, sometimes within a decade, such factual information as when, for instance, paper replaced parchment as the most common writing surface or when there was a shift from the majuscule erkat'agir script to the much more efficient bolorgir minuscule.⁸

Perhaps the use of statistical analysis applied to a newly published corpus of all the khach'kars found in the two urban localities of Jerusalem and New Julfa-Isfahan, at a total of 669 small commemorative stones, might offer a methodology suitable for carpet analysis.⁹ The authors extracted through very fine drawings, all cross-shapes, but also all floral and geometric designs of each stone in the corpus and from them established pattern books, the dates allowing researchers to trace the transformation of motifs over time. This can and should be done for inscribed Armenian carpets, and, indeed, other textiles, such as those in this exhibit.

Fortunately, there are a few surviving earlier inscribed Armenian carpets, the Gohar/Guhar carpet whose date I have read as 1699, even though other dates have been proposed,¹⁰ allow us to move back in time with assurance about Armenian rug production. There is also the dating of rugs found in Renaissance paintings from Italy, though it does not always tell us if the rug that looks like it is Armenian, in fact is. Even more important with regard to such rugs in paintings is the recent work of Lauren Arnold, who has pointed out that artists usually placed these Oriental rugs in a Christian context, most often with the Virgin Mary, strongly suggesting that these rugs were not associated with Muslim craftsmen, at least by the end users.¹¹ In a related domain, rugs and textiles found in Armenian manuscript illuminations and on some relief sculptures can be attributed close to the date of the manuscript or church and can be ascribed as Armenian with more assurance than in an Italian painting. This type of investigation was started three or four decades ago by Viken Sassouni, but has not been aggressively continued since his demise.¹²

8 Dickran Kouymjian, "Notes on Armenian Codicology. Part 1. Statistics Based on Surveys of Armenian Manuscripts," *Comparative Oriental Manuscript Studies Newsletter* no. 4 (July 2012), pp. 18-23; idem, "Notes on Armenian Codicology. Part 2.

Armenian Palaeography: Dating the Major Scripts," *Comparative Oriental Manuscript Studies Newsletter* no. 6 (July 2013), pp. 22-28, both accessible electronically at <http://armenianstudies.csufresno.edu/faculty/kouymjian/articles/index.htm>.

9 Haroutioun Khatchatrian and Michel Basmadjian, *Xa 'k'ar, L'art des pierres-croix arméniennes d'Isfahan et de Jérusalem*, Paris: Geuthner, 2014.

10 Dickran Kouymjian, "Le tapis « Gouhar » (« Gohar »)," in Mutafian, *Arménie : la magie de l'écrit*, no. 4.111, p. 278 with illustration.

11 Prof. Arnold has presented her findings in several public forums and conferences, one of which is available through a video on the Armenian Rugs Society webpage: <http://vimeo.com/63850811>. Her own database, *The Carpet Index: Oriental Carpets in Early Renaissance Paintings*, is extremely useful in this respect: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/26911776@N06/collections/72157632803028991/>

12 Viken Sassouni, "Evidence of Armenian Rug-Making on the Basis of the Illuminations of Armenian Manuscripts from the Seventh to the Fourteenth Centuries," in Samuelian and Stone, *Medieval Armenian Culture*, pp. 315-328.

The importance of such investigation, of relating the art of weaving to that of the other arts of Armenia, will strengthen the scientific approach to Armenian rug studies. Despite the enormous advances in this domain by those associated with the Armenian Rugs Society, by the first international conference on Armenian rugs,¹³ and independent scholars in Armenia and elsewhere, there is a long way to go before Armenian weaves are solidly grounded as an historical phenomenon as important as Persian, Caucasian, Turkish, or other classifications. For instance, to the best of my knowledge we have no secure information on the role of Armenians in the craft of weaving in the Ottoman Empire. I do not even know if there was a guild for weavers as there were ones for silversmiths and ceramists. But the ledgers of the latter two guilds kept in Ottoman archives have been studied by Garo Kürkman, who has published the lists of the members of these guilds in the eighteenth century; in both cases, the overwhelming majority of names are Armenian.¹⁴ Why would it be different for skilled weavers?

Beside the beauty of the textiles on display in this exhibit, they offer a chance to look into the world of Armenian weaving in its diverse dimensions. Many of the objects have their own IDs saying: "Look, I was born in such and such a year and was made by a person with this name." Surely they should serve to entice the interest of those who have not been exposed to Armenian textiles before and to stimulate those who have to penetrate further their historical context.

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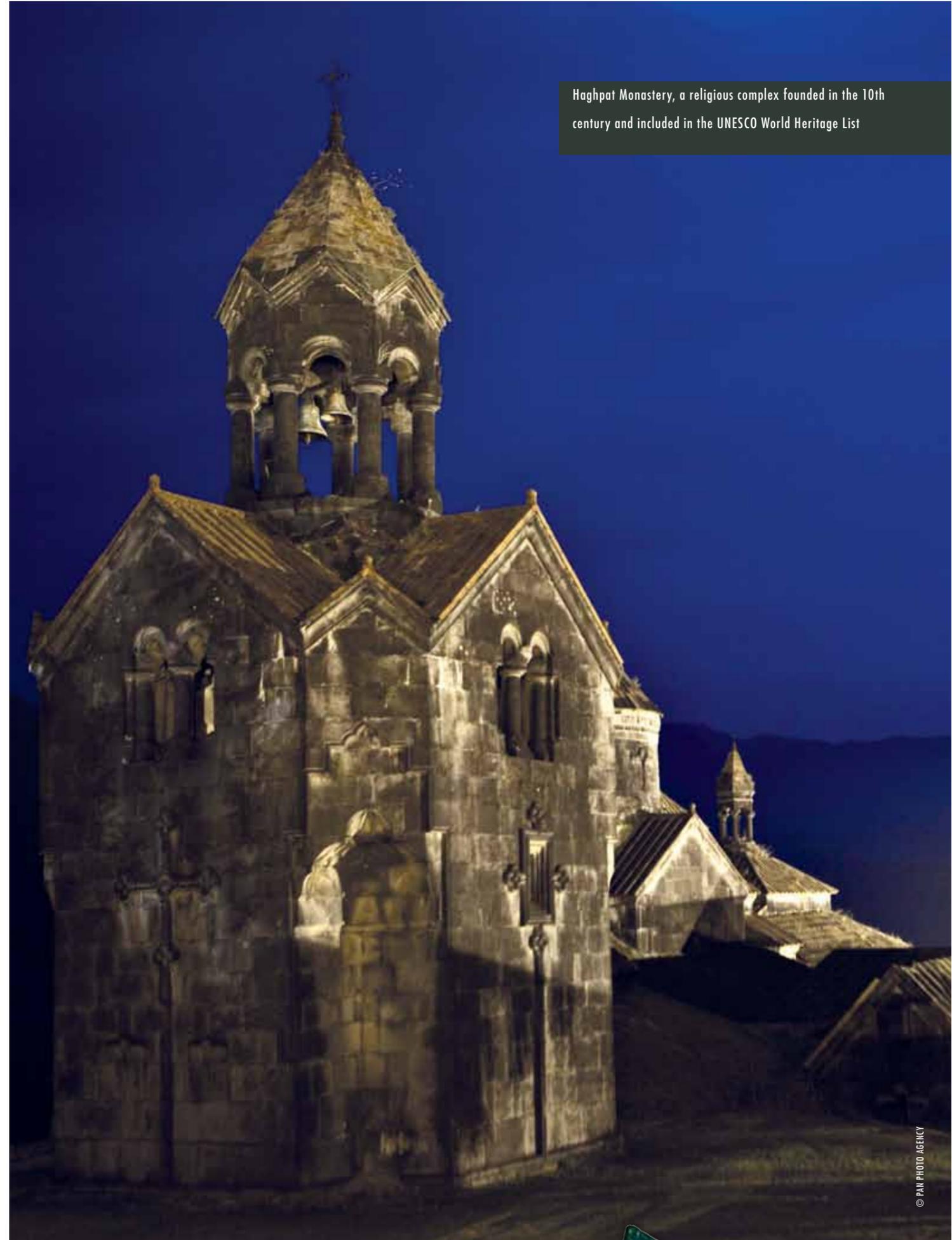
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13 Armenian Knot: Traditions of Carpet Weaving Art, organized by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Armenia, 20-22 November 2013 in Yerevan, and coordinated in part by Tatev Muradyan.

14 Garo Kürkman, Ottoman Silver Marks, Istanbul: Mithusalem Publications, 1996, passim and for documents, pp. 259-289; idem, Magic of Clay and Fire: A History of Kütahya Pottery and Potters, Istanbul: Suna and Inan Kiraç Foundation, 2006, pp. 79-84, 108-115.



Haghpat Monastery, a religious complex founded in the 10th century and included in the UNESCO World Heritage List