The history of Armenian carpet weaving is still a fragmented discourse known mostly within Armenian circles. Many of its basic facts are or have been challenged, or simply rejected, by determined nationalistic policies of neighboring political authorities, foremost among them the Republic of Azerbaijan and more subtly, but for a longer time, Turkey: for instance my copy of the English version of Şerare Yekin's useful two volume Early Caucasian Carpets in Turkey of 1978 with its censored map blacking out the word “Armenia”.

Such distortion or denial of artistic achievement has been aided and abetted by syphonic scholars of the past century who succumbed to the idea that whatever was produced historically in the boundaries of a modern nation-state or, in an earlier time, an empire, must be subsumed under the name of the dominant political constituency of the country. Thus Turkish art includes everything produced within the modern borders of Turkey (though at times it is even extended to lands formerly under the control of the Ottoman Empire), even though most of the art and architecture was created before the Turks arrived in the Near East and Asia Minor from distant Central Asia. Such a phenomenon is common to many nation-states. The United States has practiced the same policy: all art produced on the land is American, though with recent subtle appellations to account for understandable indigination: Native American art, African American art, and for an earlier period pre-Columbian American art.

Rugs are designated in similar ways. From the viewpoint of late medieval and Renaissance Europe, they were “Oriental,” coming from the East in the sense of Near or Middle East. But they were “Oriental,” coming from the East in the sense of Near or Middle East. They had better peculiarities and modes of organization. Each medium has its own peculiarities and modes of organization.

Architecture is perhaps the most stable in terms of geographic location of production: we know with total precision where a church was erected and usually the authority responsible for it. Portable objects—painting, manuscripts, ceramics, metalwork, and of course textiles, including carpets, present the obvious problems of place, date, and attribution.

Inscriptions are of great help in determining provenance for such mobile objects, but artists did not always leave their mark. Early medieval European art was often intentionally anonymous. Rugs and carpets were very rarely inscribed, thus there is the thorny and constant problem of date and provenance. There is a fairly large group of later Islamic rugs, mostly in the Top Kapi Palace collection, with important religious inscriptions, (fig. 1) but these are probably early nineteenth century rugs, suggested by some to have been manufactured in Hereke in an archaizing style; there are also many Persian rugs with inscriptions. Perhaps the largest body of carpets with inscriptions is Armenian. This is not an accidental phenomenon. Armenians were great practitioners of the art of the colophon—a memorial or simply an inscriptions of creation—used consistently in the production of Armenian manuscripts from the earliest surviving codices to the end of manuscript copying; no other book tradition—Byzantine, Latin, Syriac, Copt, Georgian, Hebrew, Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Ethiopian, even Slavonic—used the colophon as consistently as the Armenian. In this exercise, usually associated with the copying of a text, the primary colophon was always that of the scribe or author, and almost always mentions the place and date of production, the name of the scribe and patron, with secondary colophons by the artist and sometimes the binder and later owners. Thus, there should be no surprise that hundreds, probably thousands, of surviving rugs have Armenian inscriptions even though weaving an inscription is infinitely more difficult than writing one in ink on parchment or paper or carving on wood or engraving on metal. Even embroidered an inscription or stamping one on a large altar curtain is much easier than producing one on a carpet.

18 Much has been written on the subject, but a clear explanation is found in the introduction to Araxes H. Sanjian, Colophons of Armenian Manuscripts, 1301-1480. A Source for Middle Eastern History, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969, pp. 1-41.
19 Though inscriptions on carpets like that in Fig. 1, a late Herakleion type, seem perfectly rendered.

Nevertheless, the notion advanced by specialists such as Arthur Upham Pope22 and Kurt Erdmann, later perpetuated by scholars such as Richard Ettinghausen, that such inscribed rugs were woven not by Armenians, but only commissioned by them of Turkish or other Muslim craftsmen who simply tried to copy the sketches presented to them.23 Such pronouncements were advanced either out of a prejudice for the Islamic in all things from the Orient, or worse, out of ignorance. But this selective blindness toward Christian art, especially Armenian art, also resulted in the same aberrant scholarship toward earlier ceramics in the Ottoman Empire, the early sixteenth century blue and white ware from Kütahya inscribed in Armenian was rejected as the work of Armenian craftsmen even though inscriptions pointed out clearly that the pots were made by Armenians for Armenians.24 These were the same circumstances or doubts expressed toward the famous Gohar or Gohar carpet of 1699 (fig. 2), on which Gohar says in her inscription that she wove the rug: “I, Guhar/Gohar, full of sin and weak of soul, with my newly learned hands wove this rug. Whosoever reads this say a word of mercy to God for me. In the year 1148 (1699 A.D.).”25 This practice of leaving an author’s or creator’s inscription (bishtakanara) was practiced aggressively in the same seventeenth century in New Julfa-Ishahan where binders of manuscripts and books stamped on the outside leather covers inscriptions in erkat’agir providing all circumstances on their crafting, including the date.26 This was also true of silversmiths, metalworkers, ceramists, early book printers, embroiders as well as the scribes who copied manuscripts.

Very few pre-eighteenth century carpets survive and if we go back two centuries, almost nothing remains of the Oriental rug in the pre-Safavid period.


24 Dickran Kouymjian, “Armenian Epigraphy,” Journal of Art Historiography, no. 6 (June 2012), p. 12. This paper was written in 1960s when the field of Armenian epigraphy was in its infancy.

25 A 200-page Addendum comprising long extracts about Armenia from eight of the most important Arab historians of the medieval period offers precise information on carpets among the Armenians, especially for trade and exchange, often praising their great renown: Joseph Laurent, L’Arménie entre Byzance et l’Islam depuis la conquête arabe jusqu’en 886, updated new edition with addenda by Maurice Conard, Lisbon: Librairie Bertrand, 1980, pp. 475-674.

26 Léonard Amiran, “On the Origin of the Dragon and Phoenix Rug in Berlin.” Hall, vol. 4, no. 1 (1981), p. 31, ... on inscription… appears not to have been noticed…. It consists of the letters ŵ and ū of the Armenian alphabet, repeated twice … on the shoulder of the phoenix in the upper panel … In Armenian the words, “Lord God,” begin with the same two letters.”


28 http://www.discoveracirecen.org/database_item.php?id=object/151;de=No;13;en Museum with No Frontiers, offers a detailed description of the physical aspects of the carpet including a carbon-14 dating.
We are confronted, however, with numerous problems, which are far from resolved. The motif of the phoenix and the dragon has not been contextualized. There are currently two contexts: 1) that the dragon-phoenix pair is Chinese but adopted by the Yuan Mongol imperial dynasty of China after the conquest in 1279 and accession to the throne of Qubilai Khan (1279-1294), grandson of Genghis Khan, and 2) the Karakuyunlu Turkmen dynasty was the supposed indirect inheritor of the artistic motifs of the Ilkhanid Dynasty of Iran founded by Qubilai’s brother Hulagu, two centuries earlier. The first can be and has been demonstrated as probably valid; the second has little concrete evidence to justify it. There are a number of diverse threads that need to be examined, and it is impossible to do that in the context of this conference. But let me at least enumerate them:

1) The channels through which oriental carpets reached Italy and later the Low Countries: These included the Crusades, travelers and papal emissaries to the Mongol court in the thirteenth-fourteenth centuries, and merchants, many of whom were Armenians and few, if any, of Islamic faith;

2) The appearance of these oriental or Caucasian carpets (associated without tangible evidence by late nineteenth and twentieth century art historians with Islam) in Italian paintings, almost all of a Christian religious in the context, and very often with the Virgin Mary, a thesis convincingly supported by statistical data by Lauren Arnold29; 3) The history of the dragon-phoenix motif in Chinese, Mongol, and Near Eastern art. In this paper I will concentrate only on the last point.

The dragon and the phoenix are mythological creatures found in Chinese art from the earliest dynasties. They were related to the sky and thus universal. Neither was considered a menacing animal, unlike the dragon in the West, something not understood by many who have written on the dragon-phoenix carpet or other objects with this motif. In China both these creatures were considered benevolent. In time, the dragon became the symbol of the emperor, and the phoenix, the empress. Up to the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Chinese did not think of them in conflict. Thus, it is dangerous to insist that the animals in the Berlin carpet are battling each other, unless we move its date to the later Ming period, sixteenth or even seventeenth century, when Ming art (fig. 5) places them together fighting over a pearl.30 This leaves too many centuries between the renaissance paintings and the later Ming to imagine the continuity of such a static rendering of an animal motif from a much earlier period.

Furthermore, except for a single bronze only recently published,31 there are no examples of the two animals together on the same object in Chinese, Mongol, or Islamic art until after the fall of the Yuan Dynasty, that is after the fourteenth century, but more probably later in both China and Islamic lands of the Near East.

The introduction of Chinese dragons and phoenixes in the Near East first occurs through a series of large luster tiles (fig. 6) used in the private and ceremonial chambers of the summer palace of the Ilkhanids at Takht-i Suleyman southeast of Tabriz and west of Sultanaya.32 The tiles are undated and without inscriptions, but on the same walls there are other smaller and differently shaped tiles, probably affixed at the same time, with dates of 1271 to 1275/6. These impressive tiles were arranged in long rows alternating dragons and phoenixes. There are no known tiles of the thirteenth century that show the two celestial animals on the same ceramic.

The earliest representation (figs. 7a) of the dragon and phoenix together is in a headpiece for the feast of the Transfiguration in the famous Armenian Lectionary of Het’um II dated 1286.33


32 The closest in feeling are on the large luster tiles, both dragons and phoenixes, but never together on the same tile, and for the phoenix the eight-pointed star tiles in Jayavarman; Linda Komaroff and Stefano Carboni, The Legacy of Genghis Khan, Courty Art and Culture in Western Asia, 1256-1353, New York: Metropolitan Museum and Yale University, New Haven, 2003, no. 99, fig. 97 dragon from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, no. 100, fig. 100, phoenix from the Victoria and Albert Museum. During the exhibition “The Legacy of Genghis Khan” (2003) at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Linda Komaroff and her staff set up an entire wall of these tiles or their reproductions mixing dragon and phoenix tiles somewhat like the reconstruction, cf. for the same or similar phoenix and dragon tiles from Takht-i Suleyman, Dickran Kousjian, “Chinese Influences on Armenian Miniature Painting in the Mongol Period,” Armenian Studies/Studios arméniens: In Memorian Haig Barsarian, Dickran Kousjian, ed., Lisbon: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 1986, figs. 10–14, available on web, see note 3 above; idem, “Chinese Dragons and Phoenixes among the Armenians,” in Civilizational Contribution of Armenia in the History of the Silk Road, Erevan: Armenian Academy of Sciences, 2012, published 2013, p. 252, fig. 6, available on web, see note 3 above.

33 Erevan, M979, Lectionary of Prince, later King, Het’um II of 1286, fol. 334. The manuscript has accumulated a large number of studies in recent years, with all of the hundreds of miniatures and marginal decorations illustrated in Irina Dzupian, Lectionary of King Het’um II, text in Armenian Russian, English, Erevan: Hauri, 2004. For a detailed description and discussion of the dragon-phoenix headpiece, see Dickran Kousjian, “Chinese Influences,” pp. 426-431, figs. 3a-3d; idem, “Chinese Dragons and Phoenixes among the Armenians,” pp. 232-234, figs. 2-4.
This is not an isolated rendering, in this case painted twice (fig. 7b) in the spandrels of the arch above an incipit. On top of the headpiece there is a large heraldic phoenix (fig. 8a), which dominates the scene; it is nearly identical to the rebirth of a phoenix (fig. 8b) from a Jin Dynasty (1115-1234) silk brocade with gold thread.34 In the same Lectionary, there is another headpiece for the reading of the Annunciation with a picture of Christ Emmanuel, (fig. 9) guarded on both sides by Chinese lions and surrounded by Chinese lotus flowers and the Buddhist wheel of the law.35 This accumulation of Chinese motifs was not just casually added to the luxuriously illuminated royal Lectionary along with other artistic elements from the Byzantine and European traditions. These Far Eastern motifs are carefully integrated into a statement of sovereignty (figs. 8b, 9). The crown prince Het'um was honoring his father and mother, King Levon, symbolized by the youthful Christ guarded by the protective lions of Buddha, while the heraldic phoenix of the other headpiece represents Queen Keran, the great patron of the arts. The dragon and phoenix together represent the king and queen of the realm ruling over an Armenia at peace as depicted in portrait miniatures of Gospels of 1262 and 1272 (figs. 10a-b).36 Furthermore, these animals and their symbolic interpretation were clearly and perfectly understood among the artists of the court confirmed by such details as the number of claws of the dragons. In China the imperial dragon was always represented with five claws, other members of the royal family were allowed dragons of four claws, while noble vassals were permitted the use of three claws; the Lectionary dragons have four. Thus, (figs. 11a-b) in a Gospel executed in 1289 for Bishop John, brother of King Het'um I and the uncle of King Levon and Het'um II, who has a silk lining on his liturgical robe with a Chinese dragon on it with just three claws.37

How did the Armenian royal court acquire Chinese objects – silks, ceramics, perhaps even paintings -- with such designs? The following, discussed in detail in an earlier study,38 are the most likely sources:

1) through the exchange of gifts between Armenian aristocracy and the Great Khan in Qaraqorum and numerous visits to the Ilkhanid court in Sultanija and probably even Takt-i Suleyman. The most famous of these was the journey of Smbat sparapet to the capital of the Great Khan (1247-1250), which was followed by another trip of his brother King Het’um three years later (1253-1256).

The sources speak of the exchange of royal gifts, which I have discussed in detail in the articles already cited.

2) By trade on the silk route which passed through Greater Armenia and Cilicia. Whatever the source of objects which supplied the Chinese motifs to the rulers and religious leaders of Armenia, they were carefully used and their meaning clearly understood already in the 1280s.

Islamic art began borrowing chinoiserie in the 1290s, but very timidly with lotus flowers and Chinese cloudbands a decade or two earlier. In the early fourteenth century these motifs appear more abundantly in such works as the Jami al-tawarikh of Rashid ad-Din and in some Shahnamehs. But finding the dragon and phoenix alone or later together is rare and late and seldom with a clear symbolic interpretation such as its use in thirteenth-century Armenia.39

If the Berlin dragon-phoenix rug and the Marby carpet (figs. 3a-b) were royal commissions of the Türkmen Karakoyunlu or even Ottomans, as some have suggested, one would need to contextualize their use. Furthermore, there would need to be some supporting evidence that the Karakoyunlu Jahanshah (1437-1467), the most likely ruler under which they might have been woven, encouraged such Sino-Mongol motifs in his court art. If, however, these rugs were somehow associated, even indirectly, with Cilician art, one would expect an earlier, perhaps fourteenth century dating. I have not had access to articles that discuss the carbon-14 dating of the Berlin carpet and have little idea of the parameters of such dating, except the usual remark that there is a 200-year tolerance. Unfortunately, we have little concrete, irrefutable evidence that Armenians wove such animal rugs, but this is equally true for Persian, Türkmen, or Ottoman weaving of the early centuries. There are of course abundant textual references to Armenian carpet weaving in Arab, Ottoman, medieval and early modern European travel accounts. The technical skill of Armenian rugs and their very diverse and innovative design mastery is underlined by inscribed and dated carpets from the early seventeenth century. Such items, though dating two centuries after experts imagine the Berlin carpet was woven, offer the kind of precise data lacking in most other traditions. The few surviving carpets attributed to before 1500 are hard to date precisely; those pictured in Italian paintings of the Renaissance are assigned the date of the painting or to some indeterminate number of years before. Neither of these resources is much help in determining who wove them and precise geographical information on where they were crafted. In this respect, solid evidence is found for instance in the inscribed Guhar carpet of 1699 or 1700 (fig. 2), universally accepted as a magnificent textile.40

40 The two lines inscription reads: “1, Guhar/Gohar, full of sin and weak of soul, with my newly learned hands were this rug, who sooner reads this says a word of mercy to God for me. In the year 1149 (1699 A.D.)” Kouymjian, “Le tapis «Gohar» (+ «Gohar»): p. 278. In an earlier article I discussed the question of dating in detail, idem, „Les tapis d’inscriptions arméniennes,“ p. 72, note 12. Looking at a very high resolution scan and the rug itself the last digit of the date, which is clearly a vertical stroke with no element to its left, can only be ɪ, Ʌ, or ɏ, but the first three can be eliminated because other elements are missing. Thus, the badly written letter is either of one of the last two, and though badly distorted, I think it is intended to be ɪ or Ʌ, 1149 (^ 1700).
There is an earlier inscribed prayer rug formerly in a private collection in Vienna (fig. 12), current whereabouts uncertain, but published in color with a dated inscription probably of 151241, and another fragment with an inscription of ca. 1600.42 One possibly should also mention the inscribed carpet of 1592 from Julfa on the Arax, current whereabouts unknown, but copied in a new weave in Bulgaria in 1939-1940.43 In the oral presentation I also mentioned the Yakob carpet, a large "polonaise" type Safavid rug dated by style to 1620-1625 now in the Art Gallery of South Australia in Adelaide (figs. 13-a-c), signed in the upper right and lower left, Yakob/Hakob, in very finely woven Armenian majuscule (erk'at'agir), almost invisible to the naked eye, and in the extreme corners his initials: Y. and G. Yakob was certainly the weaver of the rug, because if he were the patron, his name would have appeared more prominently. It is now clear to me that this is a counter-example, though still important to demonstrate Armenian involvement in rug design, weaving, and marketing. The rug in Australia, originally part of the Bowman collection in Paris, was not woven by a mysterious Armenian working in Isfahan-New Julfa in the time of Shah Abbas, but rather Hapog Kapoudjian, established in Paris and considered by many as one of the last masters of the Kum Kapi rug making school of Constantinople. I had written about him some years ago44 but failed to make the association with the "Hapog" signature of this rug in a paper given in Zamość, Poland in 2010 on inscribed Armenian objects.45

Rather it was Berdj Achdjian of the Achdjian Gallery in Paris who recently informed me that his father Albert, who established the Oriental rug shop on rue Miromesnil, had always considered Kapoudjian as his master when they worked together in 1929-1930.46

**CONCLUSION**

The attribution of non-inscribed and undated artifacts is done through stylistic analysis and comparisons with other objects. Historical context and the previous use of motifs are also credible markers for establishing provenance. No rug weaving tradition other than the Armenian can bring along with its claim of proprietorship: 1) a long and well-documented history of weaving practice; 2) the very precocious (really unique) earliest instance of the joining together of these Chinese animals on a single object; and 3) a demonstrable understanding of what the dragon and phoenix represented to the Chinese and Mongols.

As a closing observation, in the late 1970s, when I first reported on the dragon-phoenix motif in the 1286 Lectionary, suggesting that the animals were in conflict, as is the case in the later Ming period, my colleagues of Chinese art reprimanded me because they said that was not the case. After I corrected my remarks years later, I was told that there was no precedent in medieval Chinese art of the animals together, so I claimed, without opposition on their part, that Armenian artists were the first to bring them together. It was only a few years ago that professor Lukas Nickel wrote from London that he found a Chinese report on a number of recently excavated tombs in one of which was a bronze mirror (fig. 14) with the dragon and phoenix together that could be dated to 1093.47 Consequently, at least one example of such a dragon-phoenix combination is known dating nearly two centuries before the Armenian specimens and four before the Ming. Prof. Nickel cautioned, however, that this was in the Liao Dynasty and the Liao were not Chinese; thus Central Asia might be the place where the animals were joined on an ordinary, rather than an imperial, object.48 This raises the question that if the mirror iconography was unknown in China or not popularly used, therefore inaccessible to Armenians, (fig. 6) is it not then possible that in 1286 Armenian artists or their royal patrons who had seen the separate but juxtaposed dragon and phoenix tiles at Takht-i Sulayman during a formal visit had independently brought together (fig. 15) the celestial symbols in the headpiece as they did later in the Berlin carpet in precisely the same position?

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41 Formerly in Vienna, published by Alois Riegel. Ein orientalischer Teppich vom Jahre 1202 n. Chr. und die ältesten orientalischen Teppiche, Berlin: 1895, frontispiece in color and pp. 7-9. cf. later by Robert A. Olbrych, K’alak’t’ec il en ev ukharam na Hayastarnum IX-XIII darerum (The Cities and Crafts in Armenia in the Ninth to Thirteenth Centuries), vol. 1, Erevan: Academy of Sciences, 1958, pp. 292-293 with colored plates tipped in between them; prayer rug with a long Armenian inscription and the date 961/1512, read incorrectly as 651/1202 by Riegel and by A. Olbrych following V. Emurry yam. The letters might be read as 651 (1512), but most probably not 651 (1202); the rug's design, decoration, and organization make such an early date almost impossible. See also the discussion on the type in Yelyom Gantzchorn, The Christian Oriental Carpet, Cologne, 1991, German, French, and English editions, pp. 481-484, the author sees the date as 1602 or (1651). Earlier the dating was also questioned, since the rug pattern is much later, Murray L. Eiland, “Handwoven Rugs of the Armenians,” in Lucy Der Manuelian and Murray L. Eiland, Weavers, Merchants and Kings: The Inscribed Rugs of Armenia, Fort Worth, TX: Kimbell Art Museum, 1984, p. 56, fig. 34.


46 Personal discussions and email exchanges, 15-17 April 2014, during which he drew my attention to the book about Kapoudjian, which I had totally forgotten about.


Figure 1: Inscribed Islamic rug early 19th Century

Figure 2: Guhar-Gohar

Figure 1: Gohar inscription

The Dragon Rug
Figure 1:

Figure 9:
headpiece with lions

Figure 10a:
Levon & Keran 1262

Figure 10b:
Levon & Keran

Figure 11: Bp John silk dragon

Figure 12: Riedl, probably 1512
Armenian prayer rug

Figure 13a: Yakob rug

Figure 13b: Yakob rug, detail

Figure 13c: drawing Yakob rug

Figure 14: Dragon phoenix mirror