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SOME ICONOGRAPHICAL ASPECTS OF THE LATE MEDIEVAL ARMENIAN ART ON THE EXAMPLES OF THE ALTAR CURTAINS FROM THE MUSEUM OF THE ARMENIAN CHURCH IN BUCHAREST

Abstract

In the 17-18th centuries radical changes occurred in different fields of art connected with new cultural preferences and tastes of the time, new understandings and the growing influence of the European culture, especially of the printed book and its dissemination. European printed books decorated with etchings, engravings and woodcuts were to have an important impact on Armenian art providing inspiration for the masters in different fields of art. In this paper the main iconographic features as well as the iconographic transformations and innovations typical for the time are presented on the examples of the collection of altar curtains kept in the Armenian museum in Bucharest.

Keywords: Armenian cultural heritage in Romania, Armenian Church, Armenian museum in Bucharest, the art of the Armenian printed book, Altar curtain, wood-block printing art, Tokat (Evdokia).

Introduction: The Armenian Art Exhibition in 1930 and the Establishment of the Museum by the Armenian Church in Bucharest

One of the most important events, marking the centuries-old Armenian cultural heritage in Romania, was surely the Armenian Art exhibition in Bucharest in 1930, which became a great event and a true revelation of the artistic and cultural diversity of the Armenian Art in Bucharest.¹

The exhibition, which benefited from a lot of attention and appreciation in the Armenian and Romanian leading newspapers and magazines, was initiated by a group of Armenian devotees and first of all the prominent orientalist and specialist in Armenian studies, Hakob Siruni. But it could not have been accomplished and become a great success if it did not enjoy the patronage and support of the Romanian renowned scholar, historian Professor Nicolae Iorga, a great friend of the Armenian people and an admirer of their culture.²

Three large exhibition halls showcased oil paintings and icons, illuminated manuscripts and old printed books, national costumes and liturgical vestments, carpets woven in Romania and in various Armenian centers, liturgical textiles and altar curtains etc. There were 15 sections containing 643 samples of art selected out of more than a thousand specimens brought from Suceava, Botoșani, Iași, Roman, Focșani, Bacău, Targu Ocna, Constanța, Brăila, Tulcea, Galați, Gerla and other Armenian churches of Romania.³

The exhibition was the first ever successful attempt to introduce people to the Armenian art treasures, and as a unique symbol of revival, it became the ideological basis for the great purpose of establishing an Armenian museum in Bucharest, the idea of which had already originated in the preparation stage of the exhibition.

The brightest page in the history of the museum was written in 1942, when, with the donation of the Armenian benefactors Hovsep and Victoria Dudians, the doors of the house of the Armenian culture⁴ for the first time solemnly opened in the courtyard of St. Archangels Armenian church, where the museum was to function alongside the library, being the final destination for numerous samples of art collected during fifteen years due to joint efforts and donations of Hakob Siruni, Armenian prominent families and art dealers.

Because of the complex political situation during the 1940's the library and the museum were shut down and hundreds of books and samples of art were in danger of plunder, destruction and loss. A part of the collection was sheltered in the upper chamber of the church and in the cellars of the museum, some were given to the Armenian families for protection, and a large part, by decision of the church, was moved to the Alex and Marie Manoogian Treasury Museum at the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin in Armenia. The museum was reborn and reopened only in the 1987.⁵

The Armenian museum in Bucharest is the symbol of the Armenian centuries-old presence and cultural heritage in Romania up to this day,

the preservation and study of which is a very important and vital issue. Realizing this problem, the Head of Armenian Church in Romania Bishop Datev Hakobian, in cooperation with the Head of UNESCO Chair of Armenian Art History and Theory of Yerevan State University Dr. Prof. Levon Chookaszian, started to organize and implement the study and preservation of the art collections kept in the museum, and in other churches of Romania.

The cooperation began in the autumn of 2012 when a group of researchers from the UNESCO Chair of Armenian Art History and Theory left for Bucharest to work in the Armenian museum for the first time. Being involved in this working group, I had the chance to get acquainted with the textile collection of the Museum and started to explore it. The study continues until now, identifying and raising many important issues relating to Armenian art in Romania.

In the framework of this study my current research is devoted to the collection of altar curtains kept in the museum of the Armenian Church in Bucharest, which is the most important and remarkable part of the collection of liturgical textiles and represent one of the interesting and unique pages of late Medieval Armenian Christian art.

Although the preserved samples of altar curtains are mostly dated in 17-18th centuries, the tradition of using them in the Armenian Church is almost as ancient as the church itself.⁶ It is an individual and exceptional element of the Armenian Ecclesiastical Rite, the current usage of which doesn't have its equivalent in churches of either Latin or Byzantine ritual.

The tradition of decorating the altar curtains with embroidered or wood-block printed and painted pictures also has a long history throughout the centuries.⁷

The samples of the collection are subjected to academic research for the first time. After a careful examination and analysis of individual samples I will try to introduce the main iconographic features of the given samples, as well as the iconographic transformations and innovations typical for the 17-18th centuries.

These valuable objects, definitely produced to glorify God, not only functioned as expressions of the donor's piety and demonstrations of their wealth and power, but were also manifestations of the cultural atmosphere and main artistic tendencies of the time.

The Influence of the European Iconography on the Late Medieval Armenian Art

The 17th century was a crucial period for Armenian art and history, and that was mostly connected both with a more favorable political situation in Armenia, and with an unprecedented prosperity and empowerment of Armenian communities existing in different countries of the world, as a result of a large-scale displacement and migration of Armenians.

In the late middle Ages radical changes occurred in different fields of art connected with new cultural preferences and tastes of the time, new understandings, and with the growing influence of the European culture, especially of the printed book and its dissemination.

In the 16-18th centuries the art of Armenian printed book, started in Venice, was spread to Rome, Amsterdam, Vienna and other European centers, reaching its highest development also in the East: Constantinople, Iran and India.

In the Armenian environment the spread of the European printed books and engraved images reached its peak with the establishment of the Armenian Mechitarists Catholic Congregations in Venice and Vienna, which became a strong basis for the development of the Armenian printed book.

It is necessary to conceptualize a number of transformations which were typical for this time: the geographical location, no longer in Armenia but in diaspora, essentially European; the environment of production, no longer the religious confines of the rural monastery with clergymen as scribes, but an urban one, often with laymen as craftsmen. In this sense, Armenian printing art played a crucial role, moving from the rural, isolated monastic settings to the printing shop, a secular establishment, almost always in an urban environment.⁸

The predominant source for the printed texts was earlier Armenian manuscripts. It is a surprise though that this was not the case for their illustrations. There was apparently no mobility of monastic illustrations to the print trade and no recycling by the master artists of illustrated manuscripts.⁹

The European printed books decorated with etchings, engravings and woodcuts were the main sources for images used in the religious books produced by Armenian artists in different parts of the world.

One book that was of great interest and importance to Armenians all over the world and especially in the Near East was the first printed Bible in the Armenian language, published by Bishop Oskan Erevantsi in 1666 in

Amsterdam and financed by Armenian merchants. The publication of this book was the culmination of a long-time dream of Armenians to print the complete Bible in their own language. It had remained a dream for decades because of technical and political problems, the high cost necessitating financial backing, and complications brought about by Roman Catholic censors. This Armenian Bible was profusely decorated with woodcuts illustrating scenes from both Old and New Testaments. Although the text was printed in Armenian language, Armenian artists did not design or produce the woodblocks from which the illustrations were printed. The woodcuts were the work of a Dutch artist, Christoffel van Sichem, and were mostly signed with his monogram CvS.¹⁰ Some of the woodcuts by van Sichem were simplified versions of prints copied from the works of other well-known artists, such as Albrecht Dürer, Jacob Matham and Hendrick Goltzius. These woodcuts had already appeared in many Dutch books printed from the early 1600s to at least 1657. Oskan Erevantsi apparently bought the woodblocks from either the van Sichem family, or more likely from the Dutch publisher Pieter Jakopsz Paets, who presumably no longer needed them, having already repeatedly used them for decades.¹¹

These woodcut illustrations were to have an important impact on Armenian art of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, providing inspiration for the Armenian masters in different fields of art. These illustrations were seen as new interpretations of Christian themes by the masters in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Even though the images came from books printed decades earlier in Europe, they appeared in an unusual, fresh and probably rather exotic interpretations while keeping their Christian context. This was an abiding proof of the Armenians' fascination with the European styles and their openness in adopting and adapting them. In this way, new Christian iconography and decorative motifs were disseminated in various media throughout the region.¹²

The spread of printing art among the Armenians has been defined as a by-product of Armenian merchants, who played a significant role in nearly all early centers of Armenian publication.¹³ They had created a unique network among Armenians living and composing throughout the world. Due to the Armenian commercial agents, dealing with a large-scale trade, the Armenian art goes beyond national borders and gets a new chance to be revived. The role of Armenian merchants is invaluable in bringing the World art to the Armenians and at the same time in preserving the Armenian art and culture. Being aware of the development of the world art tendencies and innovations made in different areas, they begin to dictate

tastes by purchasing, ordering and donating samples of art presenting their preferences.

The Collection of the Altar Curtains in the Armenian Museum in Bucharest

Hakob Siruni speaks with great admiration and enthusiasm about the altar curtains that have been decorating the Armenian churches in different cities of Romania for decades, referring to the exhibition held in Bucharest in 1930. He notes that three of them, presented in the exhibition, were brought from Focșani, three other samples were from Botoșani and single curtains were brought from Suceava, Iași and Galați.¹⁴ Hakob Siruni's reference to the Armenian curtains contains important information of great help in clarifying the time and place of their creation. He notes that if the altar curtains kept in the museums at the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin are mainly from far India,¹⁵ the great majority of samples kept in the Armenian museum in Bucharest have been created by Armenian Masters of Tokat (Evdokia) for the Armenian churches in Romania.¹⁶

Tokat had been a great cultural center for centuries, famous for its numerous crafts and arts; it was the most prominent and important center of wood-block printing art in the Ottoman Empire.¹⁷ The famous Turkish traveler of the 17th century Evliya Chelebi speaks with admiration about the exquisite and precious fabrics created in Tokat.¹⁸

Being on the important East-West trade route and connecting Constantinople¹⁹ with the East, it had been an important commercial center since the 16th century, where all the vital routes of Asia Minor intersected. It was an important transit center for caravans coming from Persia and India, which being separated here, continued their way to Constantinople and Izmir (Smyrna).²⁰

The wood-block prints, silk and cotton fabrics and carpets created in Tokat were of wide renown not only within the Ottoman Empire,²¹ but were also transported in large amounts abroad. According to a number of historical records, Armenian merchants of Tokat have been in close relations with Romanian commercial cities and particularly Armenian populated centers for centuries, where many locally produced products were exported. Especially prominent are the altar curtains, commissioned by private individuals and made by Armenian masters in the 17-18th centuries, which were donated to different Armenian churches around the world.²²

The altar curtains kept in the Armenian museum in Bucharest are unique examples of this cultural center. It should be noted that a few of them were moved to the Alex and Marie Manoogian treasury museum at the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin in the second half of the last century, where they are kept until today.

Nowadays there are six altar curtains in the Armenian Museum in Bucharest. In the context of the issue discussed in this paper the most noteworthy one is the altar curtain from the Holy Cross Armenian church in Suceava (Picture 1). According to the dedication, it was created in 1787, most probably in Tokat, and was made by wax-resist dyeing technique (batik) using the combination of only two colors: blue and white. The melted wax was applied on cloth in a form of images before being dipped in the blue dye.

The iconography and composition of the images decorating the altar curtain having an influence of European art are inspired by the woodcuts from the first Bible in the Armenian language, as well as from European books travelling eastwards.

The twelve scenes on this curtain represent the main events of the Way of the Cross making up the series of Passions of Christ. Breaking the traditional sequence of the image series and putting certain scenes in the central parts of the composition, the master tried to highlight the main scenes of Christ's sufferings and death.

In the center part of the curtain is the depiction of the Throne of Christ for the second coming, which is surrounded by the following episodes: above is the Crucifixion, on the left side is the Descent from the cross (a Pietà at the foot of the cross), on the right side is the Lamentation and the Entombment of Christ, below is Christ in prison a palm branch in his hand as the symbol of his triumph over sin and death. The composition is framed by the other scenes presenting the last events of Christ's earthly life: Flagellation: Christ at the Column and Christ crowned with thorns (the left-hand upper corner), Christ carrying the cross and the Erection of the cross (the right-hand upper corner), Christ praying in the garden Gethsemane and the Betrayal and the Arrest of Christ (the left-hand lower corner), Christ before Pilate and the Mocking of the Christ (the right-hand lower corner). Each picture is framed by arches resting on decorated columns, and at the meeting of the arches are placed angels with open wings.

It is important to note that in the Eastern iconographic tradition was an emphasis on the positive aspects of Christ's sacrificial death and it was consistent with Early Christian attitudes towards the Passions. The early

church generally viewed Christ in death as triumphant savior rather than suffering victim. In the Western iconography the full-scale transformation of traditional Passion narratives took place. This transformation is not entirely surprising, in that it parallels the similar shift from the Christus Triumphans to the Christus Patiens. In the early decades of the thirteenth century the traditional Christus Triumphans, a Christ who transcends suffering and is victorious over death, gazing out with head held erect, was gradually displaced by a new type, the suffering Christ or Christus Patiens. But the image of the crucified Christ is not the only indication of the radical revision in the understanding and depiction of Passion; rather it is merely one symptom of an extraordinary transformation. Another symptom is the changing narrative program: detailed presentation and heightened emphasis on the passion cycle. Relying heavily upon Byzantine images, western masters formulated these shifting interpretations, presenting the variety of scenes and compositions.²³

Western iconographic motifs and particularly scenes representing passions of Christ started to appear in the Armenian miniature paintings since 13th century, very often as marginal illuminations.²⁴ In the late middle Ages there was a new great wave of the influence of European iconography related to the wide dissemination of the printed books.

Presenting the same idea and iconographical image fifteen scenes decorating the altar curtain from the Holy Virgin Armenian Church in Focsani²⁵ (Picture 2) reveal a balance between the events of the Passion and events preceded and followed it, such as the Annunciation, the Baptism, the Washing of the feet, the Transfiguration, the Resurrection, the Ascension, Christ appearing to Mary Magdalene, the Pentecost, and the Assumption of the Holy Virgin.

According to the dedication this altar curtain was made in 1757 also in Tokat and was made also by the wax-resist dyeing technique (batik) being afterwards also painted and colored.

The altar curtain from the Holy Virgin Armenian Church in Botoșani (Picture 3) represents a unique group of curtains from the same cultural center. Images are wood-block printed on unpainted fabric using subtle combinations and color transitions of light and dark tones of red and brown.

The whole surface of the altar curtain is decorated with four large and a number of smaller sacred scenes under the arches. In the center of the composition, are the Crucifixion, the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, Virgin Mary with the Child as a queen of Heaven and St. Gregory the Illuminator.

The images of the Holy Virgin Mary are of special interest. It seems that the compositions are continuing each other: after being spiritually and bodily carried to heaven and crowned by Christ, God the Father and Holy Spirit, the Holy Virgin is presented as a queen of heaven standing on the moon and a dragon under her feet as a sign of the victory over the death.

In these depictions there is an echo of two basic dogmas of the Roman Catholic Mariology. The Catholic doctrine of the Assumption of Mary states that Mary was transported to Heaven with her body and soul united.²⁶ The religious concept of Immaculate Conception is connected with the divine intervention of Holy Virgin Mary, which holds that Mary was herself free from original sin and, therefore, worthy to be the mother of the Savior.²⁷

According to Eastern Orthodox Church Tradition, Mary died like all humanity. She died as all people die, not “voluntarily” as her Son, but by the necessity of her mortal human nature which is indivisibly bound up with the corruption of this world. Her soul was received by Christ upon death and her body was resurrected on the third day after her repose, at which time she was taken up, bodily only, into heaven.²⁸

Another interesting point is the depiction of the portrait of the Holy Virgin over her grave, which is being taken to the heaven by angels. According to the tradition the Apostle Bartholomew came to Armenia, bringing a portrait of the Virgin Mary, which was given to him by the Apostle John, because he could not see the Holy Virgin before she was “falling asleep”. In the Armenian iconographic tradition the attribute of the Apostle Bartholomew, alongside a large knife, is the image of the Holy Virgin.²⁹

The top of the altar curtain is framed with the main scenes from the traditional Feast series depicting Christ’s earthly and salvific life, which are present according to the medieval iconographic canon: the Annunciation, the Nativity and Adoration of the Magi, the Presentation at the Temple, the Baptism, the Transfiguration, the Triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the Washing of the Feet, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection, the Ascension, *Traditio Legis* (The Transmission of the Law (?)). In the marginal parts are images of 4 Evangelists, St. Soldiers, St. Archangels Michael and Gabriel in the medallions.

Altar curtains from the Holy Cross Armenian church in Suceava (1758) and the Holy Virgin Armenian Church in Focșani (1781) (Picture 4) were also created by master Agop in Tokat. Now they are in the Alex and Marie Manoogian Treasury Museum.

Although the Armenian Historian A. Alboyajyan notes in his work dedicated to the history of Tokat that no altar curtain could have its second example, since after finishing the work masters destroyed the templates,³⁰ these samples suggest the opposite. With slight difference in details above mentioned altar curtains repeat the same artistic design.

A particularly interesting and somewhat unusual trait of many of the objects under discussion here is the addition of an extensive inscription in classical Armenian, which contains some information about the master, about the place and time of the creation of the samples, the names of donator and his family as well as the monasteries and churches they have been donated to. It was traditional for wealthy Armenians to commission sacred objects. Typically, this work was done as a pious gift to a church to ensure salvation for the donor and his family. Besides their important historical meaning and significance, these inscriptions also have a high artistic value.

The inscription of the altar curtain from the Armenian Church of the Holy Virgin in Botosani: "This curtain is to the memory of Todor son of Oqsent and Georg son of Khachik and Esayi son of Astvatsatur in the city Botosani at the door of the church of Holy Virgin in the year of Armenians 1212 (+551=1763 A.D.) printed in Tokat by the hands of master Agop and his son Avetis".

The inscription of the altar curtain from the Armenian Church of the Holy Virgin in Focsani runs as follows: "This curtain is to the memory of Mahtesi³¹ Vardan and Mahtesi Avetis sons of Alexander from Focsani at the door of the church of Holy Virgin in the year of Armenians 1230 (+551=1781 A.D.) printed in Tokat by the hands of master Agop".

In the second part of the inscription the master Agop speaks with great sorrow about the sickness and death of his only son Avetis, who was 26 years old and died of plague.

Speaking about the main artistic tendencies dominant in the late medieval Armenian art, it is necessary to underscore the appearance, diversification and progressive increase in numbers of themes indicating the awakening of national identity, typical for that era. Alongside Christian scenes Armenian masters have since early Christian times and during the whole Middle Ages highlighted and often referred to the Armenian national history, but it was during 17-18th centuries that they became key themes of Armenian Art. Highly widespread are becoming the images marking the most important episode of the Armenian history: the adoption of Christianity in Armenia, the establishment of the Armenian Church, life

scenes of the first Armenian Patriarch Gregory the Illuminator, as well as scenes of the Baptism of Armenian royal family.³²

On the contextual basis of these stories, told by the 5th century Historian Agatangeghos in his History of Armenia,³³ the Armenian masters developed a very specific style of compositions inspired by both the iconography and manner of early European engravers. An iconographic program was formulated and being accepted by the Armenian Church, it entered the Armenian iconographic canon and was widely used in various fields of art. The illustrations, decorating books printed in Europe, had a great impact in formation of iconography and composition.

The wide dissemination of these scenes had its plausible ideological explanation: they were to highlight the Armenian national identity and unite people around the national church, emphasizing the importance of having a unified center for every Armenian living in a foreign land.

The depictions of various portrayals of St. Gregory the Illuminator circulating in books or as separate prints and engravings led to the emergence of identical or highly similar images in different fields of art and in different places otherwise far from one another in geographical terms. In this context there were two main iconographic types. The first, simpler category represents the baptism of the royal family, while in the second category are images where the scene of baptism is surrounded by a narrative frame summarizing the tortures of St. Gregory the Illuminator. The spreading of the iconography of St. Gregory the Illuminator, as well as its prototypes and parallels reflect the Armenian network of connections.³⁴

The altar curtain from the Armenian Holy Virgin Church in Galati represents the story of the conversion of Armenia to Christianity. This altar curtain was made most probably in the second half of the 18th-first half of 19th century in Constantinople. The images and scenes decorating it are wood-block printed on the round fabrics, which were afterwards applied on the main surface of the textile.

This altar curtain stands out thanks to its artistic composition and refined mastery, and is distinguished by a strong influence of European art and iconography, manifested primarily in the construction of the composition, the color solutions, the use of perspective, and the careful presentation of the environment.³⁵ The images are designed with an exceptional delicacy, with sharply defined details, an emphasized individuality and remarkable facial expressions.

The central theme of the curtain is the baptism of the Armenian Royal family. King Trdat and his relatives are shown kneeling in a procession to

be baptized by St. Gregory the Illuminator who is wearing rich episcopal vestments.

Dominating the top middle section is the depiction of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove whose rays of light descend towards Saint Gregory the Illuminator and Royal family. The fourteen medallions around the borders of the curtain represent the major events from the life of St. Gregory. Twelve of these scenes represent the incredible series of tortures to which Gregory was subjected, but which failed to break his spirit.

The number of tortures was a source of interpretations for the medieval Armenian historians, who gave a special meaning to each of them. One of these interpretations is based on the medieval lore, and it claims that twelve senses and body parts of a person were damaged after Adam ate the fruit from the tree of the knowledge. Thus, Gregory the Illuminator purified the senses and body parts cleansing them from the sin through his twelve tortures. According to the second explanation, the tortures of Gregory the Illuminator are related to the martyrdoms of twelve apostles.³⁶

One of the medallions represents the scene when St. Gregory cures the king Trdat, who had become a wild boar by a divine punishment for putting to death the nuns Hripsime and Gayane and their thirty-seven companions who had fled to Armenia from Rome during the persecutions of Emperor Diocletian. The King's sister, Khosrovadukht is then told in a vision that only Gregory can cure the King. Gregory is brought out of the dungeon to revive the King. Gregory the Illuminator proceeds to baptize the whole Armenian nation and convert Armenia to Christianity.

On the right side is shown the Baptism of the Armenian nation by St. Gregory the Illuminator. Above on a disc is depicted the column of fire and on top of it a cross of light. According to the tradition, in his old age St. Gregory retired to the Monastery of St. Hakob on the Mount Sepuh and submitted himself to fasts and vigils. Noah's Ark is shown on the Mount Ararat. Each of the images has a caption.

According to the legend Saint Gregory the Illuminator had a vision of Christ descending from heaven and striking the earth with a golden hammer to show where the first Armenian Cathedral should be build. The patriarch gave the church the name Etchmiadzin, which may be translated as the place where the Only-Begotten Son of God descended. Next to Etchmiadzin to the south and north he built the churches for the nuns Gayane and Hripsime whose martyrdom is also depicted with soldiers with swords beheading the kneeling nuns.

Conclusion

After tumultuous decades in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries new opportunities are being created for the development of international trade, in which the Ottoman Empire was actively involved. Being on the important East-West trade route and connecting Constantinople with the East, Tokat had been an important commercial and cultural center since the 16th century.

In the 17-18th centuries radical changes occurred in different fields of art connected with new cultural preferences and tastes of the time, new understandings and the growing influence of the European culture, especially of the printed book and its dissemination. European printed books decorated with etchings, engravings and woodcuts were to have an important impact on Armenian art providing inspiration for the masters in different fields of art. The fact that the European books were available to the Armenian masters in Tokat indicates about economic and cultural recovery in this important trade center.

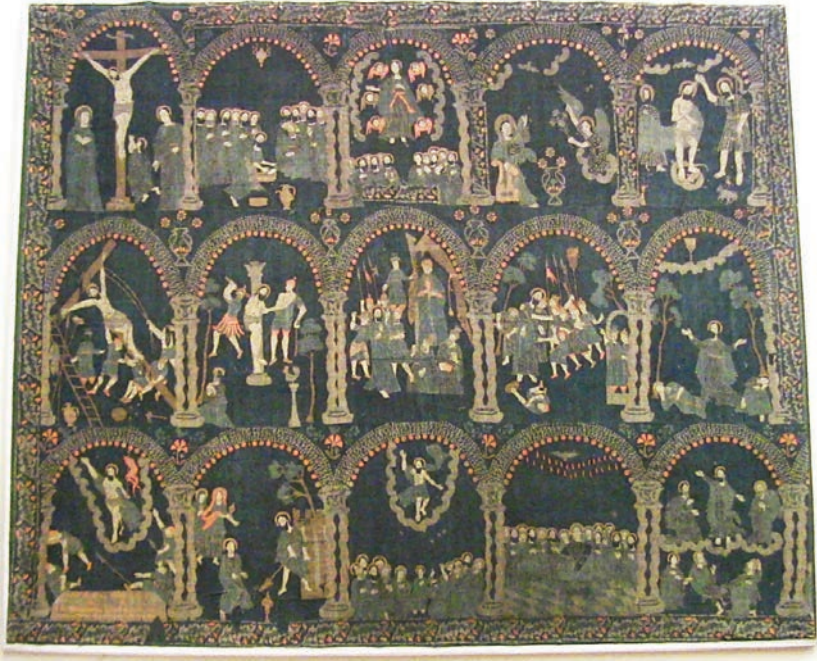
The wood-block prints, silk and cotton fabrics and carpets created in Tokat were of wide renown not only within the Ottoman Empire, but were also transported in large amounts abroad. According to a number of historical records, Armenian merchants of Tokat have been in close relations with Romanian commercial cities and particularly Armenian populated centers for centuries, where many locally produced products were exported. Especially prominent are the altar curtains, commissioned by private individuals and made by Armenian masters in the 17-18th centuries, which were donated to different Armenian churches around the world.

These valuable objects, definitely produced to glorify God, not only functioned as expressions of the donor's piety and demonstrations of their wealth and power, but were also manifestations of the cultural atmosphere and main artistic tendencies of the time.

Continuing research on these objects will hopefully lead to discover of more points of European influence on the Armenian art. Although the samples of the collection of the altar curtain kept in the Museum of the Armenian Church in Bucharest bear the influence of the Western iconography they nevertheless preserve the main artistic features of the Armenian Church ritual, illustrating the individual and exceptional image of the Armenian Rite.



Picture 1. Altar curtain from the Holy Cross Armenian Church in Suceava, 1787, Tokat (Evdokia), Armenian Museum in Bucharest, Romania



Picture 2. Altar curtain from the Holy Virgin Armenian Church in Focsani, 1757, Tokat (Evdokia), The National Gallery of Armenia



Picture 3. Altar curtain from the Holy Virgin Armenian Church in Botosani, 1763, Tokat (Evdokia), Armenian Museum in Bucharest, Romania



Picture 4., Altar curtain from the Holy Virgin Armenian Church in Focsani, 1781, Tokat (Evdokia), Alex and Marie Manoogian Treasury Museum, Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, Armenia



Picture 5. Altar curtain from the Holy Virgin Armenian Church in Galati, second half of the 18th century-first half of the 19th century, Constantinople, Armenian Museum in Bucharest, Romania

NOTES

- ¹ In 1906 on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the reign of King Carol I of Romania, a great exhibition was organized in Bucharest in which the Armenian community also took part with an official invitation presenting various samples of the Armenian Art. See Galfagian H., *Ruminahay galut'ë* [Armenian Community in Romania], Jerusalem, 1979, pp. 173-175.
- ² Siruni H., "Pukreši hay arvesti cucahandesš" [The Armenian Art Exhibition in Bucharest] in *Anahit*, №3, Paris, 1930, pp. 107-111.
- ³ *Ibid.*, pp. 106-107:
- ⁴ Galfagian H., pp. 163-165:
- ⁵ Bedros V., *Armenian Artistic Heritage in Romania: Between Exilic Nostalgia and Cultural Integration*, Bucharest, 2011, p. 129.
- ⁶ In A.D. 335, Macarius, the Bishop of Jerusalem, penned a letter to Catholicos Vertanes, the elder son and second successor to St. Gregory the Illuminator, in which the bishop addressed a series of questions regarding baptism and the Eucharist. In that 4th century document, Macarius directed Armenian clergy to make use of curtains to separate the altar from the chancel, and the chancel from the nave.

In the early history of the church, the altar curtain was a common ecclesiastical feature. In later centuries, some churches, including the Greek Orthodox Church, replaced the veil with iconostases, but this tradition was not widely adopted by the Armenian Church. Today, most Armenian churches make use of a single curtain to partition the altar from the congregation at various points in the Divine Liturgy.

According to Abraham Terian's seminal translation of the letter, Macarius writes: "The table of expiation is behind the veil, where the Holy Spirit descends; and the font is next to it in the same compartment, and out of honor set up on the right hand. And the clergy in their several ranks shall worship (there), and the congregation outside the veil, and the catechumens at the door, listening. Lest these partitions be effaced by encroachments, let each remain in his own station irreproachable."

The first mention of the veil of the Tabernacle's separating the Holy place from the Holy of Holies and screening the Ark and the seat of God indicates that it was a kind of image "the skilled work", woven from blue, purple, crimson and linen and embroidered with cherubim. The colors woven together had symbolic meaning: the scarlet (crimson) signified fire, the linen, earth, the blue, air and the purple, sea. The veil thus represented the matter, the substance, of the visible creation and the universe, the image of the sacred time simultaneously representing the past, the present and the future. The veil was the boundary between the visible and the invisible creation. The world beyond the veil was unchanging and without temporal sequence of events, but the visible world outside the veil was a place of

- change. The holiest realm, placed beyond the veil and existing outside time and matter, creates the eternal pattern for the changing sacred environment in front of the veil. See Lidov A., "The Temple Veil as a Spatial Icon Revealing an Image-Paradigm of Medieval Iconography and Hierotopy". *ICON*, 2014, 7, p. 97-108.
- 7 Hakobian A., "Haykakan ekeřecakan varaguyrneri masin" [About the Armenian altar curtains] in *Ejmiacin*, November, Etchmiadzin, 2007, pp. 96-102.
- 8 Kouymjian D., "Between Amsterdam and Constandinople: The Impact of Printing on Armenian Culture", *Die Kunst der Armenier im östlichen Europa*, eds. Marina Dmitrieva and Balint Kovacs, Köln-Weimar-Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 2014, pp. 21-22.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 24.
- 10 There were four generations of artists with the same name who used the same CvS monogram. It is thought that Christoffel van Sichem II probably produced most of the woodcuts used in the Armenian Bible. Christoffel van Sichem (II Younger, 1581 Basel-1658 Amsterdam) was a Dutch Golden Age engraver, etcher and woodcutter. See Lehmann-Haupt H., Christoffel van Sichem: "A family of Dutch 17th century woodcut artists", *Gutenberg Jahrbuch*, 1975, pp. 274-306. *Ibid.*, *An introduction to the woodcut of the 17th century*, New York, Abaris Books, 1977, pp. 39-72.
- 11 Merian S. L., "The Armenian Silversmiths of Kesaria/Kayseri in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries", *Armenian Kesaria/Kayseri and Cappadocia*, edited by Richard G. Hovannisian, Mazda Publishers, Costa Mesa, California, 2013, pp. 132-133.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 141.
- 13 Kouymjian D., pp. 25-26.
- 14 Siruni H., "Expoziřia de artă armeană din 1930" in *Ani, Revista de cultură armeană*, anul 1, vol. 4, Bucharest, 1936, pp. 32-34.
- 15 The Armenians have settled in India in early Middle Ages. The local Armenian community has developed especially in the late Middle Ages when, as a result of violence and persecution by Shah Abbas, large groups of Armenian merchants and craftsmen from Persia, especially from New Julfa moved to India. One of the most prominent Armenian cultural centers was Madras where alongside with different crafts, the embroidery art had highly developed. See Tarayan Z., *Nabořka v Armenii* [The wood-block printing in Armenia], Yerevan, 1967, pp. 97-98:
- 16 Siruni H., "Pukreři hay arvesti cucahandesř" [The Armenian Art Exhibition in Bucharest], p. 112.
- 17 The wood-block printing art has been known in Armenia since ancient times having its notable development in the late Middle Ages and its most prominent centers become Constantinople, Tokat (Evdokia), Caesarea (Kayseri), Karin (Erzurum), Erzınca, Urfa (Edessa), Van, Kars etc. The

- unprecedented prosperity of wood-block printing art was mainly due to great developing and spreading Armenian printing art. See Davtian S., *Drvagner haykakan mijnadaryan kirarakan arvesti patmut'yan* [Studies on the history of the medieval Armenian applied art], Yerevan, 1981., pp. 39-57.
- 18 *Otar albyurnere Hayastani ev hayeri masin*, [Foreign sources on Armenia and Armenians], IV volume, Turkish sources on Armenia, III book, Evliya Celebi, by A. Kh. Safrastyan, Yerevan, 1967, p. 276.
- 19 In late Middle Ages Constantinople was one of the great centers of Armenian national, religious, educational and cultural life, the importance of which was greatly conditioned by high authority of Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople (1461) to which from the 17th century was subordinated also Armenian Churches in Moldavian Principality. A number of samples of liturgical vestments, altar and chalice covers and altar curtains, kept in the Armenian Museum in Bucharest have been created by the Armenian masters of Constantinople. See Kharatyan A., *Kontandnupolsi hay galt'o'jaxe (XV-XVII darrer)* [Armenian Community in Constantinople (XV-XVII centuries)], Yerevan State University, Yerevan, 2007, pp. 49-88.
- 20 *Alboyajian A., Patmut'yun Evdōkio Hayoc* [The History of the Armenian Evdokia (Tokat)], Cairo, 1952, pp. 1259, 1261, 1265-1266.
- 21 *Ibid.*, pp. 1266, 1291.
- 22 *Ibid.*, pp. 1266, 1399-1341.
- 23 Derbes A., "Picturing the Passion in late medieval Italy". *Narrative Painting, Franciscan ideologies and the Levant*, Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 1-11.
- 24 Evans H., "Cilician Manuscript Illumination: The Twelfth, Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries", in *Treasures in Heaven: Armenian Illuminated Manuscripts*, ed. T. F. Mathews and R. S. Wieck, New York, 1994, pp. 66-83.
- 25 This altar curtain was among them which were moved to the Alex and Marie Manoogian Treasury museum at the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin in the second half of the last century. Afterwards it was donated to the National Gallery of Armenia, where it is kept today.
- 26 *Lexikon der Chrstlichen Ikonographie*, Zweiter Band, herausgegeben von Engelbert Kirchbaum SJ in Zusammenarbeit mit Günter Bandmann, Wolfgang Braunfels, Johannes Kollwitz, Wilhelm Mrazek, Alfred A. Schmid, Hugo Schnell, Herder, Rom, Freiburg, Basel, Wien, 1994, S. 276-284.
- 27 *Ibid.*, pp. 338-334.
- 28 *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, Oxford University Press, New York, Oxford, 1991, pp. 651-653.
- 29 *Kristonya Hayastan Hanagitaran* [Christian Armenia Encyclopedia], Yerevan, 2002, p. 169.
- 30 Alboyajian A., pp., 1340.
- 31 The word "Mahtesi" (pilgrim) used with the names in the inscriptions is an honorific term to signify a person who has made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

³² The western chamber of the church of Gregory the Illuminator (Tigran Honents, 13th c.) in Ani contains 16 scenes from the life of Saint Gregory the Illuminator - including his trial before king Trdat, the various tortures inflicted upon him (including his imprisonment in a pit), the martyrdom of St. Hripsime, the baptism of King Trdat and the kings of Georgia, Abkhazia, and Caucasian Albania etc.

The processional banner (gonfalon) of Saint Gregory the Illuminator (1448) is the only dated ancient embroidery that has been preserved. The front of the banner has the embroidered full-face frontal figures of the Saint Gregory the Illuminator between king Trdat and St. Hripsime, with their names inscribed above their heads. St. Gregory is wearing a mitre and has a Byzantine short white chasuble adorned with crosses in black a pallium woven with silver threads. On his right hangs an epigonation, symbol of the authority of the catholicos. All the figures have round haloes woven out of gold tread. St. Gregory is blessing with his right and holding a book in his left hand. The king, his hands raised, is dressed in a red tunic with gold belt and embroideries, while the identical tunic of St. Hripsime is green. She is wearing a red cope with matching-color shoes. The fine embroidery has a painterly quality. See Nersessian V., *Treasures from the Ark, 1700 Years of Armenian Christian Art*, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 2001, p. 129.

Since the 9th century the images of Gregory the Illumination became very common also for the Byzantine and later on since 12th century for Russian art. Ter Nersessian S., *Etudes Byzantines and Armeniennes, Byzantine and Armenian studies*, Tome 1, Imprimerie Orientaliste, Louvain, 1973, pp. 55-60. Айвазян К., *История отношений русской и армянской церкви в средние века*, Ереван, 1989, с. 66:

³³ Agathangelos, *History of the Armenians*, translations and commentaries by Robert W. Thomson, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1974.

Agathangelos, pseudonym for the author of the standart Armenian account of the life of St. Gregory the Illuminator and of the conversion of King Trdat at the beginning of the 4th c. Although Agathangelos claims to have been an eyewitness, the work cannot have been composed before the 5th c. The extant Armenian text is not the original. From an early, now lost, text Agathangelos was translated into Greek, Syriac, and Arabic. From a "received" version – further Greek and Arabic translations were made. No other Armenian text ever circulated so widely outside Armenia. The extant text covers the period from 224 to the death of St. Gregory after 325. It describes the early careers of Gregory and Trdat, the tortures and imprisonment of Gregory by the yet unconverted king, the martyrdom at Vagharshapat of nuns who had fled from Diocletian, the release of Gregory and ensuing conversion of Trdat and the court, and the destruction of pagan

- temples. See *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, Oxford University Press, New York, Oxford, 1991, p. 35.
- ³⁴ *Far Away from Mount Ararat: Armenian Culture in the Carpathian Basin*, Balint Kovacs, Emese Pal, Joint Exhibition of the Budapest History Museum and the National Széchényi Library, Leipziger Universität-Verlag, Leipzig, 2013, p. 78-79.
- ³⁵ Zambaccian K. H., "Vechi Draperii de altar în bisericile armenesti din Moldova" in *Ani, Revista de cultură armeană*, anul 1, vol. 4, Bucharest, 1936, p. 31.
- ³⁶ Tatevatsi G., *Gir'k Kar'ōzur'yan* (Ĵmeṙan hator) [Book of Preaching (winter volume)], Jerusalem, 1998, p. 435.

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