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Sacred Textiles

The Hidden Wonders of the Armenian Orthodox Church Collections of Istanbul

The perfection of execution, the rendering of figures, garments and faces is as magnificent as the best embroidery work of any period and any nation.

KOUYMJIAN, 1992

EVERY ARMENIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH—no matter where it is—possesses valuable artifacts that typify a unique and special collection of material objects that reflect the secular heritage of the lay community. Such objects were never meant to be displayed in a museum, presented as a conference paper, or published in a written text. They were meant to be used in religious celebration as anointed and blessed objects glorifying God and as physical reminders of the devotion of a people who tenaciously maintained a national spirit and religious identity through the objects they produced, donated, and used in the celebration of their faith.

Historical Perspective

The Armenian presence in Istanbul is both long and varied. Much of it, however, was subsumed in the Byzantine world to Greek Ortho-

dox culture, and later in the imperial political culture of the Ottoman world and Ottoman Istanbul. It was only after the establishment of the Armenian Patriarchate of Istanbul in 1461 that the city's Armenian religious culture matured. In a span of five centuries, the Armenian presence in the city grew from a comparatively small number of individuals and families to one of the largest and most valued minorities in the Ottoman capital—approximately 20 percent of the total population in a city that numbered nearly a million inhabitants. By the end of the nineteenth century, Istanbul and its environs boasted fifty-five Armenian Orthodox churches and a central cathedral, the latter associated with a wealthy and influential patriarchy. Sectarian strife, revolution, war, and the collapse of the Ottoman state at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, however, had a profound effect on Istanbul's Armenian population.

As a direct result of these events, many churches ceased to exist. Those that survived continue as the cultural and social center of an aging Armenian Christian population. This decline in the number of churches and, more important, the steady decline in their supportive congregations does not reflect the role the Armenian community played in the revitalization of Istanbul following the Ottoman capture of the city on 29 May 1453. Immediately following this event the Ottoman sultan, Mehmet Fatih, issued a series of edicts in order to restore Constantinople to its former glory (Lewis 1963, Kinross 1977: 112). The city was to be more than the political capital of an extensive and vibrant Islamic state. Mehmet envisioned the city as an ecumenical metropolis: “the welding together of the indigenous cultural traditions of the old Byzantine orbit . . . with the traditions of old Islam” (Witteck 1938, Mantran 1982: 127 ff). Consequently, the city was to be cosmopolitan in nature and made up of an assortment of peoples, customs, and traditions—the majority of which were non-Muslim.

To achieve this goal, the secular and religious needs of the city's

diverse population had to be met. This was especially important for the non-Muslim communities, or *millet(ler)*. The traditional view, although not without disagreement, and wrapped in an extensive mythology that supports self-serving traditions (Braude 1982: 74 ff), is that Mehmet encouraged immigration to Istanbul by establishing the “spiritual leaders of the Greek Orthodox, Armenian, and Jewish communities in the city” (Inalcik 1973: 141, Kinross 1977: 113). Greeks, Jews, and Armenians later believed that the sultan had a close personal relationship with their respective leaders, or *millet başi*. Such views, however, must be taken as a traditional rendering of a confused and exaggerated historiography that finds little factual support for either the collective or individual origins of Istanbul’s non-Muslim spiritual leadership, especially those details concerning the Greek Orthodox and Jewish *milletler*. The particulars of both are clouded by a popular rendering of “fact”—from the belief that Mehmet knew Greek and entertained converting to Greek Orthodoxy to a claim that he studied Hebrew and enjoyed kosher cuisine and the Passover seder (Davison 1982: 320).

The situation is less confused for the origins of the Armenian *millet başi*. Prior to the Ottoman conquest, the Armenian population of Constantinople, although politically active, was relatively small and numerically insignificant even though ethnic Armenians became emperors, held the position of Greek Orthodox patriarch, and made up approximately 25 percent of the provincial levies of the Byzantine army. Ethnic Armenians were assimilated into Byzantine culture. Simply stated, they became Byzantine in manner, custom, and religious belief. In this way, it is not surprising that Armenians lacked a titular spiritual leader in the city, especially because their Greek Orthodox brethren did not tolerate non-Chalcedonian Armenian religious views. The lack of spiritual representation, however, was rectified by Mehmet in an official edict, or *berat*, that established an episcopal see for the Armenian population because none had exist-

ed in the city prior to 1453 (Bardakjian 1982: 89 ff). In essence, as “an institution the Armenian patriarchate was the creation of the Ottoman state” (Nersessian 2001: 59) and dates, by traditional accounts, to 1461 (Karpat 1985: 145, Rahn 2000). Two decades later, the Patriarch had become the spiritual leader for well over 400 Armenian households in a rapidly expanding city that probably numbered more than 100,000 inhabitants (Inalcik 1973: 141, Kouymjian 1997: 100). By the end of the sixteenth century, the city possessed over half a million inhabitants, the majority of whom were Christian (Kinross 1977: 117). Although difficult to determine with any degree of accuracy, Istanbul’s Armenian population in the sixteenth century was large enough to support five churches in order to meet the cultural needs of a community that included shopkeepers, artisans, laborers, merchants, fishermen, and nobles. Both the population and the number of churches that served that population increased in the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries as Istanbul became the center of not only Ottoman but also Armenian culture (Kouymjian 1997: 26, Barsoumian 1982: 177 ff).

Political and ecclesiastical dominion within the Armenian patriarchal hierarchies empowered the patriarchate of Istanbul after the seventeenth century when it attained widely recognized universal authority. This is clearly seen after the investiture of the Catholicos of Etchmiadzin in Istanbul in 1726. Prior to this date the patriarch of Etchmiadzin had direct relations with the Ottoman court. Afterward, Etchmiadzin’s relationship with the Ottoman *Divan* was through the office of the Istanbul patriarchate (Bardakjian 1982: 94). By the end of the eighteenth century, the patriarch of Istanbul represented all Armenians in the Ottoman world. The benefits of peace, a semblance of religious tolerance, and, above all, the economic and political importance of Istanbul as a center of international trade and commerce quickened Armenian immigration to the city (Kinross 1977: 113, Barsoumian 1982) in the late eighteenth and

particularly the early nineteenth century when the Armenian *millet* “began to replace the Greeks in the government’s opinion as the most reliable Christian group in the state” (Karpāt 1985: 51). Many Armenians settled in the city, most notably in those areas around the seat of patriarchal authority in Kumkapı and Yenkapı.

Such migration, however, was not new. Prior to the establishment of the patriarchate, many Armenian nobles with their retainers had abandoned their homeland in eastern Anatolia in order to find fame, fortune, and political opportunity in the Byzantine world and imperial court at Constantinople. Later families were drawn to Istanbul for the same reason. Artisans and craftsmen gained valuable commissions within the church and those of exceptional talent attained a reputation within Ottoman circles as well. The local Armenian nobility also acquired a reputation as managers and diplomats for the Ottoman court, and over the course of time, the Armenian *millet* attained status as an alternate source of talent to the privileged position of the city’s Greek population (Karpāt 1985: 46). This strengthened the position of the patriarch and, supported by the wealth and prestige of influential lay leaders who constituted a special group of entrepreneurs—the *amira* class, the patriarchate acquired a level of cultural importance that augmented its ecclesiastical authority both within the Armenian community and Ottoman court (Nersessian 2001: 59 ff). Consequently, the patriarchate became the focal point of a wealthy and prosperous population that was instrumental in defining a distinct artistic and religious culture. By energizing artistic creativity in religious art (Thiery 1989: 306). It also is not surprising that the rise of a wealthy class of Armenian capitalists as church patrons prompted artistic creativity by underwriting religious ventures.

In this manner, ceremonial objects were not only an open expression of personal piety, they also became a form of investment appreciated by clerics and laymen alike. In essence, “it was [the well-to-do] who met the expenses of the patriarchate and the ecclesiastical and

national institutions and this in turn earned them the right to dictate their will upon the community” (Sanjian 1965: 36), including the selection of the patriarch and the control of the patriarchate (Barsoumian 1982: 179). This was no minor achievement localized to an unimportant community. The well-to-do acted as a natural but influential link between the patriarchate, the Armenian community, and the Ottoman court. More important, their wealth provided the necessary capital to finance new styles in religious art. In many respects, such wealth was also a reflection of the international breadth of the Ottoman world and the unique position of Istanbul as the center of that world. This consolidation of wealth and ecclesiastical authority was important in that it established a sense of unity within the Armenian *millet*. The patriarchate “came to be regarded as the very symbol of this unity, thus assuming such recognition and authority as never before” (Bardakjian 1982: 96). Political leadership, economic prowess, and artistic flair eventually defined a specific “Constantinople style” in church art¹ (Karaguezian 1984, Goltz and Göltz 2000). This was especially evident in the quantity, type, and grandeur of sacred textiles produced in Istanbul between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries [see cover.]. Such objects attained a wide distribution throughout the Ottoman world and beyond as indicated by the superb donations of Istanbul origin in the patriarchal treasuries at Etchmiadzin in Armenia, Jerusalem in Palestine, and Sis in southeastern Anatolia (Beirut, Lebanon) (Ghazarrian 1984, Davtian 1984, Goltz and Göltz 2000: 31, 32, 34, 50; Narkiss 1979: Figs. 182, 186–88; Kouymjian 1992: 53).

Religious Objects and the Armenian Community

From the very beginning of its existence in the fourth century A.D. to the establishment of the Istanbul patriarchate, “the Church helped create a separate Armenian identity and provided a focus for the allegiance of the entire population that was independent of the political

framework and consequently from the fate of the [political] realm” (Garsoïan 1997: 84). This helped generate extensive community participation in the cultural needs of the Church with regional churches and their priestly representatives maintaining the special interests and identity of the lay community in local affairs (Goss 1983, Narkiss 1979, Inalcik 1972: 151). Many of these needs necessitated lay involvement in the manufacture and donation of a vast assortment of physical artifacts employed in religious rites. Outside of the more expensive donations associated with financing church construction, repair, or establishing schools and hospices that only a few could actually afford, individual commitment took the form of personally produced or commissioned church accessories—priestly symbols of authority, chalices, reliquaries, illuminated manuscripts, vestments, altar frontals, curtains, banners, and chalice covers (Narkiss 1979: 143, Fig. 186: 158). The production of such objects was considered a pious act because each object donated to a church was considered a personal statement of faith empowered with deep religious meaning. Physical objects, however, duplicated the living doctrines of Christian faith and the divine liturgy of Armenian religious celebration, “a theology which, in tandem with the rites, rituals, and prayers, lives in sacred images that portray her faith and history” (Kochakian 1995: Preface).

Consequently, donations of church finery (textiles that display a wealth of images that visually illustrate the mysteries of Christianity in figurative form and symbolic design) are an integral part of Armenian life and cannot be ignored as brilliant examples of church art. Textiles hold a unique position in ceremony beyond utilitarian value. They are used between the human hand and the Gospel books; between corruptible flesh and the cross, the symbol of the Resurrection, as a cover for the chalice, the Cup of Life; or as a table spread in order to prevent the loss of the Eucharist during Communion. Vestments worn by the clergy are symbolic of the sacredness of their position and their close connection to God, the link between

the profane and the divine. As “icons of faith” they remind the lay community of their deep historical and spiritual roots—a Christian historiography that provides meaning to human existence. In this manner, religious textiles, as one category of sacred art, enhanced the importance of the Church as a symbol of paradise. Resplendent in color, shape, and form, meticulously created by devout hands, each object captured the deep devotion of the Armenian community to their Church. Textile donations were elements in both personal and collective identity “to immortalize the memory of the dedicatee on earth and to save his soul in Heaven” (Sinclair 2000: 45). The fruits of such work were a logical extension of domestic life and domestic activity—to honor God through the labor of one’s hand and guarantee a place in paradise.

The “Constantinople Style”

The “Constantinople style” did not develop in a vacuum. It is part of a well-established and mature religious culture that predates the establishment of the patriarchate in Istanbul by 1,000 years. Armenian and Christian historiography inspired the professional and the lay artisan to produce embellished artifacts for churches scattered across ancient and medieval Anatolia (Nersessian 2001, Goltz and Goltz 2002). This is readily seen in the great corpus of Armenian art that has received widespread examination—church architecture, sculptural relief, wall painting, and manuscript illumination.

Textiles, however, were more affordable than any other category of church art and appear as common donations in all time periods, many adopting the imagery usually associated with wall paintings, sculptural reliefs, and illuminated manuscripts (Kochakian 1995). Christ enthroned, flanked by the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; the Virgin Mary and Christ child flanked by angels or the Apostles Peter and Paul; the Baptism; the Crucifixion; the Resurrection; the Annunciation; the Transfiguration; events in the life of Christ; the Apostles; St. Gregory the Illuminator and King

Tridates III (the major figures associated with the conversion of Armenia); events in the life of St. Gregory; St. Stephen the proto martyr; the archangels Michael and Gabriel; and other scenes form a corpus of motifs in Armenian decoration that are as common on textiles as they are in the more defined canons of church art (Evans and Merian 1994: 123, Taylor 1998: 142). Consequently, a conscious attempt was made to duplicate the older artistic traditions and iconography in a difficult textile format without losing the textural qualities associated with thread and fabric-based art forms.

Crosses appeared frequently, as did grapes, wheat, vines, and a variety of floral motifs, which, although of pre-Christian origin, possess high symbolic meaning (Petrosyan 2001: 25 ff). Such designs are indicative of early Christian Armenian artistic canons and are not to be considered recent adaptations of a post-fifteenth-century world. Such motifs were well-entrenched in Christian art prior to the establishment of the Istanbul patriarchate. A precise canon of artistic embellishment had matured in Armenian over the course of centuries that was both unique and distinctive in form and content. Images of the divine, however, were not exclusive to the Armenian Rite. They also appear in detailed composition in Byzantine religious art (Mathews 1998). Shared iconography, the significance in depicting the life of Christ and the lives of saints, the importance of Christ enthroned with or without the Virgin Mary, and allegorical meaning attached to a body of sacred symbols are equally important in Byzantine religious art as they are in Armenian art. Shared iconography, however, does not necessarily mean imitation from the same palette of ideas or methods of depiction. Possessing a strong religious identity of its own, Armenian religious art was multiform in nature drawing inspiration from a body of deep-seated pre-Christian images as well as a core of beliefs that were unique to Armenian Christianity and Armenian church art (Carr 1998: 74–102).

In a post-fifteenth-century Ottoman context, especially in Istanbul, Armenian sculptural relief, mosaic, and fresco painting were mini-

mized and diminished, replaced by an ever-increasing display of resplendent textiles that served the same purpose but in a mobile form. It is in this context that two distinct styles of textile art are discernable in the church collections of the patriarchate of Istanbul. The first style includes those items that are reminiscent of an earlier eastern Armenian tradition, especially in the treatment of facial details, ornate and heavy patterns of stitching, and stylistically dating from the tenth to the fourteenth centuries. The second style includes textile art that exhibits a refined treatment of human features influenced by a combination of post-fifteenth-century Western and late Byzantine canons of religious and secular art. The differences are striking and range from heavily bearded images to a more delicate and naturalistic treatment of the human form. By the end of the sixteenth century, Armenian religious textiles had achieved a high level of formulaic uniformity with a well-defined corpus of naturalistic images and standardized representations of the divine. The sumptuous use of gold, silver, pearls, and precious stones also stressed textiles as a legitimate method of depicting the life of Christ and the essential elements of Christian historiography. In this manner, a distinct artistic style developed that was unique to Constantinople and the Armenian population of the city. More important, such items were easily recognized as expressions of Armenian workmanship in any cultural setting (Kasparian 1983). Talented needle artists—primarily women—created objects that became symbols of Armenian nationhood and consequently, brilliant achievements in church art.

Conclusion

If Armenian churches were the physical anchor of the lay community, the material culture of those churches visibly projected social cohesion, pride, and emotional attachment to the core of beliefs that defined the Armenian Rite. Expressed in a variety of mediums,

such objects came to symbolize a deep religious culture that had its origins in the living context of the Armenian people. As Maksoudian (1998: 37) eloquently states,

For the common Armenian the church fulfilled all spiritual, social, moral and cultural needs. That is why over the centuries Armenians of all classes have had a high veneration toward their Church and her teachings, toward manuscripts, architectural monuments, and works of art as well as material and spiritual culture. The laity as much as the clergy have felt the responsibility to rescue, preserve, and enhance the legacy of the Armenian people. They have not been motivated as connoisseurs of art but as the Legitimate heirs of a living tradition.

It is obvious that textiles played an important role in the celebration of Armenian religious culture. They were equally important in maintaining the social identity of the lay community and as such their role should not be minimized in the social and cultural environment of Armenian life in either the Ottoman or modern worlds. Production of religious textiles continues today, but in a reduced capacity and degree of complexity and execution. This is due in part to the general decline in the Armenian population of the city. The conditions of today, however, should not lessen the religious collections of the past. Those collections continue to inspire and embellish the Armenian Rite. They serve the needs of the community, reminding the diminished congregations of their faith, their rich cultural heritage, and the primacy of the Church as the embodiment of the Armenian people.

Notes

Please see the cover of this volume for a detail from the reverse panel of an eighteenth-century mitre of a soldier at the tomb in a scene from the Resurrection. The facial features and body are constructed in fine silk surrounded by a variety of stitching techniques in gold and silver wire. The result of the stitching pattern creates a three-dimensional image in

relief. The facial detail of the soldier is smaller than a human thumbnail. Church of the Holy Cross, Beyoğlu, Istanbul.

We wish to offer our deep appreciation to his beatitude Mesrob II, Armenian patriarch of Istanbul and all Turkey, for his support and blessing. We also wish to thank bishop Aram Ateshian for his diligent work on this project.

1. The distinctive quality defined by the “Constantinople style” in textile art is based on an elaborate stitching technique, detailed pictorial scenes, intricate floral patterns, interconnected composition, three dimensional images, and an extravagant use of precious metals, gem stones, and pearls. The cosmopolitan atmosphere of Istanbul assimilated Armenian craftsmen and artisans from eastern Anatolia to the broader context of an international world. Regional and local stitching patterns and techniques were amalgamated into a composite body that was immediately recognized for its artistic flair, elaborate decoration, and finely detailed treatment of the human form. In this manner, textiles duplicated and enhanced the renown achievements of the manuscript illuminator in an equally impressive miniature format in needle, thread, and cloth.

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260 Sacred and Ceremonial Textiles. CURTAINS. The first category, curtains, has been so designated because of their relatively large size, and the lack of any sewing or shaping. 264 Sacred and Ceremonial Textiles. What then, has this discovery added to our knowledge of late classical Nubian textiles? The three blue curtains, all dyed in the piece, are a real departure from the prevailing practice. Silk Thangkas and Sacred Textiles in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, Devotional Embroidery, Textile Mounting and Conservation Services, Thangka Mounting and Brocades. Art becomes sacred when it resonates with that which is sacred within each human being. The clear, joyous vibrancy of divine inspiration. Then, art is not only beautiful, but transmits an elusive quality that gives rise to a contact with one's own spiritual heart. At its highest, in beholding sacred art the viewer's heart is touched. The sacred textiles of Mecca. A special textile was made for the internal door of the Kaaba beginning in the mid-19th century. It is made of green silk with red and gold silk appliques, embroidered in silver and silver gilt wire over cotton and silk thread padding. The inscription indicates that this was ordered by Sultan Abdülhamid II (1876-1909) and presented by Abbas Hilmi the Khedive of Ottoman Egypt (1874-1931). @shirin-gol. Sacred textiles are textile products or materials that are used for spiritual purposes. This type of textile product is consecrated and cannot be used for secular activities non-related to divinity or a god. Sacred textiles are used for spiritual functions in different religions and in different areas of the world. Most of the sacred textiles around the world are ancient materials in culturally rich areas of the world. Except for the traditional religion of each region, the major religions of the world originate from the eastern part of the world. Nov 24, 2019 - Explore Nermine Ibrahim's board "Sacred textiles" on Pinterest. See more ideas about Islamic art, Islamic calligraphy, Ottoman empire. 1842. View auction details, art exhibitions and online catalogues; bid, buy and collect contemporary, impressionist or modern art, old masters, jewellery, wine, watches, prints, rugs and books at sotheby's auction house. textile.