

On New Paths for the Exploration of the Armenian Art

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Abstract During the last centuries, numerous books and papers were published on Armenian art in different collections of the world. Still there is an ocean of work to do in this field to fill in the gaps of the history of Armenian art. The members of the Chair of Armenian Art History and Theory at Yerevan State University were the first to carry out a systematic work in Romania in 2011-2017 and Iran in 2015-2019 exploring the Armenian miniatures, icons, wall paintings, silverwork, textiles etc. The results of this work were presented as papers during the conferences and published as articles.

Keywords Armenian art. Romania. Iran. Illustrated manuscripts. Wall paintings. Icons. Textiles. Silverwork.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 The Romanian Project. – 3 The Iranian Project.

1 Introduction

The exploration of the Armenian art started in the nineteenth century by French, Russian, German, Finnish, Austrian and Armenian art historians and continued in the twentieth century by Russian, Armenian, Ukrainian, American, Italian and other scholars, who published many books and papers registering and exploring the Armenian unknown artefacts, especially illuminated manuscripts in different parts of the world. There are also innumerable examples of ecclesiastic architecture (monasteries, churches, chapels, castles), sculptural reliefs, *khachkars* (cross stones) in the territories of West-



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ern Armenia (in today's Turkey), Iran, in former and present Armenian communities of India, Ukraine, Russia, Romania, Bulgaria, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt and elsewhere. Thus, the history of the Armenian art is not restricted within the boundaries of present Armenia and has a global character. Its exploration needs huge efforts from many experts of different nationalities and enormous amounts of money.

The artistic legacy of the Armenian people, which is put into scholarly circulation due to the books and articles written in different languages by former generations of scholars, represents only one part of Armenian art history. There is still a lot of work to do in this field. There are numerous Armenian artefacts in different museums of the world. The study of the art works preserved and created in many countries and especially in Armenian communities abroad is very important for filling in the gaps of the history of Armenian art. Numerous artworks that have come down to us are preserved in various countries, because of Armenian communities established there across the centuries. After leaving their historical homeland, the Armenians brought to Europe, US and Middle East decorated manuscripts, objects made of silver, icons, carpets, decorated textiles, etc. The Armenians who lived in different countries for centuries developed a large-scale cultural activity. In the Middle Ages, after inhabiting the foreign areas, they established art centres trying to preserve the national traditions and borrowing the cultural features of the new milieu. The registration, inventory and study of these samples are urgent, as many countries have favourable conditions for the assimilation of the Armenians, which results in a decrease of Armenian communities and the threat of their elimination. The destiny of their art treasures is becoming more and more threatened or unknown. This situation increased the pressing need for an exploration of the Armenian artworks by joint forces of different art historians.

2 The Romanian Project

The idea of the exploration of the Armenian artistic legacy starting from present Armenia by the joint forces of several experts was not new, since in the beginning of the sixties of the twentieth century it was started on the territory of Turkey and Iran thanks to the efforts of Prof. Adriano Alpago Novello from Politecnico of Milan and Prof. Paolo Cuneo from University of Rome, who directed the missions of Italian scholars to those countries and started systematic research and publications on Armenian medieval churches and monasteries that still existed there. They continued their work till the end of eighties of the last century.

For the idea of the necessity of the exploration of the Armenian artistic heritage of the Eastern Europe I owe to late Dr. Armen

Hakhnazarian from the University of Aachen, who in the seventies of the twentieth century initiated the research trips to Western Armenia (present Eastern Turkey) with German colleagues, his classmates from Department of Architecture of the Faculty of Architecture and Civil Engineering at RWTH Aachen University of Aachen. He and his colleagues visited the Armenian medieval churches and monasteries, made enormous research and published on them. At the beginning of this century, during a private conversation with me, Hakhnazarian expressed his concern about abandoned churches and monasteries and all artistic legacy of former Armenian communities of the Eastern Europe. Since then, I have been looking for the convenient occasion to initiate that work.

For the beginning of such project, my meeting and conversation with the head of Romanian-Armenian Diocese, His Grace Bishop Datev Hagopian, during my short visit to Bucharest in the fall of 2011, were crucial. His Grace shared with me his desire to publish a volume containing the study of the artifacts of the Dudian Museum of the Armenian Diocese in Bucharest. During those days in Bucharest, I met also Mr. Hamlet Gasparyan, at that time the Ambassador of RA (Republic of Armenia) in Romania, who during a private conversation with me mentioned the importance of the exploration of the Armenian-Romanian artistic relations and the cultural heritage of the Armenian community of Romania and expressed his interest to support such work. During those meetings with His Grace Bishop Datev Hagopian and Mr. Hamlet Gasparyan, I told them that my colleagues, the members of the Chair of Armenian Art History and Theory at Yerevan State University, would be able to carry out such work and that I would do my best to organise that project.

After returning to Yerevan, I spoke to Mrs. Hasmik Poghosyan, at that time the minister of Culture of RA, about the results of the conversations with His Grace Bishop Datev Hagopian and Mr. Hamlet Gasparyan. She promised her support for such project.

In 2012 the Chair of Armenian Art History and Theory at Yerevan State University, in collaboration with the Armenian Diocese of Romania, began the long-lasting project to study the cultural heritage of Romanian Armenians. The sponsors of the project became the Ministries of Culture, Youth and Sport of RA, later Committee of Science of RA, State Committee of Science of RA, Union of Armenians in Romania.

At His Grace Bishop Datev Hagopian's invitation, Mariam Vardanyan and Nelli Smbatyan, the lecturers of the Chair of Armenian Art History and Theory, travelled to Romania in October 2012: Vardanyan to study the silver artworks and Smbatyan to study the textiles. They started their work at Dudian Museum of the Armenian Diocese in Bucharest as there are concentrated numerous Armenian artifacts of different centuries. The collection of the Dudian Museum con-

tains medieval liturgical vessels and crosses and silver reliquaries, religious vestments, embroideries, carpets, icons, illustrated manuscripts, portraits of the representatives of the Armenian community made in last centuries, etc. One part of these artifacts was brought to Romania by the Armenians who were escaping from their homeland because of the Mongol and later Turkish yoke and the other part was created inside Romania by the artists of the Armenian community. The collection of the Dudian museum was never studied before by the experts of Armenian art.

Between July and August 2013, Vardanyan and Smbatyan went to Bucharest again. This time Seyranush Manukyan, Doctor of Arts, professor of the Chair of Armenian Art History and Theory, joined the group, who started the exploration of the icons. These three specialists made a research trip also to different centres in Moldavia and Bukovina with almost assimilated Armenian population and their cultural monuments (Focsani, Targu Ockna, Suceava, Botosani, Iasi).

In 2013, the research group was awarded a grant by the Committee of Science of the Republic of Armenia, which represented a new opportunity to continue the work already started.

The research group of Manukyan, Vardanyan and Smbatyan continued their work in Bucharest collections in 2014. Also Dr. Seyranush Manukyan visited the Armenian centres of Transilvania.

In November 2013, I went to Romania, precisely in Transilvania region. Lusine Sargsyan, the lecturer of the Chair of Armenian Art History and Theory, joined me in Romania, as she received a fellowship from the New Europe College of Bucharest in 2013 for the exploration of the Armenian illustrated manuscripts in Romanian collections and worked in different cities between October 2013 and February 2014. During the trip to Transilvania, we examined the books and carpets in the Armenian centre of Cluj-Napoca and Armenian manuscripts in the library there, and later explored the collections of books and murals and other artifacts in Armenian churches of Gherla, the city that was established by the Armenians and that in previous centuries was known as Armenopolis and Armenierstadt. The results of this research later appeared in several publications (Chookaszian 2013, 2014; Smbatyan, Vardanyan 2014a; Smbatyan 2015a; Sargsyan 2015; 2016; 2017a; 2017b; 2018a; 2018b).

Also Smbatyan received a fellowship from the New Europe College of Bucharest for the exploration of the Armenian textile and carpet collections in Romania and worked in different cities between March 2015 and July 2015. In May 2015, Vardanyan joined Smbatyan to make a visit to Armenian centres in Transilvania. They visited Gherla, Cluj-Napoca, Dumbraveni, Gheorgheni and explored Armenian collections. The same year the results of their work of that and of previous years were described in other articles (Manukyan 2015; Smbatyan 2015b; Vardanyan 2015).

In 2016, Vardanyan travelled again to Bucharest, to continue the work at the Dudian Museum. Later she published an article on that and on previous years' work (Vardanyan 2017).

Seeing the results of the research, His Grace Bishop Datev Hako-bian, with the sponsorship of the Ministry of Religions of Romania, decided to publish a catalogue of the Armenian treasures of Romania. In 2017 Seyranush Manukyan and Mariam Vardanyan went to Romania again, this time with the photographer Hrayr Baze Khatcherian to take photos for the catalogue. This catalogue is in publishing house and will be sold soon.

The members of the research group published articles and delivered papers in various international conferences (Vardanyan 2018; Manukyan 2019b).

One of the greatest achievements of the project was the First International Conference devoted to Romanian-Armenian historical and artistic relations. In order to organise the conference, the efforts of Mr. Hamlet Gasparyan (the ex-Ambassador of RA in Romania), the Armenian Union of Romania, the Diocese of the Armenian Church in Romania, and the Ministries of Culture of Romania and Armenia were particularly significant (Smbatyan, Vardanyan 2014a). At the end of October 2013, S. Manukyan, N. Smbatyan, M. Vardanyan and the Author went to Bucharest to take part in this conference and deliver papers in which our work was introduced to the audience (Chookaszian 2013; Manukyan 2013; Smbatyan 2013; Vardanyan 2013).

The group presented the results of the research in several conferences.¹

3 The Iranian Project

The city Isfahan in Iran is one of the major centres of the Armenian culture outside Armenia. Between 1604-1608 Persian Shah Abbas I violently deported thousands of Armenians to Iran from Northern (Ararat valley, especially Nakhijevan and Old Julfa) and Southern re-

¹ *International Conference Dedicated to the 125th Birth Anniversary of Hakob Siruni*, Bucharest, 2015 (Chookaszian 2015a, unpublished); *2nd International Conference: Art of Armenian Diaspora*, Gdansk, 2016 (Vardanyan 2017); *The Armenian Community and Armenian-Russian Connections: History and Modernity*, Moscow, 2016 (Vardanyan, unpublished); *Hidden Treasures Unearthed: Armenian Arts and Culture of Eastern Europe*, Los Angeles, 2018 (Chookaszian 2013; Manukyan 2018; Vardanyan 2018); *From the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea: Armenians in Cultural, Economic and Political Processes*, Yerevan, 2018 (Ghazaryan, unpublished); *12th International Congress of South-East European Studies*, Bucharest, 2019 (Chookaszian L. 2019; Manukyan 2019a; Vardanyan 2019). See Chookaszian 2013, 2014, 2015, 2019; Manukyan 2013, 2015, 2018, 2019a, 2019b; Sargsyan 2017b; Smbatyan 2013, 2014a, 2015b; Vardanyan 2013, 2015, 2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2019.

gions (especially Vaspourakan) of Armenia and settled them in Isfahan, and also in the regions of Peria and Charmahal. They brought with them many manuscripts, silverwork and other artworks. The Armenians in Isfahan established a district called New Julfa. Between the beginning of the 17th and the first decades of the 18th centuries, they also erected churches there and decorated them with murals. Isfahan is an important centre for the Armenian culture also because in 19th century the museum that contains numerous artworks and among them illustrated manuscripts was established in the territory of the Armenian monastery of All Saviour. The collection of the Armenian manuscripts of All Saviour's monastery is considered to be one of the major treasures of Armenian century-old book culture. The collection of the old museum of the All Saviour's Monastery contains medieval liturgical vessels, crosses and silver reliquaries, religious vestments, embroideries, carpets, icons, portraits of the representatives of the Armenian community made in last centuries, paintings of the Iranian-Armenian artists of the twentieth century, etc. The museum was built thanks to donations by the Armenians.

Since 2015 some lecturers of the Chair of the Armenian Art History and Theory started private trips to Iran and especially Isfahan for the exploration of the Armenian artworks. Inesa Danielyan, assistant of the Chair, was the first among them to visit Isfahan in June of 2015 and started the examination of several illustrated Armenian manuscripts of the fourteenth century. The results of her work were published in an article (Danielyan 2017) and presented in September of 2017 in Berlin during the *4th International Conference, Forum Kunst des Mittelalters, Berlin und Brandenburg an der Havel - Verortung, Entgrenzung, Globalisierung*, with a speech entitled: "The Art of Momik, the Armenian Architect, Sculptor, Miniaturist and Scribe: Connections with Western and Eastern Arts". Another communication based on the research developed by Danielyan in Isfahan was delivered in St. Petersburg during the *International Conference Armenia, Byzantium and the Orient: Written Heritage from Manuscripts to the Internet, Dedicated to the memory of Karen N. Yuzbashian (1927-2009)*, with the title "The Illustrated Manuscripts of Armenian Artist Mkhitar Anetsi (13th-14th centuries AD): Between Eastern and Western Arts".

Dr. Satenik Chookaszian was the second among the lecturers of the Chair of the Armenian Art History and Theory who had the opportunity to make a private visit to Isfahan in 2016 and to start the exploration of the murals of the churches there. Chookaszian reported the results of her work in a paper devoted to the decoration of All Saviour's Cathedral of New Julfa that she delivered during the conference held in Warsaw in 2017 concerning the Art of Armenian Diaspora. The study, which was based on verified historical data and general research, included a description and a stylistic analysis of the frescoes, was published in Poland as a separate article. The re-

sults of the research made in Isfahan by S. Chookaszian is going to be elaborated in a second article where there will be a description of each scene of murals of All Saviour's Cathedral and comparisons with other contemporary monuments. Such a detailed description is missing from the work of previous researchers.

In 2016 the representatives of the parish council of the Armenian monastery of All Saviour of Isfahan (Iran) came to Yerevan and asked me and my colleagues to support them to organise a new museum devoted to the material culture and artifacts of the Armenian community on the territory of the monastery and to start the exploration of the murals of the Armenian churches there and also to research the collection of old, former museum, the exposition of which was organised in the thirties by famous Armenian painter Sarkis Khachadourian.

The further negotiations with the parish council of the All Saviour's Monastery resulted in the formation of a new group of members of the Chair of the Armenian Art History and Theory who agreed to go to Isfahan and start the research of the Armenian artifacts there. It is noteworthy that the artistic legacy of the Armenians in Isfahan region was never explored by joint forces of Armenian art historians.

Thus parallel to the work in Romania, the trips to Iran started.

In October and beginning of November 2017, Dr. Yvet Tajarian, Dr. Davit Ghazaryan, and assistant Inesa Danielyan, lecturers of the Chair of the Armenian Art History and Theory, visited Iran. The visit of Dr. Y. Tajarian and I. Danielyan was founded by ANSEF (Armenian National Science and Education Fund) and that of Dr. D. Ghazaryan by Sirarpie Der Nersessian grant. They went to Teheran and later to Isfahan. In Tehran they examined the old manuscripts and different artefacts represented in the exposition of the "Artak Manukian" museum. Later they went to Isfahan with the intention to explore the old museum collection in the New Julfa quarter.

Dr. Y. Tajarian started to explore the paintings of the Iranian-Armenian artists of the 20th century which are preserved in the museum. Those are the donations of the authors of the paintings. Ghazarian here studied the scroll-shaped handwritten and old-printed amulets. He later introduced the results of his work in a communication delivered at the International Armenological conference dedicated to the 100th anniversary of the birth of academician Levon Khachikian (which took place in Mesrop Mashtots Matenadaran, Yerevan 28-30 June 2018). That work is already published with the title "The Collection of the Amulets in Scroll of the All Saviour Cathedral of New Julfa" in the proceedings of the communications.

Danielyan studied the Armenian illustrated manuscripts of the fourteenth century in the collection of the museum and made digitized photos of the miniatures of certain manuscripts of that period and also the decorated tombstones in Armenian old cemetery of

New Julfa; the results of her work were included in some articles that are still in press.

In 2018 the lecturers of the Chair of the Armenian Art History and Theory, including Chookaszian S., Danielyan, Tajarian and me, received the grant from State Committee of Science of RA for the exploration of the Armenian art treasures of Isfahan.

In 2018-19 the members of this group examined the materials concerning their future trips to Iran. Yvet Tajarian studied the literature on the manuscripts copied in New Julfa and also explored gorgeous illustrated Gospels and Bibles, presenting the art of the Armenian miniature school of New Julfa of the seventeenth century, and preserved in Yerevan Matenadaran collection. Danielyan meticulously studied the manuscripts of the All Saviour Monastery's catalogue and, based on the descriptions of those manuscripts, she compiled a separate list of illustrated manuscripts, sorting them by chronological order. Inesa Danielyan also carried out a description and a study of the manuscripts copied and illustrated inside New Julfa region in previous centuries. She also studied the colophons of 14-15th century manuscripts and singled out information on various historical events and people in them.

I myself travelled to Iran in July 2019 and visited Teheran where I have examined the old manuscripts and different artefacts at the "Artak Manukian" Armenian museum. During my stay I had the chance to visit the National Museum of Jewels, and to acquaintance with the works of the well-known Armenian-Iranian goldsmiths of the 19-20th centuries Tserun Masehian, Leo Avetian and those of earlier periods. In Teheran's Golestan palace, I explored the works of Klara Abgar (Abgarian), a well-known 20th-century Armenian-Iranian painter.

My main goal in Iran was the visit of the Isfahan and especially New Julfa where I started the research of illustrated Armenian manuscripts in the collection of the old and new museum of the All Saviour's Monastery of New Julfa (the museum collecting the material culture and artifacts of the Armenian community). I had the chance to examine also other artworks, i.e. medieval liturgical silverwork and textiles and paintings of 19-20th centuries, made by Sarkis Khachadourian and Armenian-Iranian painters such as Abraham Gurgonian, Smbat Ter-Kyureghian, Esayi Shahjianian, which are exposed in the same place and were never studied by the Armenian experts. My stay in Isfahan made possible the exploration of murals of All Saviour's Cathedral and the interior and exterior decoration of the Holy Godmother's church as well. Another point of interest became also the sculptured tombstones in the Armenian old cemetery (17th-20th centuries) of New Julfa. The series of papers which summarise the results of this trip are in the process of preparation.

The research of the Armenian artworks is in the process and hopefully will be continued in upcoming years. During coming years, possibly, there will be other trips of the lecturers of the Chair of the Ar-

menian Art History and Theory to Isfahan and the results of their work will be published in articles and books.²

Unfortunately, no systematic and consistent study to register the number of artworks kept in all countries has been made. The realisation of such projects will create new interests concerning the culture and history of Armenian communities. These research projects are dictated by actual necessity. It is necessary that the study and publications of the items will be accessible to the scholarly world and public.

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² In July 2019 I visited Isfahan and explored the artworks of the old and new museums of New Julfa, churches' frescoes and the tombstones of the old Armenian cemetery.

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