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Marlene R. Breu

Western Michigan University

Ronald T. Marchese

University of Minnesota/Duluth

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Expressions in Silk: Embroidered Miniatures on Historic Textiles from the Armenian Apostolic Churches of Istanbul

Marlene R. Breu, Ph.D.
Western Michigan University

Ronald T. Marchese, Ph.D.
University of Minnesota/Duluth

"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, 59)

Introduction

The assessment of Armenian embroidery offered by Kouymjian in his publication *The Arts of Armenia* is reflected in a collection of textile objects housed in the treasuries of the 33 Armenian Apostolic Churches and the Patriarchate (the official residence of the Patriarch) in Istanbul, Turkey. The textiles, many donated by devout members of the Church community, are still used in celebrations of the Divine Liturgy. The collections contain examples of the brilliant splendor associated with religious celebration, the depth of piety of the lay community, especially women, and a sense of attachment to the historical and cultural traditions of Christianity.

From baptism and the beginning of life to the last rites in death, cloth played an important role in the domestic and religious culture of Armenian life. The religious textiles in the collections are a visible reflection of high artistic achievement attained by household-based and professional needle artists who labored in an effort to produce spectacular images in cloth and thread. They stand as a rich expression of individual talent and deep spiritual conviction. Colophons or inscriptions found on many of the pieces indicate that their makers or contributors hoped for salvation and honor by successive generations through donations of the textiles to the Divine Liturgy. In addition, the textiles augment the formality and static nature of the physical structure of the church by providing a mobile art that connects the lay community to the living context of the Divine Liturgy.

The churches were the physical anchors of the Armenian community. Their material culture visibly projected social cohesion, pride and an emotional attachment to the core of beliefs that defined Armenian Christianity.

Background

Armenians. The Armenian Apostolic Churches of Istanbul were extremely important in maintaining the social identity and cultural heritage of the Armenian population of the city from the late medieval to the modern period. By the end of the sixteenth century, Armenians were part of a minority non-Muslim population that outnumbered Muslims. By the end of the nineteenth century, Istanbul's Armenian population was between 17 and 22 percent of the total population of the city (Karpas 1985, 95-106; Kouymjian 1997, 26; Sanjian 1965, 34). At this time 55 apostolic churches existed in the city (Tuğlacı 1991). During the Ottoman Empire Armenians held high positions among the Ottoman authorities, as regional administrators and diplomats as well as accomplished artists and artisans (Barsoumian 1982, 171 ff; Tuğlacı 1991; Davison 1982, 327). The 33 churches, three chapels and Patriarchate that remain are at the cultural and social center of the

Armenian population residing in Istanbul today. The Patriarch, who resides in Istanbul, is the spiritual and political leader of Armenians throughout Turkey.

Armenian needle craft. The tradition of textile embellishment in Armenian domestic and religious culture is both extensive and rich (Davtian 1984). Armenian needlecraft was widely practiced over the course of centuries, prior to a decline in the tradition that occurred in the early twentieth century. Armenian embroidery traditions were passed from generation to generation as a normal part of domestic life (Poghosyan 2001; Taylor 1992). At an early age young Armenian women learned to make needle lace and stitches that are associated with historical Armenian centers in Anatolia.

Textiles hold an important place in the Divine Liturgy of the Armenian Church. Cloth is employed throughout the four divisions of the Armenian Mass. Many items are linked to the liturgy and to Christ by a series of solemn prayers during the vesting ceremony of the celebrant (Findikyan 1999).

The study. The church treasuries contain chalices, reliquaries, illuminated manuscripts, wooden and stone objects, and a large body of textile objects. The textile objects consist of vestments, altar frontals, curtains, banners and chalice covers. Also included are book bindings, towels, table covers, and kerchiefs. We selected a representative sample of textiles from 17 of the 33 churches and the Patriarchate. We chose those that are unique in artistic and technical quality and representative of the general categories of textile art employed in the Divine Liturgy. In style and construction they evoke the memory of finery associated with a late Byzantine and earlier Armenian textile culture as well as that emphasized in post-sixteenth century Greek Orthodox and early Ottoman textile art (Johnstone 1967, 1972 and 1985; Atasoy, Denny, Mackie and Tezcan 2001).

Many contain inscriptions, often with the date of production and information regarding the contribution. The textiles date largely from the mid-eighteenth century, with the earliest dated piece of late seventeenth century origin. The limited numbers of extant textiles of earlier origin is attributed to numerous fires in Ottoman Istanbul, continued heavy usage of the textiles in the Divine Liturgy, and the fragile nature of textiles in general.

Without the benefit of an inscription or stamp, very little is known about the source of production. The refinement of stitch on some of the textiles indicates that they were probably made in professional workshops. Tambour embroidery--worked on fabric stretched on a frame and employing a fine chain stitch--was often produced in workshops. Such objects may have been commissioned and produced at home. A number of items were manufactured in church schools and workshops, organized and administered by the Church for the purpose of teaching needlecraft to women and meeting the needs for church textiles in the Divine Liturgy. Beyond the control of a church school, workshop or collective, embroideries were produced within the domestic sphere.

Textile collections. A majority of the textiles in the collections are embroidered, with additional examples of painted, block-printed and appliqued textiles that are beyond the scope of this paper. Within the embroideries, we discovered a miniature tradition

with an extraordinary level of sophisticated composition, iconography and technical skill. A perfection of execution and magnificent rendering of figures, garments and faces were created with variations in stitching techniques, which produced elaborate and unique artistic accomplishments of significant merit. Beyond stitching knowledge and the skill of affixing stitches to the surface of a fabric, textile artisans mastered the art of producing textural quality and depth of field, with a perceptive knowledge of light reflection to create objects that enhanced the spiritual quality of religious life and formed a unique corpus of religious donations.

The narrative and figurative scenes, ornate geometric designs and floral patterns were executed primarily in silk and metal threads. Silk production proliferated in Anatolia from the twelfth to the eighteenth century (Taylor 1993: 190-191). Yarns of varying twist were used to create the textiles, with loosely twisted silk floss the yarn of choice for the miniatures, as it allowed for the creation of minute and subtle facial details. The low twist gave a uniform sheen to the composition. A dramatic effect resulted from the contrast of the smooth, shiny silk with the highly textured metallic yarns of gold, silver, and alloys of lesser value, and with more complicated stitching patterns. Wool and chenille yarns were also used. Silk, cotton, linen and wool were used as the ground fabric and for linings and backings. Embroiderers couched over thick cotton yarn, cardboard, leather, and silk cocoon shells.

A variety of materials were worked into the embroideries: Precious and semi-precious stones such as diamonds, emeralds, pearls, peridots, sequins, silk cocoons, pressed metal plates and metal studs. Numerous techniques, stitches and knots were employed in the production of the textiles.

Many contain epigraphic commentary. Like the patrons of the Middle Ages who wished to have their name recorded in illuminated manuscripts they had commissioned, so too men and women who offered church vessels or liturgical textiles often had their names and the date of their donation inscribed or embroidered onto the object. Inscriptions were placed on the face or backing of the item and were stitched in metal or silk thread or with sequins. The messages are in the form of blessings on the family or community.

Miniatures

We discovered a miniature tradition in silk, similar in format to the treasured Armenian illuminated manuscripts. Of the many forms of Armenian religious art, illuminated manuscripts, along with architecture, hold a position of primacy in artistic achievement (Ghazarian 1984; Petrosyan 2001b, 52-59). Some 30,000 illuminated manuscripts remain in collections throughout the world (Kouymjian, 1992:29). Such manuscripts, regarded as sacred texts, were part of a corpus of visual artistry that was made accessible to the lay community, to remind them of the divine mysteries associated with Christian belief. Sacred images were indispensable in religious education and celebration. Their function was to reveal that which was beyond human comprehension and enhance the oral historical traditions of Christianity.

In the illuminated manuscript format, the visual story of Christianity was conveyed in a miniature format. A similar format exists in the embroideries, with superb composition that rivals illuminated manuscript examples and compare well with the

finest Byzantine examples. There is little doubt that the needle artists followed the accepted canons representing divine characters in the embellishment of the textiles.

Unlike the flat surface treatment employed in Byzantine and later Greek embroidery, elaborate layering techniques were used to produce multi-dimensional relief images (Johnstone 1961, 1967, and 1972). This appeared in both the large scale and miniature figures. Directional changes in stitching, basket-weave and diamond patterns, combinations of silver and gold of varying quality and thickness is similar to the layering of pigment and brush strokes on an illuminated manuscript page. Both provide depth of field, tonality and a multidimensional enhancement of a flat surface not unlike the painted illustrations of an illuminated manuscript.

The representations of the human form in the textile format are remarkably precise. Facial details of the saints, Evangelists, Apostles, the Virgin Mary, Christ and God are especially naturalistic, with details of individual components and shading to create depth of field. Many of the faces are smaller than the human thumbnail. Three-dimensional images were created by special techniques employed in the needlecraft. Individual miniature portraits of divine and human figures were created with the use of colored thread in fine silk floss. Facial contours, eyes and eyebrows, nose, mouth, and facial hair were all stitched in multi-colored thread to give dimensionality to the face. In a slightly larger format, facial features were produced by padding the face under a satin stitch, then stitching in appropriate places to produce three-dimensional contours.

The unity of the Trinity with God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are found on a number of the textiles. Unique to the textile medium is the representation of God the Father with outstretched hands, often situated above a cloud motif, His facial elements as detailed as other figures. Rather than being detached from earthly concerns, He is usually shown connected to the Holy Spirit as the intermediary and dispenser of grace, and then to the Son who is situated within earthly settings illustrative of the biblical stories. This is achieved by various methods, such as a string of pearls, or wide gold thread that creates a stream of light radiating from above. The radiating sunburst, a common motif in the textiles and popular method of expressing the divine in the eighteenth century, often surrounds all or part of the Trinity. It appears in pre-Christian Armenian art as well.

Depictions of the life of Christ, the Apostles, saints and martyrs monopolize the religious imagery of the collection. Angels and Seraphim appear as secondary enhancement, portrayed with detailed facial features and full heads of hair. Images of saints appear infrequently in the textile format, with the exception of John the Baptist, the Apostles Peter and Paul and the Evangelists. This is in marked contrast to the Greek Orthodox and European representations of saints (Johnstone 1967, 28 and 2002). When they do appear their physical features are naturalistic, as in the illuminated manuscript tradition, rather than idealized, so that they are readily recognizable to the lay community (Nersessian 2001, 77ff). Implements of their tortures often accompany them in the embroideries.

Textile artisans were proficient in creating minute details that illustrated obscure scenes through allusion or allegorical reference. It was not unusual for either an illuminator or textile artisan to create a unique variation of a theme. In consideration of the collections as a whole, we found two distinct styles of textile art: those that are reminiscent of earlier traditions in Byzantine and Armenian art--especially in the treatment of facial details and ornate pattern of stitching, stylistically dating to the tenth

through fourteenth centuries; and those that exhibit refined treatment of human features influenced by European baroque and rococo styles of religious and secular art (Mathews 1998, 137).

Inscriptions: The People Behind the Embroidered Mask

A number of the textiles possess significant epigraphic commentary produced with elaborate decorative elements in three primary scripts: *erkat 'agir*, an angular lettering technique sometimes called “iron script”; *bolorgir*, miniature script in manuscript illumination (the most widely used script in the textile format); and *notrgir*, a compressed secular script that developed in the seventeenth century. The art of calligraphy was an integral part of the compositions. The general assumption that inscriptions (*colophons/hishatakaran*) are predominantly an illuminated manuscript tradition is balanced by detailed comments on the textiles. In a textile medium notations offer a clear and precise reason for the donation of a specific object. As a rule, the sponsor viewed religious textiles in the same manner as a sacred text. Both were hallowed objects inspired by God for the glory of God. Consequently, the act of producing a specific gift for a church was morally rewarding. Simply stated, it was a good deed, spiritually fulfilling, and a means to attain salvation. This is clearly seen in the dedication inscription on a large cope from the Holy Mother of God Cathedral in Kumkapı:

This holy and costly sacerdotal [set of] vestment[s] is a memorial [gift] to the Holy Cross Church of the village of Apuch,ekh in [the region of] Akn. [They are] embroidered with diamond crosses, pearls, and silver [thread] - namely the crown, the amice, the cope, the stole, the maniple[s], the girdle, the slippers - through the Provision and subsidy of the God-loving Hovhannés *agha*, son of the senior father Step,an *tér* Pôghosean, and his spouse, the humble Mrs. Eva, and his son Step,an *agha* and his daughter-in-law Desnof *hanum*, and his daughter, Sinemshah *hanum*, and may our memory not be forgotten before the immortal Lamb of God. And let Him save [us] with all [our] relatives from visible and invisible tribulations. It was [donated] in the year 1834.

It is apparent that religious textiles were enhanced by texts, many of which were complimentary to the primary composition. Like the patrons of the Middle Ages, who wished to have their names recorded in illuminated manuscripts they had commissioned, so too the men and women who offered liturgical vestments had their names and the date of their donation embroidered on the object. This is clearly seen in the following:

This episcopal vestment, with all of its parts, is a memorial [gift] to the Holy Trinity Church for Grigor *amira* and his spouse, from his children, in the year 1810

and

This chalice veil is a memorial gift to St. Karapet Church in Crete. Baron Step,an, son of *tirats,u* [chorister] Grigor donated [it].

Inscriptions, however, possess additional importance beyond identifying those who donated objects to a church. They are a source of important data about the Armenian community in general. Consequently, textile inscriptions offer a valuable impression of life for the local Christian community (Sinclair 2000: 47).

It is evident from the epigraphic data that a number of individuals of high social rank appear as donors. This is clearly seen in the gift of episcopal vestments in memory of Grigor *amira* by his children to the Church of the Holy Trinity. A similar situation exists for Péshirean Yarut,win *aga*, Hovhannes *agha* and his son Step,an *agha*. A number of additional titles, some of which are associated with ecclesiastical rank or religious function, also appear, including the titles *vardapet*, *tér*, *tirats,u*, *kalfa*, *ghawla*, *kéndnet*, and *giwlhandi*. Of special note is the title *mahtesi* - "pilgrim to Jerusalem" which appears on two pieces. Three individuals were honored with the title *mahtesi* - Sargis, Meliké and Yakob. It is interesting to note that members of the lay community, no matter their social rank, as well as members of the clergy offered donations, the latter evident in a donation to the Church of the Holy Trinity by archbishop Step,annos from the Holy Mother of God Monastery of Armash. A communal donation listing a number of individuals, who perhaps perished in a recent cataclysm (earthquake) or conflict, is also evident. The donation was presented to the Holy Mother of God Church in the village of Evere□ for the deceased from the same village and the villages of Eghia and Fenese.

Special gifts were offered to village churches as well, especially by those who held high social or political rank in local Armenian communities. This is clearly seen by the magnificent gift of vestments to the Church of the Holy Cross in the village of Apuch,ekh near Akn. Epigraphic references also contain notations that indicate initial place of origin and donation prior to their migration to a current locale - either to a specific church in Istanbul or to the Patriarchate. Such donations were offered to the Holy Mother of God Church at Bursa, Holy Mother of God Church at Konya, Holy Mother of God Church at the village of Evere□, St. Karapet Church on Crete, the Church of the Holy Cross at Apuch,ekh, from St. Kirakos' Church (unknown), and the Holy Mother of God Church (unknown). Of special note are two patriarchal mitres, one given as a gift to Patriarch Zak,aria of Constantinople and a second referenced as "an ornament for a patriarch". Zak,aria was from Kagizman (Sis) and the elaborate mitre, which no doubt included additional vestments, was dedicated June 1, 1779 while the second features a unique composition derived from a mosaic or fresco original.

For whatever reason there appears to have been a conscious attempt to preserve religious cloth and the memory of those individuals who donated unique items to a church. Textiles were equally as important as Gospel books and illuminated manuscripts and their migration to more secure locations within the Ottoman State, especially to Istanbul, preserved the memory of many Armenian communities long after the original congregation disappeared. In this manner such items are reflective relics of many churches that existed in the extensive domain of the Ottoman world.

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Mitre. Late 18th century. 45 x 38 cm. Gold, silver & silk thread embroidery on silk.
Patriarchate, Kumkapı-Istanbul, Turkey. Photo: Arman Ispiroğlu



Mitre and detail of mitre. 1800. 44 ½ x 34 cm. Gold, silver, and silk thread embroidery on silk. Patriarchate, Kumkapı-Istanbul, Turkey. Face of the centurion in the detail is 1 ½ cm. Photo: Arman Ispiroğlu



Top: Chalice cover. Late 18th century. 105 x 112 cm. Gold, silver, and silk thread embroidery on silk. Church of the Holy Cross, Üşküdar-Istanbul, Turkey
Bottom: Chalice cover. 1826. 90 ½ x 82 cm. Gold, silver, and silk thread embroidery on silk. Church of the Holy Cross, Kuruçeşme-Istanbul, Turkey.

Photos: Arman Ispiroğlu