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TEXTILES AS CULTURAL EXPRESSIONS
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Social Cohesion and Cultural Expressions: The Case of the Sacred Textiles in the Armenian Orthodox Churches of Istanbul

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The life of a nation is a sea, and those who look at it from the shore cannot know its depth.
(Panossian 2006, quoting an Armenian proverb).

Prologue

The social and cultural history of Armenians is long; indeed one cannot fully appreciate its parameters without deeper investigation. This paper reports on a segment of Armenian history—the sacred historical textiles housed in the Armenian Orthodox Churches of Istanbul, Turkey. These artifacts had never before been studied, although a select few objects produced in Istanbul have been published in books devoted to the Armenian collections in Jerusalem, Etchmiadzin (Armenia), and the Sis collection from Anatolia currently in Beirut, Lebanon. Illuminated manuscripts receive the greatest attention among the historical Armenian religious artifacts, followed by stone, metal and wooden objects. Magnificent textiles exist in the aforementioned museum collections but have not been studied in as great a detail as in this endeavor. A book on the material, *Splender and Pageantry: Textile Treasures from the Armenian Orthodox Churches of Istanbul (*Marchese & Breu*),* is under contract to be published by fall of 2009. A second book on non-textile objects, *Treasures of Faith: Sacred Relics and Artifacts from the Armenian Orthodox Churches of Istanbul* (Marchese & Breu) is nearing completion.

In 2002 we presented a paper at TSA on the miniature tradition in the textile collections. This paper expands on that work, as we have been studying the collections steadily for over 10 years. The research involved content analysis and ethnographic methodologies in working within the Armenian community in Istanbul.

The Study

Semerdjian wrote, *The 'arts' are the fingerprints of a nation, left behind throughout the ages for others to examine, admire and learn. It's a window through which the soul of a nation is portrayed. It's a reflection of its culture during triumph, defeat, joy and sorrow* (2006:1). Our work certainly illustrates this. It is based on material culture studies that propose the cultural expressions of a people are illuminated in their material culture—the physical objects they design, produce and use. Social cohesion among people develops through common understanding of the meanings invested in such objects. Interpretation of these objects informs the researcher about the culture's collective thought, values and actions within an historical context.

In this paper we give a brief historical background on the social-cultural and political setting and the Church textiles, offering evidence of the use of the textile objects as a means for cultural expressions, social cohesion and collective identity. We consider the textile artifacts 1) as Armenian religious art and social cohesion, 2) as text telling the stories of Christianity in the

Armenian tradition, and 3) as artifactual evidence of collective identity and social cohesion through the inscriptions found on many of the objects.

The paper focuses on consecrated items associated with the expression of the Divine Liturgy. Our analysis of the artifacts revealed a valuable source of information about the culture and how it expressed itself in one of the key aspects of Armenian identity as a minority population in the Islamic society of Istanbul—its religion. The production and use of these artifacts contributed to the cohesiveness of a people both in Istanbul and in the Diaspora, where Armenians have maintained their social, historical and national identity largely through their religion and language.

The textiles and other artifacts in the Istanbul churches date from the seventeenth century, with the bulk of the pieces from the nineteenth century. During the Ottoman period fires were numerous in Istanbul. Many of the churches burned multiple times with loss of older artifacts. Such loses, coupled with the ephemeral nature of textiles has resulted in artifacts primarily from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with a select few earlier pieces.

Historical Influences

Historical background

Although the history of Armenians is shrouded in uncertainly, documentation exists about Armenians by the second millennium B.C. speaking their own Indo-European language (Panossian 2006:33). Early Armenian kingdoms occupied areas of Anatolia, most of which are now part of the Republic of Turkey. Armenia lay at the crossroads of a number of ancient trade routes. Although diverse civilizations surrounded and eventually incorporated Armenia into much larger and more cosmopolitan societies dominated by ecumenical forces, the unique character of its native traditions were not subsumed into the cultural matrices of their neighbors. Mathews writes "*political history emphasizes the disruptions, but in spite of the disruptions, a considerable Armenian population never left their homeland . . . the Armenian remnant in Vaspurakan paid taxes to Seljuks, then to the Mongols, then to the Turcomans, then to the Ottomans - but they remained. They lived, they went to market, they sang songs, they tilled their fields, they wrote books - in short, they flourished. Armenian art is the witness to this continuity of life, which political history often misses*
(1998: 164).

Mathews also writes that despite the tumultuous political history of the Armenians, with fleeting "moments of true sovereignty", their art "instructs us in the long continuities of the Armenian experience" (1998:163). What the Armenians lost or lacked in political territoriality over the centuries was overshadowed by the parameters of socially constructed ethnic and national identity. The conversion of Armenia to Christianity in 301—the first country to do so—and the invention of an alphabet in the fifth century contributed further to their collective identity and social cohesion. The Church eventually filled the void as a symbol of national identity and contributed to the *corpus* of Christian art by defining an inspirational method of depicting the Divine in Armenian material culture. Armenian artistic achievement represented the living community and not so much the political state. Haleblian states that "…in Armenian iconography even secular figures are depicted in a Christian context and assigned a Christian meaning" (2004:321).

Armenians in Istanbul

The Armenian Patriarchate was formally established in Istanbul in 1461, eight years after the Ottomans conquered the Byzantine capital of Constantinople where they established the center of their empire. The Ottomans ruled through a *millet* system which gave authority to the Armenian Orthodox Church over the Armenian people. Within five centuries the Armenian population grew to one of the largest and most valued minorities in the Ottoman capital. Armenians were an important minority population in Istanbul, the "faithful subjects" of the sultan (Tuğlacı 1991:53). They appeared in a variety of positions from regional administrators and diplomats to valued artisans and craftsmen. For example, Harutyun Bezian was a powerful Armenian, well-connected to the Ottoman court. He established a school for young women to learn and produce embroidered objects for the church. He and others like him created a powerful Armenian aristocracy that at times was equal to if not more powerful than the Patriarchate himself. Nikoğos and Garabed Balyan were important architects commissioned by Sultan Abdül Mecit in 1843 to design and construct the Dolmabahçe Palace. This palace was built in the baroque and neoclassical styles to replace the old palace and act as a political statement of the modernization of the Ottoman court. The Balyan brothers used the surplus materials from the palace to enhance the splendid Armenian church in Beşiktaş.

By the end of the nineteenth century, 55 Armenian Orthodox churches and a central cathedral existed in the city and surrounding area. Istanbul became the center of not only Ottoman but also Armenian culture (Kouymjian 1997:26; Barsoumian 1982: 177ff). The Church played a vital role in the community's relationship with Ottoman authorities. Events of the early twentieth century, which saw the decline and eventual demise of the Ottoman State, had a profound effect on Istanbul's Armenian population. Today the Patriarch of Istanbul and all Turkey continues to act not only as a religious leader but also as an intermediary between external authority of the modern Turkish state and the approximately 70,000 Armenians remaining in Turkey, most of whom reside in Istanbul. One of the greatest forces for maintaining the social and historical cohesion of the Armenian population in Istanbul and in the Diaspora has been and continues to be its religion.

Religious Art and Social Cohesion

Churches, stone crosses and illuminated manuscripts are among the notable and well-published cultural markers of Armenian identity. Textile and non-textile objects produced and donated to churches for the expression of the Divine Liturgy are no less important in defining the parameters of their identity. Many are preserved in the museum collections of Jerusalem, Beirut (Lebanon), Etchmiadzin (Armenia), and the church and museum collections of the Istanbul Patriarchate.

Several factors contributed to a strong Armenian religious identity. Because Armenia was the first country to convert to Christianity, it matured along with the growth of Christianity, and developed a mature body of substantial art, particularly in stone and manuscripts. Thus Armenians had a well-established body of beliefs and symbols and material objects to which they identified and carried forth. They built on these traditions despite a long succession of disruptions in their political order (Marchese and Breu, 2009)

Armenians were affected by their own art traditions before the advent of Christianity, art that developed over the centuries due to contact with others. They were strongly affected by Byzantine Christian art as it developed, and other eastern and western influences through time. As Kouymjian said, "The eclectic quality of Armenian art makes it both complex and diverse, encompassing ideas from the Orient and the Occident from the Classical and Byzantine world and the vast realm of Islam. Yet, despite the interest in other traditions, Armenian art managed to remain independent and was rarely imitative" (1992:10-11).

Despite these outside cultural influences, certain aspects of Armenian religious art are based on historical stories unique to the Armenian people. The conversion of King Tiridates III and his royal family of Armenia to Christianity by St. Gregory the Illuminator is found on a number of textile objects in the collections (Fig.1). St. Gregory the Illuminator appears as a Saint but most importantly an historical figure who reminds all Armenians of his epiphany when he was instructed by God to build a church in Etchmiadzin.

The Church has a strong apostolic foundation which appears in its art. Saints Thaddeus and Bartholomew who were the first to bring Christianity to Armenia are found in textiles along with the remaining Apostles (Fig. 2). We have also documented them on a number of metal artifacts.

Figure 1 *(left): Detail of mitre, 1779, Saint Gregory the Illuminator Blessing King Tiridates III and the royal family of Armenia following their conversion to Christianity. (Photo by Ronald Marchese)*
Figure 2 *(right): Crown and collar, 1825, with the twelve apostles surrounding the crown and Christ flanked by the Evangelists on the collar. (Photo by Arman Ispiroğlu)*

Such images were drawn heavily from Byzantine and eastern influences (Fig. 3), in addition to the strictly Armenian traditions, and were also clearly affected by the aesthetic, social, and political milieu of eighteenth and nineteenth century Istanbul. This was notable in the adoption of European artistic style in the baroque and rococo traditions. A common artistic expression developed in the city and came to be incorporated into the religious textiles as well, creating a distinctive "Constantinople Style" (Kouymjian, personal communication). The characteristic curvilinear features of these artistic movements are clearly seen in a variety of types of religious textile objects: chalice covers, altar frontals, and cloths, altar curtains, vestments, and Gospel covers (Fig. 4).

Figure 3 *(left). Mitre, seventeenth century, with Byzantine influence. (Photo by Arman Ispiroğlu)*
Figure 4 *(right). Detail of mitre, 1810, Mary as the second Eve embroidered in an 8 cm medallion. (Photo by Arman Ispiroğlu)*

The unique expressions of Christian art worshippers observed during the Liturgy became authenticated as their own. While specific motifs were found in art attributed to the Ottoman period and the eighteenth and nineteenth century European art that influenced it, the Armenian examples were Christian in content and therefore viewed as Armenian.

Textiles as Text: Telling the Stories of Christianity

Today 33 Armenian Orthodox Churches and a cathedral remain in Istanbul. Each church, the cathedral, and the Patriarchate hold their own treasury of artifacts. The Patriarchate displays a collection of textile and non-textile artifacts in its new museum, opened in summer 2006. The textile artifacts in the collections are primarily of embroidered cloth—silk or wool--produced in workshops or by women in their homes with varying skill levels including highly skilled artisans. Needlework as textile art was one of the few means of self-expression women possessed. Objects were produced for use in the home because traditional roles of women in Armenian society during the time periods studied were carried out in the home. However, a substantial amount of textiles were prepared as donations to the Church to be employed in religious celebrations. In this manner they were displayed in venues beyond the privacy of the home—in the public sphere associated with expression of the Divine Liturgy (see Fig. 10). Donations of embellished textiles offered women opportunities to simultaneously display their skills, make personal statements of faith, and contribute objects which held a place of honor in religious ritual. Family prestige and social standing were enhanced by the creation and donation of textiles, especially those with inscriptions denoting the contributor and or artisan and occasion for the donation.

Through the iconography chosen by the needle artists, the textile objects became texts of the stories of Christianity to enhance the Divine Liturgy. A complex collection of expressions of Christian belief materialized, highly detailed in artistic quality and innovative design. Textile objects used in the Liturgy, including vestments for priests, bishops, choir members and others assisting with the Liturgy, were embellished with Christological scenes to enhance the Liturgy and evoke greater involvement by worshipers through the visual images embroidered onto the

various garments (Fig. 5). The textiles illuminated the mystery and text of the Divine Liturgy, served decorative and utilitarian purposes such as altar curtains, banners, chalice covers, and handkerchiefs used as a barrier between human hands and important objects including the Word of God and crosses (Fig. 6).

Figure 5 *(left). Choir collar, mid to late eighteenth century, showing the Annunciation. The collar is worn over top the choir robe during the Divine Liturgy. (Photo by Arman Ispiroğlu)*
Figure 6 *(right). Altar curtain, 1829, 230 x 167 cm, with God the Father and the Holy Spirit above Christ the Son, represented by the Holy Eucharist. (Photo by Arman Ispiroğlu)*

Textiles as vestments present the priest or bishop as an intermediary between God and man. The vesting ritual in preparation for the Liturgy was accompanied with words of the priest and deacons to prepare the celebrant spiritually. The symbolic nature of the various parts of the vestments worn by the officiating clergy is clearly stated in the Liturgy accompanying the donning of each individual garment. For example, excerpts from the vesting found in Findikyan's *Divine Liturgy of the Armenian Church* include:

> "Lord almighty, having granted us to put on the same heavenly garment, make me your useless servant, also worthy at this hour when I make bold to approach the same spiritual service of your glory, so that I may divest myself of all ungodliness, which is a vile garment, and that I may be adorned with your light." The "light" was often created by gold thread embroidery on the mitre, lappets, collar and cope. Prayers accompanied the vesting of each separate article of dress: For the crown or mitre on the head, "Lord, put the helmet of salvation upon my head to fight against the powers of the enemy;" the stole, "Clothe my neck, O Lord, with righteousness and cleanse my heart from all filthiness of sin;" the belt, "May the girdle of faith encircle me round about my heart and my mind and quench vile thoughts out of them;" when fully vested, "My soul will rejoice in the Lord, for he has clothed me with a raiment of salvation and with a robe of gladness. He has put upon me a crown as upon a bridegroom and has adorned me like a bride with jewels" (Findikyan 1999:1-3) (Fig. 7).

The importance of the embroideries, whether of Christian characters or other motifs, is further illustrated by the conscious removal of embroidered sections from ground fabrics that

deteriorated and reapplication onto new ground cloth for continued use. We documented numerous examples of this continuing practice (Fig. 8).

Figure 7 (left). His Grace Archbishop Aram Ateşyan in full vestment following the vesting ceremony. (Photo by Marlene Breu)
Figure 8 (right). Embroidered patch, 1791, Image of St. Stephen, removed from discarded textile to be placed on newer fabric. (Photo by Ronald Marchese)

Inscriptions as Artifactual Evidence of Collective Identity and Social Cohesion

Inscriptions found on many of the pieces give historical commentary on the importance of religion to the continuation of families, collective identity of the Christian community and social cohesion achieved in a minority Christian population that existed within an Islamic empire (Figs. 6 and 8).

Examples of family memorials include:

> *This Episcopal vestment, with all of its parts* [mitre, collar and infula set] *is a memorial* [gift] *to the Holy Trinity Church for Grigor* amira *and his spouse from his children, in the year 1810.*

This set illustrates the importance of making pilgrimages to Jerusalem:

> *This is in memory of Mine, Srbuhi,* mahtesi [pilgrim to Jerusalem]*, Sargis and* mahtesi *Melike at Holy Cross Church 1825.*

Exact copies of objects were often donated to the church in Jerusalem during pilgrimages, resulting in items of Constantinople origin in the Jerusalem museum collections. Examples showing solidarity among members of a community or village include the following, one from a textile and one from a Gospel book:

This curtain at the Holy Mother of God Church of the village of Evereg is in memory of Kostan, awag*, Eghis, Suk'ias, Simon, Johannes, Asatur, Khach'atur, Gharip, yakob, P'ilipos, Abraham, Abraham, Grigor, Karapet, Paghtasar, Astuatsatur,* [and] *of Eghia, Mik'ayel, kalfa Karapet, tirats'u Nerses, Yuvakim, Shak, Yovakim, Ohanes, Ghawla Yarut'iwn, Yakob, Manuk, K'evory, Abraham, Meklon from the village of Fenese, and of all those who are living and those who are deceased. In the year 1267* [1818].

Opposite the iron post at Kumkapı, urged by barber customers and being of the same mind with them, they [sic] *gave* [this], *from the righteous earnings of all, to the magnificent and wonderful St. Nikoghayos* [St. Nicholas] *Church in Topkapı for the souls of the living and those asleep* [in Christ]. *Whichever of the officiating priests reads this Holy Gospel, we all beg him to remember all of us during the Divine Liturgy and before the immortal Lamb of Christ.* [This] *was written by the sinful and worthless deacon T'ovmas of Constantinople. In the year 1833, on the 10th of the month of March.*

A silver plate dedicated to a church on the feast of the Epiphany and the Blessing of the Water ceremony holds the following inscription. It is of particular interest in view of the possibility of internal theft for the purpose of personal enrichment or, most likely, an admonition of the Ottoman practice of confiscating precious metals to meet Ottoman monetary needs when silver and gold were in short supply:

Given to the Church of St. Gregory the Illuminator in Galata in memory of the souls of Father Markos the saintly priest, and his son Arakel ağa *who is asleep* [in Christ]. *Let those who buy or sell this be eliminated from the Register of Life, and those who enjoy* [using] *it remembered before the Lord the souls who are asleep* [in Christ] *1855.*

Inscriptions from several of the non-textile artifacts further illustrate their value as documents of social history. The following is an example of many inscriptions indicating the socio-economic status of the contributors:

This Holy relic of the venerable Wood of Life [Holy Cross], *which Sahak* amira *of Akn received from the renowned Hakob* amira*, is donated to the Holy church of Beşiktaş. Now girded with gems and silver, it is bequeathed to the same church in memory of the soul of Miss Hirp'simé, daughter of Hovhannés* amira *Tatean, the royal superintendent of ammunition, in the year of the Savior 1856.*

Inscriptions contained on many textiles provide a legacy lasting beyond the life of the original article (Fig. 8). Inscriptions and images were consciously removed from deteriorated base cloth and incorporated into new locations in order to commemorate and preserve the memory of the original benefactor. These "new" pieces preserved and intentionally communicated the collective heritage of the community.

Summary

The textile objects of the Armenian Orthodox Churches of Istanbul are a physical reminder and tribute to a people who tenaciously maintained a national spirit and character through the objects they produced, donated and used in the celebration of their faith. Armenian identity depended on Armenian religious traditions and beliefs that lay behind the physical objects donated. They are

connected to Armenian Christian doctrine, the unity of the Christian community, and the Armenian people's unwavering attachment to the Divine mysteries of Christianity.

Figure 9 *(left). Detail of Saint John the Evangelist on the back of an embroidered cope, 1877. (Photo by Ronald Marchese)*
Figure 10 *(right). Cope, 1877, used during the Divine Liturgy in the Holy Mother of God Cathedral, Istanbul. (Photo by Marlene Breu)*

Figure 11*. Embroidered inscription on the inside of the cope, 1877. (Photo by Ronald Marchese)*

Figure 12. *Detail of chalice cover, eighteenth century. (Photo by Ronald Marchese)*

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