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Armenia at The Metropolitan Museum of Art and in Venice

Visitors to the exhibition, “Armenia!”, on at the Met until January 13, will want to make a pilgrimage to this shrine and sacred place

[Italian Hours](#)

by Lucy Gordan



Ritual Book of Ordination (*Dzernadrun'ean Mashtots'*). Monastery of Zarnuk, near Cilicia, 1248. Scribe: Sargs (active ca. 1248). Ink, tempera, and gold on parchment; 45 bifolia with lacunae. Bifolia: 12 x 10 1/2 in. (19 x 26.8 cm). Armenian Mekhitarist Congregation, Library of San Lazzaro Abbey, Venice, Italy (ms 1657/440)

Photo: Hrair Hawk Khatcherian and Lilit Khachtryan.

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Since 1717 St. Lazarus Island in the Venetian lagoon has been a foremost and deeply revered center of Armenian culture in the world. Visitors to the exhibition, “Armenia!”, on at the Met until January 13, will want to make a pilgrimage to this shrine and sacred place too. For without the foresight of the first Abbot Mekhitar most of Armenia’s cultural history would have been lost forever

In 2012 “Armenia. Imprints of a Civilization” was held in Venice in three different museums on St. Mark’s Square: the Correr Museum, the National Archeological Museum, and in the

Monumental Rooms of the Marciana National Library. It marked the fifth centenary of the very first book printed in Armenian.

Why Venice? What connects Venice to Armenia? The answer is simple. The first book printed in Armenian *Urbat'agirk'* (*Friday Book*), which contains the prayer of the Patriarch Foca against natural calamities, a treatise about snakebites, and a text on the evil eye including formulas for exorcism, was printed here by a certain Hakob in 1511. Still in Venice Hakob printed another volume printed in 1512, *Aghtark* (*Book of Horoscopes and Astronomy*). It's a volume of proverbs concerning the seasons, advice on aphrodisiacs and information about medicinal plants. Also in Veinice Hakob went on to print another three titles: *Parzaytumar* (1512), a simplified calendar with a key for explaining dreams; *Pataragatetr* (1513) or Missal, and *Tagharan* (*Song Book*) (1513), an anthology of poems mostly on religious subjects. All five volumes are in St. Lazarus' library, have the typographer's logo D.I.Z.A. in Latin letters (its significance still undeciphered), and seem to be aimed at the sophisticated local Armenian market, not for export to the "homeland".



Book of Friday (Urbat'agirk'). Venice, 1511 or 1512. Printed by Hakob the sinful (meghapart) (active early 16th century). Ink on paper, with leather recycled from another manuscript. 6 3/16 x 4 3/4 in. (15.8 x 12.1 cm). Armenian Mekhitarist Congregation, Library of San Lazzaro Abbey, Venice, Italy (2225)

Photo: Hrair Hawk Khatcherian and Lilit Khachatriyan.

Except that he printed these five books, we know little about Hakob. The fact that he called himself "Meghapat" which means "sinner" on one of his colophons indicates that he was Armenian mother-tongue. In addition, the sophisticated contents of his texts seem to indicate that he was an Armenian bookseller or merchant who lived permanently in Venice.

Now Hakob's *Urbat'agirk'*, several other early printed books, many even earlier richly illuminated manuscripts and some 100 other Armenian treasures are on display in the exhibition Armenia! at the Metropolitan Museum until January 13.

As the Met exhibit's press release states: "Armenia! explores the arts and culture of the Armenians from their conversion to Christianity in the early fourth century through their leading role on the international trade routes in the 17th century. The exhibition emphasizes how over 14 centuries Armenians developed a distinctive national identity in their homeland at the base of Mount Ararat (widely accepted as the resting place of Noah's Ark) and how they maintained and transformed their traditions as their communities expanded across the globe and control trade routes from England to Latin America and from Russia to India."

"Armenia!" is divided into seven sections displayed in chronological order: "Conversion to Christianity and Trade", "Armenian Architecture", "The Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia", "Armenian Liturgical Objects", *Scriptora of Greater Armenia*", "Armenian Trade Routes in the Ottoman Empire", and "Armenian Trade Routes in the Safavid Persian Empire". In addition to the four books loaned by the St. Lazarus Library on display are some 30 others illuminated in several Armenian monasteries over the centuries, opulent reliquaries, rare textiles, liturgical furnishing made of precious materials, several Khachkars (carved stone crosses), several church models, and jewelry.

Most of these some 140 artifacts are on view in the United States for the first time; many have not traveled for centuries. "More than half of the works on display," continues the press release, "are on loan from the Republic of Armenia with the support of The Ministry of Culture. Imposing liturgical works come from the Mother See of Etchmiadzin, the primary site of the Armenian Church. In Yerevan, the 'Maenadaran' Mestrop Institute-the Museum of Ancient Manuscripts has lent monumental church sculptures. The Holy See of Cilicia in Lebanon, the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem, and the Armenian Mekhitarist Congregation in Venice are the other major Armenian religious communities lending

exceptional works." Select works come from the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, the University of Bologna, Italy, the Morgan Library and Museum, the John Rylands Library in Manchester, England, the Los Angeles Museum of Art, and the Met itself. Other American lenders include the diocese of the Armenian Church (Eastern) (New York); the Armenian Museum of America (Boston); and the Alex and Marie Manoogian Museum (Southfield, Michigan).

The exhibition's many highlights, listed here in chronological order, include:

-A four-sided stela opens the exhibition and is one of the earliest surviving works of Armenian Christian art.

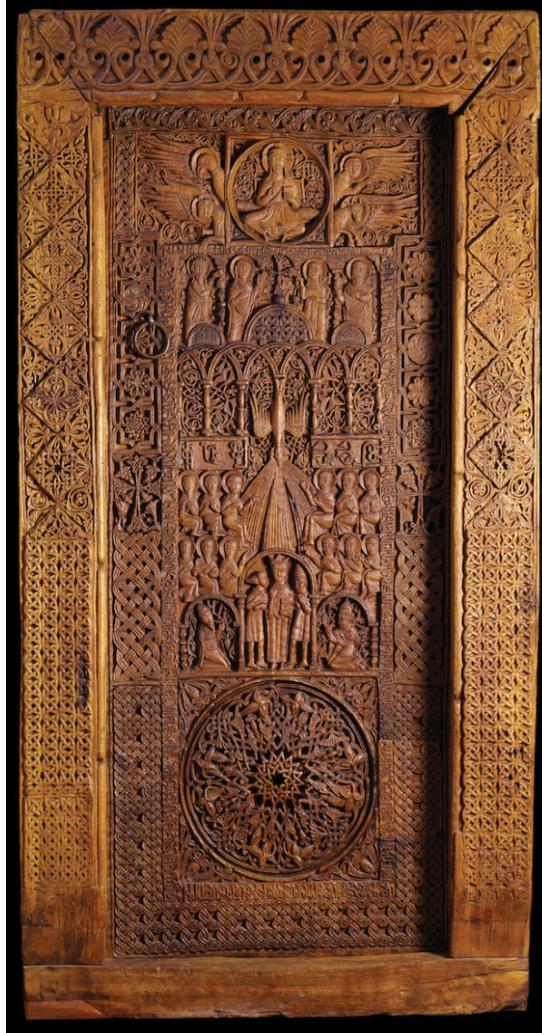


Four-Sided Stela. Monastery of Kharaba (Kharabavank'), southern slope of Aragats, Ashtarak, 4th–5th century. Tuff. 69 1/16 × 15 3/4 × 15 3/4 in. (177 × 40 × 40 cm). History Museum of Armenia, Yerevan (830)
Photo: Hrair Hawk Khatcherian and Lilit Khachatryan.

- A 5th-7th century (restored in 2000) model of the Cathedral of Holy Etchmiadzin, for such models are found on the gables of Armenian church roofs and often reflect the designs of the buildings they adorn; there are several examples here.

- The lavishly illuminated Gospel Book (1193), one of 18 on display, is from Skevra's scriptorium on loan from St. Lazarus' Library.

- The right side of a breath-taking carved door (1212) shows the four apostles identified by inscription as Peter, Mark, Matthew and Paul. The figurative panel on the left shows the Baptism of Christ.



Church of the Holy Apostles ('Surb Arak'elots'), Monastery of Sevan (Sevanavank), Lake Sevan, 1486. Walnut. 73 1/4 x 389 1/6 x 77 8 in. (186 x 98 x 20 cm). History Museum of Armenia, Yerevan (86) Photo: Hrair Hawk Khatcherian and Lilit Khachatryan.

- Another Gospel Book (1256) is from Hromkla and was elaborated illuminated by the celebrated scribe T'oros Roslin (active 1256-1268). Only another six of his works still exist.



Gospel Book of Lady Keran and Prince Levon II. Hromkla, 1262. Illuminated by T'oros Roslin (active 1256-1268); Scribe: Avetis (active 1262). Tempera, ink, and gold on parchment; 293 folios. 10 5/8 x 7 1/2 in. (27 x 19 cm). Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem (ms 2660) Photo: Hrair Hawk Khatcherian and Lilit Khachatryan.

- A large gilded reliquary of the "Holy Cross of the Vegetarians" which dates to c. 1300, probably depicts its donor, Prince Each'I Proshian, at the bottom of center of the frame; he holds his hands raised in the ancient orant prayer pose. The richly jeweled cross on the reliquary's interior contains a fragment of the True Cross.

- The silver, bejeweled arm reliquary of St. Nicholas (1315) is the oldest arm reliquary to survive from Cilicia. Arm reliquaries, initially developed in the Latin West, became highly venerated by Armenians, especially the one of St. Gregory the illuminator.



Arm Reliquary of Saint Nicholas. Cilicia, probably Sis, 1315. Silver with parcel-gilded silver sheet, twisted filigree, and gemstones. 18 1/16 x 3 3/4 in. (47.5 x 9.5 cm).

Holy See of Cilicia, Antelias, Lebanon (2v)
Photo: Hrair Hawk Khatcherian and Lilit Khachatryan.

- Gonfalon of St. Gregory the Illuminator (1448), the convertor of the Armenians is the oldest surviving example of Armenian religious embroidery.



Gonfalon of Saint Gregory the Illuminator. Aght'amar, 1448 (?). Gold, silver, and silk threads on silk.
63 x 35 1/16 in. (160 x 89 cm). Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, Armenia (N 115)
Photo: Hrair Hawk Khatcherian and Lilit Khachatryan

- A Bible with woodcuts by Christoffel van Sichem II (Dutch, c. 1581-1658), was published in Antwerp in 1657. The woodcuts being later purchased by an Armenian printing press in

Amsterdam became popular models for Armenian religious art, including liturgical metal work, and inspired the prints of European artists, Dürer in particular.

- A linen Altar Curtain (1689) is printed in red with scenes of important pilgrimage stops in Jerusalem: the monastery of St. James, the Church of the Archangels, and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.



Liturgical Curtain. Tokat (Eudokia), 1689. Printed pigment on cloth. 11 ft. x 11 ft., 7 in. (335 x 353 cm). Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, Armenia (211)
Photo: Hrair Hawk Khatcherian and Lilit Khachatryan.

- A map of Armenia Sites in the Ottoman Empire (1691) called the *Tabula Chorographica Armenica* (47 1/4 inches by 11 feet 8 15/16 inches), a luxury display object for elite merchant and scholars, shows the expansiveness of the Armenian Church in the late 17th century.





Tabula Chorographica Armenica. Constantinople, 1691. Illuminated by Eremia Ch'elepi K'ecomirchean (1637–1695). Tempera and ink on paper. 140 1/4 in. (358 × 120 cm). Biblioteca Universitaria di Bologna, Fondo Marsili, Italy (rot. 24)

Photo: Hrair Hawk Khatcherian and Lilit Khachatrian

"Armenia" is accompanied by a lavishly illustrated catalog published by the Met and distributed by Yale University Press, (hardcover, \$65). And speaking of the Armenian Church, St. Vartan's Cathedral, in Manhattan's neighborhood of Murray Hill, at 630 2nd Avenue (212-686-0710), celebrated its 50th anniversary last May.

Armenia's connection to Venice is more extensive than Hakob's five volumes. The islands of Venice proper form a fish-shaped pendant for a necklace of the some other forty islands which dot the city's shallow and marshy lagoon created by the estuaries of three rivers: the Piave, Brenta, and Sile. About half the islands lie abandoned while others house the

municipal cemetery, sanitariums, mental hospitals, prisons, medieval churches, a luxury marina and hotel, and market gardens. Just a mile away, but still within distant sight of St. Mark's Square, is St. Lazarus Island, locally known as *San Lazzaro degli Armeni*, the long-revered shrine for the Armenians and its literati.

The monastery on St. Lazarus Island is a small, comfortable, well-kept, rather suburban sort of haven, with groves of cypresses, a neat little white campanile, onion-shaped cupola, and arbors which until recently produced good table wine. There are terraces and waterside gardens famous for their roses and colorful peacocks that roam the grounds. First settled as a Benedictine monastery, the island was a leper colony for several centuries during the Middle Ages (hence named for their patron saint) and then abandoned. Since 1717, some 200 years after Hakob, it has been a refuge and the motherhouse to the Mekhitar Fathers, members of an independent Armenian order who observe the Eastern rites of the Roman Catholic Church.



Portrait of Pierre Mekhitar
(*San Lazzaro degli Armeni*,
Venice).

The first Mekhitarist fathers to arrive here were seventeen in number counting their bearded founder Mekhitar ("The Comforter"). They had been expelled from their monastery in Modone when ruthless Turkish invaders had overrun Morea (the Peloponnesus) in 1715. They sought refuge in Venice because a small, but wealthy community, of Armenians—the first foreign community to settle in Venice—had thrived here since the 13th century. The Venetian Senate had barred new religious orders from settling along the city's "downtown" canals, so gave these newly-arrived exiles the desolate island of St. Lazarus as a place of shelter.

Extremely scholarly and wise beyond his 39 years, Abbot Mekhitar (1676-1749) himself supervised the building of their new monastery and the restoration of the crumbling lepers' church. He and his monks also reclaimed land from the surrounding waters and quadrupled the size of their tiny island to its present three hectares (7.5 acres). They also acquired productive agricultural lands on the mainland. From his studies and from first-hand experience the learned Mekhitar, who'd already had to flee from Istanbul to Modone, knew full-well that the already centuries-long decimation of the Armenian nation would continue; its scholarship would be suppressed and its artistic energies emasculated, so he quickly set about making his *San Lazzaro* a repository of his nation's, language, culture and religion. In fact, when a century later Napoleon closed down the monasteries of Venice during his conquest of the city and the lagoon, "the little corporal" made an exception for *San Lazzaro degli Armeni* because he believed it to be more a center of learning than a religious institution.

Today this monastery (tel. 011-39-41-5260104 useful for confirming *vaporetto* (public waterbus) and tour times as they are subject to change) is one of the three foremost centers of Armenian culture in the world, the others being the monastery of the Mekhitarists in Vienna (another branch of the same order which broke away after Mekhitar's death) and the monastery of Echmiadzin near Yerevan.

The Island Today

To reach *San Lazzaro*, take the 20-minute ride on the no. 20 *vaporetto*, which leaves at 3:10 pm (return ride at 4:45 pm) from San Zaccaria, the Venetian church where Vivaldi composed most of his music including "The Four Seasons". Every afternoon at 3:30, certified multi-lingual guides give tours of this special island at a cost of 6 euros per person. The first stop is Mekhitar's church, then a visit to Mekhitar's rooms, which still contain his personal possessions, followed by a glimpse of the monastery's two libraries. The larger of the two with frescoes by the Venetian painter Tiepolo houses some 150,000 volumes. Its core collection is Mekhitar's personal books and 35,000 other priceless volumes and manuscripts. The other library's round building is unique for its 4,500 carefully conserved gold illuminated medieval Armenian manuscripts, four of which are now on loan to the Met. Both libraries are open only to scholars and by appointment. Next stop is the museum of artifacts, which were either collected by the monks or received as gifts from Armenian

donors worldwide. Displayed here are many fine paintings, but the collection's highlight is a fine Egyptian mummy, as well as a mummy coffin, both donated by Boghos Bey Yusufian (1775-1844), who was Minister both of Commerce and of Foreign Affairs in Egypt beginning in 1826 to Muhammad Ali Pasha al-Mas'ud bin Agha,(1769-1849) regarded as the "founder of modern Egypt" because the dynasty he established would continue to rule Egypt until Abdul Nasser's revolution in 1952. Bey's mummy is very well preserved with some of its teeth still intact and the rest carefully stowed away in a little linen bag. Some Egyptologists consider it the best-preserved in Europe. The mummy's coffin belonged to Prince Nehmekhet (c. 1000 BC), but ironically he is not the mummy (c. 1400 BC) as he is too tall to fit in the coffin! Other gifts to the museum include manna (the biblical food eaten by the Israelites during their travels in the desert) in a box, a telescope trained through a window on the Campanile of St. Mark's, a collection of books about the Armenian language in languages other than Armenian, a Buddhist ritual text found by an Indian Armenian in Madras, wooden carvings from Mount Athos (the centre of Eastern Orthodox Monasticism), Chinese carvings in ivory, a small armory of antique weapons, and a set of German medals, cast by overzealous craftsmen, depicting the heads of British monarchs including a fine portrait of "King" Oliver I! or Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658), who was Lord Protector of England, Ireland, and Scotland, but never crowned .



Byron (1813) by Phillips

Lord Byron

For the general public and the literati St. Lazarus's main tourist attraction is the story of Lord Byron, the island's most famous pilgrim. Fiona MacCarthy in her biography of the megalomaniac 19th century English Romantic poet, *On Byron and Biography*, recounts Byron's arrival in Venice on Sunday, November 10, 1816 "after eating an inferior lunch in Mestre", as his diary notes. "Although Byron," writes MacCarthy, "did not at first see himself as settling in Venice, ...he became acclimatized and lingered for the next three years. The relative remoteness of Venice at that period offered a perfect refuge for a celebrity of damaged reputation."

Almost immediately the poet, anxious to keep busy during the daylight hours of the Venetian winter, decided to learn Armenian. In fact, MacCarthy tells us, "in the publisher John Murray's archive there is a small thick book bound in light brown leather with gold tooling. It is an Armenian-Italian dictionary, inscribed and dated by Byron 30 November 1816", the day he began his studies here. Making the acquaintance of the kindly Mekhitarists, then 70 in number, he customarily rowed across to St. Lazarus three times a week to study the language. His teacher was Father Paschal Aucher, who had spent two years in England.



Byron.

According to MacCarthy, Byron had several reasons for studying Armenian. The monks, who were exiles like the poet, appealed to him. The difficulty of Armenian, with its 'Waterloo of an alphabet', was notorious and "he had found that his mind 'wanted something craggy to break upon'. To add to the complexity he studied the language in two versions; modern-colloquial and ancient liturgical Armenian." Moreover, having promised himself that he would turn devout when he turned thirty, his expeditions to St. Lazarus "satisfied his intermittent yearning for the religious life". After all, Armenia was the first Christian state in the history of the world; its Mount Ararat the landing-place of Noah's Ark and the country defined in the Scriptures as the original site of Paradise.

"As well as pursuing his Armenian studies," continues MacCarthy, "Byron was helping Father Paschal to put together an English-Armenian grammar. He did his best to interest John Murray in the commercial possibilities of this endeavor, asking him to investigate whether there were any Armenian types and letterpress available in Oxford or Cambridge."

Although by February 1817 Byron seems to have abandoned his studies and deserted St. Lazarus, preferring the uproarious festivities of Carnival in Venice, his spirit still haunts the island. It is evident in the trees he helped plant, the summerhouse in which he meditated, the desk at which he sat, the pen with which he wrote and the knife he used to cut the pages

of his books. Full of admiration for the monks, he wrote that the monastery "appears to unite all the advantages of the monastic institution without any of its vices... the virtues of the brethren...are well fitted to strike a man of the world with the conviction that 'there is another and a better', even in this life." He promised the monks that he would return, "when his head ached a little less." He never did, dying of the fever he contracted in Greece during their fight for independence from Ottoman Empire.

Other famous writers who signed the monks' visitors book include another famous English Romantic poet Robert Browning, who lived his last years in Venice, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Marcel Proust.

Pilgrim Spots besides St. Lazarus

The first Armenians to arrive in Venice and the few remaining today live near *Santa Croce degli Armeni* tucked away behind St. Mark's Square on the *Calle degli Armeni* (Armenian's Alley) and quite hard to find. From the outside it's difficult to see that this strange little building is a church unless your eyes fall first on its little bell or cross above the door. Only open on Sunday mornings for services officiated by the monks from St. Lazarus, originally it was the private residence of a wealthy Armenian merchant. The building, granted to the first colony of Armenians in Venice in the 13th century and enlarged in the 1600's, is the only small church in Venice still functioning regularly since the Middle Ages.

The third and last monument associated with Armenians in Venice is the *Palazzo Ca' Zenobio*, built in 1690 in a splendid Baroque style. In 1850 two wealthy Armenians from India, Mkertich Murat and Edward Raphael, made donations to establish an Armenian College here for the study of Armenian as well as other languages. Centrally located in the *sestiere* (neighborhood) of *Dorsoduro*, at *Dorsoduro 2586* along the *Rio* (canal) of *Santa Margherita*, it no longer serves as a center of higher learning, but rather as a not-recommendable budget hotel, yet still with a beautiful garden and a sumptuous 18th-century ballroom.

Polyglot Press

The Armenians – primarily city-dwelling merchants, shopkeepers, financiers, moneylenders and pawnbrokers – already formed the oldest of the many foreign communities in Venice, centering on the tiny *Santa Croce degli Armeni* church just around the corner from Saint Mark's Square near the church of *San Giuliano*. They had been firmly established by the

beginning of the twelfth century and their position consolidated even more firmly when Doge Marco Ziani, the grandson of Doge Sebastian Ziani (1172-78), who'd made a fortune in their country, left part of it in 1253 to establish an Armenian headquarters, "Domum in quam manent Armeni" in Venice. Thus, it is no surprise that almost two-dozen typographers in Venice published almost 250 Armenian titles between 1513 and 1789, the year the Mechitarists founded a press of their own on St. Lazarus Island.

For the next 200 years the Mechitarists' press printed Armenian related texts, predominantly religious, scholastic (grammars and dictionaries), historical, and literary, in thirty-six languages and twelve scripts which included Arabic, Aramaic, Armenian, Chaldean, Chinese, Ethiopian, Greek, Hebrew, Japanese, Latin, Russian, and Sanskrit. The books in Armenian kept the language alive and those in other languages perpetuated the culture.

Although an 18th-century press is still on display at the monastery, the printing hall has been silent since 1991. The forever-enterprising Fathers, however, still run their publishing house, Casa Editrice Armena.

Like Hakob, they rely on local presses; but, unlike Hakob, sell exclusively to foreign markets, because today only about twenty-five hundred Armenians live in all of Italy, one of the smallest communities in Europe.

Here Comes the Bride

Should you want to form your own personal bond with St. Lazarus, it's possible to get married here, but only after you have tied the knot at home. Click on www.serenissima-weddings.com and they can make all the arrangements for you.

[Lucy Gordan](#)

Lucy Gordan

Italian Hours

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