

Of Books, Art and People ARMENIA! AT THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM

■ BY LUCY GORDAN



Here, the first book printed in Armenian in 1511, called the *Urbat'agirk'* (Friday Book) and, right, a *Ritual Book of Ordination* (1248).
Bottom, the silver bejeweled reliquary containing the arm of St. Nicholas (1315)

In June-July 2001, 18 years ago, I published one of my very first articles in *Inside the Vatican*. An art essay entitled "Rome and Armenia: Art for a 1,700-Year Anniversary," it concerned an art exhibition at the Vatican Museum about the relations between the Churches of Armenia and Rome.

"Rome and Armenia" was followed by my review in *ITV's* January 2012 issue of another blockbuster exhibition, "Armenia: Imprints of a Civilization," 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. The Library had previously been the subject of another of my articles, "Venice: Europe's First Publishing Capital" in *ITV's* December 2007 issue.

"Armenia. Imprints of a Civilization" marked the fifth centenary of the first book printed in Armenian and was the official launch of the jubilee celebrations which took place in the Armenian capital Yerevan, a UNESCO World Book Capital for 2012.

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 there by a certain Hakob in 1511. Another volume printed by Hakob in 1512, *Aghtark' (Book of Horoscopes and Astronomy)* is a volume of proverbs concerning the seasons, advice on aphrodisiacs and information about medicinal plants. Hakob went on to print another three titles: *Paraytuniar* (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 *San Lazzaro 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."

Except that he printed these five books, we know little about Hakob. The fact that he called himself *Meghapart*, which means *sinner*, on one of his colophons indicates that he spoke the 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, and many even earlier richly illuminated manuscripts are on loan to the Metropolitan Museum until January 13 from the Armenian Mekhitarist Congregation, Library of St. Lazarus. In 1717 the Venetian Senate gave San Lazzaro, a desolate island in the Venetian lagoon, to the Mekhitarist Fathers, recent exiles from the Peloponnese. The Fathers then transformed the island into a place to conserve Armenian culture, which they feared would otherwise be decimated. For more information on St. Lazarus, see my article "The Venetian Island of St. Lazarus: Where Armenian Culture Survived the Diaspora," published in *ITV's* February 2012 issue.

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



fourteen 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 controlled trade routes from England to Latin America and from Russia to India."

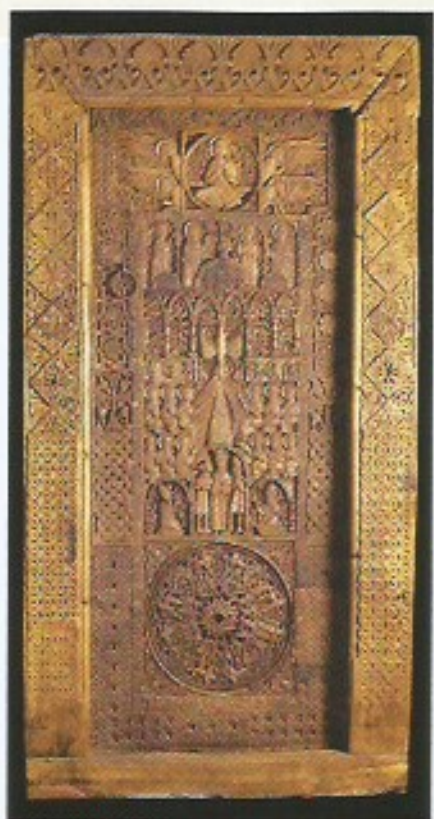
"Armenia!" is divided into seven sections displayed in chronological order: "Conversion to Christianity and Trade," "Armenian Architecture," "The Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia," "Armenian Liturgical Objects," "Scriptoria of Greater Armenia," "Armenian Trade Routes in the Ottoman Empire," and "Armenian 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 furnishings made of precious materials, several *Khachkars* (carved stone crosses), several church models, and jewelry.

Most of the 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/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.

- 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



A carved door, Church of the Holy Apostles, Monastery of Sevan

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 breathtaking 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.

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

- A large gilded reliquary of the "Holy Cross of the Vegetarians" which dates to c. 1300, probably depicts its donor, Prince Eueh'1 Proshian, at the bottom of center of the frame; he holds his hands raised in the ancient *orans* 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.

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

- A Bible with woodcuts by Christoffel van Sichem II (Dutch, c. 1581-1658), published in Antwerp in 1657. The woodcuts, 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 Sepulcher.

- A map of Armenian sites in the Ottoman Empire (1691) called the *Tabula Chorographica Armenica* (47 3/4 inches by 11 feet 8 15/16 inches), a luxury display object for elite merchants and scholars, shows the expansiveness of the Armenian Church in the late 17th century.

"Armenia" is accompanied by a lavishly illustrated catalog published by the Met and distributed by Yale University Press (hardcover, \$65). Speaking of the Armenian Church, St. Vartan's Cathedral in Manhattan's Murray Hill neighborhood, at 630 2nd Avenue, (tel. 212-6860710), celebrated its 50th anniversary last May. ○

Gonfalon of Saint Gregory the Illuminator (1448). Gold, silver, and silk threads on silk

