



Press release

Exhibition

**Musée du Louvre
Melpomène Gallery and
Moats of the Medieval Louvre**

February 21– May 21, 2007



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« Arménie, mon amie »,
the official Year of Armenia in France*

*The Year of Armenia in France is
planned and coordinated:*

*-for the Republic of Armenia,
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CULTURESFRANCE,
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Chairman: Nelly Tardivier-Henrot*

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Armenia sacra

For the first time in its history, the Louvre presents an exhibition entirely devoted to Armenian art, which aims to recognize the distinctiveness and brilliance of Christian art created in Armenia, from the conversion of the Armenian people in the early 4th century until the end of the 18th century, through a selection of two hundred emblematic works. This is also the first time that such a large number of monumental sculptures from the most important sites in Armenia are being presented alongside manuscripts and sumptuary objects. These include not only steles and carved capitals but also more than thirty khatchkars, stone slabs carved with intricately laced patterns centered on the cross, displayed in their upright position, genuine physical witnesses to the faith of Armenians, without any real equivalent elsewhere in the world.

This exhibition would not have been possible were it not for exceptional loans from the Museum and Treasury of the Etchmiadzin Holy See and from the National History Museum and the Matenadaran (Institute of Ancient Manuscripts) in Yerevan.

The first people to adopt Christianity as the state religion, Armenians recognize Saint Gregory the Illuminator as their apostle. A buffer state between the powerful empires of Rome and Persia, located at the foot of Mount Ararat, where Noah's Ark is thought to have landed, Armenia adopted a new alphabet in the early 5th century, revealed by God to the monk Mesrop Mashtots. Armenian Christians remained under the powerful combined religious and political jurisdiction of the Byzantine empire until the 6th century, when the Armenian church asserted its independence by breaking with the Byzantine doctrine of Christ's dual (divine and earthly) nature. Christian art in Armenia flourished first at the frontiers of the Islamic and Byzantine empires, and then as a result of contacts with Near Eastern Crusader art, before undergoing a revival while subjugated to Persian and Ottoman rule. Over the centuries the Armenians never abandoned their faith, despite the vicissitudes of history. The works exhibited illustrate the unparalleled achievements and the richness of artistic expression resulting from these successive confrontations.

The exhibition is divided into two parts: a number of the khatchkars are displayed in the moats of the medieval Louvre, thus offering an environment evoking their traditional setting in Armenia, where they are positioned just outside or sheltered by sanctuaries. Other khatchkars, precious objects, relics and manuscripts are presented in the Melpomène Gallery, on the ground floor of the museum, a basilica-shaped exhibition area perfectly suited to these works.

Exhibition curators: Jannic Durand, chief curator, Department of Decorative Arts, Musée du Louvre, Ionna Rapti and Dorota Giovannoni

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Following an exploration of the khatchkars presented in the moats of the medieval Louvre, the visit to the exhibition continues in the Melpomène Gallery, where it is divided into the six chronological sections described below.

1. Conversion to Christianity and Development of the Alphabet (4th–5th centuries)

The period of intense persecution against the Christians under the Roman emperor Diocletian influenced the Armenian king Tiridates III, an ally of Rome against the Persians. When Diocletian tried to force the beautiful nun Hripsime to marry him, she fled to Armenia along with her superior Gayane, and forty other holy virgins. There, Tiridates was in turn captivated by Hripsime's beauty and also tried to compel her to be his wife. In 301, Hripsime, Gayane and the entire group of nuns were tortured and killed because they chose their faith and devotion to God over the wishes of the king. Tiridates was finally converted by Gregory the Illuminator and Armenia became the first nation to adopt Christianity as a state religion. A legend has it that the king was turned into a wild boar as punishment for lusting after Hripsime and regained human form thanks to his conversion to Christianity, depicted to great effect in a 16th century manuscript: *Collection of Texts Relating to the History of the Armenian Church*. Several other episodes during the genesis of Armenian Christianity are represented in the form of legends in this collection. A century later, the monk Mesrop Mashtots invented a national alphabet, received as a gift from God. The translation of the Bible into Armenian is indicative of the independent spirit of the nation and its church, which was accompanied by the introduction of an Armenian liturgy originating in the Greek and Syriac traditions. The church came to serve the role of unifying force at a time when Armenia became the battleground of ceaseless confrontations between the eastern Roman empire and the Persians.

2. First Golden Age and Autocephaly (6th–7th centuries)

Disputed in the political realm by its powerful rivals, in the religious domain Armenia favored the uniquely divine nature of the incarnated Christ, as it made clear in the first and second synods of Duin in 553 and 555. Independent from Greek and Latin churches and largely dominated by the Persians, the Armenian church became autocephalous in the 6th century by choosing its own leader or universal bishop, called the Catholicos. The country experienced numerous political upheavals: after the installation by the Persians of a governor in the city of Duin, the Byzantines reasserted their influence, before relinquishing control to the Arabs in the middle of the 7th century. A highly varied religious architecture, captivating in its originality, flourished until the declaration of Armenia as a province of the Arab Caliphate in 699.

Several carved stone pieces included in the exhibition are fine examples of this powerful art form, showing a great fondness for the layering techniques that are also in evidence on the large cross-covered steles. The Vank'Haraba stele, sculpted on all four sides, depicts the Virgin and the conversion of Tiridates. A lintel from Duin is decorated with grape gathering scenes while Christ above the Cross is depicted in the large coils of a capital fragment. One of the most spectacular pieces in the exhibition is an eagle column capital from the extraordinary circular Zvartnots Cathedral, which today lies in ruins. Some of the oldest surviving painted parchment folios in the world are also presented in the exhibition. Dating from the 6th or 7th century, they were joined within a later manuscript and constitute the Etchmiadzin Gospel. These exceptional painted works reflect Syrian and Palestinian influences.



Left: *Collection of Texts Relating to the History of the Armenian Church: Saint Gregory in Prayer before King Tiridates turned into a wild boar*
Bales (today Bitlis, Turkey), 1569
Paper, 353 ff.; 27.4 cm x 18.3 cm
Matenadaran, Yerevan,
ms 1920, fol. 55 verso
© Matenadaran, Yerevan

Right: *Havouts Tar Khatchkar*
12th - 13th century, volcanic tuff
265 x 105 x 35 cm
National History Museum, Yerevan,
Inv. 2936 © National History Museum,
Yerevan / Photo: Vram Hakobian



3. Restoration of the Kingdoms from the Arab to the Mongol Invasions (8th–13th centuries)

At this time, the church was the main authority recognized by the Caliphate, to the detriment of Armenia's noble families. But the Byzantines scored new military triumphs and Armenia once again became a pawn in the confrontations between the two empires. The restoration of the Armenian kingdom in the 10th century, although under the sovereignty of Baghdad, ushered in a century of relative peace and prosperity. The kingdom established a number of principalities as satellite realms. In 964, Ani, the new capital of Armenia, was established on the road linking the Caliphate to Constantinople. The Byzantines suffered isolated attacks and were then defeated in 1071 and forced to retreat by the Seljuk Turks, while a Georgian dynasty formed a kingdom in the north. The kingdom reclaimed Ani in 1198 but this fragile balance was disrupted by the invasion of the Mongol hordes of Genghis Khan around 1250.

Khatchkars first appeared in the 10th century. Some of these large monumental stone slabs, positioned upright and sculpted with crosses, were dated, such as the Noradous khatchkar, sculpted in 996. We can compare the motifs incorporated in these sculpted pieces with the bronze crosses unearthed by archaeologists at Ani. Heavily influenced by both Byzantine and Islam, during this period Armenia saw the development of a very distinctive Christian or princely art, illustrated by several of the objects presented in the exhibition. The doors of the Monastery of Moush consist of panels decorated with Islamic-inspired geometric motifs, adorned with a frieze showing mythical battles and fantastic creatures. The reliquary of Saint Stephen shown here is one of the oldest surviving examples. The great silver cross of Jarjaris was used either to decorate an altar or as a processional cross. Other objects show Islamic influence including ewers and a basin. Lastly, certain manuscript paintings are Byzantine in inspiration, although transformed by Armenian ingenuity, such as a beautiful *Annunciation* from an 11th century gospel book. Two exceptional manuscripts bear witness to the sudden blossoming in this period of princely art: the *Gospel of Queen Mlkeh of Van* and the *Etchmiadzin Gospel*.

4. Cilician Armenia (12th–14th centuries)

A wave of invasions caused many inhabitants of Greater Armenia to leave their homeland and take up residence to the west, in Cilicia, where several principalities were founded that were dominated by two families. These Christian principalities were at the center of the military battles and trade exchanges which became particularly intense during the first three crusades (1095–1098, 1145–1148 and 1188–1192). One of the princely families even obtained a crown from the Holy Roman Emperor. When the fourth crusade conquered Constantinople in 1204, Cilician Armenia became one of the key states of the Christian Near East. Hetum I made an alliance with the Mongols, who helped to stem the advances of the Seljuk Turks. The Catholicosate, which had been condemned to exile, was eventually transferred to Sis, the capital of Cilicia, in 1293. But in 1375, the Egyptian Mamelukes attacked the city and put an end to two centuries of an artistic renaissance represented by works of exceptional beauty.

Four dated and lavishly illuminated manuscripts, major masterpieces of Armenian art, bear witness to the extremely high level of development attained by this art form in Cilicia: the *Prayers of Gregory of Narek* of 1173, the *Malatia Gospel* of 1268, with images painted by the artist Toros Roslin, the *Lectinary* commissioned by the future King Hetum in 1286, and the *Gospel of Eight Artists* of 1320.



Left: *Lectionary of King Hetum*, shown here *Presentation of Jesus in the Temple*.

Cilicia, 1286
Matenadaran, Yerevan,
ms 979, fol. 58
© Matenadaran, yerevan

Right: *Reliquary of the Holy Cross of Khotakerats*, opened, Region of Vayots Dzor, 1300
Gilded silver, wood, colored stones

Treasury of the Holy See,
Etchmiadzin, Inv.731
© Holy See, Etchmiadzin, DR.



5. Greater Armenia (13th–15th centuries)

In this period, Greater Armenia was wholly subject to the vast Mongol sultanate of Persia. A period of stability and prosperity began in the middle of the 13th century as a result of the Pax Mongolica and exchanges with the West, the East, and the Far East. But rivalries between Turcomans and Mongol rulers in the 14th century gave rise to a period of anarchy and desolation, culminating with invasions led by Tamerlane between 1387 and 1402. Battles between rival Turcoman factions brought the last of the princely families to ruin. Only the church, entrenched in the monasteries, still embodied a unified authority and represented the nation. The Catholicosate, which had taken refuge in Cilicia in the 10th century, returned to the historic center of Armenian Christianity when the See of Etchmiadzin was restored on the occasion of a synod held in 1441.

The arts still flourished in the 13th century in a number of areas and, despite a general decline in output, the beginning of the 14th century saw the emergence of the celebrated art of the region of Vaspourakan. Around 1300, Prince Prosh built the sanctuary of Spitakavor. A relief from this edifice, showing Persian and Seljuk influences, is presented in the exhibition and depicts *Prince Amir Hasan at the Hunt*. Among the most remarkable surviving works of Armenian art, the Louvre presents the gilt *Reliquary of the Holy Cross* ornamented with precious stones commissioned by Prince Eatchi Proshian and offered to the monastery of Khotakerats. Gospel books from the 13th and 14th centuries are decorated with simpler paintings using less costly materials, but the description of the episodes of the Bible, sometimes also inspired by Persian art, is lively and exquisite. Thus in an image of the *Presentation in the Temple*, we find a variety of ornamental motifs also seen in a number of the objects shown in the exhibition.

6. Between the Persian and Ottoman Empires (15th–late 18th centuries)

A series of wars between the Persians and the Ottomans raged during this period until 1638. However, an artistic revival developed in the 17th century, during which a varied and distinctive Armenian art exerted its influence as far as Persia, its renown only increasing after Shah Abbas transferred the population of the city of Julfa, in southwestern Armenia, to Isfahan in 1605–1606, where the Armenians established New Julfa. Armenian artists then reaped inspiration from a multitude of sources, including Western art.

A processional banner in embroidered silk, dating from 1448 and exceptionally well preserved, shows the founding figures of Armenian Christianity. Khatchkars began to adopt a very intricate technique in which the sculpted crosses were included within Persian motifs. Franciscan, Dominican and Jesuit missionaries traveled to Armenia and popularized the preferred themes and motifs of the Latin church, which were also disseminated through engravings. A reliquary in the form of arms raised in blessing contains the remains of Saints Thaddeus and Andrew, just like the Western reliquaries of the Middle Ages. In contrast, a priestly headdress in silver and gilded silver, dating from 1611, is presented in a style unique to the Armenian church. Finally, liturgical objects and ornaments from the 17th and 18th centuries, in cloth or precious metal, assume a variety of forms, influenced by Western creations of the same period or by earlier traditions. Among the notable examples included in the exhibition are an embroidered mitre, a baroque chalice, and a chrism oil vessel in the form of a dove symbolizing the Holy Spirit.

Hours: Open daily except Tuesdays from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., and until 10 p.m. on Wednesdays and Fridays
Further information: +33 (0)1 40 20 53 17 - www.louvre.fr

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Conferences, readings, art films, “Face to Face” debates, and a concert in the Auditorium du Louvre, including: Presentation of the exhibition on Monday, March 12 at 12:30 p.m. with Jannic Durand and Nelly Tardivier, and **“Art on Stage”: two Byzantine bound manuscripts**, Wednesday, March 21 at 12:30 p.m., with Jannic Durand, Musée du Louvre, Marie-Pierre Laffite, BnF, and Sen Arevshatian, Matenadaran, Yerevan.

Installation by the contemporary artist Sarkis coinciding with this exhibition: *Encounters with Uccello, Grünewald, Munch and Beuys*.

Access to the exhibition is included in the purchase of an admission to the Museum’s permanent collections: €8.50; €6 after 6 p.m. on Wednesdays and Fridays; free admission for all visitors the first Sunday of each month, and for youths under 26 after 6 p.m. on Fridays; free admission at all times for youths under 18, the unemployed, and holders of the “Louvre Jeunes”, “Louvre Professionnels”, “Louvre Enseignants”, “Louvre Etudiants Partenaires” or “Amis du Louvre” cards.