

# THE CHRISTIAN LITERATURE AND FINE ARTS OF THE ARMENIANS

BY VALERIE GOEKHAN



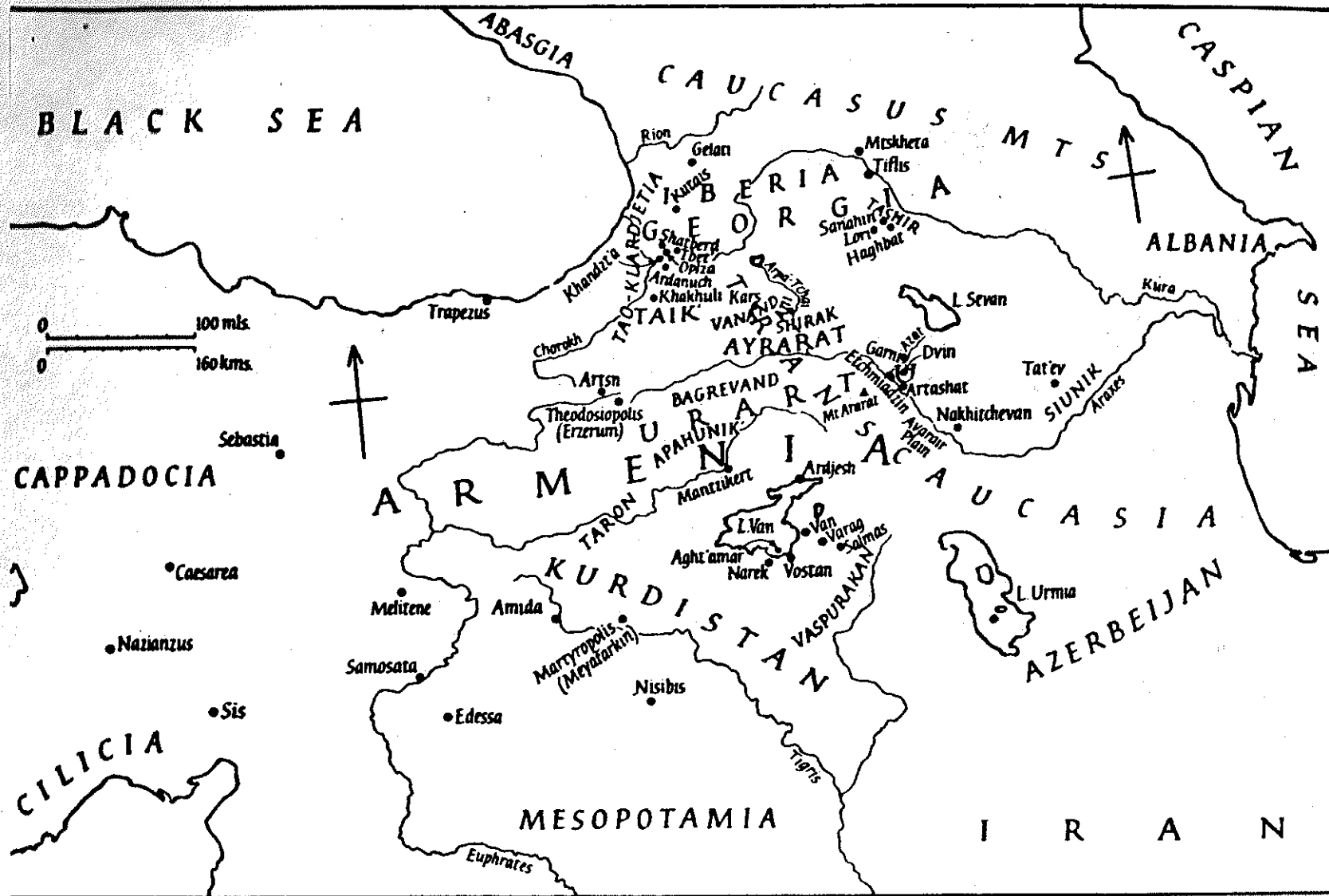
# THE CHRISTIAN LITERATURE AND FINE ARTS OF THE ARMENIANS

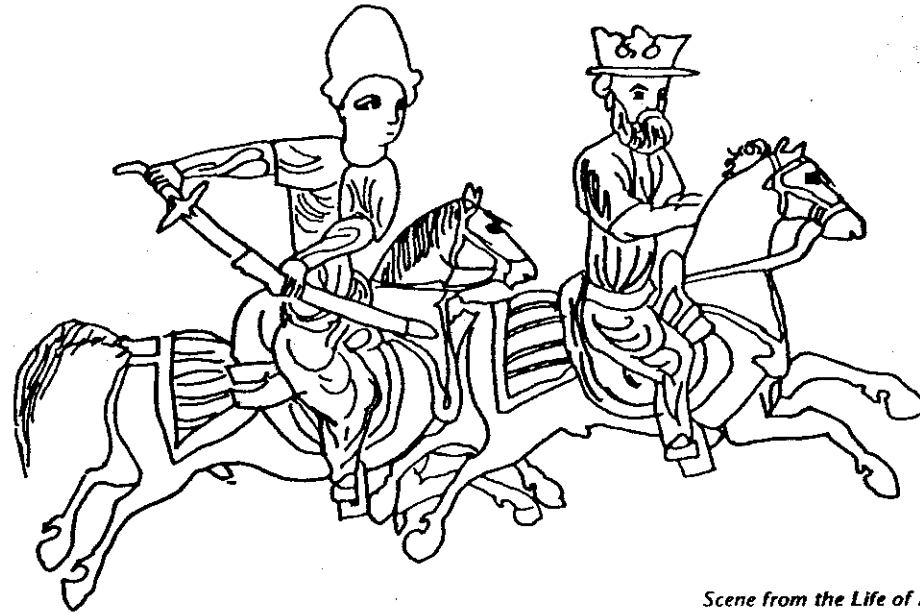
*By* VALERIE GOEKJIAN



DIOCESE OF THE ARMENIAN CHURCH OF AMERICA

NEW YORK 1973





*Scene from the Life of Alexander the Great, Isfahan, Seventeenth Century*

**L**iterature, music, architecture, sculpture, painting—it takes a people some time and some leisure to develop these arts. What happens to them in a country like Armenia, whose history is so full of persecution and suffering that there would seem very little time or leisure left for such things? It would be easy to assume that they were never given a chance to flourish and so were never developed to any great extent. But by giving here a brief over-view of these arts in Armenia from early times to the present, we shall show that this is not at all the case. The arts have always been a living, active force among the Armenians, even though there were periods when, because of foreign invasion and dominance, they were able to produce very little. Despite these low points, and probably in large part because of the early introduction of Christianity into the country, the Armenians have achieved many beautiful and unusual things for each other and for the rest of the world, throughout which they have been scattered.

Hieroglyphics and pictographs have been discovered in Armenia, so old and fragmentary that they cannot be dated or deciphered. They show that some form of written communication existed in the country in the

earliest times, even though the origins of the writings and the people who created them cannot be definitely traced. We do know that Armenia fell successively under the domination of Assyria, Babylon, and Persia, and later of the Greeks led by Alexander the Great.

Most of the pre-Christian literature of Armenia reflects contact with these neighbors. There exist legends, songs, and fragments of epics extolling the beauty of Mount Ararat, which according to the Bible was the resting place of the Ark after the Flood, and describing the wondrous exploits of the pagan deities whom the people worshipped. There are also stories of heroes like Haik, the legendary founder of the country. Wandering troubadours traveled the country, regaling their audiences with such stories and songs.

Especially under the influence of the Greeks, the Armenians began to travel to centers of learning outside their own country to be educated. We know, for example, of an Armenian named Tiran who was a friend of Cicero and who traveled to Rome, where he started a library. One of the celebrated Sophists of the Hellenistic school of philosophy centered at Athens was an Armenian called Proheresius.<sup>1</sup>

Early in the fourth century, Gregory the Illuminator, a patrician educated at Caesarea, persuaded the Armenian king to accept Christianity, and Armenia accepted the faith as her national religion. Because the Armenians had no alphabet of their own, liturgical Greek was used in the northwestern part of the country, and Syriac in the southeastern. It can be seen from this that the dual influences of Greece and Persia, each of which would always affect the parts of the country geographically closest to them, were at work.

By 404, an Armenian alphabet, created by Saints Sahag and Mesrob, was completed, and soon after translation of the Bible, from the Syriac version, began. Not completely satisfied with the Syriac translation, Mesrob and his disciples reworked their translation, this time using the Greek Septuagint. Commenting on the result, Frederick Greene says: "The ancient Armenian version of the Bible. . . has been called the queen of versions for its beauty and, though not based on the Hebrew, is of some critical value in determining the readings of the Septuagint, of which it does not follow any known recension. . . ." <sup>2</sup>

With the translation of the Bible completed, the fathers turned their attention to liturgical books, and soon church services were being conducted wholly in Armenian. During the "golden age" of the fifth century, works of many Christian patristic writers were translated, including those of Ignatius of Antioch, Irenaeus of Lyons, Hippolytus of Rome, Dionysius of Alexandria, Eusebius of Caesarea (of whose *Chronicle* only the Armenian version is extant<sup>3</sup>), Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Basil the Great, John Chrysostom, Evagrius Ponticus, Cyril of Alexandria, and many others.<sup>4</sup> Translation was not confined to the works of Christian writers; the Matenadaran manuscript library in Yerevan contains more than 300 manuscripts of Aristotle's work; and the only extant version of Zeno's treatise *On Nature* is the Armenian one.<sup>5</sup>

Armenian church fathers of the fifth century were well aware of the attacks and inroads made on Christianity by the pagan philosophers and by heretical members of the Church itself. Eznik of Kolb's *Refutation of the Sects* is a good example of Armenian apologetic writing of the time, and is valuable to scholars for the information it gives on the Mazdean religion of the Persians and on the Marcionite heresy.<sup>6</sup> Such apolo-



*Halk*



*St. Gregory the Illuminator*



*St. Sahak*



*St. Mesrop*

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 Ժ Ի Լ Խ Ծ Կ Ն Ղ Ճ  
 Ն Մ Յ Ն Շ Ո Չ Պ Ջ  
 Ռ Ս Վ Տ Ր Յ Ի Փ Բ  
 Օ Ֆ

*Approximation of Capital Letters of Original Mesroplan Alphabet*



*Armenian Bible: Christ talking to Apostles; Cilicia, Thirteenth Century*



*Portrait of Gregory of Narek, Cilicia, Twelfth Century*



*Nerses Shnorhall*



*Tatev, Stepanos, Orbelian's Inscription*



*The Monastery of Tatev, Ninth Century*

getical writing continued; the seventh-century treatise *On the Iconoclasts* by Vertanes Kertogh is "the first written document preserved in defense of the veneration of images in the Christian Church."<sup>7</sup>

The founding of the monastery of Tatev in the late ninth century was the beginning of intensive creative work. Here, for years to come, monks, painters and musicians would gather, doing parchment work, manufacturing gilt book bindings, and copying manuscripts. Indeed, monasteries were to play a large role always in the intellectual pursuits of the Armenians; often, secluded from the strife and turmoil of the world out-

side, those behind monastic walls were able to produce works of Christian art that would inspire others to carry on the fight for preservation of the faith against hostile invaders. In the words of Nerses the Grace-filled, "the monasteries have been the pillars of the country, the fortresses against the enemy, and shining stars."<sup>8</sup>

One of the most spiritual and creatively prolific of Armenia's monastics was Gregory of Narek, whose *Book of Lamentations* was written at the beginning of the eleventh century. Obviously the work of a mystic, it extols the great mercy and loving omnipresence of God while deploring the frailty and sinfulness of man, who on his own merit is so unworthy of that divine benevolence. The book is regarded by Armenian Christians with a reverence almost equal to that accorded the Bible,<sup>9</sup> and for many centuries pious people would put it under their pillows at night as a guard against evil. So well-known and loved is the book that it is often referred to simply as "Narek." Gregory also wrote songs, homilies, canticles and melodies, elegies and odes which hold a high place in the body of Armenian Christian literature and in the Church's liturgical texts.

In the latter half of the tenth century, the Byzantines reconquered Cilicia and Northern Syria. They settled many Armenian Christians in the land from which they had expelled the Muslims and so began the Cilician kingdom, which was to have much more direct contact with Europe than the mother country of Armenia.<sup>10</sup> Through contact with the Crusaders, for example, the theology of Aquinas and Gregory the Great was introduced to the Armenians, and translated. This was during the twelfth century, and it was also during this period that Nerses Shnorhali (Grace-filled) became Catholicos of the Armenians.

Nerses wrote some of the most beautiful poems of any church father. He was both poet and theologian, and his work reflects both the style of writing of the time and his sound understanding of Eastern theology. Some poems are written in couplets, in some each stanza begins with a succeeding letter of the alphabet, and so on. Underneath the outward effects of the poems lies a deep faith and reverence for God. One of Nerses' prayers is said during the Rest Service, the last of the daily services, said before retiring for the night. The prayers called "I confess with faith," is in several verses. One is: "Heavenly Father, true God, who did send Thy beloved Son to seek the wandering sheep, I have sinned against heaven and before Thee; receive me like the prodigal son, and clothe me with the garment of innocence, of which I was deprived by sin. Have mercy upon Thy creatures and upon me, a manifold sinner."

Not all those concerned with the problems of the Church wrote strictly theological works about it. The 11th-century fabulist Mkhitar Gosh, for example, wrote a fable about the owl and eagle, who decided to marry but were unhappy later because the bridegroom could not see by day and the bride could not see by night.<sup>11</sup> This fable was intended as a warning against marriages between Christians and pagans, an important factor at this time of contact with the Muslims. Mkhitar Gosh also compiled a code of church law and civil law, which was followed by Armenians throughout the Diaspora.

During the Middle Ages, troubadours wandered among the people, singing of the bitter problems of foreign occupation as well as the beauty of various ladies. Some of the clergy composed verses in imitation of the troubadours' style, and it is common that priests were often, like Nerses and many others, poets as well.





*Plaza of the Mkhitarist Monastery of San Lazarus, Venice*



*Library of the Mkhitarist Monastery, Vienna*

By the seventeenth century, the Armenians who had left their native land were spread all over Europe. At Venice, a learned churchman named Mkhitar founded the Congregation of St. Lazarus, which was to become a great center of learning. Here the works of the great European authors were translated and theological treatises written; a printing press facilitated the publication of periodicals and important books. The Mkhitarists began another such center at a monastery in Vienna which also, influenced by the enlightened Europeans, produced linguists, historians, scientists and scholars of every kind.<sup>12</sup>

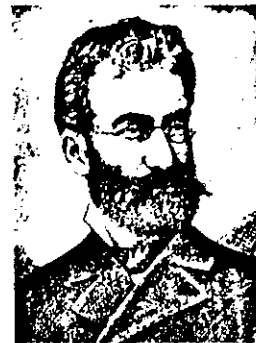
In Russia, under the influence of the great Russian novelists and inflamed by the sufferings of their countrymen, Armenians began writing in the demotic, or popular, language rather than the classical which had been used up to this time. Khatchatur Apovian wrote a realistic novel called *The Wounds of Armenia* describing the suffering of the Armenians under the Muslims, and his example was followed by Michael Nalbandian, Raffi, and many others. These writers reminded the scattered Armenians of their basic roots and inspired



*Khatchatur Apovian*



*Michael Nalbandian*



*Raffi*



*Daniel Varoujan*



*Adom Yarjanian*



*Hovhannes Toumanian*

great patriotic feeling among them; the work of Raffi was translated into six languages.

The suffering of Armenians in Turkey at this time was great. Daniel Varoujan and Adom Yarjanian, both of whom wrote about the trials of their countrymen, were deported and probably killed. And yet it was the Patriarch of Constantinople, Malachia Ormanian, who despite his harassment at the hands of the Turks was able to write the exhaustive *Askabadoom*, a three-volume history of the Armenian church and nation, which is the definitive work on that subject.

Armenian writers of various styles and *genres* can be found in every part of the world today. Some are nationalistic; some are so Europeanized that their Eastern background is almost unrecognizable; some, like William Saroyan, have achieved popularity. Perhaps those who will be remembered many years hence will be the ones who understand most completely that the body of Armenian Christian literature which preceded them came out of hardship and uncertainty, able to be borne because of the writers' faith and hope in God.

In friezes from the walls of ancient pagan buildings we see depicted singers with musical instruments of various kinds, entertaining royal audiences or singing in a group. From these it is evident that music had a place in the earliest civilization of Armenia. Of course Armenia, like the countries that surrounded her in pagan times, had her strolling minstrels and troubadors, who used musical instruments and their own melodies to accompany the stories they told. From these, no doubt, developed the folk music of the Armenians, which has been described as "lively and distinctly peculiar to the Armenian people, although showing sometimes foreign influences, either Persian or Turkish."<sup>13</sup>

The beginnings of liturgical music came in the fifth century, when so much of the work on an Armenian liturgy was undertaken:

"Christianity introduced a new kind of poetry, namely Church hymns and chants. These were called, in Armenian, sharakans. They were not only written in meter, but were composed with a view to being sung. The word sharakan means a "row of gems." Historians of the Middle Ages say that the sharakans were written mainly by the "translators," i.e. by the writers of the fourth and fifth centuries. As a matter of fact, very few sharakans were written after the thirteenth century. Since then, no prayers or hymns have been introduced into the Armenian Church.

It is said by writers of the Middle Ages that St. Sahag arranged the sharakans for ten voices and St. Stephanos for twenty-six voices, corresponding to created things — elements, plants, birds, and animals. There were also women sharakan writers. One of these was Sahakadukht, who lived in the eighth century. She not only wrote, but also composed music, and taught singing. Out of modesty, she used to hide behind a curtain, whence she gave instruction to both sexes. . . Singing was considered a great art in Armenia, and musicians were called "philosophers." Several such "philosophers" were canonised and had the word "philosopher" prefixed to their names. . . When Catholicos Petros Getadardz went to Constantinople, he took with him a company of musicians, whom he presented, as a gift, for the service of the Byzantine court."<sup>14</sup>

By the end of the fifth century, the musical canons were set. But it was not until the ninth century that a system of notation, called the *khaz* system, was used. In liturgical music books today, the marks used for this system are still included, but their meanings have not been deciphered because while they indicated the pitch, rhythm, and nuance which the singer was supposed to use, they assumed that he already knew the basic melody. Today at the Armenian Academy of Sciences in Yerevan, musicologists are attempting to decipher this system with the aid of computers.<sup>15</sup>

Under the influence of Nerses the Grace-filled, the Armenian hymnary was expanded in the twelfth century, for besides his poetic abilities he had much musical talent, and wrote some of the most beautiful liturgical music to be found in the church. It is said that when, as Catholicos, he was distressed to hear his guards singing Turkish ditties, he composed some of his music to give them something better to sing. In any case, his music is beautiful. One example is *Norasdeghdzyal*, a hymn sung in three parts during the morning service, which speaks of the newly-created life God has offered us and conveys, by the purity of its melody, a sense of the new beginning that the Resurrection, the "morning" of the Church, brings to us.

Nerses was the greatest Armenian liturgical composer to come for many centuries, but closer to our own time stands another great figure: Komitas Vartabed. This sensitive young man received some of his early



Sayat Nova



Makar Ekmalian



Komitas Vartabed



Spendiarian



Alan Hovhannes



Aram Khatchaturian

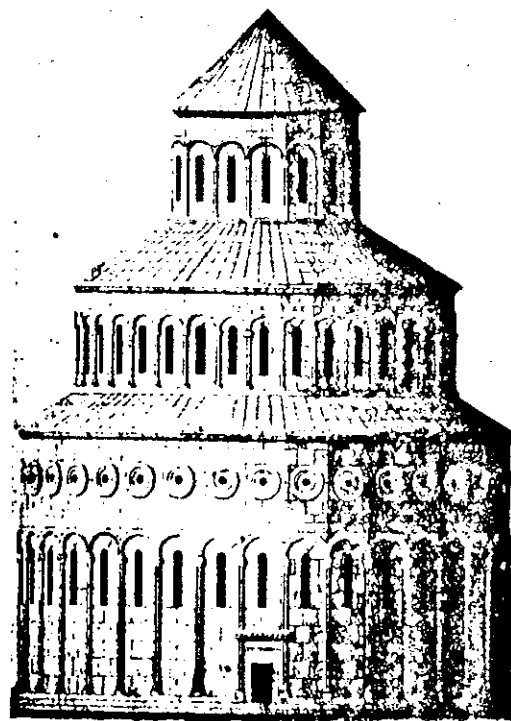
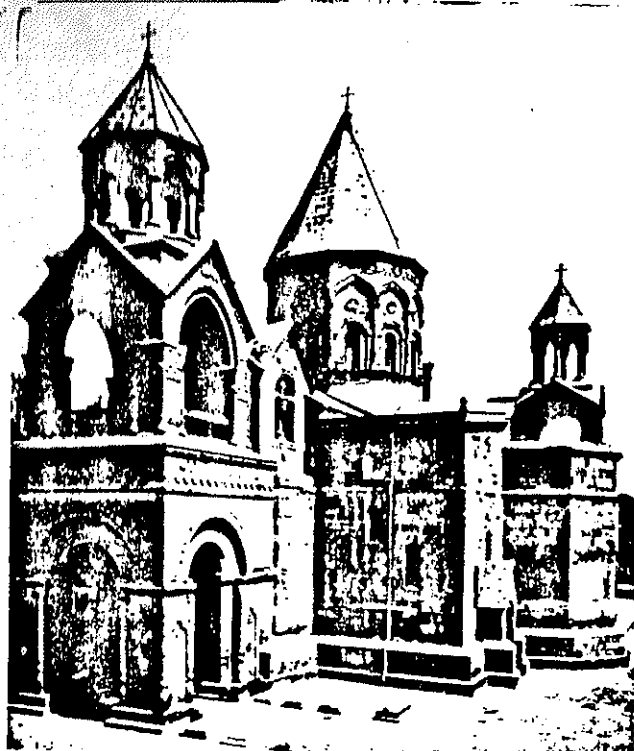
training under Makar Ekmalian, whose compositions of the Divine Liturgy are sung in many Armenian churches today. Later, he received further instruction in Berlin, and began writing some of the more than three thousand songs and compositions which are attributed to him. He took hundreds of old folk songs, arranging them in the way that they were meant to be sung, with a pure national flavor. His work attracted the attention of many Europeans; "Debussy's opinion, in which he called Komitas a great composer on the basis of only one of his songs ("Homeless"), is well-known."<sup>16</sup>

Komitas' greatest achievement is his arrangement of parts of the Divine Liturgy, which he wrote down and restored to their original style. The beauty of the Komitas Liturgy, performed today in churches throughout the world is matchless. After he died in Paris his remains were moved to Armenia to be buried there with other beloved artists. Through the work of Komitas, many people in Europe were for the first time exposed to Armenian music in its original form, unchanged by the influences of the Turkish and other Eastern, but foreign, influences which had imposed themselves on the culture of the country.

Armenian folk music was arranged symphonically for the first time by Spendiarian, early in the twentieth century. His symphonic piece, *Yerevanian Sketches*, was based on popular folk melodies, including one written by the eighteenth-century bard, Sayat Nova. With this work, and with others like it, Spendiarian became the greatest single influence on Armenian symphonic music.

Spendiarian also took a poem by a classic Armenian writer, Hovhannes Toumanian, and based on it the opera *Almast*, which depicts the Armenians trying to defend their homeland. This lovely piece, which also contains many of the folk melodies which Spendiarian grew to love, has been performed in Moscow, Tbilisi, Odessa, Tashkent, and other places in the Soviet Union.<sup>17</sup> In 1933, the Yerevan opera house which was later to be named after Spendiarian had its grand opening with a performance of *Almast*.

The operas of Armen Tigranian, whose *Anush* is not only beautiful but exacts incredible vocal feats from its singers; the ballets and symphonies of Aram Khatchaturian; the haunting quality of Alan Hovhannes' music — all are based on the music which the Armenian church and people handed down to their children.



*Above, Holy Etchmiadzin, replica of Zvartnotz and Aghtamar; below, St. Hripsime and Ani Cathedral*



**T**here is only one monument of pre-Christian architecture in Armenia, the temple of Garni. It reveals powerful fortified walls, fourteen rectangular towers, a large vaulted hall, some smaller rooms, and part of a bath. Of course, there were many pagan structures in Armenia, but when Gregory the Illuminator began his work of spreading Christianity throughout the country he saw to it that most of these were destroyed. We have spoken before of the dual influence which the Persians and Greeks had on Armenia from the earliest times, and we know that Gregory found two types of structures in the country, those with gabled roofs in the style of the Greeks, and those with domed roofs, like the ones found in Persia.

Our earliest examples of Christian architecture in the country come from the late fifth century. These were often large, rectangular basilicas, but by the seventh century most churches were being built with a central dome, a feature which is now thought of as typical of Armenian architecture. The church of Z'vartnotz, supposedly built on the site where Gregory met the Armenian king whom he was to convert, had a circular ambulatory and so was basically circular in shape. More characteristic is the church of St. Hripsime, with an octagonal center and square outward shape. Many different types of churches were built during the period, however.

The Arab invasions of the seventh century put a stop to the extensive building of churches and the church of Aghtamar, built during the tenth-century renaissance, shows evidences of Muslim influence through the themes of contemporary Muslim art contained in its friezes.

It was during this period of renaissance that many of the churches around Ani were built. Sometimes the architects would use the churches of earlier centuries as models, but there was also innovation:

"Large monastic complexes were erected during this period. . . These complexes comprised, besides the monks' cells, a library, a refectory, a bell tower, several churches with large ante-chapels and it is primarily in the latter that the new methods of construction appear.

The earliest known example of this new type is, however, not an ante-chapel but the Shepherd's church built in the eleventh century, outside the walls of Ani. The ground plan of this three-storied building takes the form of a six-point star embedded in heavy masonry. On the exterior, twelve triangular recesses are cut in the walls, between the points of the star. Six arches, rising from the clustered piers at the angles of the star, meet at a central keystone and they bear the whole weight of the second storey. This storey is circular in the interior and hexagonal on the exterior, and above it rises the circular drum on which rests the conical dome."<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps Ani's masterpiece is the cathedral built there by the architect Trdat, who was also called in to repair the dome of the cathedral of St. Sophia in Constantinople after it was damaged by an earthquake. The shape of the Ani Cathedral is of a cross in a rectangle, and has a series of free-standing, clustered piers.

The Armenians were very accomplished. They knew the secret of mixing egg with the mortar for extra strength, and the churches they built have not only lasted through many centuries, but are pleasing to the eye because of the regularity of their proportions. For the most part the churches are small and are devoid of ornamental flourishes which serve no purpose; the total effect is simple and striking.

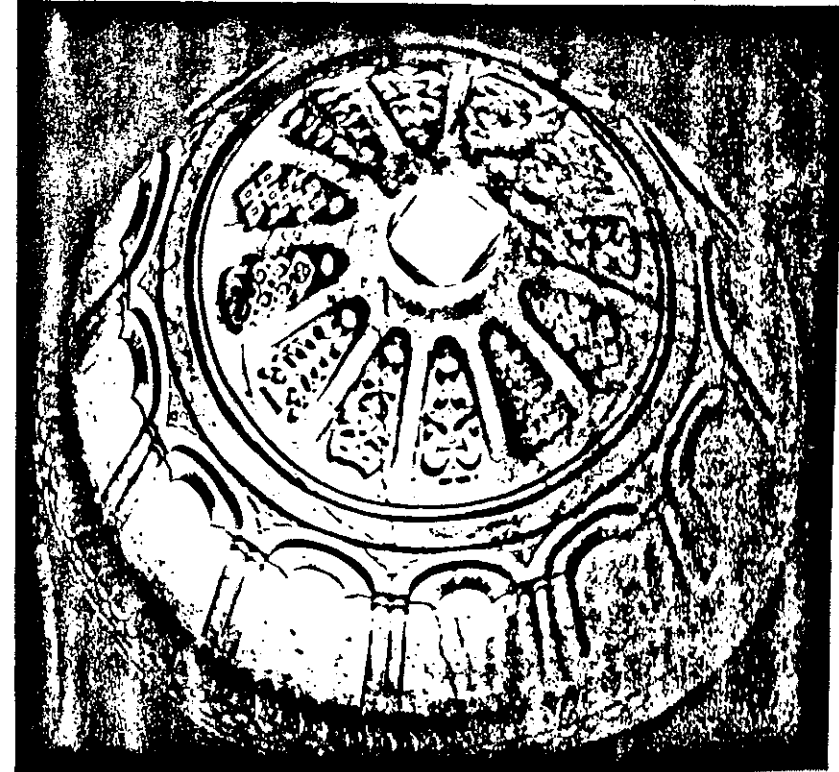
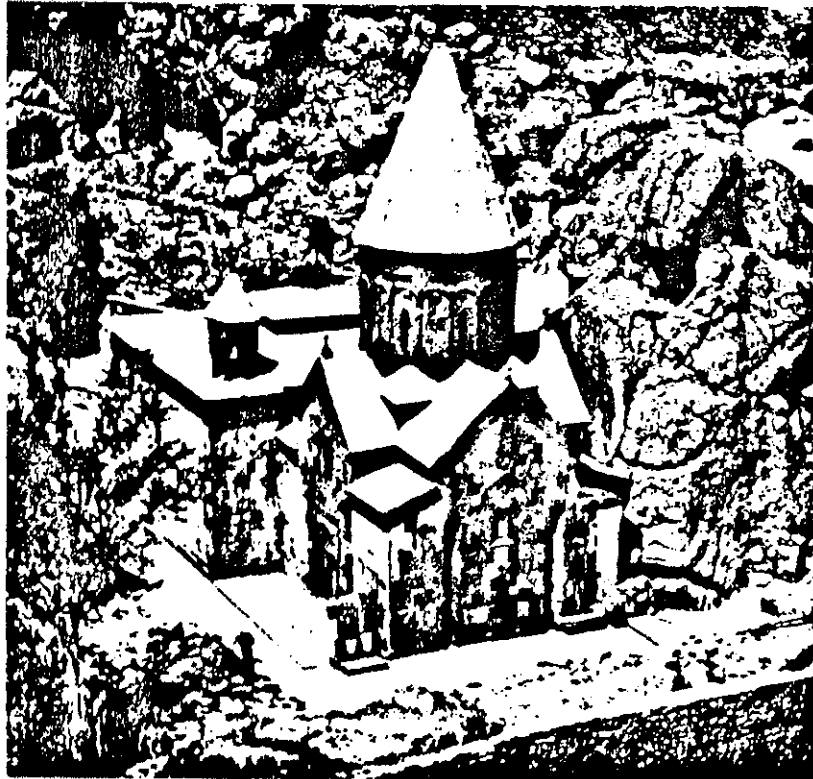
With few exceptions, the churches are built of the stone that is found all through the rocky country of

Armenia. The Armenians' skill in working with this stone indicates the high quality of architectural excellence. Certainly the Armenians perfected, if they did not invent, many architectural elements such as the conical dome, the type of rib-vault which is characteristic of their churches, and the triangular niches used to hollow out the masonry, but their salient achievement is to have done with stone all the things that older civilizations had done with brick, either baking it or drying it in the sun.<sup>18</sup>

There has been some controversy about the effects of Armenian architecture on that of other countries. The Austrian scholar Strzygowski claimed for the Armenians the role of "mother of all Christian architecture" and said that the Greek genius which built St. Sophia and the Italian genius shown in the construction of St. Peter's only realized more fully what had been originated by the Armenians.<sup>19</sup> This opinion is undoubtedly extreme, but it cannot be denied that the Armenian builders did not merely copy the architecture of other countries, but came up with many features that were their own. As to the effect of the Armenians' achievements on the Romanesque churches later built in Europe, we may quote the words of Francois Benoit:

"The Armenian style spread in different directions and influenced far-away countries. This expansion was caused by the prestige of its monasteries and by the emigration of part of the inhabitants of Ani to the North of the Caspian Sea, Crimea, Galicia, Moldavia, and Poland after the capture of their town by the Seljuks (1064).

*The Monastery of Geghart, Twelfth-Thirteenth Centuries; Interior View of the Dome of the Rockhewn Church*





*Goshavank, Twelfth-Thirteenth Centuries; Western Facade of the Church of the Illuminator*

"It certainly gave its construction formulae to Seljuk Anatolia, to Russia its schemes and doubtless its masters, to Serbia and Moldo-Wallachia its decoration. It is probable that it had an influence on the Byzantine School from the 11th century. Lastly, without drawing any definite conclusions, it is a fact that in general appearance and diverse details there is a striking similarity between Armenian Churches and the more recent works of Carolingian and Romanesque Europe."<sup>20</sup>

It is probably most sensible to say, concluding this question of who was influenced by whom, that Armenia was geographically situated in such a way as to be a natural crossroads between East and West, and that therefore she was central both in passing Eastern forms of architecture to the West, and in the receiving and incorporating of Western forms into her own architecture. There is no doubt that among the Eastern countries themselves influences were similarly shared. Her architects were wise and skillful in their use of such influences, and in the inventive use of their own minds, to create churches of lasting beauty and inspiration.

Churches built of stone, obviously, lend themselves quite easily to carved and sculpted ornamentation, and for this reason Armenian churches have much more sculpture than Byzantine churches, built for the most



part from brick. From the sixth century on, Armenian churches were decorated with various kinds of sculpture. No doubt there was a great deal of that art practiced before Christianity came to the country but, as we have noted, Gregory the Illuminator's destruction of all pagan vestiges was deliberate and thorough.

The themes of the sculpture which adorns the facades of the churches often recall those used for mosaics or wall paintings inside the churches. Often there is a quarter-length figure of Christ, or of the Virgin and Child. One of the things which differentiates Armenian church sculpture from that of Egypt and Syria is the greater use in Armenia of figure sculpture, rather than stylized floral and geometric designs. These figures often include the donors of the churches, who apparently liked to have themselves and their contribution immortalized on the face of the building. On the church at Mren, for example, the church's founder and another man who was probably the feudal lord of the province are depicted turning, with their hands extended in prayer, toward a central group of Christ and various saints. Zvartnots is unusual in that the figures on its facade are not those of the donor. Instead, there are figures of men holding spades, hammers, and other tools—in all likelihood the workmen who completed the church's construction. Another figure, bearded and holding a measuring device, is apparently the church's architect.<sup>21</sup>

Many of the themes are obviously borrowed from Hellenistic and Sasanian artistic styles, and the Armenians share with other sculptors of the Near East a horror of empty space, which often results in figures whose proportions are distorted so as to fill every available inch. During the early period, around the seventh century, ornamental sculpture is simple and limited. There are palmette scrolls, vine scrolls with leaves and bunches of grapes among the winding vines, and sometimes pomegranate branches laden with fruit. Most characteristic are small horseshoe arches, often with a bird perched under each arch. But the sculpture is simple, in keeping with the architecture itself, and is subordinated to it.

The Church of the Holy Cross at Aghtamar, built early in the tenth century, is a good example of the kind of creative activity that was resumed in this period, having earlier been halted by the Arab invasions. The exterior is almost entirely decorated. Under the roof of the dome is a frieze of running animals, and a second such frieze appears under the eaves. An elaborate vine scroll covers the wall over the windows, with scenes of hunting and rural life and groups of animals clustered among the leaves. On the walls is a Biblical cycle which contains other elements as well: Jonah and Isaac are depicted, Moses receiving the Law, Christ surrounded by angels, the Virgin Mary flanked by the archangels Gabriel and Michael. There are figures of two brothers, Saints Hamazasp and Sahak who were martyred by the Arabs in the seventh century, and of David and Goliath, Samson, Adam and Eve, the three young Hebrew men in the fiery furnace, and Daniel in the lions' den. The influence here is evidently Egyptian, for such a cycle is seen in Egyptian Coptic art of the fifth century, but not elsewhere.<sup>22</sup> Aghtamar also reflects Persian influence in its stone portraits, many of which are reminiscent of those found on Persian tombs built of rock in earlier centuries. But Aghtamar, while interesting in itself, is not really characteristic because it is more ornate than the churches which were decorated in the centuries preceding and following its construction.



*Capitals, Zvartnots*



*Ani Cathedral*



*Aghtamar*



*Amaghou-Noravank, Fourteenth Century*

By the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, ornamentation in the churches becomes more an end in itself and is less strictly related to the architecture of the building. Linear interlaces, always very simple in the early centuries, now become more complicated, with interlocking strands forming geometric figures—circles, rectangles, lozenges, triangles. Often seen are bands of stars, a common type of ornamentation in Seljuk art, and ornamental stalactites. The earlier vine scroll is in this period replaced by rigid vine stocks, and animals are more often depicted, either standing, fighting, or running through the carved foliage. It would seem that as the centuries wore on, the decoration of churches became progressively more intricate and florid, probably influenced by the styles of the Arabs and Eastern Christians.

All through Armenia, carved out in the rock, on the faces of churches, or as free-standing pieces are the steles known as cross-stones, or *khachkars*. Either funerary or votive stones, the examples of these from the fifth century are carved with individual figures of Christ, saints and angels; the Virgin with the child or standing between two angels; crosses, frequently framed by leaves; various kinds of geometric or floral patterns. Some have scenes typical of Early Christian funerary art, taken from the Bible — Daniel in the lions' den, the sacrifice of Isaac, the three youths in the furnace. One favorite theme is purely Armenian — King



Etchmiadzin



Sevan (with details)



Geghart



Amaghou Noravank

Trdat, converted to Christianity by Gregory the Illuminator, is portrayed with the head of a pig (obviously, as he was before the conversion). In later centuries these *khachkars*, like the exteriors of the churches, become more ornate and are filled with the delicate lace-like carving typical of Islamic art. *Khachkars* are rectangular pillars mounted on cubic bases, and many scholars have noted the similarity between them and the Celtic or Northumbrian panelled crosses, which are a product of a civilization so far removed from and independent of Armenia. The connection between these has not been determined, and may be incidental.<sup>23</sup>

An interesting development of the *khachkars* came with the building and sculpture of memorial springs:

"Carving stone springs is an ancient Armenian custom. At first they were the simple steles of Urartu and later the famous stone khachkars, the stone lace which captured the imagination of so many medieval sculptors.

"Then they developed into memorials of great events, popular uprisings, historic battles. When people moved from one place to another, they erected memorial springs almost before they did anything else.

"When the Armenian [Soviet] Republic celebrated its twentieth, thirtieth and fortieth anniversaries, hundreds of springs were unveiled. A magnificent memorial spring was erected in honor of Sayat-Nova. Armenian-Estonian Friendship Week was commemorated by a spring in Kanaker, the town Khatchatur Abovyan left many years ago to study at Tartu University. Yerevan and the city of Carrara pledged their friendship, and the Armenians sent the Italians a memorial spring as a gift."<sup>24</sup>

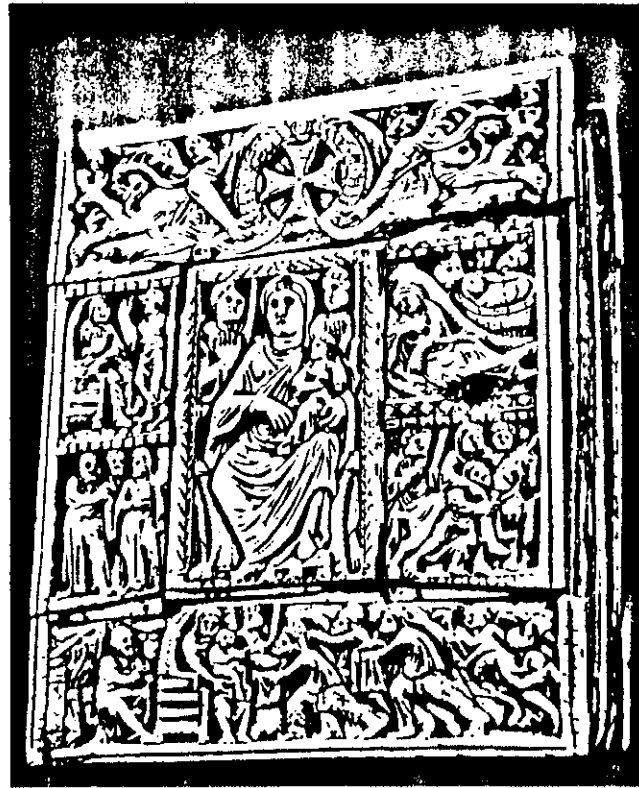
Today, a train passenger arriving in Yerevan is greeted by the monument to David of Sassoon, the hero of a folk epic. Brandishing a sword, he stands forty feet high on his legendary horse, Jalali, and symbolically protects the country's freedom. This monument is the work of Ervand Kochar, who with Chubaryan and Chakmakjian is considered one of the leading sculptors in the Soviet Union. From earliest times to the present, the Armenians have used the stone which is so abundant in their country to represent the things which most basically affected their lives.

Stone was not the only medium in which Armenian artists worked. Particularly in Cilicia, some beautiful silver work was done on book bindings and reliquaries, particularly a triptych with embossed figures of Christ, angels, saints, and the donor who made a gift of it to a feudal lord in the fourteenth century. Its style is delicate and simple, rather like the early stone-cutting we have noted. Lord Kinross was aware of these features when he wrote: "The Armenians were, and indeed still are, skilled silversmiths, and the art of their stone-cutters recalls that of jewelry, from delicate filigree to bolder chain designs. Their plated ropes, their interlaces of circles and lozenges, squares and triangles, zigzags and keys resemble modern jewelry: both intricate in conception and simple in effect."<sup>25</sup>

*David of Sassoon*



*The Etchmiadzin Gospel, Ivory, Sixth Century*



*Silver Binding, Thirteenth Century*



Painting was another form of decoration used in Armenian churches. From pre-Christian times, there is only one extant example of pictorial art, a mosaic from the temple of Garni which shows the Ocean and the Sea as personified deities. There are also a few badly damaged examples of mosaic work from Christian churches, but the more common medium is painting; the use of mosaics was apparently reserved for very special churches.<sup>26</sup>

The real history of Armenian religious painting is to be found through the study of the numerous illuminated manuscripts of the Gospels which her artists produced. These were extremely precious to the people, and the act of copying a manuscript was considered as praiseworthy as erecting a church. We have descriptions of the problems of monks, who, fleeing their monasteries in a time of foreign invasion, would carry with them the manuscript they were working on, sometimes not completing it until they had fled again and taken it with them to a third place.

We have few examples of manuscripts predating the ninth century. Ones from this period show Byzantine and Persian influence, and their style is for the most part severe and stylized. No emotions are portrayed, and the clothing which the figures wear falls stiffly, not revealing the contours of their bodies. The walls of the church at Aghtamar, the only one which has retained its painted decoration almost entirely, have the same style.

If the Armenians used Byzantine art as a model for the manuscripts, they nevertheless added features of their own. By the eleventh century, for example, canon tables were being framed by drawings of trees, something which does not appear in Byzantine art.<sup>27</sup> The Gospel of Mogni, from this period, is more linear in style than its Byzantine models, the artist has put griffins and fantastic animals with human heads around the canon table, and the faces of the figures look distinctly Armenian. By the end of the twelfth century the manuscripts are very elegant and refined in style, and quite obviously are no longer dependent on Byzantine models.

The Cilicians did beautiful manuscript work, rich in color and varied in motif; "the Armenian ornamental repertory is more varied than that of the Byzantine manuscript; at the same time the compositions avoid the heavy profusion of Muslim decoration."<sup>28</sup> Some of the decoration is very whimsical, with imaginary creatures and human or animal heads replacing the leaves in floral scrolls. Such originality is most evident in the work of T'oros Roslin, who is the leading painter of the thirteenth century. The formal severity of the earlier style gives way, in his work, to spontaneity and liveliness. His figures are graceful and often emotional, while his interpretations of Gospel passages are frequently personal. In a depiction of the Last Judgment, for example, he shows the wise and foolish virgins seeking entry to heaven. The five wise virgins are ascending, and apparently will be allowed to enter, but the five foolish ones cower in a corner while an apostle emphatically closes the heavenly door to them. Painters other than Roslin during this period emphasize emotion, movement, and realistic scenery in their work.

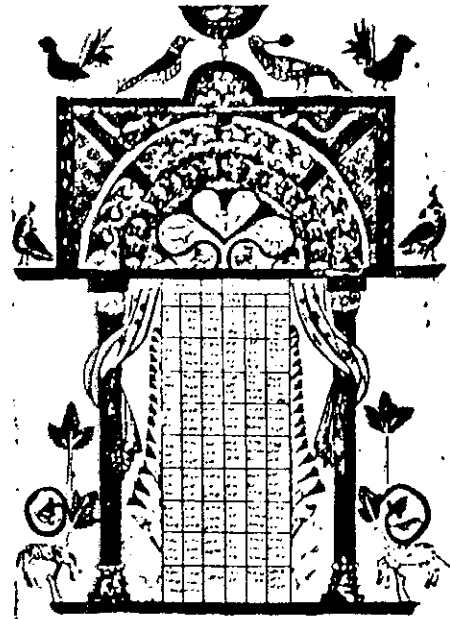
By the fourteenth century, the style of manuscripts had reverted to the original simplicity and formality



*Aghtamar, Interior Wall Design*



*Etchmiadzin Gospel, Sixth-Seventh Century*



*Gospel of Mugni, Eleventh Century*



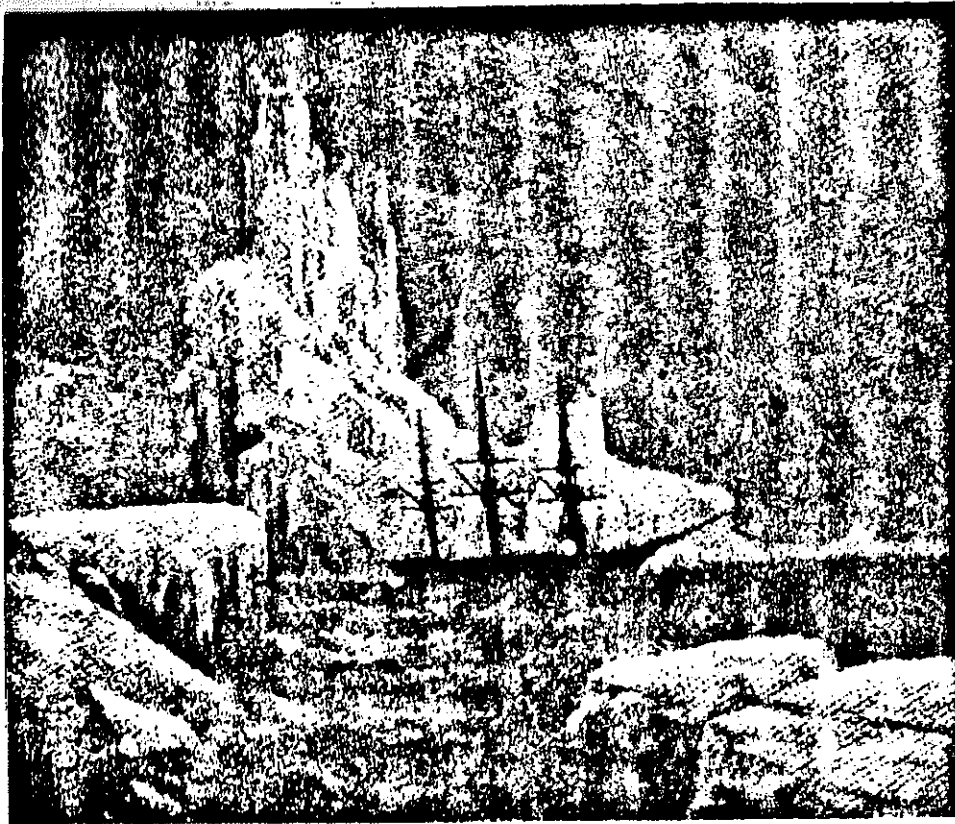
*Gospel of the Middle of the Twelfth Century, Cilicia*



*Gospel of 1287, Cilicia, T'oros Roslin*



*Gospel of 1287, Cilicia, T'oros Roslin*



*"Seascape", Aivazovsky*



*"Flowers of Chamlihal", Martiros Saryan*

of earlier centuries. The work of Sarkis Pidzak foregoes ornate floral decoration in favor of simple geometric designs. His figures are not slender and flowing but short and rather heavy. Facing pages are often identical in manuscripts of this period, unlike those of the centuries immediately preceding, when there was such great variety that no two pages of a manuscript were decorated alike.

The Mameluke conquest of Cilicia ended artistic activity there, but in Greater Armenia it continued into the seventeenth century, and the manuscripts produced there show the influence of the Cilicians, with rich colors and vivid ornamental composition.

It is interesting that many of the well-known modern Armenian painters are known for the rich hues of their paintings, and it may be that many of them are familiar with the liturgical art of earlier centuries. Under the patronage of wealthy Russians in the nineteenth century Hovhannes Aivazovsky, born in the landlocked country of Armenia, became famous for his seascapes with their romantic imagery. Arshile Gorky, in the early twentieth century, was one of the leading painters of the abstractionist school. Today in the Soviet



*"Agony", Arshile Gorky*

Union, Akop Akopyan paints Armenians in a way reminiscent of iconographic representation; Minas Avetisyan is known for the bold color of his impressionistic paintings; Martiros Saryan has been known for many years as a master of color and of the blending of Western with Oriental influences in painting.

"By nature the Armenians are deeply religious, as their whole literature and history show. It has been a religion of the heart, not of the head. Its evidence is . . . to be found in . . . a brave and simple record written with the tears of saints and illuminated with the blood of martyrs."<sup>29</sup> So wrote a visitor to Armenia almost a hundred years ago. His words are true, for the Christian faith of the people was the basis of all the art we have discussed here. And while the history of those people is a sad one indeed, perhaps its most important lesson is that despite the sadness, a people may still retain the joy and love of life that made their survival and their artistic achievements possible.



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#### FOOTNOTES

1. Sirarpie Der Nersessian, *The Armenians* (New York, 1969), p. 81.
2. Hovhannes Kasparian, comp., *Anthology of Quotations on Armenians* (Evanston, 1967), p. 26.
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5. David Marshall Lang, *Armenia: Cradle of Civilization* (London, 1970), p. 267.
6. Sarkissian, p. 41-2.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
8. Der Nersessian, p. 96.
9. Boyajian, p. 163.
10. Der Nersessian, p. 44.
11. Boyajian, p. 169.
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13. *Ibid.*, p. 368.
14. Boyajian, p. 156.
15. Lang, p. 256.
16. Robert Atayan, "100th Birthday Anniversary of Komitas," *Armenia Today*, 8-9 (1969), p. 23.
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19. Der Nersessian, p. 98.
20. Utudjian, p. 15.
21. Der Nersessian, p. 125.
22. Sirarpie Der Nersessian, *Armenia and the Byzantine Empire* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1947), p. 94.
23. Der Nersessian, *The Armenians*, p. 123.
24. Armen Kekosyan, "Memorial Springs," *Soviet Life*, 3:138 (March, 1968), p. 42.
25. Kasparian, p. 47.
26. Der Nersessian, *The Armenians*, p. 136.
27. Der Nersessian, *Armenia and the Byzantine Empire*, p. 123.
28. Der Nersessian, *The Armenians*, p. 149.
29. Kasparian, p. 13.