

Armenian Art in Iran: An Example of Cultural Interconnection

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This volume collects the proceedings of the international conference *Armenian Art in Iran*, held at Ca' Foscari University of Venice on November 14-15, 2024, as part of the 10th Seminar on Armenian and Eastern Christian Art. The initiative was promoted by the Department of Philosophy and Cultural Heritage and the Department of Asian and North African Studies of Ca' Foscari University through the collaboration between the author and Aldo Ferrari. It was made possible through the scientific, organizational, and financial support of the Salmast Heritage Association, represented by Marco Brambilla and Laura Atoian, whose research has significantly advanced the documentation and promotion of the Armenian cultural heritage of northwestern Iran. The organization of the conference was also supported by the project *Observing South Caucasus' Historical Landscape: An Open Photo Archive (OSCOP)*,¹ developed in partnership

1 The project, funded by Ca' Foscari University of Venice, aims to recover and critically examine a collection of photographs documenting the cultural heritage of the South Caucasus, taken during the Soviet period by Adriano Alpago Novello and other scholars, and to transform it into an open-access digital photo archive. Beatrice Spampinato and Francesca Penoni, members of the project team, actively participated in the organization of the conference.

with the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max Planck Institute (Gerhard Wolf and Annette Hoffmann) and the Center for the Study and Documentation of Armenian Culture (Minas Lourian).

Armenian art in Iran occupies a distinctive place within the study of the art and culture of the Caucasus and the Near East. Long regarded as a peripheral expression in relation to the principal artistic centers of historical Armenia, it is now undergoing a profound historiographical reassessment. Recent developments in transcultural studies (Welsch 1999, 194-213; Erll 2011, 4-18) and “connected histories” (Zekiyan 2005) have challenged interpretive models based on rigid cultural boundaries and static identities, while critical reflection on the historiography of Armenian, Georgian, and South Caucasian art has revealed the limitations of national paradigms that often separated phenomena shaped by centuries of shared historical experience.²

From this perspective, Armenian artistic production in Iran emerges not simply as the expression of a minority community but as the result of continuous interaction, adaptation, and cultural co-creation. Over more than two millennia – from the Achaemenid and Parthian periods to the Safavid, Afsharid, Qajar, and modern eras – Armenian and Iranian communities shared political institutions, social practices, artistic traditions, and symbolic systems that generated complex cultural stratifications. Accordingly, recent scholarship has shifted from models of one-way influence toward approaches emphasizing multidirectional exchange, mobility, and the constant renegotiation of cultural identities (Subrahmanyam 1997, 735-62).³ Concepts such as “entanglement” (Conrad 2016; Werner, Zimmermann 2006, 30-50), “transculturality” (Ortiz 1947; Rakow, Berg 2017, 186-211), and “multiple consciousness”,⁴ have proven particularly effective in illuminating the complexity of Armenian-Iranian artistic experiences beyond the constraints of national narratives.

The decision to dedicate this 10th edition of the seminars to Armenian art in Iran reflects the conviction that this field offers an exceptional laboratory for investigating cultural interaction across the Eurasian world. The historic regions of Salmas, Maku, Khoy, Tabriz, and Isfahan preserve material evidence documenting various

2 Maranci (2001); Foletti, Thunø (2016); Berg, Rakow (2017); Bacci, Kaffenberger, Studen-Karlen (2018); Foletti, Riccioni (2018); Pogossian, Nucciotti (2025).

3 For a critical overview of the medieval Eurasian and Caucasian context, see also the European research project *Armenia Entangled: Connectivity and Cultural Encounters in Medieval Eurasia 9th-14th Centuries (ArmEn)*, directed by Zaroui Pogossian, University of Florence, and the project *The Southern Caucasus Regions: Heritage, Landscape and Narratives*, directed by Gerhard Wolf at the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz.

4 For the art-historical interpretation of postcolonial notions of multiple identities and fragmented consciousness within minority artistic diasporas, see Bhabha (1994).

forms of Armenian presence, revealing how Christian communities continually negotiated their identity within changing political, religious, and cultural contexts. Rather than documenting the history of a minority alone, Armenian art in Iran demonstrates the creative potential of sustained intercultural exchange, in which Armenian, Persian, Caucasian, Mediterranean, and European traditions converged to produce original and enduring artistic forms.

Patrick Donabédian's contribution provides the volume's broad historical framework by reassessing the long-term artistic relationship between Armenia and Iran and challenging the traditional narrative of one-sided Iranian influence on Armenian art. Instead, the author demonstrates that artistic exchange was reciprocal, unfolding over nearly two millennia through successive phases of interaction. He identifies three major stages in this process: the assimilation of Achaemenid and Sasanian architectural and artistic traditions, reciprocal influences during the medieval period, and the transitional forms that paved the way for the architectural developments of the early modern era.

Beginning with antiquity, Donabédian examines archaeological evidence from Armavir, Erebuni, and the hypostyle palace at Beniamin to show how Armenian ecclesiastical architecture incorporated and transformed key Sasanian architectural concepts within a distinctly Armenian stone-building tradition. Among these were the dome on a square base – the Armenian term *gmbet* – itself deriving from the Middle Persian *gumbad* – paired half-columns and blind arcades inspired by the royal palaces of Firuzabad and Ctesiphon, and stepped podiums recalling Zoroastrian fire altars (*atrushand*). His analysis extends beyond architecture to the visual arts, tracing the survival of Sasanian iconographic traditions in Armenian sculpture, manuscript illumination, and architectural decoration. These include the representation of the Magi dressed in Persian princely attire in the *Echmiadzin Gospels*; aristocratic costumes featuring the *kandys* cloak; dynamic hunting scenes executed in the characteristic “flying gallop” motif at Ptghni and Ateni; grape-harvesting scenes; and a rich repertoire of fantastic creatures – including griffins, sphinxes, and the *pseudo-Senmurv* (Compareti 2006; Riccioni 2016). Particularly remarkable is the unique sculpted procession of sixty pitchers carved on the church of Ptghni in the style of Sasanian metalwork (*toreutics*), illustrating the continuity of Persian artistic vocabulary within Armenian monumental sculpture.

The essay further argues that artistic exchange did not flow exclusively from Iran to Armenia. During the High Middle Ages, Armenian architecture may itself have influenced the development of northern Iranian funerary towers through the adoption of the cylindrical drum crowned by a conical roof, a structural solution that subsequently became characteristic of Seljuk *türbe*. Donabédian

also traces the origins of the sophisticated reticulated vaults and double-shell bulbous domes that culminated in the churches of seventeenth-century New Julfa to earlier transitional experiments at Makaravank and Khorakert, thereby revealing the continuity of architectural innovation across regions and centuries.

Levon Chookaszian's essay shifts the discussion from architecture to monumental painting through a detailed study of the frescoes of the Church of Saint George in Haftvan, in the Salmas region. Drawing upon paintings uncovered during the restoration campaigns of 2014 and 2018, the author reconstructs the church's seventeenth-century decorative program. Fragments preserved on the eastern piers and nave walls reveal scenes from the lives of Adam and Eve, representations of the warrior saints Gevorg, Sarkis, Martiros, and Mercurius, the Coronation of the Virgin and Child, and the psychostasis, or weighing of souls, from the Last Judgment. Chookaszian situates these paintings within a broader regional network by comparing them with the mural ensembles of Meghri and Aznaberd in Nakhichevan, while simultaneously demonstrating the circulation of visual models across cultural boundaries. His study shows how Armenian painters creatively adapted compositions derived from Western European engravings imported through merchants and missionaries, thereby highlighting the importance of monumental painting as a vehicle of transcultural exchange. The essay also underscores the need for greater scholarly attention to Armenian mural painting, which has received far less study than manuscript illumination despite its exceptional historical and artistic significance.

The same dynamics of visual exchange and cultural interaction emerged in the rich and stimulating conference paper presented by **Eleanor Sims**, although it could not be included in this volume. Her study focused on three Safavid oil portraits attributed to the Armenian painter Marcos and preserved at Windsor Castle: *The Girl of Julfa*, *Qizilbash Riza* (a Persian dignitary), and *The Turkish Dancer*. The life-size portraits bear a double signature – MARCOS FECIT in Latin and ARVEST MARCOSIN in medieval Armenian – inscribed on the balustrades of the painted terraces. Sims demonstrated how Marcos combined the luxurious textiles and costumes of Safavid Isfahan with the compositional principles of Western European court portraiture, introduced through engravings circulating via merchants and missionaries. By reconstructing the provenance of these paintings, recorded in the British Royal Collection as early as 1688 during the reign of James II, she illuminated both the technical sophistication of the artists trained in the school of Minas at New Julfa and the early English fascination with Persian court culture, further reflected in the contemporary Baroque frames decorated in the chinoiserie style.

The volume's reflection on the material legacy of Armenian communities in Iran continues with **Maurizio Boriani's** essay on the preservation and future enhancement of the Armenian and Assyrian churches of Iranian West Azerbaijan. Through a systematic comparison between the documentation produced during Adriano Alpagó Novello's expeditions of 1976-77 and the field surveys carried out between 2016 and 2018 by the Salmast Heritage Association, the study provides an updated assessment of the condition of this remarkable yet endangered architectural heritage. Boriani identifies widespread structural and material deterioration caused by the region's high seismic activity, the collapse of masonry vaults, the erosion of adobe buildings constructed from sun-dried mud brick, and the gradual abandonment of rural settlements, which has exposed many monuments to vandalism and illicit excavations. Rather than advocating preservation as an end in itself, Boriani frames heritage protection within a broader strategy of sustainable adaptive reuse capable of reconnecting these monuments with contemporary society. Particular emphasis is placed on the potential of "roots tourism", promoted through the return of members of the Armenian diaspora to their ancestral homeland. In this context, the author proposes the inclusion of the churches of St. George in Haftvan and Khoy within the neighboring UNESCO heritage system and advances practical proposals for their reuse. These include converting the Church of St. Sarkis in Khoy into a regional information and documentation center and restoring the remains of a theater discovered within the precinct of the Church of St. George at Haftvan as a lapidary museum dedicated to safeguarding inscriptions and funerary monuments recovered from abandoned cemeteries and threatened archaeological sites. The essay therefore demonstrates that conservation should not be conceived solely as the stabilization of historic fabric but as an integrated cultural strategy capable of generating new forms of research, education, and sustainable local development.

Questions of cultural continuity and historical memory are further explored in **Andreh Marouti's** study of the funerary monuments of Iranian West Azerbaijan. Interpreting cemeteries as 'silent sentinels' of collective identity, the author reconstructs the evolution of Armenian funerary sculpture through a historical and descriptive methodology supported by the extensive photographic archive and drone surveys produced by the Salmast Heritage Association. The research reveals the remarkable regional diversity of funerary monuments, demonstrating that the funerary traditions of Iran frequently diverge from the classical typology of the continental *khachkar*. While the Salmas region preserves large horizontal rectangular stone monuments together with the distinctive ram-shaped zoomorphic stelae characteristic of the Caucasus, central Iran and New Julfa are distinguished by thinner upright slabs that developed after the

forced Armenian relocations under Shah Abbas I. Beyond documenting morphological differences, the study examines the symbolic language carved into these monuments. Geometric and vegetal ornament, together with cosmological symbols such as the cross, the *arevakhach* (Wheel of Eternity), and the Tree of Life, coexist with representations of weapons, agricultural tools, clerical vestments, and other attributes denoting gender, profession, and social status. These motifs reveal a layered visual language in which enduring Armenian traditions were continuously adapted to the cultural environment of Iran while preserving their religious and communal significance. The essay concludes by examining the twentieth-century shift from rural burial grounds to the large urban cemeteries of Tehran and Isfahan, driven by industrialization and internal migration. At the same time, it draws attention to the urgent need for systematic documentation, digital recording, and conservation of the isolated rural cemeteries that remain among the most vulnerable yet least studied components of Armenian cultural heritage in Iran.

The architectural dimension of this heritage is examined in **Marco Brambilla's** historical and typological study of Armenian churches in Iran, a corpus of more than four hundred surviving monuments documenting nearly two millennia of Christian presence. Brambilla proposes a clear architectural taxonomy distinguishing monumental urban churches – characterized by central towers and free-cross plans – from the numerous rural churches constructed with locally available materials such as rough stone, adobe, and timber. The study traces the evolution of this architectural tradition from the medieval monuments of northwestern Iran to its transformation during the Safavid period in Isfahan, where Armenian churches adopted external forms closely resembling the palaces and mosques of the imperial capital while preserving a distinct Christian identity through richly decorated interiors covered with monumental fresco cycles inspired by Byzantine and European artistic traditions. The essay follows the subsequent development of Armenian religious architecture through the Qajar and Pahlavi periods and into the decades following the Iranian Revolution of 1979. By examining landmark projects such as Eugene Aftandilian's Cathedral of St. Sarkis in Tehran and Rostom Voskanyan's innovative reinforced-concrete chapel of Surp Khach (Holy Cross), Brambilla demonstrates that Armenian ecclesiastical architecture in Iran has never been a static tradition. Rather, it has continually negotiated between inherited forms and contemporary architectural languages, adapting to changing political, social, and cultural circumstances while preserving its distinctive identity. In this sense, Armenian-Iranian religious architecture emerges not only as a testimony to the past but also as one of the principal foundations from which the contemporary architectural languages of the Armenian diaspora have developed.

The chronological and thematic scope of this volume extends into the twentieth century with **Tallin Grigor's** essay on modernist architecture in Pahlavi Iran, which examines the decisive role played by religious minorities – particularly the Armenian community – in shaping the urban landscape and visual identity of modern Iran. Combining transnational biography with local historical analysis, the study focuses on influential architects such as Gabriel Guevrekian, co-founder of the *Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne* (CIAM) and Chief Architect of the Municipality of Tehran, and Vardan Hovhannisian, founder of *Architecte*, the first professional journal of architecture and urban planning published in Iran. Grigor explores the delicate position occupied by these architects, who sought to uphold the programmatically apolitical ideals of the Modern Movement while working within the framework of an authoritarian state committed to rapid modernization. The essay argues that the prominence of architects from minority communities – including Armenians, Assyrians, Bahá'ís, Jews, and Zoroastrians – was closely linked to the multilingual and internationally oriented education provided by private, often missionary, schools. This educational background enabled figures such as Paul Apcar, Yougenia Aftandilians, Rostom Voskanian, and the pioneering architect Nektar Papazian Andreeff to transform their cultural marginality into a professional advantage, becoming leading protagonists of Iran's architectural modernity.

The essays collected in this volume, enriched by the discussions generated during the conference, offer a comprehensive reassessment of Armenian art in Iran. Moving beyond the traditional perception of these artistic expressions as peripheral phenomena, they reconstruct a millennia-long history of interaction through the interpretive frameworks of transculturality, connected history, and cultural co-creation. From Donabédian's analysis of Sasanian and medieval artistic exchanges, to Chookaszian's and Sims's studies of seventeenth-century painting, and the field research of the Salmast Heritage Association presented by Marouti, Boriani, Brambilla, and Grigor on funerary monuments, historic churches, secular heritage, and twentieth-century architecture, the volume demonstrates the Armenian community's enduring capacity to negotiate, preserve, and redefine its identity within the Iranian cultural sphere.

More broadly, this collection is intended not only as a historiographical and documentary synthesis, but also as a practical and theoretical resource for future scholarship. At the same time, it constitutes a transnational appeal for the active protection, digital documentation, and sustainable conservation of an exceptional cultural heritage. Rather than viewing Armenian monuments in Iran solely as the legacy of a minority community, this volume invites readers to recognize them as the product of one of the most enduring and creative processes of cultural interaction in the Eurasian world,

deserving renewed scholarly attention and long-term international cooperation for their preservation and study.

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