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ART OF TRADITION: THE ARMENIAN GOSPEL BOOKS (SEVENTEENTH CENTURY) IN THE GULBENKIAN COLLECTION*

Abstract. This paper presents preliminary notes on three seventeenth-century Armenian Gospel Books preserved in the Calouste Gulbenkian Museum in Lisbon. For the first time, these manuscripts are examined through a comprehensive art-historical lens, with attention also given to their codicological and material features. These codices attest to an unbroken manuscript tradition flourishing within the Armenian diaspora communities of Constantinople, Isfahan/New Julfa, and Crimea during the seventeenth century. Their production history and the art of their illuminations reveal both the social demand for such works and the enduring artistic preferences rooted in the medieval legacy of Armenian manuscript culture.

Keywords: Gospel Books, illuminations, manuscript art, Armenian diaspora, Gulbenkian Museum

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Introduction

Among sacred scriptures, the Gospels are the most lavishly illustrated and represent a significant component of illuminated manuscript art in many cultures. Armenian Gospel illumination can be traced to the earliest surviving miniatures of the seventh century, preserved in the Ējmiatsin Gospels. By the eleventh century, a classical program of Armenian Gospel illustration was established: full-page scenes depicting the life of Christ – from the Annunciation to the Ascension – followed by Canon Tables and portraits of the four evangelists. Although relatively standardized, the narrative illustrations of the Christ cycle were not rigidly canonical and often included additional scenes. Textually, the Armenian version of the Gospels reflects sophisticated translations from early Syriac and Greek exemplars¹. These characteristics make Armenian Gospel manuscripts both exceptional works of art and unique witnesses to a rich literary and material tradition. Many have complex histories worthy of detailed study.

Four Armenian manuscripts are displayed in the permanent exhibition of the Calouste Gulbenkian Museum in Lisbon. This small but significant group has been studied in detail for the first time as part of a doctoral project² examining these handwritten and illuminated codices through textual, visual, and material analysis.

The Armenian manuscripts in the Gulbenkian collection – a Bible (LA 152) and three Gospels (LA 193, LA 216, LA 253) – are outstanding examples from the seventeenth-century Armenian scriptoria of Constantinople, New Julfa (Isfahan), and Crimea. They illuminate the complex network of connections linking these communities at both local and global levels and reveal the cultural, social, and political realities of Armenians living far from their ancestral homeland.

The seventeenth century was a time of political fragmentation for the Armenian people, whose homeland came under Ottoman and Persian rule. Repressive conditions and shifting political boundaries prompted the establishment of thriving diaspora communities stretching from West to East. Among the principal centers of Armenian life abroad were Isfahan, Constantinople, and Crimea. Armenian merchants played a key role in the economic, social, and artistic vitality of these settlements³.

Supported by strong systems of patronage, relocated artists and artisans successfully transplanted and revived Armenian art in new cultural settings. Traditional artistic forms from historic Armenian regions found continuity in the

¹ V. NERSESSIAN, *Armenian Illuminated Gospel Books*, London 1978, p. 5–10.

² *Between Tradition and Innovation: An Interdisciplinary Approach in the Study of Seventeenth-Century Armenian Manuscripts*, supported by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia [FCT]), Ph.D grant: PD/BD/142866/2018), and Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian), doctoral grant for Armenian studies: No. 269685, 2022). The dissertation is available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10362/156948>.

³ R. GOSHGARIAN, *Armenian Global Connections in the Early Modern Period*, [in:] *Armenia. Art, Religion and Trade in the Middle Ages*, ed. H. C. EVANS, New York 2018, p. 171–177.

hands of seventeenth-century craftsmen who consciously maintained the practices of their predecessors. Manuscript art, in particular, flourished in these diasporic centers – geographically distant from the homeland, yet closely bound to it in spirit. The medieval manuscript traditions of Cilicia and Greater Armenia (Syunik⁴, Lake Van region) found renewed life in Isfahan, Constantinople, and Crimea⁴.

These centers were not isolated outposts but dynamic hubs of exchange. Goods, ideas, and people circulated through extensive mercantile networks. Artists and craftsmen often worked across multiple workshops, fostering a lively dialogue of artistic inspirations. Many manuscripts were commissioned by merchants. The revival of Armenian scriptoria in such diverse locations demonstrates both the enduring bonds to the homeland and the determination to preserve and transmit local artistic traditions. At the same time, this tradition remained open to outside influences, producing the eclectic style that characterizes the art of this period⁵.

The Gulbenkian Armenian codices first drew scholarly attention through an art-historical study of Bible LA 152⁶. That study opened new avenues for investigating the rich artistic features of these manuscripts within a broader comparative framework. This paper offers the first comprehensive examination of the art, history, and codicology of the three Armenian Gospels in the Gulbenkian collection.

The manuscripts' entry into Gulbenkian Collection

Calouste Sarkis Gulbenkian (1869–1955), an eminent entrepreneur in the oil industry, was of Armenian descent and born in Constantinople. Beyond his considerable commercial success, Gulbenkian was profoundly dedicated to philanthropy and the arts, to which he devoted a significant portion of his wealth. A passionate collector, he assembled an extensive and distinguished art collection over the course of his lifetime. In his final years, Gulbenkian settled in Lisbon, where – following his death – a museum and a foundation were established in his name. Today, the Calouste Gulbenkian Museum houses the remarkable body of artworks he acquired throughout his life⁷.

⁴ C. EVANS, S.L. MERIAN, *The Final Centuries – Armenian Manuscripts of the Diaspora*, [in:] *Treasures in Heaven – Armenian Illuminated Manuscripts*, ed. T.F. MATHEWS, R.S. WIECK, Princeton 1994, p. 104–115.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ H. GRIGORYAN, M.J. MELO, M.A. MIRANDA, J. RODRIGUES, *The Gulbenkian Bible (17th c.): An Interdisciplinary Study of a Precious Armenian Heritage*, [in:] *Art of the Armenian Diaspora. Proceedings of a Conference Held at the Ostrava University, Ostrava in June 2022*, ed. W. DELUGA, Warsaw–Toruń 2020, p. 59–75.

⁷ J.C.B. PEREIRA, *Calouste Gulbenkian: The Collector as Creator*, [in:] *Only the Best: Masterpieces of Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, Lisbon*, ed. K. BAETJER, J.D. DRAPER, New York 1999, p. 3.

Among the treasures of Gulbenkian's collection are several Armenian works, notably four illuminated manuscripts comprising one Bible and three Gospels. As with many other pieces in his collection, Gulbenkian personally acquired the three Armenian Gospels (LA 193, LA 216, and LA 253) through various intermediaries⁸. Specifically, LA 193 was purchased in 1926 in London from Kehyaian & Co., a company reputedly engaged in the trade of antique oriental carpets and other luxury goods. LA 216 was acquired in 1935 in Paris from the antiquarian bookseller Giraud-Badin. The provenance and circumstances of acquisition for LA 253, however, remain unknown. Initially kept in Gulbenkian's residences in Paris and London, these manuscripts were later transferred to Lisbon and have since formed part of the permanent exhibition of the Gulbenkian Museum.

The three Gospels were first described by the distinguished art historian Sirarpie Der Nersessian during the early years of the newly established museum⁹. Although subsequently referenced in several scholarly studies¹⁰, these manuscripts – unlike the Bible LA 152 – have attracted comparatively limited academic attention. A detailed codicological description of the three Gospels is provided in the Appendix.

Colophons and annotations

The trajectories of LA 193, LA 216, and LA 253 – from their places of origin to their eventual arrival in westernmost Europe – remain uncertain. In this respect, they share the common fate of numerous Armenian manuscripts that have been dispersed across collections worldwide. Nevertheless, careful study of the surviving colophons and annotations has enabled the reconstruction of the histories of LA 193 and LA 216, while the provenance of LA 253 remains obscure owing to the absence of a colophon. Complete transcriptions of the extant colophons in their original language have already been published¹¹.

LA 193 contains a brief colophon that identifies the manuscript's author as Nikoghayos, though it provides neither dates nor locations. Comparative iconographic

⁸ Documents no. MCG 01 470 and no. MCG 02085, Gulbenkian Archives, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon, consulted in October 2019.

⁹ Document no. MCG 04428, the dossier of Sirarpie Der Nersessian, Gulbenkian Archives, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon, consulted in October 2019.

¹⁰ A. KOUYMJIAN, D. KOUYMJIAN, *The Museum Calouste Built*, SAW 9/10, 1974, p. 7; S. DER NERSESSIAN, *L'Art Arménien*, Paris 1977, p. 233–236; M. ARAK'ELYAN, *Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Armenian Illuminated Manuscripts from Galicia, Podillia and Bukovyna*, [in:] *Armenian-Ukrainian Historical Contacts. Papers of the International Conference Held in Lviv*, ed. K. BARDAKJIAN, F. SYSYN, A. YASINOVSYI, Lviv 2011, p. 103.

¹¹ Հ. ԳՐԻԳՈՐԵԱՆ [H. GRIGOREAN], *Ցուցակ Լիսաբոնի Գիլյպենկեան թանգարանի հայերէն ձեռագրերի* [Catalogue of the Armenian Manuscripts from the Gulbenkian Museum of Lisbon], ԲՄ 34, 2022, p. 350–376.

analysis across a broad corpus of Armenian manuscripts confirms that LA 193 is the work of the renowned scribe and artist Nikoghayos – also known as Nikoghos, Nikoghayos Melanavor, or Tsaghkarar¹². His name is associated with the seventeenth-century Armenian scriptoria of Crimea, where he was active between 1647 and 1693, working primarily in the monastery of St Sargis in Kaffa¹³. This Gospel can therefore be securely attributed to the hand of Nikoghayos.

LA 216 contains a more extensive colophon, which provides richer information. The manuscript was copied in the Armenian scriptoria of New Julfa (Isfahan) by the scribe Gaspar and the artist Hayrapet. Gaspar – often styled Gaspar erets' – was among the most prolific scribes of New Julfa. Numerous Armenian manuscripts record his name in collaboration with leading artists of his time (Matenadaran MSS 191, 204¹⁴, 7614), including Hayrapet (Matenadaran MSS 189, 2399)¹⁵. Hayrapet was one of the most celebrated artists of the New Julfan scriptoria. In various colophons his name appears as Hayrapet Jughayets'i, varpet (Master) Hayrapet, or Herapet. He seems to have pursued a remarkably productive career spanning almost fifty-two years (1639–1691), contributing to a substantial number of manuscripts¹⁶. Notable examples of his work include the Gospels (Matenadaran MSS 2399, 7224) and the Bibles (Matenadaran MSS 201, 2587). Hayrapet frequently signed his name beneath the illustrations, as in LA 216. Alongside the names of the scribe and the artist, the colophon of LA 216 also records the name of Eghsbert', the woman who commissioned the Gospel, noting that her patronage was intended as a lasting memorial to herself and to her parents.

As previously noted, LA 253 lacks a preserved colophon. It contains only a later annotation, dated 1820, at the beginning of the codex, recording the names of Ōvanes and Nigar khat'un, most likely later owners of the manuscript. The Gospel is probably incomplete: on the final folio the text and the bird-shaped drawings outlined in red ink remain unfinished; several pages are missing and some gatherings are loose within the binding. Nevertheless, on the basis of its pictorial style, LA 253 can be attributed to the seventeenth-century Armenian scriptoria of Constantinople¹⁷.

¹² Mentioned also in the notes of Sirarpie Der Nersessian: Document no. MCG 04428...

¹³ Ա. ԳԵՈՐԳԵԱՆ [A. GEORGEAN], *Հայ մանրանկարիչներ, Մատենագիտութիւն, IX–XIX դդ.* [Armenian Miniature Painters, Bibliography, 9th–19th centuries], Գահիրէ [Cairo] 1998, p. 594.

¹⁴ *Ցուցակ ձեռագրաց Մաշտոցի անվան Մատենադարանի* [Catalogue of Manuscripts of Mashots' Matenadaran], ed. Լ. ԽԱՉԻՎՅԱՆ, Ա. ՄՆԱՏՎԿԱՆՅԱՆ [L. KHACH'IKYAN, A. MNATS' AKANYAN], vol. I, Երևան [Yerevan] 1965, p. 269, 272.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 268, 795.

¹⁶ Ա. ԳԵՈՐԳԵԱՆ, *Հայ մանրանկարիչներ...*, p. 328.

¹⁷ Mentioned in the notes of Sirarpie Der Nersessian: Document no. MCG 04428...

The art of illuminations

Gospel LA 193

LA 193 is among the most striking manuscripts in the Gulbenkian collection. Its pictorial program is conveyed through an arrangement of illuminations characteristic of Armenian manuscript art. At the opening of the Gospel are ten fully illuminated folios of Canon Tables, including the Eusebian Letter. All the Canons are richly adorned with floral and animal motifs in vivid colors. Portraits of Eusebius and Carpianus appear in the upper arches of the first two Canons, while the remaining eight are embellished with a variety of trees, vegetal ornaments, birds, and animals such as peacocks, roosters, partridges, lions, and monkeys. Each of these motifs carries a specific meaning and function within the context of the Canon Tables, as explained in several medieval texts by Armenian church fathers and theologians¹⁸.

Each Gospel begins with a portrait of its evangelist, followed by a fully illuminated Incipit page, the two facing one another across separate folios. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are depicted seated in a slightly inclined writing posture, whereas John is shown dictating his words to the young Prochoros. The Incipit pages display elaborately decorated headpieces, marginalia, and text written in ornate majuscule bird-letters, each initial incorporating the symbol of its respective evangelist. The Genealogy of Christ is presented in seventy-eight roundels (p. 292–295) within the Gospel of Luke. Other illuminations – including marginal ornaments and elaborated initial letters – are familiar features of Armenian manuscript art. Vegetal patterns and palmettes in the marginalia mark the beginnings of chapters, which typically commence with finely executed majuscule letters formed from interlaced ornaments and birds.

The manuscript's most original feature lies in its frieze-like narrative miniatures: tiny figures and forms integrated directly into the text on almost every folio, allowing the Gospel narrative to unfold visually before the reader. This distinctive device appears earlier in the so-called “Gospel of Eight Artists” (Matenadaran MS 7651, thirteenth–fourteenth centuries, Sis, Cilicia), produced in the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia (1198–1375) (Fig. 1). MS 7651 itself was copied from a Byzantine exemplar (Laurenziana MS Plut.6.23, 1001–1100) (Fig. 2), whose miniature style was already regarded as innovative within medieval Armenian scriptoria¹⁹. LA 193 thus attests to Nikoghayos's admiration for the miniature art of Cilician Armenia. Moreover, it is not the only copy of MS 7651 executed by

¹⁸ Վ. ՂԱԶԱՐՅԱՆ [V. GHAZARYAN], *Խորանների մեկնություններ* [Commentaries on Canon Tables], Yerevan 1995.

¹⁹ S. DER NERSESSIAN, *Miniature Painting in the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia from the Twelfth to the Fourteenth Century*, vol. I, Washington 1993, p. 104.



Fig. 1. The Massacre of the Innocents (Matthew 2:16–18). Left: LA 193, p. 36 (Crimea, 17th century) © Gulbenkian Museum; Right: Matenadaran MS 7651 (Sis, Cilicia, 13th–14th centuries) © Matenadaran.

Nikoghayos. He produced three known copies²⁰: a Gospel copied in Kaffa in 1667²¹ or perhaps 1672²² (Library of the Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan SSR)²³ and another in 1684 (Matenadaran MS 6341), which is nearly identical to the present manuscript, LA 193. Comparison of the illumination programs of LA 193 with the fourteenth-century prototype and the other two copies shows that LA 193 and MS 6341 adhere more closely to the original than does the Gospel of 1672. The latter contains over seventy marginal figurative miniatures, typically depicting Christ

²⁰ А. ГЕВОРКЯН, *Армянский миниатюрист XVII века Никогос Цахкарар*, ВОН 3 (322), 1970, р. 94; Э. КОРХМАЗЯН, *Армянская миниатюра Крыма (XIV–XVII вв)*, Ереван 1978, р. 79; Ա. ՔԵՆՈՎԵՍ, *Հայ մանրանկարիչներ...*, p. 594.

²¹ According to the Armenian Great Year.

²² According to the New Era and the coming of Christ.

²³ The black and white microfilm of this Gospel is in Matenadaran MS 51, see in А. ГЕВОРКЯН, *Армянский миниатюрист...*, p. 95. This manuscript's current state and location are unknown to us.

either alone or in interaction with other evangelical figures²⁴, which are absent from LA 193. Clearly, medieval Armenian manuscripts were highly valued and frequently reproduced in early modern Armenian scriptoria²⁵, demonstrating the enduring inheritance and continuity of artistic traditions in Armenian manuscript illumination well into the seventeenth century.



Fig. 2. Detail: *The Healing of the Demoniacs* (Matthew 8:16–17) and *Christ and the Disciple in the Boat* (Matthew 8:19). Top: LA 193, p. 61 (Crimea, 17th century) © Gulbenkain Museum; Bottom: Laurenziana Plut.6.23, f. 15v (Byzantium, 1001–1100) © Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana.

²⁴ E.g. “True teaching of Law” (p. 33), “Messengers from John the Baptist” (p. 64), “The parable of the Weeds” (p. 77), “Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath” (p. 176), “The arrest of Jesus” (p. 251), etc. In some cases other marginal figures are depicted, such as “Joseph holding two doves” (p. 277).

²⁵ There are even exact indications of that. For instance, the colophon of an Armenian Gospel from 1669–1670 (Freer MS 36.15) mentions that its Canon Tables are copied from an earlier example (Walters MS 539) that seems to be illustrated in 1262 by famous artist T’oros Roslin (see S. DER NERSESSIAN, *Armenian Manuscripts in the Freer Gallery of Art*, Washington 1963, no. 6, p. 94; EADEM, *Études Byzantines et Arméniennes*, vol. I, Louvain 1973, p. 523).

Gospel LA 216

LA 216 is another outstanding codex in the Gulbenkian collection. Its particular distinction lies in its small dimensions, which highlight the artist's exceptional ability to execute finely detailed miniatures on a remarkably minute scale. In addition, the codex is encased in a precious silver cover of refined craftsmanship. The artistic character of this manuscript reflects the style of seventeenth-century New Julfan scriptoria and bears witness to the continuity of the painting traditions established by the renowned master Hakob Jughayets' i. Hayrapet, the illuminator of LA 216, clearly perpetuates the workmanship of his predecessors while developing a personal and distinctive approach.

The arrangement of the Canon Tables and the evangelist portraits with their corresponding Incipit pages in LA 216 follows the pattern observed in LA 193. The ten Canon Tables, including the Eusebian Letter, present striking compositions of interlaced forms and vibrant colors. Hayrapet's inspiration and technical skill produce a synthesis of traditional Cilician and New Julfan elements. His hand is recognizable in the robust forms, while the heavily decorated headpieces and monumental columns of the Canons are filled with intertwined vegetal motifs, birds, and animals. The influence of Cilician models is particularly evident in the headpieces of the Canon Tables, which may be compared, for example, with Topkapi MS 122 (ff. 7v–8r, 1v–2r, 3v–4r), Matenadaran MS 7644 (f. 5v) (Fig. 3), Matenadaran MS 2629 (f. 3v), and Venice MS 1635 (f. 8r)²⁶.

The four evangelists in LA 216 are depicted in a writing posture, each accompanied by the symbol traditionally associated with his Gospel, as in other manuscripts illuminated by Hayrapet and his disciple Astvatsatur in New Julfa, Isfahan (Matenadaran MSS 2399, 6772). The portrait frames are elaborately ornamented in a manner recalling the style of Hakob Jughayets' i, and their backgrounds are lavishly gilded. Hayrapet's name ("Hayrapet tsaghkogh") is inscribed at the base of the portrait frames of Mark, Luke, and John with Procorus. Each Gospel opens with an Incipit page comprising an ornate headpiece, marginal palmettes, a text incipit written in majuscule bird-letters, and large initial letters formed from the symbols of the evangelists. The headpiece of Matthew's Incipit page includes a representation of the Deesis – Christ flanked by the Virgin and John the Baptist – arranged within three upper semi-arches. At the beginning of Matthew's Gospel, seven consecutive folios present the Genealogy of Christ in thirty-nine roundels, followed by a full-page miniature of the Tree of Jesse. This theme of Christ's genealogy appears in other Gospels illuminated by Hayrapet, who often collaborated with Astvatsatur (e.g. Matenadaran MSS 6765, 6772, 6774).

²⁶ See reproductions in S. DER NERSESSIAN, *Manuscrits Arméniens Illustrés des XII^e, XIII^e, et XIV^e Siècles de la Bibliothèque des Pères Mekhitharistes de Venise*, Paris 1937, Album, Pl. XVIII for Venice MS 1635 (f. 8r); EADEM, *Études Byzantines...*, vol. II, p. 87–88, 93, Figs. 318–323 for Topkapi MS 122, and Fig. 342 for Matenadaran MS 7644 (f. 5v); and in EADEM, *Miniature Painting...*, vol. II, p. 57–59 for Matenadaran MS 2629 (f. 3v).

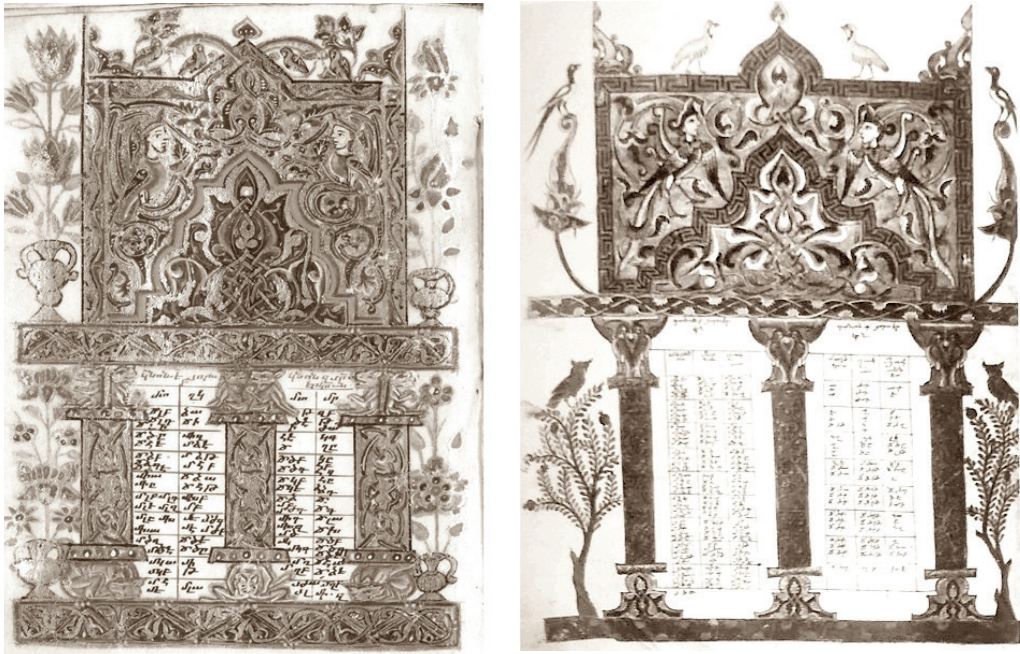


Fig. 3. Canon Tables. Left: LA 216, f. 5r (1686, New Julfa) © Gulbenkian Museum; Right: Matenadaran MS 7644, f. 5v (13th century, Cilicia) © Matenadaran.

Narrative scenes from the Gospels appear within the text itself as small rectangular miniatures corresponding to the relevant passages. This system of illumination distinguishes LA 216 from other manuscripts illuminated by Hayrapet, in which the evangelical scenes generally precede the text at the beginning of the codex (e.g. Matenadaran MSS 2399, 6774, 6782, 7237). Ornate initial letters introduce most chapters. A particularly charming feature introduced by Hayrapet is the decoration of the text with zoomorphic or anthropomorphic majuscule letters representing the symbols of the evangelists: in Matthew's Gospel the initials are formed entirely of angels, whereas the Gospels of Mark, Luke, and John contain letters shaped as lions, oxen, and birds respectively. The manuscript is further distinguished by its vivid marginal flower illuminations (Fig. 4). The colourful profusion of carnations, irises, tulips, and lilies creates a striking visual impression. Hayrapet employed similar floral marginalia in the Gospel he illuminated in 1691 in New Julfa (Matenadaran MS 247). The naturalistic character of these flowers sets them apart from the more conventional vegetal patterns of other Armenian Gospels.



Fig. 4. Details: Flowers in marginalia. LA 216 (New Julfa, 1686) © Gulbenkian Museum.

These stylistic features reveal a novel approach developed by Hayrapet over the course of his long artistic career. Yet a notable continuity in his style emerges when LA 216 is compared with Matenadaran MS 2399, an earlier manuscript produced in collaboration with the scribe Gaspar. Although three decades separate the two works – MS 2399 dating to 1656 and LA 216 to 1686 – Hayrapet’s mastery remains consistent.

Gospel LA 253

Gospel LA 253 lacks a preserved colophon; thus its date, place of production, scribe, and patron remain unknown. Sirarpie Der Nersessian, in her earliest observations, attributed the manuscript to the Constantinopolitan scriptoria²⁷.

Unlike LA 193 and LA 216, LA 253 begins with the so-called Christ cycle, a characteristic feature of Armenian Gospel illumination²⁸. This sequence of full-page miniatures narrates episodes from the life of Christ, typically from the Annunciation to the Resurrection, and precedes the Canon Tables. The number and subjects of the miniatures vary from Gospel to Gospel. The Christ cycle in LA 253 includes the Annunciation, Nativity, Presentation at the Temple, Baptism, Raising of Lazarus, Entry into Jerusalem, Washing of the Feet, Betrayal, Crucifixion, Descent from the Cross, Ascension, Pentecost, and Second Coming²⁹. These are followed by nine illuminated folios of Canon Tables, including the Eusebian Letter. The first folio of the Eusebian Letter is missing; the series of Canons begins instead with the continuation, whose headpiece features the figure of Carpianus. The four Gospels then commence in the usual order, each introduced by a full-page evangelist portrait and an Incipit page. The text is further embellished with a few marginal figurative miniatures³⁰, a variety of ornamental motifs, and rubricated incipits adorned with bird-letters and other zoomorphic or decorative initials.

Both the full-page miniatures and the ornaments reveal the work of a highly accomplished artist and closely recall the style of medieval Armenian illumination, though LA 253 is clearly a seventeenth-century manuscript. In seeking to establish its precise date and historical context, extensive comparative studies were undertaken, focusing primarily on the miniatures of the Christ cycle and the evangelist portraits.

A particularly striking feature of the Gospel is the execution of the evangelist portraits in a highly classical style, strongly reminiscent of Byzantine models. At first glance, the skill of the anonymous artist might suggest a medieval origin. Our research, however, shows that comparable evangelist portraits occur in several Armenian manuscripts. The portraits in LA 253 are almost identical to

²⁷ Document no. MCG 04428...

²⁸ Մ. ՄԱԹԵՆՍՅԱՆ, Ա. ԱՎԵՏԻՍՅԱՆ [K. MAT'EVOSYAN, A. AVETISYAN], *Ավետարանական պատկերներ, Տերունական շարքի 12 գլխավոր պատկերները* [Gospel Illustrations: The 12 Main Illustrations of the Series of Lord], Երևան [Yerevan] 1993; D. ΚΟΥΥΜՋΙΑՆ, *Some Iconographical Questions About the Christ Cycle in Armenian Manuscripts and Early Printed Books, Le Sacre Scrittura e Loro Interpretazioni*, OAm 4, 2015, p. 121–143.

²⁹ Most probably, the scenes of the Transfiguration, Harrowing of Hell, Resurrection, and Last Judgment originally existed, but are now missing. This assumption is supported also by the evidence that the third gathering (ff. 18r–26v) that follows the Second Coming, consists of nine folios from which three are probably missing.

³⁰ Images of John the Baptist (f. 32v, Matthew 3:1), Joseph of Arimathea (f. 90v, Matthew 27:57; f. 138v, Mark 15:43; f. 214v, Luke 23:50; f. 272r, John 19:38), Mary Magdalene (f. 91v, Matthew 28:1), Blind Man of Jericho (f. 199r, Luke 18:35).

those of Matenadaran MS 2629 (1272–1278, Gospel, Sis/Cilicia) (Fig. 5). Further close parallels can be found in Armenian Gospels such as Jerusalem MS 2568 (13th c., Prince Vasak's Gospel, Cilicia), Beirut MS (1297, Cilicia), British Library MS Or. 5626 (1282, Cilicia), Matenadaran MS 6290 (1295, Cilicia), and Jerusalem MS 2563 (1272, Cilicia)³¹. All these examples originate from the thirteenth-century scriptoria of the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia and attest to the revival and enduring influence of medieval artistic traditions adopted by early modern Armenian miniaturists.



Fig. 5. Portrait of Evangelist Matthew. Left: LA 253, f. 28v (Constantinople, 17th century) © Gulbenkian Museum; Right: Matenadaran MS 2629, f. 13v (Cilicia, 13th century) © Matenadaran.

³¹ Some reproductions and more details on the mentioned Gospels can be found in the literature. For Matenadaran MS 2629 see *Մայր ցուցակ հայերէն ձեռագրաց Մաշտոցի անուան Մատենադարանի* [General Catalogue of Armenian Manuscripts of Mashtots' Matenadaran], vol. VIII, ed. Գ. ՏԵՐ-ՎԱՐԴԱՆԵԱՆ [G. TĒR-VARDANEAN], Երևան [Yerevan] 2013, p. 810–812; *Armenia. Art, Religion...*, p. 156; S. DER NERSESSIAN, *Miniature Painting...*, vol. II, p. 157–159, illustration no. 418 (f. 13v – Matthew, f. 92v – Mark, f. 139v – Luke, f. 221v – John and Prochoros). See more reproductions in *ibidem*, vol. II, for Jerusalem MS 2568 illustration no. 413 (f. 94v – Mark); for Beirut MS illustrations no. 532 (f. 15v – Matthew), no. 533 (f. 104v – Mark), no. 534 (f. 163v – Luke), no. 535 (f. 257v – John and Prochoros); for British MS Or. 5626 illustration no. 518 (f. 101v – Mark); for Matenadaran MS 6290 illustration no. 525 (f. 14v – Matthew, f. 103v – Mark, f. 162v – Luke, f. 261v – John and Prochoros); and for Jerusalem MS 2563 illustration no. 398 (f. 115v – Mark).

Further evidence emerged from an examination of two seventeenth-century Armenian manuscripts that contain almost identical evangelist portraits: Matenadaran MS 204 (Bible, 1660, probably New Julfa)³² and Matenadaran MS 248 (Gospel, 1656, New Julfa)³³. The iconography of many scenes in the Christ cycle³⁴, as well as the decoration of the Incipit pages and numerous initials in LA 253³⁵, also closely resembles that of Matenadaran MS 248. Unfortunately, the colophon of MS 248, like that of LA 253, does not preserve the names of the scribe or illuminator. MS 204, a Bible copied by the scribe Gaspar – likely the same Gaspar associated with the Gulbenkian Gospel LA 216 – contains a cryptogram decipherable as “Step’anos,” probably indicating the artist’s name. The evangelist portraits in this Bible (ff. 468v, 484v, 495v, 512v) bear a strong resemblance to those in LA 253, while the carnations in the headpieces and marginalia recall the floral ornamentation found in LA 216, illuminated by Hayrapet in New Julfa.

Beyond the evangelist portraits, the full-page narrative illuminations of LA 253 find close iconographic parallels in other seventeenth-century Armenian manuscripts, including Paris MS Smith-Lesouëf 252 (1654, Gospel, Isfahan), Morgan MS M.621 (1650, Gospel, Constantinople), and Matenadaran MS 236 (1646, Gospel, Constantinople) (Fig. 6). In Morgan MS M.621 and Matenadaran MS 236, the evangelist portraits and Incipit pages differ in approach from those of LA 253, yet the iconography of the Christ cycle closely matches the style of LA 253.

These comparisons confirm that LA 253 belongs to the corpus of Armenian Gospels produced in the seventeenth century, most probably in Constantinople. The identities of its scribe and artist, however, remain unknown – likely lost with the missing folios of the codex. Further investigation and broader comparative research may eventually help to reconstruct the original history of this richly illuminated manuscript.

³² See more in *Մայր ցուցակ հայերէն ձեռագրաց Մաշտոցի անուան Մատենադարանի* [General Catalogue of Armenian Manuscripts of Mashtots’ Matenadaran], vol. I, ed. Ս. ՄԱՍՏՈՒՄՅԱՆ, Օ. ԵԳԱՆՅԱՆ [A. MNATS’AKANYAN, O. EGANYAN], Երևան [Yerevan] 1984, p. 899–906; Ս. ԳԵՈՐԳԵԱՆ, *Հայ մանրանկարիչներ...*, p. 714.

³³ See more in *Մայր ցուցակ...*, vol. I, p. 1073–1076; Ս. ԳԵՈՐԳԵԱՆ [A. GEORGEAN], *Անանուն հայ մանրանկարիչներ, Մատենագիտություն, IX–XIX դդ.* [Anonymous Armenian Miniature Painters, Bibliography, 9th–19th centuries], Գահիրէ [Cairo] 2005, p. 464.

³⁴ The iconography differs in the scenes of Annunciation, Nativity, Presentation at the Temple, and Ascension.

³⁵ Such as bird-letters “Ե” (e.g. LA 253, ff. 42r, 69v with Matenadaran MS 248, ff. 52v, 72v) and “Յ” (e.g. LA 253, ff. 50r, 224r with Matenadaran MS 248, ff. 61v, 264r) with their not very often found forms.



Fig. 6. The Baptism. From left to right: LA 253, f. 8r (Constantinople, 17th century) © Gulbenkian Museum; Morgan MS M.621, f. 6r (Constantinople, 1650) © Morgan Library; Matenadaran MS 236, f. 7r (Constantinople, 1636) © Matenadaran.

Color in the illuminations

The color palette, a defining feature of these seventeenth-century Armenian manuscripts, provides valuable insight into the artistic practices and materials employed during this period (Fig. 7). The use of costly pigments reflects the refined tastes of the Armenian merchant communities and suggests the circulation of rare materials through the trade networks linking Constantinople, Isfahan/New Julfa, and Crimea. The palette further underscores the continuity of medieval traditions in early modern scriptorial practice, as many of the pigments correspond to those long established in medieval illumination. This observation accords with the pigment analyses conducted by Thomas Mathews and his team, which document the chromatic repertoire of Armenian manuscripts from the tenth through the sixteenth centuries produced in a range of Armenian scriptoria³⁶.

The principal pigments identified in the Gulbenkian manuscripts include lapis lazuli, vermilion, minium, orpiment, organic reds, and mixtures of blue with yellows and organic reds to produce greens and purples, as well as lead white, carbon black, and gold³⁷. The greens appear to derive from either malachite or vergaut.

³⁶ C. EVANS, S.L. MERIAN, *The Final Centuries...*, p. 104–115.

³⁷ H. GRIGORYAN, M. VIEIRA, P. NABAIS, R. ARAUJO, M.J. MELO, M. MANSO, M.A. MIRANDA, J. RODRIGUES, *Exceptional Illuminated Manuscripts at the Gulbenkian Museum: A Bible and Three Gospels*

Vergaut – a mixture of orpiment and indigo – constitutes the dominant green in the Gospels LA 216 and LA 253, produced in Isfahan and Constantinople respectively, whereas malachite serves as the primary green in Gospel LA 193 from Crimea. A potentially significant discovery in LA 216 is the identification of a cobalt blue pigment: traces of this blue were detected in the calf symbol of the Evangelist Luke (f. 141v) and in the vestment of the Evangelist John (f. 213v), suggesting the use of smalt. This, however, remains a preliminary hypothesis that requires further analytical confirmation, highlighting both the ongoing nature of this research and the possibility of future revelations.



Fig. 7. The colors used in the Gospels LA 193 (first column), LA 216 (second column), and LA 253 (third column) through details of architecture and ornaments © Gulbenkian Museum.

Produced in the Armenian Diaspora, Heri 6.3, 2023, p. 3211–3231. XRF (Energy dispersive X-ray spectrometry), FORS (Fiber-Optics Reflectance Spectroscopy), and Raman spectroscopies allowed the identification of the pigments present in the paints.

Lapis lazuli, a precious and symbolically charged pigment, merits special attention. It constitutes the principal blue in all the Gulbenkian Gospels except LA 253, where azurite also plays an important role in the illuminations. Among other costly colors are lake pigments – responsible for the brilliant reds, pinks, and purples – derived from carminic acid obtained from scale insects. Gold is lavishly employed across all four manuscripts, enriching backgrounds, ornaments, and text alike.

Although the manuscripts share many of the same pigments, the methods of their application differ, reflecting each artist's distinctive approach to color and design³⁸. In their unique and individual expressions of artistic creativity and innovation, these works stand as a vivid testament to the enduring splendor of medieval Armenian art.

Conclusions

The comparative analysis of the three Armenian Gospels (LA 193, LA 216, and LA 253) in the Gulbenkian collection demonstrates that each manuscript constitutes a distinctive testimony to seventeenth-century Armenian art, produced within the diaspora communities of Constantinople, New Julfa, and Crimea. The sustained production of handwritten and illuminated codices during this period attests to a continuing social demand and to the enduring cultural value of such works. Two of the Gospels, LA 193 and LA 216, can be securely attributed to renowned masters of their time: Nikoghayos Melanavor, the scribe and artist active in Crimea (LA 193), and Hayrapet, the illuminator, in collaboration with the scribe Gaspar, active in New Julfa (LA 216). Although the colophon of Gospel LA 253 is not fully preserved, it has nonetheless been possible to confirm its attribution to the Constantinopolitan school, while a possible link between this milieu and New Julfa cannot be ruled out. Further comparative research focusing on the iconographic, palaeographic, and codicological features of LA 253 may eventually permit the identification of its creators.

The artistic features of these three Gospels reflect the aesthetic preferences and scriptorial practices of their respective communities, revealing a pronounced seventeenth-century Armenian inclination toward medieval models. This continuity of local tradition in manuscript art coincides with the period in which new Western influences were emerging in many Armenian manuscripts, particularly Bibles. The steadfast adherence to indigenous, predominantly medieval traditions is confirmed not only through iconographic analysis but also through the material study of these Gulbenkian Gospels, which demonstrates the continued use of the

³⁸ *Ibidem.*

pigment palettes characteristic of medieval Armenian illumination. In this way, the seventeenth-century Armenian scriptoria embody a conscious revaluation of medieval artistic heritage, ensuring the revival and perpetuation of this legacy across the dispersed Armenian communities.

APPENDIX

Codicological description

A concise codicological overview of manuscripts LA 192, LA 216, and LA 253 (Figures 8–9) is provided below. In these manuscripts, the beginning and end of each gathering are marked by an Armenian letter with a specific alphanumerical value, which is reproduced accordingly. Arabic numerals accompanying each letter indicate the number of folios contained within the respective gathering. When the identifying letter for a gathering is absent, it is substituted with an Arabic numeral. A reference table listing the Armenian letters, their Latin transliterations, and corresponding alphanumerical values is included at the end of the description (Table 1).

Gospel LA 193

DATE: 17th century (1647–1693). PROVENANCE: Crimea. SCRIBE: Nikoghayos. ILLUMINATOR: Nikoghayos. PATRON: unknown.

SIZE: 176 x 133. FOLIOS: 277+2 (posterior pagination in pencil: 1–554, references in this description are to the posterior pagination, therefore, the recto and verso of each folio are not indicated), unwritten: 1–3, 6–7, 10–11, 14–15, 18–19, 22–27, 175, 548–549, 551, probably missing between 228–229. GATHERINGS: 1 x 13 + A-IG x 12 (T', IG x 7, ZhT' x 10). SCRIPTURE: *bolorgir* (round minuscule), one column, 23 lines. MATERIAL: parchment, inks and pigments, gold. BINDING: brown leather on wooden boards, silver plaques overlaid on the outer faces of the left and right boards, remnants of two fabric straps attached to the outer face of the right board, lining of protective parchment attached to the boards. END-LEAVES: 1 (left) + 1 (right), parchment, unwritten. CONDITION: good.

ILLUMINATIONS: ornated letters and marginalia, narrative miniatures in almost all the folios, Canon Tables (4–5, 8–9, 12–13, 16–17, 20–21), ornated Incipit pages (29, 177, 273, 429), evangelists: Matthew (28), Mark (176), Luke (272), John (428).

Gospel LA 216

DATE: 1686. PROVENANCE: New Julfa. SCRIBE: Gaspar. ILLUMINATOR: Hayrapet. PATRON: Eghsabert⁶.

SIZE: 108 x 079. FOLIOS: 266, unwritten: 2v–3r, 4v–5r, 6v–7r, 8v–9r, 10v–11r, 139r–141r, 213r, 264v–265r, 266r–266v. GATHERINGS: 1 x 10 + A-IA x 12 (Z x 14, ZhA x 8) + 1 x 6. SCRIPTURE: *bolorgir* (round minuscule), two columns, 25 lines.

MATERIAL: parchment, inks and pigments, gold. BINDING: brown leather on wooden boards, double silver cover, fore-edge flap with two silver straps on the right board, lining of stamped fabric. ENDLEAVES: probably missing. CONDITION: good.

ILLUMINATIONS: ornated letters and marginalia, narrative images in almost all the folios, Canon Tables: (1v–2r, 3v–4r, 5v–6r, 7v–8r, 9v–10r), ornated Incipit pages (12r, 92r, 142r, 214r), evangelists: Matthew (11v), Mark (91v), Luke (141v), John (213v), Genealogy of Christ in 39 roundels (12v–15v), Tree of Jesse (16v).

Gospel LA 253

DATE: 17th century. PROVENANCE: Constantinople. SCRIBE, ILLUMINATOR, PATRON: unknown.

SIZE: 154 x 114. FOLIOS: 280, unwritten: 1r–1v, 2v–5r, 6v–7r, 8v, 9v–10r, 11v–12r, 13v–14r, 15r, 16v–17r, 18v–19r, 20v–21r, 22v–23r, 24v–25r, 26v–28r, 94r, 143r, 278r–280v; probably missing between: 8v–9r, 14v–15r, 17v–18r, 36v–37r, 38v–39r, 82v–83r; protective paper leaves added later between 5v–6r (double leaves) and between 7v–8r, 8v–9r, 10v–11r, 12v–13r, 15v–16r, 25v–26r, 28v–29r, 94v–95r, 143v–144r, 219v–220r (single leaf). GATHERINGS: 3 (4+13+9) + A-IA x 12 (B x 8, Ē x 10) + IB (5+13). SCRIPTURE: *bolorgir* (round minuscule), two columns, 23 lines. MATERIAL: parchment, inks and pigments, gold. BINDING: brown stamped leather on wooden boards, fore-edge flap on the right board, striped fabric lining. ENDLEAVES: probably missing. CONDITION: good.

ILLUMINATIONS: ornated letters and marginalia, full-page narrative miniatures (5v–6r, 7v–8r, 9r, 10v–11r, 12v–13r, 14v, 15v–16r, 17v), Canon Tables (18r, 19v–20r, 21v–22r, 23v–24r, 25v–26r), ornated Incipit pages (29r, 95r, 144r, 220r), evangelists: Matthew (28v), Mark (94v), Luke (143v), John (219v), unfinished bird-shape outlines in red and unfinished text (277v), blank folios lined in red (278r–279r).



Fig. 8. Bindings of the three Gospels. From left to right: LA 193 (Crimea, 17th century); LA 253 (Constantinople, 17th century); LA 216 (New Julfa, 1686) © Gulbenkian Museum.

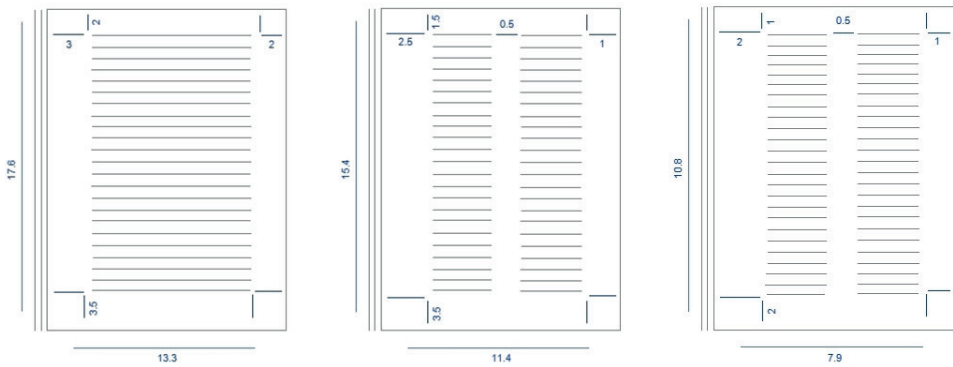


Fig. 9. Page layout for each manuscript (dimensions are given in cm). From left to right: LA 193 (Crimea, 17th century); LA 253 (Constantinople, 17th century); LA 216 (New Julfa, 1686).

Table 1. The capital letters of the Armenian alphabet with corresponding transliteration and alphanumerical value.

Armenian Letter	Ա	Բ	Գ	Դ	Ե	Զ	Է	Ը	Թ
Transliteration	A	B	G	D	E	Z	Ē	Ĕ	T'
Alphanumerical Value	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Armenian Letter	Ճ	Ի	Լ	Խ	Ծ	Կ	Հ	Ձ	Ղ
Transliteration	Zh	I	L	Kh	Ts	K	H	Dz	Gh
Alphanumerical Value	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90
Armenian Letter	Ճ	Մ	Ի	Ն	Շ	Ո	Չ	Պ	Ջ
Transliteration	Ch	M	Y	N	Sh	O	Ch'	P	J
Alphanumerical Value	100	200	300	400	500	600	700	800	900
Armenian Letter	Ռ	Ս	Վ	Տ	Ր	Ց	Ւ	Փ	Ք
Transliteration	R	S	V	T	R	Ts'	W	P'	K'
Alphanumerical Value	1000	2000	3000	4000	5000	6000	7000	8000	9000

Acronyms for manuscript collections

Beirut	Arisdaghesian Collection (private), Beirut
British	The British Library, London
Freer	The Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
Jerusalem	St. James of Jerusalem, Armenian Patriarchate Library, Jerusalem
Laurenziana	Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Florence
Matenadaran	The Mesrop Mashtots Institute of Ancient Manuscripts, Yerevan
Morgan	The Pierpont Morgan Library & Museum, New York
Paris	Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris

Topkapi	The Topkapi Palace Museum, Istanbul
Venice	The Mekhitarist Library of San Lazzaro Congregation, Venice
Walters	The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, Maryland

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