Installation view of Connecting Threads / Survivor Objects at Tufts University Art Galleries, 2021, featuring in foreground, a saghavard or priest's hat of 1822 from Tokat, and in the background, at left an 18th-19th century altar curtain from India or Iran, and at right, one made by Hakob of Tokat from 1766 (Photo Julia Featheringill)

ARTS & CULTURE TEXTILES TUFTS UNIVERSITY

Armenian Church Textiles Displayed at Tufts University

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by **Aram Arkun**

MEDFORD, Mass. – The Aidekman Arts Center of the Tufts University Art Galleries presents an exhibition of Armenian church textiles from August 5 to December 5 called Connecting Threads / Survivor Objects. It is a small but varied collection of 11 embroidered, block printed and painted objects that are rare surviving legacies of Armenian culture. The exhibition was organized by Christina Maranci, Arthur H. Dadian and Ara T.

Oztemel Professor of Armenian Art and Architecture, and Chiara Pidatella, Research Curator.

Dr. Christina Maranci

Dr. Maranci related the origins of the exhibit: "Basically it came about by me poking around through the website of the Armenian Museum and also the Museum of Fine Arts and noticing the wealth of liturgical textiles. I thought it would be a nice way to exhibit Armenian art by looking at textiles because of the ways in which textiles speak to the early modern experience. I talked about it with Dina Deitsch, the director of the art galleries. That is how it came about and it seemed like a really great opportunity to teach."

Saghavard (priest's crown), 1822, with metallic thread, sequins and brass on blue velvet, by unknown maker in Tokat (photo courtesy Armenian Museum of America)

The materials for the exhibition emerged from the work conducted in Maranci's spring 2021 seminar, The Threads of Survival, which included ten undergraduate and graduate students. She said, "My intention was never for this to be a large show. It was always to be something that was the product of student research. The crucial thing actually was taking objects that had been almost completely unstudied, barely catalogued, and to do deep research on them. Each student was assigned a single object, and had a chance to do that kind of careful work with a single object over the course of a semester."

Embroidered cross, probably 18th century, by unknown maker possibly in Constantinople, with gold, beige, white, and blue threat on red velvet (photo courtesy Armenian Museum of America)

Deitsch said, "For us as an academic art space, what was exciting was the collaboration that we were hoping to do with Christina and Chiara, and the fact that the students' scholarship was able to have a physical realization in an exhibition. I think it was a wonderful collaboration between the Armenian Museum of America and eventually the MFA [Museum of Fine Arts] that Chiara managed from start to finish."

Deitsch said that such a collaboration between students, faculty and the galleries had not been done recently, though historically there had been such efforts. One of the things that shifted was that Tufts acquired the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, and a stronger relationship was established with the MFA. "So we were thinking through different models. This was almost a prototype of a model that was really successful and exciting. This was something we tried to link to the galleries, to connect the faculty's research, but we had not been able to do it so profoundly and robustly. This was the first iteration of that," Deitsch stated.

It is also an unusual exhibition for the galleries because they usually display contemporary art, from the 20th century to the present, and don't often show historical works, Deitsch said. The Armenian focus adds to its uniqueness.

With the exception of two objects, a fragment of a late 18th century altar curtain possibly from Constantinople, loaned by Boston's Museum of Fine Arts for the show, and a facsimile of a Gospel book, from Tufts University's Tisch Library, the remainder of the exhibition consists of textiles from the Armenian Museum of America in Watertown, Mass. There are many Armenian textile collections elsewhere in the United States but Maranci pointed out that these textiles are delicate objects, making transportation complex, so the choice of Boston-area institutions was intended to allow students easy access to working with items.

Installation view of Connecting Threads / Survivor Objects at Tufts University Art Galleries, 2021 (Photo Julia Featheringill)

Maranci examined what was in these collections and selected suitable objects. She explained: "I chose things that have inscriptions, for the most part, because I wanted students to be able to do the research about where the items came from. I wanted objects in general to have iconography, so they could study where does this artistic tradition come from, and I wanted to have a range of objects, so that we could talk about the different kinds of textiles and how they were used. It was deliberate and I was glad to get the okay from both museums to be able to do that."

As only two of the students could read Armenian, reading the texts was a group effort involving the Armenian Museum staff, Maranci herself, and her graduate student Erin Piñon, who in fact co-taught the class. Many of the inscriptions are in *gabakir*, with ligatures or combined letters, and many letters are also dropped, making them difficult to decipher even for readers of Armenian.

Maranci used the textiles as a starting point for the students to learn about various dimensions of the Armenian experience. In class, she said, "We talked not just about history and artisanship but about liturgy, and how the object functions within its liturgical context. We talked about iconography and the viewers' experience. We had clergy come and lecture to us. I think it was meaningful for the students to have this rounded sense about how the textiles functioned."

The exhibition includes "survivor objects" as part of its title because the communities which created them no longer exist. They have disappeared or have been exterminated, and often even the physical traces of the Armenians have been eliminated. Consequently, Maranci said that the class talked a lot about cultural genocide. The brochure accompanying the exhibition mentions not only the 19th century Hamidian massacres of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire and the Armenian Genocide of the World War I period, but also ongoing destruction of Armenian culture by Azerbaijan as a result of the Nagorno-Karabakh or Artsakh war of 2020.

The Textiles

Topics: textiles, Tufts University

People: Chiara Pidatella, Christina Maranci, Dina Deitsch

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The students uncovered interesting information in their studies, as each item has its own story. Maranci gave the example of a cope (priest's robe) or *shurchar* from Surabaya, which is made of a special Indonesian fabric called *prada*, gilded with gold leaf, dust or thread. She said, "We had a student working on it who happens to be of Indonesian background who happens to be half-Indonesian, and so had a particular interest in this region, The cope is a product of the Armenian trading colony that was established there in the 18th century, and into the 19th century. She was able to track down what we believe is the family of the patron who produced it and whose name is on the clasp of the *shurchar*. This is the Apkarian or Apcar family, very famous in the context of Indonesia and Surabaya in particular."

Shurchar (cope or priest's robe), by unknown maker in Surabaya, Indonesia, dated from the late 19th century to as late as 1933, with silk, metallic thread, machine lace trim, metal clasps; lining printed cotton and silk (photo courtesy Armenian Museum of America)

The students approached the liturgical vestments, curtains and objects in different ways, depending on their personal interests and expertise. Maranci pointed out that the largest piece in the exhibition, a liturgical curtain made in Yevdokia (Tokat), was destined, according to its inscription, for the church of Surp Kevork (Saint George) in Mardin. This church, unlike many others, survived but was listed as one of Europa Nostra's seven most endangered sites in 2013. Maranci said, "My student in the School of Fine Arts, who was taking my seminar, digitally reattached the curtain to its original interior space in a wonderful way."

A potentially controversial conclusion concerns a cotton ecclesiastical curtain which is resist-dyed, printed and painted in India or Iran in the 18th or 19th century. Maranci and her student Atineh Movsesian consulted with people who work on Isfahan and New Julfa, in Iran, and experts on India, but they found nothing obvious indicating it belongs to artistic traditions in those areas. It is an unusual curtain with a *huqqa* (hookah) smoker alongside traditional images of saints, ecclesiastics, and Adam and Eve, among others.

Christ is featured in profile. Most unusual, however, is an inscription which reads in Armenian "Witness Mahemed" and a seal bearing a hand below the inscription to its right.

Curtain by unknown maker, India or Iran, 18th-19th century, resist-dyed, printed and painted cotton, which includes the inscription in Armenian of Witness Mahemed (photo courtesy Armenian Museum of America)

Maranci cautiously speculates, "I may be wrong, but I think what we might be looking at, based on the iconography and the inscription, is evidence for the longtime tradition that the Prophet Muhammad insured the safety of Armenian Christian sites in and around

Jerusalem. We know this tradition from Armenian medieval sources. This might be a very late visualization of that decree, or edict, of the prophet."

She added that this shows how much work remains to be done on such curtains. This particular object had previously been entirely unstudied. She added, "If I am right, then we have precious unique testimony for something that was known from sources but not in visual terms." She went on to raise more interesting questions, such as what community made this object, and, if indeed it referred to the famous "Oath of the Prophet," why was this important for that community to this extent?

The Installation

Maranci and her students provided the texts for the installation of the exhibition. She said, "This was the first time that I was involved the installation of a professional show, where there are discussions about how the walls should look, what color the paint should be, and so on". There is a lot that goes into it and it was really a conversation. Sometimes I was a part of it and sometimes I wasn't." She provided ideas about how the accompanying map should look and what made sense about placement of the liturgical textiles which originally would have been seen in a church, moving about in ceremonies, and not statically hanging from walls or under vitrines. There was an attempt, she said, to give a sense of the pre-modern meaning of the objects by avoiding a sterile, traditionally white gallery space.

Dr. Chiara Pidatella in front of an altar curtain loaned by the Armenian Museum of America (photo Aram Arkun)

Pidatella, Research Curator at the Tufts University Art Galleries, said that the exhibition was two years in the making. The art gallery has its own professional staff, and she represented the latter in supervising the students together with Maranci. She said, "I was the project manager, making sure that everything was going well and on track. It was a group effort, as we all have different skills to contribute."

Maranci said, "Chiara is a scholar of Italian art, with a doctorate in this field. She helped us navigate through the museums, the students and the gallery, and did a lot of the legwork. It is a huge job. Even with a small exhibition like this, there are a lot of moving pieces. She was incredible in making it all work and also in putting together the guide."

The Armenian Museum of America was the first institutional partner, and then Pidatella, Deitsch and Maranci visited the Museum of Fine Arts to talked with the curator there about lending a piece. "Unfortunately," Pidetella said, "covid hit, and it was not easy to work on the loans, but all the partners were really eager to get this exhibition out. It is so relevant, considering the current situation [i.e. in Artsakh]."

Vakas (collar or amice), 1771 and later, with red silk, gold and metallic threads, leather support; cotton addition with cartouche. By unknown maker in Trunis village, Armenian historical province of Goghtn in Vaspurakan (modern Orduabad, Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic of Azerbaijan) (photo courtesy Armenian Museum of America)

"The Armenian Museum of America was so generous," Pidatella said. "There was a pandemic but it accommodated the students so they could go there and study objects in person. They could look at the technique and make a lot of considerations which they could not have done just by looking at an image in a book. Unless you are really standing in front of the objects, you lose all of these dimensions."

Pidetella pointed to the two large altar curtains and said, "We did not want to hang them on a wall, because of the stress. We are always mindful about preserving these textiles, so we came up with these slanted displays. We were also looking at the Met's Armenia! Exhibition a couple of years ago for ideas. We are not the Met [Metropolitan Museum of Art], but we were really committed and invested." She said that everything, even the

lighting, was meticulously calculated, and during the installation process, officials from the two lending institutions were also present to supervise.

Embroidered fragment, probably 18th or early 19th century, made by Katarine [Katherine], possibly at Tsakhgavank [Flower Monastery], Mount Ara, Republic of Armenia; silk on cotton muslin, silk embroidery thread, with gold and silver thread (photo courtesy Armenian Museum of America)

While Tufts does not have the facilities to carry out conservation treatment, fortunately, the Museum of Fine Arts decided to do some work on its loan item, which appears to be a fragment of an altar curtain from the late 18th or early 19th century. Pidatella said that the conservator during this process discovered some traces of wax and oils, and this says a lot about the original location of this embroidered textile. Susan Lind-Sinanian, textile curator at the Armenian Museum, did some reinforcement of the textiles loaned by this museum before they came to Tufts.

Viewing and Events

Pidetella said, “Our goal is to reach out not only to the Armenian community, but to the larger Tufts community and the Boston communities. It is a one-of-a-kind exhibition.” The exhibition actually ended up taking place a year earlier than originally scheduled due to the effects of the Covid pandemic, and gallery hours are back to normal (Tues.-Sun. 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.) at the Koppelman Gallery of the Aidekman Arts Center at Tufts University (40 Talbot Avenue, Medford). For more information, see https://artgalleries.tufts.edu/blog/news/2021/01/30/connecting-threads-survivor-objects/.

There are a number of events connected with the exhibition, including a public reception on September 23, a November 18 workshop with Samantha Fields, a faculty member from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, and a closing tour with Dr. Helen Evans, who recently retired from the Met, on December 5.

A video made at Tufts, which can be viewed either at the entrance to the exhibition or online, features Maranci providing basic background information accompanied by maps and images, and visitors can download an educational guide on their smart phones. There is also a brochure available for visitors which includes descriptions of the displayed items and an essay by Piñon on the block-printed church curtains. The brochure places items in historical context with insights into their relevance.

Galleries director Deitsch concluded, “We haven’t had a general non-student public in a long time, so we are thrilled with this.” Maranci in turn said, “I hope it is reflected in the show that this material connects with so many different worlds. It isn’t just a tiny, obscure culture, but is one that has a lot of power to speak to a lot of different kinds of people. That was made abundantly clear from my experience with the students and their own experience with the objects.”

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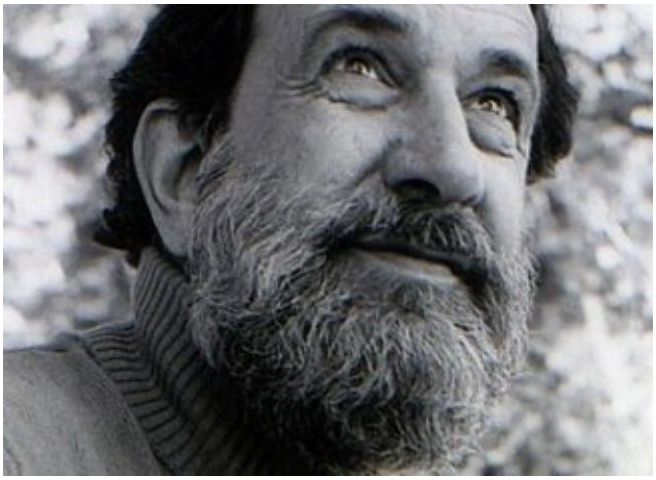

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