

Unknown Maker

Vakas (amice or collar), 1751

Silk canvas embroidered with metallic silver, gold, yellow, and brown threads; leather backing and stiff paper support

Armenian Museum of America

This *vakas*, or stiff, upright collar, formed part of the ecclesiastical vestments of the celebrant. Its symbolism is made clear in the Armenian ritual of Vesting: donning the *vakas*, the priest asks God to “clothe my neck with righteousness.” Running across the collar is an arcade sheltering nine figures: the central “Deesis” (of Christ, the Virgin, and John the Baptist) and six additional saints. This composition, which frequently appears on *vakases* of the centuries, would have held special power during liturgical moments when the celebrant turned his back to the congregation. The inscription below informs us that it was made as a memorial gift for an individual named Anapik’.

Inscription:

ՅԻՇ[Ա]Տ[Ա]Կ Է ՎԱՐՇԱՄԱԿՍ
ԱՆԱՊԻՔԵԻՆԻ ԴՈՒՌՆ ՍԲ ԽԱԶԻՆ
ՌՄԹ-ԻՆ

This varshamak [cloth] is a memorial
gift of Anapik'. At the doors of [the
church of] the Holy Cross.
[in the year] 1751.

Unknown Maker

Trunis village, Armenian historical province of Goght'n in Vaspurakan (mod. Ordubad, Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic of Azerbaijan).

Vakas (collar), 1771 and later.

Red silk, gold and metallic threads, leather support; cotton addition

Armenian Museum of America

This *vakas*, like the other one in this exhibition, features the “Deesis”: Christ appears enthroned between the Virgin at left and John the Baptist at right. Using threads of varying tones and thicknesses, the needleworker delineated details such as Christ’s cross-topped orb and the Virgin’s pointing gesture, using twisted metallic threads couched by horizontal stitches to create a shimmering effect. Flanking the central figures, large flowers rise from handled vases, a visual motif that finds parallels in contemporary Ottoman and European traditions and speaks to the connected culture of the early modern Armenian world.

The band inscriptions name the *vakas* as a memorial donation for the church of Saint Step'annos in the town of Trunis, probably a reference to a church by that name in the historical region of Goght'n (mod. Ordubad, Nakhchivan). That church, like so many others, was destroyed in a widespread campaign to erase Armenian cultural heritage in the region, making this textile a precious trace of a now-lost indigenous community.

Border band inscription:

ՅԻՇԱՏԱԿ Է ՎԱԿԱԱԸՍԻ ԴՈՒՌՆ
ՍԲ ԸՍՏԻՓԱՆՆՈՍ ՏՐՈՒՆԻՍ ՔԵՂ

This vakas is a memorial gift. At the doors of Saint Step'annos in the village of Trunis

Cartouche on cotton addition:

Այս է ս[ուր]բ ըստէփ/անուսին
տօրօնաց/գէղընօվանէսի օրթի/մ[ա]
հտ[ես]ի արաղբարը [...] վէր/ակացօւ
թվ[ական] ՌԲՃԻ սեքտէմբէրի աին
ըստայբու

This [is for] the church of Saint Step'annos in the village of Toron. Ōvanēs son of mahtesi [pilgrim to Jerusalem] Araghbar, guardian, in the year 1220 (1771), September 1. [...]

Unknown Maker

Constantinople [?]

Fragment of altar curtain [?], late 18th
or early 19th century

Silk embroidery on cotton ground

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

This embroidery was probably part of the altar curtain of an Armenian church. Such textiles blocked the view of the apse during Lent and at specific moments in the Divine Liturgy, such as during the preparation of the eucharist. While the oldest surviving altar curtains date from the 17th century, the tradition dates back at least to the 7th.

The crucified body of Jesus is flanked by the Virgin Mary and Saint John the Evangelist and several additional forms: the sun and moon (an interpretation of the darkness that fell at the time of the crucifixion) and hovering angels. One angel catches a stream of blood in a chalice, drawing an explicit link between the Gospel narrative and the liturgy of the mass. Emotional faces and expressive gestures animate this textile and highlight the drama of the subject. Christ's open eyes and muscular body highlight his divinity even at the moment of death, an important concept in Armenian theology. Atop the cross appears the resurrected Christ, haloed and making the sign of benediction.

Inscriptions:

ՅՆԹՀ

Յ[ԻՍՈՒՍ] Ն[ԱԶՈՎՐԵՑԻ]

Թ[ԱԳԱԻՈՐ]

Հ[ՐԵԻՑ]

“Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews”

ԽԱԶԵԼՈՒԹԻՒՆՆ Բ[ՐԻՍՏՈ]ՍԻ

The Crucifixion of Christ

Տ[Է]Ր Ա[ՍՏՈՒԱ]Ծ Յ[ԻՍՈՒՍ]

ԲՐ[ԻՍՏՈՍ]

Lord God Jesus Christ

Unknown Maker

Constantinople [?]

Khoiyr (bishop's mitre), probably 18th century
Dyed and metallic thread embroidery
and semiprecious stones on silk; silk lining
Armenian Museum of America

This mitre, worn by an Armenian bishop during the Divine Liturgy, features rich embroidery, raised “bullion” stitches, pearls, and colorful stones. Its opulence and sheen recall the Armenian vesting hymn, which describes Christ “clothed with light as with a garment.”

This mitre features a rich program of imagery. One side depicts Christ surrounded by the Apostles, all rendered in minute detail (note the sword in the hands of Paul, at upper left, and Peter's keys). Below Christ is the haloed Lamb of God, lying on a Cross. The other side shows the Virgin and Christ Child surrounded by Christ's ancestors (the so-called Tree of Jesse). Such details, although invisible to the congregation, performed a central function of the mitre: its sponsorship, making, and wearing were acts of pious veneration offered to God, who was the mitre's principal and ultimate viewer.

Facsimile of The Etchmiadzin Gospels

6th-13th centuries

Mesrop Mashtots Institute of Ancient Manuscripts
(Matenadaran), Republic of Armenia, MS 2374
Tufts University, Tisch Library, Special Collections

The Gospel book, containing the four Gospels of the Christian New Testament, is a central text of the Armenian Christian faith; the majority of the almost 40,000 surviving Armenian manuscripts are Gospels. Gospels occupy a central role in the Armenian Divine Liturgy, in which celebrants read and chant aloud its texts, elevate it high over the head, process with it around the altar and the nave, and venerate and kiss it. Along with the textiles in this exhibition, the Gospel book forms part of the rich material, visual, and theological fabric of the Armenian Church.

The Etchmiadzin Gospels (presented in facsimile here) is among the most celebrated works of medieval Armenian manuscript art. Bound with 6th-century Byzantine ivory covers, the main text was produced in the latter 10th century with additions from the 13th. Most remarkable, however, are two sewn-in folios at the end. These date from the 7th century and bear scenes of the Annunciation to Zakariah, the Annunciation to the Virgin, the Adoration of the Magi, and the Baptism.

Unknown Maker

Constantinople [?]

Embroidered Cross, probably 18th century

Gold, beige, white, and blue thread on red velvet

Armenian Museum of America

This cross-shaped embroidery was intended to be sewn onto a liturgical vestment; such patches would usually outlive their original textile and would be attached to successive garments. At its center is the Virgin and Child, while each of the pointed terminals bears an evangelist, all rendered as half figures. Identifiable are John, with his eagle, and Luke, at right, with the ox; most likely, Matthew is at left and Mark at the bottom.

Using long-chain stitches and metallic thread, the needleworker has created a highly abstract image, reducing bodies to geometric forms and adding drama through bold facial features and active gestures. Note the special attention to the garments of the figures: the striped skirt of the Virgin, her long blue mantle, and the unusual sleeved garment of Christ. On the chest of Christ's garment is a tiny cross-shaped form: a representation, in miniature, of the patch itself—as if the needleworker sought to clothe not only an ecclesiastic but also Christ himself.

Unknown Maker

India or Iran

Curtain, 18th–19th century [?]

Resist-dyed, printed, and painted cotton

Armenian Museum of America

This ecclesiastical textile features images of Christ, ecclesiastics, saints, Abraham and Isaac, and Adam and Eve. These last two images, highlighting concepts of sacrifice and salvation, are appropriate Old Testament antetypes for the central rite of the Armenian Church: the Divine Liturgy, or *patarag* (sacrifice).

This curtain also contains many unusual elements. Included in the program is a huqqa smoker (bottom center), imagery that is anomalous in an Armenian Christian context but conforms to artistic traditions of 18th–19th-century Southeast Asia. Also remarkable is the image of the Last Judgement featuring Christ in profile, rather than frontally.

Strangest of all, however, is the inscription at the center of the textile, which appears to bear the words “Witness” and “Mahemēd.” This text may refer to the famous “Oath of the Prophet,” a document in which Muhammad ensured the protection of Armenian and other Christian holy sites in Jerusalem, and which was known and mentioned already in medieval Armenian sources. The hand-shaped Seal of Muhammad just below the Prophet’s name further strengthens this interpretation. Leaving aside questions of the oath’s authenticity, this textile may constitute a unique visualization of that document.

Inscription:

ሃሃሊጌበ[ኮ]ፀኮ[በ]ኔ ሆሊረቴሆድጉ

Witness, Mahemēd

Maker Unknown

India or Iran

Curtain, 18th to 19th centuries?

Resist dyed printed and painted cotton

Armenian Museum of America

This ecclesiastical textile features images of Christ, ecclesiastics, saints, Abraham and Isaac, and Adam and Eve. These last two images, highlighting concepts of sacrifice and salvation, are appropriate Old Testament antetypes for the central rite of the Armenian Church: the Divine Liturgy, or patarag (sacrifice).

This curtain additionally contains many unusual elements. Included in the program is a huqqa smoker (bottom center), imagery anomalous in an Armenian context but which conforms to artistic traditions of 18th-19th century Southeast Asia. Also remarkable is the image of the Last Judgement featuring Christ in profile, rather than frontally.

Strangest of all, however, is the inscription at the center of the textile, which reads “Witness of Mahemēd.” This text probably refers to the famous “Oath of the Prophet,” a document in which Muhammad ensured the protection of Armenian and other Christian holy sites in Jerusalem, and which was known and mentioned already in the medieval period. The hand-shaped “Seal of Muhammad” just below the Prophet’s name further strengthens this interpretation. Leaving aside questions of the Oath’s authenticity, this textile may constitute a unique visualization of that document. Its appearance on an early modern textile from Iran or India, moreover, reflects an abiding concern about the welfare of Armenian Christian sites in Jerusalem by the early modern global diaspora.

Unknown Maker

Tokat (mod. Republic of Turkey)

Saghavard (priest's crown), 1822

Metallic thread, sequins, and brass on blue velvet
Armenian Museum of America

The *saghavard* is traditionally worn by Armenian priests during the Divine Liturgy. When donned during the rite vesting, the *saghavard* is described as the “helmet of salvation” (Ephesians 6:17), worn to oppose the powers of the enemy. The regal associations of the *saghavard* are also evoked here in its elaborate brass fittings and cross-shaped top.

This *saghavard* is richly embroidered with metallic threads laid on and couched to the velvet. Its sides feature large, repeating floral forms, while the top bears sunburst and star designs. Encircling the base of the *saghavard* is the donation inscription, which relates that it was made for the most famous and probably oldest church in Evdokia (Tokat), Saint Stepanos. Evdokia was home to a large and prosperous community of Armenians before their extermination in the Armenian Genocide of 1915–22. The text also names the donor, a certain Martiros Pōyachean, who was a *mahtesi*—a pilgrim to Jerusalem—offering a sense of the mobility and pious practices of Armenians during the early modern period.

Inscription:

Յ[Ի]Շ[Ա]Տ[ԱԿ] Է ՍՂԱՎԱՐՏՍ Դ[ՈՒ]
ՐՆ ՍՐԲ[Ո]Յ Ն[ԱԽԱՎԿԱ] ՍՏԵՓ[Ա]
ՆՈՍԻ ԵԿԵՂ[ԵՑ]ՕԻՆ ԵԻԴՈԿԻՈՅ
ՍՐԲ ԵՂԻԱ Ք [ԱՀԱՆԱՅ]
ՊՕՅԱՃԵԱՆ ՄԱՀՏԵՍԻՆ
ՄԱՐՏԻՐՈՍԵՆ ԹՎԻՆ Հ[Ա]ՅՅՅ
ՌՄՀԱ ԻՆ

This crown is a memorial gift for [lit. at the doors of] the church of Saint Stepanos the Proto-martyr of Ewdokia for the priest mahtesi Eghia Pōyachian from Martiros in the year of the Armenians 1271 (1822).

Hakob of Tokat

Tokat (mod. Republic of Turkey)

Altar Curtain, 1766

Block-printed and hand painted cotton

Armenian Museum of America

Altar curtains are traditional features of the Armenian Church. Hanging between the sanctuary and the nave, they are closed during specific periods in the Divine Liturgy and also at Lent. This curtain is one of a small group of surviving hand-painted, block-printed altar curtains produced in the Ottoman city of Evdokia (mod. Tokat, Republic of Turkey), home to a large and prosperous Armenian population (see the *saghavard*). After this curtain was made, it traveled over 665 km (413 miles) south to its home in an Armenian church in Mardin, a town on the Turkish-Syrian border—testimony to the fame of Tokat's textile production.

This curtain features an extraordinary array of images organized within a series of arcades and medallions. At the top is Christ in Glory, flanked by two liturgical scenes showing priests elevating the Host. At left and right, respectively, are the Virgin and Child and the Deposition from the Cross. The second tier of imagery highlights Gospel episodes that are celebrated as major feasts in the Church. Finally, the main zone shows the Crucifixion flanked by the Assumption of the Virgin, at right, and, at left, the Virgin with the Christ Child—here with a sunray halo and the moon at her feet, echoing Apocalypse 12:1–6.

While the sun has faded its colors, this curtain's deep red, brown, and orange dyes would help focus the mind for worship, revealing in pictorial form the mysteries of Christian salvation being enacted and concealed behind it.

Band inscription:

Յ[Ի]Շ[Ա]Տ[ԱԿ] Է Վ[Ա]Ր[Ա]Գ[Ո]
ԻՐԱ. ՄԷՐՏԻՆՑԻ. ՄՈՒՍԱՅԻ ՈՐԴԻ
ԲԱՐԵՊԱՇՏ ԵՒ Ա[ՍՏՈՒԱ]ԾԱՍԷՐ.
ԱՍԼԱՆԻ. Ի ԴՈՒՌՆ Ս[ՈՒՐ]Բ
ԳԷՈՐԳԱՅ: Թ[ՎԱԿԱՆ] ՌՉԿԶ: ԻՆ

This curtain is a memorial gift. For
Musa of Mardin, son of the worshipful
and God-loving Aslan. At the doors of
[the church of] Saint George. In the
year 1766.

In smaller letters:

ԹՈՒԽԱԹՑԻ Տ[Ի]Ր[Ա]Ց[Ո]Ի ԱԿՈՒԲԻ
ԲԱՆՆ

This is the work of the chorister Akob
of T'okhat'.

Katarinē (Katherine)

Possibly Tsakhgavank' (Flower Monastery)

Mount Ara, Republic of Armenia

Embroidered fragment

probably 18th or early 19th century

Silk on cotton-muslin, silk embroidery thread with gold and silver thread

Armenian Museum of America

Armenian literary sources and inscriptions on textiles attest to the major role of women in the production of embellished textiles. This cloth fragment is also precious testimony, naming the maker as a certain Katarinē (or Katherine). Katherine intended the textile to adorn a site dedicated to the virgin martyr Barbara (perhaps the eponymous cave shrine on Mount Ara), suggesting special devotion to that female saint.

The textile portrays a hooded monastic kneeling in prayer before a book open on a stand. An ogee arch shelters this scene, which is further bordered by repeating flowers and the upper and lower band inscriptions. Katherine was a talented and meticulous artist: short stitches sewn into the monastic's blue mantle create a stippled, shimmering effect. The floor below is decorated in longer green stitches in diagonals, suggesting tiles.

The identity of the figure represented is uncertain. Nevertheless, the blue cloth above and below the face, the large eyes and delicate brows, combined with the mention of two females in the inscription, invite us to view this figure as a nun at her prayers—perhaps the virgin martyr Barbara or even Katherine herself.

Inscription:

ԻՎԱՅԵԼՈՒՄՆՍ[ՈՒՐ]

ԲԿՈՒՍԻՆՎԱՌՎԱ/

ՌԵ[Ա]ՑԱԶԻՆՔԿՏՐԻՆԷՆԿԱՐԵԱԼ

For the adornment of the Holy Virgin
Barbara, by the right hand of Katarinē,
painted.

Unknown Maker

Surabaya, Indonesia

Shurchar (cope or priest's robe),
possibly late 19th century, as late as 1933
Silk, metallic thread, machine lace trim, metal
clasps; lining: printed cotton and silk
Armenian Museum of America

This shurchar clothed the celebrant during the Divine Liturgy, as a “radiant garment” of the Lord. Its semicircular form and bright colors tie it to examples made in Constantinople, but this example was made in Surabaya, Indonesia, home to an Armenian trading colony in the early modern period. It is made of a special batik fabric called prada, which used gilding (with gold leaf, dust, or thread) to highlight certain elements of the pattern. This traditional Indonesian textile was reserved for elites and ceremonial rites, thus making it appropriate for use in the Armenian Divine Liturgy.

The metal closure contains a precious inscription honoring an “Annamaria Evgarean”— possibly a relation to the famous Apcar family, whose founder was the wealthy merchant Aratoon Apcar. Born in the Armenian suburb New Julfa (a suburb of Isfahan, Iran), Aratoon moved to Calcutta, expanding his business across Southeast Asia with a strong presence in Singapore, Malaysia, and the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia). Material objects like this shurchar therefore testify eloquently to an Armenian diaspora both faithful to ancient tradition and dynamically adapting to new contexts and cultures.

Inscriptions on metal clasp:

(LEFT)

Նուէր իր սիրելի զաւակներից:
1933 թ[ուական] Ապրիլ:

(RIGHT)

Ի յիշատակ հանգ[ուցեալ]
Եվգարեանի:

[This is] a gift from her beloved
children 1933 April in memory of
[deceased?] Madame Annamaria Y.
Evgarean

Hakob of Tokat
Tokat (mod. Republic of Turkey)

Altar Curtain, 1766
Block-printed and hand painted cotton
Armenian Museum of America

Altar curtains are traditional features of the Armenian Church. Hanging between the sanctuary and the nave, they are closed during specific periods in the Divine Liturgy and also at Lent. This curtain is one of a small group of surviving hand-painted, block-printed altar curtains produced in the Ottoman city of Evdokia (mod. Tokat, Republic of Turkey), home to a large and prosperous Armenian population (see the *saghavard*). After this curtain was made, it traveled over 665 km (413 miles) south to its home in an Armenian church in Mardin, a town on the Turkish-Syrian border—testimony to the fame of Tokat’s textile production.

This curtain features an extraordinary array of images organized within a series of arcades and medallions. At the top is Christ in Glory, flanked by two liturgical scenes showing priests elevating the Host. At left and right, respectively, are the Virgin and Child and the Deposition from the Cross. The second tier of imagery highlights Gospel episodes that are celebrated as major feasts in the Church. Finally, the main zone shows the Crucifixion flanked by the Assumption of the Virgin, at right, and, at left, the Virgin with the Christ Child—here with a sunray halo and the moon at her feet, echoing Apocalypse 12:1–6.

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Band inscription:
Յ[Ի]Շ[Ա]Տ[ԱԿ] Է Վ[Ա]Ր[Ա]Գ[Ո]
ԻՐԱ. ՄԷՐՏԻՆՅԻ. ՄՈՒՍԱՅԻ ՈՐԴԻ
ԲԱՐԵՊԱՇՏ ԵՒ Ա[ՍՏՈՒԱ]ԾԱՍԷՐ.
ԱՍԼԱՆԻ. Ի ԴՈՒՌՆ Ս[ՈՒՐ]Բ
ԳԷՈՐԳԱՅ: Թ[ՎԱԿԱՆ] ՌՉԿԶ: ԻՆ

This curtain is a memorial gift. For Musa of Mardin, son of the worshipful and God-loving Aslan. At the doors of [the church of] Saint George. In the year 1766.

In smaller letters:
ԹՈՒԽԱԹՅԻ Տ[Ի]Ր[Ա]Ց[Ո]Ի ԱԿՈՒԲԻ
ԲԱՆՆ
This is the work of the chorister Akob of T’okhat’.



Photos: Wolter Braamhorst, Europa Nostra

This large curtain was made for the church of Saint George of Mardin. Located in southeast Turkey, Mardin was a multiethnic city prior to the Armenian and Assyrian Genocides (the latter also known as Seyfo, or sword) of 1915-1922. The church of saint George, a three-aisled vaulted basilica constructed of yellow-gold stone, was founded as early as the fifth century, restored several times, and now lies abandoned and in disrepair. In 2013, it was listed as one of the six most endangered sites by the international heritage organization Europa Nostra.



Unknown Maker
Trunis village, Armenian historical province of Goght'n in Vaspurakan (mod. Ordubad, Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic of Azerbaijan).

Vakas (collar), 1771 and later.
Red silk, gold and metallic threads, leather support; cotton addition
Armenian Museum of America

This *vakas*, like the other one in this exhibition, features the “Deesis”: Christ appears enthroned between the Virgin at left and John the Baptist at right. Using threads of varying tones and thicknesses, the needleworker delineated details such as Christ’s cross-topped orb and the Virgin’s pointing gesture, using twisted metallic threads couched by horizontal stitches to create a shimmering effect. Flanking the central figures, large flowers rise from handled vases, a visual motif that finds parallels in contemporary Ottoman and European traditions and speaks to the connected culture of the early modern Armenian world.

The band inscriptions name the *vakas* as a memorial donation for the church of Saint Step’annos in the town of Trunis, probably a reference to a church by that name in the historical region of Goght’n (mod. Ordubad, Nakhchivan). That church, like so many others, was destroyed in a widespread campaign to erase Armenian cultural heritage in the region, making this textile a precious trace of a now-lost indigenous community.



Photo courtesy Argam Ayyvazyan historical archive

Border band inscription:
ՅԻՇԱՏԱԿ Է ՎԱԿԱԱԸՆՍԻ ԴՈՒՌՆ ՍԲ ԸՏՏԻՓԱՆՆՈՍ ՏՐՈՒՆԻՍ ՔԵՂ

This vakas is a memorial gift. At the doors of Saint Step’annos in the village of Trunis

Cartouche on cotton addition:
Այս է ս[ուր]բ ըստէփ/անօսին սօրօնաց/գէղընօվանէսի օրթի/մ[ա] հտ[ես]ի արաղբարը [...] վեր/ակացօ թվ[ական] ՌԲՃԻ սեքտէմբերի ան ըստայբու

This [is for] the church of Saint Step’annos in the village of Toron. Övanēs son of mahtesi [pilgrim to Jerusalem] Araghbar, guardian, in the year 1220 (1771), September 1. [...]

The objects in this photograph: the mitre (the pointed hat, top center), the four examples of the vakas (or detachable collar), as well as stoles, crosses, and sacred reliquaries offer a sense of the splendor of the churches of the Monastery of Saint T’ovma (Thomas) before its destruction in the 1919, when Turkish troops massacred the Armenians of Agulis and looted the monastery. The red vakas in this exhibition was made for the church of Trunis, located in the same province of Goghtn.



Unknown Maker
Constantinople [?]

Embroidered Cross, probably 18th century
Gold, beige, white, and blue thread on red velvet
Armenian Museum of America

This cross-shaped embroidery was intended to be sewn onto a liturgical vestment; such patches would usually outlive their original textile and would be attached to successive garments. At its center is the Virgin and Child, while each of the pointed terminals bears an evangelist, all rendered as half figures. Identifiable are John, with his eagle, and Luke, at right, with the ox; most likely, Matthew is at left and Mark at the bottom.

Using long-chain stitches and metallic thread, the needleworker has created a highly abstract image, reducing bodies to geometric forms and adding drama through bold facial features and active gestures. Note the special attention to the garments of the figures: the striped skirt of the Virgin, her long blue mantle, and the unusual sleeved garment of Christ. On the chest of Christ’s garment is a tiny cross-shaped form: a representation, in miniature, of the patch itself—as if the needleworker sought to clothe not only an ecclesiastic but also Christ himself.



Unknown Maker
Vakas (amice or collar), 1751
Silk canvas embroidered with metallic silver, gold, yellow, and brown threads; leather backing and stiff paper support
Armenian Museum of America

This *vakas*, or stiff, upright collar, formed part of the ecclesiastical vestments of the celebrant. Its symbolism is made clear in the Armenian ritual of Vesting: donning the *vakas*, the priest asks God to “clothe my neck with righteousness.” Running across the collar is an arcade sheltering nine figures: the central “Deesis” (of Christ, the Virgin, and John the Baptist) and six additional saints. This composition, which frequently appears on *vakases* of the centuries, would have held special power during liturgical moments when the celebrant turned his back to the congregation. The inscription below informs us that it was made as a memorial gift for an individual named Anapik’.

Inscription:
ՅԻՇ[Ա]Տ[Ա]Կ Է ՎԱՐՇԱՄԱԿՍ ԱՆԱՊԻՔԵՆԻ ԴՈՒՌՆ ՍԲ ԽԱԶԻՆ ՌՄԹ-ԻՆ

This varshamak [cloth] is a memorial gift of Anapik’. At the doors of [the church of] the Holy Cross. [in the year] 1751.



Katarinē (Katherine)
Possibly Tsakhgavank’ (Flower Monastery) Mount Ara, Republic of Armenia

Embroidered fragment
probably 18th or early 19th century
Silk on cotton-muslin, silk embroidery thread with gold and silver thread
Armenian Museum of America

Armenian literary sources and inscriptions on textiles attest to the major role of women in the production of embellished textiles. This cloth fragment is also precious testimony, naming the maker as a certain Katarinē (or Katherine). Katherine intended the textile to adorn a site dedicated to the virgin martyr Barbara (perhaps the eponymous cave shrine on Mount Ara), suggesting special devotion to that female saint.

The textile portrays a hooded monastic kneeling in prayer before a book open on a stand. An ogee arch shelters this scene, which is further bordered by repeating flowers and the upper and lower band inscriptions. Katherine was a talented and meticulous artist: short stitches sewn into the monastic’s blue mantle create a stippled, shimmering effect. The floor below is decorated in longer green stitches in diagonals, suggesting tiles.

The identity of the figure represented is uncertain. Nevertheless, the blue cloth above and below the face, the large eyes and delicate brows, combined with the mention of two females in the inscription, invite us to view this figure as a nun at her prayers—perhaps the virgin martyr Barbara or even Katherine herself.

Inscription:
ԻՎԱՅԵԼՈՒՄՆԱ[ՈՒՐ]
ԲԿՈՒՄԻՆՎԱՌՎԱ/
ՌԵ[Ա]ՑԱՋԻՆՔԿՏՐԻՆԷՆԿԱՐԵԱԼ

For the adornment of the Holy Virgin Barbara, by the right hand of Katarinē, painted.

Facsimile of The Etchmiadzin Gospels

6th-13th centuries

Mesrop Mashtots Institute of Ancient Manuscripts

(Matenadaran), Republic of Armenia, MS 2374

Tufts University, Tisch Library, Special Collections

The Gospel book, containing the four Gospels of the Christian New Testament, is a central text of the Armenian Christian faith; the majority of the almost 40,000 surviving Armenian manuscripts are Gospels. Gospels occupy a central role in the Armenian Divine Liturgy, in which celebrants read and chant aloud its texts, elevate it high over the head, process with it around the altar and the nave, and venerate and kiss it. Along with the textiles in this exhibition, the Gospel book forms part of the rich material, visual, and theological fabric of the Armenian Church.

The Etchmiadzin Gospels (presented in facsimile here) is among the most celebrated works of medieval Armenian manuscript art. Bound with 6th-century Byzantine ivory covers, the main text was produced in the latter 10th century with additions from the 13th. Most remarkable, however, are two sewn-in folios at the end. These date from the 7th century and bear scenes of the Annunciation to Zakariah, the Annunciation to the Virgin, the Adoration of the Magi, and the Baptism.