

Connecting Threads / Survivor Objects

August 30–December 5, 2021

Connecting Threads / Survivor Objects explores the kaleidoscopic world of Armenian liturgical textiles from the collections of the Armenian Museum of America and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Embroidered, block printed, and painted, these objects dating to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries show the multidimensional nature of liturgical textiles, reflecting the vitality of Armenian communities during the Ottoman Empire and their influence along global commercial routes. While many Ottoman Armenian churches are now in ruins after successive waves of persecution from the 1890s to the 1920s, these fragile, beautiful textiles bear witness to the survival of a people, its identity, and faith.

The exhibition was developed with undergraduate and graduate students from the seminar *The Threads of Survival: Armenian Liturgical Textiles in Local Collections* at Tufts University in spring 2021: Jeffrey Bui, Elettra Conoly, Claudia Haines, Andrea Horn, Sara McAleer, Atineh Movsesian, Grace Rotermund, Shirley Wang, Cas Weld, and Sofia Zamboli. Many of these textiles received the scholarly attention they deserve for the first time as students engaged in close examination of each individual textile at the Armenian Museum of America alongside in-class discussions about the objects and relevant literature. The exhibition labels and educational material present the outcome of their extensive research.

ORGANIZED BY Christina Maranci, Arthur H. Dadian and Ara Oztemel Professor of Armenian Art and Architecture, Tufts University, and Chiara Pidotella, TUAG Research Curator.

We encourage you to reach out to [Liz Canter](#), Manager of Academic Programs, to discuss your plans for incorporating this exhibition into your curriculum or to arrange a class session.

KEY TERMS

Altar curtain: An ornamental curtain hung vertically at the front of a church, usually drawn and opened at specific times in the liturgy and in the liturgical year.

Batik: A traditional Javanese artistic technique in which a wax design is applied to a textile, after which the textile is dyed, leaving the wax-covered portions undyed.

Block printing: An artistic technique in which engraved wooden blocks are covered with ink and applied to a textile to create a repeating pattern.

Cope / shurchar: A semicircular robe worn by the priest during the liturgy. In the Armenian tradition, the *shurchar* symbolizes a shield against the attacks of the Devil.

Diaspora: A cultural group living outside of its traditional geographical homeland.

Embroidery: An artistic technique where individual threads are stitched into a piece of fabric to produce an ornamental design.

Genocide: Intentional violence committed against a cultural group with the ultimate aim of destroying that group.

Liturgy: Worship performed by a community of faith, usually according to a defined, ritual pattern.

Mitre / khoiyr: A tall headdress made of two stiff, oblong pieces of material sewn together at the bottom. Originating in the Western tradition, the *khoiyr* was adopted by the Armenian Church during the Crusades.

Saghavart: A tall, round headdress worn by the priest during the liturgy, traditionally symbolizing the role of Jesus Christ as King of Kings.

Vakas: A tall, stiff piece of decorated linen worn around the priest's neck, symbolizing both obedience to Christ and the priest's single-minded focus on his ministry.

Vestment: A garment worn by a priest during the celebration of the liturgy. In the Armenian Church, individual vestments are intricately decorated and usually carry specific symbolic meanings.



- Major Cities
- ◆ Sites of Significance

This map shows major cities along with reigning empires from the 16th century to the early 20th century. It highlights settlements of significance where the Armenian textiles were originally produced and displayed during these four centuries

Credit: This map was created by Carolyn Talmadge, Data Lab Services Manager, Research Technology, Tufts Technology Services. Data Sources: Natural Earth, ESRI.

Life / Afterlife

The liturgical textiles featured in **Connecting Threads / Survivor Objects** originated in a ritual context, survived waves of persecution from the 1890s to the 1920s, and are now being shown in a museum context. These shifts invite us to consider crucial questions about these objects' lives and afterlives—their variable pasts, presents, and futures.

KEY QUESTIONS

- How do the meanings of textiles develop, change, and evolve across time and space?
- At what point does an artwork become an artifact? What are the potential consequences of this shift?
- What happens to a ritual object when it is removed from the ritual process?



Armenian

Saghavard ▶
(liturgical crown), 1751.

Metal, sequins, and gold metallic thread on velvet.

ARMENIAN MUSEUM OF AMERICA.

RELATED RESOURCES

Interview with Christina Maranci, "[Armenia in History and the Heart](#)," Radio Open Source, 2021

Christina Maranci, "[Cultural Heritage in the Crosshairs Once More](#)," Wall Street Journal, 2020.

"[Q&A: Armenian Genocide Dispute](#)," BBC News, 2021.

Hrag Vartanian, "[Artsakh: Cultural Heritage under Threat](#)," Hyperallergic, 2021.

[Statement by President Joe Biden on Armenian Remembrance Day](#), the White House, 2021.

[Armenian Genocide](#), Khan Academy.

Network / Movement

Under the Ottoman Empire, Armenian communities occupied a broad geographical area ranging from the Caucasus to the Anatolian peninsula, from Crimea to Russia and Western Europe, and from Amsterdam to East and South Asia. The textiles in this exhibition originated in the prosperous Armenian communities of Istanbul, Tokat, Talas, Kütahya, and Gümüşhane—all in modern-day Turkey—as well as in Armenian trading settlements in Surabaya, Indonesia. Examining the social, religious, economic, and intellectual networks within which these textiles have traveled allows us to shed light on their functions, meanings, and values in both the past and the present.

KEY QUESTIONS

- How are these textiles representative of global social, religious, economic, and intellectual networks? How do they demonstrate the fusion of traditions and visual styles across time and space?
- How did movement play a role in the creation, lives, and afterlives of these objects?
- Could textiles be considered commodities? Why or why not?

▼ **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



RELATED RESOURCES

[Armenian Diaspora Communities](#), Office of the High Commissioner for Diaspora Affairs.

[Helen Evans: Armenian Art and Creative Exchange on Medieval Trade Routes](#), Armenian General Benevolent Union, YouTube, 2018.

[The Armenian Diaspora](#), Library of Congress Country Studies.

[Sebouh Aslanian—On the Boundaries of History The Armenian Diaspora of the Early Modern Period](#), Armenian General Benevolent Union, YouTube, 2020.

Communities / Individuals

Because these liturgical textiles were created for use in a religious context, they held special and highly personal meanings for their original makers, users, and communities. In this way, they act as powerful embodiments both of pride in Armenian Orthodox traditions and of Armenian identity more broadly.

KEY QUESTIONS

- What relationship did these objects have with their makers, users, and communities?
- Who wore or displayed these textiles? Who viewed them in their original context? How are these past audiences similar to or different from the audiences of *Connecting Threads / Survivor Objects*?
- How do religious garments, textiles, and other ritual objects contribute to and reflect a given religious tradition's unique cultural legacy?



▲ **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.

RELATED RESOURCES

[Vestments](#), the Western Diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church of North America, YouTube, 2019.

[The Divine Liturgy of the Armenian Church](#), the Eastern Diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church of North America, YouTube, 2011.

[Object Show and Tell: Liturgical Vestments](#), the Armenian Museum of America, YouTube, 2021.

Materials / Techniques

The textiles featured in *Connecting Threads / Survivor Objects* reflect a wide variety of materials and techniques, including embroidery, block printing, dye, painting, and much more. Closely examining the materiality of these objects invites us to consider who made them and what types of artistic processes they used, and to appreciate the time, care, and expense invested into their production.

KEY QUESTIONS

- Who is involved in the production of textiles?
- How does the process of producing a textile add to its value?
- How do the unique materials and techniques involved in textile production differ from those of other artistic media and processes?
- Can we identify evidence of movement, trade, and exchange through the materials used in these textiles?



Armenian, Embroidery

▲ **The Crucifixion**, late eighteenth or early nineteenth century.

Cotton and silk, embroidery.

MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON.

RELATED RESOURCES

[Arts of Armenia—Textiles](#), Armenian Studies Program at Fresno State University.

[A Sampling of Armenian Embroideries from the Collection of the Armenian Museum of America](#), Armenian Museum of America.

[Batik of Java: A Centuries-Old Tradition](#), Asian Art Museum, YouTube, 2017.

[Object Show and Tell: Altar Curtain](#), the Armenian Museum of America, YouTube, 2021