

# Connecting Threads



# Survivor Objects

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*Connecting Threads/Survivor Objects* presents the vibrant cultural heritage of Armenians. These precious objects trace the Armenian communities deported or exterminated during massacres by the Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid in the 1890s, as well during the Armenian Genocide of 1915–1922 and its aftermath. The consequences of genocide are ongoing: just last year, a war in Nagorno-Karabakh (Armenian Artsakh) in the South Caucasus ended with the transfer of historically Armenian territories to Azerbaijan, endangering countless Armenian monuments. Survivor objects—such as the textiles displayed here—bear witness to those communities and their material and spiritual environments.

Armenian church textiles are also historical records, with inscriptions often recording their dates, their sponsors, the churches for which they were made, and sometimes the artists' names. Their iconography reflects diverse sewing and painting traditions while offering a sense of the connected nature of the early modern Armenian world.

Textiles reveal facets of the Armenian experience in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Ecclesiastical costumes and hangings linked Armenian communities across the globe, from the Ottoman and Persian empires to Armenian trading settlements throughout East and South Asia. Made with silk, linen, cotton, and velvet, shimmering with metallic thread, and adorned with imagery, they display virtuoso craftsmanship. They are also “moving icons”: whether as vestments worn by ecclesiastics or curtains functioning as fluid dividers within the church space, Armenian textiles form, quite literally, the sacred fabric of the church.

*Connecting Threads / Survivor Objects* is organized by Christina Maranci, Arthur H. Dadian and Ara T. Oztemel Professor of Armenian Art and Architecture, and Chiara Pidotella, Research Curator. 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.



This map shows major cities (blue circles) along with reigning empires from the 16th century to the early 20th century. It highlights settlements of significance (red diamonds) where the Armenian textiles were originally produced and displayed. Created by Carolyn Talmadge, Data Lab Services Manager, Research Technology, Tufts Technology Services. Data Sources: Natural Earth, ESRI.



# A Closer Look: Armenian Block-Printed Curtains

Sometime in the second half of the eighteenth century, at least four Armenian churches—scattered from present-day Romania to southeastern Turkey—received distinct but related altar curtains, individually patronized and donated by men who sought to display their piety.<sup>1</sup> Thanks to detailed, hand-painted inscriptions that span the length of each curtain (approximately four meters), we learn from these objects the story of their own origins. They tell us exactly where they are from, who their patrons were, what churches they were sent to, and by whose hand their designs were created. Like the colophons in Armenian manuscripts (*hishatakaran*, literally “place of memory”), wherein scribes recorded details concerning the production of the very book they had just copied, textiled inscriptions offer us invaluable information about when each curtain was made and the actors involved in its materialization. While this information remains priceless, we must also remember to contextualize the rich historical data of place names, people, and dates against the object on which these details were recorded, the rituals associated with it, the industries that led to its production, and the networks that supported its movements. Textiles—caught between artifact, heirloom, art, and craft—also carry the memories of their own lives and those of a forgotten, incomprehensible, and often traumatic past into our present. As witnesses to a fragmented history, Armenian textiles offer us fruitful ways of understanding Armenian material culture and heritage.

## DUPLICATION AND REPLICATION

We are fortunate to have one such curtain on view in *Connecting Threads/Survivor Objects* (FIG. 1). This curtain (hereafter called the Mardin curtain, after the town where it was later sent), like so many of the liturgical textiles in this exhibition, is an exemplary model of its type, and illuminates understudied aspects of Armenian involvement in Ottoman industries and the Armenian Church in the early modern period. It was commissioned and prepared in Tokat, a center of Ottoman textile production in northern Anatolia that specialized in one of the most emblematic finishing stages of the early modern Ottoman textile industry—block printing, whereby images and ornament are transferred onto a textile surface using a carved wooden block as its matrix. If we look closely, we can see how this technique was effectively and imaginatively utilized to create a full and dramatic composition (FIG. 2).



FIGURE 1  
Mardin Altar Curtain, printed and painted in Tokat in 1766 by  
“the chorister Akob of Evdokia (Tokat),” Armenian Museum of America, Watertown, MA.  
Photo courtesy of the Armenian Museum of America.





FIGURE 2

Detail, Mardin Altar Curtain, showing repetitive floral and chevron patterns framing the bodies of the Virgin and Child. Photo courtesy of the Armenian Museum of America.

The repetition of identical forms used to decoratively frame and fill the backgrounds of the curtain's image program was infinitely aided by the use of block printing, which gives the composition a sense of unity. In a process called *dajazartut'yun*, a form of "applied" or "tattooed" decoration, the desired design of individual blocks was sketched, transferred to wood, and then carved in mirrored relief.<sup>2</sup> The raised surfaces of the block were then inked and pressed/stamped to the support over and over again, often in ordered rows or patterns. The support of this altar curtain consisted of seven long cuts of cotton, stitched together vertically. The lightweight fabric, woven with a consistent warp equally weighted to its weft, provided an even surface on which ink could be transferred without bleeding, a hallmark of Tokat block-printed textiles.

Although the processes that led to the production of this curtain were complicated and drew from several local guilds, the inscription attributes the work to the hand of a single man, a certain Hakob from Tokat, identified on this curtain, and several others, as Hakob Dpri, or Hakob the Printer. When read as an occupational surname, Hakob's identification (or self-identification, if he authored the inscription) as a printer not only makes transparent how he saw his work, but also firmly situates him within an established guild of textile printers, or *basmaci*, who were active in the provinces of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>3</sup>

#### IN MOTION: BEFORE THE ALTAR, ACROSS ANATOLIA

From Tokat, this curtain was sent south to the church of Saint Grigor in a town called Mardin, in present-day southeastern Turkey. Once in place, hung before the altar, it served an important role in the celebration of the Divine Liturgy of the Armenian Apostolic Church. For much of the church year, altar curtains operated on two basic principles: closed to conceal and drawn to reveal. At key moments during the liturgy, the curtain was drawn before the altar and the congregants looked upon the textile's surface, which offered them a dizzying number of visuals to furnish their imaginations. Despite Hakob's identification as a printer, final touches, such as the inscription that runs between the registers and the more intricate details of the Christological scenes, were painted by hand. The lower half of this curtain consists of three scenes framed within multifoil arches. The central panel shows a

scene of the Crucifixion, flanked on either side by Marian iconography—the Virgin and Child on the left, and the Assumption of Mary on the right. On either side, these scenes are framed by a column of medallions filled with images of equestrian saints and evangelists. Above, a row of nimbed and winged angels extends horizontally across the middle of the curtain. Smaller, framed vignettes fill the upper register with Christological scenes.

Across the curtain, individuals are clothed in printed fabrics—the bread and butter of Tokat's textile industry. The Virgin wears fabrics with uniformly printed floral and ornamental designs. In the left panel, the patterns on her clothing are almost indistinguishable from the densely decorated background against which she stands—a meeting of delicate draftsmanship and contemporary dress design, where Ottoman aesthetics, Christian iconography, and Armenian ritual likewise intersected.

It should be no surprise that the curtain on display here bears similar, repetitive patterns and shares iconography and compositional designs with at least three surviving curtains from Tokat, also printed by our Hakob. Before Hakob completed the Mardin curtain in 1766, his earliest attributed curtain (FIG. 3) was sent to a church on Lim Island, in Lake Van, in 1750. Today, this curtain is safeguarded within the museum of San Lazzaro degli Armeni in the Venetian Lagoon. Holding onto his designs and carved blocks, in 1781, he prepared another altar curtain (FIG. 4)—now held in the Museums of the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, where yet another undated example of this curtain is also housed. While Hakob's work should not be considered "mass produced" in the contemporary sense, he certainly repurposed his own designs over the course of the next three decades.

These "printed" curtains should, however, be distinguished from the understandably paramount and revolutionary connotations of printed media throughout the early modern world. Despite such textiles' seemingly mechanized production, block printing involved manually aligning blocks to treated cloth—a labor-intensive process that required substantial collaboration, including the preparation of stamps by wood carvers, inks by dyers, and linen and cotton by cloth manufacturers. Designing cohesive and dynamic compositions required careful drafting and planning on a vast scale. In the case of Hakob's serial duplication of altar curtains for Armenian churches, we find the creation of a market separate from the one in which the costly, unique, and



bespoke curtains commissioned by wealthy merchants emerged. Rather, patrons (typically pilgrims) were offered a range of customization options, including a personalized inscription, donor portrait, and extension of dimensions and designs based on the churches in which the altar curtains were to be placed.

AFTERLIVES

From just this one example, we can see that objects like the curtain in this exhibition are connected to several others by their design, style, and purpose. We can also link such textures to important, universal rituals in churches that no longer exist. The textiles that compose *Connecting Threads/Survivor Objects* are, of course, objects that have survived by one means or another. They are safeguarded in museums across the world where, although no longer used or worn, and removed from their original contexts, they nonetheless continue to transmit important histories of Armenian art, ritual, and culture. While the textiles in the exhibition are illustrative examples of liturgical vestments and furnishings, many of them are fragmentary, damaged, and show signs of use and, perhaps, abuse. On the surfaces of several objects, we see evidence of use and repair, efforts to extend and even save their lives. It would not be incorrect to suppose that many other such objects have been lost to time, destroyed, or pillaged. In that respect, the Mardin curtain is exceptional.

Although the Mardin curtain remains in remarkable condition, time has not entirely spared it from damage. Across the curtain, but particularly along the bottom edge, repairs have been made, fortifying the fragile fabric for continued use. Those charged over the centuries with this special restoration chose similarly colored, floral-printed textiles to mend the holes and tears with patches. It is not hard to imagine the brilliant red dye that once saturated the curtain’s surface. More difficult is envisioning the matching cuffs, collars, stoles, copes, and miters that were once worn in tandem with the select liturgical vestments in this exhibition. Reconstructing these groupings is near impossible, as their closest relatives or matching pairs have not yet been located, and may never be.

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NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For an in-depth treatment of the patronage of block-printed textiles at the intersection of Ottoman-Armenian industry, pilgrimage, and liturgy in the early modern world, see Erin Piñon, “Printing Pilgrimage: Replication and Imagination between Tokat and Jerusalem,” *West 86th: A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture* 28, no. 1 (Spring–Summer 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Armenian: դաջագարդրություն. Serik Davt’yan, *Episodes in the History of Medieval Armenian Applied Arts* [in Armenian] (Yerevan: Publishing House of the Academy of Sciences of the Armenian SSR, 1981), 39–57.

<sup>3</sup> For more on the craft guilds associated with the textile industry, see Yüksel Duman, “Notables, Textiles and Copper in Ottoman Tokat 1750–1840” (unpublished PhD thesis, Binghamton University, 1998).



FIGURE 3  
Lim Altar Curtain, painted and printed in Tokat in 1750, Museum of the Mekhitarist Congregation of San Lazzaro degli Armeni, Venice. Photo courtesy of Hrair Hawk Khatcherian.



FIGURE 4  
Altar Curtain, painted and printed in Tokat in 1781, Museums of the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin. Photo courtesy of Hrair Hawk Khatcherian.



# Labels

1

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.

2

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.

3

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



INSCRIPTION  
ԻՎԱՅԵԼՈՒՄՆԱՍ[ՈՒՐ]ԲԿՈՒՍԻՆՎԱՌՎԱ/  
ՌԵ[Ա]ՑԱԶԻՆԲԿՏՐԻՆԷԼՆԿԱՐԵԱԼ  
*For the adornment of the Holy Virgin Barbara,  
by the right hand of Katarinē, painted.*

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.

4

Hakob of Tokat  
Tokat (mod. Republic of Turkey)

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

BAND INSCRIPTION  
Յ[Ի]Շ[Ա]Տ[ԱԿ] Է Վ[Ա]Ր[Ա]Գ[Ո]ՒՐԱ.  
ՄԷՐՏԻՆՑԻ. ՄՈՒՍԱՅԻ ՈՐԴԻ ԲԱՐԵՊԱՇՏ ԵՒ  
Ա[ՍՏՈՒԱ]ԾԱՍԷՐ. ԱՍԼԱՆԻ. Ի ԴՈՒՌՆ  
Ս[ՈՒՐ]Բ ԳԷՈՐԳԱՅ: Թ[ՎԱԿԱՆ] ՌԶԿԶ: 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  
ԹՈՒԱԹՑԻ Տ[Ի]Ր[Ա]Ց[Ո]Ւ ԱԿՈԲԻ ԲԱՆՆ  
*This is the work of the chorister Akob of T'okhat'.*

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 (see Figs. 1 & 2) 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*, cat. 5). 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.

5

Unknown Maker  
Tokat (mod. Republic of Turkey)

*Saghavard* (priest's crown), 1822  
Metallic thread, sequins,  
and brass on blue velvet  
Armenian Museum of America



INSCRIPTION  
Յ[Ի]Շ[Ա]Տ[ԱԿ] Է ՍԱՂԱՎԱՐՏՍ ՍՐԲ[Ո]ՅՆ  
ՍՏԵՓ[Ա]ՆՈՍԻ ԵԿԵՂ[Ե]ՑԻ[ՈՅ]Ն ԵՒԴՈԿԻՈՅ  
ԱՐԴԵ[ԱՄ]Բ ՊՕՅԱԸԵԱՆ ՄԱՀՏԵՍԻՆ  
ՄԱՐՏԻՐՈՍԻՆ ԹՎԻՆ Հ[Ա]ՅՕՑ ՌՄՀԱ ԻՆ  
*This crown is a memorial gift for  
the church of Saint Step'anos of Evdokia by  
mahtesi Martiros Pöyachean in the year of the  
Armenians 1271 (1822).*

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.

6

Unknown Maker  
India or Iran

Curtain, 18th–19th century [?]  
Resist-dyed, printed, and painted cotton  
Armenian Museum of America



INSCRIPTION  
ՎԿԱՅՈՒԴԻԹԻՈՂՆ ՄԱՀԵՄԷԴ  
*Witness, Mahemēd*

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.

7

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

BORDER BAND INSCRIPTION  
ՅԻՇԱՏԱԿ Է ՎԱԿԱԱԼՍ  
Ի ԴՈՒՌՆ ՍԲ ԸՍՏԻՓԱՆՆՈՍ ՏՐՈՒՆԻՍ ԶԵՂ  
*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 տօրօնաց/գէղըն  
օվանէսի օրթի/մ[ա]հոտ[ես]ի արաղբարը [...] վէր/  
ակացօւ թվ[ական] ՌԲՃԻ սեքտէմբէրի աին ըստ  
այբոյ  
*This [is for] the church of Saint Step’annos in  
the village of Toron. Ōvanēs son of mahtesi [pil-  
grim to Jerusalem] Araghbar, guardian, in the  
year 1220 (1771), September 1. [...]*

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.

8

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



INSCRIPTION  
ՅԻՇ[Ա]Տ[Ա]Կ Է ՎԱՐՇԱՄԱԿՍ ԱՆԱՊԻԲԵԻՆ  
Ի 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.*

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’.

9

Unknown Maker  
Constantinople [?]

Fragment of altar curtain [?], late 18th  
or early 19th century  
Silk embroidery on cotton ground  
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

INSCRIPTIONS  
ՅՆԹՀ  
Յ[ԻՍՈՒՍ] Ն[ ԱԶՈՎՐԵՑԻ] Թ[ԱԳԱՒՈՐ]  
Հ[ՐԵԻՑ]  
*“Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews”*  
  
ԽԱԶԵԼՈՒԹԻԻՆՆ Զ[ՐԻՍՈՂ]ՍԻ  
*The Crucifixion of Christ*  
  
Տ[Է]Ր Ա[ՍՏՈՒԱ]Ծ Յ[ԻՍՈՒ]Ս Զ[ՐԻՍՈՂ]  
*Lord God Jesus Christ*

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.



10

Unknown Maker  
Constantinople [?]

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



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.”

The mitre's embroidered decoration 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 they would have been 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.

11

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

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*

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.

## Related Public Programming

Fall 2021 Opening Reception  
Opening Reception  
September 23, 6–8PM  
Aidekman Arts Center / Medford

Workshop  
*Hand space—the need to make special*  
with Samantha Fields, Sculpture, SMFA  
November 18, 6–8PM  
Aidekman Arts Center / Medford

Closing Event  
Tour of *Connecting Threads/Survivor Objects*  
with Helen C. Evans, PhD  
December 5, 2PM  
Aidekman Arts Center / Medford



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*Connecting Threads / Survivor Objects* is organized by Christina Maranci, Arthur H. Dadian and Ara T. Oztemel Professor of Armenian Art and Architecture, and Chiara Pidotella, Research Curator. Special thanks to Christopher Barbour, Pam Parmal, Erin Piñon, Carolyn Talmadge, the Armenian Museum of America, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Design  
Dante Carlos

Copyediting  
John Ewing and Kristin Swan

Printing  
Puritan Press

Photographs courtesy the  
Armenian Museum of America  
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