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# *The Collection of Silver Book Bindings of the Armenian Museum in Bucharest and their Relationship to Eastern and Western Arts*

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The collection of silver book bindings of the Armenian Museum in Bucharest holds its important place among Armenian, as well as foreign collections, due to its variety, artistic and stylistic features. There are preserved about 43 bindings, six of which are double-bindings, made entirely of silver plate, the others are made of separate metal parts. Most parts of the bindings date to the 18–19<sup>th</sup> centuries, some of them were imported from Constantinople while others were locally made in Romania.<sup>1</sup>

One of the oldest bindings from the Armenian Museum collection is a Gospel from Caffa (fig. 1). Any definite information about its preparation, place and date of creation does not exist. There are two donative inscriptions in the Gospel, from 1351 and 1451 and in none of them is there information about the binding. Comparing only with Romanian monuments of the 15–16<sup>th</sup> centuries and considering the obvious Byzantine influence, Dan Simonescu claims that it was made in the 15–16<sup>th</sup> centuries in Romania<sup>2</sup>. Armenian inscription on the binding prove that the silversmith was Armenian. Unfortunately, we have no information about Romanian Armenian silversmiths of this period, which could support Simonescu's conjecture about the preparation of the binding in Romania in that period.

Bucharest, settled as it is between East and West, the items preserved in its Armenian Museum provide evidence of the city's long role as a cultural crossroad. In analyzing the samples, the characteristic elements of Western and Eastern arts are easy to identify,

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<sup>1</sup> Only Dan Simonescu in his article about a Gospel from Caffa of 1351 had mentioned one particular binding. Cf. D. Simonescu, 'Evangelia Armeana din Iași', *Ani, Anuar de Cultură Armeană*, 1941, p. 341–343.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 342.



Fig. 1. Silver binding No. 1 of the 15–16 centuries? (Gospel of Caffa, 1351)

as well as indications of the relations between them. The bindings from the Bucharest collection were made in Constantinople. In the 17–18<sup>th</sup> centuries radical changes occurred in different fields of art and were expressed particularly in the cultural melting pot of cosmopolitan capital of Ottoman empire. In the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, during the reign of Sultan Ahmed III, the Ottoman government started to seek ways to overcome the difficulties facing the empire in the modern age. At this time, the Ottomans took a greater interest in the European countries and their cultures. In 1720 Sultan Ahmed III sent a delegation to Paris, to Louis XV's court, which was ordered to watch closely the processes taking place there, to get acquainted with French economy, culture and science thoroughly.<sup>3</sup>

Consequently, thanks to the new understanding of European culture, preferences and tastes changed, due to the growing influence and the spread of European printed books.<sup>4</sup> According to some scholars, the “French royal style”, adds a new impulse of ideas, entered into the artistic life of Constantinople. The mixture of local style and European

<sup>3</sup> Վ. Բալբուրդյան, *Օսմանյան կայսրության պատմություն*, Երևան 2011, pp. 360–361.

<sup>4</sup> H. Evance, S. Merian, ‘The Final Centuries. Armenian Manuscripts of the Diaspora’ in *Treasures in Heaven: Armenian Illuminated Manuscripts*, ed. T. F. Matheus, R. S. Wieck, New York, 1994, p. 112.

Baroque, later Rococo styles formed the new “Constantinople style”<sup>5</sup>. We can definitely say that the bindings in “Constantinople style” preserved in the Armenian Museum in Bucharest were prepared by Armenian master silversmiths, as most of them hold Armenian inscriptions and it is also known, that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Armenian jewelers and silversmiths occupied a leading position in Constantinople<sup>6</sup>.

The earliest binding in this group is No. 38, which was made in 1783 and donated to the Armenian Holy Virgin Church in Botoșani in the Northern part of Moldavia according to the dedicatory inscription (fig. 2). Here we already see the new Western accent, which is the depiction of the *arma Christi*. In the corners of the upper cover, angels with those instruments in their hands are presented. The other side of the binding presents *Madonna with Child* and *Evangelists* in the corners, but the modeling of the figures is more dynamic (fig. 3).

The next example is the book binding of the printed Gospel No. 31, which was prepared at the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (fig. 4). On the upper cover the scene *Christ enthroned* is presented, with the symbols of Evangelists on the throne. On the lower cover is the scene of the Crucifixion with no visible Western influence. The two scenes are framed with stylized floral patterns in Constantinople style.

The image of *Christ enthroned* is typical for Armenian art. Although we meet its earliest example in the Gospel of 1236 painted by Ignatios<sup>7</sup> (fig. 5), it is less common in book bindings. It is interesting that we could find only a few bindings with the same image (but rudimentary in comparison), which were made in Caffa. These are the Gospel bindings from 1656 (No. 2534), 1668 (No. 6606)<sup>8</sup> (fig. 6) and 1723 (No. 7675)<sup>9</sup> (fig.7), preserved in the Matenadaran in Yerevan.

It is known that the Armenian art of Constantinople, particularly the miniature painting, was greatly influenced by the Armenian art of the Crimea<sup>10</sup>. In order to replenish Constantinople with citizens, in 1475 a great number of Armenians were forcibly resettled there from Caffa. In later centuries the immigration of Armenians from Crimea, and particularly from Caffa, continued<sup>11</sup>. The immigrants were mostly artisans and merchants. We are sure that these processes greatly influenced the appearance of elements

<sup>5</sup> R. T. Marchese, M. R. Breu, *Treasures of Faith. Sacred Relics and Artifacts from the Armenian Orthodox Churches of Istanbul*, Istanbul 2015, p. 92.

<sup>6</sup> G. Kürkman, *Ottoman Silver Marks*, Istanbul 1996, p. 71, 287–289; Հ. Ստեփանյան, *Հայերի ներդրումն Օսմանյան կայսրությունում*, Երևան 2011, pp. 584–600.

<sup>7</sup> S. Der-Nersessian, A. Mekhitarian, *Armenian Miniatures from Isfahan*, Brussels 1986, p. 62; *Horómos Monastery: Art and History*, ed. Ed. Vardanyan, Paris, 2015, p. 346, 349.

<sup>8</sup> H. Buschhausen, H. Buschhausen, E. Korchmasjan, *Armenische Buchmalerei und Baukunst der Krim*, Erevan 2009, p. 246, fig. 285.

<sup>9</sup> G. Eliasjan, *Silberbeschlagene Handschriften aus dem Matenadaran*, Jerewan 2011, p. 133.

<sup>10</sup> H. Evance, S. Merian, ‘The Final Centuries. Armenian Manuscripts of the Diaspora’ in *Treasures in Heaven: Armenian Illuminated Manuscripts*, ed. T. F. Matheus, R.S. Wieck, New York, 1994, p. 108.

<sup>11</sup> Ալ. Խառատյան, *Կոստանդնուպոլսի հայ գաղթօջախը (XV–XVII դարեր)*, Երևան 2007, p. 56.



Fig. 2. Silver binding No. 38 of 1783, Constantinople (upper cover)



Fig. 3. Silver binding No. 38 of 1783, Constantinople (lower cover)

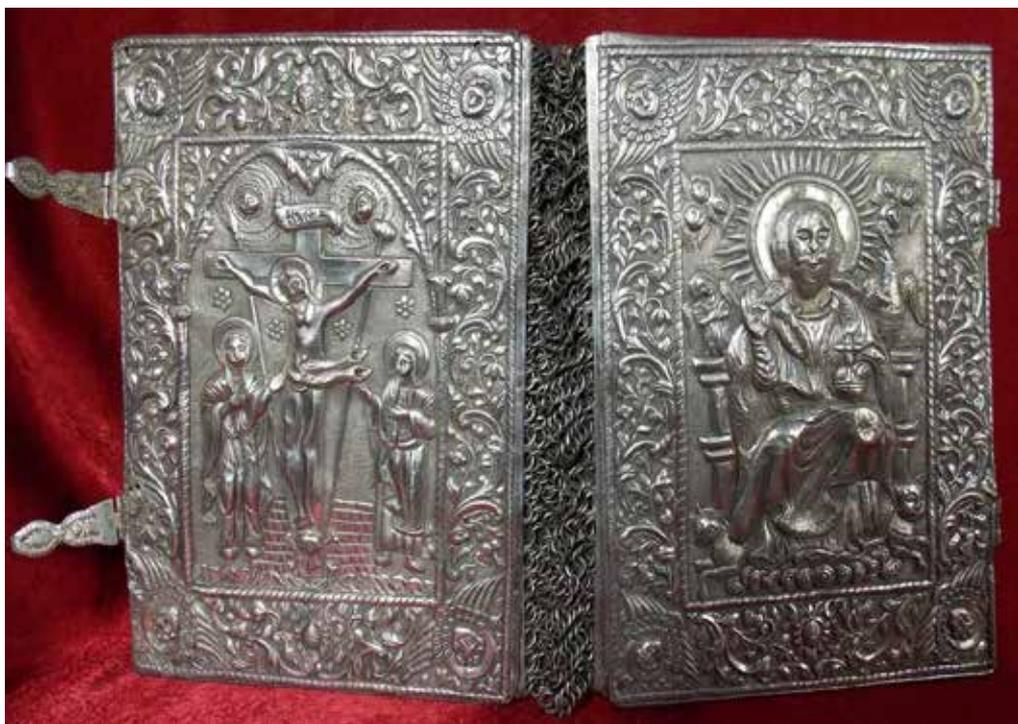


Fig. 4. Silver Binding of the Gospel No. 31, turn of the 18–19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Constantinople

typical for the Armenian art of Crimea in the Armenian art of Constantinople. Therefore, we can assume that the adoption of the image of *Christ enthroned* on the binding represents the influence of the Armenian art of Caffa.

The binding of manuscript No. 42 is in the new style (fig. 8). On the upper cover is the *Resurrection*, and on the lower cover the *Crucifixion*, both with spacious iconography, clearly of Western influence. The two scenes are again accentuated within a stylized frame. Beyond the frame, in the four corners are images of the *Evangelists* and their symbols. Scenes occupy the entire surface of the upper and lower covers, without leaving any free space.

Such interpretation of the *Resurrection* was imported into Armenian art after the iconographic changes in the 17<sup>th</sup>–18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Prior to the 17<sup>th</sup> century it was more common in Armenian art to depict the the *Holy Women at the Sepulcher* instead of the *Resurrection*.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Constantinople style got a more noticeable Western character, whose vivid expression is shown in the Bucharest collection. The binding No. 14 of the Gospel of Myrophores with green velvet background and overhead silver decoration dates to the first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (fig. 9). The upper cover presents the



Fig. 5. *Christ enthroned*, Gospel of 1236, New Julfa, Holy Savior Monastery, No. 36/156



Fig. 6. Binding of Gospel, Caffa, 1668, Matenadaran, No. 6606



Fig. 7. Binding of Gospel, Caffa, 1723, Matenadaran, No. 7675



Fig. 8. Silver Binding of the Gospel No. 42, turn of the 18–19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Constantinople



Fig. 9. Silver Binding of the Gospel of Myrrophores No. 14, 19<sup>th</sup> century, Constantinople



Fig. 10. Silver Binding of the Gospel of Myrrophores No. 15, 19<sup>th</sup> century, Constantinople



Fig. 11. Silver Binding of the Mashtots (Book of Rituals) No. 29, 19<sup>th</sup> century, Constantinople

Resurrection, on the lower cover is the *Entombment of Christ* with the same technique and iconographic features. The figures are presented with expressive and plastic solutions and are placed at the bottom of the scene. On the top there is the Cross surrounded by the Instruments of the Passion. Upper and lower covers are framed with splendid garlands.

The Gospel of Myrrophores No. 15 and its binding also belong to the 19<sup>th</sup> century (fig. 10). On the binding of this Gospel we see the same scenes, with the same techniques as on the book binding of No. 14, but with a more saturated iconography, and in comparison with the previous example, the scenes are framed with double garlands. The main scenes are framed with a highly stylized vegetal and floral oval garland, out of which are heads of angels placed in the four corners. These all are framed with the second rectangular garland.

The most unique example is the book binding No. 29 – a Book of Rituals (Mashtots) (fig. 11). The Book of Rituals was published in Constantinople in 1792. The inscription reads that “the silver and gilded Mashtots” was donated in 1805 to the Armenian Church



Fig. 12. Scene of Marriage Ceremony, Silver Binding of the Mashtots (Book of Rituals) No. 29, 19<sup>th</sup> century, Constantinople

in Iasi. The binding is seriously damaged - the heads of figures are missing, as well as some parts of their features, and the bottom half of the lower cover.

There are four scenes presented, two on the upper cover and two on the lower one. Each scene is horizontally oval and enclosed in a frame resembling woven wheat spikes. Two scenes are connected with symbolic ribbons and are included in one common wheat spike frame.

This is the Book of Rituals, where the Rituals of the Armenian Church are presented. Therefore, four of them are depicted on the binding – these are Baptism, Marriage ceremony, Communion and Funeral. On the upper cover are placed the scenes of the Baptism and Marriage ceremony, and on the lower cover are the Communion and Funeral. The scenes are very unique in their composition and presentation. It is likely that other examples may exist, but as of yet we know of none.



Fig. 13. Johannes Lingelbach, *Gezicht op de Dam, Armenian Merchants* (1656), detail

The scenes are not crowded with figures, only the main figures are depicted in the scenes.

The most unique is the scene of Marriage. This is particularly noteworthy since depictions of marriage are not met with very often in Armenian art (fig. 12). The scene is depicted the moment of the marriage blessing, when the groom holds the right hand of the Bride with his right hand. The groom and the next layman are wearing clothing typical for wealthy Armenian merchants and noblemen of the 17th–19th centuries (fig. 13). The bride is wearing a bridal veil on her head, which covers her face and according to the engravings of that period, this was typical for Armenian brides of Constantinople<sup>12</sup>. In all scenes we see that the priest is wearing clothing typical for Armenian clergymen (fig. 14).

Having considered works from Constantinople, I will now look to some examples from Romania. Sargis Golanjian, who has invested much time in to the study of Roma-

<sup>12</sup> Е. Н. Николаева, *Армянская коллекция государственного музея истории религии*, Санкт-Петербург 2011, р. 35.



Fig. 14. Silver Binding of the Mashtots (Book of Rituals) No. 29, The figure of Priest with the clothing of Armenian clergymen, details

nian-Armenian cultural heritage, notes that the “Armenians living in the city of Iasi were involved in various crafts including silversmithing”<sup>13</sup>. In this regard, the most important artifact is No. 23, the Gospel book published in 1729 in Constantinople (fig. 15). There are two inscriptions in the Gospel, the first of which contains very important information. It is the name of a Romanian-Armenian jeweler, who had lived and worked in the Romanian city of Iasi. According to the inscription, Father Johan’s son, the jeweler Bartholomew (Bardulimeos) from Iasi, donated the Gospel to the Holy Virgin Church of Iasi in 1781. As a result, this is the first Romanian-Armenian master’s name we know. The second inscription, recorded in 1805, is about the silver covering of the Gospel. In comparison with the bindings presented above, this one is simpler. In the four corners of green velvet background, on both covers, images of single angels are attached. In the middle of the upper cover is the scene of the *Crucifixion* with an oval frame, now missing. In the center of the lower cover is the scene of the *Resurrection*, again, in an oval frame.

Examples No. 120 and 121 repeat each other completely. The two Rituals (Mashtots) published in Jerusalem were donated by Khachik Gabri to the Armenian Church of the Holy Virgin in the city of Roman (fig. 16, 17). The binding was definitely made in Roma-

<sup>13</sup> У. Քոլանջյան, ‘Հայերը Ռումինիայում’, *Հայկական Սովետական Հանրագիտարան*, 10 (1984), p. 30.



Fig. 15. Silver Binding of the Gospel No. 23, 19<sup>th</sup> century, Iasi, Romania

nia in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as indicated by the silver hallmark used in Romania in the period between 1906–1926<sup>14</sup> (fig. 18).

The composition of the binding is quite simple - the master has avoided details, ornaments and crowded scenes. In the center of the upper cover, on the dark-red velvet background with an oval frame, the image of the Crucified Christ is placed. The oval frame is flanked by the heads of angels attached in the corners. The composition of the lower cover is similar to the upper cover, with one difference: in the center, instead of the *Crucified Christ* is the *Resurrection of Christ*, again, with an oval frame and simple iconography. The locks are formed by molten figures of Saint Peter and Paul. The upper covers of both bindings are decorated with donative inscriptions. These are placed on the polished frames and merge into the general composition. The inscriptions are also important as an ornamental enhancement to the general composition.

It is evident that the bindings prepared in Romania are quite different from those produced in Constantinople. Though they are simpler in form and style, they show the variety of artistic tastes, opportunities and styles of the period.

Nevertheless, it is impossible to include all the book bindings and all relevant information associated with them in one paper, especially in the situation when we have no

<sup>14</sup> <http://hallmarkwiki.com/?ShowHallmark=12225>.



Fig. 16. Gospels No. 120 & 121, 20<sup>th</sup> century, Romania, Upper covers



Fig. 17. Gospels No. 120 & 121, 20<sup>th</sup> century, Romania, Lower covers

consensus about the place and the date of origin of some bindings which have a high artistic value.

Undoubtedly, the silver binding collection of the Armenian Museum in Bucharest plays a very important role in the history of Armenian and Romanian precious metal art due to its unique artistic representations and compositions.



Fig. 18. Hallmark used in Romania between 1906–1926, Gospels No. 120 & 121, 20<sup>th</sup> century, Romania