

INTRODUCTION

Armenian manuscripts are treasuries of knowledge and tradition, attesting to the religious, intellectual, literary, economic, scribal, artisanal, and visual practices of Armenian communities and their neighbours across the world. Produced since the creation of the Armenian alphabet in the early fifth century CE, Armenian manuscripts survive in abundance from the medieval to the early modern periods. The total number of manuscripts is often given as thirty-five thousand, with the proviso that an unknown number of codices remains unstudied and unpublished.³ The largest and most significant repository for Armenian manuscripts is the Mashtots Institute of Ancient Manuscripts (or Matenadaran) in Yerevan.⁴ Other important collections are kept in the Library of the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem, the Mekhitarist Monastery of San Lazzaro degli Armeni in Venice, and the Mekhitarist Monastery of Vienna. Additionally, major and minor collections of Armenian manuscripts are housed in universities, libraries, museums, monasteries, and churches across the world.

Private collections form another important repository for Armenian manuscripts. Not all such collections are accessible to scholars, meaning that our knowledge of Armenian manuscripts must always be considered only partial. We are, therefore, exceedingly grateful to Dr. David and Jemima Jeselsohn for initiating and organizing the present publication, with the aim of sharing their holdings with scholars and the public.

The David and Jemima Jeselsohn Collection consists of ancient and medieval art objects originating in the Near East and the Holy Land. This collection, dating from 1970 and growing over the years, is carefully kept in Zürich (Switzerland). The

³ See for example Merian (2015), at 52 and note 1.

⁴ In this book, the conventional, modern spellings of Mashtots, Yerevan, and Etchmiadzin are used, instead of the transliterations Maštoc', Erevan, and Ējmiacin.

artefacts belong to three main categories: archaeology (terracotta, bronze, silver and glass; seals and potsherds containing short notes inscribed in Aramaic and Hebrew; and numismatic items from Israel); Judaica (Jewish ritual objects); and medieval manuscripts, incunabula and old printed books written in Hebrew, Syriac, Greek, Latin, and Armenian. Among the Jeselsohn manuscripts are five Armenian codices. Of great importance for Armenian studies and the history of art more generally, these manuscripts occupy a special place in the David and Jemima Jeselsohn Collection. They represent various literary types, including biblical, hagiographic, homiletic, and liturgical texts. They also reflect an array of visual and artisanal traditions, connected to artistic centres in the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia (modern southwest Turkey), Constantinople, and New Julfa (a suburb of Isfahan in Iran), and span a period of over 300 years. The earliest example (aside from the flyleaves of JM34 and 35), dates from 1353 and the latest from the later seventeenth or early eighteenth centuries (JM22).⁵

Addressing each of the Armenian manuscripts in the David and Jemima Jeselsohn Collection, this book is divided into five chapters. Each chapter begins with codicological information, including measurements and details of construction and binding, and then proceeds to a systematic description of the textual content. This section also presents the colophons, if extant: Colophons are memorial notes by those responsible for the creation of the manuscript, or by later readers. They are particularly typical of Armenian manuscripts, and record precious first-hand historical information about the making of the book, often including the names of the donor and family members, the artists and scribes involved, and sometimes where and when the work was produced, or even contemporary historical events.⁶ Each chapter then considers the painted imagery, including figural decoration and ornamentation, with attention to questions of style, date, and attribution, accompanied by discussion of related manuscripts in other collections. The final section considers the known history of the manuscript from its time of creation to the present day.

Chapter One debuts an extraordinary manuscript, JM34 – a heretofore unidentified and unpublished Miscellany copied and illustrated by the celebrated

⁵ Based on their palaeography and codicology, the parchment endpages of JM34 and JM35 (leaf III) are undoubtedly more ancient than the thirteenth century; see pp. 24–26 and pp. 153–154.

⁶ For an introduction to Armenian manuscript colophons, see Sanjian (1969), 1–41, and Stone (1995).

Cilician manuscript painter Sargis Picak, active in the first half of the fourteenth century. Wrongly catalogued by Sotheby's as a work of 1535, JM34 is of exceptional value for its collection of thirty-one texts, including edifying stories about martyrs and saints, sermons, and prayers. This manuscript was written in 1353 CE. The authors of these texts include church fathers such as John Chrysostom, Cyprian, Epiphanius of Salamis, Ephrem the Syrian, and Jacob of Serugh, as well as the Armenian authors Vardan Arewel'ci (1198–1271 CE), Zak'aria Catholicos (d. 879), and Yovhannēs vardapet. Among these texts are some unusually important works, including one of the earliest versions of Jacob of Serugh's Homily on Good Friday, the oldest known copy of the apocryphal Questions of St. Gregory, and a recension of Apocalypse of the Virgin.

The manuscript is equally valuable for containing no fewer than twenty-nine colophons by Sargis Picak, in which we learn that he is a married priest and that his wife's name is Zablun. The colophons also offer precious insight into Sargis's working life: in one colophon, he complains of problems with the manuscript's quires and asks the reader not to blame him; elsewhere, we learn that he completed the codex in the time of his old age. Indeed, JM34 is one of Sargis's very last manuscripts; it bears the same date (1353) as a Gospel book in the Matenadaran (M 6795), previously considered to be his latest surviving dated work.⁷ The most recent study of the decoration of this manuscript considers JM34's eleven marginal figures, as well as its headpieces, marginal ornaments, and decorated initials. The figural imagery displays Sargis's hallmarks as a painter, including expressive faces and subtle modelling. Study of JM21 together with Sargis's published manuscripts of the late 1340s and early 1350s thus offers precious insight into the sunset of Sargis's artistic career.

Chapter One also introduces a previously unpublished and unstudied carved ivory plaque, which is affixed to the front binding of the manuscript. Although this object deserves its own sustained and specialized study, the present volume serves to introduce it to scholars, and presents evidence in support of a tantalizing possibility: that JM34 preserves a rare example of medieval Armenian ivory carving.

Chapter Two is devoted to JM35, a Ritual or Euchologion (its Armenian title is *Maštoc'*), dated to 1586. It was copied in the Church of the Sts. James in Jerusalem in 1586 CE by Bishop Astuacatur of Muš (mod. Turkish Republic). This manuscript is only modestly decorated, but nevertheless features an artistic program typical of

7 See Eremyan (1953).

Armenian manuscripts: ornate headpieces, vegetative ornaments of arabesques and palmettes in the margins, and decorated initials in the shape of birds. These creatures, which modern scholars refer to as *tr'č'nagir* (bird letters or ornithomorphic letters), form part of the traditional vocabulary of Armenian manuscript art.

The text consists of a compilation of central rites of the Armenian Church, including baptism, marriage, holy communion, burial, various funerary services, penitence, and animal sacrifice; also included are blessings of water, grain, a cross, a church door, a baptismal font, and a defiled church. These rituals, with their directives for movement, prayers, and scriptural readings, are of central importance to the study of Armenian liturgy, theology, and ecclesiology. Because, as scholarship has shown, those rites do not remain static, but develop over time and vary from place to place, the publication of JM35 offers precious insight into our understanding of Armenian liturgical practices in sixteenth-century Jerusalem.⁸

Chapter Three is devoted to JM24, a beautiful parchment leaf of the opening of the Gospel of John, studied and published previously by Michael and Nira Stone. As these scholars have discussed, JM24 most likely originates from a Bible produced in New Julfa, a suburb of Isfahan, and dates to the middle of the seventeenth century, perhaps in the 1640s. The opening bears on its verso a lush ornamental headpiece with gold leaf and bright blue, and a recto of equally ornate marginal ornaments and decorated initials. If the attribution to New Julfa is correct, the manuscript attests to the flourishing of artistic production in that city. In the seventeenth century, New Julfa became home to Armenian merchant families of the Safavid Empire, who established autonomy and vast wealth through their global trade networks, and who were avid artistic patrons – evident not only in their illuminated manuscripts but also in their extraordinary church complexes.⁹ This led to a revival of Armenian manuscript culture and a distinctive style of illumination.¹⁰

⁸ These rites are the subject of study by many scholars, including Bishop Daniel Findikyan and Gabrielle Winkler. For study of the *Maštoc'* in particular, see the massive edition of the earliest known euchologies by Ter-Vardanean (2012). This is the first volume in a chronological series including the rituals as they developed over time, including both the later medieval period and, subsequently, printed editions.

⁹ On New Julfa see, generally, Aslanian (2011). On the churches of New Julfa see Landau and van Lint (2015). Carswell (1968) is also relevant.

¹⁰ Der Nersessian and Mekhitarian (1986), 168, 205–206.

Chapters Four and Five are devoted to Gospel books, the earliest known and most abundant textual genre among Armenian manuscripts. JM21 and JM22 feature characteristic elements of an Armenian Gospel book: they begin with full-page cycles of the Life of Christ, followed by the Canon Tables – the retrieval tool created by Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea (c. 260–340 CE), which allows readers to collate passages across the four Gospel texts.¹¹ Following the Canon Tables are the Gospel texts themselves, prefaced by a portrait of each evangelist, and the first words of each text, often adorned with decorated letters and headpieces. In the richest of Gospels manuscripts, as in JM21 and 22, many of the text pages feature marginal ornamentation of figural, vegetative, or geometric forms.

Chapter Four concerns JM21. The main colophon names its scribe as Azaria, the places of production as New Julfa, in the Monastery of the All-Saviour (Surb Amenap'rkic') and the church of the Mother of God (Surb Astuacacin), and a completion date of 1695. JM21 may thus be placed securely within the context of New Julfa. The lavish decoration of JM21, including abundant gold, eight full-page prefatory scenes, luxurious Canon Tables, and no fewer than 201 marginal decorations, are also a reflection of this prosperity. The bright palette of the paintings, the expressive faces and gestures of the figures, and the stacked forms of the compositions, exhibit similarities with works produced within the circle of a known painter, Hayrapet of Julfa.¹²

JM22 forms the subject of Chapter Five. This Gospel is without a secure date or place of production. The original colophon (fol. 101r) asks the reader to remember a certain David and his wife Sara, but it does not specify whether 'David' is a scribe, painter, or indeed patron of the manuscript. Nevertheless, stylistic and iconographic analysis of the imagery strongly suggests late seventeenth- or early eighteenth-century Constantinople as a place of production. The Armenian manuscripts of Constantinople present many parallels with JM21, including the linear rendering of forms and figures, the gem-like palette, and abundant gold leaf. Nevertheless, the plump, rather childlike figures, dramatic gestures and facial expressions, and the addition of visual 'sub-plots' within the narrative scenes (despite the manuscript's small size), are uniquely charming. This manuscript bears no fewer than 206 marginalia, several presenting additional narrative episodes from the Gospels.

¹¹ For an important study of an Armenian Gospel book and its iconography, see Mathews and Sanjian (1991).

¹² Here we acknowledge the insights given by Dr. M. Arakelyan upon the figure of Hayrapet.

Taken as a whole, the David and Jemima Jeselsohn Collection of Armenian manuscripts presents a corpus of high quality and significance. The newly identified Sargis Picak manuscript is of exceptional importance for the study of medieval Armenian art, both for the images and for Sargis's colophons. The Ritual holds particular importance for scholars of the Armenian liturgy and its development in sixteenth-century Jerusalem. Finally, with specimens from both the manuscript traditions of Constantinople and New Julfa, the two main diasporic centres for Armenians in the early modern era, the David and Jemima Jeselsohn Collection offers, in small compass, precious insight into manuscript patronage and production during one of the most prosperous moments in Armenian history.



Fig. 1.1



Fig. 1.2



Fig. 1.3

the ornamented geometric frame, from which the feet of the apostles protrude, and the beaded halos of the prophets and Christ (Fig. 1.3). Hand gestures are similar as well.

These comparisons lead one to a tantalizing possibility: Could this be a fourteenth-century Armenian ivory plaque? As Dickran Kouymjian has noted, surviving ivory and bone carvings are quite rare within a medieval Armenian context.⁹ Ivory book covers are known from the written testimony of Vrtanēs Kert'ol, the seventh-century theologian, who exhorts in his 'Concerning the Iconoclasts' the veneration of the Gospel text as opposed to the ivory (փիղն սկլէքացն [elephant bones]) which adorns it.¹⁰ A surviving example of ivory covers on an Armenian manuscript is the Etchmiadzin Gospels (M 2374), a tenth-century manuscript with two sewn-in seventh-century folios. The covers, composed of five panels on front and back, and featuring images of the Virgin and Child and Christ with saints, belong to sixth-century Byzantine ivory carving tradition, as scholars have long agreed.¹¹

⁹ <http://www.fresnostate.edu/artshum/armenianstudies/resources/artsofarmenia/sculpture.html> (accessed 9 January 2022).

¹⁰ K'ēsēan (2004), 493–500, at 498. Several scholars have noted this as evidence for ivory: see Durand, Rapti, and Giovannoni (2007), 107; Nersessian (2001), 155.

¹¹ Most recently *Armenia Sacra*, see bibliography on 105.



Fig. 1.6



Fig. 1.7



Fig. 1.9



Fig. 1.10