**Works of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction:**

**Armenian Manuscript Illumination in Seventeenth-Century Constantinople**

I wish to speak on a tradition of Armenian manuscripts that is not well known outside of specialist circles. While the illuminations of Greater Armenia, and most of all Armenian Cilicia, are celebrated as high points in the narrative of Armenian art history, the manuscripts produced by the Armenian community of Constantinople, most of which date to the seventeenth century, have received far less attention. This is particularly striking when one considers the number of codices and scrolls that can be associated with the tradition (I have found at least 35 published so far, but I seem to find new ones each day) and their copious illustration. Nor are the Constantinopolitan manuscripts, as a whole, modest in material or the product of untrained artists, as is clear enough from a detail from Armenian MS 11 from the Houghton Library, Harvard.

Scholars, in general, have not been particularly charitable about the tradition. On the contrary, certain, sometimes rather forceful, judgements on quality emerge from a reading of the academic literature. For example, the rendering of faces in the manuscripts has been described as 1.) “bland” 2.) “careful, but almost emotionless” or 3). having a “uniform, fixed expression”. The most celebrated scholar of Armenian art, Sirarpie Der Nersessian, was rather more blunt when she referred to the style (in specific reference to Walters manuscript 547), as “uninteresting.”

“Stereotyped” is a word that arises frequently in discussions of the treatment of the Constantinopolitan manuscripts. Heide and Helmut Buschhausen write of their lack of variation or innovative adaptation, which resulted in a decoration that was “tiresomely stereotypical (*ermüdend stereotyp*).” The term may be intended here to indicate a certain consistency of forms, or their execution by linear means. But it is felicitous in light of my argument that stereotype originally referred to the printing process invented in 1725 by the Scottish goldsmith William Ged. I will pursue the relationship between print technology, and specifically printed images, and the manuscript painting of seventeenth-century Constantinople.

**The Illustrations: Development of the “Constantinopolitan Style”**

The recent publication of *Treasures in Heaven* offers what I have found to be the longest discussion of the style. In the ultimate chapter of the exhibition catalogue, entitled “The Final Centuries: Armenian Manuscripts of the Diaspora”, Helen Evans and Sylvie Merian outline the origins and development of the Constantinopolitan school. The development of the style, as presented in the essay, proceeds through the analysis of three manuscripts, beginning with Houghton Armenian MS 11. This codex, dated to 1643, contains a prefatory miniature cycle of New Testament images as well as elaborately embellished canon tables, copious marginal illustration, and full-page author portraits, much like medieval manuscripts from Cilicia. Evans and Merian note, however, that the deep, brilliant Cilician palette is, on some folios, replaced with the pale and cool colors which would become typical of the Armenian manuscripts of Constantinople. We can see this shift particularly in the scene of the Crucifixion.

The final manuscript, in the authors’ view, “epitomizes the local Constantinopolitan style.” This is the Philadelphia Manuscript attributed to the painter Gabriel, who worked in the last decade of the seventeenth century. The Annunciation scene of the Philadelphia Gospels features the two large protagonists, the archangel Gabriel and the Virgin. The event takes place, like many of the images from the Constantinopolitan Armenian tradition, in an exterior, urban setting. This is true whether or not the narrative calls for a cityscape; so, the nativity scene does not include a grotto, as in images of the same subject by T‘oros Roslin, and Christ and the apostles participate in the Last Supper in what also appears to be a metropolitan scene. In the case of the Annunciation, the artist has lavished attention on the architecture, with its polychrome surfaces and ornamental details. This image also displays the palette shift from earlier manuscript painting noticed by the aforementioned scholars: deep blue, green, orange, and magenta are set against the pale architecture, creating strong chromatic rhythms across the surface of the page.

The polished paper surface, devoid of detectable pigment, has become the dominant flesh tone, which is contoured by line, rather than shaded by modulated color. The line is extremely sharp, black, and fine. Details of the face and hands show that this is a confident artist with a steady hand. The black lines define, also the architecture, and the frame of the entire image, showing the use of a straightedge. I want to stress that the effects that the painter has created are only partially apprehended through digital reproductions (this is actually a digital photo of a slide taken in 2001, when I was allowed to photograph the manuscript). The page surface, as perhaps an oblique view shows better, appears mirror-smooth, with no apparent raised surfaces of pigment, and no visible brushstrokes. Although to modern eyes this may not seem particularly striking, so accustomed are we to the mechanical and digital reproduction of images, it is nonetheless an act of virtuosity to create such effects by hand, and a counter, surely, to the negative evaluations of the Constantinopolitan style discussed above, and I will argue.

With this in mind, it is useful to return to the term “stereotype”, as used in the academic literature. Glancing through the figural scenes of the Philadelphia manuscript, the word certainly seems appropriate. Faces are essentially linear maps of white surface and black line. The eyebrows are generally a straight black line; the eye is a small black circle with upper and lower lids also defined by straight lines; the nose is strong with a high bridge and a straight edge without definition of the nostrils; the mouth is described by two black lines—short and generally straight horizontals. Helen Evans and Sylvie Merian describe this technique, and the distinction between the two traditions, as “drawing” rather than painting—that is, to use the dictionary definition, to produce a picture with lines or marks particularly with a pen or a brush. The Philadelphia manuscript suggests the use of instruments and materials used for writing the text—pen and the carbon-based gum arabic. This would explain the fine, unwavering lines contouring the figures. In any event, the resulting facial template applies, whether male or female, divine or mortal, young or old, and is used within a variety of narrative contexts and moods.

Colophons attest to at least two other manuscripts by Gabriel, which I have mentioned above: British Oriental Ms 14161, discussed by James Russell in a volume accompanying the *Treasures in Heaven* exhibit; and, also, the Alexander Romance of the Vienna Mekhitarist Library. There are other manuscripts which could be associated with the artist, although lacking a firm attribution. The same style appears in another manuscript, a *mashtots*, or ritual, which was exhibited in the *Treasures in Heaven* exhibit and discussed in the exhibition catalogue. Held, at least until 1994 in the Boston University Mugar Library, its whereabouts, are at present unknown. Another member of this stylistic group is a Gospel book now in the University Library of Bologna. Discussed in 1913 by Macler, who did not know the Philadelphia manuscript, it bears almost exactly the same iconographic program. And one more manuscript, the tiny Gospels now in a private collection in Manhasset, also seems to belong to the same school.

Whether or not I can make the argument for a single artistic oeuvre is less the point, though. What is more important is that these late seventeenth-century manuscripts, by their commission and production, attest to a new aesthetic—one defined by graphic line, by summarized, schematic features. One may choose to describe this aesthetic in negative terms: as tiresome repetition. Yet there is surely more to discover. With regard to Gabriel, so obviously a master of his craft, and evidently considered by his patrons as worthy of significant commissions, it is worth asking why such a style was adopted and cultivated, and what it meant to contemporaries. Even further, should we accept that the individuation of figures, and the highlighting of specific physiognomies, is inherently valuable, or is it only our own bias, perhaps driven largely by modern sensibilities of what images should be? If we accept that the “stereotype” produced by Gabriel was not due to his own deficiencies or lack of imagination, then we can proceed to ask further art-historical questions. What might have driven this style? And what informed the development of the manuscripts of seventeenth-century Constantinople? In reflecting on these questions, I would like now to turn to the arrival and impact of European printed images.

**European Prints and Armenian Art**

Scholars have long studied the role of European printed images in the formation of Armenian art. The influence of Dutch prints in the painted interiors of the churches of New Julfa has been studied, most recently by Amy Landau and Sarah Sayeh Efketharian. Book arts also demonstrate this relationship, whether in the borrowing of single motifs, or wholesale iconographic appropriations, such as the De Bry Rescension Bible or a set of silver covers in Kayseri, which Merian has linked to the Voskan Bible.

Because of its wide circulation in Armenian communities, I would like particularly to focus on the potential role of the Voskan Bible as a source for the manuscripts. The woodcuts first appeared in the *Biblia Sacra*, which was first printed in Antwerp in 1646 and then reprinted eleven years later. The woodcuts, it is known, are not all by van Sichem; many are designed after other artists, who include Dürer, Lukas van Leiden, Holbein, Heemskerk, Goltzius, and Nadal. Even a cursory glance at the images make clear that we are not dealing here with the kind of close compositional and iconographic correspondences that art historians have successfully drawn with regard to the De Bry Rescension and the silver covers from Kayseri. The scenes attributed to Christoffel van Sichem II are complicated, with multiple figural groupings covering the entire page and dramatic, movemented forms. Spatial recession is indicated in part through orthogonals and through figures of various scales. There are few places the eye can rest: the forms and their linear contours seem to drawn one’s vision around the page in search of repose. The stable solid forms of the Constantinopolitan manuscripts, the often shallow foreground space, and the high horizon lines reflect a radically different conceptualization of the picture plane.

As is widely known, there were four Christoffels Van Sichem, and art historians have distinguished the father, Christoffel I, from his son by their manner of hatching. While the woodcuts of Christoffel I exhibit the ample use of cross-hatching, they seem to have been avoided by Christoffel II, who preferred instead the use of hatching. His technical skill is made clear by the Transfiguration scene. The basic figural composition is given dramatic expression by the intricate play of thin, closely spaced parallel lines, which radiate around and rake across the figures and objects. In the Last Supper, the same technique is used to indicate depth. The parallel lines are laid either horizontally or as orthogonal lines receding into the distance, and they are juxtaposed against each other to indicate different architectural angles. Shadow is indicated either by short hatchmarks, as on an ankle or on a vessel, or by thicker and darker parallel lines.

We do not have to search hard to find, in the manuscripts of Constantinople, the presence of similar visual effects. Short strokes of parallel lines are used to indicate shadows on legs, on architectural elements, and on vessels. Longer strokes are arranged horizontally to indicate foregrounds; where one can also find, particularly on objects, the use of a kind of intuitive orthogonal system. A scene of Christ carrying the Cross in the Vienna Hymnal is particularly instructive in this regard: here, lines indicate formal contours by their direction, but also seem to show distance, by their increasingly narrow spacing. This technique recalls the treatment of the middle zone of Van Sichem’s Last Supper image, with its recession of orthogonals into the background.

In drawing these comparisons, I should make clear two things. First, that I am not saying that parallel lines were invented in the seventeenth century, nor that Armenian manuscripts of other, earlier traditions, did not employ emphatic linear patterns to dramatize compositions. We can recall, for example, the chrysography of Cilician painting, derived from Byzantine art, or the lively graphic style of the Lake Van manuscripts of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Painters of medieval Armenia were, to be sure, well acquainted with the expressive possibilities of line. Yet what we have seen here: the persistence of hatchmarks on figures, on objects, and in the landscape, combined with the increasing importance of the printed image as a new visual form present a compelling combination of circumstances. So, too, does the precise regularity of the painted lines; equal in thickness, length, and placed at narrow intervals. They generate a kind of visual rhythm, or energy that is not easily attributed to earlier manuscript traditions.

The role of print as a source becomes indisputable when considering one particular visual device which emerges in the Constantinopolitan manuscripts. In several instances, a central figure, usually sacred, is distinguished from its surroundings by closely spaced lines, presumably gold (but I have yet to see these images in person). In fol. 88 of Walters 547, these lines seem to emanate from the Virgin and Child, defining a sacred zone and glorifying the holy figures. In two folios (253v and 331v) of Vienna manuscript 986, they radiate from the prominent crosses; the latter scene is a common image type, in which the cross is flanked by trumpeting angels. Late medieval images surely provided the prototype for the image, but in the Constantinopolitan version, the formerly blank zones surrounding the cross now vibrate with thin stripes of gold. This technique, in graphic if not coloristic terms, recalls a familiar convention of contemporary European print-making, as pages from the Voskan Bible demonstrate. Also noteworthy is the decision to appropriate this technique specifically for the glorification of a sacred figure or object. While multi-colored mandorlas, for example, were the traditional means to frame figures, painters of the Constantinopolitan manuscripts seem to be experimenting with a new way of visualizing the heavenly vision: this not trivial when one remembers the function of these images as instruments in the liturgy and as focal points for prayer.

So now we may take one last look at the faces of the late Constantinopolitan manuscripts. An image of the Betrayal from the Philadelphia manuscript demonstrates well why they have been called “stereotypes”. Yet if we begin to look at them together with the faces encountered in the Voskan Bible, an interesting relationship develops. There, particularly in the narrative scenes, faces are treated in summary form, eyes are large dots, short lines define the mouth and the brows. While I am not suggesting necessarily a direct visual source from print to painting, the correspondingly summarized treatments of physiognomy invite the following questions: what if what we perceive as a stereotype, or a short-cut, for the work of layering tones and differentiating faces was in actuality, an aesthetic effect deliberately striven for by the artist and desired by the patron? What if that aesthetic prized the contrast between bright page surface and black line, and favored the consistency of forms over variation and individuation—features that are, in one way or another, inherent in the making of prints? It is worth considering whether the limitations of our own visual perception, saturated as it is in machine-made images, may be hindering us from appreciating the manuscripts of seventeenth-century Constantinople.

**Conclusion**

With surely much more work to be done on the tradition, I would like to end not with a conclusion but with further questions. I have only discussed the relationship between Constantinopolitan manuscripts and European print imagery, but even a preliminary glance at the images suggests other directions for study. Manuscript 986 of the Vienna Mekhitarist Library bears on each full page image a set of trefoil hasps, a visual convention known from contemporary Ottoman book arts, including decorated Korans. The prominent architectonic backdrops suggest the impact of the local urban landscape. What would emerge from a close investigation of these forms in relation to the architectural history of Constantinople? Or in relation to the detailed contemporary accounts of the city by Eremia Celebi? Such a study might tell us more about the conditions and realities of the Armenian community of seventeenth-century Constantinople. I have also neglected here the immediate political and religious context in which these manuscripts were produced, yet the volatile relations between the Armenian orthodox community and Catholics in the city is well documented, and culminates just as Gabriel was producing his images. What more can those placid faces in the images tell us, if they can tell us anything at all, about the era? And last, and perhaps the biggest question of all, what did printed images signify to seventeenth-century Armenians? Art historians have in the past described this encounter using words such as “current”, “fresh”, and “exciting”. But one must be suspicious, surely, of a unanimously positive response, particularly on the part of professional painters. To someone like Gabriel, who worked in an ancient and sacred tradition of image-making, and who was the second generation in his family to do so, the arrival, circulation, and sale of printed images must have raised questions about his own status as an artist, his livelihood, and the future of his craft. So I’ll end with these questions, and also with the hope that the manuscripts of seventeenth-century Constantinople receive greater scholarly attention for what they can tell us about a key moment in cultural history and about the relations between manuscript and print.