

Critics' Forum

Literature

The Future of the Past: Toward the Preservation of Armenian Manuscripts

By Tamar Boyadjian



Zeyt'un Gospels: First page of the Gospel of St. Mark

On January 19, 2011, the University of California, Los Angeles hosted a lecture by UC Davis Art History Professor Heghnar Zeitlian Watenpaugh, entitled “Heritage in Conflict: The Modern Life of a Medieval Manuscript.” Watenpaugh’s lecture focused on the conflict surrounding the seven detached leaves of Canon Tables belonging to the Zeyt’un Gospels, which recently resurfaced after their mysterious disappearance half a century ago. In 1994, these missing pages were loaned by an anonymous collector to the Morgan Library in New York for a public exhibition. The same year, the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles claimed to have legally acquired the Canon Tables – presumably from the same unnamed collector – for an unclosed sum of money. Last year, the Western Prelacy of the Armenian Apostolic Church of America filed a lawsuit against the J. Paul Getty Museum challenging its ownership of the Canon Tables and demanding their return. The Canon Tables were separated from the original Zeyt’un Gospels, currently housed in the Maštoc’ Matenadaran (Ms. 10450) in Yerevan Armenia, during the Armenian Genocide.

According to Watenpaugh's lecture, the Gospels were well-traveled even before their modern disappearance. They ended up in the Church of Zeyt'un (present-day Süleymanlı, Turkey) after the medieval period. In 1915, the Gospels were then entrusted to an unnamed individual for safekeeping. Eventually, the manuscript that housed the Gospels was loaned to a Dr. Łazarian, who in 1922 delivered them to the American Missionaries in Marash. In 1928, someone by the name of Lehman brought the Zeyt'un Gospels to Istanbul, where the renowned Armenian art historian, Sirarpie Der Nersessian, analyzed them. Watenpaugh suggests that the Zeyt'un Gospels were recovered by Church Officials during World War II, at which point the seven torn leaves of the Canon Tables were discovered.

The mysterious provenance of the Zeyt'un Gospels is not the only reason that the manuscript has attracted a great deal of attention throughout the years. The Gospels are the first known signed work of the most important Armenian miniature painter of the Middle Ages, Toros Roslin. Roslin illuminated the manuscript in 1256 in the scriptorium of Hřomkla for the Armenian High Patriarch, or Catholicos, Constantine I. Roslin's style is well noted for its delicacy, elegance, and innovative iconographic techniques, which also suggest knowledge of the conventions used in Western Europe by Roslin's contemporaries. The Gospels' rarity and uniqueness have exalted their position not only within the Armenian community but also throughout the world. The Armenian Church also believes the Gospels to be sacred and to possess supernatural powers. When the Gospels were housed at the Church in Zeyt'un, they were believed to provide its citizens protection. Watenpaugh claims that during the early years of the First World War, the Gospels were showcased in the streets by the local priests.



Interior manuscript page of the Zeyt'un Gospels, showing the work of 13th-century Armenian illustrator, Toros Roslin

The mysterious and suspicious disappearance (and now reappearance) of the Canon Tables in the Zeyt'un Gospels raises a number of questions about the preservation, exposure and housing of Armenian manuscripts. Undoubtedly, the events surrounding the Armenian Genocide complicate the provenance of all surviving Armenian material, especially if the colophon, the inscription at the end of a particular manuscript, has not survived. Paleographic and codicological examination can aid in the dating and location of manuscripts' origins; however, in some cases the handwriting script and material qualities present within a particular codex cannot entirely confirm the temporal and physical position of a manuscript. Whereas manuscripts in many other traditions face similar difficulties in dating and provenance, the case is seemingly much more sensitive when it pertains to Armenian materials. Examples such as the tale of the Zeyt'un Gospels reinforce the long-existing anxiety and concern over the preservation of Armenian manuscripts and call to mind the various types of destruction inflicted upon Armenian artifacts and ancient sites throughout the centuries.

A majority of Armenians appreciate the valuable and extremely significant nature of Armenian manuscripts such as the Zeyt'un Gospels. They view ancient manuscripts as artifacts and cultural monuments of the Armenian people, a reminder of the nation's past, and treasures that should be cherished and venerated. Despite what people may think, however, numerous Armenian manuscripts are accessible within large collections in the United States and abroad. Many manuscripts housed in academic repositories, such as the one in the Young Research Library at the UCLA campus in Los Angeles, are not difficult to retrieve. The chance to physically encounter such a manuscript, examine it at close proximity, and handle it, sensing its ancient provenance first-hand, is not as inconceivable as it might seem. One can even find Armenian manuscripts listed for sale on eBay –though the credibility of sellers and their acquisition of the manuscript may very well be questionable, of course. The practice of selling such items on an online auction site also evoke disturbing images of black markets and the illegal trade in antiquities, not to mention the same concerns about cultural preservation mentioned above.

A good amount of the unfamiliarity with Armenian manuscript collections outside of the major world repositories is indeed due to a lack of exposure, though that is far from the only reason. Armenian manuscripts have long stood – individually and collectively – as symbolic metonyms (stand-ins) for the lost Armenian homeland. They have become vehicles through which discussions concerning the study and maintenance of Armenian heritage, both in the religious and secular spheres, have been channeled. Here is where scholarly efforts toward preservation and questions of national culture and heritage coincide.

For this reason, Armenian manuscripts are often considered synonymous with the Armenian culture of a remote past, rather than the present or future. Although countless Armenian manuscripts – 25,000 in all, to be exact – presently exist in repositories all over the world, we hardly associate them with the cultural heritage of Armenians today. It seems natural to think of these materials as artifacts of preceding generations, rather than emblems of present-day Armenian heritage. Perhaps it is time to re-consider these

materials, as not simply the relics of yesterday but the pillars of today. Rather than simply a solemn metonym, perhaps we can think of each manuscript as a palimpsest upon which Armenians have written and continue to write their own histories. The texts composed on the vellum or paper surface of each single leaf or those in a bound manuscript are better viewed, not as a series of testaments to ancient history but votives to an Armenian heritage that is alive today.

The question of the care of Armenian manuscripts, however, remains a critical one. Today, these manuscripts require a great deal of protection and preservation within libraries, private archives, and other repositories. Many of the smaller collections of Armenian manuscripts, for instance, are oftentimes incredibly poorly funded. They also lack the appropriate staff with the expertise necessary for proper maintenance and upkeep. Unfortunately, the budget crises and cuts within these repositories have resulted in recent years in staff dedicated to preserving and caring for Armenian materials to be let go, often to be replaced by non-specialists. In some extreme cases, units to which Armenian materials belong have simply been shut down. In these cases, the housing, maintenance and accessibility of the Armenian manuscripts have become jeopardized.

The preservation and study of Armenian manuscripts demand consistent scholarly consideration, while the objects themselves deserve more care and attention. And although such a responsibility has traditionally belonged to scholars, experts, ecclesiastics, and sometimes even politicians, a great deal of the materials relating to the study of Armenian literary culture remains unexposed and unexamined, by professionals and the general public alike. Actively preserving them and genuinely appreciating their value demands that, rather than viewing them as distant and unattainable objects of the past, we take upon ourselves the task of their protection, preservation, and exposure, and the funding to carry it out. Incidents such as those surrounding the Zeyt'un Gospels remind us of the need to safeguard and maintain current collections of these and other long-surviving Armenian manuscripts. The story of the Gospels also confirms the active role we must take in maintaining and developing current collections of Armenian materials. Let us do so by shifting our attitude toward these objects from one of mere veneration to one that upholds their value in the here and now.

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