

## AN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY ARMENIAN TRIPTYCH

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Three-hinged or folding panels, artistically decorated with religious themes, were used as altar pieces since the early days of Christendom. These carved or painted works, known as triptychs, often served as receptacles for the remains of saints or other holy objects.

The existence of Armenian triptychs from the Middle Ages to recent times is indicative of their important role in the religious life of the people. It is unfortunate that because of the country's troubled political situation, most of these triptychs have been destroyed. Some of the surviving pieces have been published.

As a rule, Armenian triptychs were fashioned in silver and sometimes gilded. Although the technique of enamel decoration was known to Armenian goldsmiths<sup>1</sup>, it was not applied to triptychs. For contrast, one should examine the highly decorative enamel medallions appearing in some early European triptychs<sup>2</sup>.

One of the earliest and finest Armenian triptychs studied is the triptych of Skevra, dated 1293 A. D. (752 of the Armenian era). It is currently in the Leningrad Hermitage Museum. The work was ordered by Bishop Constantine, the Father Superior of the monastery of Skevra, in Cilician Armenia.

The Skevra triptych was first studied by Carrière who transcribed and translated the inscriptions<sup>3</sup>. Two years later, in 1885, Alishan in his noted treatise, *Sissouan*<sup>4</sup>, provided a full-page photograph of the Skevra

1. *Armenian Art Treasures of Jerusalem*, ed. B. Narkiss. Caratzas Brothers, New Rochelle, N. Y., 1979, pp. 139-143.
2. W. VOELKE, *The Stavelot Triptych*, The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, 1980.
3. A. CARRIÈRE, *Inscriptions d'un reliquaire arménien de la Collections Basilewski*, *Mélanges Orientaux*, Paris, 1883, pp. 169-213.
4. L. ALISHAN, *Sissouan* (Armenian Edition), Venice, 1885, pp. 107-112.

triptych and gave the entire text of the dedication. He also made mention of the fact that Constantine referred to the triptych as a reliquary of saints. A most scholarly treatise on the triptych, penned by S. Der Nersessian, appeared in 1964<sup>5</sup>.

Other publications on the subject of Armenian triptychs are noteworthy. In a monograph on the princely Armenian family of the Proshians, Archbishop Hovsepien described in some detail the Eatchi Proshian triptych, dated 1300, and indicated that in artistic scope, it compared favorably with the Skevra piece. The Proshian triptych is in the Museum of the Holy See of Etchmiadsin in Armenia<sup>6</sup>.

Illustrations of both the Skevra and Proshian triptychs appear in Tchobanian's *La Roseaie d'Arménie*<sup>7</sup> published in 1918, and in the third volume of *The History of Armenia*<sup>8</sup> published in 1976.

The Proshian triptych is described in Arakelian's 1958 work, *Cities and Crafts in Armenia during IX-XIII c.*<sup>9</sup>, in Abrahamian's volume, *Armenian Jewelry Art* printed in 1983<sup>10</sup>, in *Treasures of Etchmiadsin* published in 1984<sup>11</sup> and in Der Nersessian's *Armenian Art*<sup>12</sup>.

Abrahamian shows photographs of two other triptychs<sup>13</sup> in the Etchmiadsin Museum, which he dates sometime between the tenth and twelfth centuries. These are also illustrated in Arakelian's volume<sup>14</sup> and in *Treasures of Etchmiadsin*<sup>15</sup>.

1. *Armenian Art Treasures of Jerusalem*, ed. B. Narkiss. Caratzas Brothers, New Rochelle, N. Y., 1979, pp. 139-143.
2. W. VOELKE, *The Stavelot Triptych*, The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, 1980.
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4. L. ALISHAN, *Sissouan* (Armenian Edition), Venice, 1885, pp. 107-112.
5. S. DER NERSESSIAN, *La Reliquaire de Skevra*, *Revue des Etudes Arméniennes*, I, 1964, pp. 120-147. (Sixteen illustrations).
6. K. HOVSEPIAN, *Kaghpagiank and Proshiank*, Vagarshabad, Armenia, 1928, pp. 182-200. (In Armenian).
7. A. TCHOBANIAN, *La Roseaie d'Arménie*, Paris, 1918, pp. XII and 64.
8. *History of Armenia*, vol. III, 1976, pp. 961-963. Ed. P. N. Arakelian, Yerevan, (In Armenian).
9. P. N. ARAKELIAN, *Cities and Crafts in Armenia during IX-XIII centuries*. Yerevan, 1958, Pl. XXII and XXIII (In Armenian).
10. V. A. APRAHAMIAN, *Armenian Jewelry Art*, Yerevan, 1983, Pl. 28. (In Armenian).
11. *Treasures of Etchmiadsin*, 1984, Etchmiadsin, Armenia.
12. S. DER NERSESSIAN, *Armenian Art*, 1984, p. 161. Arts et Métiers Graphiques, Switzerland.
13. See ref. 10, Nos. 29 and 33.
14. See ref. 9, Pl. XXI.
15. *Thirty Centuries of Armenian Metal Art*, An Exhibition from the Collection of Dr. Paul Z. Bedoukian, AGBU Gallery, New York, 1978.

The following triptychs are included in *Treasures of Etchmiadsin*.

Reliquary, Aragadz, St. Nshan, XIII c.

Reliquary, XV-XVIII c.

Reliquary, X c., restored in 1101.

Reliquary, Khotakerats St. Nshan, 1300.

Reliquary, with relic of Noah's ark, 1698, Kanaker.

Reliquary, X c., restored in 1143.

Reliquary of Geghard, 1687.

Reliquary, XVI-XVIII c.

Reliquary, XVI c.

Reliquary, 1698.

Reliquary, 1783.

Undoubtedly, other triptychs exist in the Mekhitarist Museum in Venice and Vienna, as well as in Jerusalem, but to the best of the writer's knowledge, they have not been studied or published.

In this article, the author would like to report on an 18th century triptych in his collection. It was purchased at an auction in New York in the mid 1970's. Its provenance is unknown. In 1978 it was exhibited as part of the author's collection of Armenian Metallic Art<sup>16</sup>, has been on public view on several occasion since then, and is now at the Armenian Library and Museum in the Boston area.

It measures 192×290 mm. when closed and 340×290 mm. when the wings are open. When closed, the thickness of the triptych is 35 mm. The metal work is silver and the high points are gilded. The whole is enclosed in a hinged wooden box. It is obvious from the inscription that it was presented to the church in Chamek, a town in Asia Minor, in the year 1743.

The center panel of the triptych is most interesting. Almighty God is represented in the upper part of the panel, above the clouds and with arms spread, rays radiating below the clouds. Behind His head is the Holy Triangle. Below the clouds, the whole field is taken by a large Calvary cross supported by two kneeling angels. The stem and base of the cross are decorated with three-leaf and floral designs, with the field areas cut out. The upper part of the cross consists of a highly decorative crosslet, with the center cross and four arms cut out. It is quite possible

16. The word *գաբ* or *գաղ* has been used with the meaning of gift. Thus see Պ. ՅԱՐՈՒԹԻԻՆ Թ. ՏԷՐ ՅՈՎՆԱՆՆԱՆՑ, Պատմութիւն Նոր Զուգայի, Հտ. Ա. էջ 327, Նոր Զուգա, 1880.

that when the triptych was made, semi-precious stones embedded in metal supports were in the cut-out areas.

Both the panel and the wings bear inscriptions in highly artistic lettering. In all cases, where an inscription appears, the area has been polished and smoothed, and the field hammered to expose polished forms of lettering.

Adjacent to the arms of the cross and the center cross one sees inscriptions, for the most part abbreviated, as follows:

Upper arm: ՆԻԿՈԼՈՍ ՀԱՅՐԱՊԵՏ (Father Nicholas)

Center cross: ԿԵՆԱՅ ՓԱՅՏ (Wood of Life, i.e. Bones)

Left arm: ԿԱՐԱՊԵՏ (Garabed)

Right Arm: ՄԾԲՆԱՑԻ ՀԱՅՐԱՊԵՏ (Of the city of Medsbin)

Lower arm: ԻԳՆԱԴԻՈՍ ԱՍՏՈՒԱԾԱԶԳԵԱՑ (Ignatius, of the Godly nation)

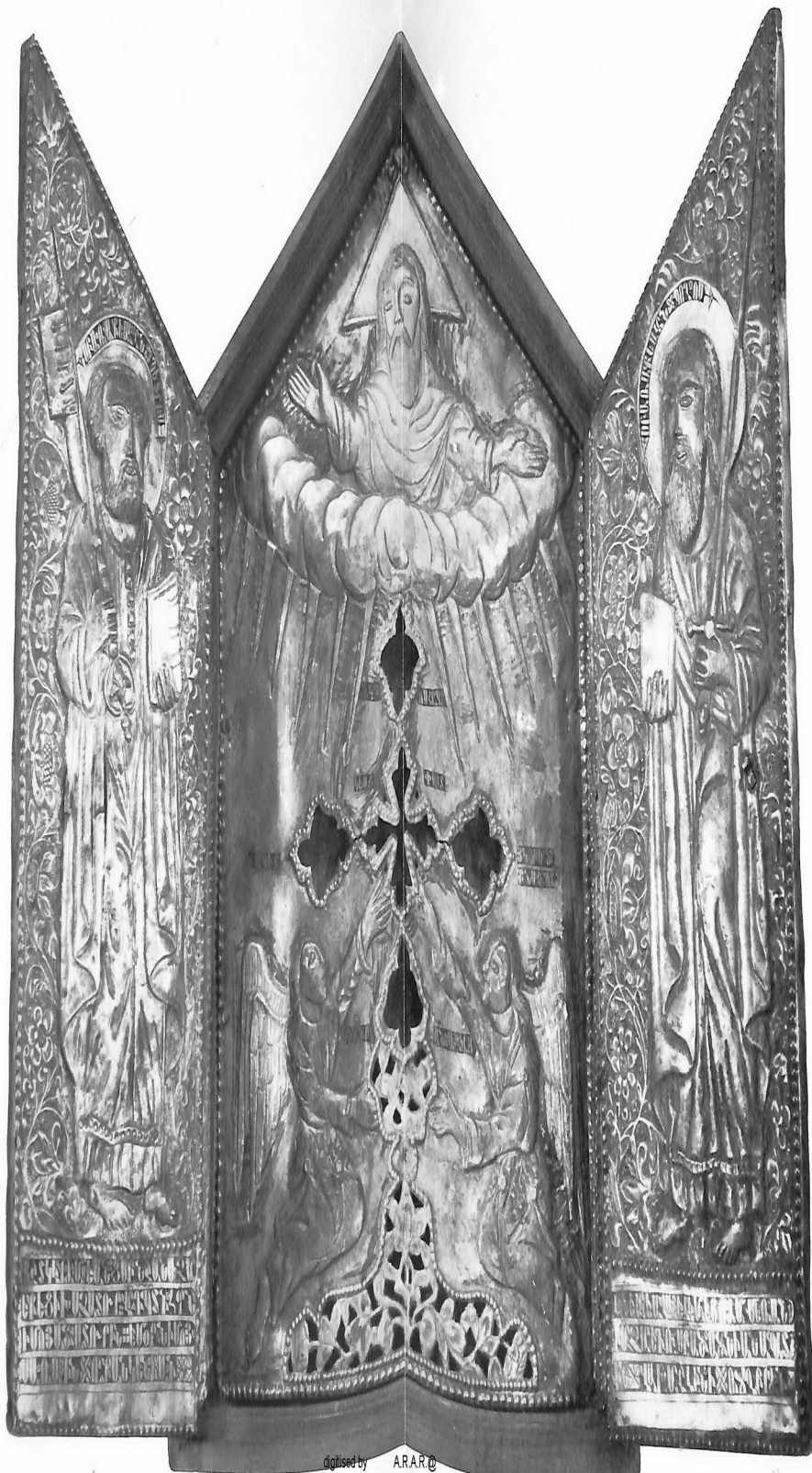
The left wing is decorated with the standing figure of Saint Peter, facing slightly to the right, and the inscription «The Disciple St. Peter» (ՍԲ ԱՌԱՔԵԱԼՆ ՊԵՏՐՈՍ) in the upper portion of the halo. He is dressed in flowing robes and is standing barefoot. In his right hand is a large key which extends over his right shoulder. He holds a book in his left hand. Beneath his feet, in a polished rectangle, appear four lines of inscriptions, again in abbreviated form:

ՅԻՇԱՏԱԿ Է ԹՈՎՄԱՍԵԱՆՑ ՍԲ ՆՇԱՆԱ ԶԱՄԵՔԵՑԻ  
ԽԱԶԱՏՈՒՐ ՎԱՐԴԱՊԵՏԻՆ ՀՕՐՆ ԻՄՈՑ ԱՍՏՈՒԱԾԱՏՈՒՐԻՆ  
ԵՒ ՄՕՐՆ ԻՄՈՑ ՍԱՌԱՅԻՆ ՈՐՔԱՆ ԿԵՆԴԱՆԻ

(«In memory of the Tomasian family, of the Church St. Nshan, in the village of Chamek, of the Vartaped Khachatour, of my father Asdouadsadour and my mother Sarah. (I will enjoy them) as long as I am alive»).

The right wing is likewise decorated with a standing bearded figure, this time representing St. Paul, facing slightly left, and holding a long sword in his left hand. In his right hand he holds a book. The upper left part of the halo bears the inscription ՍԲ ԱՌԱՔԵԱԼՆ ՊՈԼՈՍ («The Holy Disciple St. Paul»). His bare feet are seen below the flowing cos-





tume. Underneath, in a polished rectangle, are three lines of inscriptions, a continuation of the writings on the left wing, reading:

ԼԻՆԵՄ ԵՍ ՎԱՅԵԼԵՄ ԵՒ ՅՈՐԺԱՄ ՄԵՌԱՆ  
ԻՄ ԶԱՄԵԳՈՒ ՍՈՒՐԲ ԱՍՏՈՒԱԾԱԾՆԻ ԱՆԱՊԱՏ  
ԻՆ ՎԱԽ ՄԸ ԼԻՆԻ ՌՃՂԲ ԹՎԻՆ

(«I will enjoy it and upon my death, it is to be a gift to my St. Asdouadsadin Monastery of Chamek. Of the year 1193 (1743 A.D.)»)<sup>17</sup>.

When the hinged wings are closed, they are joined with a clasp. Both wings are covered with cloth and decorative crosses are attached to the wings. The left cross, of the Calvary type, is ornamented with the figure of a saintly woman in a pious gesture (the Virgin Mary?). At the foot of the cross is the coiled form of a serpent.

On the right wing is a similar cross with the figure of the crucified Christ. The carved figure of a cherub is at the base of the cross.

The triptych of Chamek is a beautifully executed example of early 18th century craft portraying the evolution of religious art in Armenia. Hopefully other examples extant will appear in print.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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17. «my vineyard as a gift in memory of my parents» is written «այգին իմ վաղմ եւ յիշատակ իւր ծնողաց»: