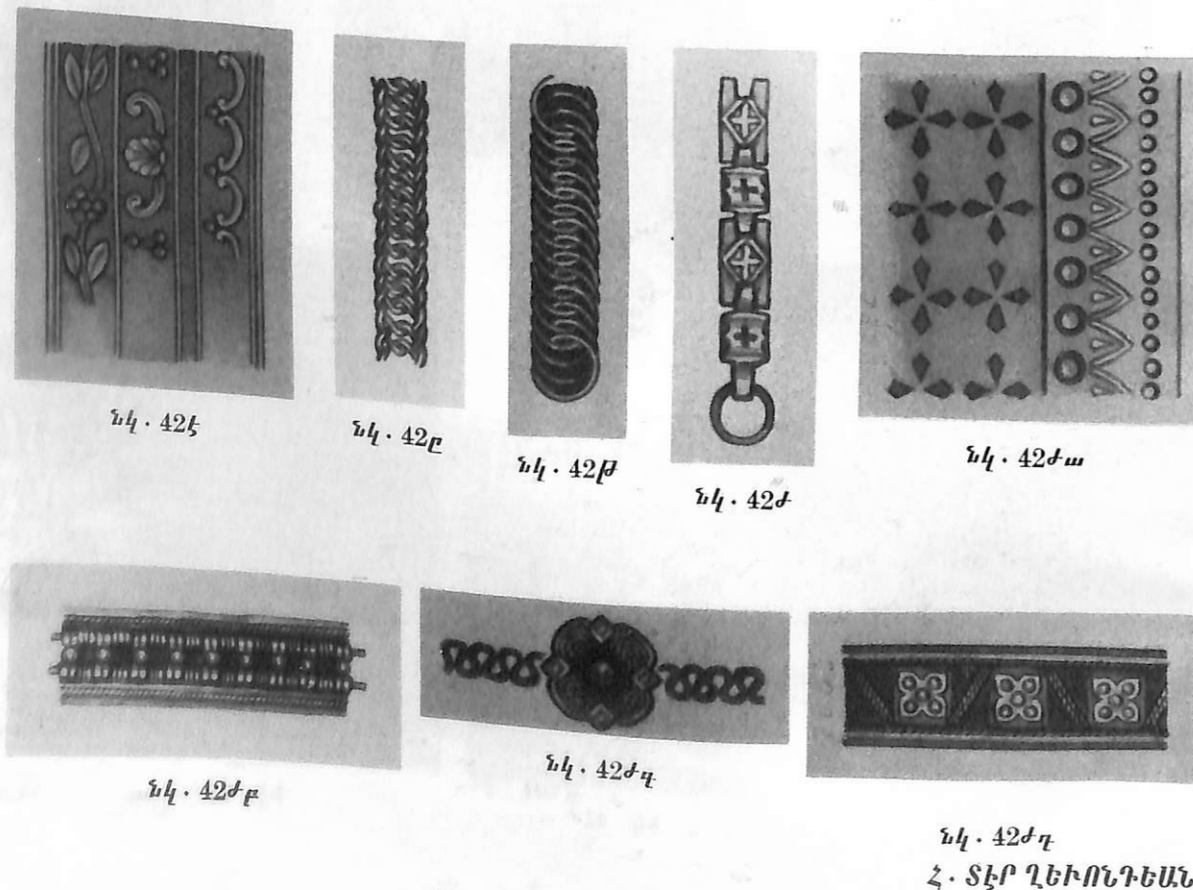
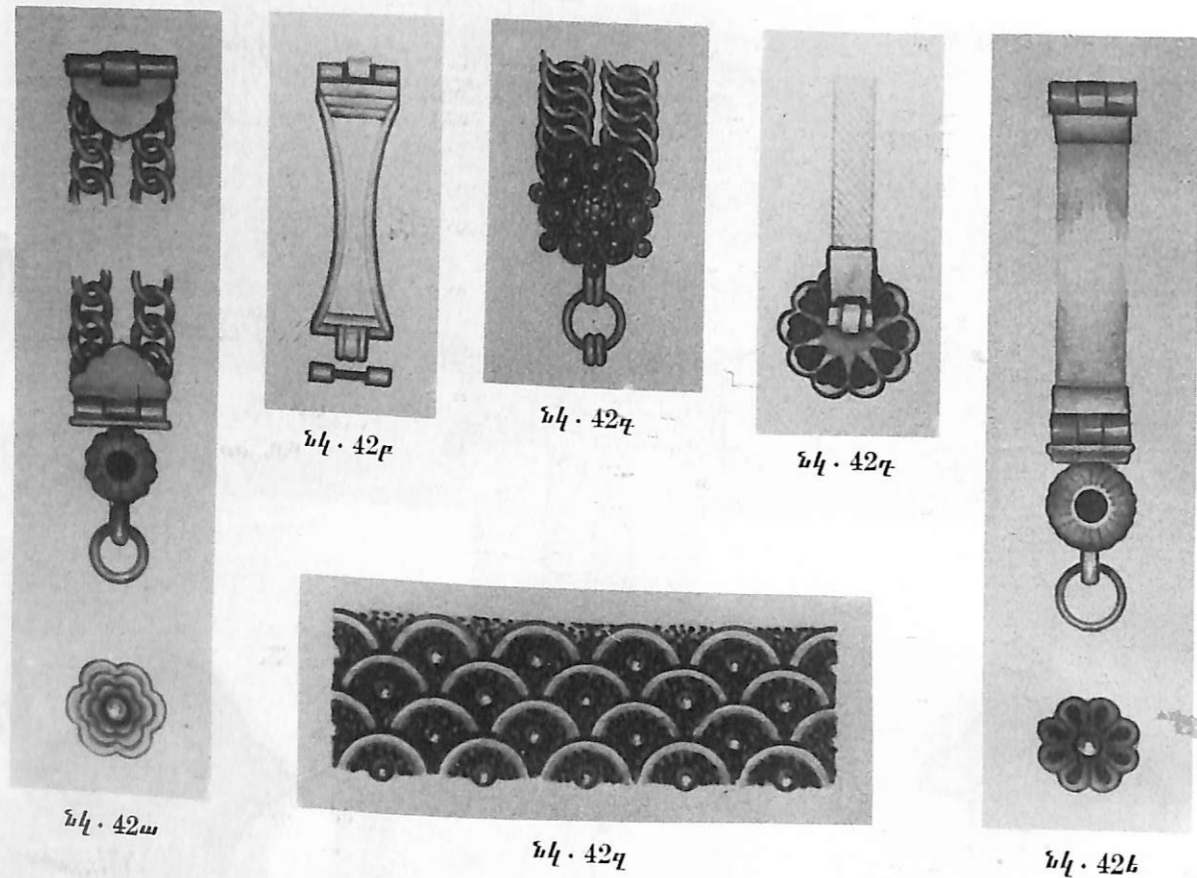


Կղպանքներ, շղթաներ եւ այլ զարդեր



The metal Covers of Manuscripts of Yerevan's Mesrop Mashtotz Matenadaran

English Summary of the Armenian Text

Father A. Sekoulian  
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During our meeting last summer, we discussed my restored designs of the metal covers of Yerevan's St. Mesrop Mashtotz Matenadaran's manuscripts and the list of the manuscript metal covers which I had prepared during my early years in Armenia. You proposed that I write a study of those bindings, based upon their classification into groups of jewelry schools, according to the regions of historic Armenia.

I thought your advice was very appropriate, since this subject had never been written about before. In the continuing pages, I have tried to do my best in executing the proposed projects, realizing that I couldn't rely on any antecedent work to help me in this enterprise.

Yours sincerely,  
H. Ter Ghevondian

INTRODUCTION

Truth being the basis for all beauty, I must admit that not all of the metal manuscript covers that I have in my disposition are masterpieces. Most of them were manufactured in an era when Armenia was under the domination of two different foreign powers who didn't encourage progress in artistic skills. Nevertheless, since these metal covers are part of our heritage, we must protect, study, and interpret them, assuring their continued existence as artworks.

After beginning the job, I found that the task was not easy. I faced the difficulty of finding information concerning the persons who ordered the cover's creation as well as the actual designers and jewellers. Often the dates of their creation were unknown, since the colophons' contents often

wer not eloquent and were usually quasi-religious, thereforen unrelated to our purpose.

During the first phase of my work, I studied the covers which had missing but restorable parts. These covers were the remnants of masterpieces, which, I am sure, eloquently represented monumentalism, the dominant trend of Armenian Art in those centuries. I have left their discussion for the four last illustrative pages.

Secondly, from around 80 of the best pieces that I had photographed myself, I chose to include in the study 37 manuscript covers which contained some information about the time and place of their preparation, and the persons who ordered their design or gilded the metal themselves.

I was attracted by the masters' intimacy with the material they so skillfully treated. So I decided to concentrate specifically in my study on the fact that the masters were not only in command of the tools they used during the manufacturing process but they also allowed the nature of the tools and materials themselves to influence their work. Such tools were made in the traditional national styles carried down through time by the sons who continued the trade of their craftsmen fathers.

One region often influenced another region. In my study I discuss how young novices would travel from region to region as apprentices. When they returned to their native area, they would bring back with them the influence of their master teachers and the regions in which they worked.

In the two regions of historic Armenia dominated first by Turkey and Persia and then by Turkey and Russia, Armenian jewelry has kept almost the same national

profile, since the same traditions prevailed in both parts. Armenian jewellers sometimes submitted, for commercial reasons, to the taste and influence of their foreign customers. But since Armenia is a mountainous and somewhat isolated country, particularly in the wintertime, such a foreign influence, fortunately, did not often prevail.

Because of the invasion of Tamerlane (Timer Leng) at the end of the XIV century, only some metal bindings (covers) from the Cilician Armenian era remain, mainly in the St. James Monastery of Jerusalem, but the rest were burned or sacked, mainly during the period when the Mongolo-Turkic hordes of Tamerlane occupied the famous Tatev Monastery, well-known for its wealth of manuscripts. At this time, the best Armenian craftsmen and artists were taken into captivity to Central Asia, which aided in the flourishing of the arts in the above mentioned region.

The artworks that we study express the spirit of their times and the tragedies of the country in which they were prepared. Very few valuable artworks are available from the XIV and XV centuries, but through the few that exist we can recognize their artists' talent, faith and goodwill. It is that great faith that we perceive on the superimposed crosses irregularly hailed by succeeding generations of donors who engraved their feelings and wishes, or sometimes a small portion of their history on these crosses.

I have divided the different regions and styles of Armenian jewelry into the following categories: Vaspourakan (Van), Garin (Erzeroum), Siounik and Cilician Armenia. I have omitted Sebastia since we couldn't find any cover art in the Matenadaran.

However, Armenian museums do display secular filigree jewels from later centuries in this area. In this study I have included samples from covers done in Crimea, Nor Djougha and Constantinople, trying always to be as realistic as possible in my evaluations, without prejudice.

### The School of Vaspourakan

The restrained, original and monumental forms of the chiselled manuscript covers of Vaspourakan embody the centuries old traditions of Armenian jewelry. Based on the style of the intaglios of the Church of the Holy Cross of Aghtamar and under the spiritual influence of the surrounding convents, the work of this school has remained almost intact in its preservation of national spirit. Also, thanks to the trade links, the Vaspourakan School was able to influence the art of Armenian jewelry throughout the Near East, from Nor Djougha (Ispahan) to Cesarea and Constantinople.

The Vaspourakan School is characterized by a one-step flat style, where the upper parts are decorated by chiselled fine lines. The generalized forms can successfully compete with any of the jewelry schools of historic Armenia. Produced throughout the XVI and XVII centuries and after a long period of cultural stagnation, where only some Armenian convents were bearing the torch of progress, the artworks of these centuries, however, cannot be compared to the descriptions of marvellous churches, palaces, and objects by Touma Ardzrouni (X century).

Dominantly chiselled objects have been selected for our descriptions. However, in addition, the twisted twin silver cable ropes, also called "Armenian Note", characteristically frame many of the XVI-XVII centuries' covers. This style was also used on the secular jewels of the 18th and 19th centuries' silver belts and other types of items where engraving and black niello are also used. The two main depositories of these objects are the Historical Museum of Yerevan and the Museum of the Echmiadzin Convent.

At this moment, we still have only an insufficient knowledge of Vaspourakan jewelry art. Much more time and financial investment is needed to study and completely evaluate the value of this main branch of Armenian jewelry.

### The School of Garin (Erzeroum)

The region of Garin has always been considered the most creative part of Armenian, with its finest and most beautiful original national handicrafts and costumes which reflect the good taste and craftsmanship of Armenian fashion.

Under the influence of this creative spirit, an art of filigree and chiselling has progressed, matched only by some jewels from the excavations of Dvin, and some hammer and chisel work in the see-through extraction style, doubled with filigree and engraving.

Marco Polo describes the beautiful manufactured goods of Erzinga, not far from Garin. This fact proves that the whole region was producing artistic goods.

Because of Garin's geographical position, jewellers from this area were able to export its filigree jewelry all around the country. Located on the crossroads of the regions of Shirak, Georgia, and Iran, Armenian craftsmen, who immigrated from Garin to far regions, took with them their light and easy transportable dies and other tools, designs and models. In so doing, they expanded their ancestral traditions to as far as the Northern Caucasus and Crimea, teaching and spreading their high skills to the local populations, mainly in Daghestan and Russia.

The emigrating Garin craftsmen maintained close trade and cultural ties with their old country by means of tool and jewelry exchange. Such exchanges created the diversity of styles which characterized the Garin region, helped these craftsmen to spread their professional influence to far regions of foreign countries. On the manuscript covers of Garin the chiselled religious topics and decorative ornamental parts in the forms of medallions are fitted on finely decorated filigree backgrounds with silver nails or beads.

### The School of Siunik

The manuscript covers of Siunik obviously represent great creative activity.

Vaspourakan chiselling styles have been adopted very creatively, showing a prodigious discipline, consisting of casted figurative motives covering flat silver materials and surrounded by very regularly designed ornamental frames.

This new trend adopted by Siuniks jewellers reflects the Western European art discipline. Highly regular shapes were created. A separately made figure, cast with the help of the traditional Armenian half-ball tipped nails, was fixed into the flatness of the background material.

Here also many styles are interrelated on one piece: casting, chiselling, scissoring with chisels and hammer and filigree. Such eclecticism, while conveniently adaptable to the covers actually degraded the sincerity of the traditional styles.

The School of Siunik has improved the cover's design and using the incalculable possibilities of double-wired ropes, has achieved previously unobtainable results, adding to the national heritage new creative forms and designs, very suggestive for future creations.

Based upon this short observation, I can affirm that the manuscript covers of Siunik display a boldness of design and the evidence of new techniques, renewing trends and reflecting a deep understanding of the Armenian style in jewelry.

### The jewelry of Cilician Armenia

Very few of the Matenadaran Cilician Armenian manuscripts are covered with silver, because of the unfavorable conditions prevailing in the region after the downfall of the Roupinian dynasty and the loss of Armenian independence.

During the 11th to 14th centuries, favourable conditions have prevailed for the progress of the chiselling art and trading activities. The Port of Ayas (Layas) has been described by Marco Polo as having "great trade".

Famous voyagers, as Willebrandt and Oldenburg, write about "marvelous things"

and "beautiful monuments". In his 1853 trip to Sis, in Cilicia, Victor Langlois attests to the existence of four relics containing "rights" (right-hand bones) covered with silver. Langlois called these ornaments "arabesque", a general term used to identify all Middle-Eastern ornamentation.

The late Archbishop Haikazoun Voskerichian personally informed me that more than twenty silver and gold covered manuscripts are kept in the St. James Monastery of Jerusalem, although only two of them have been studied and photographed. One of them is the No. 7690 Bible, written and gilded (covered) with a very masterfully chiselled binding. The Bible has been written by order of the Catholicos Kirakos of Bartzerberd in 1249 "during the reign of King Hetum I". On the first side (face) Christ, St. John the Baptist, and the Virgin Mary are chiselled, and on the second, the four Evangelists - John, Luke, Mark, and Matthew - are all masterfully chiselled with anatomical perfection and expressions. This is the peak of Armenian artistic performance in Cilician Armenia, when the country was often successfully defended against invaders during the 13th century. Three other covers remain from the 17th century but their design and chiselling skill do not match the above-mentioned cover of 1249.

The link between the 13th and 14th century artworks and those of the 17th is inexistent, because the 15th and 16th centuries were a period of anarchy and insecurity in Cilician Armenia, where the caprice of a local potentate was considered the supreme law. All valuable objects were pillaged by the attacks on many religious institutions and even by the killing of the Supreme Patriarch, the Catholicos Gabriel by Turks (September 10, 1770). Some fragments of ecclesiastical silverwork remain at the Catholicoosate of Antelias, in Lebanon.

#### Jewelry Schools of Emigrant Armenians Poland, Moldavia and Crimea

Armenian style jewelry and manuscript covers were also manufactured in

countries such as Poland, Moldavia, and Crimea by emigrant Armenian craftsmen. From the 11th century to 1946, there was an Armenian minority group in the city of Lwov, always migrating to the south. At the end of the 15th century the Armenian community of Constantinople was organized, adding to the Armenian population that already lived there during the Byzantine era. The tragedy caused by Shah Abbas brought thousands of Armenians from Siunik to Ispahan (Nor Djougha) where a great Armenian community was constituted that began to trade with India and China. J. B. Taverniers testimony of his selling to King Louis XIV precious stones valued at more than a million francs and bought primarily from Armenian traders is proof that the Armenians had already been settled in their new country. It was a great victory for the Armenians of Lwov to have their own written laws and courts.

During my visit to Lwov, I saw in the historical museum many swords and other weapons of great artistic value with gold-plated silver handles, part of them supposed to be the work of Armenian craftsmen. On the upper floor of the museum, there is a hall where the King John Sobieski used to confer with Armenian jewellers on money matters.

A Polish author, V. Lozinsky, cites the names of 28 Armenian jewellers who always invited new craftsmen from Armenia, thus consolidating the continuation of the Armenian style in local production.

In Moldavia, Armenian jewellers have produced many religious objects: chalices, ringing-instruments (Kshotz) and others, now kept in a separate room in the Historical Museum of Kiev, all brought from the Armenian Convent of the Holy Virgin at Kilia.

Five manuscript covers from Kafa (Theodosia) are kept in the Matenadaran, all bearing the mark of the Armenian style. Most of them are decorated with the security-conscious style of big half-round ending nails used often to preserve covers longer. On the cover of the manuscript No. 7858, there is a cross with the inscription: "Inter-

cede to the Saint for Joseph's son Minas whom the Kalmuks killed in 1711". Isn't this a historical document?

#### Nor Djougha (Ispahan)

This Armenian community, formed and reinforced with many groups of forced emigrants from Persian-occupied Armenia, flourished quickly after a few decades and by the end of the 17th century had already arrived at the peak of its prosperity.

The trade of gold, precious gems, and manufactured jewels was one of the Armenian jeweller's main occupations. These items were notable for their beauty and high quality. Their influence extended to India, where a scattered group of Armenia still live in an organized community.

The Nor Djougha Armenians, living near Armenia, had the possibility of constant commercial and cultural ties with their relatives and friends who remained in the country. For this reason, their manuscript covers bear the influence of 17th and later 18th centuries Armenian jewelry of the Siunik.

Following the practice of casted figures nailed on flat silver plates as in the Siunik, these Armenians excelled in making ornamental frames, especially on the back of their covers. Such covers equal in quality to the famous filigrees of Garin. The twin parts of the backs, moving on fine hinges, where the interlaces (knits) to triple double-wired ropes make competable ornaments. The Chisel-hammer cooperation in making these frames created a new means of artistic creativity.

The only inconvenience on the bindings are the casted figures which were either taken directly from Western models or were Western influenced. Such influences can't surprise anybody, since trade interaction was constant and the flow of materials and imported goods also brought models. Except for such rare influences, the national character of the silver works is undeniable.

On the first side of the cover of manuscript No. 6772 a rare frame, unique in its construction surrounds the crucifixion.

I would also like to direct the readers' attention to the leather back of the above-mentioned manuscript cover and the end of the whole cover, where a very typical ornamental knit is designed by deep burning.

The knitted filigree, chiselled, casted, and gem-decorated covers of Nor Djougha do not show the same good taste and high quality national craftsmanship as shown by those made by professionals in the motherland.

#### Constantinople

Different conditions prevailed in Constantinople, due to the overwhelming influence of Western culture, of the cosmopolitan environment and the exceptional geographical position of the city. The craftsmen have struggled between the influx of Western cultural artifacts on the one hand, and the new forces from the motherland on the other hand. The demand for secular jewels having always overweighed the demand for rare religious artifacts, the balance has always inclined toward the secular and only continuous immigration has brought some national spirit, especially from Vaspourakan where the same old traditions have continued.

It is possible to affirm that only the jewelry art of manuscript covers has persisted against the current of foreign influence, thanks to the traditions of the national church. One of the best proofs of foreign influence is the cover of manuscript No. 6778, where the crucifixion has a Romanesque style church in the background. The same covers are joined from two sides with a traditional back consisting of eight short horizontally placed chains. The ending part is decorated with a niello filled inscription, which convinces us that the work at least on this later portion, has been done by a newly-immigrated craftsmen, possibly from Vaspourakan.

Another cover is No. 5641, where the second side is skillfully chiselled with a Resurrection scene where the guardians are shown with costumes like Janissaries, their heads covered. Either the artist consciously wanted to show the Janissaries as negative figures, or he was ignorant of the Roman costumes. The first alternative is more credible.

The chiselling works have clean-cut lines, well-improved backgrounds and are designed skillfully.

The covers of Constantinople are executed during the same centuries when similar art was beginning to flourish in Armenia, after two centuries of stagnation. This raises the question of the existence of similar items in Constantinople during the Byzantine era. Did they exist and were destroyed during the attack of Mehmet II's army on Constantinople in 1453?

## CONCLUSION

A definitive opinion on Armenian jewelry would require a study of all of the items found in different museums and the reading of all existing bibliographical sources, which I tried to do.

This study serves only as an introduction to the manuscript covers of St. Mesrop Mashtotz' Matenadaran where more than two hundred such covers are kept. We have only studied 37, describing their unique features. I have also drawn upon some other fragments of very-worn covers of great artistic value by restoring and copying their best parts. Doubtless the many museum items that I have seen compose the background for my opinion.

I would also like to emphasize the fact that if I considered only the ecclesiastical silverwork – crowns, tiaras, chalices, and others – I could have the majority of items that were saved from destruction during our tragic history, since many items, mainly jewels have been vandalized, destroyed or been melted in the melting pot.

Although it would be immodest to consider this study a definitive one without seeing the great collection of manuscript covers of the St. James Monastery of Jerusalem and some others in many private collections, since our subject is the St. Mesrop Matenadaran's collection the richest of these collections, I do think that I have some right to issue opinions.

Except rare covers, very few works of jewelry from the Cilician era of the 13th and 14th centuries have come down to us from the period before the 17th and 18th centuries. Therefore, we can consider the above-mentioned centuries to be some kind of renaissance, after the loss of the two precedent (15th and 16th) centuries of jewelry artworks. During the two centuries mentioned above, the Armenian jewelers had the necessary materials provided from the gold and silver mines of Armenia and Cilicia, but primarily by means of international trade. Experienced Armenian merchants imported gems and other necessities from India and China, due to their strong ties to the famous Company of India (Compagnie des Indes).

In all four regions of historical Armenia – Vaspourakan, Garin, Siunik, and Cilicia – each had its specific characteristics. Vaspourakan, with its isolated geographical position, had developed a chiselling style which was different from the other regions, where there were no medium high-rises, but only one step high from the background, with fine lines to accentuate the forms. In Garin the style is different since religious art was inspired from the secular fine and communicative style, where the chiselled parts, mainly thematic, are superimposed on the filigree background. On the covers of Garin we see the synthesis of filigree, chiselling, and engraving united on one cover and creating a complex style, pleasant to the human eye.

The chains of Garin extend from the finest knit interlace to the most resistant and dynamically inspired, obviously the results of intensive trade and economical prosperity.

In Siunik prevails the style of flat surfaces covered with casted figures, creating an eclectic style, inspired from urgency and necessity.

From the Cilician era (13th and 14th centuries) we are acquainted at least with three covers of which the manuscript No. 7690 is in the Matenadaran. On those covers the following features are prominent: the regularity of very disciplined forms, the clarity of lines of the chiselling, and the beautiful letters. After three hundred years of foreign rule, with its barbaric destructiveness, all of the above-mentioned characteristics have disappeared on the covers.

I am convinced that the 13th and 14th centuries' masterpieces had their parallels in the three regions of Armenia, where a marvelous triptych. "The Khodageratz Sourp Nshan", was produced in the Siunik at 1300 A.D., where the Broshian and Or-

belian ruling dynasties were competing in generosity and fatherliness with the Roupi-nian kings of Cilician Armenia.

There are three general characteristics of Armenian manuscript covers: (1) the salient parts of the two ends near the backs of the covers which keep to covers secure from fast dwindling, securing their longe vity; (2) the primarily strong chainwork of the backs used in the three parts of Armenia; (manuscript No. 6788) and (3) the generally strong feeling of monumentality that the covers inspire in the onlooker, finding ourselves in front of a "grandeur".

If we think for a while about what the art of jewelry in Armenia could be without all of the destructiveness of evil forces, we will have an idea of how they could have inspired us.

Haik Ter Ghevondian