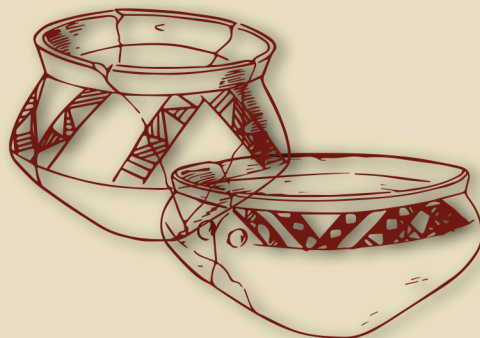




HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL HERITAGE OF
ARMENIA





Fresco of the Lmbat monastery
(photo: Arsen Harutyunyan)

Karen Matevosyan ARMENIAN FRESCOES

Mural painting (fresco) is one of the oldest and unique branches of Armenian art, which is inextricably linked with architecture. The ancient samples of mural painting in Armenia have been preserved since the times of the kingdom of Urartu (Ararat), 8th-7th centuries BC.

On the territory of the Republic of Armenia, those are present in the fortresses of Erebuni (Yerevan) and Teishebaini (Red Hill, arm. Karmir Blur). The preserved parts of the mural paintings are in religious structures and they represent ritual, hunting and other scenes, and extensive decorative friezes are also present there.

Samples of another type of monumental art of pre-Christian Armenia called mosaic painting were found in the capital city of Artashat and in the royal fortress of Garni. Mosaics were used to decorate the floors of bathrooms.

The rapid rise of Armenian mural painting occurred in the Middle Ages- after the adoption of Christianity, and was related to the large-scale church construction in the country. The early mural monuments of this region date back to the 5th-7th centuries.



A Fragment of the Fresco of the Holy Cross Church of Aghtamar
(photo: Hrayr Hawk Khacheryan)



A Fragment of the Fresco of Tatev Monastery
(photo from Seyranush Manukyan's archive)

Of the even older mural paintings, unfortunately, only very small parts of the ground paint (ground) or very small parts of mural paintings have been preserved, as in the basilicas of Kasagh and Yereruyk, in Tekor and Dvin. In 1931 the fragments of the ancient mural paintings of the demolished Saint Paul and Peter Church (Surb Poghos-Petros church) in Yerevan are kept in the History Museum and National Gallery of Armenia.

The 7th century is much richer in monuments with mural paintings, which is rightfully referred to as the golden age of Armenian architecture. To that period belong the distinguished by high skill performance mural paintings of Mren Cathedral, St. Stepanos church (first half of the 7th century) in Lmbatavank, Cathedral Churches in Aruch and Talin, St. Stepanos church in Kosh, big church in Artik, Karmravor church in Ashtarak, St. Zoravar church in Yeghvard, St. Hovhannes church in Mastara.

From the iconographic standpoint, for the frescoes of this period typical is the depiction of the Divine revelation scene in the senior tabernacle of the churches. In Lambatavank, that depiction is based on the vision of the prophet Ezekiel, and in Mren and Aruch, in the tabernacle a large image of Christ is depicted, standing on a pedestal and holding a parchment scroll. In Talin, only the ornate pedestal with the unfolded Gospel on it is depicted. The images of apostles and of other saints (especially of holy soldiers), episodes of evangelical scenes, ornaments and other such depictions have also been preserved. Already from that period, Armenian inscriptions have been preserved on the Armenian frescoes.

In addition to preserved monuments, the Armenian bibliographic works also bear many testimonies of the existence of frescoes in churches.

The most notable is the work called “About iconoclasts” written by Vrtanes Kertogh at the beginning of the 7th century, where he first justifies the need to have paintings in churches, then he mentions some of the paintings in the churches of his time: the Virgin Mary with the Child in her arms, the Baptism of Christ, his Tortures and Crucifixion, his Burial, Resurrection and the Ascension.

Vrtanes Kertogh also mentions in his work the depictions of the first Catholicos of Armenia, St. Gregory the Illuminator, and the holy virgins Gayane and Hripsime.



Holy Savior church in Ani, figure of
painter Sargis Parshik
(photo: Karen Matevosyan)

One more testimony of the attitude of the Armenian Church is first church council of Sis held in 1204, the fourth of the eight canons of which refers to the issue of paintings and has the following content: “To accept the image of the Savior and the images of all the Saints and not to deface them, regarding them as pagan images.” From this rule, it may be assumed that there were also cases of damage to images.

Unfortunately, the Armenian mural painting has not been sufficiently studied. Even more, for a long time, there was a widespread belief that the Armenian Church rejected the mural paintings, allegedly for theological reasons. This misconception was scientifically refuted in the middle of the 20th century, mainly thanks to the works of Sirarpi Der-Nersesyan (1896-1989) and Lidia Durnovo (1885-1963), who showed, both with sourceological references and with the study of mural monuments themselves, that already in the 5th -7th centuries, the Armenian churches had mural paintings (mentioned above) regardless of the religious disputes with the Byzantine Church, and this tradition continued further in the 10th-13th centuries, in different parts of the country (in Vaspurakan - Aghtamar, St. Hakob church of



Procession of the King Trdat III (Tiridates), S. Gregory the Illuminator Church in Ani (photo: Hrayr Hawk Khacheryan)

Kaputkog, in Syunik - Tatev, Gndevank, in Shirak - Ani Cathedral, St. Savior, Horomos, Harich, in Gugark - Haghpat, in Tavush - St. Apostles (Arakelots) Monastery, in Ayarat - Geghard, Kecharis, Yeghipatrush, in Artsakh - Dadivank, etc.).

It should also be added that murals in the decoration of Armenian churches were not a mandatory, nor were icons used during church rituals (as is done in the Orthodox Church). Whether or not to have a mural in any church and its size was decided mainly at the discretion of the client.

Medieval Armenian wall paintings were mainly made with the fresco technique. The Armenian fresco technique has its own characteristics, in particular, it is characterized by a thin base layer (ground), which consists of a mixture of lime and gypsum with

thickness of approximately 0.5 cm. This thickness is related to the smooth arrangement of the church walls made of hewn stones, when the inner surface of the walls is as smooth as the outer surface and cannot hold a thicker layer of plaster.

The flourishing of Armenian architecture and mural painting in the 7th century was interrupted by the Arab conquest of the country, and it experienced a reawakening after the liberation from foreign power and the restoration of statehood in the 10th-11th centuries. One of the notable monuments of this period is the Holy Cross of Aghtamar, which walls are completely covered with frescoes, mainly of New Testament themes and fairly well-preserved paintings. This church was built by Gagik Artsruni king of Vaspurakan in 915-921.

The latter also founded his palace not far from the church, which, according to the testimony of the historian of Anonymous Artsrun, was also decorated with frescoes, but only with secular scenes.

Unfortunately, the palace does not exist now, and from the description left by the historian, one can only imagine what unique paintings there were: “The king is seen sitting on the golden throne with splendid honor, surrounded by lightful youngsters and joyful servants. Here is also the group of minstrels and the admirable dance of the girls, as well as groups of fencers, fights of the wrestlers, groups of lions and of other beasts, flocks of birds with various kinds of decorations”.

Separate fragments of frescoes were also found in the palace of Ani, the capital city of the Bagratunis. Unfortunately, our information about secular mural painting in medieval Armenia is limited by these two facts.

And among the religious mural monuments, most notable is the large fresco in Tatev monastery painted in 930, which has been preserved in parts, but some of its image parts were described by the 13th century historian Stepanos Orbelyan. Here, in addition to the images of the apostles, prophets, and the Birth of Christ, there was also the impressive scene of the Last Judgment.

Small size murals are found in the region of Syunik, in Vorotnavank, Gn-devank, Shatin monastery (Verin Noravank).

The Cathedral of Ani, built in 1001, also had frescoes, which have been known for a long time, but have more thoroughly been studied only recently. The reason is, that in 1064, when Ani was conquered by the Seljuks and the temple was converted into a mosque, the frescoes were covered with a thin layer of plaster. Later (in 1124), when the Georgian king David the Builder conquered the city, the church was returned to the Armenians and was reconsecrated, but the frescoes were not opened. Thanks to Christina Maranci's research, it was revealed that there was a large mural image of Christ standing on a pedestal in the Major Tabernacle.

The restoration of this mural (removal of the outer layer of plaster) will allow us to see this unique mural in all its magnificence.



Fresco from Dadivank Monastery,
Saint Nicholas among Jesus Christ,
Holy Virgin accompanied by an Angel
(photo: Hrayr Hawk Khacheryan)

In Ani several other churches also have frescoes inside. The Holy Savior church was illustrated at the end of the 12th century, and the image of its illustrator, Sargis Parshik, is preserved in the fresco. Like the previous ones, there are also Armenian writings near the images of Saints depicted in Saint Grigor (Khachot) church (the parts of its frescoes are now in the Hermitagemuseum) and in Tigran Honents rock-hewn tomb (early 13th century).

St. Gevorg church of Horomos monastery near Ani also has a mural with the image of Christ in the altar.

In the senior tabernacle of the fresco created in the 13th

century in the St. Nshan Church in Haghpats the large image of Christ is depicted, and on one of the walls, the prince KhutluBughha Artsruni, who ordered the fresco, is depicted in full height. In the Dadivank monastery in Artsakh artistic images of Saint Stephen Protomartyr and Saint Nicholas the Wonderworker have been preserved, near which the date of creation is also written - 1297.

In the 13th century, Armenian Chalcedonian wall painting also appeared in Armenia, particularly in the monasteries and churches belonging to the high-ranking officials of the state of Georgia- to the Zakarian princes of Armenian origin, who accepted the Chalcedonian faith: Pghndzahank (Akhtala), Kobayr, Kirants. Among them is the church in Ani built by Tigran Honents in 1215, which passed to the Armenian Chalcedonians in the 50s of the same century and was completely illustrated. Here is presented the life of St. Gregory the Illuminator with separate series of images.

The preserved writings on the frescoes created in the area of the Armenian Chalcedonians are in Greek and Georgian. It should be noted, that the monuments of Armenian Chalcedonian mural paintings are limited to the framework of the 13th century, while after that the tradition of mural paintings continued in Armenian churches (in Armenia and outside of Armenia settlements) and experienced significant development in the 17th century (Cathedral of St. Etchmiadzin, Amenaprkich church of Old Jugha, Astapat, Agulis, Varagavank, St. Gevorg church of Mughni, Meghri churches, etc.) then continued and reached up to the present day.

Armenian wall paintings have also been preserved in medieval Armenian settlements. The oldest of them dates back to the 12th century and is located in the White Monastery (Deyr el-Abiad) in Egypt. The artist's name, Teodoros Kesuntsi, is also included in the painting. There are frescoes in the 14th century St. Astvatsatsin Armenian Church located in Famagusta city in Cyprus. In the 14th-15th centuries, many Armenian churches were decorated with murals in Crimea.

In the 16th century, frescoes were depicted in Holy Savior Armenian monastery in Trabzon and in the 17th century, in the churches of Nor Jugha near Isfahan, the capital of Iran at that time, where two muralists, Minas and Hovhannes Mrkuz, are also well remembered. It is noteworthy, that in addition to the large-scale murals in churches, the houses of rich Armenian merchants (khojas) were also decorated with murals in this city.

It should be noted that mural painting, as compared to other types of fine art, is extremely sensitive to external influences, both to the influence of nature and climatic conditions, as well as to human intervention, as the result of such intervention would be images deterioration or sometimes completely disappearance over time. Most of the Armenian murals were affected by these influences.

The study and restoration of Armenian murals have become particularly active in the last 15 years. In the restoration process particularly significant is the contribution of the "Research Center for the Restoration of Frescoes" (head: Arzhanik Hovhannisyan), the Armenian architect Ara Zaryan (resident of Italy) and Belgian restorer Christine Lamoureux.



Ascension, Haghat Monastery
(photo: Rev. Hetum Tarverdyan)

In the mentioned period, through the “Research Center for Restoration of Frescoes”, restoration or strengthening of frescoes was carried out in the Kobayr Monastery, in the fully frescoed church of St. Gevorg in Tbilisi, in the Church of Mughni, in St. Hovhannes church in Small Village of Meghri, in the Etchmiadzin Cathedral.

And with the efforts of Ara Zaryan and Christine Lamoureux, mural paintings were renovated in St. Stepanos church in Lmbatavank, Karmravor church in Ashtarak,

church in Artik, St. Hovhannes church in Mastara (mural paintings were opened out of plaster thanks to them), churches in Dadivank and Haghat. Extensive album-studies have also been published about some of these monuments (St. Gevorg church in Tbilisi, Dadivank, Haghat). In 2019, in Yerevan the collection of articles and materials entitled “Armenian Frescoes” was also published, which brought together the major information about the history of Armenian mural painting and the main monuments.

Nevertheless, there is still much to be urgently done towards the study, preservation and restoration of Armenian murals (scientific cataloging of all murals, strengthening and restoration of murals, etc.).

To sum up, we can say that mural painting is one of the traditional and unique fields of Armenian fine art. The studies conducted in recent years prove that medieval Armenian mural paintings were quite large in number and widely spread, and that Armenian mural painting developed along with the main stages of Armenian architecture. The works of Armenian medieval mural paintings stand out for their artistic merits, with often original iconography and are of great importance not only for Armenian, but also for world art.

*Translated from Armenian by
Gohar Arakelyan*

