

EXHIBITION REVIEW

Armenia!

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
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The Metropolitan Museum of Art's exhibition is the first significant attempt in the United States to explore the legacy of Armenian artistic and cultural productions. [1] The exhibition includes works from between the fourth and seventeenth centuries, presenting a complex history that reaches beyond the rigid categorizations of medieval Christian studies. Helen C. Evans, the exhibition's curator and a specialist of Byzantine art at the MET, has brought together 140 rare objects, including church models, cross stones (*khachkars*), illuminated manuscripts, liturgical furnishings, metalwork, and textiles from several national and international public and private collections.[2] These distinctive works of art and culture demonstrate how Armenians interacted with the world around them while simultaneously maintaining their own unique identity in a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic region (Fig. 1)

In *Armenia!*, visitors are immersed within the vigorous dynamics of fourteen centuries of Armenian art and architecture as they walk through six different galleries. These separate sections make it clear that the standard approach of looking at Armenian art only through the lens of Christian art has shortchanged this rich culture. The galleries begin with Armenia's conversion from polytheism to Christianity, and then continue to present sample objects that highlight art and architecture from the Armenian Kingdoms of Bagratid, Artsruni, and Cilicia. The final gallery explores works of Armenian craftsmen during the Ottoman and Safavid Empires.

The four-sided stela that commemorates Armenia's Christianity acts as an entry point to the exhibition (Fig. 2). When St. Gregory the Illuminator converted the early-fourth-century CE King Tiridates the Great to Christianity, Armenia became the first region to formally adopt Christianity and to abandon polytheism. Medieval ceramics from Dvin illuminate Armenians' active trading relationships with other regions. A glazed bowl dated to the eleventh century depicting an eagle — a heraldic bird — is one of the luxury lusterware examples on display (Fig. 3). Imported from Iran and Syria, lusterware was considered a luxury item and was widely used by Armenian elites as tableware between the ninth and thirteenth centuries.

Fantastic animals – fictional hybrid creatures that represent magic, power and other-worldly mysticism – are widely depicted in Armenian architecture. The thirteenth century bas-relief of a sphinx from the monastery of Yovhannavank is just one example of their common depiction in Armenian architecture (Fig. 4). Similar fantastic animals are encountered in Byzantine, Georgian, Mongol, and Seljuk architecture of the medieval period. In terms of literature, the *Alexander Romance* – the body of legends about the career of Alexander the Great – was popular among the Armenians. A folio from a sixteenth-century manuscript of the Greek *Alexander Romance*,” illuminated by Bishop Zak’ariay of Gnunik’, shows an episode where a giant crab swallows Alexander’s ship, and then afterwards two donkeys lead and accompany him through the land (Fig. 5).

The cultural production of Armenian art and architecture requires in-depth scholarly analysis and curatorial attention. With this in mind, the MET’s *Armenia!* exhibition offers a good starting point for better understanding the distinctive nature of Armenia’s objects and monuments and the fourteen centuries of its cultural interactions and trade relationships with other populations across Anatolia, Iran, the Mediterranean, and the South Caucasus.[3]

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[2] For more information about the exhibition see Helen C. Evans, ed., *Armenia: Art, Religion, and Trade in the Middle Ages* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2018).

[3] For a recent critical survey of ancient, medieval, and early modern periods of Armenian art see Christina Maranci, *The Art of Armenia: An Introduction* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).



Figure 1. Detail of the first world map printed in Armenian language. Amsterdam, 1695. Engravings by Adrian Schoonbeek and Peter Schoonbeek; printed by T'ovmas Vanandets'i. Ink on Paper. Photo by Bihter Esener.



Figure 2. Installation view of Four-Sided Stela, 4th–5th century, from Vank' Xaraba. Photo by Bihter Esener.



Figure 3. Installation view of Glazed Bowl, 11th–12th century, from Dvin. Photo by Bihter Esener.



Figure 4. Installation view of Bas-Relief of a Sphinx, 13th century, from the Monastery of Yovhannavank. Photo by Bihter Esener.



Figure 5. Installation view of the *Alexander Romance*, 1538-1544, illuminated by Bishop Zak'aria Gnuni. Photo by Bihter Esener.