



Shahan Sanossian

# Armenian illuminated

The Phoenix Art Museum brings together the Saint John's Bible, European religious manuscripts, and the James Melikian Collection

by Shahan Sanossian

LOS ANGELES – From December 11, 2007, to March 9, 2008, the Phoenix Art Museum will present three linked exhibitions showcasing handmade bibles and religious manuscripts produced over a span of more than 1,300 years. Illuminating the Word: The Saint John's Bible will showcase the only hand-written and illuminated bible commissioned since the spread of the printing press over 500 years ago. The Early History of the Bible will display works such as an eighth-century biblical manuscript fragment from Egypt, a 16th-century Hebrew Esther scroll, a page from the Gutenberg Bible, and a first edition of Martin Luther's New Testament. The third exhibition, Selections from the James Melikian Collection, will feature several rare objects, including the Khaboris Codex, an Assyrian New Testament manuscript, and three beautiful and rare Armenian Four Gospels, the earliest of which was made around 1350.

## The Saint John's Bible

Beginning in the 1970s, **Donald Jackson**, one of the world's foremost calligraphers, began discussing his dream of producing an entire bible by hand. Throughout the 1990s, Saint John's Abbey and the University in Minnesota explored the feasibility of such a



Illuminated Manuscripts 1350 Evangelary, Nativity (Birth, Adoration of Magi, Annunci.)

exhibition



## The early history of the Bible

Books as we know them today replaced stone and clay tablets, scrolls, and sheets of papyrus near the end of the Roman Empire. Until the advent of the printing press in the 15th century, the only way to produce a book was by writing each word by hand.

The most common book ever printed is the Bible, whose sacred status led to the art of illumination. Scribes and artists would decorate illuminated manuscripts with paint and gold, making each manuscript a unique record of the time and place it was created.

The Early History of the Bible was first exhibited in 2005 at the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore after it received the gift of an early 17th-century Torah scroll created in the European Diaspora of Judaism. Ranging from 300 B.C.E. to the 19th century, the manuscripts that will be on display chronicle the art of bookmaking from antiquity to modern times, including a New Testament written in Aramaic in the 11th century, a leaf from a Byzantine Book of Psalms from the 1300s, and two French illuminated Bibles from around 1250. One of the reasons the Phoenix Art Museum chose to display this collection is that it highlights the parallel traditions of handmade scripture from Judaism and pre-Reformation Christianity.

### Selections from the James Melikian Collection

The Khabouris Codex is one of only two Assyrian New Testament manuscripts from the 11th and 12th centuries written in Aramaic that is still in existence in the Western Hemisphere. The other is housed in the Library of Congress. Other selections from the James Melikian Collection in-



Illuminated Manuscripts 1598 Evangelary, End of Days.

project, and Jackson created the first samples. But it wasn't until Ash Wednesday in the year 2000 that the first words were penned on vellum for what would become the Saint John's Bible. Over the last eight years, Jackson has been working with many artists to write and illuminate the book using quills and paints ground from lapis lazuli, vermilion, malachite, silver, copper, and gold.

The nearly completed bible is monumental. It stands two feet tall and three feet wide. It is made up of more than 1,000 pages which are bound in seven different volumes. Although the bible is richly ornamented and lettered by hand, the bookmakers used computer technology to

design and manage page layouts. It contains both the Old and New Testaments and is meant to present scripture from a modern-day perspective, reflecting today's multicultural world and the recent strides made in science and technology. The bible includes imagery not only from Eastern and Western religious traditions but also from Native American cultures. When completed in 2009, it will be displayed at the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library at Saint John's University in Minnesota, used in worship, and available to the public. Selections from the bible have been traveling the country, but the exhibition in Phoenix will be the first time it is exhibited beside ancient texts.

clude English printed Bibles from the 1500s and 1600s, including the tallest printed bible, and a collection of three Armenian Four Gospels.

The Armenian Four Gospels were written in Aramaic on rice paper. Each begins with a series of illustrations showing the life of Jesus. One of the texts, believed to be from 1651, was produced by an Armenian team in Istanbul. It was used for three decades by Vardapet Minas of Kona who commissioned a beautiful silver cover for the book in 1675.

**James S. Melikian** began collecting manuscripts four years ago. “I wanted to collect something unusual and not so easy to find,” Melikian says. “I did some research which led me to buy old printed Armenian books from the 1600 and 1700s.

“My intense collecting really got started when my wife, **Ana Almeida Melikian, Ph.D.**, . . . and I began to discuss what I could do with my spare time and money to make an impact on the arts and culture – things we both share a passion for.” Melikian began with small purchases and sometimes made mistakes. “In just over three years though, buying antique manuscripts and artifacts has become a full-time passion for me. Now I know which experts to confer with and how to spot fakes or wrongly described offerings or just something not worth buying.

“Ancient illuminated manuscripts are, for me, the ultimate artistic expression before modern times. Think of all the time and effort needed to make a great handwritten manuscript with paintings. In the Eastern Christian world, this was especially true for Armenians since they didn’t make icons like the Russians and Greeks, and so all their best artistic efforts and religious devotion were poured into their illuminated manuscripts.”

To Melikian, collecting these manuscripts is like holding centu-

ries of history and art in his hand. “Collecting combines history, art, and even business – what a great combination. The ultimate satisfaction is when a collector is able to pioneer a new area by bringing together items that let others see a part of history they didn’t think of before.”

Armenian illuminated manuscripts are difficult to find. “Of the 35,000 or so Armenian manuscripts that exist,” Melikian says, “about 11,000 have some paintings and 5,000 of those would be with many paintings like the three to be seen in the upcoming exhibit.” Most of the finest manuscripts belong to museums or the Armenian Church. “Just last June, three illuminated Armenian manuscripts came up for sale in London, though none were that exciting. You can still find lesser-quality Armenian manuscripts if you look hard.” However, Melikian warns that antiques offered by sellers in Armenia are often fake, stolen, or illegal to take out of Armenia. “So I would advise avoiding this market.”

Though the Khabouris Codex is not of Armenian origin, it was a thrilling buy for Melikian. While collecting Armenian items, he kept an eye on sales at the large auction houses in London and New York. “I had not been interested in Western European or Islamic manuscripts because there have been so many others buying them for so long. But then the Khabouris Codex . . . came up for auction, and I was mesmerized. I had not seen such an old Christian Oriental manuscript before for sale. It also had such an unusual 20th-century history, as the men who found it in a Christian monastery on the Turkish-Iraqi border in 1966 thought they had found the earliest complete New Testament ever known – the earliest words of Jesus. I just felt I must have it, even though it was expensive and not Armenian. By buying it and adding it to my Ar-



menian illuminated manuscripts, I was expanding the horizons of my collection.

“Though most of my purchases have been of Armenian items, I think it was very wise to branch out beyond that as my collection is richer for it and actually makes it easier for me to share the Armenian treasures with the public.”

Melikian has continued to expand his collection. “We did just buy a medieval Tibetan manuscript with 502 paintings. . . . I am always attracted to manuscripts which are beautiful and unusual.”

He has also purchased items from non-Armenian Christian Oriental cultures, including an illuminated Coptic Egyptian prayer book, an extremely rare 300-year-old Ottoman Arabic manuscript of the Four Gospels, and two Ethiopian manuscripts with paintings from the 1700s. Many of these will be at the Phoenix Art Museum.

In addition to manuscripts, Melikian collects Armenian silver church artifacts. In his col-

**Illuminated Manuscripts Silver Cover of 1868–1892 Bible (front).**



James S. & Ana Melikian

lection are several silver chalices dating from 1648 to 1889, silver crosses from 1347 to 1908, silver clerical staffs, crowns, oil lamps, altar decorations, and a very rare hand of God probably made in the 1800s. "There are also several pairs of brass cymbals dating from 1635 to 1721. One of my best items is one of the only known Armenian-made icons in the world, made in 1696 by the most famous Armenian artist of the time for the Catholicos of all Armenians."

Melikian has lectured about his collection, but the upcoming exhibit will be the first time some of the pieces in his collection will be shown to the public. **Dr. Thomas Loughman**, curator of European Art at the Phoenix Art Museum and a friend of the Melikians', was instrumental in bringing the collection to the museum. Armenian manuscripts have been exhibited in museums before, but what makes this exhibit unique is its context. Melikian says, "This upcoming exhibit may be the first to display Armenian art with Western European manuscripts."

It is no surprise that Melikian chose to collect historical objects. He and his siblings grew up learning investment from their father and the appreciation of culture and antiques from their mother. The family business involves buying and remodeling historical commercial real estate. "Typically, we enjoy finding empty or underutilized properties with some historic past and remodeling them to be able to lease them out – thus saving a part of local history and at the same time creating economic value."

His parents, **Gregory J. and Emma Ordjanian Melikian**, were the leading sponsors of the Melikian Critical Language Program at Arizona State University. The program teaches Armenian, Uzbek, Tatar, Macedonian, and other unusual languages. "This has been a very successful program under Dr. Stephen Batalden, and has gained national attention. Each summer, two professors from Yerevan State University come here to teach beginning and intermediate Armenian to mostly non-Armenians."

Aside from the opportunity to view beautiful and historical objects from our past, the upcoming exhibit at the Phoenix Art Museum offer Armenians a chance to learn more about their culture.

"Most Armenians know their identity through two historical

events," Melikian says. "The first nation to accept Christianity as a state religion, and then the 1915 Genocide." He believes that there is much more to Armenian culture. "Armenian illuminated manuscripts and Armenian silver work... are a part of this heritage unknown to the vast majority of Armenians and non-Armenians. The history of Armenian printing is also so special, with the Armenians being the first to bring printed books to the Middle East, and the first to have a printing press in the entire Middle East (in Isfahan in 1640). I have learned so much about the unknown history of Armenian culture over the past few years and hope more and more Armenians and non-Armenians will come to appreciate this as well.

"One of the most unique aspects of collecting Armenian artifacts is knowing that most of the churches and monasteries where these manuscripts and silver and brass chalices and crosses were made with such loving care and artistry are now gone and sitting in present-day Turkey long destroyed and abandoned. Every Armenian antique (and I feel this especially with my collection of Armenian Church relics) has a special history waiting to be rediscovered." ❧

connect:

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Dates:  
December 11, 2007 to March 9, 2008

Hours:  
Tuesday, 10 A.M.–9 P.M.  
Wednesday through  
Sunday, 10 A.M.–5 P.M.  
Closed Mondays and major holidays

Admission:

Adults \$10  
Seniors (65 and over) \$8  
Full-time students \$8  
Children ages 6-17 \$4  
Children under 6 free  
Museum members free

Every Tuesday evening, 3 P.M.–9 P.M., admission is free for everyone.

First Friday of every month, 6 P.M.–10 P.M., admission is free for everyone.