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ARTISTIC DECORATION OF *HISTORY OF ARMENIA* PUBLISHED BY HAKOBOS ISSAVERTENTS

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Abstract. Archimandrite Hakobos Issavertents's *History of Armenia*, published in 1888 by the Mekhitarist Congregation, Venice, is a pivotal work bridging Armenian history and European aesthetics. This article employs a comparative-historical method to analyze the engravings within, exploring the fusion of Classicism and Romanticism. Italian artists Giuliano Zasso, Giovanni Fusaro, and Giuseppe Cannella the Younger skillfully depicted Armenian history, blending Greco-Roman aesthetics with emotional resonance. The engravings encompass battles, mourning episodes, and royal ceremonies, presenting a nuanced narrative. By seamlessly marrying artistry with historical narrative, the book becomes a cultural bridge, enriching global understanding of Armenia's heritage.

Keywords: Mekhitarist Congregation, Armenian history, engraving, book design, Classicism, Romanticism, Italy

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Научная статья

ХУДОЖЕСТВЕННОЕ ОФОРМЛЕНИЕ «ИСТОРИИ АРМЕНИИ», ИЗДАННОЙ АКОБОСОМ ИСАВЕРТЕНЦОМ

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Аннотация. В течение веков армянская Конгрегация Мхитаристов на острове Святого Лазаря в Венеции являлась не только распространителем европейской литературы, науки и передовой общественно-политической мысли своего времени в армянской действительности, но и Мхитаристы представляли Армению в Европе, воистину становясь послами армянской культуры и создавая маленькую Армению на острове Св. Лазаря. Мхитаристы ставили перед собой задачу – ознакомить читателя на европейских языках и сделать общеизвестной историю и культуру армянского народа. Поэтому ими издавались книги, посвященные многовековой и славной истории Армении на итальянском, французском, русском, английском, немецком и других языках. Статья посвящена деятельности в этом плане одного из отцов-мхитаристов – архимандрита Акобоса Исавертенца (1835–1902 гг.). В 1888 г. в Венеции на французском языке им была издана большеформатная альбом-книга «История Армении» (*Histoire de l'Arménie*), в которой различные события армянской истории представлены в общедоступном изложении и проиллюстрированы выразительными гравюрами. Художественное оформление и гравюры книги с искусствоведческой точки зрения до сих пор не были изучены. Цель данной статьи – изучение приведенных в книге А. Исавертенца «История Армении» картин-гравюр с помощью историко-сравнительного метода. В частности, как создавались образы исторических лиц и событий с точки зрения классицизма и романтизма, какими художественными приемами пользовались художники для большей выразительности в духе упомянутых направлений, какими способами создавались образы героев, мужчин и женщин, армян и инородцев. Гравюры книги, представляющие различные эпизоды армянской истории, мастерски соединяют художественные традиции классицизма и романтизма. В результате, иллюстрации служат не только визуальным изображением исторических событий, но и представляют армянский народ, как носителя европейских эстетических представлений и нравов.

Ключевые слова: конгрегация Мхитаристов, история Армении, гравюра, книжное оформление, классицизм, романтизм, Италия

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Introduction

The Mekhitarist Congregation (1717–present) on St. Lazarus Island in Venice, Italy, has been a vital center for Armenian culture, art, science, and education since the 18th century. In a challenging historical context, where the Armenian people lacked statehood and distinct borders on the world map, it became imperative to collect, preserve, and present their culture to the world [1. P. 116–117]. In addition to showcasing Armenian culture, the 17th and 18th centuries offered a favorable period for integrating Armenian narratives, various myths, and legends circulating in Europe, along with the depictions based on them in both European settings and Armenian settlements. This era was especially favorable for the establishment of an Armenian center in Europe, a destiny fulfilled by Mkhitar Sebastatsi (Mekhitar of Sebaste).

In 1700, Sebastatsi brought together 15 students in Constantinople, establishing a congregation in 1701 that was later named Mekhitarist after his death. To ensure the congregation's unhindered functioning, they moved to Europe in 1703 and ultimately settled on the island of St. Lazarus in Venice in 1717 [2]. Thus, the Mekhitarist Congregation not only spread European literature, science, and contemporary socio-political thought within the Armenian context [3], but also acted as ambassadors of Armenian culture, representing Armenia to Europe and the world. They sought to promote the history and culture of the Armenian people in various European languages, showcasing the historical glory of Armenia. Consequently, they commenced the publication of books dedicated to Armenian history in Italian, French, English, German, Russian, and other languages.

Over the years, the Mekhitarist fathers fostered strong connections with leading countries across the globe, striving to present Armenian history, culture, and art. Particularly noteworthy was the connection between the Armenian Congregation of Venice and Russia. For instance, Archbishop Gabriel Aivazovsky (1812–1880), the brother of the renowned seascape painter Ivan (Hovhannes) Aivazovsky and a member of the Mekhitarist Congregation,

introduced Russian typefaces to a printing house in Venice and initiated the publication of Russian literature. Ghevond Alishan (1820–1901), a distinguished scholar of the congregation, closely collaborated with Russian scientists, being a member of the Moscow Archaeological Society, the Free Society of Lovers of Literature, Science, and the Arts, as well as the Imperial Russian Archaeological Society [4. P. 91].

The fathers of the Mekhitarist Congregation made significant effort to showcase to the civilized world the rich Armenian legacy, encompassing the history and the heroic journey undertaken by the Armenian people across generations. In this context, Archimandrite (Vardapet) Hakobos Issavertents (1835–1902) stands out, particularly for publishing *History of Armenia* (*Histoire de l'Arménie*) in 1888 in Venice. This extensive book-album in French presented various events from the centuries-old Armenian history in an accessible and engaging essay, complemented by expressive engravings [5]. The book was subsequently reissued in Armenian in Venice [6], and in 2007, the engravings and commentary were published in Yerevan in a book-album format [7].

Remarkably, the artistic aspects of the engravings and design of the book have not been studied to date. This article seeks to explore the engravings published in the *History of Armenia* by employing the comparative-historical method. The analysis will focus on how the described historical events and figures were reflected through the lenses of Classicism and Romanticism. It further explores the artistic techniques employed by the authors to amplify the expressiveness of events, analyzing how various protagonists, encompassing both women and men, Armenians, and foreigners, were depicted in alignment with the principles of these artistic trends.

The structure and thematic scope of *History of Armenia*

Hakobos Issavertents actively pursued scholarly work within the Mekhitarist Congregation, producing historical works such as "France and Prussia" (1870) [8], philosophical writings such as "The Fisherman of the Lake: Reflections from the Evening Hour" (1872) [9], geographical pieces like "Journey to Indian Bombay" (1887) [10], linguistic contributions including "Educational of English Language" (1880) [11], and numerous other works [12]. Proficient in English, Greek, Italian, and French [13. P. 494], Issavertents made a valuable impact by translating numerous Armenian works into these languages. Despite his diversified Armenological contributions to Armenology in both Armenian and various European languages, and his former status as a distinguished European scholar, his name remains relatively unfamiliar to the

Armenian public. In this context, obituaries commemorating his passing were published in Venice, expressing that "He devoted all his efforts to introducing the Armenian people to Europe, a cause he ardently pursued" [13. P. 493]. Similar sentiments were conveyed in Tiflis, where it was noted, "He rose to prominence in the European scholarly community, dedicating his entire career to familiarizing Europe with the Armenian nation" [14]. Meanwhile, Armenian newspapers in Marseille reflected on his legacy, expressing, "With his demise, the Mekhitarist Congregation grieves the loss of one of its most eminent members, and the Armenian nation bids farewell to a revered figure who tirelessly endeavored to introduce them to the world" [15].

In composing the book *History of Armenia*, Archimandrite Hakobos drew inspiration from Movses Khorenatsi's (5th century) *History of Armenians* [16] and Mikayel Chamchian's (1738–1823) three-volume historical compilation [17], curating and presenting noteworthy events and incidents that he believed would captivate European readers. Issavertents's *History of Armenia* spans 390 pages and features 61 engravings crafted by Italian artists. The generosity of Indo-Armenian merchant Hovhan Harutyunyan of Batavia (Jean Arathoon De Batavia) (named after the Indian city of Batavia) made the publication of this extensive album possible. In the preface, Issavertents notes that Jean Aratun had requested him to curate and present "various significant events related to our beloved Armenia" [5. P. 1]. The engravings bear the signatures of three esteemed Italian artists: Giuliano Zasso (1833–1889), Giovanni Fusaro (1803–1894), and Giuseppe Canella the Younger (1837–1913). Following the finest traditions of European classical painting, these Italian artists, adeptly portrayed the real and mythical aspects of Armenian history. They skillfully depicted landscapes, architectural structures, urban and military scenes, palace interiors, period clothing, and armor, enriching the book with a visual narrative of Armenian history.

Beyond the creative imagination and artistic abilities, an engraver should also possess a deep understanding of the history and culture of the Armenian people. Issavertents, the author of the book, played a crucial role in disseminating this knowledge. During his studies at Moorat Raphael College in Venice, he not only refined his artistic skills but also collaborated with Italian artists, exchanging perspectives on Armenian culture [13. P. 419]. This collaboration aimed to ensure precise depictions of characters, atmospheres, settings, and nature in alignment with the text, enabling localization and historical context rooted in specific events.

Despite Issavertents's assertion in the preface that the texts in the book were not meant to provide a comprehensive history of Armenia but rather to elucidate the historically themed illustrations [5. P. 1], it is important

to note that the written texts extend beyond the thematic focus of each image, encompassing the entire historical period related to the depicted events.

The thematic scope of the book ranges from the beginning of Armenian history, narrating the battle between Hayk, the progenitor of Armenians, and Bel, the adversary [18. P. 206–209], to the conclusion with Davit Bek's uprising in Syunik during the 1720s [19. P. 176–180]. Nevertheless, the final illustration in the book refers to the events of 1269 in Cilician Armenia [20. P. 253–254], portraying King Hetum I mourning the death of his sons. The accounts of events in the succeeding centuries lack accompanying illustrations, possibly due to the artists' inability to complete the engravings on time, leaving the last eight themes without images.

It is noteworthy that Issavertents, as highlighted in the obituary in the *Bazmavep* journal, aimed to commission smaller-sized engravings of the book's illustrations from Italian artists for future incorporation into Armenian textbooks. Unfortunately, one of the Italian painters met a tragic end by drowning in the canal due to intoxication, preventing the completion of the project. Archimandrite Hakobos had hoped to fulfill this educational endeavor before his demise but was unable to bring it to fruition [13. P. 495].

The influence of Classicism and Romanticism on the book engravings

This voluminous tome (29 × 40 cm) features a sturdy cover, albeit adorned on its exterior, enveloped in paper of various shades of brown. Within, the publication boasts pages crafted from milk-colored, thin, yet well crafted paper. The book comprises 390 pages and the textual content is elegantly presented in dual columns.

Diverging from the tradition of Armenian old-printed books, which often featured intricate vegetal, animal, or geometric motifs adorning the margins, Issavertents's tome exhibits a more restrained decorative approach.

Numerous pages feature delicate embellishments along the lower borders, depicting imagery such as Greek column capitals, birds, vases, butterflies among roses, various plants and flowers, swords, shields, helmets, and items related to geography and astronomy like globes, maps, compasses, and telescopes. The lyre is a common motif, often adorned with flowers or placed near military symbols, symbolizing the grandeur and glory of the ancient world. Such intricate engravings, characteristic of the Mekhitarist printing house, are frequently encountered in their other works, notably in the *Bazmavep* journal.

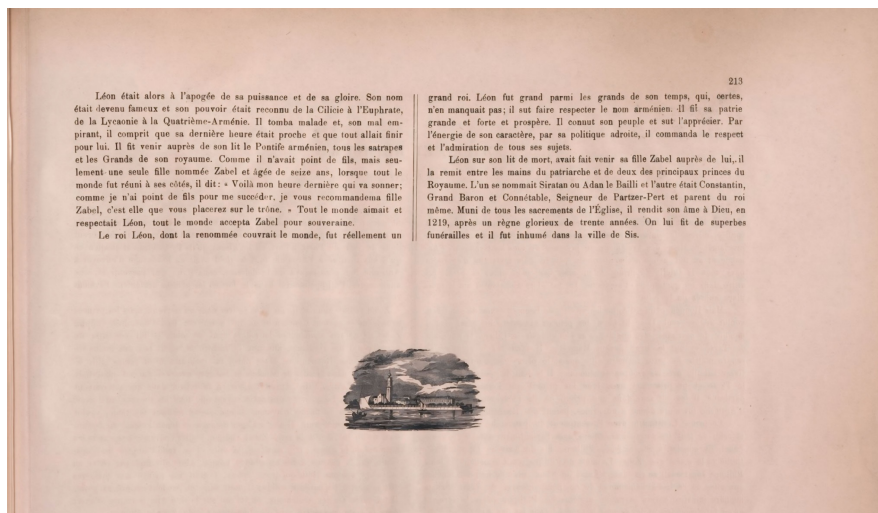


Fig. 1. Decorative element, p. 213

Some of these decorations go beyond mere ornamentation, creating lyrical scenes like a lone steamship navigating rough waves or cherubic angels playing trumpets. One small engraving seems to depict a panoramic view of Venice from St. Lazarus Island, featuring architectural landmarks such as the Venetian Tower, St. Mark's Cathedral, and Doge's Palace, with billowing sails adding a sense of movement to the artwork's intricate detail (Fig. 1).

The title page of the tome follows the classicist style prevalent at the time, featuring pristine background space adorned with a small engraving depicting military paraphernalia: helmets, shields, swords, and arrows. This tasteful ornamentation adds a touch of sophistication to the presentation of the book's information.

The initial letter of the preface commands attention with its grand scale and intricate floral motifs, evoking a sense of solemnity and reverence rarely replicated elsewhere in the book.

The overall artistic decoration of the publication is characterized by restraint and tastefulness rather than opulence. However, the engraved illustrations, executed in the classicist style, significantly elevate the book's decorative value. Additionally, elements of a romantic worldview are incorporated into the design, enriching the visual narrative of the publication. Mkhitar Sebastatsi, the pioneer of Armenian Classicist literature and founder of the Mekhitarist Congregation, established the basis for Armenian Classicism with his 1732 publication "Tagharan", marking the inception of this genre and

classicist direction [21. P. 46]. Sebastsi, a key figure in Mekhitarian poetry, facilitated the transition from medieval Armenian monastic poetry to European Classicist poetry [22. P. 144–157].

By the mid-19th century, a shift towards romanticism became prominent in Mekhitarian literature, stemming from Ghevond Alishan's journal *Bazmavep* from 1847–1858, especially the series *Songs of the Nahapet* (Patriarch) [22. P. 144–157]. Alishan's romantic works were created in harmony with Scottish poet James Macpherson, who, using the name Ossian, sparked the Ossian literary movement in Europe in the 1760s [23. P. 492–496]. Following this trend, Alishan published *Songs of Nahapet* under the name of Nahapet, an ancient Armenian poet from the 17th century. Similar to Macpherson's influence in Europe, Alishan's works infused Romanticism into various art forms, especially literature and fine arts [22. P. XVI].

The works and publications of the Mekhitarist Congregation skillfully integrated successive European styles, culminating in distinctive engravings within the examined book. Adopting the characteristic of Romanticism, the engravings portray scenes of wars, battles, and duels emphasizing the stark contrast between good and evil as two extremes. For instance, in the engraving depicting the battle between Armenian patriarch Hayk and Bel of Babylon (Fig. 2), Hayk stands heroically, fighting for freedom, while the tyrant Bel, struck by Hayk's arrow, falls with a disfigured face. The dynamic engravings, captured in the moment of motion, direct the viewer's focus to the main characters, creating a palpable sense of tension.

Adhering to Classicism's symmetrical balance principle, the composition utilizes intersecting diagonal lines to maintain a sense of motion. The careful detailing of women and men, as well as weapons, animals, and vegetation, in well-defined drawings, preserves the accurate anatomical proportions of human bodies. The engravings, restricted to black and white with light and shadow effects, ensure a three-dimensional visual effect. The facial expressions of Hayk and Bel convey intense emotionality, characterized by furrowed brows, resolute gazes, and expressive features that emphasize both romantic emotion and anger. The use of black and white intensifies the dramatic effect of the scene, highlighting the contrast between light and dark as representations of the dichotomy of good and evil.

In the book, various military scenes meticulously depict warriors, highlighting their well-defined and aesthetically pleasing physiques. Italian artists portray Armenian heroes in an idealized manner reminiscent of Greco-Roman mythological figures. The book intentionally omits the gruesome aspects of war, opting instead to focus on the triumphant outcomes (Figs. 3 and 4).



Fig. 2. *Battle of Hayk and Bel* by Giuliano Zasso

It is noteworthy that the portrayal of heroes in the Greco-Roman style correspond with a characteristic evident in European classicist literature. According to theorist Charlotte Denoël, the iconography of French classicist book art in the 19th century was significantly influenced by Greek culture [24. P. 2].

Considering the weight of Armenia's history, marked by intense and tragic occurrences, a distinct set of engravings in the book can be considered as mourning episodes. One poignant example is the portrayal of the funeral of Armenian King Artashes the First (Fig. 5). Moses Khorenatsi recounts that after the death of the beloved king, many people, overwhelmed by grief, resorted to suicide. Describing Artashes's funeral, Khorenatsi observes, "In front they blew bronze trumpets, behind came wailing maidens dressed in black and mourning women, and then followed the mass of the common people". [16. P. 199]. In the engraving, corresponding to these accounts, we witness the funeral procession departing from the palace, led by herald blowing trumpets. In the ancient world, trumpets served as a means of announcing



Fig. 3. *Gisak Dimaksean Defending King Artaxias I* by Giovanni Fusaro

important news [25. P. 85]. In Armenian medieval art, the representation of a flute or trumpet mainly symbolized the conveyance of good news, particularly prevalent in the Vaspurakan and Syunik miniature schools, especially in depictions of Annunciation and Nativity miniatures [26. P. 60].

Horses pull the carriage carrying the king's body, adorned with his shield, spear, arrow, and bow. In the corner of the image, grieving women are depicted with expressive and theatrical movements. The incorporation of mourning women in ceremonies was a ritual rooted in the ancient world, a tradition that can be traced back to Ancient Egypt [27. P. 157].

The final engraving in the book, represents Hetum the First's lamentation for his sons and offers a particularly distinctive portrayal (Fig. 6). The composition includes not only the grieving king but also courtiers, military personnel, and clergy. The artist skillfully communicates grief and compassion through various means: the despondent posture of the king seated on his throne with closed eyes, soldiers wiping away tears with their cloaks, figures embracing each other for solace, and black-robed clerics engaged in prayer.

The author of the previous engraving is Giuseppe Cannella the Younger. In contrast to Cannella's emotionally charged depiction, Fusaro's figures



Fig. 4. *Battle of Varazdat with the Lombards* by Giuliano Zasso

display greater restraint and a more static quality, devoid of the internal tension expressed in the former.

It is worth highlighting that the three engravers in charge of the book's illustrations have unique individual styles, yet they remain committed to the classicist style and narrative approach. Giuliano Zasso contributes the majority of the illustrations, characterized by a dynamic quality where animated figures often express intense emotions. Zasso's engravings convey an ethereal, dreamlike quality as dictated by the plot, as evident in his representation of pre-Christian Armenia with flying deities, dragons, and enigmatic priests [28].

Giovanni Fusaro's works, on the other hand, feature static and stable lines, as well as balanced and symmetrical compositions, and subdued emotional expression. In contrast, the etchings of Giuseppe Canella the Younger display balanced compositional structures, with figures vividly expressing emotions.

Particular emphasis should be placed on the depiction of female figures in the carvings, especially Armenian heroines who bear resemblances



Fig. 5. *Artashes I Funeral* by Giuseppe Canella the Younger



Fig. 6. *King Hethum I Mourning the Death of His Children* by Giuliano Zasso



Fig. 7. *Armenian Princess Tigranuhi before Wedding with Ajdahak* by Giuliano Zasso

to Greek goddesses in their graceful appearance, hairstyle, and spirit. While their slender bodies resemble Hellenistic sculptures, yet they are anything but lifeless, with their sentiments and emotions clearly portrayed.

For instance, the image of Armenian princess Tigranuhi en route to marry King Ajdahak of Media (Fig. 7) showcases Tigranuhi's discretion. Adorned in regal attire and lavish jewelry, it seems that she was sent as a gift to the king of Medes. The lowered gaze, gestures of the hand, and hesitant steps emphasize her submission to her brother's will.

The background elements, such as columns, arch patterns, and sculptures, provide immediate context for the palace environment of Media. Notably, Italian engravers present Armenians resembling European heroes and heroines, while other nations, such as the Medes, are depicted as Eastern peoples with distinct physical features.

The publications of the Mkhitarians in the second half of the 19th century adhere to the classicist direction, encompassing both literary text and the artistic decoration of the books. Notably, Ghevond Alishan's topographical volumes [29–33], published nearly simultaneously with Issavertents's *History of Armenia*, deserve special mention. The initial pages of these volumes feature engravings in the classicist style, though with a subtly symbolic interpretation. In these depictions, different historical Armenian regions personify

various resembling Greek muses, and either mourn or extol the glory of Armenia, often holding a lyre. These engravings serve as a condensed representation of Alishan's perspectives and historical accounts [34. P. 142].

In contrast to the engravings found in the current book, the illustrations on the frontispieces of Alishan's topographical volumes showcase a more symbolic representation. This difference arises from the influence of the artistic and compositional preferences of Father Alishan. Given that Issavertents's book sought to communicate the content through a visual language, the engravings in this work lean towards a more narrative style.

Conclusions

History of Armenia by Archimandrite Hakobos Issavertents stands out as one of the most pivotal foreign language editions from the Mekhitarist Congregation, serving as a channel to introduce the extensive Armenian history to Europe, spanning from ancient times to the contemporary era.

The engravings in this book skillfully traverse the artistic domains of Classicism and Romanticism, expertly blending precise composition and form with evocative emotional tones. Going beyond mere visual representations of historical events, these illustrations present the Armenian people as bearers of European aesthetic ideals and moral values.

In essence, the Italian artists depict significant episodes from Armenian history, intricately interwoven with key figures and events from both Ancient Eastern and Greco-Roman civilizations. This method imparts a global perspective to Armenian history, surpassing local confines and infusing it with the rich tapestry of world history. Through this meticulous blend of artistry and historical narrative, *History of Armenia* emerges as a significant cultural bridge, fostering a more profound comprehension and appreciation of Armenia's heritage on the global stage.

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