

About the ‘*Armenia!*’ exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of New York

A distinguished art historian and well-known specialist of Byzantium, Mrs Helen Evans has been working at the Metropolitan Museum of Art for many years. Among the exhibitions she has organized, let us mention ‘*The Glory of Byzantium (843-1261)*’ in 1997 and ‘*Byzantium: Faith and Power (1261-1557)*’ in 2004. Such topics involved necessarily neighboring Armenia, and Mrs Evans’ growing interest for Armenian art was finally materialized by the present widely publicized exhibition called ‘*Armenia!*’, where the curious exclamation mark may reflect some kind of admiration. More important is the absence of any mention of period in the title, contrary to the two above mentioned Byzantine exhibitions. At first glance, it suggests that the exhibition should cover the three milleniums of Armenian history, or at least, if one decides to exclude Urartu, the period from 500 B.C. to our days. This is not the case: it begins at the dawn of the 4th century, with the Christianization of Armenia, and ignores totally one millenium of pagan Armenia. As an example, the absence of the name of the most famous of all Armenian kings, Tigranes the Great (1st c. B.C.), in an exhibition called ‘*Armenia!*’ looks strange, if not unacceptable. It would have been fair to call the exhibition ‘*Christian Armenia!*’, and briefly explain on an introductory panel that Armenia did exist long before, and that the Christianization opened a new artistic era. Such was the case of the exhibition properly called ‘*Armenia Sacra*’ in Paris (musée du Louvre, 2007).

The quality of the various items displayed here is properly amazing. The exhibition succeeded in obtaining some incredibly rich loans, some of them having systematically been refused before, as a manuscript of the greatest Armenian miniaturist, T’oros Roslin (13th c.), lent by the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem. Let us also mention the fabulous wooden door of the *Mush Surb Karapet* monastery, now kept in a private collection, so that this is probably a unique opportunity to admire it.

Many other similar examples can be given, but an exhibition is not a mere collection of masterpieces, it has to be a pedagogical tool and lead the visitor into a world essentially unknown, helping him to discover it. Unfortunately, this is not the case for ‘*Armenia!*’. First of all, the absence of any map, from the very beginning to the end, is amazing. Does everyone know what and where Armenia is? Even for those who know it, where are Cilicia, Vaspurakan, Sevan, Siwnik‘ and so on? These provinces remain purely abstract names. Even in the last section, dedicated to the trade routes, not a single itinerary is explicitly shown. As for the catalogue, it includes, at the very beginning (p. 24-25), a single map, which stretches from the Eastern America to Japan: Armenia is so tiny that the names of dozens of cities and monasteries are illegible, the provinces being totally omitted!!

This huge gap could have been, at least partly, compensated by some adequate historical explanations, but these are absent from the exhibition as well as from the catalogue. A glance to the list of the contributors of this catalogue shows that it involves exclusively art historians, there is practically not a single historian in spite of the fact that the evolution of art cannot be dissociated from the historic frame.

As a first consequence of this absence of historical control, precisions are often lacking and mistakes are frequent. Let us quote a few of them:

- After 387, Armenia was not “made a vassal state of Iran”, it was divided between Byzantium and Persia (p. 209)
- The dates of the historian Movses Khorenatsi are still controversial, between the 5th and the 8th or even 9th century: the precise dates “(410-490)” assigned here make no sense (p. 29)
- The annexion of Kars took place in 1065, not in “1054” (p. 34)
- The mother of Queen Melisende was not from “Edessa” but from Melitene (p. 35)

- The first husband of Zabel has not been “deposed” but put to death (p. 35, 130)
- King Levon V has not been “buried” in Saint-Denis – where his tomb stone was transferred in the 19th century – but in the Celestins’ convent (p. 36)
- The name “*Armenia Maritima*” for the Crimean coast is a myth (p. 88)
- This southern coast of Crimea was in the hand of the Genovese alone, not the “Venitians and Genovese” (p. 164)
- The foundation of the Armenian Patriarchate in 1461 by sultan Mehmed II and the bishop of Bursa is purely mythic (p. 172, 253)
- The patriarch of Jerusalem was not at all restricted “on a local level” (p. 233)

The exhibition captions and the catalogue notices are full of interesting details concerning the description of the objects, but they generally omit completely the historical context. For example, let us have a look to the section dealing with Armenians in Italy (p. 164): when, why, how did they settle there? No answer. Even worse for Jerusalem (p. 218), where the foundation of the Patriarchate is totally ignored and the famous mosaics quoted without any reproduction – the only picture being the interior of the cathedral. As for the famous map of K‘eomiwrchean (1691), why do neither the caption nor the article (p. 301) mention its amazing story: it was considered as lost until its discovery by chance in Bologna three centuries later!! Let us add that usually a catalogue recalls, for each object, the former exhibitions where it has been already displayed: no such precision is given here for any of them.

All over the exhibition and its catalogue, a widespread mistake is the name “Kingdom of Cilicia”. Such a kingdom has never existed: there has been in Cilicia a “Kingdom of Armenia”, so called by the Armenians as well as all their neighbors (Arabs, Greeks, Franks,...). To be geographically more precise, one may speak of “Cilician Armenia”. A few rooms away from ‘*Armenia!*’, the Museum has a permanent showcase containing some silver coins from that kingdom, where one can read explicitly “King of Armenia”. Why didn’t the exhibition display some of these coins?

As for the birth of this last Kingdom of Armenia far away from the motherland, there is a more serious problem. One reads that at some moment “Armenians moved into Cilicia” (p. 34), without any explanation. Were they tourists? The reason given elsewhere, “the Byzantine defeat at the battle of Manzikert” (p. 134), is absurd: that battle took place in 1071 between Byzantines and Seljuk Turks, it did not involve the Armenians. The real reason has to be found somewhat earlier, when these same Seljuk Turks captured Ani in 1064. Why is this event carefully ignored here, as it had been on p. 31, where one can read, without any explanation, that the monuments of Ani “stand even now in ruins”? These ruins are “on the modern closed border between the Turkish and Armenian Republics” (p. 66). On which side? And why is this border “closed”? While it is correctly recalled that the Kingdom of Cilician Armenia has been destroyed in 1375 by the Mamluks (p. 164), why aren’t the Turks mentioned for the destruction of the Bagratid Kingdom of Ani in 1064? Anyway, the word ‘*Turks*’ is totally absent of the catalogue, as one can check it in the index: is it by chance?

These questions lead us to some more political considerations. As we have seen, the exhibition begins with the Christianization of Armenia – which would make sense if it were explicit. It ends with the 18th century, allowing to omit the tragic fate of Armenians from the 19th century on, and particularly the genocide.

Like the silence about the fate of Ani, several other indices are somewhat puzzling.

- One speaks of the “monastery of the Holy Apostles in Mush” (p. 97) without specifying that it has been destroyed by the Turks during the 20th century.
- Among the jewels of this exhibition, one can admire the carved door of this monastery (p. 109). How did this door survive the destruction of the whole monument? Why isn’t there a

single word about that? Maybe because any answer would necessarily include the word 'genocide'.

- The only explicit mention of deprivations concerns the cemetery of *khachkars* of Julfa, in Nakhchivan. One reads (p. 91) that they "were deliberately destroyed in the 1990s, in an attempt to eliminate any trace of Armenian presence from the region". Although the date is wrong – it took place in 2005 – there is at least a correct mention. But why isn't the name of Azerbaijan, the author of this crime, mentioned?

- This province of Nakhchivan counted many monasteries, which had been photographed before their complete destruction by Azerbaijan. There is not a single trace of any of them, neither in the exhibition nor in the catalogue. Is it in order to avoid putting that State in accusation?

- Monuments of Lori, Siwnik' or Vaspurakan are largely mentioned, but those of Arts'akh-Karabagh, which are not less important, are practically absent, in particular the famous monastery of Gandzasar: briefly mentioned only once (p. 178), it did not deserve any picture or commentary. Is that in order to avoid speaking of the Azerbaijan's claims?

In one word, as in each case, it is obvious that Turks and Azeris were aware of that exhibition from the very beginning. Did they make pressure on the authorities in order to avoid the mention of anything that could recall their criminal policy towards Armenians? Let us consider another hypothesis: the friendly relations of the USA towards these 'Republics' may have resulted in an automatic censorship by the Museum authorities themselves.

Finally, the incredible absence of any map may enter very well in such a frame. Maps are potentially dangerous: they suppose borders, presence of populations, leading one to ask why the Armenians, so numerous and active in such or such area, have totally disappeared there. The answer has to come from Ankara and Baku.

This exhibition is included in the Museum entrance ticket, so that a lot of people pass through it. I paid attention to these visitors: it was obvious that they were delighted by the beauty of what they saw, but also obvious that they did not understand anything of the context. What a waste!! Armenia has still to wait...

As a conclusion, one can say that '*Armenia !*' is a fabulous display of Christian Armenian Art until the 18th century, but that as an Armenian exhibition it is a complete failure, unworthy of an institution as famous as the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

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