

Reviews

Margret Jaschke, Robert Stähle, *Kostbare Einbandbeschläge an armenischen Handschriften* (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2015). ISBN-13: 9783954900534, ISBN-10: 395490053X. 205 pp.

The publication presents the result of the study and restoration of 77 metal bindings on as many manuscripts held in the Matenadaran, the Institute for the preservation and study of the world's largest collection of handwritten Armenian books in Erevan, Armenia. Most are silver, sometimes just crosses or other decorative motifs attached to the original leather binding. I was fortunate to have been at the Matenadaran while the team— independent professional book and manuscript binders who came together from different parts of Germany —were still actively working and to have witnessed their skill and grace. They not only consolidated shaky bindings, but very often fashioned new clasps, decorative plaques, and other metal elements, some that had dropped off or were loose, using metals carefully chosen to match or to be in harmony with the surviving ornaments.

The result is quite remarkable and convincing as is immediately evident by turning the pages of this lavishly illustrated (nearly a thousand photographs) analysis of a variety of silver bindings. The covers are listed in categories by type; each arranged by the date of the original copying of the codex. Thus we are presented with one manuscript from the thirteenth century, seven of the fourteenth, five of the fifteenth, eight of the sixteenth, 46 the seventeenth and four from the early eighteenth century. The texts were written or copied between 1237 and 1724 in localities from Constantinople to Isfahan. That there are more from the seventeenth century than all other centuries combined reflects the reality of surviving Armenian manuscripts with or without metal bindings. Though it may seem strange that the peak of surviving manuscript production was in the second half of the seventeenth century, more than 250 years after the first Armenian book was printed, it was only in that century, more precisely in the 1660s, that the number of individual titles of printed books clearly surpassed those of handwritten copies. Nevertheless, the selection chosen seems for the most part to have bindings closely contemporary to the copying. The use of elaborate silver bindings reflects moments of prosperity: the time of the Armenian kings of Cilicia and the second half of the seventeenth century, when rich merchants were often the patrons.

Curiously, there is no attempt to date the bindings (which in some cases are probably rebindings) themselves. The oldest example with original silver-gilded plaques on the upper (Deisis) and lower (Four Evangelists) covers is a Gospel of 1249 (M7690) from Hromkla in Cilicia, bound in 1255, one of the masterpieces of Armenian silverwork commissioned by the Catholicos Constantine.

Within the categories of bindings usually based on the decorative aspects of the metalwork, from isolated metal crosses to fully gilded silver plaques on the upper and lower sides, the sequence is not chronological. Each of the 77 selections is given a double-page opening, with on the left views of the restored upper and lower covers, sometimes the decorative spine, preceded by the accession number in the Matenadaran collection, the manuscript type, virtually all Gospels except for three: a Bible, a New Testament, and a liturgical text. Then the date is given of the original copying, the place when known, the size, and the writing surface (paper or parchment). Usually the craftsman's name, if known, is provided and sometimes the artistic motif. On the facing right-hand page, there are five to ten additional photos of details of the pre-restoration binding with technical commentary by the authors, who, however, rarely discuss iconography or decorative motifs. They are experts in metalworking and concentrate on methods used for refurbishing the codices.

At the end of the book there are elaborately illustrated and discussed binding elements, such as various methods of keeping manuscripts closed: leather thongs, woven or chain metal fastening bands, hook and loop clasps, vertical rivets with appropriate pierced straps to firmly guard the book closed. At the end there is a well-illustrated glossary of some sixty binding features. Before the bibliography, a comprehensive list of all manuscripts used is arranged by the accession number in the collection. There are no general indexes.

Margret Jaschke and Robert Stähle are professional binders, with practical experience, even though both have been teachers of the art; Stähle is also a major university professor in book arts. The amount of practical knowledge they bring together on the execution of Armenian metal bindings, with all elements carefully defined and illustrated, often with a series of detailed photos of each fastener, clasp, or other form of protection, serves to make this minute inspection of precious bindings a virtual handbook. In this respect it will become an indispensable guide, a must-have for any manuscript scholar, repository, or fine book collector.

This virtuoso compilation does not, however, present the artistic aspect of these covers. Of course simply turning the pages of this lavishly illustrated, full-colour volume, offers even the uninitiated a remarkable repertory of Ar-

menian metal art, whether in the repoussée work of many of the covers, the engraving on others, the clearly hand-fashioned crosses, the fine filigree designs, sometimes used on both covers and spine, often photographed when they were removed for restoration. One is confronted throughout with non-repetitive artistic details—from elaborate, often inscribed, frames around the central icon-like motif to inlays, sculpted relief, sometimes in very high relief.

The Gospel book serves as the most cherished text of the Christian religion and thus was the most elaborately decorated. Virtually all of the 5,000 or so surviving Armenian examples are illustrated. It is easy to understand why the Four Gospels were also physically the most beautiful manuscripts, not just because of their content, but also because they were, along with the Missal, the most used during the liturgy. They were displayed on the altar and held up to the faithful during and after service, and usually made available afterwards to be kissed. Precious metal bindings are rarely, if ever, found on other texts of the church such as Psalters, ritual books, missals, or hymnals.

Since the Gospels are devoted to the life of Christ from the Nativity to Crucifixion and Resurrection, the decoration reflects their usage. A Crucifixion on the upper cover is almost universal; the lower cover often depicts the Resurrection in some form, for example the empty Sepulchre, but also the Incarnation with Mother and Child, and a variety of other less frequent subjects. Many of the metal bindings illustrated in the volume contain a Crucifixion—usually represented by a braided cross on a stepped pedestal representing Calvary—on the front cover. This tradition is a continuation of one established much earlier in the first millennium on the usual leather bindings of codices. The Resurrection on the lower cover almost never has Christ visibly rising from the tomb, a late borrowing from Europe in the Armenian tradition. It was mostly the empty tomb, represented by a rectangle dominating the entire field, indicating the removed stone slab that closed the cave of Joseph of Arimathea. The authors have included a few of these leather bindings: e.g. MSS M187, p. 26; M1336, p. 30; M5194, p. 44, M6386, p. 68.¹ As with the majority of manuscripts with metal bindings, the original leather one was decorated before the addition of metal plaques.

The study contains a wealth of information on Armenian manuscript bindings, but it is mostly through visual inspection. The authors, as has been noted above, do not discuss decoration or the long history of Armenian leather

1 A discussion can be found in D. Kouymjian, ‘Armenian Bookbinding from Manuscript to Printed Book (16th–19th cent.)’, *Gazette du livre médiéval*, 49 (Autumn, 2006), 1–14; idem, ‘The Decoration of Medieval Armenian Manuscript Bindings’, in G. Lanoë, ed., *La reliure médiévale: pour une description normalisée. Actes du colloque international (Paris, 22–24 mai 2003) organisé par l’Institut de recherche et d’histoire des textes (CNRS)* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), 209–218.

covers. Their concern is with the hardware, so to speak, of the metal overbinding. Even though Armenian silver manuscript bindings have been discussed in miscellaneous articles or notices in the catalogues of major art exhibits that included Armenian manuscripts, there is nothing available with the wealth of visual and descriptive information as is supplied here by the coauthors. Their exacting analysis of the techniques employed will be the indispensable starting point and reference tool for future scholarship.

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