

Armenian Crafts in the Ottoman Empire:  
Cultural Exchange and Armenian Identity

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements of the  
University Honors Program  
University of South Florida, St. Petersburg

December 10, 2015

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## Abstract

Current studies on Armenian identity trace Armenian identity to specific historical events, such as the adoption of Christianity and the creation of the Armenian alphabet. These studies, and the importance they place on Armenian independence, ignore the experience of people who lived under foreign domination, yet still considered themselves to be Armenian, such as those living in the Ottoman Empire. The millet system of the Ottoman Empire sorted Armenians into a distinct group, much like current researchers' conceptions of Armenian identity as essential. This thesis argues that crafts produced and reproduced identity for Armenians within the *millet* system. The genocide of 1915 greatly determined the way scholars perceived the entire period of Ottoman control over Armenians, namely as one of conflict. There were numerous examples of collaboration between Ottoman Turks and Armenians. Crafts serve as a physical memory of Armenian identity that was constantly being redefined. Material culture, such as metal work, *khatchkars*, and textiles, will be analyzed to demonstrate that Armenian identity could coexist, influence, and be inspired by Ottoman culture, countering the narrative of an essentialist Armenian identity. The causes and political implications of the current narrative of conflict will be discussed as well as the role crafts play in Armenian society today, and could theoretically play in the future.

## Chapter I: Introduction

### *I. Defining Identity*

The National Museum of History is an impressive building in Republic Square in Yerevan, the capital of Armenia. The museum “presents the rare traces of cultural interrelations with the ancient eastern countries in the Armenian Highland: Egypt, Mitany, the Hittite kingdom, Assyria, Iran, the Seleucid state, Rome and the Byzantine Empire,” as proudly stated on the museum website (Museum History). Cultural interrelations with the Ottoman Empire, however, are absent. Many of the exhibits focus on pre-Christian Armenia in the Paleolithic and Bronze ages. There are multiple exhibits with displays that fall within the Ottoman period, especially those on the Armenian Genocide. However, little or no mention is made of the Ottoman Empire and the role of Armenians within it, apart from violent Ottoman-Armenian encounters. Exhibits use the term “Western Armenia” rather than specifying that there were Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. This term prevents geographical identification and analysis of complex social realities.

The National Museum of Armenian Ethnography is a beautifully constructed building in the province of Armavir, less than an hour from Yerevan. The museum has a large collection of Armenian handicrafts on display. The plaque outside the door reads: Memorial Complex of Sardarapat Battle, and in smaller font: National Museum of Armenian Ethnography and “History of Liberation Struggle. The memorial commemorating the Armenian victory over an invading Ottoman army in 1918 is just a short walk from the museum, past the row of eagles symbolizing the spirit of Armenia and a Wall of Glory and Victory. A large central hall houses an exhibit



related to the 1918 victory, while the rest of the museum has displays on food, clothing, metal work, carpets, and other handicrafts. Many of the crafts date to the Ottoman Empire, but there is little mention of the Ottoman Empire except in the chamber dedicated to their defeat at the hands of Armenians during the Battle of Sardarapat in 1918. At this site Armenia's independence is tied to a battle against Ottoman Turks, "according to the Armenian national narrative this was a struggle for the physical survival of the Armenian people" (Zolyan 787). A similar perspective is portrayed by the Genocide Museum. Early on in the exhibition, the "Ottoman culture of violence" is cited as a cause for the genocide. By calling violence intrinsic to Ottoman culture, centuries of coexistence and cultural exchange are ignored. This might be expected in a museum of this type, built on an unprecedented national tragedy, but it does present a history that does not reconcile the position of the Armenian *millet* as a protected people within the Ottoman Empire for centuries.

Before Armenians gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, their homeland comprised and shifted between much of what is present day eastern Turkey, northeastern Iran, sections of Azerbaijan and Georgia, and the modern day Republic of Armenia. Its location made it the corridor between Asia and Europe, attracting both invaders and lucrative trade (Bournoutian 7). While the traditional myths about the origins of the Armenian people are often biblical, scholars have two interpretations of the arrival of Armenians to the territory. The first is that they were an Indo-European group originating from either the Aral Sea region or the Balkans, the second is that they were the original inhabitants of the region (Bournoutian 17). Archeological finds dating back to the Late Bronze Age support the theory that Armenians were early inhabitants of the region (Smith 549). After their conversion to Christianity in 301 AD, Armenians knew very few periods of independence; such as between 301 and 428, and 884 and

1045. From 1460 to 1918, Armenia was a possession of the Ottoman Empire. After a brief period of independence followed by Soviet control, Armenia achieved independence in 1991, becoming the modern Armenian state. Among the challenges to the new republic, the preservation and assertion of Armenian culture was very important.

For the scope of this research, Armenian refers to the members of the Armenian *millet*. This is not intended to marginalize Armenians absent from the Ottoman Empire, or to consent to its limitations, but to highlight the experiences and identity of a particular group of Armenians. Though other minorities, such as Greeks and Jews, were part of the Empire, this thesis analyzes the relationship between Armenians and Ottoman Turks. The term Ottoman or Ottoman Turk refers to ethnically Turkish individuals who occupied the dominant position in the ethnic hierarchy.

There are numerous accounts of the origins of Armenian identity, largely based on interpretations of Armenian history and culture. George Bournoutian, an academic who focuses on Armenian history, states that “the establishment of Christianity and the development of the Armenian alphabet” were the major forces that first united the Armenian people (45). Theo Maarten van Lint makes a similar claim about the importance of religion, but traces the formation of Armenian identity to the first millennium in a series of three phases, first the Urartian period from about 1200 BCE to the conquest of the Armenian plateau by the Achaemenids which contributed to ideas of Armenian as an ethnic category; second the Zoroastrian phase which unified Armenia and led to Greek and Iranian cultural exchanges; and third the significant role of the church under Catholicos Yovhannes Ojnec’I, which distinguished Armenians from their Greek and Iranian neighbors (251). Authors Mikayel Zolyan and Tigran Zakaryan cite the re-imagination of the Armenian nation after independence, the narrative that

was based on certain historical events, such as the adoption of Christianity and the creation of the Armenian alphabet, became one based on “the opposition of a (mostly positive) self-image- a people struggling for national independence, and a (mostly negative) image of “the Other”- an alien empire that tries to subjugate the nation,” especially with regards to the Ottoman Empire and the genocide of 1915 (785). Taken together, the sources of Armenian identity according to these authors are certain periods of Armenian history such as the creation of the Armenian alphabet, the adoption of Christianity, and the struggle for freedom from foreign domination, manifested in the Armenian genocide. It is this emphasis on the ancient roots of Armenian identity that is at display in the National Museum of History in Yerevan.

Though these factors do have great historical and cultural significance, claiming them as defining periods of Armenian identity is inherently limiting. Armenian identity rooted in sovereignty discounts the experience of Armenians who lived their entire lives under foreign domination. Nor did the Armenian people come into existence when Christianity was adopted. The Armenian people walking the streets today of Yerevan are not the citizens of Cilicia, the Braguntuni kingdoms, or Urartu. Armenians who lived before the genocide, such as those living in the Byzantine or Ottoman Empires, challenge this definition. Thus, theories that periodize Armenian identity in specific historical developments do not to serve many groups of people who were known, to others and themselves, as Armenians.

Religion, language, and historical events all contribute to identity, but a concrete definition of ‘Armenianness’ remains elusive. Not only is identity itself abstract, but conceptions of what it meant to be Armenian changed over time and geographical location. Eric Dursteler, a scholar who has studied the Venetian community in Constantinople, has argued that conceptions of nation are fluid, and explains nation not by its modern definition, but as a dynamic group of

people (11). Considering oneself part of a nation is a form of self-identification. If nation is not defined by religion, language, and certain historical events, as Dursteler suggests, then identity, though shaped by these characteristics, also does not have to meet these standards (13). Benedict Anderson, for example, has made the argument that nations are socially constructed, or imagined, largely based on the printing and standardization of vernaculars (53). Stuart Hall describes identity as a “‘production’ which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” that exists within a certain “position,” or historical context (222). Hall points to two contrasting interpretations of identity, which reflect current conceptions of Armenian identity and the perspective argued in this thesis. The first is as a “shared culture, a sort of collective ‘one true self’...[which] reflects the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as ‘one people,’ with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history” (Hall 223). The second involved the “continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power,” therefore “identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past” (Hall 223).

Dursteler’s idea of fluid identity, though based on the Venetians in Constantinople, also applies to the Armenians in Constantinople. Armenians did have a common religion and language, but their position changed dramatically when power over their territory shifted. The laws by which they were governed, the people who they were surrounded by, and the cultures they experienced differed depending on the state of which they were a part of. These distinct contexts undeniably had an effect on the ways in which Armenians conceived of themselves. With regard to Anderson’s model, it is questionable whether the importance of printing applied to the Armenian case. The significance of the Armenian alphabet in cementing Armenian



identity is doubtful because as late as 1921, “seventy-three per cent of the population of Armenia was illiterate” (Wilcox 221). However, Anderson’s conception of nation as socially constructed is widely applicable, including to the Armenian case. The members of Armenian communities in the Ottoman Empire separated from other Armenian communities would “never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson 49). Ties between Eastern and Western Armenia, which were controlled by different powers and kept separate, demonstrate this imagined community.

The *millet* system and current conceptions of Armenian identity rigidly distinguish Armenians from other groups. These interpretations follow Hall’s first definition of identity as “stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning” (Hall 223). This definition is not satisfactory to capture the dynamic complexities of Armenian identity throughout history and craft art. Therefore, the second definition of identity that Hall adopts provides the framework that underlies this research. Armenian identity is a “continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power,” something that expanded, developed, and shifted. Cultural exchanges between Armenians and Ottoman Turks demonstrate an Armenian identity unexplored by current presentation of crafts in Armenian museums and undefined by current theories of Armenian identity.

## *II. Cultural Exchange and Identity in Crafts*

As defined by Hop Irvine in *The Art of Crafts*, “a craft reflects the influence of the tradition to which it relates, a considered use of materials employed with a degree of skill and concern for the function of the object, and traditional or personal aesthetic judgements as evidenced in the creative individual interpretation of the object by the



*Khatchkar* dating to XII-XIII centuries, Azarian 28

artisan” (46). For example, the Armenian *khatchkar*, or cross stone, reflects Armenian Christian tradition. It requires a certain skill and artistry in carving, and serves a certain purpose, often as a commemorative marker or gravestone. Other important Armenian products, such as textiles, ceramics, and silver, require the intersection of skill, tradition, and function during their production and therefore can be considered crafts under this definition. Variation among crafts made by Armenians demonstrates the breadth of their traditions and techniques.

Cultural exchange can take a variety of forms.

Music, art and literature can be exchanged between different cultures. Shared techniques, motifs, and script in crafts also manifest cultural exchange. Ottoman artisans using Armenian carving techniques and Armenians using Arabic script on ceramics are both examples of cultural exchange. Crafts are important indicators of identity because they are a direct expression of the people who make them. Crafts, like identity as defined by Hall, are constantly changing through production and reproduction.

As a whole, they represent the culture of their

communities of origin. Individually, crafts provide a snapshot of the identity of the person who made them, within a given time and geographical location. Considering their nature, crafts provide an insight into the minds of individuals. Their hands paint, weave, and carve in ways that the artisan deems culturally appropriate. Unlike the rigid identity imposed by states from the top down, crafts are made at the base of society and represent popular culture. State symbols, such as those in the photographs above, could reflect pressure exerted by the state or Ottoman patrons on



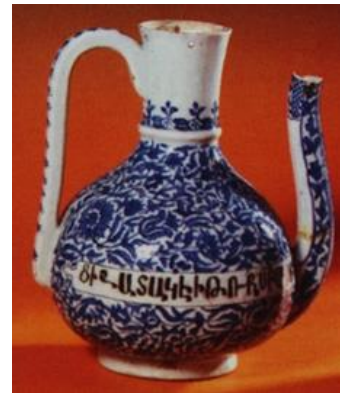
Tobacco box featuring the Ottoman coat of arms, Tokat 145



Tobacco box featuring Soviet Armenian state symbols, Tokat 51

Armenian artisans. Though these symbols may have been introduced into Armenian craft tradition by a socially dominant group, these crafts expanded the definition of identity for Armenians living in the Ottoman Empire to include Ottoman symbols. They served a daily function, exhibiting their hold on the identity of the individuals at the time. These symbols do not fall within Armenian identity as defined by current theories, but they were made by Armenian artisans based on the personal, rather than traditional, judgement of the maker.

The importance of cultural exchange in identity begs the question, why do Armenian museums and accounts of Armenian identity lack mention of cultural exchanges during the Ottoman period, which was long and particularly influential in the eventual founding of the Armenian state? This thesis explores the Ottoman period because of its crucial influence in current conceptions of Armenian identity. The relationship this thesis explores rests on collaboration rather than conflict. Though the Armenian Genocide features prominently in current narratives of Armenian identity, it should not characterize the entire Ottoman period and justify its exclusion in theories of identity and their presentation in museums. The portrayal of Armenian as “distinct” through museum exhibitions overlooks the subtleties of identity, as well as the unavoidable influence that living for centuries with a people of another culture will have on identity formation. The portrayal of Armenian culture as consistently distinct from others is both erroneous and detrimental to a deeper understanding of Armenian identity and the relation of the Armenian people to their neighbors. Armenian crafts of the Ottoman Empire reflect the fluid nature of Armenian identity.



Porcelain jug, Kutahya, 19<sup>th</sup> century, St. James Cathedral, Jerusalem, Tokat 19

### *III. Outline of Project*

This thesis uses both historical data and samples of craft art to analyze the ways in which Armenian identity adapted to Ottoman culture. The second chapter explores Armenians' position in the Ottoman Empire through the Armenian *millet* system. The third chapter presents an analysis of Armenian crafts. Examples of crafts will be compared and contrasted to Ottoman art to elucidate the effects the two cultures had on each other. The fourth chapter details the current presentation of crafts in Armenia today, the reasons for such presentation, as well as the possible benefits craft analysis could have on present-day relations between Armenia and Turkey.

## Chapter 2: Armenian People in the Ottoman Empire

### *I. The Armenian Millet*

When the Ottomans conquered Armenian lands in Anatolia in the fifteenth century, Armenians became subjects of the Ottoman State. Between 1460 and 1856, the Ottomans redefined Armenian identity through the *millet* system, which organized people into groups based on religion (Bournoutian 189). The *millet* system was especially important in Constantinople, where each *millet* was designated their own corner of the city, separating them from other *millets* as well as Ottoman Turks (Bournoutian 189). Much like the *dhimmi* status of Christians and Jews during Arab rule, *millet* status brought both responsibilities and privileges. Members of the community were *reaya*, or “tribute-paying subjects,” required to pay a poll tax known as the *jizya* (Bournoutian 191). It is debated whether the *millets* were accepted or merely tolerated and the exchange of paying taxes for protection has been compared to racketeering (Balakian 40). In addition, the situation for peasants in the countryside was significantly different from those living in urban centers such as Constantinople. Institutional differences, such as tax collection methods, could impact the status of minorities. In order to lessen the administration required to levy taxes, for example, the right to collect was sold to local elites who were unaccountable for the methods or fairness of collection. (Balakian 41). While not immune to extortion and violence, the societal position of the *millet* offered protection from forced integration and conversion. The *millet* system also allowed minority communities to govern themselves in a semi-autonomous way. More importantly, the *millet* defined the Armenian people as a single unified community according to their religious, ethnic, and linguistic features. Ironically, the Ottoman imposed Armenian identity rests on the same principles as imagined by scholars such as Bournoutian and Lint. This essentialist narrative does not account for pluralism

within the millet, such as the presence of Catholic Armenians, or the changes made, like the adoption of Ottoman clothing, within the *millet* throughout its existence.

Religion, the defining characteristic of the *millet*, did not remain free of Ottoman control either. While a portion of Armenian territory was under Ottoman control as early as 1460, during the reign of Mehmed II in the late fifteenth century, the Holy See of Echmiadzin would remain unconquered until the first quarter of the sixteenth century (Balakian 189). Mehmet II, in order to reduce the centralized power of the Armenian Church that lay outside his grasp, recognized the authority of bishops as religious leaders in areas primarily populated by Armenians. This included the establishment of the office of the Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople who was approved by the Sultan and exercised full authority over the Armenian *millet* (Balakian 190-1). The head of the Church for Armenians in the Ottoman Empire was now no longer Echmiadzin, but the Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople. Despite such a dramatic change in religious leadership imposed upon by the state, the Armenian Church continued to be the institution central to Armenian faith and identity. Armenians separated by geography were now separated by religious administration, but both groups continued to identify as Armenian

Ottoman laws affected the faith and fashion of *millet* minorities. Maintaining traditional clothing of minorities was meant to keep them distinct, especially within the capital city. The clothing laws of both Sultan Osman III, 1754-57, and Mustafa III, 1757-74, specifically targeted minorities as a way to demonstrate power, especially in times of uncertainty (Quataert 408). Sixteenth century laws required Armenians to wear certain colors and materials, such as “skirts of a particular Bursa fabric dyed blue, black or navy” while preventing them from wearing yellow, which was reserved for Muslims (Faroqhi 25). Thus, traditional costumes of the Armenian people were not only prescribed by their own communities, but also influenced by

state power and conceptions of what was appropriate Armenian clothing.

Dress codes made a political statement. Minorities in the Empire were restricted to certain articles, but certain items, such as the fez, were allowed, if not expected. In 1829 Sultan Mahmud II “ordered his bureaucrats to wear a plain fez” and “prescribed in painstaking detail the clothing...for each rank” in order to preserve grandeur but limit spending (Quataert 412). The policy had political motivations, “it was a leveling device that symbolically restructured the Ottoman state on a completely new footing—one that was no longer religious in its distinctions but nonreligious in its uniformity... Wearing the fez, all civil officials would not only appear equal before the sultan; they would also look the same to one another” (Quataert 413). Mahmud II expected the changes in civil dress to extend to the populace at large, including the *millets* (Quataert 412). Clothing laws such as this demonstrate that minority groups could attain greater social mobility by wearing the clothing of the dominant ethnic group. Non-Muslim merchants used clothing typically worn by Muslims because it allowed them to enter government positions and differentiate “themselves from ordinary people of all faiths” (Quataert 414). A photograph from 1898 shows Armenian cloth makers, members of a wealthy merchant class, wearing the fez (Quataert 416). Adoption of a Turkish article of clothing enabled Armenians to demonstrate their wealth in a public manner; it served as a tool for negotiating power and a daily ritual within their community.



Photograph from 1898 of Armenian *esnafs*, or cloth makers, wearing the fez, Quataert 416

Though they were a minority group, many Armenians were able to rise to important economic and political positions. One such group was known as the *amiras*, an organization of

Armenian bankers who emerged in the eighteenth century. *Amiras* were granted privileges, such as wearing restricted Ottoman clothing and riding horses. Many *amiras* achieved important administrative positions such as director of the imperial mint and chief imperial architect, and managed to maintain great influence over the Armenian *millet* (Bournoutian 192). Many Armenians owned businesses that were popular regardless of ethnicity. Tokatlian's Restaurant and Hotel in Constantinople, Armenian owned, was recommended by a British lieutenant-colonel to European travelers for its atmosphere and food that "a well-to-do Turk eats," and was a popular hotel and restaurant for both locals and foreign dignitaries (Davis 361).

Though Armenian communities shifted between Empires, they remained connected. A significant example was the town of Julfa that though subject to deportation and conquest, at different points in time, became a hub of Armenian trade in both the Ottoman and Persian Empires. Julfa, on the border of Iran, has a significant merchant population known for their trade in silk. Before this town was conquered by Persia in the seventeenth century, it was a possession of the Ottoman Empire. Armenians trading with Persia had been considered Ottoman merchants for legislative purposes, taking advantage of the privilege granted in the capitulations to Ottoman subjects (McCabe 63). After inclusion into the Persian Empire, Armenians were forcibly relocated in 1604 by Shah 'Abbas, some to the capital of Isfahan, others to the newly established city of New Julfa (Bournoutian 210-11). Armenian merchants in Iran grew into a powerful group which became prosperous as a result of special privileges such as possessing a monopoly on silk trade (Bournoutian 210-11). Though the Armenians of New Julfa were removed from the Ottoman Empire, they maintained ties with Ottoman Armenians by supporting cultural centers such as schools and churches. Some Julfan Armenians returned to Armenia under Ottoman control and contributed to *zartonk*, or Armenian cultural revival, which began in the early 1800s



and lasted until the Armenian Genocide (Bournoutian 212).

The *tanzimat*, or reform, period, began in 1839 when Sultan Abdul Mejid I issued the *Hatt-i Sherif-i Gulhane*. This edict espoused values such as life, liberty, and property, and promised equality for the minorities in the Empire, including the Armenians. (Bournoutian 199). Reforms launched by the edict included the promise of equal opportunity, justice, taxation, military service, education, and government appointments (Balakian 37). Though these reforms were important, they were enacted by the sultan and could be rescinded at any time (Bournoutian 199). The edict gave Armenians greater representation in the court system and more effective avenues toward justice. Though the edict benefitted minorities, it also served a political purpose. Russia often intervened in Ottoman affairs on the basis of their harsh treatment of Slavic minorities, with which they had cultural and ethnic ties. The *Hatt-i Sherif-i Gulhane* effectively ended this justification by guaranteeing equality. However, European powers expected more. In 1856, the Treaty of Paris concluded the Crimean War, which began in 1853. The *Hatt-i Humayan*, another edict of the Sultan, “guaranteed Christian subjects security of life, honor, and property and abolished the poll tax” (Bournoutian 200). The *Hatt-i Humayan* was another attempt to curb Russian intervention as well as improve relations with European powers. However, both reforms did not respond to the Armenian desire for greater freedom within the Ottoman system, despite the fact that the reforms applied largely to urban areas, leaving little changed in the provinces.

## *II. The Armenian Genocide*

Though Armenians were legally second class citizens with less rights and privileges than their Turkish counterparts, Armenians did not rebel against the Empire and were considered a loyal *millet* for much of their time in the Ottoman Empire until the early 1900s (Bournoutian

204). During the *tanzimat* period, the Armenian *millet* drafted, approved and submitted the Armenian National Constitution to the Porte, which was approved of and integrated into Ottoman law in 1863 (Bournoutian 205). The constitution laid out the rights and responsibilities of the community and established a place in the national council of Armenians throughout the Empire (Bournoutian 205). While the text of the constitution and the reality did not always match, the document itself emphasized that Armenian's priority at that time was not independence, but equal and just treatment. Despite the promises of *tanzimat* reform, the previously hopeful situation of the Armenians began to turn bleak. Sultan Abdulhamid II's massacre of Bulgarians in 1876 who tried to rebel earned him the title of "Bloody Sultan" and instigated the Russo-Turkish War. After Russian victory, Armenian elites took advantage of international treaties to express their desire for more rights. During the negotiation of the Treaty of San Stefano, that ended the last Russo-Turkish war in 1878, an Armenian delegation demanded the inclusion of "the future of the western Armenians" in the negotiations. The resulting treaty, signed on March 3, 1878, allowed Russian troops to remain in Armenian provinces until the Ottoman government enacted reforms and protected them from Kurdish and Circassian raids in article 16 (Bournoutian 264). However, Abdulhamid II appealed to the British for aid. The British denounced the treaty and called for renegotiations, fearing the expansion of Russian influence. This time, the Armenians sent a delegation, headed by the former patriarch of Constantinople, Khrimian, to visit Europe. The delegates requested local rule, civil courts, and a mixed police force for their community (Bournoutian 264). The delegation was largely ignored and article 16 of the Treaty of San Stefano was reversed, leaving Armenians in a precarious position with the adoption of the Treaty of Berlin in July of 1878 (Bournoutian 264).

Armenian political parties emerged to improve the situation of Armenians in the Empire.

Despite the *tanzimat* reforms and the adoption of the Armenian National Constitution, three major Armenian political parties believed that independence was necessary. In 1885, the Armenakan Party was founded. At first a secret society, the party worked toward greater security of Armenians and the possibility of self-rule, trusting that they would receive aid from European powers (Balakian 45). Founded only two years later, the Hunchak party strived for an independent socialist Armenia. (Balakian 45). In 1890, the Dashnaktsutiun (Armenian Revolutionary Federation) emerged. The Dashnaktsutiun supported the idea of an armed nationalist revolution (Balakian 45). In response to growing cries for Armenian autonomy and the fragility of the Ottoman Empire, Abdulhamid II persecuted the Armenian minority. Believing that the growing parties were a threat to his regime, Abdulhamid II appointed anti-Armenian officials to Armenian provinces (Balakian 55). He also formed the *Hamidiye*, a military regiment loyal only to the sultan, to carry out systematic attacks against Armenians (Bournoutian 266). Over 200,000 Armenians were killed from 1894 to 1896 (Bournoutian 269). The Young Turk movement was also growing during this period, with cooperation from the Armenians. However, after ousting, Abdulhamid II, the leadership of the young Turks changed, and their previously tolerant platform was replaced with pan-Turkism, racism and militant nationalism (Bournoutian 271). Enver Pasha, minister of War, Talaat Pasha, Minister of Interior, and Jemal Pasha, Military-Governor of Constantinople rose to power on January 23, 1913 (Bournoutian 271). When World War I broke out, the Ottoman Empire entered the war on the side of Germany, and after a series of losses in Transcaucasia and Iranian Azerbaijan from 1914-1915, Armenians became a scapegoat (Bournoutian 273). Armenian soldiers were disarmed and removed from positions of power (Bournoutian 273). As of April 24, 1915, the Ottoman state began to actively deport and kill Armenians.

The Armenian Genocide was both a tragic loss of life and a trial for the Armenian people. The massacres from 1894 to 1896 that resulted in over 200,000 deaths and the genocide of 1915 ended the lives of over one million people, which greatly decimated the Armenian population, an approximate 48% (Ferllini 4). The state-sponsored elimination of the Armenian people was a devastating loss, in terms of life, land and culture. The genocide marked a significant change in the political consciousness of the Armenian population. It strengthened Armenian resolve to assert the need for an independent Armenia as well as to seek retribution for the tragedy of the genocide.

The destruction of a people entails the destruction of their culture. This was of course intentional. The solution to the ‘Armenian Question’ was the avenue towards “political and economic independence for Turks as an ethnic-national group” and an ethnically Turkish state (Bloxham 188). Although half the entire Armenian population survived, it lost its social, human, and physical capital. Well entrenched communities were uprooted and displaced, if not extinguished altogether. In addition to these losses, the Armenian Genocide caused dramatic material loss. The state actively took land that was left behind by deported Armenians and encouraged the confiscation of their possessions by Muslims (Balakian 189). In an investigation of a mass grave near what was a concentration camp at Ras al-Ain, bodies lacked any personal objects, suggesting that deportees were stripped of their valuables (Ferllini 10). Individuals who did have personal belongings used what they had to survive, either by buying protection or seeking better living conditions, further depleting individual resources (Ferllini 6). Without material wealth many Armenian refugees were destitute. The techniques and skills used to create crafts became increasingly important. Deportees who were skilled in crafts could work for an income, something that made a large difference when they were lacking both material and

personal security (Ferllini 7). These crafts capture the identity of genocide survivors and served as a means of survival.

Although the genocide was addressing the “Armenian Question,” many women and children were spared death and were instead abducted and placed in Muslim homes to be integrated into Ottoman society. Abduction was not only lucrative, but a tactic of war. Because abduction reinforces hierarchies of power, it was used as a tool to further destroy Armenian families, communities, and culture (Ekmekcioglu 532). The genocide allowed for “near-free access to females and minors,” meaning that abduction of Armenian refugees had no consequence and was in fact supported by the state (Ekmekcioglu 526). On April 30, 1916, a memorandum between Interior Minister Talaat Pasha and Minister of War Enver Pasha described policies that aimed at integrating women and children into Ottoman for the purpose of converting them to Islam (Ekmekcioglu 527). Abduction did not include men who were thought to pass on ‘Armenianness’ due to patrilineal tradition (Ekmekcioglu 530). Thus, about “5 to 10 per cent of the Ottoman Armenians,” mostly women and children, were kidnapped and forced to convert (Bloxham 142).

The process of their integration is enlightening to understand what the Ottoman government considered core aspects of Armenian culture. It also caused a dramatic shift in the Armenian community’s defining characteristics. Assimilation began with conversion and prohibited use of Armenian and contact with other Armenian converts (Ekmekcioglu 528-9). ‘Armenianness,’ as understood by the Ottoman state was again reduced to particular characteristics such as religion, language, name, and connection to other Armenians (Ekmekcioglu 530). After the genocide, Armenians worked to liberate children and women who had been abducted in a campaign called the *vorpahavak*, or “the gathering of orphans” in

Armenian. (Ekmekcioglu 534). This campaign was in tandem with a nationalist campaign, called “National Rebirth,” designed to increase the population of Armenia and therefore exert more pressure on foreign powers for a large independent Armenian state (Ekmekcioglu 544). Before this campaign, the Armenian identity of children born from Muslim fathers was called into question. However, the campaign caused “inclusion in the national collectivity by making room for one group that would otherwise have been excluded— babies of Muslim fatherhood” (Ekmekcioglu 544). Though this inclusion was for political reasons, it does illustrate how ideas once held to be essential in Armenian identity, such as having a Christian Armenian father, could drastically change during even a short period because of political and social realities.

Another effect of the Armenian genocide on the population was a major geographical shift. Thousands of Armenians fled the Ottoman Empire with their families and the few possessions they could carry. Many existing diaspora communities absorbed these refugees, and new diaspora communities arose in countries such as Canada and Australia (Bournoutian 356-9). The Ottoman Empire was no longer the territory with the majority of the Armenian population. That title was inherited by the Armenian controlled provinces of Russia. The Armenians now had a sizable portion of their population living outside their traditional homeland. This would change conceptions of “Armenianness” and make ties to a traditional homeland a questionable category for Armenian identity.

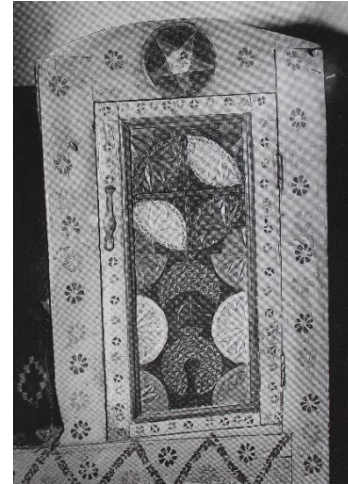
After World War I, the Treaty of Sèvres described the terms of Ottoman surrender. Section VI, articles 88-93 dealt with what was to become of Armenia (Balakian 325). Turkey had to recognize Armenia as an independent state as well as agree to the borders defined in the treaty by President Woodrow Wilson. However, Mustafa Kemal, a Turkish military commander, was opposed to the treaty as well as Greek occupation of previously Ottoman territory (Balakian

325). His supporters, the Kemalists, sent a delegation to the Soviet Union, making a pact that any treaty not recognized by Turkey would not be recognized by the Soviet Union (Bournoutian 312). The Turkish army attacked Armenia in 1920, leaving Armenians with the choice to submit to Turkey's demands or become part of the Soviet Union (Bournoutian 312). Kemalists, negotiating with western powers from a position of power after victory in the Greco-Turkish War, refused to recognize Sèvres or any discussion of Armenian statehood. (Balakian 369). Nationalist ambitions were dashed when the promises made under the Treaty of Sèvres were broken when the Treaty of Lausanne was ratified in 1923. Armenia lost both the territory it was promised, as well as its independence for the next 70 years.

## Chapter 3: Crafting Identity

### *I. Introduction*

Though Crafts, much like identity, are thought of as unchanging, they can also change dynamically based on their surroundings. For example, artisans produced crafts during Soviet rule which featured Soviet symbols not previously present on Armenian works. A traditional cupboard, called the *ukyalti*, made in 1939 bears a hammer and sickle (Abrahamian 106). New elements were thus incorporated into well-established patterns



*Ukyalti*, 1939, Abrahamian 106

with little or no precedent using the same carving techniques. Though Soviet symbols did not become an entrenched motif, they do demonstrate the ability of individual artisans to incorporate foreign ideas.

If iconography of the ruling elite was carved into the furniture of Armenian subjects during the Soviet period, is the same true for the Ottoman period? Armenians have influenced other cultures, and they have adapted the styles of the cultural milieu in which they found themselves. The *Exhibition Catalogue of Turkish Art of the Ottoman Period*, published by the Smithsonian Institute and the Cultural Affairs Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey in 1973, displays crafts from the Ottoman period. The author argues “there has been unnecessary debate on the origin of artists who executed early Ottoman tiles and pottery...The Ottoman world was attracting great quantities of people escaping from the unrest in the East and, due to the expansion of the empire, various ethnic groups were being assimilated into the system” (Atil 24). The claim that minorities were assimilated bears some weight, since they were subjects of the Ottoman Empire. The author elaborates, “Ethnic origin was of no consequence as



all who lived within the Ottoman Empire were given the chance to be an Ottoman” (Atıl 28). However, being an Ottoman subject did not sever the bonds of ethnic groups, especially considering the effort exerted by the state to keep these groups from integrating by imposing the *millet* system. Stating that all Ottoman subjects were in fact Ottoman and therefore claiming that the origin of these people did not matter obscures the complex collaboration between minorities and Ottoman Turks. Turkish and Armenian people interacted in social, business, and political spheres. Turkish people dined at Armenian establishments, enjoying the cuisine and culture of a different ethnic group (Davis 361). Armenian artisans incorporated foreign patterns, often for Ottoman clients. Though they were relegated to a *millet*, they were a respected merchant class. Armenian merchants played a substantial role in the textile trade as intermediaries between the West and Safavid Iran (Quataert 408). Their skills in producing various crafts were admired not just within the community, but by other groups as well. Emphasizing difference is not meant to claim credit for artistic achievements or to emphasize the independence of each group, but to demonstrate the ways in which Armenians and Ottoman Turks interacted through material culture. Without accepting ethnic and social differences within the Ottoman Empire, there can be no analysis of the advantages of such diversity.

Linkages do not occur in a vacuum. Ottomans influenced Armenian crafts through both commissioned work and general inspiration. Empires spanned vast territories and cultures, creating a diverse pool of artistic, musical and literary works to draw inspiration from. *Millets* kept groups politically distinct while cultural and commercial realities brought groups together. There have been few documented examples of Armenian motifs and techniques that contributed to Ottoman culture, possibly due to the view explored above that all crafts, regardless of the

ethnicity of the artisan, were Ottoman crafts. These linkages remain important and worth exploring.

This chapter will highlight cultural exchanges between Ottoman Turks and Armenians in multiple crafts including the *khachkar*, rugs, ceramics, metalworking, and textiles. Currently, culturally distinct crafts are displayed and praised as distinctly Armenian



Kutahya pottery, 18<sup>th</sup> century, Abrahamian 119

crafts, such as the unique style developed in Kutahya, a village in present day western Turkey, in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century (Abrahamian 119). Essentialist definitions of Armenian identity, which align with Hall's first definition and aim to distinguish Armenian identity from that of other cultures, prevent analysis and celebration of collaborative crafts. However, claims of ownership of specific crafts, patterns, and techniques begin to blur as cultural exchanges are elucidated. Cultural exchanges expand Armenian identity to include not only those who are Christian, speak Armenian, and were affected by the genocide, but all people who self-identify as Armenian. Crafts demonstrate Hall's second definition of identity because they demonstrate the variety within Armenian identity caused cultural interaction (Hall 223). Linkages between these art forms clarify historical relationships and the value of positive cultural interactions. Armenian motifs on mosques and Arabic lettering on Armenian plates, as well as other examples to be explored in this chapter, reveal a creative bond between Armenian and Turkish culture, which was important to Armenian identity and is currently unrecognized, underappreciated, and underutilized.

## II. The Khatchkar

The combination of the rich crafting tradition of Armenia with strong religious beliefs manifests itself in the *khatchkar*, or cross-stone. There is a broad spectrum of sizes and patterning of *khatchkars*, but they all have the common central element of a cross, typically over a round symbol for eternity, with detailed vegetal carving on the stone. They are found in large quantities near churches and in monastic compounds, but they also appear in cemeteries, by springs, and at cross roads (Abrahamian 60).

The *khatchkar* originated when Christianity spread to the newly converted area in the 4<sup>th</sup> century (Abrahamian 60). King Trdat

ordered pagan temples and symbols destroyed and replaced by crosses (Abrahamian 60). At first, the new monuments to Christianity were stone carvings with four sides depicting biblical stories (Abrahamian 60). By the 7<sup>th</sup> century, the stone had evolved to a flat rectangular rock carved on one side to depict a cross with vegetal patterning, resurrecting both biblical symbolism of the Garden of Eden as well as reflecting the cultural significance of agricultural life (Abrahamian 60). In 2010, the Armenian *khachkar* was added to UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (Intangible Cultural Heritage). Recognized by the international community as an element of Armenian cultural heritage, examples of exchanges and developments challenge the idea of tradition without revolution, while supporting the idea of cooperation between different, and unequal, ethnic groups.



5<sup>th</sup> century *khatchkar* excavated at Dvin, Abrahamian 31



*Khatchkar*, Armenian Patriarchate, Jerusalem 1460, Rahmani Plate 16



Lintel over Ribat of 'Ala' al-Din, Jerusalem, Ottoman

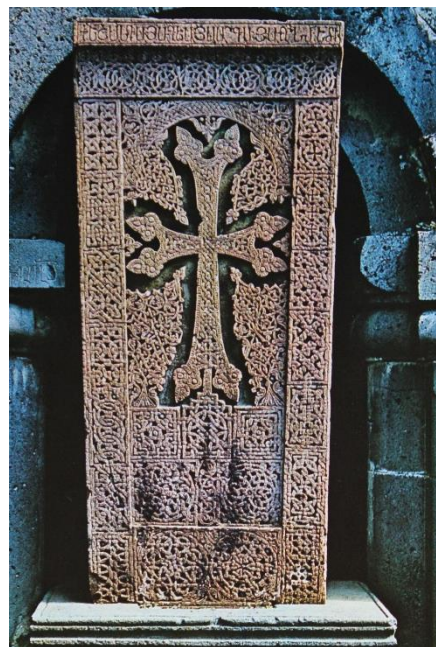
Though *khatchkars* reached their “aesthetic peak as a form of stone carving in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries,” they were widely produced until the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Abrahamian 60).

Despite their Christian nature, *khatchkars* had an influence on Ottoman art. They contained the first chip-carved rosettes, a spiral ornamentation, found in Jerusalem in the mid-fifteenth century (Rahmani 68). This type of rosette was frequently used and has been documented on *khatchkars* set in the wall facing St. James' Cathedral at the Armenian Patriarchate, carved into the walls of churches, and as free standing stones (Rahmani 69). Similar carvings were uncommon in Armenia at the time, yet they remained prevalent in Jerusalem. These patterns and techniques are thought to have been a local invention of the mid-fifteenth century (Rahmani 69). The Mamluk Sultanate

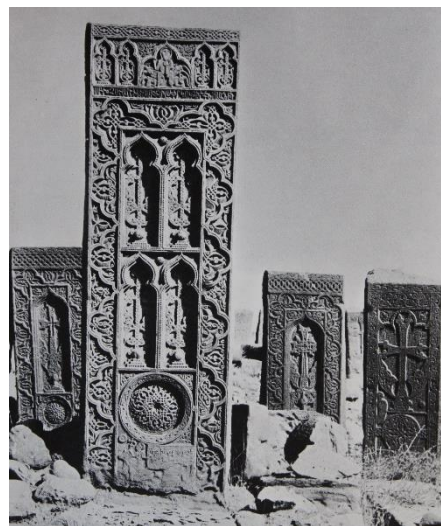
controlled Jerusalem during the development of this technique, but evidence suggests that after Ottomans conquered the territory in 1517, chip-carved rosettes were added to a Mamluk building, on the entrance to the Ribat of 'Ala' al-Din, by Ottomans (Rahmani 69). Thus, an ornament developed by a Christian people was used by the ruling Islamic power to decorate a Muslim building.

The town of Julfa, on the border with Iran, was an Ottoman possession occupied by many Armenian merchants and artisans (McCabe 63). Works created before the seventeenth century conquest of the Persians can therefore be considered within the Ottoman period. There are

numerous examples of khatchkars with Ottoman motifs (Azarian 57). Compared to *khachkars* dating from the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries in various Armenian communities in the region, 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century *khachkars* from Julfan cemeteries contain artistic elements not found within Armenian patterning tradition. One of the stones, instead of one large central cross, has four smaller crosses, each housed within the carving of a pointed arch emerging from a rectangular shape, similar to the common Ottoman architectural elements, such as the minaret. Though pointed arches can be seen on some Armenian churches, such as the chapel of Grigor the Enlightener in Tavush, they were not common features and were absent from *khatchkars* (Abrahamian 67). Typically, the cross is covered by a rounded, square, or fitted top. The *khatchkar* retains many Armenian elements, such as the vegetal carving, Christian iconography, a pair of lions, and the circular symbol for eternity. The incorporation of patterns from Muslim Ottomans is found on numerous *khatchkars* in the cemetery, some with more than one cross within the peaked arch, others with only one but numerous repetitions above the cross (Azarian 58). These elements, worked into a distinctly Armenian craft, show a cultural exchange. The patterning was accepted and integrated into the headstone with both the cross and Armenian writing. These designs, used in combination rather than as a replacement on these *khatchkars*



*Khatchkar* dating to 1216, Azarian 35



*Khatchkars* from Julfan Cemetery, XVI-XVII centuries, Azarian 58

demonstrate collaboration with a dominant foreign culture while asserting an Armenian identity rooted in tradition, language, and religion.

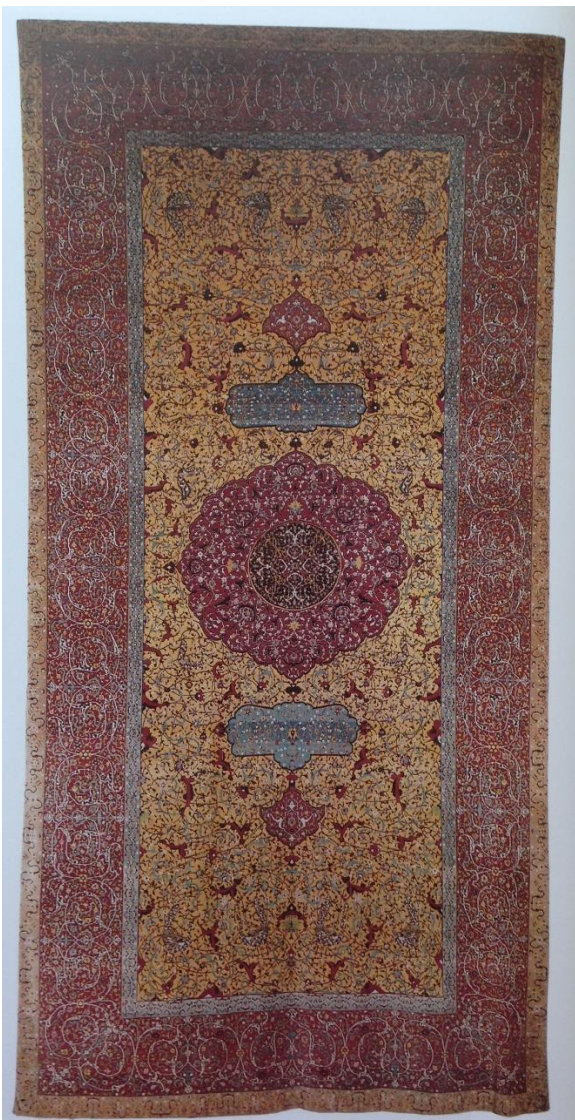
### *III. Textiles*



Double Prayer Rug, Anatolia, early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Manuelian 177

Carpets and rugs, though often used as interchangeable terms, are two distinct crafts in Armenian culture. Carpets are made by weaving or braiding threads of different colors. This results in a flat fabric resembling a tapestry. Rugs are made by knotting a colored thread around the front and back of a loom, then cutting the thread. Each thread is tied individually. Typically there are at least one hundred and sixty thousand knots per square meter that create the pile of the rug (Ayvazyan). Armenian rugs feature a double knot, a technique that persists in carpet production today in factories such as the Megerian Carpet Factory in Yerevan (Ayvazyan). Rugs require more labor than carpets as each individual knot is hand tied. Both carpets and rugs are present in Armenian crafting traditions, but the rug is considered a finer craft and thus will focus on this craft.

Ottoman art borrowed from Armenian rug traditions. The oldest known carpet, the ‘Pazyryk’ carpet, dates to the fourth or fifth century BC. Though its origins are debated, it has



Anhalt-medallion rug, 16<sup>th</sup> century, Gantzhorn 382



Tugra Suleyman I, before 1530, Gantzhorn 383

been proposed that it was produced by artisans of Urartu, often cited as the first Armenian kingdom, because it depicts of bucks and griffins consistent with Urartian iconography (Gantzhorn 50). Even if the ‘Paryzyk’ carpet is not Armenian in origin, evidence suggests that Armenians produced rugs as early as the first millennium (Gantzhorn 24). Before the Ottoman Turks conquered Armenian territory, carpet weaving was a well-established tradition with delicate technique. The Anhalt carpet is an Armenian carpet which features an alternating ‘E’ pattern on its border, a cross design, and vegetal patterns (Gantzhorn 390). The circular vegetal designs from this carpet were used by Sultan Selim-Shah I in 1518 and his successor Sultan Suleyman-Shah I in their official *tugras* (Gantzhorn 390). The *tugra* was the official seal of the sultan which was used for official documents and coins, and could serve a decorative function as well. Other sultans, such as Mehmed II and Bayezid II also used traditional Armenian designs to fill the *tugras* (Gantzhorn 390).

The double prayer rug pictured at the beginning of this section depicts designs, themes, and language from



Double Prayer Rug inscription, Manuelian 176

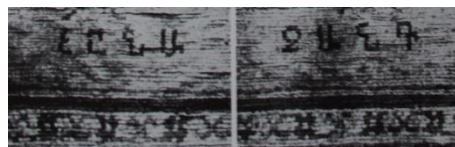
Ottoman culture on a rug woven by an Armenian artisan.

The inscription, found between the two rugs and magnified on the right, contains words derived from the Turkish language written in Armenian script. Ottoman Armenians often spoke Turkish and Armenian, merging the two languages and adopting family names based on Turkish words. The inscription reads “D. Tishekezekian [man with a broken tooth], 1909 January 12, Ghevond Tuybeyekian [man with a fine mustache], Ez [Abbreviation of Erzeum, the city of production]” (Manuelian 176). These rugs feature



Silk Prayer Rug, Anatolian 19<sup>th</sup> century, Manuelian 173

hanging lamps and cross panels, common features in Turkish prayer rugs that have found their way to a rug produced by an Armenian artisan. Another prayer rug, from



Silk Prayer Rug Inscription, Manuelian 172

the 19<sup>th</sup> century, more closely follows the compositional format of prayer rugs of the Ottoman court which are derived from the architecture of mosques (Manuelian 172). Design elements such as the palm leaf border, floral panels, and columns are Ottoman, but beneath the columns, Armenian text is visible. The text translates as “hena” and “zang.” Together they make the Armenian word for obedient, implying the rug had religious significance for the Christian Armenian artisan (Manuelian 172).



Clothing also demonstrates cultural exchange. In medieval Armenia, clothing was influenced by other peoples, during the Arshakuni dynasty, Armenian kings adopted clothing from the Parthian Persian court and during the Bagrantuni dynasty, kings wore turbans (Abrahamian 177). Clothing worn by Armenians in the Ottoman Empire was also influenced, both by official regulations, as discussed in chapter 2, and by fashion trends. Embroidered silk scarves, typically made with a Turkish technique known as *mushabak*, were popular as a headscarf and around the waist throughout the Empire (Hovannisian 96). Such scarves were found in photographs of Armenians in Smyrna, or Izmir, in the nineteenth century (Hovannisian 96). Clothing differed greatly between Armenians living in territory controlled by the Ottoman Empire, referred to as Western Armenia, or by Russia, Eastern Armenia. It was typical in both regions for women to wear a kerchief over the mouth (Abrahamian 181). An article present only for Ottoman Armenian women was the apron, or *gognots*, which was worn outside rather than in the home as a symbol of marriage (Abrahamian 185). Headdresses from Eastern Armenia were typically made from stiff velvet of cloth which were much less ornate than those from Western Armenia with silver netting and embroidered adornments (Abrahamian 182). Men's clothing also differed, in Eastern Armenia a long jacket, or *chukha*, and fur cap was customary, but in Western Armenia short jackets and felt



1998 postage stamp depicting Armenian costumes worn in Vaspurakan in the 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Abrahamian 181

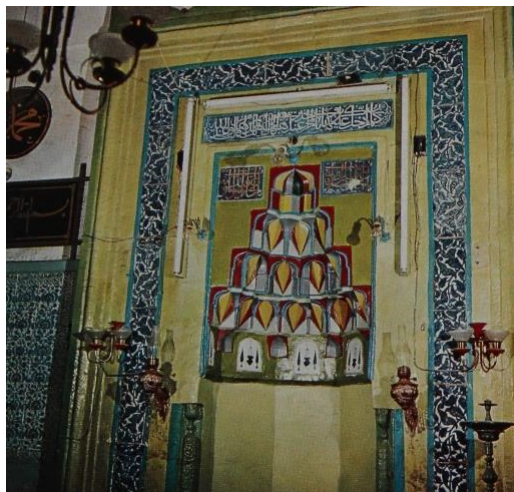


1998 postage stamp depicting Armenian costumes worn in Yerevan in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Abrahamian 179

caps were common (Abrahamian 181-2). Costumes from both regions are considered “native dress,” though current narratives of Armenian identity do not include other variations caused by cultural exchange in the identity of Ottoman Armenians.

#### *IV. Ceramics*

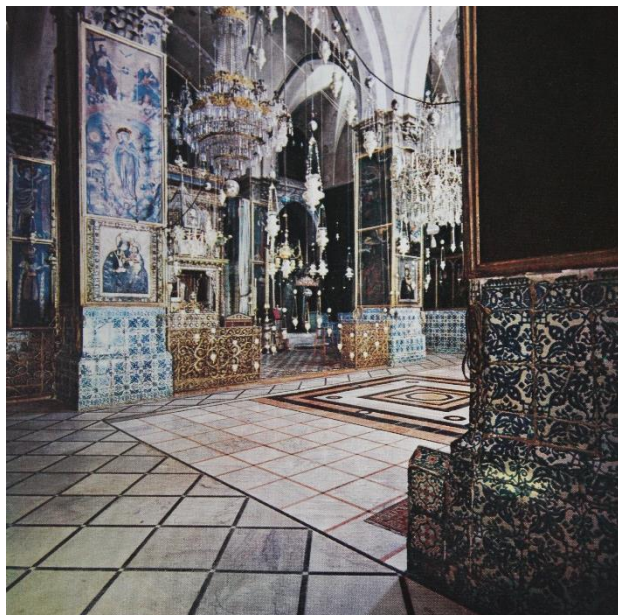
The town of Kutahya had a large population of Armenian artisans. In the late 14<sup>th</sup> century it became an important manufacturer of pottery for the Ottoman Empire. The tastes of clients influenced the character of the work, potters incorporated Ottoman designs, which increased their popularity with Turkish patrons in Istanbul (Abrahamian 119). Potters in Kutahya catered to both Armenian and Muslim patrons (Carswell 15). Iznik dominated ceramic production until the 17<sup>th</sup> century, but Kutahya production in the 18<sup>th</sup> century grew both in scale and quality (Yeomans 92). Many Iznik potters moved to Kutahya (Yeomans 92). The town became the center of ceramic production in the Ottoman Empire (Ribiero 110). These potters contributed to the Kutahya pottery industry and because the style and themes of ceramics were similar to those



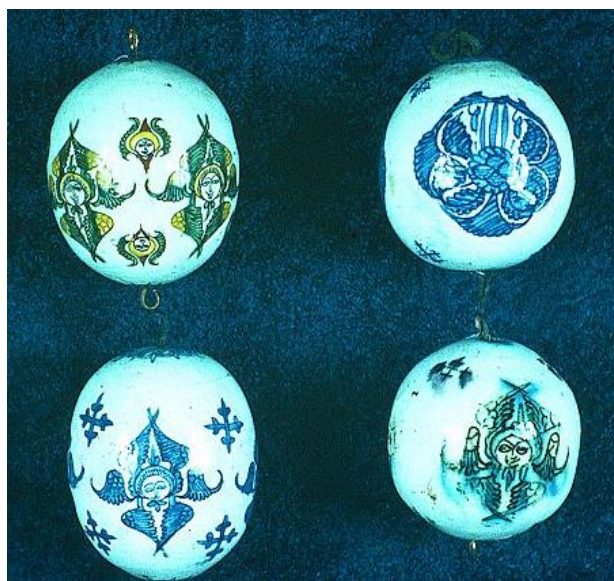
The *mihrab* in the mosque of Hisar Bey, Carswell plate 1



*Mihrab* in the Mosque of Ali Pasha, in Kutahya, Carswell plate 31



Interior of the Cathedral of St. James, Jerusalem, Carswell frontispiece



Kutahya oil lamps, XVIIIth century, Kouymjian

scrolling, fragile arabesques with leaves and petals...while others ...are designed for churches, displaying seraphim with wings arranged in a cruciform formation” (Yeomans 92).

The Armenian salt jar in the shape of a pregnant woman emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in both Eastern and Western Armenia (Abrahamian 127). There are four variations of the salt jar

produced in Iznik (Atil 24). In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Armenian urban center applied techniques developed in Iznik to create ceramics with newly developed decorations rooted in the Christian tradition (Abrahamian 119). Kutahya continued to develop the craft, including the addition of the color yellow, which was unknown in Iznik (Carswell 11). The Armenian Cathedral of St. James in Jerusalem features tiles and ceramic eggs made in Kutahya that are stylistically Ottoman but contain biblical scenes and winged cherubs (Yeomans 92). Ottoman and Christian elements are both found on ceramics made for an important Armenian church. Tiles and oil lamps made in Kutahya adorned mosques, primarily in Constantinople (Kouymjian). The Cinili Kiosk featured a number of porcelain eggs, “some display thin,

with different degrees of detail and realism. It is unclear why these vessels emerged at this time, though it is known that they were made by women (Abrahamian 130). With ambiguous origins, it cannot be known if there were Ottoman contributions to the creation of this craft. However, this new form of art emerged during the Ottoman period, suggesting that the atmosphere was open to cultural innovation, even within the *Armenian millet*, which is often thought of as restrictive. Rather than stagnating under foreign dominion, Armenians continued their trades, practices, and crafts, both perpetuating tradition and reinventing the field of Armenian crafts.



Early 20<sup>th</sup> century salt jar from Bambakashat (Ayrarat), Abrahamian 129

#### V. Metalwork and Silver

Metal became an important substance for construction in the late 5<sup>th</sup> to early 4<sup>th</sup> millennia BC (Abrahamian 137). This importance is reflected in Armenian history; metal was used for tools, utensils, weapons and adornment since the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC (Abrahamian 137). Copper, silver, and gold were prominent metals in household items, decorative objects, and jewelry. The salver, or large shallow circular dish, was a common item in Armenian homes in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Some were made for religious rites while others served domestic purposes. Jewelers made church artifacts and items for everyday use. Belts were important as a symbol of marriage and virtue for Armenian women (Abrahamian 201). Metalwork was distinct in different villages. Because working as a craftsman was seen as beneath Muslims, “craftsmanship was left to the *gyavurs*,” leaving



Large copper tray from Old Julfa, 1477, Kouymjian

minority populations to fill the demand for crafts (Tokat 282). Julfa, Van, and Istanbul were centers of metalwork production for the Ottoman Empire.

Examples of metalwork from the town of Julfa exhibit cultural exchange between peoples of different cultures and languages. A salver dating to 1477 made by an Armenian artisan, now exhibited in the State Historical Museum in Yerevan, features engravings of both Armenian and Arabic script (Kouymjian). It is unknown if the plate was for an Arabic client, but the presence of both languages, Armenian in a central ring, and Arabic on the outer ring, suggests a bilingual client or artisan, one that accepted both languages as important enough for a dish of both common use and display.

The city of Van, in present-day western Turkey, was a major Armenian center with a significant Armenian population both in the city and the surrounding villages. In 1890, the city population was 40,000, 25,000 of which were Armenian (Tokat 79). Though many crafts were produced in Van, the top specialties were gold- and silver-wear (Tokat 81). Skill in this craft led to expansion of the industry, in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there were 120 jewelry shops and gold- and silver-making factories in Van which produced thousands of crafts every year (Tokat 116). Numerous silver objects, such as tobacco boxes, water bowls, and eyeglass cases, nielloed with the seal of Armenian artisans feature not only Arabic script, but also the Ottoman coat of arms (Tokat 128-30). One object has the Ottoman



Water bowl featuring the Ottoman coat of arms and the port of Van, Armenian and Arabic signature stamped on bowl, Tokat 129



Silver engagement box featuring Mother Armenia and the ruins of the former Armenian capitals, late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Tokat 20



Tobacco box with *tugra*, Tokat 178

coat of arms on one side, and an Armenian name on the other (Tokat 151). Though Ottoman imagery is featured on certain works, Armenian imagery continued to persist, such as that of Mother Armenia and the Armenian coat of arms (Tokat 133-4). These works, despite Ottoman themes, are works of Armenian art.

Beautifully nielloed Arabic scripts and Ottoman buildings hold a place in Armenian art, calling into question the portrayal of Armenian crafts as culturally distinct. It was not only the products of Van that spread, but the techniques developed there, that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century disseminated to other cities in Turkey, like Karin, Sebastia,

Istanbul Adana, Izmir, Izmit, Baghesh, Triebizond, Tigranakert, and Konia (Tokat 116). The Arabic works for niello, *savat*, is derived from the Armenian *sevat*, showing evidence of the techniques outward transfer from Van (Tokat 118). Van, in addition to the items listed above, also designed and produced official coins and military medals (Tokat 77). Van crafts produced by Armenians were officially recognized and celebrated. In 1910 “the Turkish government organized an exhibition of works by Van craftsmen, during which Kevork Kuyumjubashion and Sahag Der Arisdagesian were awarded medals of honor” (Tokat 120).

Julfa and Van were Armenian trade and cultural centers, but Armenian artisans also practiced their trade as a minority in Istanbul. Ottoman sultans contributed to the presence of Armenian artisans in Istanbul. Sultan Kanuni Suleyman I resettled a large group of Armenian goldsmiths and silversmiths from Van to Istanbul in 1534 and in 1639 Sultan Murad IV brought more continued to resettle Armenian artisans (Tokat 282). Greeks held a dominant position in metalwork in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, however, by 1806, “of the 18 most well-known goldsmiths and silversmiths in Istanbul, 17 were Armenian and one was Greek” (Tokat 282).



Gold coin scale with Arabic script, Constantinople, Tokat 286

Armenian artisans featured palaces and mosques on their work. The object on the right, is a silver tobacco box made in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century by Garabed Balian, an Armenian artisan, featuring the Dolma Bahche palace as well as an inscription in Arabic (Tokat 49). Another box made by two



Tobacco box featuring the Dolma Bahche Palace, mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Tokat 49

artisans from Van features the Sultan Ahmed mosque (Tokat 192). Armenians also interacted directly with the Ottoman state. Military medals were made by also made by Van artisans. The medal pictured below reads: “Van 84 – Long live my emperor. Shaban [the owner]” (Tokat 76). Other artisans, such as the Duzian family, also worked for the state. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Ottoman Mint run by the Duzians and employed Armenian artisans who expanded its production (Tokat 48). Works made by Armenian craftsmen were well regarded, Sultan Selim III



Military medal and coins minted in Van during the reign of Sultan Muhammed Kharazm Shah, Tokat 76-7

gifted silver and gold objects created under the supervision of the Duzians to Napoleon Bonaparte (Tokat 283). Numerous other artisans worked directly for the sultan. Two prominent examples include Artin Bezjian, or Kazaz Artin Amira, who became head of the Ottoman Mint in 1819 and was an

advisor to Sultan Mahmud II and Mikayel Kurian who worked for Sultan Abdul Mejid and his mother in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (Tokat 283-4). Armenian artisans were revered by the state.

Contrary to the narrative of conflict supported by essentialist conceptions of Armenian identity, collaboration occurred both with fellow Ottoman subjects and the Ottoman state itself.

## VI. Conclusion

When examining Armenian crafts, numerous examples of cultural exchange emerge. These exchanges do not exclude Ottoman trends, patterns, and techniques. The craft traditions of the *khatchkar*, rugs, ceramics, metalworking, and textiles, demonstrate cultural exchanges between Ottoman Turks and Armenians. Crafts made by Armenian artisans were used, and often favored by Ottoman elites. Reversely, examples of Armenian influence on Ottoman art, such as carving techniques, also contributed to this exchange. As crafts from this period are studied closely, linkages emerge in what was typically thought of as a distinct cultural craft from a rigid cultural identity. It becomes more difficult to attribute one craft or technique to a certain group since groups shared techniques and continued to refine them through practice. Culturally distinct crafts may serve a purpose in defining a culture, but culturally collaborative crafts define the relationships that cultures had with one another. Despite the turbulent past shared by Ottoman



Turks and Armenians, examples of collaboration and partnership are apparent. Exploring this collaboration can help to uncover an Ottoman Armenian identity that was characterized by mutual respect and creativity rather than exclusively by violence.

## Chapter 4: Armenian Identity and International Relations

### *I. Introduction*

Current conceptions of Armenian identity are rigid, discounting how Armenian culture developed in collaboration with Ottoman culture. When examining Armenian culture, numerous examples of cultural exchange emerge. Greek, Byzantine, and Russian influences are all seen in Armenian crafts and architecture and are prominently on display in museums. Levon Abrahamian's book, *Armenian Folk Arts, Culture, and Identity* offers a thorough examination of Armenian crafts as a product of cultural exchange. Despite the importance and length of the Ottoman period in Armenian history, however, there is little mention of Ottoman collaboration in Abrahamian's work. Examples of Ottoman collaboration that are mentioned in the book, such as the pottery of Kutahya, are described with much less zeal than the "unique style of decoration" that developed later, independent of Ottoman influence (119). The previous chapter discussed how connections between Ottoman Turks and Armenians manifested itself in crafts such as *khatchkar*, rugs, ceramics, metalworking, and textiles. These connections contributed to a narrative of Armenian identity different than the Armenian identity rooted in a periodicized Armenian history. This chapter demonstrates that Ottoman Armenian identity emerged in a cultural context previously thought of as oppressive. It becomes difficult to attribute one craft or technique to a certain group because techniques were shared and developed by both Armenian and Ottoman artisans. The evidence presented in this thesis challenges the conception of Armenian culture as independent from its surrounding cultures and a strictly interpreted periodicized phenomenon, but rather something that is constantly developing. Crafts made in the Ottoman Empire by Armenians are no less Armenian than those still made today, or those made soon after the adoption of Christianity. Discounting the role Ottoman Turkish culture had on the

Armenian society within the *millet* system ignores an important part of the culture of those individuals, and thus the culture of Armenians.

This chapter will delve into the causes for current craft presentation and the role new analysis could play in the presentation of crafts. The genocide greatly altered the perception of earlier peaceful relations with Ottoman Turks in current theory of Armenian identity. Cultural landmarks and museums, for example, provide insights into Armenian identity as perceived by the state. The turbulent past shared by Ottoman Turks and Armenians contribute to the significance of this approach. Exploring collaboration rather than conflict, however, can help to uncover a past, still shared by Ottoman Turks and Armenians, that is characterized by mutual respect and creativity rather than violence.

## *II. Causes of Current Craft Presentation*

Crafts remain important in Armenian culture today. Numerous groups, such as the Teryan Cultural Center and the Homeland Development Initiative Foundation located in Yerevan, attempt to carry on and promote craft traditions. Historical crafts displayed in museums define Armenian identity. Museums house scores of crafts representing Armenian culture from different geographical and historical contexts. The way in which they are presented affects how Armenian identity is defined. The National Museum of History and the State Museum of Ethnography are two major examples, with multiple exhibits dedicated to the types of crafts discussed in the previous chapter. However, there is little mention of Ottoman influence on craft production. This is not surprising considering the current relations between Armenia and Turkey, which largely rest on the events of 1915. Difficulties of alternative presentation include locating crafts, determining their origins, and an unwillingness to admit to the interactions between the Armenians and Ottoman Turks. Modern perspectives and nationalistic goals influence

conceptions of the past but prevent a dialog of collaboration to form in public space. The portrayal of Armenian culture as distinct overlooks the subtleties of identity, as well as the unavoidable influence that living for centuries with a people of another culture will have. The conception of a static and isolated Armenian identity is the side effect of a quick summary of the past, the kind on display at these museums that creates an imbalanced narrative of the history of the Armenian people.

### *III. Cultural Exchanges and International Relations*

Cultural interactions are important to international relations. Professors of conflict resolution Michelle Lebaron and Jarle Crocker offer three views of culture that impact the effectiveness of international conflict resolution. The first is that culture can be understood through the lens of universalism, as done by scholars such as Francis Fukuyama, as “rooted in...universally understandable rational behavior” (Lebaron 54). Alternatively, culture can be understood as “elemental and immutable,” as described by Samuel P. Huntington (Lebaron 54). Universalist culture does not account for “instances in which culture produces irrational action,” leaving force and sanctions, rather than diplomacy, as “the only tools for achieving the national interest” (Lebaron 56). Essentialist culture contends that “conflict is inherent in the international system because the interests of civilizations...will always vary to some degree” (Lebaron 57). However, both views can prevent a constructive dialog from forming between peoples of two cultures. The authors propose a third understanding culture from the inside out, by listening to the experience of people from other cultures and learning their history, as the key to successful foreign policy (Lebaron 57). The authors state that “cultural influences are not uniform or static,” citing Iran’s reconciliation of Islam and Western modernity (Lebaron 58). Cultural exchange increases understanding of the culture with which you are negotiating. Armenian cultural identity

involves countless cultural exchanges with different cultures. Ottoman-Armenian cultural exchanges explored in the previous chapter highlight the dynamic nature of Armenian identity. Understanding the subtleties of this identity does not only provide cultural, but diplomatic insights. As stated by Lebaron and Crocker, understanding culture provides the basis for understanding two peoples as they work to resolve conflict.

The United States has recognized the importance of cultural exchange by dedicating many programs bringing together peoples of different cultures. The Cultural Presentations Program under the Fulbright-Hayes Act of 1961 aims to “strengthen the ties which unite us with other nations by demonstrating educational and cultural interests, developments and achievements of the people of the United States” (Ellinson 137). This act was proposed during “the troubled year of 1945-as the world was moving from World War II to the years of military occupation and post-war reconstruction,” in an effort to continue civilian efforts for peace despite political struggle (Ellinson 138).

Positive aspects of Armenia’s historical relationship with Iran, such as the merchants of New Julfa, demonstrates how an emphasis on shared cultural experiences benefit today’s political relations. This relationship was not without violence, as Armenians were forcibly relocated in 1604 by Shah ‘Abbas (Bournoutian 210-11). Relocation, however, was not the end of this relationship, but the beginning. Armenians were moved to the capital of Isfahan and the newly established city of New Julfa (Bournoutian 210-11). Armenian merchants were granted a monopoly on the silk trade by the Shahs and became a prosperous and powerful group (Bournoutian 210-11). Numerous examples of craft collaborations emerged from this new community. Armenian goldsmiths were employed by Abbas Mirza, Shah Fatal, and Shah Mahmed (Tokat 276). Though relations with Iran are friendly for numerous other reasons, such

as trade partnerships, this positive historical relationship benefits present day relations between Armenia and Iran.

Challenges arise when attempting to present a culturally collaborative view of the Ottoman period. If museums were to include this view, new exhibits or content would have to be added, which may not be desirable considering the controversy surrounding this period. In addition, it would require international cooperation and research into the history of craft production that demonstrate collaboration which proves difficult if the artisan was unknown and the works of certain villages were scattered due to deportation. Though relations are not friendly between Turkey and Armenia today, there is a possibility that cultural interactions could be beneficial. A study of shared history before 1915 through an art form such as crafts could foster understanding between the people of Armenia and Turkey. Culinary, musical, and literary efforts also have the possibility of yielding similar results. A cultural exchange program between Armenia and Turkey could start a dialog, at least among academics, about almost five hundred years of shared history before 1915.

Osep Tokat, in his book on Armenian metal work, focuses on centers of Ottoman Armenian production such as Van, in present-day Turkey, but also highlights the interactions with different cultures. This includes cultural exchanges with India, Egypt, Ethiopia, Syria, and France (Tokat 275-81). While categorizing oriental carpets, Volkmar Gantzhorn investigates the influence of Armenian carpets in Europe and the Middle East. This includes Armenian carpets and patterns appearing in European paintings by Jan van Eyck (123-4). Chinese ceramics influenced production in Iznik which would eventually move to Kutahya (Ribero 21). These cultural exchanges provide another way to study relations between groups, especially those in conflict. Because of historical injustices and ongoing conflicts, study of collaboration becomes

unlikely and more difficult. By referring to historical collaborations, it may be possible to acknowledge the positive historical relationships, and use them to approach conflict resolution differently. The currently lack of discussion surrounding Armenian and Ottoman collaborations in crafts, but also other cultural fields, only reinforces the existing conflictual relations imposed by the current essentialist understanding of Armenian identity.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

Identity is a complex and fluid concept and Armenian identity is no exception. Cultural exchange is a crucial element of identity. Though examples of cultural exchange between the Armenian people and other groups are presented in the National History Museum of Armenia and the National Museum of Armenian Ethnography, there is no mention of the Ottoman Empire aside from its role in the Armenian genocide. In addition, the existing examples of cultural exchange are not as central to museum exhibits, which instead emphasize characteristics that differentiate the Armenian people through specific historical periods, such as the adoption of Christianity and the Armenian alphabet, rather than connect them to other cultures. This conception of Armenian identity is mirrored in scholarly discussion of Armenian identity by authors such as Bournoutian, Lint, as well as Zolyan and Zakaryan. They portray Armenian identity as rooted in the previously mentioned historical periods, as well as the struggle for freedom from foreign domination, manifested in the Armenian genocide. However, this definition does not define the identity of Armenians living before the adoption of Christianity, the creation of the Armenian alphabet, or the genocide. It also does not account for the significant variation between geographically separated groups of Armenians. Scholars such as Dursteler, Anderson, and Hall provided a theoretical framework for discussing identity in this research. Armenian identity is not fixed and should not be rigidly defined by certain characteristics. Armenian identity is a “continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power,” something that expanded, developed, and shifted by individuals (Hall 223). This approach to identity can be seen through a cornerstone of culture, namely crafts. Crafts are produced on an individual level based on the intersection of tradition, skill, and function. They are constantly changing through production and reproduction, demonstrating what foreign decorative elements



or techniques donned the objects used daily in households. Armenian crafts produced in the Ottoman Empire demonstrate how cultural exchanges shaped Armenian identity in the Ottoman Empire.

The Ottoman period of Armenian history is notable not only because it is rarely studied in a positive light, but because of its length and influence. Stretching from the late fifteenth to the early twentieth century, the Ottoman Empire shaped the Armenian experience for millions of Armenians for centuries before the first incarnation of the modern Armenian state. The *millet* system defined the responsibilities and privileges of Armenians, who were separated from other ethnicities by religion, and created an essentialist understanding of ethnicity. Religion, political rights, economic opportunity, and even clothing were shaped by state policies. The Ottoman period ended with the Armenian genocide in 1915. This was a tragic loss of life and culture which affected the political consciousness and definitions bounding the Armenian people. The genocide continues to shape conceptions of Armenian's status within the *millet* system as well as current conceptions of Armenian identity.

The *millet* system did have an important role in shaping Ottoman Armenian's lives, but it did not account for cultural exchanges between groups in many fields, including craft production. Armenian crafts, rather than the *millet* system, demonstrate the fluid and collaborative nature of Armenian identity within the Ottoman Empire. Armenian people living in the Ottoman Empire had Ottoman motifs on items that they would use daily, such as bowls, tobacco boxes, and clothing, if not for eternity, such as a *khatchkar* used as a grave stone. Cultural exchange was not seen as a corruption of a pure Armenian identity, but a fact of daily life. Tradition, a central element of the craft, expanded to include these Ottoman motifs that were now significant to the Armenian community. Armenian craft tradition also impacted Ottoman

culture through skill with carving, weaving, and metal work. Armenian artisans worked for the Ottoman state and Ottoman clients, resulting in crafts drawing from multiple cultures which remained consistent with how Armenians identified at the time.

Culture, regardless of its presentation, is a dynamic force. Cultural exchanges are central to culture, shaping its boundaries. Armenians in the Ottoman Empire exchanged cultural elements with Ottoman Turks through craft production while still retaining their Armenian identity. Understanding culture provides the basis for understanding between two peoples as they work to resolve conflict. Though relations are not friendly between Turkey and Armenia today, there is a possibility that cultural interactions could be beneficial. A study of shared history before 1915 through an art form such as crafts could foster understanding between the people of Armenia and Turkey. A cultural exchange program between Armenia and Turkey could start a dialog, at least among academics, about their almost five hundred years of shared history before 1915. Armenian identity shapes its understanding of itself and of relations with its neighbors. Reevaluation of essentialist narratives of identity could yield both novel academic research in shared Armenian-Ottoman history as well as a new basis for dialog in resolution between Turkey and Armenia.

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