

8-18-2002

# Mathews and Taylor, Armenian Gospels of Gladzor

Kathleen Maxwell

*Santa Clara University*, [kmaxwell@scu.edu](mailto:kmaxwell@scu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://scholarcommons.scu.edu/a\\_ah](http://scholarcommons.scu.edu/a_ah)

 Part of the [History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology Commons](#), and the [Other History Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Maxwell, Kathleen. Review of Thomas F. Mathews and Alice Taylor, *The Armenian Gospels of Gladzor: The Life of Christ Illuminated* (J. Paul Getty Museum, 2001) for *The Medieval Review* (on-line; August 30, 2002).

This is a copy of the original article as published in the journal *The Medieval Review*, with permission of the journal.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts & Sciences at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Art and Art History* by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [rscroggin@scu.edu](mailto:rscroggin@scu.edu).

Mathews, Thomas F. and Alice Taylor. *The Armenian Gospels of Gladzor: The Life of Christ Illuminated*. Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2001. Pp. 120. \$39.95 0-89236-626-5. ISBN: \$24.95 0-89236-627-3.

Reviewed by:

Kathleen Maxwell  
KMaxwell@scu.edu

---

The Armenian Gospels of Gladzor is an exhibition catalogue featuring the deluxe fourteenth-century manuscript of the same name from the Young Research Library at UCLA. This exhibition coincided with the celebration in 2001 of the seventeenth-hundredth anniversary of the establishment of the Armenian Church and with the conservation of the Gladzor Gospels in which it was disbound, offering a unique opportunity to view its Canon Tables, Evangelist portraits, incipit pages, marginalia, and fifty-four narrative miniatures. The manuscript derives its name from the Gladzor monastery in Greater Armenia where the manuscript was completed. It was given to UCLA by Dr. Caro Minasian in 1968 and ranks as one of the finest Armenian illustrated manuscripts in America. The authors are ideally positioned to write this text. Prof. Mathews previously co-authored a scholarly monograph on the Gladzor Gospels with the late Prof. Avedis K. Sanjian entitled *Armenian Gospel Iconography: The Tradition of the Glajor Gospel* (Washington, D.C., 1991). Prof. Taylor has also written *Book Arts of Isfahan: Diversity and Identity in Seventeenth-Century Persia* (Malibu, 1995) for the Getty. The text of the exhibition catalogue is short (35 pages), but ambitious in its coverage of the complex social, political, and religious fabric of thirteenth- and fourteen-century Armenia.

Chapter One: Making an Illuminated Manuscript provides a context for Armenian manuscript production and introduces the reader to some of the defining characteristics of Armenian society and its unique form of Christianity. We learn that the Armenians converted to Christianity in 301, but that they broke with the Roman and Greek Churches in 451 (Council of Chalcedon) over the nature of Christ. The Armenians believe that the divine and human natures of Christ are inseparable, while the Roman and Greek churches hold that they remain distinct and unconfused in Christ (p. 13). Thereafter, the Armenians (and others) were referred to as Monophysites as opposed to the Duophysites (Greeks, and eventually, the Roman Catholics). The authors then turn to the singular status of the medieval illustrated manuscript. Its sacred and unchanging Gospel text is contrasted with its narrative illustrations. The illustrations of Christ's life were open to varying interpretations depending upon the cultural landscape in which they were produced. The Gladzor narrative illustrations, the authors argue, reflect their fourteenth-century social, political, and monastic contexts (p. 15) and they are the focus of this catalogue. Chapter One continues with a discussion of what is known about the Gladzor Gospels. Two names are found in an inscription on page 227 within an illustration of the Second Storm at Sea. T'oros of Taron, the most famous artist associated with the Gladzor monastery, begs the Abbot Yesayi (of Nich) to remember him, his unworthy disciple. We also learn that three quarters of the illustrations of the Gladzor Gospels interrupt their Gospel text at precisely the same point as the illustrations of the early eleventh-century Vehap'ar Gospels. In some cases, the Gladzor miniatures replicate those of its earlier model. A debt to the Armenian manuscripts of Cilicia is also acknowledged by the authors in the decoration of the Canon Tables, Evangelist portraits, and non-figural decoration of the Gladzor Gospels. This chapter concludes with a brief discussion of the various hands responsible for the miniatures and a description of their stylistic characteristics. Only T'oros of Taron signed the manuscript, however, and the authors conclude that he worked on it early in his career, probably before 1307. A later colophon of 1377 indicates that the manuscript was made at Gladzor, but the authors believe that the manuscript was probably initiated at another monastery. Chapter Two situates the Armenian monastery in its cultural and political environment. Like their western counterparts, Armenian monasteries were not isolated from the outside world. Armenians were more often than not subject to others whether Seljuks, Georgians, or Mongols. The inherent flexibility of the nakharar system, the nobility who enjoyed hereditary rights to their lands, allowed them to direct their service to non-Armenian kings. The nakharar lords also supported the monasteries (p.22) and it was there that some of the greatest writings of the age were produced. The intellectual tradition of the monks is revealed by the fact that the three great Armenian histories written in the thirteenth century are all by monks (p.25). Moreover, some sixty-nine manuscripts can be associated specifically with the Gladzor monastery. One third are Gospels and Bibles. There are also a few classical texts, but the majority are theological texts and most of these are exegetical in nature (p. 28). The two most important vardapets (religious teachers of highest rank) associated with Gladzor, Nerses of

Mush and Yesayi of Nich, authored commentaries on books of the Old Testament.

With the foundations of Armenian medieval culture laid out in Chapters One and Two, Chapter Three, the most important of all, turns to the narrative illustrations of Christ's life. Here the authors argue for the purely Armenian character of these illustrations, underlining the impact of Armenian exegetical texts by authors like Nerses and Yesayi, upon the illustrations of the Gladzor Gospels. T'oros and Yesayi also worked together with another exegete, John of Yezinka, who wrote a Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew. This text allows the authors to make important connections between contemporary exegesis and the Gladzor illustrations. Other influential earlier Armenian literary sources are also noted including commentaries of Saints John Chrysostom and Ephrem the Syrian, as well as Armenian catechisms, hymns, and liturgical prayers. There is not space in the authors' text to discuss all fifty-four miniatures, but they discern six larger themes within the narrative cycle and discuss several examples of each. These themes are as follows: The Divine Physician, The Human and Divine in Christ, Christ and the Church, Women in the Life of the Christ, The Church and the Nations, and Christ in the Rites of the Armenian Church. The illustration of the Crucifixion best exemplifies the spirit of Armenian faith, according to the authors. It is distinctly Armenian in its emphasis on Christ as powerful even in death, reflecting, for example, liturgical hymns, an early Armenian catechism called *The Teaching of Saint Gregory the Illuminator*, the Sunday hymn of the Resurrection, and a sermon text of the fourteenth century (p. 38). In addition, the illustration of the Crucifixion also reflects the Armenians' belief concerning the two natures of Christ. The illustration depicts separate streams of blood and water flowing from Christ's side. This supports the Armenian practice of serving unmixed wine in the Eucharist in contrast to the Roman and Greek practice of diluting the Eucharistic wine with water. The authors write that "for Armenians the water and blood symbolize not the water mixed with wine in the chalice, as in the Roman Catholic interpretation, but the distinct sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist" (p. 46).

Mathews and Taylor also note that the Armenians were under considerable pressure at this time from Roman Catholic missionaries to conform to rituals dictated by Rome. In citing the numerous literary sources, both contemporary and older which exercised a demonstrable influence on these illustrations, the authors remind those of us who specialize in illuminated manuscripts from other locales that we, too, must examine comparable sources in our research. Through such sources, Mathews and Taylor have recognized the rich and complex cultural fabric that can affect the illustration of even the best known texts. *The Armenian Gospels of Gladzor* offers a great deal to the reader at a modest price. The color illustrations are superb and the text offers an excellent introduction to Armenian Gospel illustration. It doesn't truly serve as an introductory text because it raises a number of complex issues that space constrictions do not allow the authors to develop, but it is within reach of the motivated lay reader and will be a welcome addition to scholars' personal collections. I also recommend it for university libraries, particularly those that do not have Mathews' and Sanjians' scholarly volume from 1991 already in their collection. I have noted only a few minor flaws. The accessibility of the color plates is hampered by the fact that in the catalogue's index there are italicized page references to these plates for each scene. However, while the catalogue was in production, the page numbers on the color plates were omitted and therefore the index is less convenient than the authors had planned for it to be. The authors also provide a brief glossary (p. 114) that will be very helpful to those unfamiliar with medieval illustrated manuscripts. However, they might have included "colophon" which they use without really defining it on p. 17. There is also an error on p. 18 where the reader is referred to p. 119 rather than p. 120. On p. 32 there is a reference to Christ's disappearance into Heaven, for which I would have substituted "ascension" into Heaven. These are but minor quibbles. Scholars and novices alike will be impressed with the complex underpinnings of Armenian Gospel illustration.