Theo Maarten van Lint and Robin Meyer, eds.


This handsome catalogue was produced in conjunction with the eponymous exhibition of the Bodleian Libraries at the University of Oxford, in commemoration of the centennial anniversary of the Armenian Genocide of 1915 and the jubilee anniversary of the establishment of the Calouste Gulbenkian chair of Armenian Studies at Oxford. The catalogue draws from collections across the world, including Oxford, which began to acquire Armenian manuscripts already in the seventeenth century.

The catalogue presents the visual and material culture of historical Armenia, which encompassed the present-day Republic and parts of southern Georgia, northern Iran, Azerbaijan, and eastern Turkey. It opens with a set of essays by noted experts in the field, each offering a critical basis upon which to understand the works featured in the catalogue. Theo Maarten Van Lint’s introduction to the Armenian people and their culture escorts the reader from antiquity to the present day, narrating the complex and tumultuous history of Armenia in rich detail. Van Lint highlights the diverse and distinctive characteristics of the Armenians, whose culture was infused both by the classical Mediterranean and the Iranized world to its east and south. Incorporating the most recent scholarship in Armenian studies and offering the reader a range of theories and positions, this essay is an excellent starting point for the catalogue. The following essay on Armenian writing by Dickran Kouymjian is equally rigorous and authoritative. Beginning with the invention of the Armenian alphabet in the early fifth century, Armenian script began a fascinating evolution from initial majuscule (erkatʿagir, lit: “iron letters”) forms to modern cursive scripts. The author also considers inscriptions on stone, wood, and textiles, as well as Armenian calligraphy, of which fine examples are known. Sylvie Merian’s essay places Armenian manuscripts in a historical and social context. An expert on codicology, Merian discusses the patrons and artists involved with book production before turning to the technical process of book construction, considering preparation of parchment, illumination, and silver covers. The concluding essay by Alessandro Orengo considers Armenian printed books from their emergence in the early sixteenth century until the Soviet period. Armenian printing emerged, as the author shows, alongside the development of diaspora centers in Europe and the rise of Armenian mercantile activity.

The main part of the volume is the catalogue, which encompasses a wide array of works from the ancient to contemporary periods. Included are entries on illuminated manuscripts and printed books, religious and secular texts,
coins, textiles ceramics, metalwork, and modern print culture. Among the highlights is a Gospel book by the seventeenth-century painter Mesrop of Khizan, (cat. 1 and cover image). The pictured image shows Saint John dictating to Prochoros, and indicates the painter’s preference for abstract patterns and rich colors over spatial illusionism. The rich and long tradition of Armenian canon table decoration is represented in a Gospels of 1597 (cat. 3); there we can see how the architectonic forms of the canon tables are enlivened with strong, confident colors, a playful linearism, and several birds, including a pair of large owls. Cat. 4 is the famous Gospels of Yakob of Julfa, also from the sixteenth century, which features an astonishingly creative and original iconography. In addition to the usual scenes of the life of Christ, the artist has added scenes from Genesis. One features a beardless God with evangelist symbols, and, on the facing page, an abstract, almost psychedelic scene includes a cross and partially concealed face. Lesser known but equally striking is a late thirteenth or fourteenth century Bible located in the Matenadaran (the Institute for Ancient Manuscripts) in Erevan (cat. 7). An image of the apocalypse shows a mature and graceful Christ painted in soft, modulated colors and careful naturalism; this image, as the authors observe, suggests relations with Italian mural painting.

Among the entries are commentaries, and texts on grammar, astrology, science, philosophy, and history, many with striking pictorial accompaniments. One such text shows the so-called Tree of Porphyry, a diagrammatic device for illustrating the scale of being (cat. 33). Illustrated historical cycles are also represented, such as a sixteenth-century manuscript of the Armenian Romance of Alexander (cat. 42). The photographed detail shows an astonishing image of Bucephalus, the horse of Alexander, whose body is composed of a hybrid of carefully painted real and mythological creatures.

The catalogue highlights the rich network of cultures to which Armenia belonged, and which Armenian texts and images show so clearly. Several polyglot works are featured; among them a striking fourteenth-century manuscript fragment of the Gospel of Luke (cat. 37). The text is split into five columns, written in Aethiopic, Syriac, Memphitic Coptic, Karshuni (Arabic in Syriac script) and Armenian. Another entry (cat. 41) features Yeremya Çelebi Kömürçyan’s Story of Paris and Vienne, written in Armeno-Turkish (Turkish written in Armenian letters). Both of these objects are fascinating for what they tell us about encounters across textual cultures. The authors are assiduous about addressing not only textual and formal questions raised by each work, but also its social, political, and religious dimensions.

In its final sections, the volume expands beyond the arts of the book. Prayer scrolls (hmayils) are presented in three entries, and a separate section is devoted to coins, including fine examples from the ancient Artaxiad and medieval...