

ARMENIAN STYLE IN MEDIEVAL RELIEF ORNAMENTATION WITH ANIMAL AND PLANT MOTIFS

"The eye through which I see God is the same eye through which God sees me".

(Angelus Silesius)

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Armenian Visual Art is a historical type of art, one of the most ancient and greatest styles in world culture. It dates back to the early Upper Paleolithic and Neolithic Epochs. The archetypes of the Armenian style are characterized with the rock art, rock paintings, petroglyphs, carved into rock and stone (mainly basalt) surfaces; pithiness of animal and plant motifs, geometric shapes; comprehensive and special solemnity, restrained and modest elation and significance, **naive-seeming realistic and stylized, symbolic, multivariate, cognitive description of the world.**

Common artistic forms of plant and animal motifs, human figures, lion, eagle, snake, dragon, scorpion, hunting, household and life scenes, solar symbols, strictly ordered ornamental motifs, peculiar hieroglyphic script, vishapakars (serpent-stones, dragon-stones), steles, ceramics, khachkars (cross-stones), columns and frescoes – they all embodied and decorated the world, buildings, premises, monasteries, churches, temples and tombs.

Armenian style is a complex, comprehensive, complete and holistic style. It formed the basis for pictorial archetypes of the main motifs of Indo-European world, mythology and religion, key plots, legends and narratives of the Genesis, as well as forces of nature, the creator, tree of life, dragon-slayer, thunderer, snake/serpent and dragon, plants, resurrection, sunrise, stars, volcanic activity, lava, mountain, home and hearth, allegories and metaphors. **Armenian style** includes earliest conception of birth and death, small, large, wingless and winged **crosses**, as well as right-facing and left-facing **swastikas**. Images of **hearth, sacred mountains, jagged, step pyramids**, round and rectangular hearths, topographic maps, stairs, Heaven and Earth, stylized images of clouds of smoke and flame, fire - "bushes" - sea waves (water) are the universal invariant features of Armenian style. The models of Cosmic House (macrocosm) and Earthly House (microcosm) are univocally reflected in the "image and likeness" in rock art.

Armenian style is a cognitive style, visual and comprehensible, knowledge-rich (information-intensive), informative, knowledge-intensive language of reality description and its modeling. This is a design tool for intercultural communication and knowledge transfer, technology, skills and experience, formation of a library of knowledge on life, death and resurrection. **Armenian style** is a living entity, which is the basis of origin and ideological content of Armenian ornaments and ornamental art ("zardarvest"). Its pictorial tradition formed the distinctive character of Armenian architectural style with relief ornamentation. **Armenian style** was the basis for formation of Armenian scripts, ideogram, hieroglyphic and alphabetic characters, as well as decorations in decorative-applied art, ceramics, carpet manufacturing, in manuscript and book ornamentation, as well as in Taraz (Armenian dress).

Armenian style tunes in to the spirit of regulations in nature. It implements the known laws of harmony, geometry and mathematics, the golden ratio, Fibonacci numbers, etc. Geometrical properties of cross, square, circle, rhombus, ellipse, trapezoid, spiral, triangle and other shapes are skillfully embodied in works of the artists and craftsmen. With the greatest sense of harmony and simplicity, they used the stone surface and its 3D properties (three-dimensionality) to transmit visual images in transforming environment in time and space: depending on certain times of day, month and solstice, the same image appears to revive, starts to "act" and move in shadows and light projections. Thus, the ancient artists depict the idea of "pseudo-animation", imitate the process of motion of light, shadow, the sun and the moon. The figures move, as if revived, they awaken and dance. They drift together and fight against each other, striving to evince their abilities and influence the feelings of the audience.

Armenian style - is the scenes of "rock theatrical virtual representations", the statuesque music and petrified light itself; and at the same time it is the synthesis and harmonic accord of man and nature, environment and space, voice of the heavenly spirit and soul of the first man, father, ancestors, Creator and mother, the synthetic movement of experience and feelings.

Armenian style - is the great "eye" of history, pointed at cultivated humanity. The main distinguishing features of the **Armenian style** are:

- a) **in architecture** - unique majesty is attained through the tendency to the model of the tree of life, cosmic tree, microcosm and macrocosm, model of the winged solar disc and cross, stability and durability to meet proportionality between separate units of structures and constructions, harmony of all the shapes and lines;
- b) **in sculpture and painting, carving and engraving on surfaces of rocks and stones** (vishapakar-monuments, cross-stones, steles and tombstones) – creation of realism archetypes, the effort not to make a precise transition of forms and manifestations of visible and invisible world, but **to use them as a language to express philosophical, ideological, and later religious ideas**, which tell about natural phenomena, historical events and facts of everyday life, describing and illustrating ancient mythological ideas, legends and stories using the motifs of plants and animals;
- c) **in pictographs** - establishment of the original basis of graphic art and graphic design, formation of experience and skills in creating "etsagirs", patterned, ideogram, hieroglyphic and modern alphabetic writing system through the tradition of rock art (stamped or engraved rock paintings);
- d) **in ornamentation and decorative-applied art** - creation of universal symbolic archetypes, which realize the modeling principles for complex decoration of manuscripts and books, household objects, rugs, carpets, objects and tools, weapons, clothing (Taraz), walls of houses.

To ancient Armenians, an image is, above all, **a spirit, life, light, dawn and sunrise**, a communication language, a sacred sign possessing a life-giving power. To create a figurative mark of an object or idea means to revive them, strengthen, consecrate, preserve

and perpetuate their vitality; to maintain the skills, abilities, knowledge, thoughts and pass them down from generation to generation. The artistic activity of the Armenians, within their predilection for natural, stylized and abstract images, was mostly focused on **architecture and ornamentation; sculpture and painting**, the two branches of fine arts, played a subordinate role.

Worldview

Armenian style is based on a developed worldview and religious cult of ancient residents of the Araratian Mountains. The whole art of ornamentation originated from **the need for knowledge, concepts of birth, fertility, tree of life, tree of the knowledge of good and evil, death and resurrection, eternal life, space, interconnection of forces of nature**, as well as **cross, swastika and astral symbols**. Moreover, animal and plant motifs, bright and contrastive colors of natural, "earthly" palette in visual arts express gratitude towards the forces of nature, the Creator, his sons and daughters - the father and the mother, the elements of Trinity. Proto-Armenian envisioned earthly life as part of the way, preceding another one - infinite life; and their earthly houses - as a temporary shelter, whereas his true dwelling was the area of ascension of his soul - heaven, space. Cosmic and linguistic image of the world, developed within ancestors of the Armenians, testifies permanent synthesis and continuity of genetically related traditions and experience of ancient hunters and gatherers, cattlemen and planters.

Armenian style is often characterized with the words **canon, archetype and conventionality**. The Armenians believe that Vahe, the creator of the world, was the first artist. His earthly representative is the first man - brave and noble Vahagn, ancestor of the Armenians. He founded the city of Van, Van Sea (salt lake) and Lake Sevan (fresh water). Vahagn – a dragon slayer and thunderer, later transformed into solar deity, frees the world from a dragon, sows the good seed, releases water and secures life on the earth. His bride Astghik (counterpart of Roman Venus) embodies fertility, birth and love.

The archetype of mirror symmetry occurs in **Armenian style**. It is represented in the images of the world tree, karatev (four-pointed cross), eagle, falcon, scorpion, bull, vishap - dragon, lion, snake, jackal, sun, moon and other animal, plant and combined ornamental motifs. It becomes indispensable in geometric ornamentation.

Another important feature of **Armenian style** of ornamentation is lack of totemism. In contrast to the religion of ancient Egyptians, who didn't analogize their gods to a man, the Armenians (like ancient Greeks) converted the images of animals into attributes of deities, though still not turning them into a hypostasis - an embodiment of a deity. Initially the ancestors of the Armenians used animal motifs (snakes, birds, dragons and deer) to portray typical and distinctive natural phenomena, good and evil forces, order and chaos, darkness and light, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, lava, solar and lunar eclipses, thunder and lightning, thunderstorm and rain, smoke, clouds of smoke, rivers, tide, lakes and seas. Later, under the influence of fierce struggles against culturally and religiously backward tribes and

nations, after emergence of the state, the early monotheistic views of ancient Armenians were transformed into a new ideology with its own pantheon of gods.

The Pantheon of Armenian Gods was not very large. **Solar deity became the highest cult** - formidable and gracious, life-giving and destroying. Ancient Aratta is called the land of the Father (Creator) - light, spiritual sun (the land of holy rites and knowledge), house of arch-father, earthly hearth of the deity Ar (counterpart of Vahagn). Solar (spiritual, lucid) symbols are diverse: the concept of sun was depicted in the form of a winged disc - a sphere with lots of outstretched hands-rays; as well as in the form of an eagle, falcon, lion or a bull. Circle (similar to the solar disk) constantly occurs in Armenian ornaments.

Monumental colossal stone **columns, steles, sculptures of fish and vishaps (dragons)** play a crucial role in Armenian visual arts. In Armenian art an important place is given to the image of god Aramazd - the supreme deity, creator of heaven, earth, sun and moon. He is often equated with a lion. There are also known stone statues of goddess Anahit. Birds, eagles and storks represented the forces of heaven, light and good. Snakes and dragons usually reflected the action of evil, forces of darkness, chaos and death. Unique and notable Armenian vishapakars and cross-stones stand out with relief images of various forms of crosses, amazing animal and plant ornamental motifs.

Systems analysis

Analyzing foreign and domestic experience of art history on describing image of the world and formation of universal principles of studies of ornamental motifs as an object of cognitive-graphic, historical development, subjected to cross-cultural transformation and interconversion, the author comes to the following logical and reasonable conclusions (Vahanyan V., 2010):

1. If an ornament has a denomination, it is determined by that denomination, whence it follows that it can be positioned as an artistic element;
2. If the type (motif) of an ornament has an enduring nature, its prior interpretation is considered to convey the original defining meaning of this motif;
3. If cruciform and swastika symbols have the earliest origin among all ornamental motifs and the widest possible dissemination throughout the territory of historical Armenia, then these symbols are proto-signs - one of the major archetypes serving artistic proto-language of visual arts;
4. If the first artistic symbols were characters of words about life, fertility, light, freedom, family (grain, fruit, seed, embryo, father, mother, son, heaven and earth, tree of life, plant, animal), and the most ancient pictorial elements were crosses and swastikas, then cruciform and swastika symbols should be considered as **one of the two units** of major ornamental archetypes, that impersonate and describe a particular character/hero, his birth, life and death, resurrection and downfall (name, word, concept, actions) and carry corresponding ideological frame. **The second unit** of archetypes embody the deeds of the Creator, God, forces of nature, corresponding actions, litigation narratives and major acts of physics and biology of vital functions.

To sum up, the cognitive archetype of ornament is envisioned as a synthesis of words and deeds - actions;

5. If there was a single proto-language of ornamentation, it had cruciform and swastika features.
6. If there was a single proto-language and it was round (the concept of one Father - the Creator) and cruciform (the concept of the Son, the first man), solar and swastika, four-component, four-cornered, four-petalled; and each round, cruciform and swastika ornamental symbol embodies an image, sign of a specific deity, then the set of gods was invariant for related and neighboring tribes of the Armenian highlands. If a hero (man) was depicted standing immobile, shaped as a winged cross, then his bride or wife was depicted oblique. Adequate worldview and religious ideology derive from the monotheistic concept of forces of cosmos and nature, objective concept of the image of Father;
7. If all modern religions are later formed ideological paradigms of social and economic reforms, and if early monotheistic worldview is its precursor, then the solar, cruciform and swastika characters are archaic religious symbols, which formed the invariant language of visualization of a number of world religions: Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Mithraism and Christianity;
8. Cross, solar and swastika symbols, as well as other archaic visual motifs of Armenian ornamentation describe the main theme of Indo-European mythology and iconography. A winged cross symbolizes life in many mythologies and religions, and a wingless cross - symbolizes death. In Egypt, Sumer, Akkad, Hatti, Assyria, Babylon, Persia and Urartu a winged solar disk embodies the supreme solar deity in the heaven, despite the fact that the names of these deities differed. In various countries an eight-pointed star or an eight-petalled rosette embodied the same god, the morning star - Venus (Astghik).

The principle of invariance in ornamental symbols

The principle of symmetry. An ornamental symbol is preserved for as long as possible in history of culture, transformations of related motifs and describing systems in case this symbol, as an archetype, originally had maximum symmetry (Tyunyaev A.A.). Thus, the first principle of transformation of ornamental shape, symmetry breaking, characterizes the process of motion (change of shape). Consequently, as soon as the symmetry in visual representation of an ornamental symbol/character starts to break, this form of an ornament acquires a tendency to move, that is, its visual appearance is changed. This tendency leads the original image of an ornament to "death", as the process of motion is perceived as "birth and death" (development, revival or resurrection) – transformation. In this case, the structure and organization of a system is changing (according to the period of time) to the point, when its current image cannot be visually identified with the original shape. Thus, we are witnessing the "birth" of a new ornamental shape. Such transformations characterize all the stages of historical development of Armenian ornamental art.

The principle of historicity. It derives from the principle of symmetry and determines that the higher the level of symmetry is, the more archaic and of earlier origin an

ornamental symbol is (Tyunyaev A.A.). This point states a more ancient origin of cruciform and swastika symbols, since we know that they have the highest degree or level of symmetry. It should be considered that prototype symbols can be elucidated as both immobile and moving images and objects. All the ornamental archetype symbols have symmetry in the directions of **immobility** (vertical axis) and **mobility** (horizontal axis).

The principles under discussion were expanded, based on systematical and technical requirements of integration and completeness (Vahanyan G., 2005) in research and modeling of complex systems. The author proposes new universal principles of **continuity**, **compliance** and **compatibility**. As modern cognitive scientific instrument (Vahanyan V., 2009), they allow not only to avoid errors during the study, synthesis and analysis of complex and combined ornamental compositions, but also provide the opportunity to efficiently split a complex system (a set of complex archetypes on standard modules) to more plain and simple elements. It's easier to interpret the scenes, plots and relief images, identify the origin and genesis of the used ornamental motifs.

The extant ornamental symbols are mostly preserved since the Upper Paleolithic period. Throughout the evolution of rock paintings, symbols and characters, there was formed a semiotic ornamental system of cognition and fixation of worldview, ideas, thoughts, experience, skills and mythical motifs. Using descriptive (graphic) elements, they allow to transmit the structured information in the form of knowledge and to fix them in time and space.

Given the principle of similarity in reshaping and artistic design of ornaments, proposed by the author, a number of problems can be solved, such as “to what extent the characters and artistic images correspond/are similar to earlier archetypes”. In identifying common archetypes in semantic-figurative description of the motif, interpreting its symbolism, it's unambiguously interpreted. Since a greater development of ornamental-semiotic system in Armenian visual arts and architecture, the author focuses particular attention in his research on archetypes of medieval Armenian relief ornamentation with animal and plant motifs. Among them major (typical) motifs of medieval relief ornamentation are revealed and patterns of their transformation are disclosed (Vahanyan V., 2009, 2010). They reflect:

1. the concepts of genesis, the Father - light, knowledge and formation of the elements of creation: symbols of sky, earth, water, sea, smoke, fire, flame, and plants;
2. the concepts of birth (son, fruit, grain, seed, flower, tree of life), growth, development and fertility;
3. the concepts of the first man, Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, mother and maternity;
4. the concepts of the forces of good and evil, struggle of black and white, light and chaos, birth and death, death and resurrection, immortality;
5. the concept of twins (duality concept);
6. the concepts of hierarchy and trinity: a family - father, mother and son; father, mother and the holy spirit (concepts of trinity, three forces, trident, thunder and lightning characters);

7. the concepts of four elements, four cardinal directions, four races, four Evangelists, “up and down”, “right and left”, north and south, east and west, cross, etc .;
8. the concepts of circle, wheel, motion in time and space (winged cross, swastika, disk, rosette), the 12 zodiac signs, hours, months, sons, disciples, apostles);
9. the concepts of heavenly and earthly houses, stepped mountain, peak, hearth, gkhhatun, calvary;
10. the concepts of monastery, temple and church, macrocosm and microcosm; concepts and values of Christianity;
11. the concepts of heraldry, objective, structure and value of a royal crown and public education.

Conclusion

General interpretation of Art presupposes the art to simplify. Symbolism is envisioned as a language of simplification, and ornamentation is represented as construction and preservation of the "theater" of time and space, good and light, feelings and emotions, environment and the forces of nature, using most comprehensible animal and plant motifs and their images. Describing Slavic paganism, B.A. Rybakov notes: “Slavic paganism is a part of a huge universal complex of ... visions, beliefs and rites, dating back thousands of years, that formed all the later developed religions in the world”. Proto-Indo-European worldview can be characterized the same way, as any other religious and mythological system of ancient times; vestiges and distant echoes, preserved in artifacts; symbols and characters of rock and ornamental art in the Araratian Mountains.

The ancient Armenian song about the birth of Vahagn says: “his eyes (“achkunk”) are like two suns” (M. Khorenatsi). There used to be a tradition in ancient Egypt to portray the “eyes” of a supreme deity in eye shape (Brockhaus and Efron Encyclopedic Dictionary, online available from: [//bibliotekar.ru/bee/25.htm](http://bibliotekar.ru/bee/25.htm)). This archaic attribute is preserved in Christian iconography: two luminaries, the sun and the moon, are depicted over the cross with crucified Christ. To explain this phenomenon, we compare the notions “contemplate” (compare Russian “zret’s” - behold, Armenian “zard” - ornament, “zardarvest” – ornamental art), “look” and “see”. It is well known that the words “zreniye” (vision) and “zret’s” (contemplation) are of Indo-European origin. Their original meaning is “shine”, “glitter”. What is the definition for an “eye” in universal Indo-European perception? In Polish “glaz” (eye) is defined as “block, rock, stone”. Slavic “glaz” has no generally accepted explanation. “Denotations of the “moon” and the “sun” prove this point: according to Japhetic theory they are defined as an “eye” (N. Marr). In architectonics of the notion “eye” we observe a certain analogy with designation of the Armenians – “ai”, “hay”. The mythological definition for the word “see” is “live” (Iliad XVIII, 61; Odyssey IV, 833), and “blind” means “dead”. Accordingly, “eye” means “light”. Therefore, the phenomenon of “two eyes like two suns” means carrying light, knowledge and doctrine of life, transferred to the descendants by Vahagn. Thus, “the eye through which I see God is the same eye through which God sees me” (Angelus Silesius).

In the XXI century, the descendants of Vahagn and Hayk, Mher and David of Sassoun, we continue to actively contribute to the formation of conditions for genesis, creation, love, harmony, light, knowledge, victory over the forces of evil and injustice, based on and using values and traditions of Armenian style, distinctive for medieval Armenian relief ornamentation with animal and plant motifs.

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