
Negotiating Persian Artistic Traditions among Armenian Christians in Safavid Iran

YVETTE TAJARIAN, GRETA GASPARYAN

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YVETTE TAJARIAN

Matenadaran (Research Institute of Ancient Manuscripts), Yerevan State University (Yerevan, Armenia). yvettetaj@yahoo.com
ORCID: 0000-0001-9302-0104

GRETA GASPARYAN

Matenadaran (Research Institute of Ancient Manuscripts) (Yerevan, Armenia). arthistoriangreta@gmail.com
ORCID: 0000-0002-0235-6778

Abstract. *This article examines three interconnected domains through which Armenian Christians living in Isfahan during the Safavid period adopted and creatively transformed Persian artistic traditions. The article analyzes the incorporation of Islamic architectural and decorative forms into the exterior and interior decoration of Armenian churches in New Julfa; the depiction of a Muslim shah in the wall painting of the mansions of Christian Armenian khojas (merchants); and the relocation of the Armenian Christian scribal center, as evidenced by two Gospel manuscripts preserved at the Matenadaran (MS 6785 and MS 7639). The research is based on architectural analysis, iconographic and stylistic comparison, and the examination of manuscript colophons. The findings demonstrate that these phenomena should not be understood as signs of religious assimilation, but rather as expressions of cultural interaction, adaptation, and negotiation. Armenian Christians preserved their religious identity while simultaneously integrating elements of Persian artistic tradition, thereby forming a distinctive bicultural synthesis shaped through diplomacy and coexistence within an Islamic context.*

Keywords: Julfa, New Julfa, Isfahan, deportation, khoja mansion, Armenian church, dome, tile, manuscript illumination, Gospel

Переосмысление персидских художественных традиций армянскими христианами в Сефевидском Иране

Ивет Таджарян

Матенадаран (Научно-исследовательский институт древних рукописей),
Ереванский государственный университет (Ереван, Армения).

yvettetaj@yahoo.com.

ORCID: 0000-0001-9302-0104

Грета Гаспарян

Матенадаран (Научно-исследовательский институт древних рукописей)
(Ереван, Армения). arthistoriangreta@gmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0002-0235-6778

Аннотация. *Статья посвящена анализу трех взаимосвязанных сфер, в рамках которых армянские христиане, проживавшие в Исфахане в сефевидский период, осваивали и творчески переосмысливали персидские художественные традиции. В исследовании рассматриваются заимствование исламских архитектурных и декоративных форм во внешнем и внутреннем убранстве армянских церквей Новой Джульфы, изображение мусульманского шаха в настенной живописи домов армянских христиан-купцов (ходжей), а также перемещение армянского скриптория (центра книжного письма), прослеживаемое на примере двух Евангелий, хранящихся в Матенадаране (рукописи № 6785 и № 7639). Анализ основан на архитектурных наблюдениях, иконографическом и стилистическом сравнении, а также изучении колофонов рукописей. Полученные результаты показывают, что данные явления следует интерпретировать не как признаки религиозной ассимиляции, а скорее как проявления культурного взаимодействия и адаптации в рамках исламского имперского контекста. Армянские христиане сохраняли свою религиозную идентичность, одновременно интегрируя элементы персидской художественной традиции, что привело к формированию своеобразного бiculturalного синтеза, сложившегося в условиях сосуществования.*

Ключевые слова: Джульфа, Новая Джульфа, Исфахан, депортация, дома ходжей, армянская церковь, купол, керамическая плитка, книжная миниатюра, Евангелие

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Iran prior to the foundation of New Julfa

IN the 16th century, the establishment of the Safavid Dynasty marked a significant and decisive turning point in the history of Iran, as from then on, the situation in Iran remarkably changed. The establishment of political stability, the wide spread of Shi'ism as a state religion, economic prosperity, and gaining a more significant role in the world arena were the characteristics of the Safavid period. Among other things, the Safavids created a thorough governmental structure that controlled all the phases of the development of art — from preparing artists to creating art tools and artworks. This active involvement is the proof that arts became highly prioritized by the Safavids.

After ascending the throne, Shah Abbas I (1588–1629) initiated major political and urban reforms, one of the most significant of which was the transfer of the Safavid capital to Isfahan in 1597–1598. (Before that, the Safavid capitals had successively been Tabriz and Qazvin¹.) After that, Isfahan was changed, the population increased. Major urban development took place in the southwestern part of the existing city, while the older urban fabric of Isfahan remained in place. Thus, Safavid Isfahan developed through the expansion and transformation of an already existing city rather than through an entirely new foundation. Isfahan became a commercial and diplomatic city, and many markets, mosques, palaces, schools, and factories were built there. Investments were encouraged to promote the development of the new capital city, therefore, after a short while a huge number of merchants from various nations settled down and many factories were based there, which enhanced the trade². No essential changes were made to the structure of Isfahan's old town as the construction works were done far from the old districts of the city. As a result, the new Isfahan included two parts — old and new. In this way, the city emerged through the combination of older urban traditions and new imperial ambitions, and during the reign of Shah Abbas I this approach was applied to the fields of industry and art as well. As the French traveler Joseph Pitton de Tournefort notes, “Abbas the Great changed the face of the entire world: all the

¹ Mathee, R. (2012) “Safavid Iran through the Eyes of European Travelers”, *Harvard Library Bulletin* 23 (1–2): 10–12.

² Ferrier, R. W. (1996) *A Journey to Persia: Jean Chardin's Portrait of Seventeenth-Century Empire*, pp. 17–25. London: I.B. Tauris.

goods of the East became known in the West, and the products of the West adorned the East³.

In the summer of 1604, Sultan Ahmed I of the Ottoman Empire sought to recover the lost territories and moved his troops from Erzurum (Karin) toward Kars and Shirak. Shah Abbas chose not to engage in a direct battle, but instead adopted a strategy of forced depopulation in the threatened regions. He determined to depopulate the parts of the country that were attacked by the Sultan and drove Armenians out to Isfahan. The goal of this policy was that as a result, the enemy would be deprived of the opportunity to get food supply, which would hinder further Ottoman invasion. Thus, due to the forced deportation of the Armenians by Shah Abbas, new diasporan communities were created in Iran, and one of the most remarkable ones became the Isfahan's Armenian community⁴.

This article approaches these processes through three interconnected domains — ecclesiastical architecture, mural painting, and manuscript culture — each of which reveals a different aspect of cultural interaction within the Armenian community of New Julfa. Considered together, these domains reflect not separate phenomena, but a few complementary expressions of a shared visual and cultural environment.

2. From Julfa to New Julfa: A Historical Overview

The city of *Jugha (Julfa)*⁵ was located in the *Yernjak* district of the *Syunik* province of Greater Armenia⁶. Julfa was one of the prominent settlements of Armenia, which has been a major trade center since the 13th century due to its strategic geographical location. For decades, trade has been the primary occupation of its residents, and most of their wealth has been generated through these activities. The trade caravans

³ Tajiryan, E. (2017) *New Julfa in European Sources of the 17th-18th Centuries*. Vol. 2, p. 187. Yerevan.

⁴ In addition to Isfahan, Armenian communities were established in various regions of Iran, including Gilan, Mazandaran, Hamadan, Kashan, Fereydan, Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari, and Shiraz.

⁵ The toponym *Jugha* (Armenian: Ջուղա) corresponds to Julfa in English-language sources; *Nor Jugha* refers to New Julfa.

⁶ The city's geographical location rendered it a crucial commercial crossroads, situated along one of the principal routes connecting Europe with the Far East. Julfa was among the most significant urban centers of historical Armenia and continued to exist without interruption until 1848. From the 17th through the 20th centuries, it was commonly referred to as Old Jugha in order to distinguish it from New Julfa. For more see Ayvazyan A. (1984) *Jugha*, p. 3. Yerevan.

of Jugha merchants — known in Armenian sources as *khojas*, traveled freely to India (Madras, Calcutta), China, Persia, Italy (Venice), Vienna, Amsterdam, Constantinople, Moscow, Crimea, Astrakhan, as well as Java Island, Philippine Islands (Manila) among others⁷. By the 15th to the 17th centuries Armenian *khojas* had become prominent figures within Armenian society, renowned both for their immense accumulated wealth and for their patriotic engagement in the organization and support of Armenian printing enterprises.

The beginning of the 17th century was marked by heightened geopolitical tensions, as the Ottoman–Safavid rivalry escalated into open warfare, producing devastating consequences for Eastern Armenia. As the prominent contemporary chronicler Arakel of Tabriz (Davrizhetsi) records:

The 17th century commenced for the Armenian people with catastrophe. In 1603, Shah Abbas I marched from Isfahan with a vast army toward the Araratian plain in order to launch a long-planned campaign against the Ottoman Empire. He first captured Tabriz, then seized Nakhijevan within a single day, and subsequently directed his forces toward the conquest of the fortress of Yerevan⁸.

According to several sources, in planning the occupation of the Nakhijevan district Shah Abbas attached particular importance to the commercially renowned city of Julfa, where he remained encamped for three days. Arakel Davrizhetsi relates that the citizens of Julfa, unaware of the Shah's true intentions, received him ceremonially, adorning the road from the riverbank to the palace of Khoja Khachik. However, following the capture of the Yerevan fortress, Shah Abbas initiated the large-scale forced deportation of the Armenian population of Eastern Armenia — an event known in historical sources as the *sürgün* or the “Great Surgun” — which resulted in the displacement of approximately 400 000 Armenians⁹.

⁷ Ayvazyan, A. (1978) *Historical and Architectural Monuments of Nakhijevan*, p. 39. Yerevan: Hayastan Publishing House.

⁸ Arakel of Tabriz (Davrizhetsi) (1988) *History*, pp. 32–35. Yerevan.

⁹ Some accounts concerning the relocation of Armenians to Persia are found in the chronicle of the above mentioned historian Arakel, who notes that the population was transferred to Persia in three groups. He refers to the first group as the “Deportation of the Strangers,” the second as the “Deportation of Ararat,” and only the third group is designated as the “Julfans” (Arakel of Tabriz (Davrizhetsi) (1988) *History*, p. 84). From this it becomes clear that Shah Abbas initially intended to relocate people to

The deported inhabitants of Jugha were relocated to the vicinity of Isfahan, where, by royal decree, Shah Abbas permitted them to settle along the banks of the Zayandeh River. There, a new community emerged, named New Julfa in memory of their former homeland.

In this regard, art historian Ghazaryan observes: “Having settled along the banks of the Zayandeh River near Isfahan, the population of Old Jugha, through their diligence, active engagement of the mercantile class, and the skilled craftsmanship of artisans, succeeded in imparting an urban character to New Julfa”¹⁰. The city was constructed according to a carefully devised urban plan¹¹, featuring a grand avenue extending approximately 3000 meters, named after the first *kalantar*¹² of Julfa, Khoja Nazar. New Julfa soon became one of the major political, economic, and cultural centers of the Safavid state, serving as a key node within the commercial network linking Europe and India.

3. Manifestations of Islamic Art and Architecture in the Christian Ecclesiastical Buildings of New Julfa

3.1. The Influence of Islamic Architecture on the Exterior Decoration of Armenian Christian Churches

From the beginning of the 17th century, Isfahan emerged as one of the major centers of Persian artistic production, where architecture, mu-

Persia not only from the historic settlement of Julfa, but also from a number of towns and villages in the Araratian region. Historian Mikayel Malkhasyan argues that the population brought from various parts of Armenia into the Araratian province was gathered and concentrated in a single location. Many among them had managed to escape captivity; nevertheless, they too were to be located and subjected to forced deportation. See Malkhasyan, M. (2019) “The Issue of the Territorial Coverage of the Deportation of the Armenian Population Organized by Shah ‘Abbās I’, *Armenological Issues* 3 (18): 56.

¹⁰ Ghazaryan, M. (1974) *Armenian Painting in XVII–XVIII Centuries*, p. 13. Yerevan.

¹¹ “Khiābān-e Nazar” (translated from Persian: Nazar Avenue), regarded as the main thoroughfare of Julfa, measured 3276 paces in length and 16 paces in width. Along this avenue were located numerous workshops and shops; however, it has unfortunately been destroyed and today marks the starting point of the entrance to New Julfa. For a detailed discussion, see Khachikyan, Sh. (1988) *The Armenian Mercantile Community of New Julfa and Its Commercial and Economic Relations with Russia in the Seventeenth–Eighteenth Centuries*, p. 37. Yerevan; Ter-Yovhaneanc, Y. (1880) *History of New Julfa in Isfahan*. Vol. I, p. 172. New Julfa.

¹² The *kalantar* (translated from Persian: “city head”) was the title given to an individual who was typically chosen from among the wealthy khojas of New Julfa. His primary responsibility was to oversee matters of political and public significance within the community of New Julfa. See Tajiryan, E. (2017) *New Julfa in European Sources of the 17th–18th Centuries*, Vol. 2, p. 113.

ral painting, manuscript illumination, and various decorative arts flourished. As the capital of the Safavid state, it developed a relatively unified visual and architectural environment that shaped both monumental and vernacular building practices.

Within this context, the Armenian community of New Julfa was compelled to negotiate its position in a predominantly Islamic cultural and political environment. While preserving their religious identity and ecclesiastical traditions, Armenian patrons and builders selectively engaged with the architectural language of Safavid Iran. As a result, the churches of New Julfa offer a particularly clear example of architectural adaptation, in which Armenian liturgical structures incorporate elements characteristic of the surrounding Iranian environment.

Although the new environment in which Iranian Armenians found themselves — with its religious themes, ritual practices, and cultural worldview — differed fundamentally from Armenian Christian traditions and was initially perceived as alien and emotionally distant, over time the community was forced to adapt to this new reality. For the Christian Armenians who settled in Iran, the preservation of their faith, language, and cultural identity remained a primary concern. To this end, they adopted a cautious, flexible, and diplomatic approach, gradually establishing mutually beneficial relations with Shah Abbas I and his successors.

Adaptation to the surrounding cultural milieu, the expectations of religious authorities, and the specific characteristics of Safavid state policy became an essential means through which Armenians ensured both communal security and the continuity of their cultural identity. One of the most tangible expressions of these interactions can be observed in material culture, particularly in the field of church architecture. While the Armenian churches of Isfahan functioned as Christian places of worship¹³, their exterior decoration frequently incorporates elements characteristic of Iranian–Islamic architecture, including domed structures, pointed arches, tiled surfaces, and related formal features. In the Armenian architectural tradition, the dome is typically positioned at the center of a cruciform plan and is articulated through a conical or pyramidal roof, symbolizing vertical ascent and possessing clear structural and symbolic significance. This typology, established in late antiquity,

¹³ Carshwell, J. (1968) *New Julfa. The Armenian Churches and Other Buildings*, p. 23. Oxford.

demonstrates remarkable continuity throughout the history of Armenian church architecture (fig. 1).

By contrast, the domes of several churches in New Julfa — most notably that of the Holy Savior Cathedral — display forms that diverge from traditional Armenian models. Instead of the sharply defined conical or pyramidal profiles typical of Armenian architecture, these domes often feature rounded bases and elongated vertical forms. Morphologically and structurally, they closely resemble domed solutions found in Safavid religious architecture.



Fig. 1. Dome of the Holy Savior Cathedral in New Julfa. © Greta Gasparyan

From both morphological and engineering perspectives, these forms closely resemble the domed solutions prevalent in the Iranian–Islamic religious architecture. This affinity becomes particularly evident when viewed in relation to the major Safavid monuments of Isfahan, such as the Sheikh Lutfollah Mosque (1603–1619) and the Shah (now Imam) Mosque (1611–1630)¹⁴, whose domes similarly feature bulbous bases and pointed vertical emphasis. The parallels observed here do not suggest direct imitation, but rather reflect the influence of a shared architectural language shaped within the same urban and cultural environment.

¹⁴ See “Islamic arts: Architecture”, in *Britannica*. [<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Islamic-arts/Safavid-art#ref317020>, accessed on 11.11.2025].

An additional factor contributing to these similarities was the choice of building materials. In Isfahan and its surrounding regions, brick construction dominated architectural practice, owing to the scarcity of natural stone and the advanced development of local building technologies. The brick enabled the creation of expansive, smoothly contoured domes with gradual transitions, making it particularly well suited to the pointed and elongated dome forms. The use of the same material and construction techniques in the Armenian churches of New Julfa — often employing the same local craftsmen — naturally resulted in comparable structural and formal solutions.

These architectural features should not be interpreted as religious transformation, rather, they reflect a conscious and pragmatic process of adaptation to the local architectural environment. While incorporating elements of the prevailing architectural language into the exterior appearance of their churches, Armenians consistently preserved Armenian Christian traditions in interior spatial organization, iconographic programs, and liturgical functions. The result was a distinctive synthesis in which Armenian ecclesiastical architecture retained its Christian liturgical and symbolic logic while selectively adopting formal solutions shaped by the Iranian architectural environment.

Thus, the material culture of Iranian Armenians formed within a foreign environment — particularly the stylistic characteristics of church exteriors — may be regarded as an important historical and cultural testimony. It demonstrates how a Christian community was able to preserve its identity while simultaneously respecting and creatively integrating the artistic components of the surrounding culture.

3.2. The Influence of Islamic Art on the Interior Decoration of Armenian Christian Churches

In 17th-century Isfahan, the exterior and interior surfaces of buildings were extensively decorated with ceramic tiles, mosaic tilework (*mo'arraḡ*), and polychrome tiles executed in the so-called *haft-rang* (“seven-color”) technique. Ceramic tile decoration thus became one of the defining elements of architectural design¹⁵.

Within the Armenian milieu of New Julfa, these techniques — especially the *haft-rang* method — were widely adopted in church in-

¹⁵ Carshwell, J. (1968) *New Julfa. The Armenian Churches and Other Buildings*, pp. 26–27.

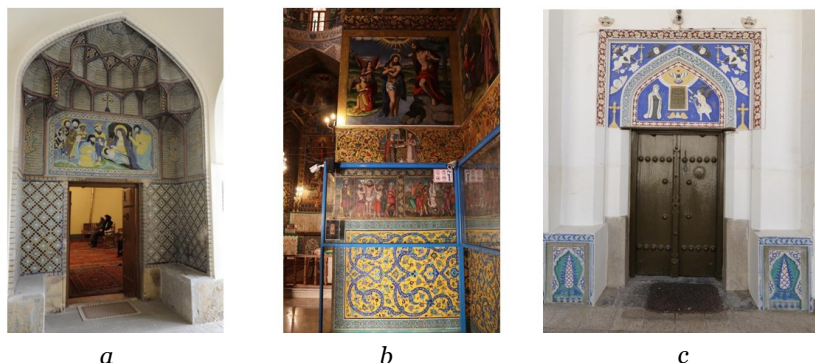


Fig. 2. Tiles as a decoration of the churches in New Julfa
a – the entrance of the St. Gevorg church, *b* – the lower zone of the inner hall of the Holy Saviour Cathedral, *c* – the entrance of the St. Stepanos church.
 © Diocesan Council of the Armenian Diocese of Isfahan

teriors and, in some cases, on façades and in courtyards. Although such decorative practices were not characteristic of traditional Armenian architecture, they were gradually integrated into the visual language of New Julfa's churches. While the technical and chromatic features of these tiles closely parallel those found in Safavid mosques, their iconographic content was fully reinterpreted within a Christian framework (fig. 2).

In terms of technique and color palette, the tilework used in New Julfa's churches closely corresponds to that of Isfahan's mosques, while differences are observable mainly in the selection of ornamental motifs, iconographic themes, and the arrangement of colors. Various sections of these churches preserve ceramic tiles with diverse thematic content, distinguished by their original design and iconographic solutions.

The tile decorations employed in the Armenian context of New Julfa are characterized by a rich ornamental vocabulary, including vegetal motifs, animals, fruits, and birds. While the overall decorative language follows Persian traditions, clear influences of Chinese art are also evident, manifested in depictions of mythical creatures, phoenixes, and stylized cloud patterns (fig. 3).

Some of the tile mosaics were produced by Armenian craftsmen and often bear Armenian inscriptions, indicating their integration into a local artistic practice. Although the Holy Savior Cathedral and St. Bethlehem Church are among the best-known examples, the use of ceramic tiles was in fact widespread across nearly all churches in New Julfa.

The tiles were systematically placed in different architectural zones — beneath the sanctuary, along the lower registers of interior walls, above entrances, and on bell towers — each corresponding to a particular iconographic and decorative program. The lower zones of the sanctuary frequently depict central Christian themes, such as Christ and the Apostles, emphasizing the theological focal point of the sacred space. The lower registers of church interiors are typically adorned with vegetal and ornamental motifs, while angels are commonly represented on bell towers. Tile panels placed above entrances, such as scenes of the Nativity of Christ, function as symbolic transitional images, visually guiding the faithful into the sacred realm.

These observations demonstrate that ceramic tile decoration in the churches of New Julfa should not be understood merely as the adoption of Persian artistic forms. Rather, it represents a process of selective adaptation, in which technical and formal elements of the Safavid visual environment were reinterpreted and integrated into the symbolic and liturgical structure of Armenian ecclesiastical space.

4. Royal Presence in Khoja Mansions in Safavid Isfahan

After establishing Isfahan as the Safavid capital, Shah Abbas I envisioned transforming it not only into a political center, but also into a major hub of Persian art and architecture, culture, and internation-



Fig. 3. Exterior tile decoration of the Golestan Palace (Iran; now the Golestan Palace Museum), 16th century.
© Yvette Tajarian

al trade — one that would serve as a vital link between Europe and India¹⁶. A central role in the realization of this strategy was assigned to Armenian merchants, particularly the *khoja* elite of Julfa¹⁷. As noted by the academician I. Petrushevsky: “In undertaking the large-scale deportation of the Armenian population, Shah Abbas was fully aware that the relocation of experienced merchants and artisans to Iran would stimulate the development of foreign trade and contribute significantly to the country’s economic growth, especially in its central regions”¹⁸.

Following the deportation, the population of New Julfa rapidly reached approximately three thousand inhabitants. For many years, Shah Abbas exempted Armenians from taxation, granted land for the construction of churches, and took various measures to ensure that they remained in Iran. Under royal patronage, the Armenians of New Julfa were able to preserve their national and religious identity by establishing churches and schools and by fostering manuscript production, printing, and the visual arts.

Numerous written and visual sources attest that Iranian Armenian *khojas*, regardless of their Christian faith, consistently maintained respectful — and often close — relations with high-ranking Muslim officials and the Safavid ruling authority. These relations are reflected not only in official documents and travel accounts, but also in the mural decoration of the *khojas*’ mansions. The Italian traveler Pietro Della Valle remarks: “The mansions of the *khojas* of New Julfa were so splendid that they were capable of hosting even the shah himself”¹⁹. Shah Abbas is known to have visited the mansions of Armenian merchants, interacted personally with the *khojas*, and, according to some sources, even attended religious ceremonies. In this context, *khoja* mansions functioned not merely as residential spaces, but as sites of diplomatic interaction.

During the 17th and 18th centuries, the wealthy *khoja* class constructed numerous mansions, some of which have survived, while oth-

¹⁶ Ghazaryan, M. (1968) “XVII Century Armenian Painting of New Julfa”, *Historical and Philological Journal* 1: 193.

¹⁷ Tanavoli, P. (2016) *European Women in Persian Houses: Western Images in Safavid and Qajar Iran*, p. 19. London: I.B. Tauris.

¹⁸ Petrushevsky, I. P. (1949) *Essays on the History of Feudal Relations in Azerbaijan and Armenia (Sixteenth–Eighteenth Centuries)*, p. 82. Leningrad.

¹⁹ Hermet, A. (2000) *The Venice of the Armenians*, p. 175. Yerevan: Sahak Partev Publishing House.

ers are known only through written sources. Based on new studies of the researchers, out of 44 mansions, six have not been preserved over the years but 38 mansions are still standing, some of which have undergone modifications and now serve different purposes²⁰. Among the surviving examples are the mansions of Abgar, Khoja Petros Velijanyan, Hovhannes, Sukias, Martha Peters, and others, while destroyed residences include those of Alo Khan, Agha Kamalyan, Voskan, Vrtanes Abgar, and several others. Within this milieu, mural painting emerged as a visual expression of khoja identity, social status, and political affiliation. Photography played a crucial role in the study of these khoja mansions too. Iranian-Armenian Avo Hovhannisian documented most of the khoja mansions in detail through extensive photographic work²¹.

4.1. *The Depiction of Shah Abbas in the Mansion of Khoja Sultan*

Although Armenians, like other Christians living in Isfahan, were formally subjects of the Safavid state, contemporary accounts indicate that their role extended far beyond this status. As intermediaries in commercial and economic networks, Armenian khojas maintained close and often direct relations with the shah. The ruler himself also showed interest in the internal life of Christian communities and could enter their social and domestic spaces when he wished. These interactions, while based on political pragmatism, also reflected a degree of personal intimacy. For prominent members of the Armenian mercantile elite, such as the khojas, their position within the community facilitated not only economic activity but also direct engagement with royal authority, creating relationships that were mutually beneficial on both political and social levels.

One of the murals in the mansion of Khoja Sultan — described by Avo Hovhannisian as “Shah Abbas II at a Banquet” (fig. 4) — is

²⁰ Tajarian, Y., Gasparyan, G. (2024) “The Khoja Mansions of New Julfa as a Source for the Study of the Characteristics of Architectural Cultural Heritage,” *Multidisciplinary Reviews* 7: ss019.

²¹ The majority of khoja mansions have not survived to the present day. As a result, the study of their mural decoration has largely become possible through photographs taken at different periods, among which the work of photographer Avo Hovhannisian is particularly significant. These photographs function as documentary evidence of once-prominent architectural complexes, providing scholars with essential material for their identification, analysis, and interpretation. See Hakobyan, H., Hovhannisian, A. (2007) *New Julfa (Julfa): The Artistic Decorations of Khoja Mansions (Seventeenth–Eighteenth Centuries)*. Yerevan.



Fig. 4. Shah Abbas II at a Banquet, Khoja Sultan's mansion in New Julfa.
© Avo Hovhannisian

particularly expressive in ideological terms, precisely because the Shah is represented not in a royal palace setting, but inside the mansion of an Armenian Christian *khosro*.

Here, the shah is seated in a relaxed, almost everyday posture, devoid of formal courtly or sacralized attributes. This presentation removes him from the distant realm of sanctified authority and situates him within the human, secular space of an Armenian domestic interior.

The image also carries documentary significance. Just as depictions of Christian officials and foreign envoys in Persian royal murals are understood as evidence of their actual presence at court and direct interaction with the shah, the same principle applies to the murals found in the mansions of Armenian *khosros*. The image of the shah here is not symbolic or allegorical, but rather functions as a visual affirmation of real presence — a confirmation that he had entered the space of the house or maintained direct relations with its owners.

Within the Safavid visual tradition, representations of the shah in banquet or reception scenes were well established and conveyed ideals of controlled sociability and royal presence. In this respect, the image also participates in a broader pictorial language of Safavid court culture.

The central ideological axis of the mural lies in this spatial transposition: the Muslim shah is “relocated” into a Christian environment, while the Armenian merchant household becomes a site that accommodates the presence of secular authority. This constitutes an artistic expression of Safavid Iran’s diplomatic realities. Although the Armenian *khosros* were Christian, they simultaneously served as key agents within the shah’s economic, commercial, and diplomatic networks. Consequently, the appearance of the shah on the walls of their mansions should not be reduced to a simple expression of domination; rather, it reflects a more complex relationship in which hierarchy, patronage, diplomatic proximity, and coexistence operate simultaneously.

ly. The shah is represented not as a religious authority, but as a secular patron whose favor ensured the economic and cultural autonomy of the Christian community.

The choice of a reception scene is far from accidental. The presence of a musician, the relaxed postures of the figures, and the depiction of everyday gestures create an atmosphere of peaceful coexistence in which religious difference is not emphasized as a point of opposition, but is subtly neutralized through cultural interaction. Here, the Muslim shah participates in the secular sphere of Christian domestic life — music, conviviality, and social exchange — visually articulating ideas of coexistence and mutual recognition. In this way, the Armenian merchant mansion emerges not as a closed system, but as a space where distinctions of power and faith temporarily yield to social communication.

From a religious perspective, the mural invites a multilayered reading. The depiction of the shah within the domestic space of an Armenian merchant should therefore be understood as both a sign of political presence and a visual expression of negotiated coexistence. It reflects a context in which religious difference did not preclude interaction, but was mediated through shared social and cultural practices.

5. Negotiating the Iranian Artistic Environment: Two Gospel Manuscripts from New Julfa

Medieval Julfa, as a prominent economic and cultural center, is also known in the history of Armenian manuscript culture for its scriptoria. Based on the colophons and the stylistic features of miniature painting in the surviving manuscripts, it may be assumed that the teaching and organized practice of the scribal arts in Julfa began as early as the 12th–13th centuries and continued until the forced deportation organized by Shah Abbas. A significant portion of Julfa's scribal centers were destroyed, particularly during the forced displacement of the population, with the result that only a limited number of manuscripts — primarily dating from the 14th to 17th centuries — have survived²². The surviving manuscripts, however, provide valuable evidence for tracing the transformation and relocation of scribal activity.

²² Ayvazyan, A. (1998) *Mural Painting Art of Nakhijevan*, pp. 12, 14. Yerevan: Gitutyun Publishing House of the National Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Armenia.

This process can be most clearly observed through two Gospel manuscripts preserved at the Matenadaran, MS 6785 and MS 7639. They represent two distinct yet complementary stages of the same historical transformation. Together, they allow for tracing the gradual transfer of the scribal tradition from pre-deportation centers to Isfahan, within the broader context of the formation of New Julfa.

MS 6785 is particularly significant, as its colophons attest to two different centers of production: Khizan and Isfahan²³. One part of the manuscript was written in Khizan during the pre-deportation period, while another part was completed later in Isfahan. This circumstance allows the manuscript to be interpreted as a transitional monument,

in which two scribal realities — pre-deportation and post-deportation — are combined within a single manuscript.

Particular attention should be paid to the illuminated page of MS 6785 and its miniature and decorative program. The ornamentation of the page (fig. 5) does not closely follow the conventions of Armenian manuscript illumination alone. Its symmetrical vegetal and geometric interlace, multicolored framing, and integrated ornamental field point to a broader Islamic manuscript tradition. In this respect, the composition may be associated not only with Safavid manuscript art, but also with earlier Seljuk and post-Seljuk frontispiece conventions, which continued to shape Islamic manuscript design over a long period. Cross motifs are clearly emphasized within the decorative frames,



Fig. 5. Title page, MS 6785, Gospel Khizan and Isfahan, 1607. Scribe: Khachatur of Khizan; illustrator: Petros the monk, Mesrop the deacon; patron: khoja Petros, 34r
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²³ Ter-Vardanyan, G. (2005) *Armenian Manuscript Art of New Julfa and Adjacent Regions (Materials from the Exhibitions of the Mesrop Mashtots Matenadaran and the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, July–August)*, p. 133. Yerevan.

while the inscriptions preserve the Armenian script and linguistic identity. What we encounter here is not simple formal imitation, but a process of creative appropriation, whereby a Persian compositional scheme is employed to convey content imbued with Christian ideology. This phenomenon may be characterized as a conscious separation and reconfiguration of form and meaning, resulting in a bicultural synthesis.

Of particular importance is the presence of two colophons on this page of MS 6785: one placed at the center of the illuminated composition and another in the lower part of the page. Structurally, the central colophon recalls title-page solutions common in Persian manuscript tradition; however, its content is fully Armenianized, emphasizing Christian belief and highlighting the name of the manuscript's patron, khoja Petros. The inscription in the lower section of the page ("Drawn by the sinful hand of Khachatur, a native of Khizan, in the city of Shosh, Isfahan, in the year 1607") clearly testifies that this page was executed in Isfahan by Khachatur, originally from Khizan. This inscription provides material evidence for the continuity of the scribal process in a new environment.

The next stage in the relocation of the scribal center is represented by MS 7639, which is the earliest known dated manuscript written in New Julfa that is richly illustrated. This Gospel, copied in Isfahan in 1610²⁴, demonstrates that scribal activity after the deportation was not only restored but rapidly consolidated in New Julfa as a stable center. Unlike MS 6785, MS 7639 was created entirely in the new environment and did not undergo a phase of physical relocation.

MS 7639 is exceptional for the scope of its iconographic program: it is entirely devoted to the life, miracles, and trials of Christ and includes approximately sixty miniatures (fig. 6). The manuscript's patron, the prominent khoja Avetik²⁵, represents the social stratum that, following the deportation, became the principal patron of scribal and artistic production in New Julfa.

The decoration of illuminated pages produced during the early phase of Armenian manuscript production in New Julfa reveals connections with the artistic milieu of Safavid Iranian book arts.

²⁴ Gasparyan, G. (2025) "An Examination of the Artistic Decoration of the Portraits of the Evangelists and Their Title Pages in the Matenadaran Manuscript No. 7639", *Journal for Armenian studies* 2 (69): 198.

²⁵ Tajarian, Y., Gasparyan, G. (2025) "New Julfa as a Juncture of Armenian, European, and Persian Art", *Orient Journal* 60: 48.



Fig. 6. The Presentation at the Temple and the Baptism, MS 7639, Isfahan, 1610. Scribe and illustrator: Hakob the presbyter; patron: khoja Avetik, 4v–5r © Matenadaran (Mesrop Mashtots Research Institute of Ancient Manuscripts)

In particular, the ornamental structure of the decorated pages in manuscript MS 7639, characterized by a fully gilded background, dense vegetal ornament, blue and red cartouche-like text panels, and the framing of the text field, recalls the compositional principles of frontispiece-type pages found in the 16th–17th century Safavid Qur’ans and other Islamic manuscripts. In such pages, the text field is typically placed within a richly ornamented and gilded frame filled with vegetal decoration, complemented by colored cartouches and organized around a clear axis of symmetry. Comparable formal solutions can also be observed in MS 7639 (fig. 7), where the same ornamental vocabulary — the dense network of small vegetal motifs set against a golden ground and the chromatic combination of gold, lapis blue, and red is reinterpreted within the context of an Armenian Gospel manuscript.

This phenomenon should not be understood as a direct imitation of Islamic manuscripts, but rather as a creative adaptation by the Armenian community of New Julfa to the visual environment in which the city was formed at the beginning of the 17th century. Manuscripts commissioned by Armenian merchants and Khoja families were writ-



Fig. 7. Title page with the inscription naming Khoja Avetik, MS 7639, Isfahan, 1610. Scribe and illustrator: Hakob the presbyter; patron: khoja Avetik, 73v–74r
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ten and illuminated within the same cultural space in which Safavid courtly and urban examples of book art circulated.

It is also significant that the colophon of MS 7639 identifies its recipients as Khoja Avetik linking the manuscript to the mercantile elite of New Julfa, the very social group that was actively integrated into the Safavid cultural milieu. In the Armenian manuscript, the following inscription appears in the indicated section: “*Լգուսացոց սոցա զխօջա Աւետիկն եւ զեղբայրն զխօջա*” (*Ēzstats’ogh sora zkhoja Avetikn ew zēġbayrn zkhoja*), meaning “The recipient of this is Khoja Avetik and his brother Khoja.” It is particularly noteworthy that the name of the patron-recipient is written within what may be considered a sacred section of the manuscript. At this point begins the Gospel text of the Evangelist Matthew, and any such name page symbolically marks the entrance to the respective Gospel. In effect, it functions as a symbolic threshold or doorway into the sacred word. It is therefore not accidental that the illuminator chose precisely this location to insert the inscription of the patron-recipient. In Islamic manuscripts as well, this section, often in the form of a decorated title page or frontispiece, was regarded as a sacred space, serving as

a visual and symbolic prelude to the reading of the holy text. In this sense, the page operates not merely as decoration, but as a carefully structured visual field in which patronage, text, and ornament are conceptually integrated.

Although MS 7639 is dated 1610, only a few years after the establishment of the Armenian community in New Julfa, the Persianate artistic language visible in its decoration should not be regarded as an influence formed solely within this new environment. It is more likely that this ornamental vocabulary was already familiar to Armenian artists before the deportation, when the Armenian community of Julfa existed within the cultural and economic framework of the Safavid state. After the relocation to Isfahan, this artistic experience did not emerge anew but rather intensified, as Armenian artists became directly integrated into the visual culture of the Safavid capital.

The comparison of these two manuscripts reveals a clear trajectory: from a transitional phase, in which pre- and post-deportation artistic traditions coexist within a single codex, to a fully established scribal center in New Julfa, where a new visual language emerges through the reinterpretation of Persianate artistic forms. The Iranian artistic environment is not simply adopted, but actively negotiated, resulting in a coherent visual system in which Persianate forms are reinterpreted within an Armenian Christian framework.

Conclusion

The examples presented in this article demonstrate that the engagement of Armenian Christians in Isfahan with Persian artistic traditions was not the result of religious compromise, but of a complex process of cultural negotiation shaped by political, social, and economic realities.

The architectural and decorative features of the churches of New Julfa reveal how Armenian architects adopted elements of Islamic architecture — such as dome forms, brick construction, and tile decoration — while preserving the structural, liturgical, and symbolic foundations of Christian space. Likewise, the presence of Muslim shah in the wall painting of khoja mansion should be understood not not as unidirectional domination, but as a layered relationship in which hierarchy, patronage, diplomatic engagement, and coexistence operated simultaneously.

The analysis of the two Gospel manuscripts further demonstrates that the forced deportation did not disrupt the continuity of Armenian manuscript culture, but instead led to the relocation and reconfiguration of an entire scribal tradition. While MS 6785 reflects a transitional phase marked by the coexistence of different artistic systems, MS 7639 represents a more integrated stage, in which Persianate compositional principles, particularly those associated with manuscript frontispieces, are reinterpreted within an Armenian Christian context. The integration of the patron's name into the decorative and symbolic structure of the Evangelist's title page exemplifies this process, revealing a sophisticated visual system in which text, ornament, and meaning are conceptually unified.

Taken together, these case studies demonstrate that the Iranian artistic environment was not passively adopted, but actively negotiated, resulting in a coherent and distinctive visual language. Within this system, Armenian Christian identity was not diminished, but rearticulated — emerging through the selective adaptation and transformation of Persian artistic forms within a new cultural and historical context.

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About the Authors / Информация об авторах

Yvette Tajarian — Senior Researcher at the Oriental Studies Department of Matenadaran (Research Institute of Ancient Manuscripts); Associate Professor at Yerevan State University; Head of the Matenadaran Museum (Yerevan, Armenia). yvettetaj@yahoo.com

Ивет Таджарян — старший научный сотрудник Отдела востоковедения Матенадарана (Научно-исследовательский институт древних рукописей); доцент Ереванского государственного университета; заведующая Музеем Матенадарана (Ереван, Армения). yvettetaj@yahoo.com

Greta Gasparyan — Researcher at the Department of Medieval Art Studies of the Matenadaran (Research Institute of Ancient Manuscripts) (Yerevan, Armenia). arthistoriangreta@gmail.com

Грета Гаспарян — научный сотрудник Отдела изучения средневекового искусства Матенадарана (Научно-исследовательский институт древних рукописей) (Ереван, Армения). arthistoriangreta@gmail.com