

The Armenian Khachkar Art

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Abstract. In this article, the followings are observed: the symbolism of the cross, the origin of khachkar art, the preconditions of khachkar's creation, the stages of development and the peculiarities of artistic means. The article also involves the analysis of decorative motifs. The latter, repeating the artistic perceptions of the period, developed harmoniously with the artistic decoration of the church structures. Born in the 9th century, khachkar art became an expression of the Armenian people's aspirations, religious perceptions and ideas. Moreover, if the monuments of historical periods, losing their functional significance over time, became the bearers of the culture only for certain period, khachkar art has been retaining its practical significance. The aim of the study is to present in a systematic way the development succession of khachkars stage by stage, the fictive and ornamental peculiarities specific to each period.

Introduction

Khachkar art has always been in the center of attention of Armenian and foreign scientists presenting diverse fields of culture. Various art critics, historians, archaeologists, lithographers, architects have been occupied in the study of these monuments. There exist a bunch of studies concerning Armenian khachkar art: monographs, scientific dissertations, articles, film series. From the latest publications it's worth mentioning M. Hasratian's "Djugha's art school of khachkar art" (2000 y.), historian Hamlet Petrosian's "Khachkar" (2008 y.), S. Karapetian's "Djugha's Khachkars" books (1995 y.), photographer Hrair Baze Khacherian's "Khachkars" (2015 y.), co-author Armen Kyurkchian's "Armenian ornamental art" (2017 y.) entitled picture books etc. In the following study we have tried to present in a systematic way the preconditions created for khachkar art development, types of khachkars, stages of inventive development and its' peculiarities. Studies devoted to khachkar art are essential, as those thousands of marvelous stone monuments of Christian period are spread on the lands, where Armenians have always lived.

Methodology

Scientific patriotic and foreign literature, pictures, measurements have been studied. Systematic research and comparative analyze have been done.

Results

The symbol of khach and the origins of khachkar creation. Khachkar art is one of the unique realities of Armenian culture. More than 5000 khachkars have been preserved in the territory of RA and historical Armenia. Khachkar has been enrolled in UNESCO list of humanity's non-material heritage entitled "Armenian khachkar art: The symbol and the creation of khachkar".

Khachkar is an upright slab facing west. The main decoration is the khach sculpted on the central vertical pivot of the western surface, which has become the basis for the name "khachkar". After the adoption of Christianity in Armenia, khach, as an object of worship, has become the main symbol of the new faith. It symbolizes eternal life, the victory of Jesus Christ over Devil and sin in the sake of humanity's salvation. It's worth mentioning that one of five Pavilion Holidays of Armenian Apostolic church is the Feast of the Cross. It is celebrated in the memory of the event when Jesus's

cross was returned from Persian slavery to Jerusalem and elevated in Goghgota. Many Armenian churches have been anointed by the name of Surb Khach (Basilica of Kasakh - 4-5th centuries, Akhtamar church - 9th century, Armenian churches of Akhalkalak and Damala in the territory of Georgia - 19th century etc). This wish is spread among Armenians: "Be strong with the cross". In this case the cross is identical with Jesus. Cross-worshipping is one of the unique aspects of Armenians' Christian faith.

In the architecture we come across the decorative motive of khach in the decorations of entrances' lintels and windows of early Christian period (4-7th centuries) churches (Ashtarak's Tsiranavor (5-6th centuries), Kasakh (4-5th centuries), Odzun (6th century) and other churches), as well as on the pedestals of quadrangular monuments (Vorohtnavank, St. Gevorg monastery, Dsegh village, Khando village of Djavakhk etc) [1]. After the adoption of Christianity, the ornament of khach was engraved on the surface of some monuments, dragon stones and phallus adjusting to new faith. Stone crucifixes can serve as prototypes of khachkars, which were elevated on quadrangular monuments, columns, and pedestals (St. Hovhannes in Djavakhk, the monument in Tatev, the crucifixes in Haxartsin, village Dvin, Yaghdan village of Lori, Harats monastery etc.).

The roots of khachkars go back to 6-8th centuries. The khachkars of this period haven't been preserved. The reason is the Arab destructive invasions. It can be mentioned that in the Armenian monument art the main role belongs to khachkars since the 9th century till today.

The role and meaning of khachkars. Khachkars were elevated in the historically important places, sanctuaries, on the gravesides, near the churches as monuments, sometimes even enched in the walls of churches. As time passes by, khachkars gain a bunch of meanings, according to which they are divided into the following groups:

- Memorial khachkars, which were elevated on the gravesides, near the tombstone facing the west (khachkars of Noratus, Saxmosavank, Old Djughha monastery complex cemeteries).
- Worship khachkars, which were elevated in sanctuaries, in the territory of monastery complexes, churches (The Amenaprkich church of Haghpap, twin khachkars of Dadivank, embroidered khachkars of Goshavank etc.).
- Monumental khachkars, which were elevated in order to glorify an important historical event (the khachkar elevated when Amberd castle was liberated from seljuks, Aradjadzor's khachkar in Artsakh etc.) [2].

Development stages and peculiarities of khachkars. The following development stages of khachkar art development can be singled out: 9-10th centuries, 11th, 12-13th and 14-17th centuries [3].

Early khachkars (9-10th centuries) are mainly complete stone slabs (basalt or tuff). Their downside protrusions are enched on the stone pedestal, sometimes they were just elevated on the ground without any pedestal. Mainly they have bowed or vertical setup expanding upright. As the altars of the churches, khachkars too are facing the west. The main khach with its whole perimeter is included in the ribbon-side belt. Khach monuments have double branch wings ending by circle balls: sprouts. Grape, pomegranate and other ornaments are hanging down from the upper wing of khach, and palm leave ornaments climb up from the two sides below, which almost join the horizontal wings of khach. As symbols of Christianity, grape and pomegranate become one of the important ornament motives of khachkars [4]. Either gradual bases or rosettes were sculpted below the khach. Sometimes those gradual bases were sculpted by lily or palm leave ornaments. Later, khachkars underwent some changes preserving the main setup: central khach sculpture (Fig. 1).

Some of initially preserved khachkars are the khachkar near "Ekhtsu ktor" chapel cemetery in Artsakh, Vakhuh village (866 y.), the khachkar in Hortun village, Ararat region (876 y.), the khachkar elevated by Katranide queen in Garni village (879 y.), the khachkar "Murad Khach" elevated by prince Grigor Atrnerseh from Syunik in Mets Masrik (881 y.), the khachkar in Makenyats chapel (9th century), a bunch of khachkars in Talin (882 y.), Kechut (886 y.), Tatev (895-906 yy.) etc.

Since the 11th century a bunch variety of khachkar rich ornament motives development process has been undertaken. Marvelously sculpted central khach was included in vertical, sometimes above arch form edge belt. Grape and pomegranate hanging from khach wings continue to be essential in

this period khachkar ornaments, below palm ornament already more luxuriously decorated. The edge belt embracing the central khach with its whole perimeter is rich by geometrically multiple ornament motives, even unrepeatable on the same khachkar. Later, these ornaments, with their complex, marvelous, multiple solutions become expressive of not only khachkar but also artistic content decoration of worship buildings.

Later, in the 11th century khachkars ending up by cornices or friezes are created. They were mainly of two types. The first was when the upper angle of khachkar slab was cultivated as a pushing forward plain surface. The second was when the khachkar slab was decorated by frieze in the upper angle, which was attached to khachkar by iron nails or by special protrusions done on the edge of khachkars. The frieze was quite often decorated by various plant, geometrical ornaments, or sculptures (Fig. 1).



Mets Masrik
881



Maqenyats vanq
996



Haghpatavanq
1023



Havuts Tar
1081



Bjni 11th c.

Fig. 1. Khachkars of 9-11th centuries

12-14th centuries are the flourishing period of khachkar art. A great number of masterpieces of khachkar art were created throughout the whole territory of Armenia, decorated with sculptures of diverse patterns and content. In the following period special attention was given to anchor and basic pedestal, which could be multilevel, sometimes quite high and sculpted with ornaments. In this case the monumentality of khachkar was more emphasized. It gained a dominant, solemn look and was perceived higher from its actual height enlarging and underlining the importance and impact of the monument (Fig. 2).

Geometrical ornament motives were dominant, which were used in the cultivation of the edge belt rotating round the main khach. The ornament sculptures of this period with their large variety, unique solutions of unrepeatable ornament motives, woven, embroidered ornaments, give magnificent elegance and luxury to khachkars making the khachkar art ideal (khachkars of Poghos, Momik, “Sirun Khach” in Dsegh). Ornamental motives are repeated in the church buildings external decorations of this period, in the entrance lintels, ornament belts, decorations of frescoes [5].

In the late 12th century sculptures of Jesus, Goddess, Saints, angels, apostles, sometimes even those of secular people were widely used in khachkar setup (Hayravank, Arakelots vank of Sevan, Bjni, Vardenis, Dadivank, Noravank etc). These sculptures enrich and sacrifice the worship of khach in Armenia. Some great examples are khachkars in Noravank, a part of which belong to a great master of Middle Ages Momik. We come across sculptures of secular theme, too. In the late 13th century khachkars named “Amenaprkich” are created, the main khach of which present the crucifixion scene of Jesus (khachkars of Haghpat, Dsegh, Djghingyol, Marts, Sevanavank and others) (Fig. 2).

Since 12th century we can also meet group khachkars, which were placed on general or separate pedestals (Kecharis, Havuts Tar, Geghard, Haghpat and others). A special attention should be paid to magnificent khachkars sculpted into natural rocks (cave khachkars in Geghardavank, Garni, Vayots Dzor, Vardenis and other places).

Since 12th century to 14th masonry khachkars are also seen, when khachkar was wholly enched into saint stone cavity, which was crowned under edged or double-edged roof (khachkars in Yeghvard, Bjni, Hovhannavank, Havuts Tar, Bri Yeghtsi, Khtskonk, Oshakan, Petevan khachkar in Kanaker and others). Masonry khaches were enched into church walls, too.



Fig. 2. khachkars of 12-14th centuries

Some masterpieces of khachkar art of **15-17th centuries** are Noratus and Old Djughha (Nakhidjevan) cemeteries, which represent a unique “forest” of marvelous, unrepeatable khachkars (more than 100000 khachkars). In 2005 khachkars and tombstones in Nor Djughha were destroyed because of vandalism organized by Azeri forces, and they left only pictures, videos, and other undeniable information [6,7]. The latter with their important protocols are historically essential documents.

Conclusion

Analyzing khachkar setup peculiarities, we can state that as the time passed by khachkar gained three-part setup:

- The downside, that is pedestal symbolizes the Earth and permanent Earth life,
- The central part is the mainly sculpted stone slab, where khach is elevated. It symbolizes the Tree of Life, life itself, faith, love towards God. Khach is centered into the altar emphasizing its saint essence,
- The upper side is the frieze, which symbolizes eternal life, heaven sanctified with icons.

Hence, khachkars belong to Christian period Armenian monument art. The main role in ornaments of khachkars belong to sculpted khach, a special place is given to pomegranate symbolizing Christianity, grape clusters, palm leave ornaments, geometrical diverse ornaments, which are not repeated even in the same khachkar, sculptures and valuable protocols.

Thousands of khachkars created throughout centuries are unrepeatable and unique. Each khachkar represents its author’s mastery, imagination, and the wholeness of emotions and faith. It has found its way of expression in the symbol of eternity: ornaments of khach and khachkar. These thousand marvelous stone monuments are spread in those territories, where Armenian people has always lived and created.

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