

SIRARPIE DER NERSESSIAN PAPERS AND PHOTOGRAPHS, 1939-1966

Repository: Image Collections and Fieldwork Archives,
Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington, D.C.
Location: ICFA Stacks
Identifier: MS.BZ.005
Title: Sirarpie Der Nersessian Papers and Photographs, 1939-1966
Name of Creator(s): Der Nersessian, Sirarpie, 1896-1989
Inclusive Dates: 1939-1966
Language(s): English, Armenian
Quantity: 2 boxes of papers and photographs, including approximately 50 black and white photographs and approximately 119 negatives

SCOPE AND CONTENT

Sirarpie Der Nersessian was one of the pioneers of Armenian-Byzantine art history. She established the methodology for the study of Armenian illuminated manuscripts and incorporated Armenian art into the scope of Byzantine art history. Over the course of her career, Der Nersessian visited and cataloged the three most significant collections of Armenian manuscripts in the world: the collection of Etchmiadzin now held at the national library, Matenadaran in Yerevan, Armenia; the Armenian Patriarchate in Jerusalem, Israel; and the collection of the Mekhitarist monastery of San Lazzaro in Venice, Italy.

The collection mainly documents Der Nersessian's professional life at Dumbarton Oaks from 1944-1963. The majority of the collection consists of correspondence, primarily with the Director of Dumbarton Oaks, as well as resumes, lists of publications, and project reports, along with photographs and negatives of illuminations in Armenian manuscripts that Der Nersessian considered for her 1993 publication, *Miniature Painting in the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia*.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Sirarpie Der Nersessian was born in Istanbul (Constantinople), Turkey on September 5, 1896 and died on July 5, 1989. Der Nersessian was the third child in an educated upper-middle-class family that included her parents, an older brother, Boghos, and an older sister, Arax, along with her mother's siblings. Her uncle, a renowned theologian and church historian, Archbishop Malachia Ormanian, was the Armenian patriarch of the Ottoman Empire from 1896 to 1908 and was a major source of inspiration for Der Nersessian throughout her life.

Orphaned after losing first their mother in 1905 and then their father in 1914, Der Nersessian and her sister left family behind when they fled persecutions against Armenians in the Ottoman Empire in 1915. They went first to Bulgaria and then across war-torn Europe to Switzerland, where Der Nersessian completed her secondary education and commenced university in 1917. In 1919, soon after the end of the World War I, the sisters moved to Paris, where Der Nersessian pursued graduate degrees at the Sorbonne, studying with the leading Byzantine scholars of the period, the historian Charles Diehl and art historians Gabriel Millet and Henri Focillon. Her lifelong friendships with Byzantine historian Father Francis Dvornik and art historian André Grabar also started during her student years in Paris.

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The beginning of Der Nersessian's academic career coincided with the infancy of the specific field she would come to adopt, the study of Byzantine manuscript illuminations, which she explored in both of the theses she completed for her *doctorat ès lettres*. In the first, she investigated the illustrations of the medieval romance of Barlaam and Joasaph; the second was her initial study of Armenian illuminations, specifically those of 12th, 13th, and 14th century manuscripts held at the library of the Mekhitarist monastery at San Lazzaro in Venice, Italy. Published in two volumes in 1936-1937, Der Nersessian's second thesis was the first-ever comprehensive publication on Armenian manuscripts.

Working as an assistant to Gabriel Millet at the École Pratique des Hautes Études, Der Nersessian organized the photographic collection of Early Christian and Byzantine art and archaeology. This work attracted the attention of American Byzantinists, such as Charles Morey, Albert Friend, and Walter Cook, who travelled to Paris since such a photographic archive did not exist in the United States at the time. In 1930-1931, upon recommendation by these colleagues, Der Nersessian was invited (while she was still a PhD student) to lecture at Wellesley College and so became the first female professor to teach Byzantine art in a women's college. Eventually, Der Nersessian would become the chair of the art history department and director of the Farnsworth Museum at Wellesley.

Der Nersessian's first encounter with Dumbarton Oaks was a lecture that she gave in 1939, a year before the institute was conveyed to Harvard. This lecture was one of a number that she was asked to deliver during World War II, including a series of five lectures held at the Morgan Library in New York and sponsored by New York University's Institute of Fine Arts, which were eventually published by Harvard University Press as *Armenia and the Byzantine Empire: A Brief Study of Armenian Art and Civilization* (1954). In the academic year of 1944/45, Der Nersessian was invited to Dumbarton Oaks as a Senior Fellow; the following year she became full faculty and a member of the Board of Scholars. While at Dumbarton Oaks, she resided on the grounds in what is now the Operations building at S and 32nd Streets, NW in Georgetown, joined by her sister in 1947.

At a period when Harvard University rarely hired female professors, Der Nersessian was appointed Henri Focillon Professor of Art and Archaeology in 1953. At Dumbarton Oaks, she served as deputy director of studies (1953-1954) and as acting director of studies twice (1954-1955 and 1961-1962). Der Nersessian also served as symposiarch for two of Dumbarton Oaks' Byzantine symposia (1948 and 1958) and participated in a total of seven symposia.

Der Nersessian also traveled for her research, making two trips that would contribute significantly to her work. The first was a sabbatical in Jerusalem, taken during the 1951-1952 academic year. With her sister Arax, Der Nersessian visited the library of the Armenian Patriarchate for six months to study its collection of unpublished manuscripts. During the same trip, the sisters traveled to Egypt, Palestine, and to the Armenian churches of Aleppo, Syria and Antelias (near Beirut), Lebanon. They also used the visit to return to Istanbul for the first time since their departure 36 years earlier and reunite with their brother. In 1960, following a congress in Moscow, Der Nersessian visited Armenia and Georgia. She spent a month as the guest of the Armenian Academy of Sciences, studying the world's premiere Armenian manuscript collection, that of Etchmiadzin, now held at the Matenadaran, the national library in Erevan.

During the nearly twenty years that she spent at Dumbarton Oaks, Der Nersessian's research

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continued to focus on manuscript illuminations, as well as on Byzantine and Armenian art in general. Along with countless articles, she published a number of catalogs of manuscript collections, including those of Chester Beatty Library (1951, revised and republished in 1958), the Freer Gallery of Art (1963), and the Walters Art Gallery (1973), as well as miniatures from Isfahan, Iran (co-authored with Arpag Mekhitarian, 1986). Another joint effort was a text relating to the 10th century Armenian chapel, Aght'amar (1965), which combined Der Nersessian's research with photographic documentation acquired by Dumbarton Oaks through one of its fieldwork projects. She also contributed a detailed study of the iconography of the Parecclesion in the Kariye Camii in Istanbul, Turkey to volume 4 of Paul Underwood's publication, *The Kariye Djami* (1975). The work for her magnum opus, *Miniature Painting in the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia from the Twelfth to the Fourteenth Century*, commenced while she was at Dumbarton Oaks and was the subject of her retirement speech in 1963. The volume was published posthumously in 1993.

Upon her retirement in 1963, Der Nersessian returned to Paris and continued to lecture at European universities, including the Collège de France. In October 1965, she returned to deliver her final lecture at Dumbarton Oaks, "Scholarship in Byzantine Art and Archaeology, 1940-1965" for the institution's 25th anniversary celebration. Der Nersessian was awarded the status of Emerita and was made an honorary associate of the Board of Scholars. During her retirement she continued her research, publishing even more extensively, for a total of over a dozen titles and approximately 100 articles. She is well-known in the field of Byzantine Studies, having written various articles on Christian Art, Cilician illustrated manuscripts, unpublished Armenian manuscripts, and Coptic paintings in Egypt. In 1981, she assumed the directorship of the *Revue des Études Arméniennes*, the field's premiere scholarly journal outside of Armenia, a title she held until her passing on July 5, 1989.

Der Nersessian was the only woman at Dumbarton Oaks to ever gain full professorship at Harvard University; the first woman to receive the Saint Gregory the Illuminator Medal of Honor from the Armenian Apostolic Church (in 1960); and the second woman to receive a gold medal from the Society of Antiquaries of London (in 1970).

ADMINISTRATIVE INFORMATION

Acquisition information: The Image Collections and Fieldwork Archives received these materials in 1998 from the Dumbarton Oaks Director's office.

Processing Information: Processed by former staff members of the Image Collections and Fieldwork Archives; re-processed by Anne-Marie Viola, Metadata and Cataloging Specialist in 2013. Viola re-arranged the materials within the files of the first series to reflect the chronology of the records, primarily correspondence and other dated materials. The second series was re-arranged into the three files identified below, and two separate containers of similar materials within this box were integrated into the second file in this series. Six items identified as products of Der Nersessian's tenure as acting Director of Studies in 1960-1961 were transferred to the Dumbarton Oaks Archives in August 2013.

Finding aid was first revised by Rona Razon, Archivist, in September 2010, then in December 2012 by Razon and Jessica Cebra, Departmental Assistant, and again in September 2013 by

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Viola. The biographical note was written by Gnder Varinliođlu for the 2009 exhibit, "Women Belong in? Papers of Women Byzantinists from the Image Collections and Fieldwork Archives" and was expanded upon by Anne-Marie Viola in 2013.

Conditions on Access and Use: Access to the collection is unrestricted. It is available for research purposes. Photographs are for research and study purposes only.

Physical Access: Appointment is required for access because researcher space is limited: <http://www.doaks.org/icfa-appointment-request-form>. For research queries, contact the staff of Image Collections and Fieldwork Archives (icfa@doaks.org).

Preferred Citation: *Sirarpie Der Nersessian Papers and Photographs, 1939-1966, MS.BZ.005, Image Collections and Fieldwork Archives, Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University, Washington, D.C.*

INDEX TERMS

Individual Names

Der Nersessian, Araxie Iskouhi; Arax

Der Nersessian, Sirarpie; Tr-Nerssian, Sirarp'i Veronik'; Nersessian, Sirarpie der Thacher, John

Institutions

Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem; Erusaghmi Patriark'ut'iwn
Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection; Dumbarton Oaks
Farnsworth Museum of Art
Freer Gallery of Art
Harvard University
Mashtots'i Anvan Hin Dzeragreri Institut Matenadaran
Walters Art Museum
Wellesley College

Subjects

Armenian manuscript
Black and white negative
Manuscript illumination
Byzantine
Photographic print
Research notes
Report
Armenian art and architecture
Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia
Catalog
Lecture
Rsum

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Places

Paris, France
Erevan, Armenia; Yerevan
Venice, Italy
Washington, D.C.
Jerusalem, Israel

COLLECTION ARRANGEMENT

This collection is arranged in two (2) series, according to the format of materials:

**SERIES I: CORRESPONDENCE AND DIRECTOR'S OFFICE RECORDS, 1939-1966
(bulk dates: 1944-1966)**

Contains Sirarpie Der Nersessian's employee records, correspondence between Der Nersessian and the Director's office, with various universities, and annual project reports – documents from both prior to and during her employment at Dumbarton Oaks. This series is arranged chronologically.

SERIES II: PHOTOGRAPHS RELATED TO THE PUBLICATION *MINIATURE PAINTING IN THE ARMENIAN KINGDOM OF CILICIA*

Contains materials related to photographs of manuscript illuminations included in the Dumbarton Oaks publication by Der Nersessian, *Miniature Paintings in the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia: From the Twelfth to the Fourteenth Century* (1993). Images come from manuscripts held by the Matenadaran in Erevan, Armenia, and the Armenian Patriarchate in Jerusalem, Israel, as well as other smaller collections held by the Freer Gallery of Art of Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. and the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore, MD.

Photographs from the Matenadaran may include those that Der Nersessian noted as received in her 1956 annual project report or from her travels there, as noted in her 1960-1961 annual project report (see File 3 in Series 1). Photographs from the Armenian Patriarchate are most likely from her 1951-1952 sabbatical, during which she completed an inventory and photographic documentation of the library's holdings with the assistance of her sister, Arax.

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Note to researchers: If you find any errors in the Collection Inventory and Description, please notify the Archives Specialist immediately.

COLLECTION INVENTORY AND DESCRIPTION

SERIES I: CORRESPONDENCE AND DIRECTOR'S OFFICE RECORDS

Box 1:

Folder 1: Employee records, resumes, and articles

File includes materials related to Der Nersessian's career and tenure at Dumbarton Oaks.

The first document is a typescript of the lecture Der Nersessian delivered at Dumbarton Oaks, *Some Aspects of Byzantine Sculpture*, dated March 10, 1939.

In addition, this file includes: a Harvard University employee registration form dated November 1944 (mostly incomplete); three resumes (January 1946, February 1947, and undated, probably 1960); a document dated January 24, 1955, which lists the positions she held at Dumbarton Oaks, possibly for the annual report; and two undated typewritten copies of a document that appears to summarize her education, career, and publications, one with the name "Mrs. D. Khoyan" and an Arlington, VA address attached.

Also included are two articles announcing Der Nersessian's life-time appointment to Dumbarton Oaks as Professor of Byzantine Art and Archaeology: *Times-Herald*, April 1946 and *Wellesley Magazine*, July 1946.

Folder 2: Correspondence regarding research and appointments at Dumbarton Oaks

Folder includes: a request to lecture and discussion regarding lecture topic; article and publication of life-long appointment as professor of Byzantine Art and Archeology at Dumbarton Oaks in 1946; University statements; a letter outlining future investigation plans for study of Armenian Art and request to study overseas for the academic year, 1951-1952; a letter of approval of Armenian studies and appointment of Mrs. Araxie Iskouhi Der Nersessian as research assistant in 1953; and an introduction to Der Nersessian's retirement lecture in 1963 outlining her scholarship, etc.

Folder 3: Annual project reports

Includes both handwritten and typewritten annual reports of the major projects and publications Der Nersessian worked on while at Dumbarton Oaks

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SERIES II: PHOTOGRAPHS RELATED TO THE PUBLICATION *MINIATURE PAINTING IN THE ARMENIAN KINGDOM OF CILICIA*

Note: Additional negatives relating to Der Nersessian's work found in the ICFA Backlog and cold storage have been moved to ICFA cold storage for preservation purposes. Accession and negative numbers include: B52.1-.2259; C53.1-.9; 2012.0045.0016-.0069; 2012.0064.0001-.0003; 2012.0067.0133-.0138; and 2012.0078.0001-.0163.

Box 2:

Folder 4: Negative envelopes from the Matenadaran, Erevan, Armenia

Negatives requested from the Matendaran, the national library of Armenia in Erevan. Each envelope includes: a thumbnail photograph; the title of the illumination; information about the relevant manuscript; folio and figure numbers; and the library's stamp. Text is in Armenian.

Note: Negatives for these photographs have been moved to ICFA cold storage for preservation purposes. Accession numbers include: 2012.0078.0001-.0146.

Folder 5: Photographs for publication

This file consists of black-and-white photographs selected for the 1993 publication *Miniature Painting in the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia* by Sirarpie Der Nersessian. All prints have plate numbers written on the verso, and many have notes about being replaced with better versions.

Note: Contents in two folders (5-1 and 5-2). Photographs were originally organized into two separate containers: the first, an expanding wallet file with the following note written on the exterior, "6/91 discarded photos (superseded by better ones, in boxes"; the second, a Kodak photographic paper box. Photographs in the latter also included notes about being replaced with better copies.

Folder 6: Photographs for publication from the ICFA backlog

Contains two black-and-white photographs that were found in the ICFA Backlog in a folder entitled, "Photographs (samples) and copy negatives of Armenian manuscript for Der Nersessian book" (see Document Removal form in file). The prints are for plates 606 and 585 in Der Nersessian's *Miniature Painting in the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia*.

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RELATED ARCHIVAL COLLECTIONS

- Black and White Photograph Collection, Illuminated Manuscripts*. Image Collections and Fieldwork Archives, Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection. Washington, D.C. See boxes 9-17: Jerusalem: Armenian Patriarchate. http://www.doaks.org/library-archives/icfa/icfa_pdfs/doaks-icfa-illuminated-manuscripts.pdf.
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