

Heavenly Treasures

The 1700th Anniversary of Armenian Christianity is Celebrated by Museums in London and Paris

BY HRATCH TCHILINGIRIAN; PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM



Ten years in the making, the British Library in London is staging a large-scale and first of its kind exhibit, called “Treasures from the Ark – 1700 Years of Armenian Christian Art,” that will be on display through May 28.

At the same time, in Paris, at the Pavillon des Arts in Les Halles, “Ani – Capital of Armenia in the Year 1000,” an exhibition organized by the museums of Paris and the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU) will run through May 13.

Head of exhibitions at the British Library, Allen Sterenberg, says, “This is one of the most ambitious projects the Library has ever undertaken – with such a large number of objects from so many countries. The exhibit is designed to locate the visitor in Armenia.”

“Treasures from the Ark” is also one of the most expensive projects the Library has organized. The £300,000 (over \$450,000) cost of the exhibit is fully funded by the London-based Vatche and Tamar Manoukian Charitable Foundation.

The over 150 items in the exhibit – which include khachkars (cross stones), illuminated manuscripts, sculptures, gilt silver bindings, reliquaries, wood carvings, textiles and ceramics – have been brought together from institutions and museums in 20 countries, but most are from Armenia. A 10th century gospel with ivory covers from the Matenadaran in Yerevan and a 15th century khachkar from Sevan are among the items being shown for the first time outside Armenia. Also for the first time, a complete Armenian Bible manuscript, King Hetum’s illuminated Bible dated 1269, and a 10th century manuscript from the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem will be on display.

“This exhibition will bear witness to a clear originality and a tenacious attachment to old traditions, along with an equally significant ability to absorb and regenerate models coming from the outside world,” explained Father Nerses Nersessian, head of Collections of the Christian Orient at the British Library, and curator of the exhibit.

The British Library is one of the “Big Five”

Focus of the Month

holders of Armenian manuscripts, with close to 100 manuscripts, many of them donated by Lord Curzon in 1917. Some 60 manuscripts have been added to the collection since 1975 when Nersessian became curator of the Oriental collection.

The beginning of the Armenian book collection at the Library goes back to 1836, when the Mekhitarist Fathers in Venice sent an unsolicited Armenian Dictionary to the Library. Impressed by the publication, the curators decided to acquire Armenian books. Today, it has one of the richest collections of 17th and 18th century Armenian printed books.

The French exhibition, which was visited during its opening days by Presidents of Armenia and France, Robert Kocharian and Jacques Chirac, in mid-February (photo at right) is advertised by billboards throughout Paris. The opening was held under the auspices of Paris Mayor Jean Tiberi.

French historian Jean-Paul Mahe was among the first to call attention to Ani's history and cultural legacy. This extensive exhibit does the same. "The illuminated manuscripts present evidence of the intellectual dynamism of Ani. The religious objects and artifacts of daily life reveal a refined lifestyle. The old photographs (dating from the turn of the last century) place the churches and other buildings throughout the city. Finally, the eyewitness accounts of European travelers of the 17th through 20th centuries provide minute details and precise depictions of the city and the sites," writes Anahid Samikyan in *Achkhar*, a French-Armenian periodical published in Paris.



Through the cooperation of various institutions, this exhibition brings together rare objects: some 100 bronze, copper, wood, stone and ceramic pieces from the State History Museum in Yerevan, manuscripts from the Matenadaran, enamel cups and richly decorated vases from the Louvre's Oriental Antiquities section, the French National Library for ancient maps, and the AGBU's Library Nubar for engravings depicting the voyages of European travelers.

"Ani - Capital of Armenia in the Year 1000" not only documents ancient history, but also calls

attention to the huge restoration and preservation task that awaits the international community. ■

Above, center: President and First Lady Kocharian and President Chirac at the Ani Exhibit in Paris. Photo by Martin Shahbazian/ Armenpress.

Below, left: A projecting lion head sculpture from the pagan Temple of Garni in Armenia, owned by the British Museum, on display for the first time. Below, right: Khachkar from the State History Museum of Armenia.

Opposite page: Tapestry representing St. Gregory the Illuminator, 1448, from the Mother See of Holy Ejmiatsin.

