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Abstract: The Armenian legislation is currently protecting and preserving architectural monuments, archaeological sites, and minors' artistic forms of art like *xač'k'ars*. Unfortunately, there are several cases of precious wall paintings preserved inside religious buildings (*Tat'ev, Lmbatavank', K'obayr, Mastarà*) being damaged during architectural monument restoration. In recent years, there has been a lot of interest in study, conservation, and restoration of wall paintings in Armenian churches; however, there is one terrible reality to report: the neglect and abandonment of the protection and safeguarding of visible wall paintings for many bureaucratic and logistical reasons, as well as reasons for complete indifference for the destiny of the frescoes. A significant illustration of this negative attitude is the chapel of the Armenian monastery of *K'obayr*. After many years of abandonment, the Armenian Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport made a move and began a campaign of studies and restorations in collaboration with the Polytechnic of Milan, to restore the buildings and wall paintings. Restoration work on the *K'obayr* chapel has been put on hold since 2013 due to inadequate administrative administration. As a result, the chapel's single nave's double-pitched roof, which is incomplete has remained exposed for the past 10 years, and rainwater infiltration formed a lovely part of the wall paintings. Our four years of endless reports and reminders have yielded nothing. The purpose of this article is to show once again, that the wall paintings in Armenian churches are historical monuments that must be safeguarded and are an inseparable key component of each existing church's monumental architectural heritage; consequently, they must be protected.

Keywords: *K'obayr, Mastarà, Lmbatavank', Axt'ala, Karmravor, Art'ik..*

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Introduction

There are limited references in Armenian architecture studies to wall paintings preserved in churches and temples that were created immediately after the church was built or later. Architecture and wall painting art are inseparable values, and one compliments to the other [1-3]. The Armenian church is a volumetric and geometrically secluded and mysterious environment created by a masterful combination of stone constructions. The wall paintings that survived on the internal walls, were made by using lime, sand, and mineral pigments to convey the ideas and commandments of spiritual values. The union of these two beautiful forms of cultural expression gives power and meaning to the spiritual structure, making it the cradle of Christianity's conservation and spread. The prevalence of wall paintings in churches, their depictions, painting skills, and color solutions reveal an important yet unexplored part of Armenian culture. According to our research, there were at least three regions in Armenia with wall-painted churches: the northern area, bordering Georgia (*Kiranc', Khučap, K'obayr, Hałbat*, 10-13th century); the central area - on the slopes of Mount Aragac (*Lmbatavank', Art'ik, Mastarà, Koš, T'alin, Aruč*, 7th century); and the southern area - bordering Iran (*Surb Hovhannes, Surb Astvacacin, Surb Sargis*, all in *Melri*, 17-18th century). A preliminary study of the wall paintings preserved in the churches of these three regions revealed their differences as well as their exceptionally high artistic value. In the Armenian highlands, many churches have been built and painted since the early days of Christianity. Many wall-painted churches in Ani's capital require a separate investigation

(Tigran Honenc‘, Sant Savior, and the Cathedral). The study of the numerous fragments of wall paintings that survived to this day, both from the early Christian and mature Middle Ages, is possible only because they have been preserved and restored.

The historian Vrtanes Kertogh in his treatise «Յաղագու պատկերամարտից» (About Iconoclasts) [4,5], written in the 7th century, exhaustively illustrates the presence of wall paintings in numerous churches of the time and the use of natural mineral pigments as well as pigments of vegetable and animal origin in the design they created. There is inadequate knowledge of the subject because of a lack of studies due to the large number of abandoned historical monuments on Armenian territory. On the one hand, the almost complete indifference of Soviet scholars in an atheist country, particularly for reasons of inappropriate illegal usage of monuments such as kolkhoz grain warehouses, has promoted the degradation and definitive loss of many pictorial fragments preserved in various churches in the territory of the Republic of Armenia. All wall paintings in Armenian churches are little studied for a variety of objective and subjective reasons: wall paintings are erroneously considered to have no local origins, and frescoes are painted by foreign artisans (Byzantines, Syriacs, Georgians, and Franks). We are convinced that painting and architecture are one and single, indivisible thought and that the design of the church and its interior decoration highlight full and harmonious work. There is presently no census and no complete catalog collecting all of Armenia's pictorial heritage [6]. Without this, it is impossible to study, conserve, restore, and produce a catalog of wall paintings in Armenian churches. The fundamental issue is insufficient attention from the government, religious institutions and local population. There is an absence of valorization and appreciation to recognize the value of this great cultural heritage. The lack of knowledge of those people who make decisions is also a major issue. I would like to present our testimony through examples of what happened to us while we were on our mission in Armenia from 2012 to 2022.

Materials and Methods

Our research and work have led to unbelievable outcomes that are evident with the naked eye. As previously stated, the products used for cleaning, phasing, grouting, consolidation, mortar restoration, and wall painting were chosen as the classics utilized in Italy because they were all restored with the consent of the authorities that protect the monumental and visual heritage so well-renowned around the world. The methodology for restoration was developed by the School of Restoration in Italy and is used in Veneto. The decades of professional expertise and the results produced in Venetian churches and palaces show the accurate use of conservative restoration methods used on numerous medieval murals executed in Italy and applied to wall paintings in Armenian churches.

Literature review

We have published numerous articles and four books on wall paintings in Armenian churches:

- Dadiank Revived Miracle.

Authors: Karen Matevosyan, Avet Avetisyan, Arà Zarian, Christine Lamoureux, Armenian, Russian and English book (with Blessing of Primate of the Artsakh Diosece of the Armenian Apostolic Church Archbishop Pargev Martirosyan), Victoria Foundation, Yerevan, 2018, ISBN 978-9939-1-0690-8.

- The Restoration of the Wall Painting in Several Armenian Churches of First Christian Ages.

Authors: Arà Zarian, Christine Lamoureux, Armenian and English book (presentation of Patrick Donabédian also in French and Italian), Tigran Metz, Yerevan, 2018, ISBN 978-99941-0-945-6.

- Haghbat- Restauro Conservativo Dei Dipinti Murali Del Secolo X, X-Xiii Nella Chiesa Del Santo Segno, 976-991.

Authors: Christine Lamoureux, Arà Zarian, Armenian and Italian book (presentation of Seyranoush Manoukian), Tigran Metz, Yerevan, 2019, ISBN 978-99941-0-981-4.

- Dadivanh – La Conservation-Restauration Des Peintures Murals Datées 1297 Dans L'église Kathoghike Construite En 1214.

Authors: Arà Zarian, Christine Lamoureux, Armenian and French book (presentation of Antonia Arslan), Tigran Metz, Yerevan, 2020, ISBN 978-99941-0-945-6.

Armenia's current legislature protects and preserves architectural monuments, archaeological sites, and small forms of decorative art, such as *xač'k'ars*¹. Unfortunately, there are several examples of magnificent frescoes kept inside religious structures that have been substantially lost during the process of restoring architectural monuments (Tat'ev, Fig.1, Lmbatavank', Fig.2, K'obayr, Fig.3, Mastarà, Fig.4). Despite recent interest in the conservation and restoration of wall paintings in Armenian churches, there is a negative reality to highlight that leads to the abandonment and neglect of the protection and safeguarding of traces of wall paintings and frescoes for various bureaucratic and logistical reasons. A significant illustration of this negative attitude is the chapel of the Armenian monastery of K'obayr, which, after many years of abandonment, when Georgian academics took action to define the monument of Georgian culture (because of the existence of several inscriptions also in Georgian), Armenia's Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport has acted to launch a campaign of studies and restorations in collaboration with the Polytechnic of Milan to restore the building and wall paintings [7]. The work on restoration of the K'obayr chapel has been halted since 2013 because of administrative inefficiency. As a result, the incomplete double-pitched roof (1.25 m² of slabs missing and the tip of the pitch is 7 ml) of the chapel with a single nave has remained exposed for the last 10 years, and rainfall infiltration has greatly increased the number of wall paintings (Fig.5). Our frequent reports and numerous reminders, which have lasted four years, have led to nothing, and the precious wall paintings are being lost daily. In 2022, we presented an elaborate detailed project (also available in English) to the international scientific commission specializing in the sector of monumental art of the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sports of the Republic of Armenia for the cleaning, consolidation, and conservative restoration cycle of wall paintings in the chapel of the K'obayr Monastery (88 pages, with photos, drawings, analyses, and so on) (Fig.6). The Commission provided some observations and suggestions for project improvements, which we considered. In 2023, we sent the completed project with all relevant components to the Ministry in Yerevan, requesting a date for the new presentation. This response was unexpected. The communication pointed out that the double-pitch roof, which had been left unfinished for 10 years, needed to be finished first. The Commission-approved roof design was now out of date and needed updating by a professional architect (Fig.7). My application was rejected because my authorization license was considered expired. I am the author of approximately 25 restoration projects of religious buildings in Armenia, including Vorotnavank' Monastery, Mak'enyac' vank' Monastery, churches in Makaravank', Dapnoc' vank', Hac'arat, Solak Mayravank', Kot'avank', Tel, and others. In 10 years, only a small part of the roof could be completed, and we now must wait another few years for them to find a designer and funding. Our proposal to design and fund the works was rejected. Due to water infiltration and the negligence of the owner, 50% of the wall paintings have been lost.

The competent authorities displayed the same indifference in the case of Haričavank, a symbolic monument of medieval Armenian architecture, where the few fragments of the depiction of Hodegetria cannot be salvaged and preserved since a small piece of the roof has not been maintained and waterproofed (Fig.8). The Ministry has said that unless the roof situation is fixed, it will be impossible to propose a project to restore wall paintings, which will disappear in the meantime. We have been requesting this minor intervention for three years, which might be done in a single day by using specific materials to waterproof the link between the gavit's roof and the Mother Church's roof (Fig.9). Although the Haričavank' monastery is the property of the Holy See of Ejmiacin, our project for cleaning, consolidating and conserving the remains of the wall painting must be

¹ The RA Law on the Preservation and Use of Immovable Monuments of History and Culture and the Historical Environment, Yerevan, 1998.

presented both to the Ministry's Scientific Commission and the Holy See's Commission of Architects. The issue is that one rejects the other while we await the project's presentation (Fig.10). We proposed an intervention on our initiative to waterproof the external covering above the wall of the internal painting. We are awaiting communication to leave for Yerevan and present our proposal, for which we are willing to invest the necessary funds. We did not receive a single invitation during the entire year of 2023.

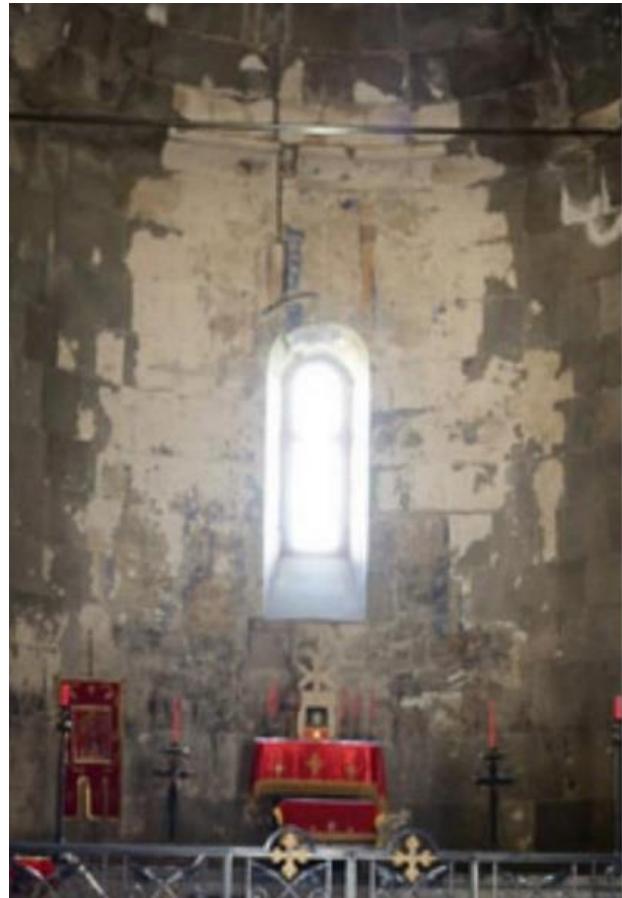


Fig. 1. 10th-century wall paintings of the main altar of the Saints Peter and Paul church in the Tatev monastery complex before and after restoration of the church



Fig. 2. Depicts the process of removing historical plaster from the southern dome of the Saint Stephen Protomartyr Church in Lmbatavank to clean the walls, as well as our discovery of a 7th century mystical illustration in 2024

In the Mother Church of Art'ik, where the dome does not exist, in 2017, a section of the fresco cycle in the main altar from the 7th century was restored (Fig.11). For the best possible conservation of the restored paintings, we asked for the construction of a small provisional cover of the K'obayr type to be built, but it was never made. The wall paintings are now practically outside, in the open air (Fig.12).



Fig. 3. Due to the poor restoration of the roofing of the Kobayr chapel, as well as the infiltration of rainwater throughout the decades, high-value frescoes of the 12th century were lost

In 2019, in Hałbat Monastery, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, we restored the wall paintings in the main altars, which had significant rainfall infiltration in the southeastern part due to the leaning external gallery (Fig.13). We notified all required authorities and obtained permission to begin soil excavations and waterproofing. When the wall paintings were restored, the Archbishop and Dean of the Diocese of Gugarac' Sepuh Č'uljyan passed away, and everything stopped. I wrote, sent letters and contacted the Holy See of Ejmiacin, but nothing came from it. A waterproofing project was proposed by removing the soil layer for permanent intervention; however, construction work was stopped due to the solution of a temporary cover made of sheet metal taken from the Rectory fire. For the past four years, rain has infiltrated and washed away parts of paintings from the third register of the main altar of the Holy Sign church restored by us. The indifference and lack of care for this important Armenian heritage, as in the case of a *xač k'ar* installed in the masonry inside a church, is considered a historical monument and therefore protected and conserved, but the mural painting on the church's wall no. After 4 years, rain still fell on the sheet metal retrieved from the rectory fire (Fig.14).

In 2017, we discovered the remains of wall paintings on the southwest corner of the church of Saint John Baptist in Mastarà. After completing the research and studies, we presented the cleaning, consolidation, and restoration project to the Armenian Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport, and it was authorized and approved. While doing the cleanup operation, we discovered that after the church reopened to the faithful state in 1993, during the Soviet period, this church was adapted to a grain warehouse, and metal tools were used to eliminate the mortar lade, seriously damaging the remains of fresco fragments hidden under the mortar (Fig.15). Toward the end of the 18th century, during the occupation of Armenia by Tsarist Russia, a wooden mezzanine was built in the church of Mastarà, in the western apse, to house the choir after the church's conversion to an Orthodox rite. The fresco was damaged during the construction, and the wooden structure covered a part of the Holy Knight that we discovered. In 2017, we presented the project sketch to the Ministry of Culture to detach the staircase from the wall and complete the fresco (Fig.16). I never got a response.

In 2016, we cleaned, consolidated, and restored the fresco cycle of the Surb Astvacacin church in Karmravor (Fig.17). In 2018, at our own expense, we decided to prepare illustrative panels with photos and texts in Armenian and English, as well as explanations of the various QR code works. The panels have

a metal frame and are printed on rigid PVC (Fig.18). After preparing all the panels, we rented a vehicle and took them to all the churches. In 2021, we reported that the illustrative panel in Karmravor was destroyed with the intention of obtaining metal profiles and building a plate for lighting candles hidden behind the *xač'kar* (Fig.19). This was because it was no longer possible to light candles in the church to protect the restored frescoes. My project included building a new external altar layout for candle lighting by the faithful, together with the reconstruction of the portico destroyed in the 1990s. An entirely free idea was never considered (Fig.20).

In 2020, we presented an elaborate project for cleaning, consolidation, and conservative restoration of wall paintings on the west wall of Axt'ålå Monastery, 10th century (Fig.21). The proposal was rejected by the Republic of Armenia's Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sports, justifying the need for the drum and dome to be restored first (the project has been ready for 10 years, but no financing has been found). The drum and dome collapsed in the nineteenth century and were replaced in the Soviet period with a wooden cylinder roof to protect the interior from bad weather and rain. The frescoes on the internal walls of the Cathedral are protected from infiltration, and there is no impediment to their restoration.

Between 2015 and 2017, we conducted research, analysis, and

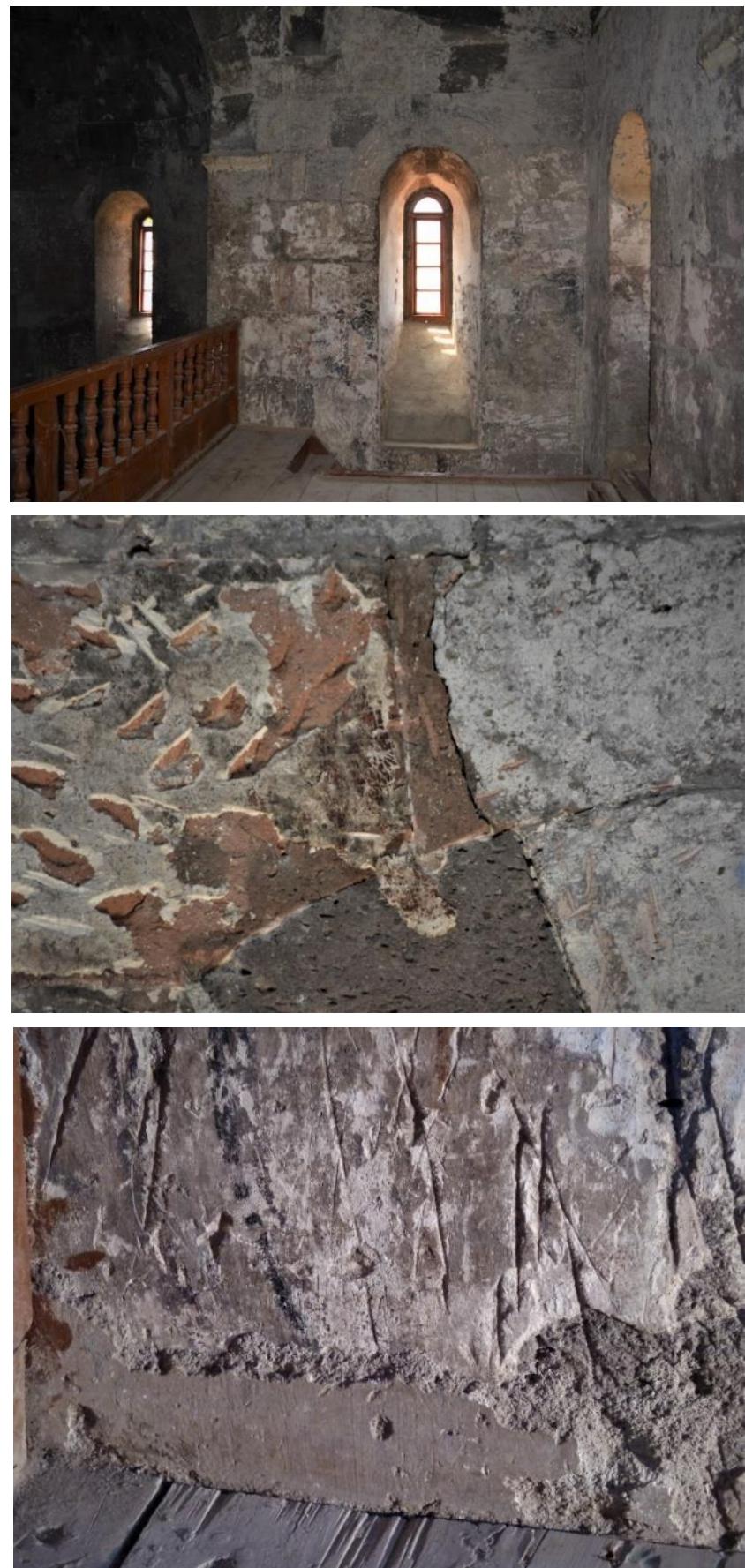


Fig. 4. Damaged parts of the 7th century frescoes on the walls of St. John Baptist Church in Mastara, caused by Soviet plastering and its removal in the 1990s

surveys and presented a project for the cleaning, consolidation, and conservative restoration of two mural paintings in the Kat'olikè church of the Armenian Monastery of Dadivank' in Arc'ax, dating from the 9th to the 18th centuries, commissioned by the Ministry for the Protection of Monumental Heritage and Tourism Development of the Republic of Mountain Karabax. The two frescoes from 1297 represent the following scenes: on the north wall, "The stoning of Saint Stephen Protomartyr" (Fig.22), and on the south wall, "The Granting of Patriarchal powers to Saint Nicholas the Wonderworker" (Fig.23). After the second war in Karabax and before the handover of the Armenian Monastery of Dadivank to the Azeris in 2020, the Armenian authorities decided to remove the frescoes to avoid vandalism by the occupiers (Fig.24). The Armenian operators initially canceled all our restoration work from 2014 to 2017 and then removed the frescoes, damaging them (Fig.25). Our requests to see the wall painting fragments removed from Dadivank were refused and never accepted. We intend to collaborate to restore wall paintings and display them to the public. We hope that the opportunity to achieve this goal will be created.



Fig. 5. *The bad condition of the Kobayr chapel's roof*



Fig. 6. Ara Zarian and Christine Lamoureux's 2021 project to clean, repair, and conserve the frescoes of the Kobayr chapel, waiting for the gable roofs to be restored

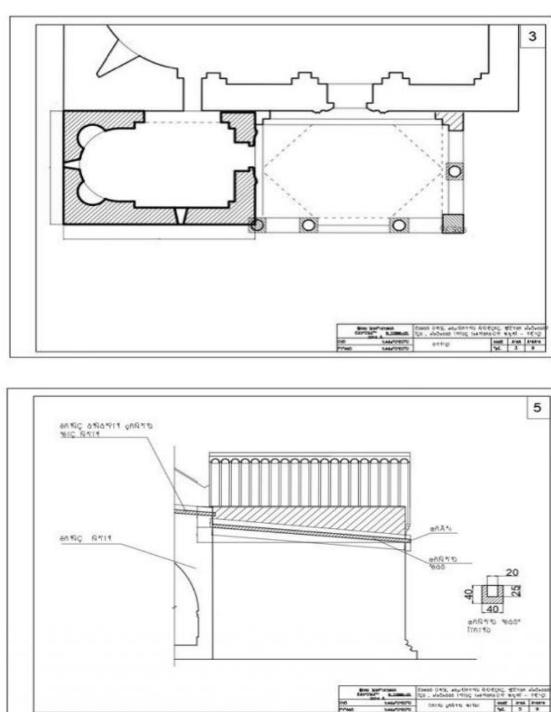


Fig. 7. Architect Gor Mikayelyan's restoration project for the Kobayr chapel roofs was proposed in the 1990s but never implemented



Fig. 8. Fragments of a mural painting dated 1235 were found on the upper part of the entryway to Holy Mother of God Church from the Harich Monastery

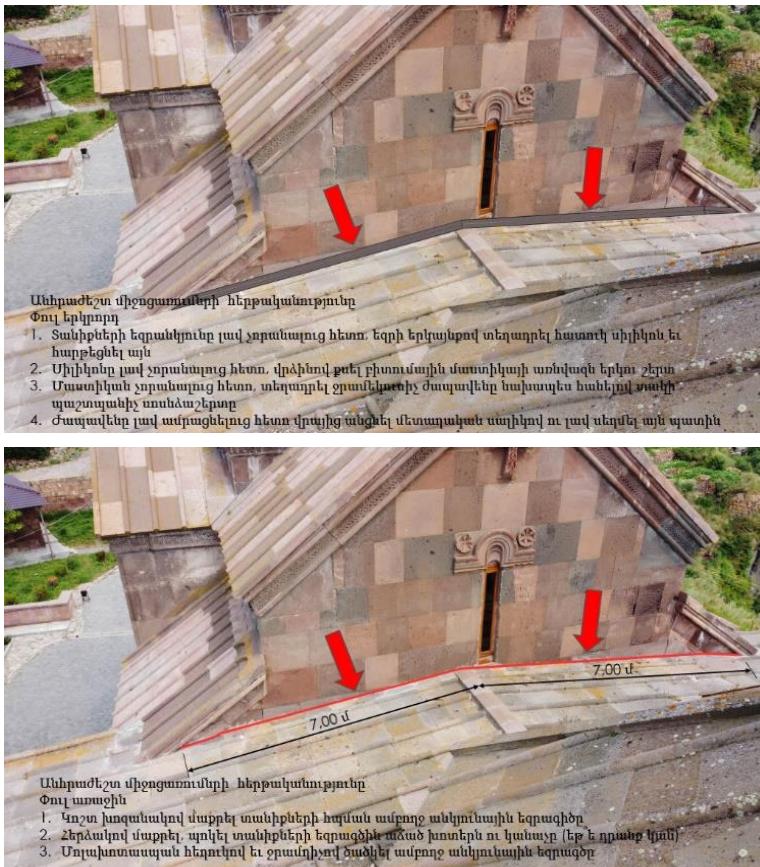


Fig. 9. Architect Ara Zarian's proposal for waterproofing the gable roof of Harichavank courtyard in 2021 is awaiting approval from the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin

Wall paintings in Armenian churches are historical monuments that must be preserved and are an inseparable part of the monumental architectural heritage of each existing church.

Results and Discussion

Between 2012 and 2019, the wall paintings in the Armenian churches underwent conservative restoration, consolidation, and cleaning. The authors also mentioned the results of the absence of local professionals with fresco restoration experience and knowledge, as well as the lack of interest from the authorities and the lack of expertise. The materials, techniques, and procedures used for the interventions on the wall paintings in the churches of Artsakh and Armenia are the same as those used during the restoration of frescoes in churches in the Veneto region in Italy. Over the



Fig. 10. Ara Zarian and Christine Lamoureux's project to clean, maintain, and restore the Harichavank frescoes, approved by the RA Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sport in 2024, is now awaiting approval from the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin



Fig. 11. The restoration of a section of the 7th-century fresco preserved on the south wall of the main altar at St. George Cathedral in Artik

course of a professional career spanning approximately 35 years, they restored approximately one hundred frescoes after being hired and approved by religious organizations as well as the province of Veneto's Superintendence for Heritage Cultural Institutions. The technologies, materials, and applications that the Minister of Culture, Science, Education, and Sports of the Republic of Armenia sought during the 2022 session of the International Scientific Commission are clearly visible across this time frame. These insights were considered and used to make changes and improvements to the restoration and conservation projects that would be presented shortly.

Discussions about the usage of novel nanotechnology materials, which have yet to be tested but are commercially marketed by the companies that create them, require time, which is insufficient. It was determined to employ traditional approved and proven materials, which have demonstrated great effectiveness and long-term durability, with at least 30 years of evidence of nontolerance to environmental changes. In any case, we decided to use next-generation materials for future work in Armenian churches.



Fig. 12. The same mural after restoration in 2016



Fig. 13. A general view of the Haghpat monastery complex from the southeast

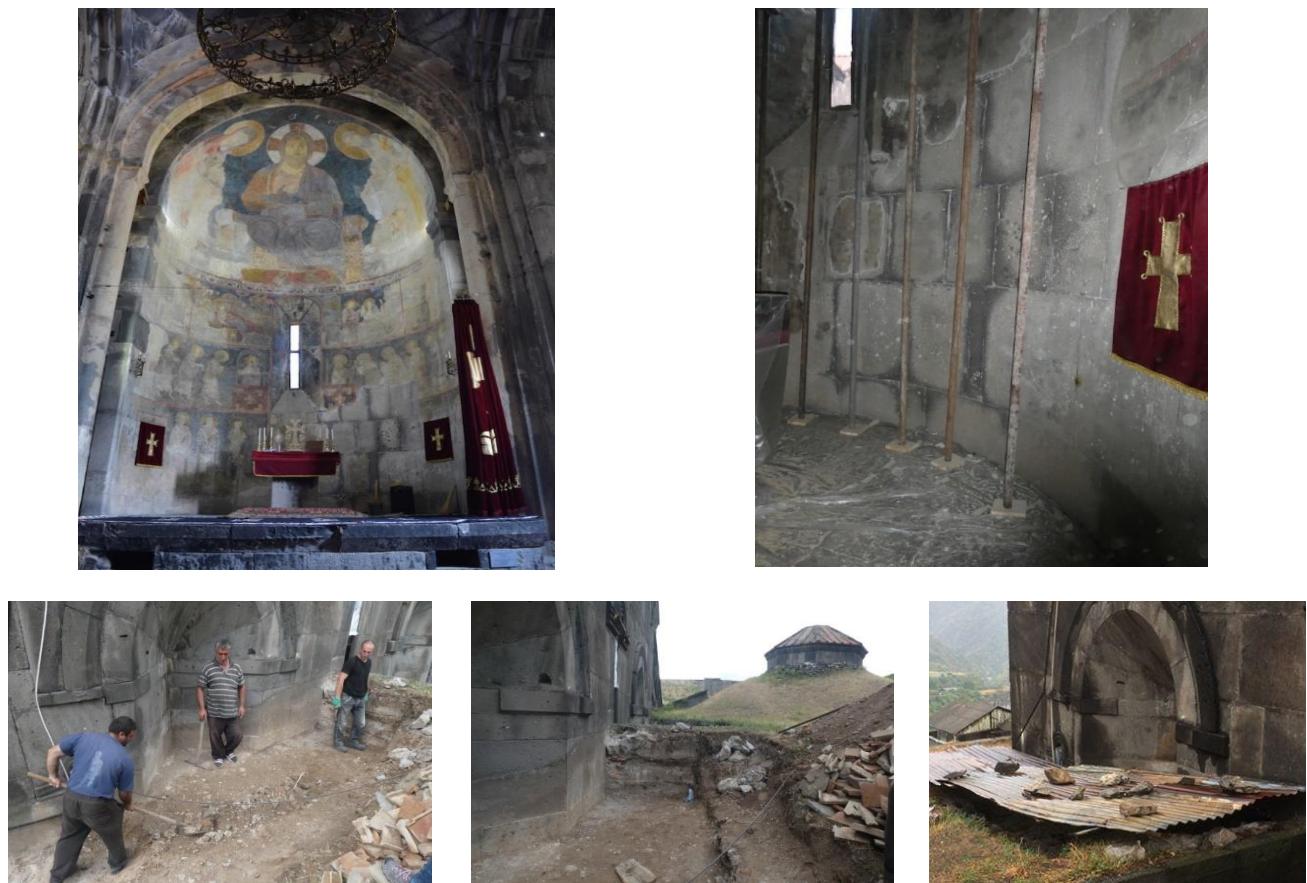


Fig. 14. The damages caused by humidity to the wall of the mural painting restored by Ara Zaryan and Christine Lamoureux in 2019 of the main altars of the Holy Sign Church of the Haghpat Monastery complex, as well as the necessary measures and the unfinished status as of today

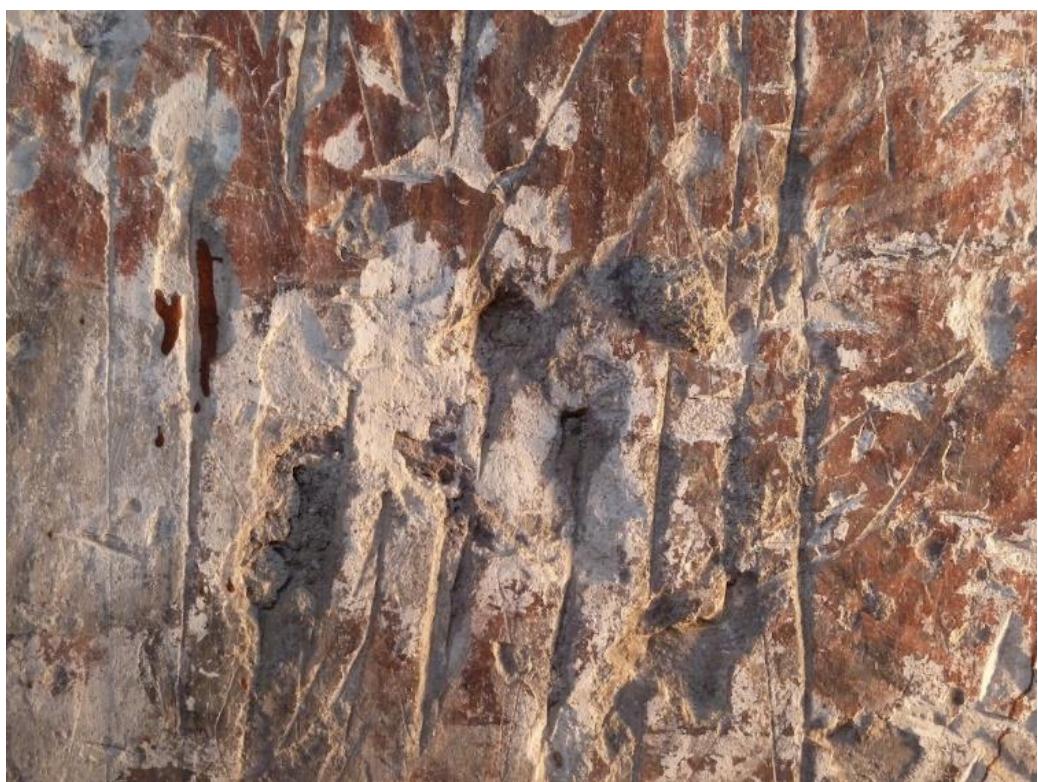


Fig. 15. An example of the brutal destruction of the fresco remnants discovered in 2015 by Ara Zaryan and Christine Lamour of St. John Baptist Church in Mastara



Fig. 16. The fragments of a fresco from the 7th-century can be found on the church's southern wall beneath the wooden wheels of an 18th-century lodge. Ara Zarian and Christine Lamoureux restored the wall painting in 2016

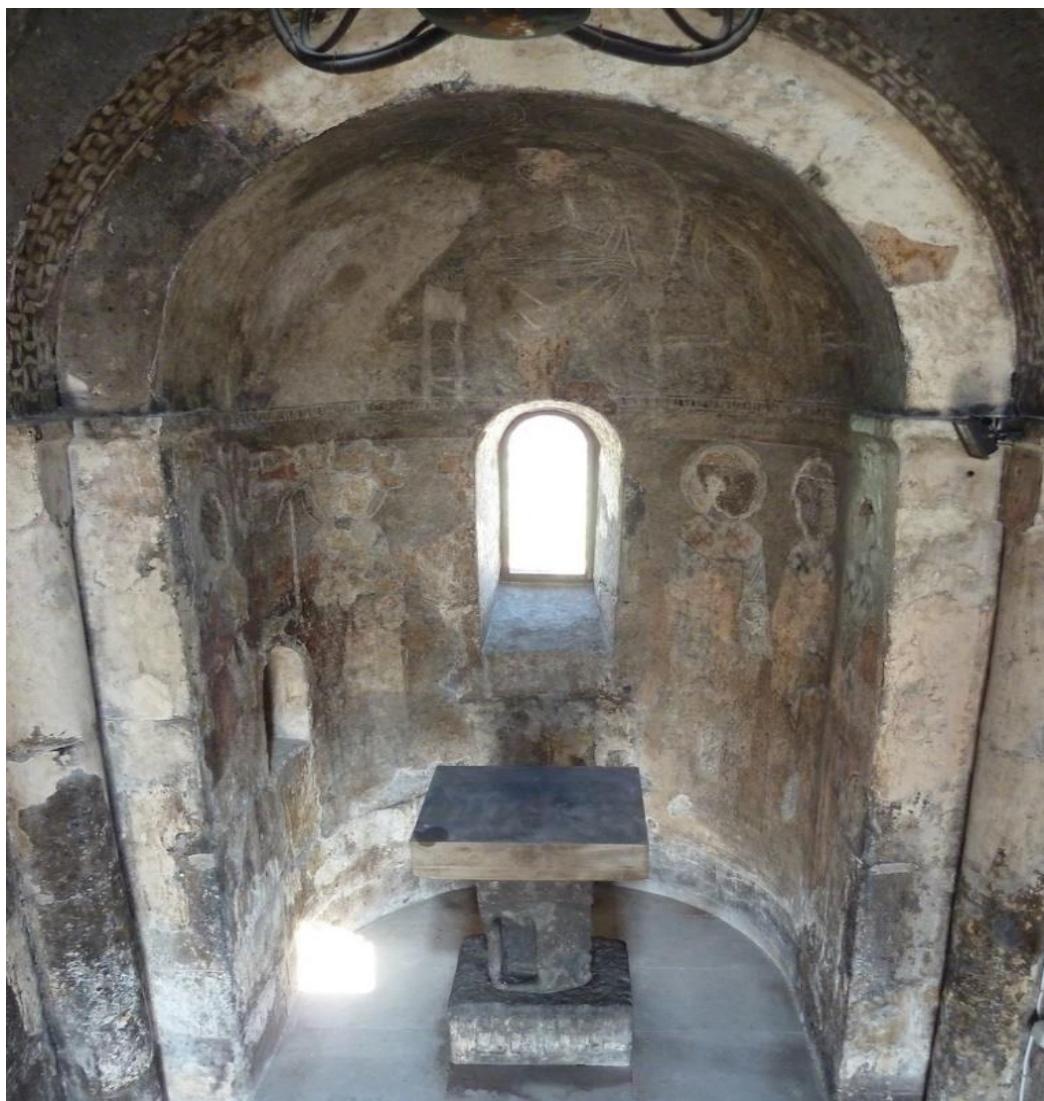


Fig. 17. After completing the works of cleaning, fixing, and conservation restoration of the frescoes on the main altar of St. Holy Mother of God Church of Karmravor in 2016

Conclusion

1. In Armenia there is no complete inventory of church wall painting fragments and scenes.
2. Without any knowledge of the monumental heritage, it is impossible to improve and legalize cultural heritage.
3. In Armenia there is no school of wall painting restoration and the few specialists who study, conserve, and restore wall paintings are often criticized.
4. Based on the examples presented above, it can be concluded that political and religious authorities do not pay adequate attention to the protection of pictorial heritage in Armenian churches due to a lack of professional training in the field.
5. We propose a rethink and thorough study to maintain what little survives of the beautiful wall paintings in Armenian churches.
6. We offer our expertise in creating a thorough catalog of all wall paintings in Armenian churches funded by the government or benefactors.



Fig. 18. The process of preparing bilingual explanatory panels near the frescoes restored by us



Fig. 19. 2022, after destroying the Crimson's explanatory panel and building a pool of candlelight from its metal rods

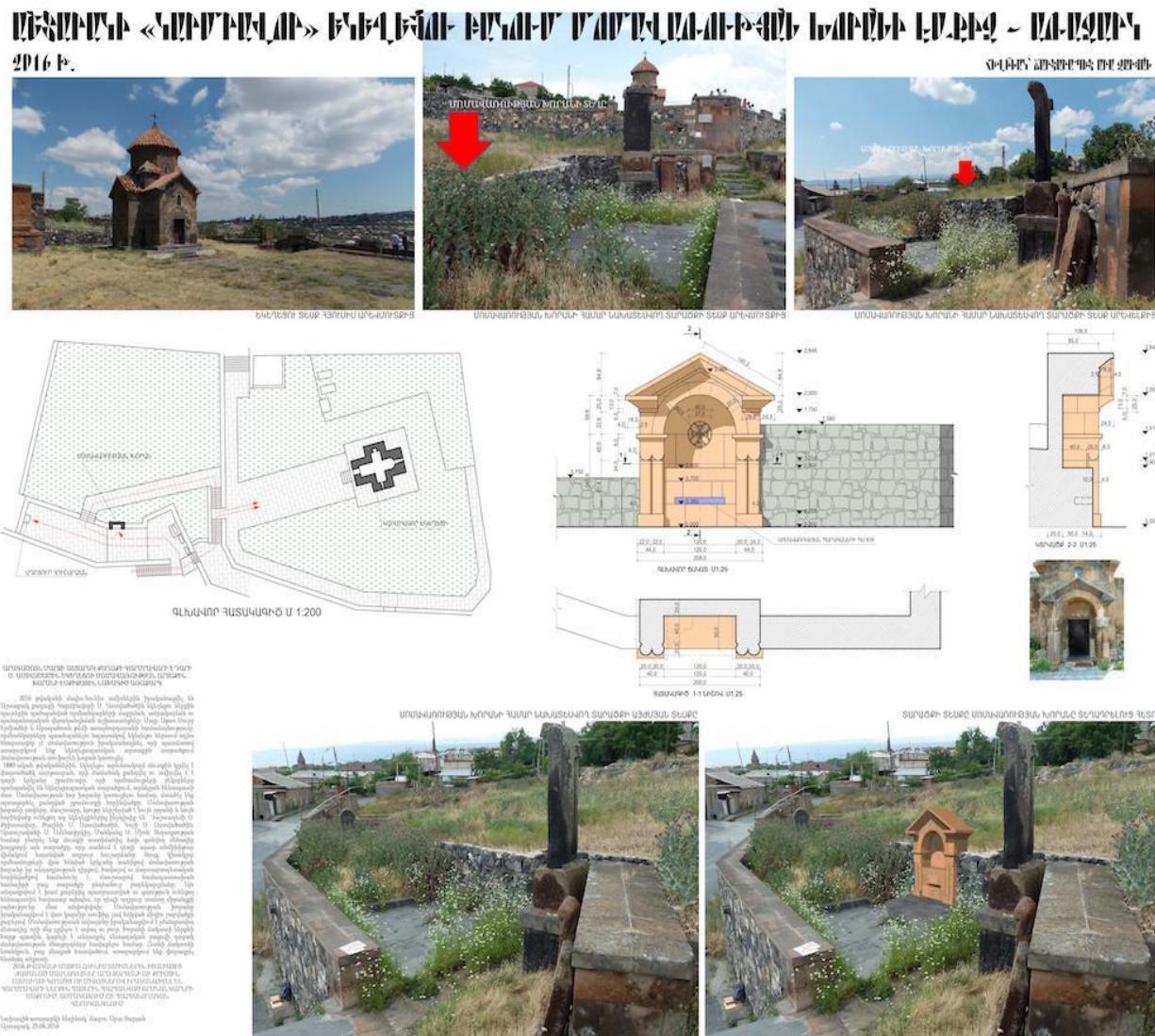


Fig. 20. After restoring Karmravor's murals, architect Ara Zarian proposed the unrealized candlelight altar project

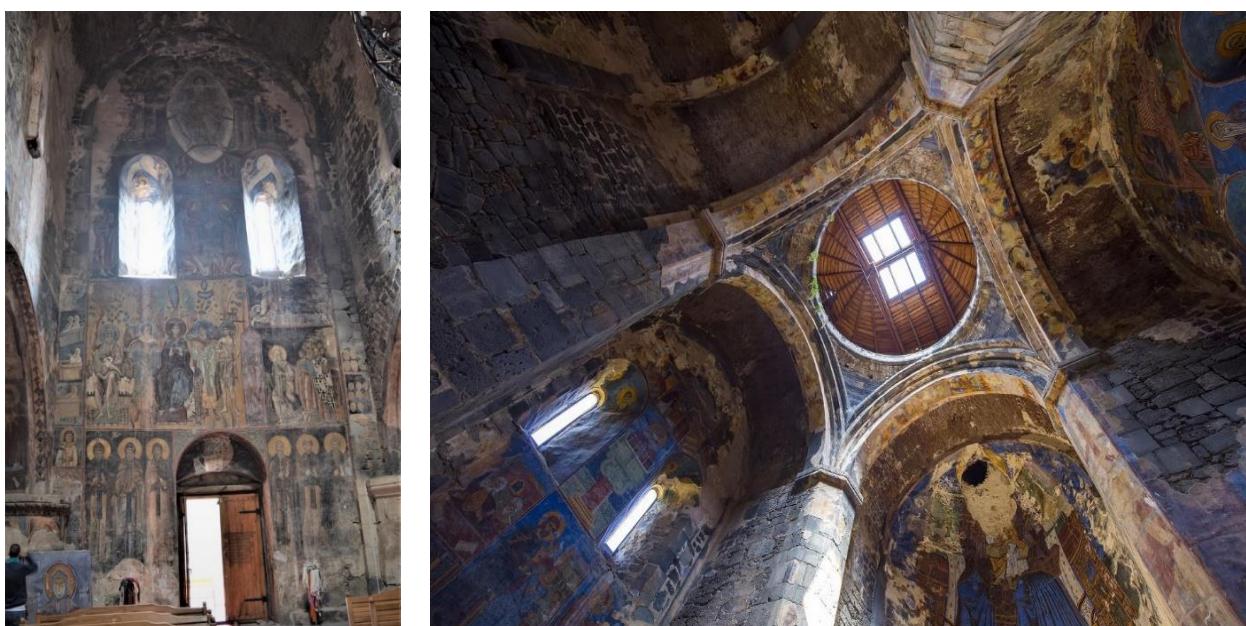


Fig. 21. The interior walls of St. Holy Mother of God Church at Akhtala Monastery are completely frescoed, dating from the XII-XIII centuries



Fig. 22. Before and after restoration of the 1297 mural on the south wall of the Cathoghike Church of St. Holy Mother of God in Dadivank Monastery by Ara Zarian and Christine Lamoureux from 2015 to 2017



Fig. 23. Before and after restoration of the 1297 mural on the northen wall of the Cathoghike Church of St. Holy Mother of God in Dadivank Monastery by Ara Zarian and Christine Lamoureux



Fig. 24. 2022, after demolishing the mural on the northern wall of the Cathoghike Church of St. Holy Mother of God



Fig. 25. Dadivank Monastery Cathoghike St. Holy Mother of God Church,
the mural is being removed from the wall for the safety of it

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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