



JULFA IV. ARCHITECTURE AND PAINTING

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iv. Architecture and Painting

Architecture. By 1640 New Julfa had grown into an important cultural center of high repute with many public buildings, including churches, markets, and bath houses, as well as private residences and workshops. Four bridges over the Zāyandarud connected the Armenian settlement with Isfahan, and today the Mārnun Bridge, the K̄vāju Bridge, and the Čārbāg Bridge are still standing (map, i/Figure 2). The Čārbāg Bridge, commonly called Si-o-seh pol, is at the end of Čārbāg Avenue. For Armenians its 33 (Pers. *si-o-seh*) arches symbolize the 33 years that Jesus Christ lived on earth, but the bridge is also associated with [Allāhverdi Khan](#) (d. 1613), a Safavid *golām* of Georgian origin.

The architecture of New Julfa documents how Armenian Christian traditions were adapted to a Persian Islamic environment. The influence of the official Safavid architecture on the Armenian buildings was balanced by Armenian patrons who employed Armenian craftsmen and artists with a European training and imported artwork from Amsterdam and Venice. New Julfa's buildings preserve a rich heritage of the applied arts, ranging from the 17th to the 20th centuries.

In the 1660s New Julfa had 24 churches that belonged to the Armenian



Apostolic Church, as well as a few other missionary houses and chapels. Today 13 Apostolic churches are still standing (map, ii/figure 3). The most important are All Savior's Cathedral and the churches of the Holy Mother of God, St. George, and St. Bethlehem. The others are St. James, St. Stephen, St. John the Baptist, St. Catherine, St. Nicholas, St. Gregory the Illuminator, St. Sargis, St. Minas, and St. Nerses.

(1) K̄vāja Avetik' financed the erection of All Savior's Cathedral between 1653 and 1664 (Carswell, pp. 30-34; Hakhnazarian and Mehrabian, pp. 23-35; see i/PLATE III). All of its interior was adorned with floral stucco decoration and with frescoes, showing scenes from the Old and the New Testaments. The frescoes are the work of Varpet Minas (ca. 1600-70), Yovhannēs Merquz (1635-1715), Tēr-Kirakos, Barseł, and others.

(2) Parts of St. James' Church date back to 1606, and it is therefore considered the oldest church of New Julfa (Carswell, pp. 35-36; Hakhnazarian and Mehrabian, p. 37). The small church, sometimes called chapel, is located at the entrance to the courtyard of the Church of the Holy Mother of God.

(3) The construction of the Church of the Holy Mother of God, built in 1613, was also financed by K̄vāja Avetik'. Its sumptuous interior decoration combines frescoes, stucco reliefs, and tiles with oil paintings on canvas imported from Venice (Carswell, pp. 41-42; Hakhnazarian and Mehrabian, pp. 37-43).

(4) St. George's Church in the P'ok'r Mēydan quarter is one of New Julfa's largest and most famous sanctuaries (Carswell, pp. 37-40; Hakhnazarian and Mehrabian, pp. 53-57; see i/PLATE V). Since the construction of the church was financially supported by K̄vāja Nazar, the second mayor of New Julfa (see i, above), it is also known as K̄vāja's Church. The church is a renowned pilgrimage site, since it houses a few stones from the Holy See in Ējmiacin (i/PLATE VI).

(5) St. Stephen's Church in the Yakobjan quarter was built between 1613 and 1614 (Carswell, pp. 43-45; Hakhnazarian and Mehrabian, pp. 65-67). The construction of the largest church in New Julfa was made possible through the collective efforts of the quarter's inhabitants.

(6) The Church of St. John the Baptist in the Č'arsu (Pers. *čārsu*) quarter was originally dedicated to the Holy Mother of God (Carswell, pp. 46-47;



Hakhnazarian and Mehrabian, pp. 96-100, 108). But it was rededicated, when its congregation obtained relics of St. John the Baptist, which are kept in a reliquary in the shape of a right hand. The church is therefore also known as the Church of the Holy Hand (*Ajĭ Žam*).

(7) St. Catherine's Church and Nunnery are also located in the Č'arsu quarter, and their 1623 construction was financed by K̄vāja Exiazar (Carswell, p. 48; Hakhnazarian and Mehrabian, pp. 92-95). In 1858, the nunnery housed the first New Julfa school for girls (see ii, above), and in 1967, parts of the complex were converted into an orphanage and a home for the elderly (see iii, above).

(8) St. Bethlehem Church is a magnificent edifice with a huge dome (Carswell, pp. 50-52; Hakhnazarian and Mehrabian, pp. 44-51; see i/PLATE VII). Its construction was financed by K̄vāja Petros Veliĵaneanc' (see i, above). It has many frescoes attributed to Varpet Minas, Martiros, and Bogdan Saltanov (b. in 1630s, d. 1703). In the 1850s the church was on the verge of collapse, and Āqā Elizian ensured its restoration. (See below for updated figures 1-6).

(9) The Church of St. Nicholas the Patriarch is located in the Łaragel quarter and was at first dedicated to the Holy Mother of God. It was built around 1630 through the joint efforts of the quarter's inhabitants. The church was rededicated to the patriarch, when the congregation was given one of the saint's relics (Carswell, pp. 58-59; Hakhnazarian and Mehrabian, pp. 82-87).

(10) The Church of St. Gregory the Illuminator was built in 1633, in the P'ok'r Meydan quarter, and K̄vāja Minas financed its construction (Carswell, pp. 60-62; Hakhnazarian and Mehrabian, pp. 58-63).

(11) St. Sargis' Church was built in 1659, in the Erevan quarter (Carswell, pp. 52-54; Hakhnazarian and Mehrabian, pp. 68-75). Donations from the congregation paid for the church building. The few preserved frescoes suggest that its whitewashed walls used to be covered with paintings. Shortly after its construction, the church served for about three decades as the seat of Yovhan Vardapet, a rival to the Primate of New Julfa, and so it is also known as Yovhan's Monastery (*Ohanay Vank'*).

(12) St. Minas' Church in the Tabriz quarter was built between 1658 and 1662 (Carswell, pp. 55-56; Hakhnazarian and Mehrabian, pp. 76-81). Its apse, niches, and pillars are completely covered with frescoes.

(13) St. Nerses' Church in the K'oč'er quarter was built in 1666, and originally



dedicated to the Holy Annunciation (Tēr-Yovhaneanc', II, pp. 209-10; Hakhnazarian and Mehrabian, pp. 88-91). Avetik' Gilanēnc' built the church, while seeking the pardon of the church authorities for his marriage, considered incestuous according to the Canon of the Apostolic Church. The church was rededicated to St. Nerses the Great when the congregation received one of his relics.

The plan of the churches follows that of the churches in the Armenian provinces of Gołtan and Yernjak, which today is part of Nakhijevan, in particular the churches in Old Julfa, Agulis, C'łna, Bisti, P'araka, Yayji, and Ramis. In general, the domed churches are derived from a central square plan, which is their dominant feature (Carswell, pp. 19-20). The walls are built of brick and a mixture of clay and thatch, with a layer of gypsum as the final plaster coating; in Armenia, however, the churches have solid stone walls (cf. Karapetian, pp. 46-47). A distinct characteristic of the churches of New Julfa is that they are integrated into a building complex, thereby appearing more like monasteries than churches. They are surrounded by high, fortified walls, and have cells, community rooms, storehouse, and kitchen. Several entrances connect the complex with different streets, facilitating access to refuge in emergencies and dangerous situations. Some churches have a main sanctuary and an eastern chapel, which is called summer church (Arm. *amran žam*). This typical feature of New Julfa churches is also found in the Armenian churches built by Julfan merchants in India.

All churches had wooden bells (Arm. sing. *simandrom*), but today only a single specimen is preserved in St. Catherine's Nunnery. St. Thomas' Church was the first sanctuary with a bell, and it was therefore known as the Church-with-a-bell (Arm. *Zangov Žam*).

The interior of Armenian Apostolic churches is not usually well lit, as semi-darkness is considered more appropriate for entering into the presence of God. The interior is simple and austere, and all decoration is concentrated on the facades, but not so in the New Julfa churches. Since the facades of Safavid mosques were lavishly adorned, the church facades in Persia had to be plain by contrast to avoid any impression of a competition between mosques and churches. The New Julfa architects therefore designed church interiors with richly decorated frescoes and tiles to compensate for their bare facades. These changes to the traditional norms of Armenian religious architecture were mediated by the incorporation of European architectural elements, since Julfan merchants encountered European architecture on their wide-ranging



business trips. This new style had a considerable impact on the architectural traditions in Nakhijevan, Karabakh, and Armenia between the 17th and 19th centuries. Since the New Julfa community preserved their relations with their homeland, their architectural heritage became an integral part of Armenian culture.

Painting. The interiors of All Savior's Cathedral, St. Bethlehem Church, and the Church of the Holy Mother of God were completely covered with frescoes, but only those of the cathedral have been studied in more detail (Boase; Ghazarian; Kurdian). Wall paintings became an accepted element of the interior of Armenian churches and were also widely used for the decoration of secular structures, such as private residences. Unfortunately, in recent decades many important houses were significantly altered, or even demolished, before their frescoes could be investigated, and many wall paintings are now irrevocably lost.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, the interior of the New Julfa churches was decorated with bands of polychrome tiles. This Iranian technique of glazed relief tiles is known as *haft rangi* (lit. "of seven colors"). The commonly employed colors are yellow, blue, turquoise, brown, green, purple, and white (Carswell, p. 26). In the Armenian context the *haft rangi* tiles of the walls and pillars, whose diameter ranges between 120-40 cm, not only show inscriptions and geometrical and floral patterns, but their biblical scenes are populated with animals, angels, and mythical creatures such as the phoenix and dragons. Another style of glazed relief tiles reveals the influence of Indian art. The two lush landscapes of St. Sargis' Church (Carswell, p. 52 and pls. IVa and 54-55; Hakhnazarian and Mehrabian, p. 73), with their palm trees, monkeys, tigers, and elephants, illustrate the close ties with the Armenian community in India.

New Julfa artists preserved the Armenian traditions, and they created a local New Julfa style, because they were also receptive to Safavid and European art. Safavid miniature painting was very sophisticated, and in the 17th century such masters of the art as Reżā (d. 1635) and Moḥammad Zamān (fl. 1649-1704) displayed European influences, though the precise origin of these influences is a matter of debate (Welch). While the shahs employed European artists in the Safavid capital (Carswell, p. 22), the Armenian merchants purchased European artworks on their business travels. Moreover, in 1666 the priest Oskan Erevanc'i (1614-74) edited and published in Amsterdam the first printed Armenian Bible, which circulated widely among Armenian communities in Turkey, Persia, and India. Its illustrations by the Dutch artist



Christoffel van Sichem became an important source of inspiration for New Julfa frescoes and miniatures (Carswell, pp. 21-26, figs. 4-9).

The Armenian historiographer Arak'el of Tabriz (II, p. 305) admired the work of Varpet Minas, who had been trained by European artists in Aleppo, an important commercial center in Ottoman Syria. Minas worked in oil, water colors, and charcoal, and was a skilled portraitist. Among the work ascribed to him are frescoes in St. Bethlehem Church and the houses of ԿՎՁԺ Տափրազ and Petros Veliĵaneanc' (see i, above), as well as in the palaces of Shah Şafi and Shah 'Abbās II. Yovhannēs Merquz and Tēr-Step'anos were his most important pupils.

The monk Yovhannēs Merquz, a gifted theologian and scholar, is associated with wall paintings in All Savior's Cathedral. They comprise parables and other scenes from the Gospels, as well as a cycle of 21 paintings, mostly depicting the torments of St. Gregory the Illuminator (Boase, p. 325; Carswell, pp. 25-26 and pl. III). Bogdan Saltanov (known as Astuacatur and Ivan Saltanov) was a native of New Julfa, but in the 1660s he moved to Moscow to work in the Kremlin armory of Czar Alexis I (r. 1645-76) and his successors (Carswell, p. 25 n. 14). Archival records document Saltanov's considerable artistic output in Russia, and he is known to have created religious and secular paintings. Saltanov did not, however, sign his works, and scholars do not agree about possible attributions. Moreover, his early work in New Julfa remains to be studied.

Images of St. Bethlehem Church:

Figure 1. St. Bethlehem Church (Surb Betghem), Julfa, looking east to the portal from the courtyard. (Photograph H. Borjian, 2015)

Figure 2. St. Bethlehem Church (Surb Betghem), Julfa, looking east to the altar under the alcove, squinches and part of the dome. (Photograph H. Borjian, 2015)

Figure 3. St. Bethlehem Church (Surb Betghem), Julfa, looking up into the interior of the dome. (Photograph H. Borjian, 2015)

Figure 4. St. Bethlehem Church, (Surb Betghem), Julfa, looking southwest under the dome. (Photograph H. Borjian, 2015)

Figure 5. St. Bethlehem Church, (Surb Betghem), Julfa, north wall, with the



portrait of Khoja Petros Velijanians'. (Photograph H. Borjian, 2015)

Figure 6. St. Bethlehem Church (Surb Betghem), Julfa, frescos and tileworks of the northwest corner. (Photograph H. Borjian, 2015)

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