

From Armenia to Anonymity  
The Unseen Legacy of Armenian Motifs in Global Luxury Fashion  
and Their Role in Identity Preservation

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## **Abstract**

Armenian visual art is rooted in its ancient history, culture, and geography. Armenian symbols and visuals have been continuously progressing since prehistoric rock carvings and cave art. It is almost characteristic to Armenian creators to take inspiration from personal stories, centuries of national customs, spiritual beliefs and daily traditions in their artistic expressions. Through this love for symbolism, locals have excelled in storytelling through craftsmanship and creative expression.

Think of the popular Paisley pattern often seen as a print on bandanas, shirts, dresses, scarves and even ties, gaining popularity beyond ethnic accessories and becoming a symbol of the modern boho and European pop scene. The pattern, appropriated by luxury fashion houses like Balenciaga, Isabel Marant and D&G, in fact, has proven Armenian origins.

The modern luxury fashion industry mixes art and culture with profit, with backstories and messaging of pieces becoming more and more relevant. As a visual-focused platform, fashion is a leading sphere which can preserve cultural heritage along with its visual wealth. Thus, this project focuses on fashion design as its field of research – as presumably the most powerful medium to sustain, promote and pass on cultural art. Fashion is a domain where taking inspiration from culture is encouraged, although recently, cultural elements are often taken out of context and presented publicly without credit. Besides, many times, ethnic art elements transform and evolve into global emblems, blurring the line between culture and commercialism. This research aims to point out and examine the integration of Armenian motifs in the international premium fashion industry. It focuses on their significance in design and erased

identity, discussing the broader consequences of cultural underrepresentation and erasure of heritage.

Fashion, as form of art and storytelling, introduces design beyond aesthetic appeal, presenting stories of origin, authentic identities, and history. The context that defines certain visuals becomes under risk when fashion industry players appropriate them without acknowledgment. Besides undermining Armenian artistry, this also puts limits on the global visibility and appreciation of Armenia's contribution to the creative world. Armenia, already being under-recognized on the global creative map, particularly within the creative industries, is almost "endangered" on account of the lack of proven evidence about its contribution to the global creative sphere.

This project targets three primary areas; first, to identify and overview instances of Armenian-born visuals incorporated within international premium fashion; secondly, to emphasize the recognition deprivation of the Armenian community for their artistry and heritage; thirdly, to raise awareness on the negative consequences of cultural narratives being redefined within fashion, while still remaining disconnected from their origins.

This project encourages the necessity of tracing the origin of cultural elements used by brands/designers, not only to illustrate the need for proper credit and justice, but also to understand the message these brands communicate and how an audience perceives the message. Today, more importance is placed on the way material culture communicates different stories. Thus, there is a need to advocate for Armenian creators, cultural heritage and independent artisans in particular, entering a broader dialogue on appreciation and economic justice. Through

examples, the project stresses the role of Armenian motifs as cultural ambassadors within global narratives in fashion.

### **Literature Review**

Being part of the South Caucasus, where cultures have had immense influence on one another in shaping separate cultural identities, Armenia's art and symbols often also mix the differing customs of neighboring nations in the area (Foletti et.al., 2016). Taking into account the scarcity of proper documentation, it becomes a challenge to identify separate visual motifs of purely Armenian origin. However, the history purely Armenian motifs hold is still available not just in written, but in oral history, giving a chance of enlightenment on their relationship with modern-day design.

Creatives from various fields on a global level have long drawn inspiration from diverse disciplines and cultural motifs, either seeking to be different or finding pure resonance in cultures other than their own. From Picasso's amusement with African masks to today's contemporary installations rooted in aboriginal art, native heritage has been and continues being a powerful resource for creative endeavors in a variety of art spheres.

Within fashion and design, the creator often adapts already-existing motifs to fit into a certain style or aesthetic. This is well illustrated by Picasso's quote "Good artists borrow, great artists steal," implying that stealing is a less apparent form of duplicating. Thus, the essence of the original source culture is often overlooked and not considered, with the unknown author not receiving any credit (Aguero, 2024). While it is common and human to create actual unintended

copies of already existing visuals, the recognition of their history today is important as it can shape how the creative product, in this case, fashion, is perceived and consumed by a variety of people from different backgrounds within its audience and consumers.

Cultural appropriation, first introduced by Edward Said in his book *Orientalism*, occurs when elements of one culture are adopted by another and given new meaning and context, specifically in art and design (Said, 1978). In creative fields, this is often pronounced when a representative of the borrowing culture achieves commercial success without acknowledgment of the original culture (Young, 2008). There are fine lines between copying, borrowing, drawing inspiration and unintentional recreation of visuals in creative fields. Clearly, similar issues occur frequently but do not have one direct way that they can be dealt with. “The meeting of two cultures never turns one into a carbon copy of the other. Rather, it produces something unpredictably new,” - is what Martin Puchner argues in his book, “Culture,” viewing cultural appropriation as a necessary process that enriches nations and their identities (Puchner, 2023). Through discussions on 15 historical periods, Puchner argues that cultural exchange results in evolution and promotes hybridity. He advocates for the universal interchange of creations and ideas despite their origin, essentially being against those who value cultural possessions and safeguard traditions.

Puchner’s central point is that encounters between diverse cultures lead to new inventions rather than replications. He brings examples of significant moments like the influence of Greek customs on Roman culture, Xuanzang’s pilgrimage to India, Biblical influence on Ethiopian Christianity, etc. Puchner believes cultural exchange can be collaborative and beneficial for both sides, without erasing the originating culture.

In contrast to this, in her paper “Fashion Between Inspiration and Appropriation,” Barbara Pozzo presents cultural appropriation as exploitation of intellectual property and cultural expressions from other cultures. She points out the negative consequences for the given cultural heritage when items and symbols are taken out of context and used without acknowledgement. The use of different elements by borrowing cultures from origin cultures in design often leads to the uncompensated commodification of heritage, prioritizing commercial gain (Pozzo, 2020). An example would be Ralph Lauren’s pieces in a 2022 collection, resembling indigenous Mexican designs from Contla and Saltillo. The designer faced criticism for selling these garments and got publicly accused of plagiarism by the wife of Mexico’s president (FitzGerald, 2022). Another example is Louis Vuitton in 2012: marketing a Maasai shuka-resembling pattern as a “Louis Vuitton signature.” While LV stated that various cultures have inspired the collection, there was no trace of collaboration with, or advantage given to the Maasai community in Kenya and Tanzania (Hoag, 2019, Mondaq).

While the mix of different cultures can result in originality and inventive solutions, the protection of the heritage of marginalized communities is crucial. Today, the focus is still put on individual ownership when it comes to crediting. Thus, collective right of holding is often ignored. This raises the need for higher awareness on cultural contribution and proper attribution on a global scale (UN, 1996). Besides the need to voice misuse and address the return of cultural artifacts, there is also the need to encourage and promote the origin minorities’ participation in decision-making as authors. In many spheres there is an increased visibility for less known sources of origin and authors due to organizations like UNESCO and WIPO. However, the fashion and design sphere specifically is not usually prioritized within similar endeavors.

The concept of TCPs (Traditional Cultural Properties) was developed to help designers integrate foreign cultures' properties in modern products not only in their physical and visual form but also considering behavioral (cultural meaning) and conceptual (original value and ideology) of said resources (Qin, et.al., n/d). This reinforces cultural sustainability, assisting designers in ethical practices like fostering learning and responsible use of various cultural assets. Although the authors Qin and Ng focus on technical aspects and do not mention fashion and inspiration while discussing TPCs, they argue that modernization and globalization usually marginalize heritage in design, resulting in superficial cultural representations. This model may seamlessly apply to the use of Armenian-origin motifs and concepts in fashion, promoting more mindfulness for the utilizers.

Observations and criticism have shown that tradition is the underlying support for good design. A product of tradition serves as a bridge between the past and the present, thus appealing not only visually but also on a psychological level to its audience. In general, middle eastern art and design concepts and themes have long found their place in western brands and not only. An essay on the architecture of Armenian churches, examines how Armenian art is marginalized within medieval studies on account of historical and geographical influencing factors. It presents Armenia as an overlooked country despite its cultural contributions, highlighting a detailed series of inventive approaches in Armenian conceptual designs and visual elements (Maranci, 2006). Besides, the study tries to prove Armenia's role as a generator of creativity, rather than a passive receiver of external dominant pressure.

The intersection of motifs of Armenian origin and global premium fashion continues to be an under-explored topic in academic discussions. While there is extensive research on broader cultural appropriation and the use of non-Western aesthetics in worldwide art, separate studies on Armenian visual traditions, particularly in fashion, have been very scarce. While previous research offers important records of the historical and cultural backgrounds of Armenian motifs, there are no credible sources that critically examine how these motifs are utilized or taken over in global creative sectors. Conversations about cultural appropriation often led to broad assumptions about non-Western artistic styles without looking at specific instances like those from Armenia. Pointless to say, there is a lack of application of theoretical frameworks that examine the consequences of incorporating cultural symbols from Armenian heritage in design. There is still an unexplored connection between historical documentation of Armenian motifs and how their ideologies apply even in Armenian fashion. Oftentimes, the hidden origins that are not recognizable or easily traceable have the power to position their creator as a distinct idea originator, opening doors in a broader context.

### **Research Questions**

The project is guided by the main research question: How does the uncredited use of Armenian motifs in global luxury fashion affect the cultural recognition and preservation of Armenian heritage? The question concentrates on how cultural appropriation, heritage and visual branding interrelate. It addresses recognition within the niche aspect of Armenian creativity in global fashion. For a clear image, the research attempts to answer to two sub-research questions, the first one being: How have Armenian motifs been used in global luxury fashion, and to what extent have their origins been publicly acknowledged or traced in brand narratives?

This question looks at brand narratives, PR materials and perspectives, exploring how Armenian-inspired designs are represented in fashion beyond Armenia. The second sub-research question is: In what ways does the uncredited use of Armenian motifs in luxury fashion diminish public understanding and appreciation of their cultural and historical significance? Focusing on the consequences of unacknowledged or unknown roots of Armenian-born design in fashion, this question addresses potential cultural identity erasure along with Armenia's role in global creative dialogue.

### **Methodology**

The primary method necessary for the project is a qualitative approach using content analysis along with visual studies. Content analysis includes thorough examination of Armenian-born motifs across ancient mediums such as textile, khachkars, jewellery and architecture, focusing on their historical context and comparing it to modern interpretations. The analysis has a goal to trace and specify the symbolic meanings of said motifs. Within visual studies, a variety of diverse premium fashion houses'/brands' collections and campaigns will be investigated in terms of the presence of Armenian design elements. Brands that have a record of adapting foreign designs or appropriating cultural heritage will serve as key examples. Besides contemporary fashion, archival research will be conducted to trace how these designs have been transformed over time since their roots. This approach will identify the extent of Armenian motifs in global fashion, whether they are presented as their original meaning and what significance they hold in their contexts.

Collecting data consists of analysing Armenian motifs in global premium fashion through images and first-hand publications, and historical books and records of Armenian patterns and motifs. The stage of data analysis includes thematic decomposition and comparison of Armenian motifs, their roots and implications in fashion design. A semiotic perspective helps further understand how the way motifs are used and thus, how they influence cultural perception. Additionally, insights from relevant specialists from Armenia and abroad through one-on-one exclusive interviews will help for a more professional break down.

## **Background and Contextual Overview**

### Visuals and Design Motifs of Armenian Origin

Armenia's artistic heritage throughout millennia reflects its historical experiences and religious dedication as a nation, as well as its interplay with surrounding cultures. The visual aspect of Armenian art such as symbols, artifacts and patterns has gone through numerous adjustments as pieces of art regarding both their meaning and aesthetics. These take shape in almost all handmade fields or artistic areas Armenians have engaged in throughout history.

In architecture, Armenia is known for its churches and monasteries dating back to 301 AD. The construction of these has been characterised by stone carvings and intricate illuminated paintings, an example being the medieval complex of Geghard. Common motifs in Armenian architecture include geometric decorations, interlacing knots, and stylistic leaves. The rosette and the Armenian eternity symbol are similar circular motifs symbolising the universe and wholeness. The stone rosette has been found in 1283 AD, at Dadivank, Karvachar, Artsakh.



Ancient Armenian rosette

The eternity symbol, “Arevakhach” in Armenian, can be found in the 7th century Saint Hripsime Church, 13th century Harichavank Monastery near Artik, 13th century Gandzasar and Geghard Monasteries, as well as modern monuments like the Armenian Genocide Memorial and Yerevan Cascade Complex, etc.



Armenian eternity symbol

Khachkars have inherent roots in Armenia, standing for both honorary and religious motives. They often have a carved central cross framed in usually botanical designs which symbolise faith

and eternal life. The craftsmanship of the Armenian khachkars has been recognized by UNESCO as components of the country's cultural heritage.



Armenian khachkar

Manuscript illumination in Armenia has been developed in the 5th century, when scribes and artists created a tradition out of it. Such manuscripts are easy to distinguish due to their radiant colours, elaborate designs, and letter illustrations. They often feature interlaced strings, flora and fauna elements, and religious iconography. Each separate piece reflects both native traditions and personal influences.

Armenian ornamental art has a wider selection of a decorative concepts that can be found in architecture, ancient publications, textiles, ceramics, and everyday technical tools. These are

grounded in their meanings and messages connected to Armenia’s geography, cultural customs, nature, eternity, family and other concepts.

Armenian carpet weaving has its separate spot in the country’s culture. They are celebrated for not only their craftsmanship and differing styles, but also the stories they tell as works of art. In the Armenian folktale “Anahit,” the heroine found her way to her lover by communicating with him across countries through constructing a carpet with a message written on it. Many ancient carpets display dragons, medallions, flowers, people, geometric objects, each carrying their own value across different regions of Armenia. The most important carpets of medieval Armenia were crafted in the renowned workshops of monasteries. These carpets were primarily donated to churches (Kyurkchyan et.al., 2010). The carpets from Lori, for example, feature the floor plan of the Odzun Church in their centres.



Ancient Armenian “Khndzoresk” carpet

Another example is floor plan of the Mother Cathedral of Echmiadzin on a carpet design. Widely known carpets called Kndzoresk, are decorated with a key symbol representing the sun or eternity (such as the cross, starry patterns, etc.) around which dragons are depicted in pairs (Kyurkchyan et.al, 2010). Medallions form the center, serving as the root of the design of the

carpet. For instance, a sun can be in the centre, depicting a cross within a square which itself symbolizes the four corners of the world. The worship of the earth in Armenia is expressed in many art forms, including carpets. For instance, the agricultural culture of Armenia is reflected through the use of rectangles and squares, which symbolize the earth, fertile soil, and the fields. Similar designs are illustrated in carpets with rectangular patterned designs from Shushi, late 19th century. Parallel motifs found on the walls of ancient fortresses can also be seen in the tooth-like patterns of Armenian carpets and textiles. These jagged patterns typically serve as borders and have a protective significance. The art of carpet weaving is an essential component of the country's culture to this day.

This leads to embroidery in Armenian textiles, traditional attire, ancient garments and home objects. The designs represent how the nation interprets the universe, life, relationships, every day life and even food. The stitch technique "Aintab," has Armenian roots in embroidery, where threads are removed from the fabric to create a desired pattern, often shaped like diamonds, triangles and other symmetrical outlines.

Armenian visuals also find their place within metalwork. Local metalworkers have been famous for their skill in creating various items from bronze, silver, and other metals since the rise of the craft. The Urartian period has left behind artefacts like helmets, swords, vessels, and jewellery fragments with deeply intricate designs.

### Cultural Appropriation

When members of a dominant culture take a concept, symbol or an artefact from a minority culture without permission or understanding, and adopt it as theirs, cultural appropriation occurs.

It often leads to the exploitation of said elements. In creative fields like art, design and fashion, the use of styles of various origins leads to ethical concerns, underrepresentation, and intellectual ownership debates. Throughout years, cultural appropriation has been a recurring problem in the fashion industry. Hence, it would be natural to question the industry's role in identity preservation and agent of equality. Some recent examples of prominent labels misusing foreign concepts include Carolina Herrera's 2020 Resort collection, where the Mexican culture minister accused the designer of stealing native Mexican patterns, claiming one of the designs was taken from traditional shawls, another one is 'Indy Turban' by Gucci in 2018, where the brand showed the Indian headpiece as an accessory, facing criticism for commercialising and disrespecting the deep religious significance of the turban (Devadhar, 2023). Similarly, Valentino's 2025 collection allegedly copied exact designs from Métis and Dene beadwork experts, who are indigenous artists (Factora, 2024). In 2027, Dior replicated the traditional Romanian Bihor coats without credit, while they originally were developed by local craftsmen of Romania. In 2025, Isabel Marant's misappropriation of the Mexican Tlahuitoltepec blouse in 2015 was confirmed as plagiarism due to the identical design. Many other cases have raised controversy in the fashion sphere, involving Victoria's Secret, Tory Burch, Stella McCartney, Burberry, Louis Vuitton, etc using foreign visuals without attribution.

### The Ethical Debate on Cultural Exchange Dynamics

Cultural exchange, exploitation and appropriation are unavoidable topics of discussion in the design industries, where cultural symbols circulate among creators of various levels of power. Regarding cultural appropriation, Postcolonial Theory and Representation Theory are the main

lenses of analysis, showing how dominant agents aestheticise and misrepresent cultural properties, washing away their original messages. Cultural appropriation means adopting cultural elements of a marginalised community by often a larger, more dominant group without proper context, permission, or recognition. Stuart Hall (1997) argued that representation is never neutral: if cultural concepts are taken and reapplied into fashion contexts, especially of commercial nature, they are therefore re-signified in a way that distorts their initial meaning. Bell hooks (1992), for instance, critiqued the commodification of Black culture as a "spice," in modern terms, an "aesthetic" to be added to not only visual design, but other narratives, pointing out how extractive such practices can be. "Appropriation is not just about usage—it's about recontextualization, which often involves distortion, misrecognition, or fetishization" (Hall, 1997). As for cultural exchange, it is best explained through intercultural communication (Hall, 1990), global cultural flows (Appadurai, 1996) and cosmopolitanism (Hannerz, 1992). These concepts are umbrella terms to different ways cultures can interact, mix and impact each other in ethical, consensual and collaborative ways. Thus, cultural exchange occurs in case of mutual sharing and reconstruction of cultural ideas on a respectful ground. For example, in fashion and design, this can take shape through collaborative projects between designers or artists representing different regions, resulting in visibility for both agents. "Cultural exchange presumes a relationship of reciprocity and recognition, which distinguishes it from exploitative or appropriative dynamics" (Ziff & Rao, 1997, p. 9). Cultural exploitation shows most difference when compared to the other two, where agents in power methodically extracts cultural aesthetics, primarily driven by profit. Marxist theories of surplus value underlie this practice, implying that marginalised communities' efforts are commodified, giving them no material benefit. World-

systems theorists (Wallerstein, 1974) believe that minor cultures are “inherently” positioned as suppliers of cultural capital to countries with high economic power.

A context-related example is the common case of brands outsourcing crafts and embroidery to less known communities, hardly paying enough for survival, and marketing it under “artisan luxury” without crediting the artisans. Even cultural heritage can be treated like mere material that is wrapped and sold within neoliberal capitalism (Harvey, 2005). “Under capitalism, culture itself becomes a commodity—stripped of context, flattened into brand value, and sold for surplus profit.” Post-socialist and postcolonial frameworks like Armenia’s are often the victims of this, where national motifs, traditional elements and crafts get incorporated into creative narratives in the west with no hint of political or historical context.

In fashion specifically, in order to avoid appropriation, the industry must adopt practices. First, collaborating with artisans and craftsmen of the represented country can directly end up in a win-win situation, with social and economic benefits for both sides. For instance, Maria Grazia Chiuri collaborated with the School of Craft in Mumbai to create the embroidery for Dior’s pre-fall 2023 collection (Allaire, 2023). Secondly, creators and designers that hold any sort of leverage must be educated on the history and meaning behind the concepts they adopt or take inspiration from, ensuring not only informed use but good reputation in the industry as a brand. This leads to the third practice – to properly credit and consider fair compensation for the origin community for their work. However, since Armenia has never been widely known beyond the region of Caucasus, the contributions it has had in the creative sphere have not been disclosed or explored, which has made it difficult to point out elements of Armenian origin in the bigger picture. Nevertheless, there have been several instances of Armenian visuals being appropriated

internationally. One relatively known example is Lady Gaga's 2020 "911" music video inspired by the Armenian filmmaker Sergei Parajanov's "The Colour of Pomegranate" film, featuring traditional Armenian symbols, as well as costumes by designer Karina Akopyan, without explicit declaration of their Armenian origin. Remarkably, many Armenian audiences were grateful to the pop-star providing visibility for Armenian art. However, others may argue that such mindset equals being manipulated into believing something is promoted, while it is ultimately being taken advantage of. Another instance is Kanye West's 2020 Yeezy "Ararat" Sneakers inspired by the Mount Ararat, an important characteristic of Armenian identity. Critics did not approve of this as the shoe, being named after the mountain, undervalues the true symbolism of Ararat. It did not show effort to engage with the Armenian communities, therefore, neglecting meaningful cultural exchange. Another case in fashion is Victoria's Secret in 2015 Vogue Russia starring Stella Maxwell who wore the traditional Armenian Taraz attire. While being intriguing and exciting to its audience, the edit faced instant backlash for being 'insensitive' and displaying national garments of Armenia without proper context or message.

The insufficient interchange between the international fashion industry and representatives of Armenian communities limits potential collaboration and authentic representation of artists. Besides, with the fashion industry being one of the most fluctuating fields, it lacks clear frameworks for distinguishing when there is need for recognition, credit, or reciprocal cooperation. Similar reasons tie into Armenia being excluded from the primary dialogue in not only arts, but also other fields throughout history, which in turn has been controlled by Armenia's geopolitics and continuous role as a minority country.

## Armenia's Marginalization Throughout History

Given its long history dating back to ancient times, approximately 9th century BCE, Armenia has been through a significant hardship as a nation overshadowed by physically more powerful and politically dominant nations. As it is often the case in history, the centuries' worth of value Armenia has brought to cultural, intellectual, and scientific spheres has faced systematic neglect in the international dialogue. Since there is limited information on Armenia's art scene, particularly fashion, here is an example from another sphere: the Armenian book printer Hakob Meghapart developed the first printing techniques in Armenia in 1512, but the history of typography does not mention his contributions along with European printers. Besides Armenia's geopolitical position, it has been a target of conflicts on account of many factors, like being the first Christian nation, making controversial choices, constantly striving for independence as a small nation, and other cultural practices that have played decisive roles in making Armenia a victim of hostility. This has undoubtedly promoted the diminishment of Armenia's voice and right of proprietorship across many fields, particularly the arts. The lack of acknowledgment of Armenia's influence and contribution is thus not incidental, but instead a result of decades of dominant antagonists using, mistreating, appropriating, or simply overlooking any valuable product of Armenian origin.

Armenia was located in the middle of major civilizations such as Persia, Byzantium, Mongolia, Ottoman Empire and Russia, which has been both a blessing and a curse. In regard to the latter, Armenia very quickly became a battleground and a target for conquest. Naturally, Armenia was repeatedly forced to oblige to foreign regulations, depriving it the power and resources to sustain

and foster their intellectual and cultural traditions like other larger nations did. After each minor turning point that further deprived Armenia of a chance to stand up for itself, new criteria in cultural, linguistic, and social contexts were imposed. This way, people were suffocating, while their national and academic achievements were being assimilated.

During the period when Armenia was under the control of Persian and Byzantine empires, the Byzantine often took ownership over Armenia's progress in theology and philosophy, making them part of their own customs and blurring the line between "Armenian" and "Byzantine."

While they did acknowledge Armenians' Christian identity, the Armenian theologian Gregory of Narek's profound impact in Christian mysticism was still incorporated in Byzantine practices without any attribution. In contrast to this, Armenia's freedom was not given a second thought under Persia's domination, who viewed Armenia as a border region, disregarding its cultural institutions. The Persian Safavid Empire regularly relocated Armenian craftsmen and merchants.

When Armenians resettled in New Julfa in the 17th century, their advancements in arts got blended with the Persian culture. Similar intense periods for Armenia would often last for generations, which meant that the fluctuation of law took the rights - if not lives - of thought-leaders way, stifling the accomplishments in visual arts particularly. The Ottoman period marked one of the most significant cases where the Armenian culture and any kind of autonomy was vastly suppressed: Armenians' participation in various creative spheres was not authorized or acknowledged in the wider imperial scope. The Ottoman elite gave a chance of working and contributing to the Turkish industry to those intellectuals of Armenia who stood out in various fields, crediting their efforts as Ottoman. One of the most distinguished Ottoman architects, Mimar Sinan, who built the Sukeymaniye Mosque, was originally from an Armenian family, although all his creations are attributed to Turkey. In parallel to the constant suppressions, the

comeback of intellectual freedom Armenia experienced in the 19th and early 20th centuries under the Russian regime, was actually the beginning of a deeper loss of national identity for Armenia. Although Russian policies allowed opportunities for Armenian intellectuals within the huge Russian academic network, they downplayed the Armenian identity and utilized their efforts in benefit to the Russian narrative. The indication of this is the legacy of many Armenian engineers and artists (often with adjusted last names in accordance with Russia), which to this day is credited to Russia's history and achievements, rather than recognized as Armenia's. A famous example is Ivan Aivazovsky, known as a Russian sea painter, but of Armenian descent, originally named Hovhannes Aivazyan, whose artwork was presented as of Russian heritage. What concerns the Armenian Genocide from 1915 to 1917, it not only physically eliminated Armenian communities but also practically erased all Armenian intellectual records. The writers, artists, scientists and political decision-makers in Armenia were systematically targeted in order to deliberately destroy any cultural leadership left in Armenia. For instance, the composer, priest and choirmaster Komitas Vardapet, who was instrumental in preserving the Armenian folk music, was arrested and lost his legacy during the Armenian Genocide. Other thought leaders executed during the Armenian Genocide include poet and writer Siamanto, philosopher Krikor Zohrab, Aram Satunts and others. Losses of significant visual and written archives wiped away a total generation of Armenian creatives and scholars, putting an end to centuries of Armenian wisdom and expression. In consequence, in the global discourse, Armenia's say was further marginalized, while the surviving communities had to rebuild everything from zero.

After 1991, when Armenia regained its independence, people started to make an effort to claim back their individuality in almost all spheres of life. This was as difficult as it gets on account of

the lasting impacts of being marginalized as not only a country, but as humans with the right of life. The countries that have had the power to claim their spot within global creative industries throughout history, continue having their influence in these spheres and are acknowledged internationally. This is obviously not the case for Armenia, since its autonomy as a producer is relatively new. While the Armenian diaspora communities have been crucial in asserting Armenia's place in design and fashion, their influence is fragmented, with no support from primary institutional bodies.

### **Examples of Armenian Motifs in Fashion Design**

The following examples have been chosen to illustrate the prevalence of design motifs in fashion design which can be traced to full or partial Armenian origins – geographically and contextually. While these cases serve as proof for cultural appropriation of Armenian heritage, it must be considered that there is virtually no design that can be assessed exclusively as Armenian, Persian, Turkish, Roman, Mongolian - or for that matter - even Egyptian or Greek, especially when it comes to artistic inheritance which come which come with little to no background information. That is, most traditional or ethnic visuals are traded overtime and can be proliferated through one dominant culture, or multiple cultures. Thus, it is natural for several different cultures to use similar motifs and patterns, however, Armenia's role as neither a creator, nor - in some cases - a proliferator of design magnetized in fashion, should not be overlooked and forgotten.

## 1. The Boteh (Paisley) Pattern



The Boteh pattern

Boteh is a widely popular almond-like pattern, that has a sharp end and a round corner on the other end, also known in English as Paisley. Paisley was well-known and used in countries in Asia Minor, the Orient and Middle East, existing since the ancient times. Currently, there is still no definitive information on its exact origin, date of creation and contextual history. For many, it is a familiar almond-shaped design seen in fashion, accessories and other everyday garments. Nowadays, the Boteh is still vastly populated popular in both European and Oriental countries. For instance, the famous Italian premium brand ETRO uses the pattern as a signature ornament, classifying it as the element of the timeless "Boho" style. The undeniably mysterious, but widely

recognizable pattern has also been used in Armenian national attire and jewelry. Boteh has been used in High Hayq, Cilicia, Vaspurakan, and across Small Hayq, including Karin, Sebastia, Marash, Shatakh, Perry, Igdir, Halberd, and Alexandropol, in the 18-19th century particularly, with the increased practice of golden thread embroidery on aprons and national costumes. Boteh is known as "nshanakhsh", sometimes, "badamanakhsh" in Armenian dialect, but despite its common usage, there is no matched translation or etymology of it.

According to fashion encyclopaedias and textbooks, the Boteh had an Indian origin, where it can be found on cashmere wool shawls and in "mehndi" body art to this day. According to Indians, the form of Boteh is a symbol representing movement, energy and development, which is the reason they still put it on Indian wedding dresses as a decoration. Similar to Armenian national clothing, the pattern was used in the Sassanian Empire for decorating royal regalia like crowns and court garments, using silver and gold threads. There is a belief that it was forbidden to illustrate the Boteh on rugs for centuries, as it was a sacred symbol, and couldn't be put on the ground. Then it started to be widely used on carpets, but the Boteh lost its component of aristocracy very recently, in the 18th century. In the 14th and 16th centuries, across Europe, there was a rise of cashmere scarves covered completely with the Boteh pattern. Then during the 17th century, cheap products with the pattern started being produced, and the pattern soon became known as Paisley in Great Britain, named after a Scottish city. Now it is still a famous pattern in rugs and decorative products in the East, often praised in folklore. According to studies, Boteh and a carpet element called "Muganian" come from ancient times of the Zoroastrianism religion and still carry its spiritual meaning.

Some design experts believe the pattern has feather shape, or a form of a bird's wing, others attribute the silhouette of cypress tree to the pattern, others see it as an almond, palm leaf, fig, pear, and other implications of fruits and vegetables. There is a wider uncertainty regarding the title of the pattern and its etymology. "Boteh" meant "Torch of Zoroastrian" in Zoroastrianism - an undying flame, which was lit in temples. In Farsi, the word "Boteh" signifies the plant thistles. Its branches take the form of the Boteh when they burn, and the strong aroma of its flowers add to the special approach towards the Boteh pattern. It is interesting how the Boteh is also present among star constellations, in Boötes constellation. In early times, it always had the same name across different languages. In Europe, in Ireland particularly, there are complex artifacts related to the Boötes constellation. Specifically, there is a significant stack of stones in the Febag village, which is directly related to the constellation in Ireland. While examining these stones, and the research that followed, it was found that the meaning of a thumb was closely related to the stones, which were called FENAGH, "finger". According to the widely-respected Armenian philologist Hrachya Acharyan, the Armenian word "Bhut mat" is purely of Armenian origin, coming from the old grammatical form "bhut"-thumb. Thus, it becomes a logical step to see the link between these evidences which is unlikely to be a mere coincidence. It is another question what this interrelation means within the context of the Boteh pattern.

There is an ancient famous Chinese legend, "The Weaver Girl and the Cowherd."

In the old Chinese tale, Chzhi-Nyuy, spinner, the daughter of Heaven's Lord Tsyau Di, is the goddess of carpet weavers on the east coast of the Silver River, where she weaved clouds with

magic silk. In one interpretation of the narrative, the girl resembled a silkworm due to her graceful nature.

When the weaver girl meets a young man named New-Lan, a cowherd, they fall in love, marry and have two children - a girl and a boy. Since his daughter stops weaving clouds after marriage, the Heaven's Lord gets upset and separates them, taking the cowherd to the other side of the river. They only get allowance to meet once a year, on the 7th day of the 7th moon, which has been the Lover's day for centuries in both China and Japan. The relation to astronomy in this story becomes clear. In addition, the Chinese referred to Milky Way as the Silk River. Besides, since the Heaven's Lord's daughter Chzhi-Nyuy was the goddess of carpet-makers, she was associated with the "Julhak" star Vega - the brightest star of Qnar constellation (Lyra). Thus, it is evident that New-Lan, the cowherd, symbolizes the Bootes constellation. However, a recent interpretation to the legend doesn't support New-Lan Bootes as the Bootes constellation with its brightest star Arkturus, but claims it is an Eagle constellation with the star Altair - unrelated to the story. Yet, the author of the book "Myths of Ancient China", Yu-Ken writes "On two sides of the heavenly river reminding white silk ... we can still see two large and bright stars – Bootes and Weaver. Behind the Bootes there are two small stars, son and daughter..."

This is evident at how the stars are positioned, a clear representation of the Bootes constellation, the biggest star of which Arkturus is also named Bootes with two twin stars behind it, instead of Altairi. Plus, nowadays, it is easier to notice things which weren't visible in the night-sky in the past. The 7th day of the 7th moon, which was the day the lovers were allowed to meet, coincides with month Mehekan and Astghik day on the early Armenian calendar. The Goddess Astghik and God Vahagn were lovers in old Armenian tales. Similar to the Chinese tale, where the

weaver girl swam in Silver River and met the cowherd, in Armenian mythology, Goddess Astghik was swimming in Aratsani river - flowing across the valley of Mush. Since her and Vahagn's love was perceived as sacred, people thought their unification caused rained on the earth, bringing joy and blessings to people. Moreover, swallows delivered messages between Astghik and God Vahagn, and in the end of the Chinese legend, the messengers delivering news were also birds.

The Silk Route used to connect Armenia to China in the ancient times. These Chinese-Armenian parallels are supported by a similar Sumerian-Akkadian perspective, which states that the name of the Caspian Sea originates from the Akkadian word "kaspu," meaning "silver" (A.Revazian). It is safe to conclude that Armenian-Chinese correlation is rational, later named the "Great Silk Road." In the sky, the Silver River divided the Weaver and Bootes, while on Earth, the Silver Caspian Sea was the separation point of China, non-ironically known for silk production, and Armenia, known for professional carpet production. The final analysis of these pieces of evidence is that Armenia imported threads from China which were dyed into red, azure and purple, and made into luxurious rugs, selling all over the world. This profitable partnership led to myths of love, turning the Boteh pattern a love symbol, representing respect and cooperation between the two countries. With time, under other influences, the pattern's original meaning could have been forgotten.

As to why the star Vega was chosen as the weaver, when the Great Silk Road was created, initiating the Armenian-Chinese cooperation, the Vega star was "the Pole Star," of the time, in 13000 years B. C. - more than 15000 years ago. While these explanations may be contradicting

today's design history textbooks and overall understanding, this evidence serves as sufficient data to reconsider the myths and their meanings from a fresh viewpoint. Moreover, this earth-sky correlation - common in ancient legends - is considered coincidental in modern times, yet, the most recent archeological findings in Portasar (Gebekli Tepe) in an ancient Armenian Highland (currently, territory of Turkey) has shown a deeper level of the earth-sky concept in architecture, creating new mystery around the subject.



Ancient Armenian rug, "Boteh"

The botteh is widely used across fashion design, some examples being collections by Etro including Spring/Summer 2007, 2009, 2018, 2022 and 2024, Dolce and Gabbana Spring 2000k, Balenciaga throughout the 2010s, Jil Sander Spring/Summer 2012, Jonathan Saunders Spring/Summer 2016, as well as Prada, Kenzo, Tori Richard, Calvin Klein, Hugo Boss and HM.



Etro



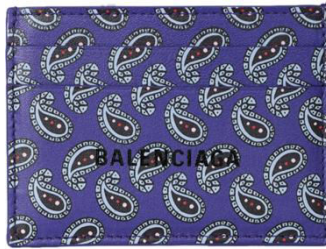
D&G



Jil Sander



Prada



Balenciaga



Jonathan Saunders

## 2. Dragon Rug Pattern



Ancient Armenian rug, “Vishapagorg”

According to historian, publicist, writer Vahe Lorents, carpet weaving in Armenia carries traditions of millennia. In Karmir Blur and Erebuni, archaeologists have found a number of carpet fragments. As already known, carpets used to serve as floor and wall decor as symbols of luxury and authority. Armenian and Persian carpets, close in nature, were desired for their high quality and reputation. The term 'karpet,' meaning carpet, first appeared in the Armenian dialect in the 5th century. The oldest known carpet in the world, discovered in 1949 near Russia's Altai region, in the tomb of a Scythian leader in Pazyryk, dates back approximately 2,600 years, with scholars unanimously attributing it to Urartian (Armenian) origins. While Iranian carpets are categorised by the location they were created in (e.g., Isfahan, Khorasan), Armenian carpets are

sorted by theme: Vishapagorgs (Dragon Carpets), Tsaghkagorgs (Flower Carpets), and geometric-patterned carpets known as Gohar.



Ancient Armenian dragon-patterned rugs

Silk, cotton and wool were the main tools of carpet creation in Armenia, distinguished by their earthy and harmonious colors. In the Middle Ages, red color was derived from the cochineal insect and madder roots, while yellow was made through chamomile and green from husks, pomegranate peels made shades of black, etc. Ancient historians such as Pliny the Elder, Procopius of Caesarea and Strabo noted that since antiquity Armenians used to export dyes to the neighbour countries. Thus, Armenians benefited from the great fame of their carpets in the early times.

Carpet pieces dating to before the Urartian period have been found in Artik, Ani, and Karmir Blur, some of them made in the 13th century BCE. Encolithic and medieval textiles were

discovered in the Areni caves in 2007. Similar findings have been made in more Armenian sites of Teghut, Shengavit, and Shresh Blur, with carpets up to 5,000 years of age.

Some context regarding the Armenian carpets' popularity includes the emir of Atrpatakan, Abusaj, sending taxes gathered from Armenia to Caliph al-Muqtadir, including 400 horses, money, and seven Armenian carpets, one sized approximately 960 square meters of length. In the Middle Ages, Armenian carpets made it to the Far East, where a tent belonging to Caliph al-Mutawakkil (847-861) was made of cochineal-dyed Armenian textiles. Arab writer Ibn Fadlan, a member of the caliphal embassy to the Volga Bulgars, made it known in the 10th century, that King Almas's tent which accommodated over 1,000 people, was decorated entirely with Armenian carpets. Citing Arab and Persian sources, historian V. Bartold, noted that Armenian carpets were honoured beyond the Arab world, including Iran, where they decorated the royal homes of Ghaznavid sultans and rulers of Khorasan and Kashgar. Records of 10th-century by Simeon Magistros mention that in a 819 battle, the Bulgars took valuable goods from the Byzantines, including fine Armenian carpets. This shows their developed reputation in Europe by the 10th century.

It also believed that in the 13th century, Marco Polo, traveling through Cilicia (Armenia) mentioned that in Sebastia, Caesarea and Konya, Armenians crafted world's finest carpets. Thousands of Armenian carpets were traded to different parts of Europe each year, with even European renaissance paintings illustrating Armenian carpets. The Armenian word 'karpet' entered the vocabulary of European languages during this period.

The most eminent and recognisable Armenian carpets are the Vishapagorg carpets. The dragon design in Armenia's culture, dating back thousands of years, symbolizes protection against evil, represents the natural concepts in Armenian epic tales and mythology. Vishapagorgs depict dragon-like ornaments, sometimes featuring motifs like the tree of life, jagged diagonal patterns, and the god of war - Vahagn's emblem, known as the "Cross of Battle." This is because, in one of the legends, Vahagn defeats the dragon, gaining the title Vishapakagh (Dragon Slayer) in Armenian mythology.

There are a few variations of the Armenian dragon pattern, some of them detailed and obvious, and others serving as implications of a dragon, shaped in a curve. An identical version of the design can be found specifically in the fashion brand Bottega Veneta's Dragon Intrecciato-Leather Tote bag editions for the New Lunar Year collection.



Bottega Veneta

Other cases with highly similar patterns showcased on the runway include Yves Saint Laurent in March 2004, Givenchy in 2015, Gucci in Spring 2017, and other less known brands which release products with no concrete credit.



YSL



Givenchy



Gucci

### 3. The Winged Lion of Venice



The Venetian Lion sculpture

The Lion sculpture is believed to have its origin as a winged lion/griffin statue in relation to the god Sandon in Tarsus, Cilicia, around 300 BC. Sandon, the leader of the Cilician Pantheon, often compared to the Greek Heracles and the Armenian god Vahagn, was worshipped as early as the 2nd millennium BC. A well-known monument to Sandon in Tarsus was a significant landmark until around the 3rd century AD. The 3-ton statue was then taken to Benice, Italy, and placed on a column in St. Mark's Square, in the 12th century, becoming a long-term symbol of the city. It then gained worldwide recognition as the traditional symbol of Venice's patron.

Commonly, illustrations of the lion, appeared on the flags and metal coins of Cilicia (Armenia) both with and without the wings. Yet, its origins date back much farther than the Cilician Kingdom or even the Roman Empire.

One of the earliest manifestations of the lion with features specific to itself is conformed to be found during the Urartian era (9th-6th century BCE), where the lion, with an obvious resemblance to the Venetian Lion, is portrayed with the god Haldi riding it. One other noteworthy example is from the time King Rusa II (685-645 BCE) ruled in Urartu, with the artefacts now displayed in the Museum of Anatolian Civilizations in Ankara. The lion was highly related to the goddess Ishtar in Babylonian culture (most prominent in the 18th and 6th centuries), that shows its wide significance in ancient Near Eastern communities. Thus, many scholars believe the lions of Urartu and Babylon share not only artistic aesthetics, but also messaging. The winged lion concept can be found in the earliest civilizations, with origins in the Lamassu or Shedu of Mesopotamian mythology, which often portrayed figures as wings lions or bulls. As already known, Mesopotamian civilisations like Urartu and Babylon, have existed before the establishment of Chinese civilisation, with Urartu establishing in the 9th century BCE and Babylon earlier, in the 18th century BCE. The fall of Urartu was followed by the region's population initiating the foundation of the Armenian nation, carrying forward many customs and elements of its previous culture. This evidence, thus, suggests that the origin of the lion symbol

comes from the Near and Middle East, with strong ties to Urartian, Babylonian, and Mesopotamian societies.



Armenian wood sculpture

The classic ancient form of the lions has existed for over two thousand years in the Near East, the Middle East, and Armenia itself. A recent study that spreading quickly online, claimed that the Lion of Venice originated in China, however, failed to offer sufficient evidence. The only support to this claim is the resemblance between the Venetian lion and the traditional Chinese guardian lions, which were designed within the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD). A close comparison between these symbols shows that Venetian lion cannot be of Chinese origin. The symbol clearly has more similarities with the lion motifs found in the Eastern region, especially in the Near East and Armenia.

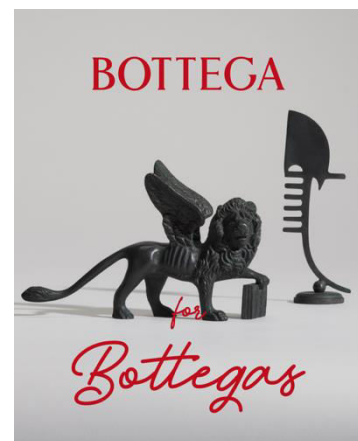
It was discovered that a vast portion of the bronze artefacts of the lion, found in the region, dates back to the Early Bronze Age, particularly the Shengavit and Kuro-Arax cultures. Similar crafts emerged in the late 4th millennium BC, spreading across the Eastern territory, also in the

Armenian Highlands and surrounding districts. One of the main areas of the art metalwork as a cultural development was the Valley of Ararat.

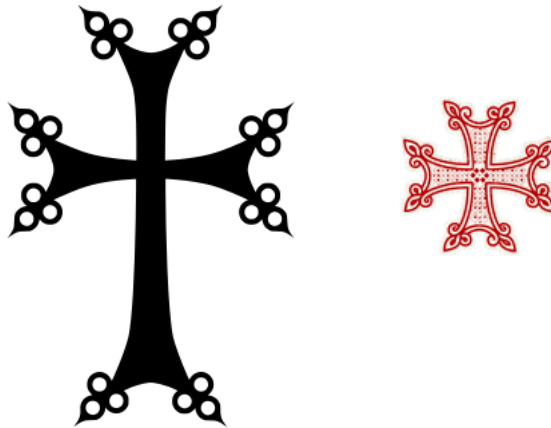
It is noteworthy, that the world's earliest known human-made copper items like beads, pins, and other objects were crafted in around 8000 BC in the region near today's Armenia, Turkey, and Iran. The location has been inhabited by indigenous societies, including Armenians, who always have been known for their skills in crafts, metalwork, sculpting and other disciplines.

Consequently, it is undeniable that the lion motif links to Armenia and Armenians, with historical proof showing its origin from early Armenian lands. Currently, there is not enough archaeological and historical data that can disprove this connection, or suggest an alternative.

It is no surprise that the lion symbol has enjoyed global popularity as a statement piece, whether on accessories, souvenirs, clothing, or haute couture. The motif has been adopted by brands such as Etro, Bottega Veneta, Dries Van Noten, Ben Bridge and other small scale labels.



#### 4. The Armenian Christian Cross



Earliest versions of the Armenian cross

In design, there are numerous variations and visual representations of the cross, in many contexts widely known as the Christian cross. Known as the first country to adopt Christianity as religion in 301 AD, it is safe to assume Armenia has also had its say in the cross symbol as a representation of the belief system. Armenia’s official adoption of Christianity as state religion occurred before the Roman Empire and other societies did.

Generally, there is no credible record indicating where and how the cross as a symbol was created. Only in the 4th century it came into prevalence as a Christian metaphor. At first, Armenia inherited and altered native symbols metaphorical for sun and tree concepts (Arevakhach particularly, or “sun-cross”) into an extraordinary cross resembling nature. Its earliest versions be found in spiral designs in the Urartian period and in 5th-century monogrammatic crosses surrounded with doves. It was during the 5th century, when a “pulled-proportion” in design became increasingly common, and the recognisable cross with flared arms emerged in Armenia, signifying the Tree of Life and embellished with rosettes and braided floral patterns. This version of the cross is now attributed to Armenia as the “Armenian

cross.” In architecture, many relief crosses can be found sculpted on the facades of churches and temples, including the notable Echmiadzin Cathedral and the Holy Cross Church of Aghtamar. Churches like Saint Gayane and Saint Hripsime have cross-shaped floor plans and exterior crosses carved into their entrances, positioning the cross as a ceremonial and testimonial addition. The cross is also inseparable from illuminations in manuscripts (for example, Gospel miniatures kept in the Matenadaran museum) as well as ritualistic metalwork (Gospel binding inscriptions at Hromkla). Today, on a larger scale, the Armenian cross continues being used in a variety of forms, including government stamps, diaspora memorials, contemporary paganism, and even in Unicode, indicating the role it plays as both spiritual symbol and national emblem.

Long before Armenia had anything to do with Christianity, the sun-cross, known as the eternity symbol (Arevakhach), which is a round spiral was often used to decorate Urartian architecture and later medieval statues. It had a spiritual messaging, symbolising cosmic flow and singularity. This visual has been formally encoded in Armenian standards and Unicode since 2014.

Armenia’s earliest Christian crosses were monogrammatic: a cross with mirrored arms within a wreath, framed by nature animals that represent souls in paradise. Appearing on inscriptions and crafts from the 5th century, these are considered first cases of blending Christian iconography with local artistic heritage. Theologians of medieval Armenia drew parallels between the cross and the heavenly Tree of Life, which, assumedly created by God, blended the most distinctive elements of all flora and stood for the “fruit” of Christ’s salvation. Scholar James R. Russell observed that Armenian crosses are designed on “tongues of flame,” featuring a sunburst in the middle part, instead of the crucified body of Christ. This style reflects how Armenia’s pagan

heritage, the Zoroastrian fire symbolism, was integrated into Christian iconography. Armenian metalwork artists had a tradition of crafting crosses with floral designs since the ancient times. Orontid dynasty coins serve as evidence to this. Overtime, the tradition became basis for developing altar crosses found in the Armenian Rite liturgy. It is also crucial to note that Western and Eastern Armenian art differs in all disciplines. In this case, Western prefers fluid floral and detailed ornaments, while Eastern designs focus on distinct geometry and knot-work. In classifications of the Christian crosses, the Armenian cross is known for the trefoil on its flared ends, which is where the title “blooming cross” comes from.

Armenia’s cross symbolism was inscribed in 2010 by UNESCO, insuring property rights on centuries worth of craftsmanship. In 2014, Arevakhach symbol was added to Unicode 7.0, enabling online public representation. Despite that, as multiple variants of the cross coexist in today’s visual arts arena, crosses aren’t often recognised as belonging to a specific nation or culture. The Armenian cross is often blended with the Georgian or Persian crosses, as well as compared to the Celtic cross of Western Europe in the Early Middle Ages. The closest cross variation to the traditional Armenian cross is the East Syriac Cross, with similar edges and overall shape. Its origins are believed to date to the 1st century, in the regions of Mesopotamia, including modern Iraq, eastern Syria, Turkey, Iran and Armenia. This goes to show how strong of an influence cultures had shared back in time, indicating that it would be naive to assume that any version of the Christian cross could be attributed to one nation and one nation only.

Nowadays, in many cases, the cross has gained popularity also as a gothic symbol, used in dark aesthetics. The Armenian cross continues appearing in different forms on a global scale,

including embroidery, accessories, prints, bags, and so on. Some brand using the cross in designs include Christian Lacroix, BEssARION, Formakers, Dolce&Gabbana, Blumarine, Gucci, and others. A thought-provoking case is the brand Chrome Hearts, established in 1988, extremely popular among youth and identified by its flared-armed cross logo. The earliest version of the brand's logo shared a striking resemblance with the Armenian cross. However, according to interviews and online archives, there is no certainty around the meaning behind the logo. A recent article notes "The emblem of Chrome Hearts takes its cues from a movie project imagined by the founders. This connection highlights the brand's Gothic style." Although the designers have a valid foundation for their design, it is undeniably clear that they took inspiration from the already-existing concept of the cross.



Chrome Hearts logos

### Discussion

Historical Archives: Misclassification of Visuals under Dominant Aesthetics

Classifying visual heritage within historical archives is not always an accurate process due to the long-standing imposition of dominant arts, which leads to other cultural identities being minimized. This phenomenon can take place in different ways, including renaming artifacts, misattributing cultural origins of a certain product, overshadowing indigenous creative practices and so on.

A perfect example is the controversy between two important French museums, the Guimet Museum and the Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac Museum, which were accused of removing the title "Tibet" from their exhibitions to fit the political motives of the time. The replacement of "Tibet" with terms such as "Himalayan World" and "Xizang Autonomous Region," the museums were criticised for their careless attitude and the misrepresentation of the cultural significance of Tibetan artifacts (Le Monde, 2024).

Similarly, Armenian art and culture has often been misclassified and subsumed under broader regional themes in the West and not only. For instance, there have been publicly talked-about cases of galleries exhibiting artifacts of Armenian origin under themes such as "Ancient Turkey," detaching these works from the original historical context. This not only makes understanding Armenian artistic contributions more challenging but also reflects how big of a role geopolitics play in cultural representation (Aravot, 2020).

To misclassify also means to organise and store physical artefacts and materials incorrectly. It is not a secret that numerous significant works have not made it out of museum archives and been overlooked because of failed identification. This is well illustrated by the case of the discovery of

a rare Alaskan Tlingit military helmet in the storage of the Springfield Science Museum. Initially the piece was mislabeled as an Aleutian hat, remaining unrecognised for more than a century. Much cultural significance and history may be potentially lost on account of inaccurate cataloging (Hyperallergic, 2014).

The misclassification of visual and material artistic heritage is not just a matter of law and ethics but has profound consequences for the cultural identity and history record of a said culture. By giving in to the dominant artistic categories, institutions responsible for the protection of culture risk contributing to colonialist practices and diminish the diverse artistic media globally. Addressing these issues requires time and effort to reevaluate the system, contact source communities, and foster an inclusive approach.

### The Role of Brand Narratives in Cultural Appropriation

In many cases, brands using borrowed cultural symbols are not completely aware of their origin and context, thus spreading misinformation, and other times, making up false statements to avoid talking about the borrowed elements. Insights from designers in marketing materials and interviews show how they also prefer positioning their actions as appreciation rather than appropriation, revealing the strategies used to legitimise such incorporations.

A widespread strategy is obviously framing the use of foreign elements as inspiration. For instance, the French designer Isabel Marant was criticised for her *Étoile* collection in 2015, where the designs were almost identical copies of the traditional Mexican Tlahuitoltepec blouse

of the Mixe community. The designer defended her collection by claiming that it various cultures it, with a goal to celebrate their aesthetics. However, the communities of Mexico were offended by receiving no acknowledgment or economic benefit as the original artisans (Lee, 2020). Similar cases are impossible to keep track of, since people continuously cross the line in the creative industries. However, press and interviews with designers often attempt to reveal the intent behind integrating foreign concepts and motifs in their designs. Especially with social media around, the public is given freedom you react and comment on brand narratives, where consumers and critics scrutinize the authenticity and ethics of the stories collections tell through design. Besides the negative outcomes this might have, it allows for everything to come to the surface immediately, which leads to recognition and justice. For example, in result of cultural appropriation, dissemination of online feedback often leads to brands apologising or even retract products. After facing backlash in 2019, Gucci removed a turban accessory item from the collection and released an official statement expressing their shame (N/A, 2023).

However, it is important to note that similar cases to Gucci end in justice because the appropriated cultures are equipped with the capacity to stand up for their culture and intellectual property, in contrast to marginal cultures with no voice. In truth, most cultures that achieve acknowledgement after being a victim to cultural appropriation, do so because they have some global recognition to begin with. Whereas, roughly about 60% of the whole global population (supposedly, more) is unlikely to have heard of Armenia, let alone be aware of its own distinct cultural identity.

## Final Outlook

The integration of Armenian motifs in design narratives globally, without clear acknowledgment is a typical case of a long-standing and systemic pattern of cultural appropriation. It is logical to conclude that Armenian visual elements, which have been developed in its early civilisations, as results of worship, cave-art, myths and ancient customs, have been and continue to be adopted by the international premium fashion industry in a way that excludes their cultural origin. These motifs, whether architectural, ornamental, or religious, are not mere aesthetic addition, but they carry historical memory, collective identity, and spiritual depth. When they are repurposed and stripped (sometimes, unintentionally) of context in design, they receive no authorship and their meaning gets decreased. In addressing the posed research questions, it becomes evident that given the shared history with its neighbouring countries, many Armenian motifs have been stripped of their origins at early stages and become widely used in global high design, particularly through ecclesiastical patterns found in attire and khachkars (cross-stones), geometric stylisations found in carpet weaving, medieval manuscripts and church engravings, and other forms of visuals. However, their presence is rarely acknowledged and recognised in brand narratives. Instead, these visuals are either generalised as “Eastern,” “Byzantine,” “Oriental” or “Middle Eastern,” or left completely uncontextualized, allowing brands to benefit from their stylistic solutions without properly attributing them to their original heritage. The lack of traceability further encourages the invisibility of Armenian contributions, despite their unquestionable influence.

This cultural misappropriation has broader implications. Borrowing distinct motifs without acknowledgment results in symbolic erasure, which is not a mere creative oversight, but it is an

act of cultural deprivation. Considering Armenia's physical scale, capital dynamics and opportunities as a country, appropriation in this context has deeper consequences across multiple disciplines such as cultural, economic, and political fields.

The cultural aspect may be considered the most obvious since, the continuity of Armenian identity is disrupted. Since heritage is not static, it survives and expands when it is practiced, recognised and celebrated. Erasure, whether considered or unintentional, ceases such evolution and gives no right to Armenians to see themselves represented in a global creative ecosystem. This leads to the economics, with dominant agents making profit without crediting or collaborating with Armenian artists and designers, limiting their access to the global market and the benefits that come with intellectual property recognition. With the international fashion industry being a multi-billion-dollar domain, anything that gets turned into marketable aesthetics, contribute to its profitability. This form of exploitation hinders potential income and investment opportunities for Armenian artisans, local creative industries and cultural preservation.

On a geopolitical scale, cultural underrepresentation and misrepresentation contribute to the marginalization of Armenia in international discourse. In a region characterised by historical conflict and ongoing struggle for recognition, cultural visibility functions as an important soft power. It is a tool of claiming presence, strengthening diplomatic cultural exchanges, and asserting a narrative about a the nation's role in the world. When Armenian culture is borrowed and rebranded, it not only affects its perception but weakens its voice on the global scene, where visibility often means authority.

Thus, this form of cultural “exploitation,” titled under inspiration or fusion, continuously reinforces existing power dynamics between dominant creative agents and marginalized source cultures. The lack of formal protections for collective cultural expressions further worsens this issue, particularly in sectors like fashion where both the creativity and business aspects are targets. There is a need to advocate for a shift in perspective. Armenian motifs are not remains of a distant past but active signs of identity, resilience, and art. Their appropriation without acknowledgment is not a mere violation of fairness principles. It threatens to disconnect people from their own heritage. Recognizing this, there is an increasing urgency to promote awareness, establish well-developed ethics in commercial design, and advocate for policies that protect the visual legacies of marginalized cultures.

On a broader aspect, this project calls for critical thinking about the “artisanal” or haute couture collections one sees, which are institutionalised and marketed as premium design. Often, the narratives standardised by textbooks, archives, or expert works may unintentionally prioritise dominant cultures and set others aside. To unlearn this hierarchy, one must first cultivate the habit of questioning so-called “facts,” challenging surface-level narratives, and seeking the truth behind what they consume, pay for and adopt.

Finally, this research calls for consensus of marginalised artisanal groups or protection of centuries-worth of intellectual and cultural property. Armenian creatives must be viewed not only as inheritors of rich traditions but as rightful participants in global aesthetics and consumable design. This ties strongly into the establishment and progression of an arts management system that Armenia has continuously struggled to prioritise, considering the constant state of conflict, inadequate public services and corruption. A designated legal system

within arts management means creating platforms that amplify the country's creative industries, developing policies that promote them, allocated funding, builds capacity and broadens access to both domestically and abroad.

As a leading remunerative medium of the arts that continues to globalize, fashion shouldn't do so at the expense of misapplied authenticity and ownership. It should instead become a space where cultural values meet with respect, where origins are celebrated, opening doors to further partnerships beyond the design industries. The distinctness of Armenian visual legacy is not worth to be lost to anonymity, but to be rightfully acknowledged, credited, and sustained throughout future generations.

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