

FAILURE TO REPATRIATE VANDALIZED ZEYTHOUN GOSPELS' FOLIOS

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✘ [Rev.Dr. Vrej N.Nersessian](#), London, England, 23 September 2015

The "Pocket Oxford Dictionary of Current English" defines restitution as "*restoring of property &c to its owner*". In no sense can [the settlement with Paul Getty Museum](#) be described as fulfilling the above definition.

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This Gospel was copied in the scriptorium of Hromkla, Seat of the Armenian Catholicosate of All Armenians when the Armenian See was in the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia. The manuscript was copied and illuminated by the foremost artist of the medieval world Toros Roslin in 1256, upon the request of Catholicos Kostandin I Barjberdtsi (1221-1267).

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It is called the Gospels of Zeythoun because, for a time, it was kept in that region, before it became part of the Madenataran collection (now Manuscript .No.10450). This is first of the seven manuscripts signed by Roslin. The missing leaves with the miniatures of the Canon Tables, once belonging to a Mr. Atamian of Watertown (suburb of Boston), were purchased by the Paul Getty Museum "70 years ago". Is it conceivable that the museum does not have a record of the exact date of the purchase?

The true owner of the manuscript is the Catholicasate of the See of Cilicia. The settlement is unsatisfactory and hypocritical. The Paul Getty stance is very similar to the argument of the British Museum concerning the fragments of the Parthenon. In that controversy, the museum claimed that the marbles were also bought legally by Lord Elgin at a time when Greece was under Ottoman occupation and the Turks were not the ideal custodians of cultural heritage of any nation be it of the Greeks or the Armenians. If the whole botched incident was to win publicity on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Genocide for the J. Paul Getty Museum it has certainly succeeded. But since the "settlement" has failed to have the fragment returned to its rightful owner, the plaintiffs have failed miserably.

Without wishing to rub salt on our collective defeat, it is worth remembering that in 2011, I

succeeded in repatriating to Jerusalem two magnificent vandalized miniatures of the famous Queen Keran Gospels, also copied and illuminated by Roslin in 1272, in Sis, the capital city of the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia. The leaves were returned to Jerusalem and recently, with expert assistance from the Madenataran, were re-inserted into the Queen Keran Gospels (Jerusalem Manuscript .no.2563).

The leaves, missing from the Queen Keran Gospels since 1910, were bought and sold by the Dutch art dealer Michel Van Rijn . In 1987 the leaves were purchased by Mr. Thanassis Martinos, who having been convinced when seeking authentication for the miniatures from the author, that they belonged to a manuscript in the collection of the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem, agreed to return it as a gift. The story of its discovery and return to Jerusalem is told in Rev. Dr. Vrej Nersessian, [*The Repatriation of an Armenian cultural Treasure*](#). The Gospel of Queen Keran, Sis, Cilicia,1272AD, London 2011.

Mount Ararat, Ani, the seven provinces of Western Armenia were also owned by Armenia and Armenians. There is not a single person in the world who would negate this claim. But is it now back in the hands of its lawful owner? No.

Isn't it customary that a story of failure in our history receives more attention and publicity than a story of success?

Keghart.com: See [*Getty Museum and Armenian Church Reach Agreement*](#)

Rev.Dr. Vrej N.Nersessian was the former curator in charge of the Christian Middle East Section in the British Library,1975-2012.

