

## 'I have the honour to inform you that I have just arrived from Constantinople': Migration, Identity and Commodity Disavowal in the Formation of the Islamic Art Collection at the V&A

*Alyson Wharton-Durgaryan*

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### Abstract

The relationship of the V&A with three dealers, Krikor Minassian, Hagop Kevorkian and Dikran Kelekian, proffering goods from the Ottoman Empire they had recently fled, provides an interesting case study for viewing asymmetries of power in the twentieth century art world. Referred to by museum staff as 'foreign merchants' and regarded with suspicion concerning their financial motivations, these dealers went out of their way to prove themselves as collectors, connoisseurs and benefactors. V&A staff continued to distrust them and voiced condescension into the 1930s and even the 1950s. Keepers and Directors, as defenders of institutional values, engaged in commodity disavowal disconnecting their purchases from the hybrid and traumatic contexts of their arrival. They made reference to the market when it suited them: forcing down prices of Kelekian's loan items following his death in 1951, so that they could be acquired at minimal cost. Museum-dealer relations emerge from archival documentation as fraught with slurs and one-upmanship, despite a gentlemanly surface culture.

**Key words:** Dealers, Armenian, Islamic, Oriental, V&A.

This essay looks at how three Armenian dealer-collectors from the Ottoman Empire shaped Islamic Art collections at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A). It argues that the complex life stories of Dikran Kelekian (1868-1951), Hagop Kevorkian (1872-1962) and Krikor Minassian (1874?-1944), who fled the empire in the 1890s, call for a reassessment of collecting Islamic Art as a process of commodity disavowal. Acknowledgement of multi-layered biographies – not only of objects (Appadurai 1993), but also of intermediaries who transported and sold them, – can contribute to current initiatives to reappraise and decolonise the field. As Mirzoeff writes 'Diaspora peoples have been marginalized by this visualization of national cultures in museums, while consistently using visual means to represent their notions of loss, belonging, dispersal and identity' (Mirzoeff 2000: 2). The interactions of these dealer-collectors with the V&A shows, albeit at times only indexically, loss, belonging, dispersal and identity, all of which were ignored by the museum.

Histories of the V&A have told its vision from the perspective of its founders, curators and others crucial to its formation and running (Burton 1999; Bryant 2011). Revisionist studies drew attention to its colonial context, some stressing agency of makers and other outsiders to the institution and its power structures (Barringer and Flynn 1998). Despite studies exploring relationships with European connoisseurs, collectors and dealers in some detail (Wainwright and Gere 2002), Islamic Art historians have neglected to study this. One recent book set forth political, commercial, social and cultural contact between Victorian Britain and Qajar Iran as indivisible from the V&A's collecting Persian Art, establishing a counter narrative on the ways Qajar subjects could exert power – ranging from intermediary dealers sourcing ceramics from cash-strapped elites, to craftsmen producing in consultation with V&A curators (Carey 2017). However, even in this work, the hybrid nature of individuals, interactions and processes could not help but be minimised, national separations retained, and the voice emanate from the V&A.

Armenian-Ottoman dealer-collectors, in contrast, had an in-between status in relation to nineteenth century imperial and national imaginaries. They – leaving the Ottoman Empire

and arriving in Britain in the 1890s – were the ultimate stateless actors. Yet, they continued to express nostalgia for their former home: – Kevorkian's headed paper stated 'Hagop Kevorkian & Co. Oriental Merchants' and 'Hagop Kevorkian (of Constantinople)' in a large font, whilst listing Bishopsgate as his primary address. These Armenians relied on wide-ranging networks to make a new life. Unlike the individuals studied by Carey, many of whom were tied to the Qajar State, they were not speaking back to the imperialism of European collecting and institutional control (Carey 2017). Instead, their buying, selling, proffering activities reflected exile and their quest to come to terms with their past, present and future.

Central to the process through which the legacy of these Armenian-Ottoman dealer-collectors was minimised and the V&A's Islamic galleries constructed was commodity disavowal. Commodity disavowal has been described by Anthony Shelton as the process through which an object's commodity phase is minimized and its 'extra or interstitial and hybrid condition [is] eluded and replaced by often-exoticized significations.' These commodities thus become misrepresented 'as unique and singular cultural icons' (Shelton 2005: 75-6).

Commodity disavowal can be identified on several levels. It is present throughout the V&A's attempts to distance their objects from the market. It also works on interstitial levels through staff-dealer dynamics. First, through the purchase of – or refusal to purchase – certain objects and justifications for purchasing. Second, through diverging conceptualizations of Islamic Art: in contrast with the vision of 'Oriental' citizenry promoted by these Armenian-Ottomans, V&A's keepers classified goods according to national styles. Third, they seldom bought items that were Armenian, preferring Christian wares that could be categorized according to their hierarchy. Fourth, the V&A tried to minimize Armenian-Ottomans leaving their mark on the objects they lent to the museum.

### **'Islamic Art' as a Category: Recent Reappraisals.**

Revisionist approaches to Islamic Art have seen galleries renamed to combat essentialism, growing acknowledgement of non-dominant populations and peripheries. The Metropolitan Museum of Art reopened its gallery as 'Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, and Later South Asia' in 2011 with the hope that: 'the new space will highlight both the diversity and the interconnectedness of the numerous cultures represented here...'. Publications, too, have called for an 'entangled presentation', the 'construction of ambiguous meanings' and 'multivalent paradigms' (Junod *et al.* 2012; Carey and Graves 2012).

Islamic Art's collecting practices have also been revisited. The 'discovery' of Islamic art was long painted as a story of European travellers, engineers, consuls and academics discovering an unchanging 'East' (Said 1979). Whilst there continues to be a focus on 'Westerners' over their counterparts in the Islamic world, with disproportionate attention paid to Robert Murdoch Smith, an engineer and diplomat, who gathered ceramics for the V&A in Persia (Scarce 1973; Vernoit 2000: 7-9; Carey 2017), or curator-academics such as Arthur Lane (Vernoit 2000: 14), this asymmetry is starting to be adjusted. A study of Paris-based Ottoman Hakky-Bey stresses how he published works on Islamic art contemporaneously with the development of the field in European centres (Türker 2014). Work on Ottoman-Jewish luxury goods trader Far Away Moses, who sold 'Oriental' wares at the Chicago Fair, also incorporates multiple perspectives made possible by looking at an extra-imperial subject using sources in Ladino, Ottoman and other languages (Cohen 2015). This essay asks what happened when a similarly mobile and multivalent actor encountered an art institution of a specifically didactic kind.

Dikran Kelekian's role in defining the field of Islamic Art in the United States has been highlighted. He held considerable leverage over what was acquired by large museums and private collectors (Simpson 2000; Komaroff 2000; Jenkins-Madina 2000). In this age before expertise, dealers like Kelekian served the role of educating and guiding collectors and developed 'gentlemanly' relationships (Jenkins-Madina 2000: 72; Simpson 2000). However, non-western art from locations with a strong British technocratic, diplomatic and financial presence, such as Qajar Iran and Ottoman Turkey, had a particular role at the V&A. Although studies have drawn attention to the racialized notion of identity promoted for the Islamic collection – for instance, how the Iran display of 1876 dwelt upon its, according to the

words of Murdoch-Smith, 'old Aryan stock' (Carey 2017: 109), shifting the focus to relations of museum staff with these Armenian-Ottomans highlights the process through which this singular form of identity took the place of multi-layered life stories.

### **Armenian Migrations, Art and Identity.**

Complicated cultural legacies of the Armenian Genocide of 1915 have started to receive attention. Zeitlian-Watenpaugh, through tracing the journey 'from Genocide to justice' of medieval illuminations of the Zeytun Gospels' Canon Tables, which were smuggled out of Anatolia during the 1920s, ending up in the Getty Museum by 1994, argues for the new category of 'survivor objects' (objects bearing witness to atrocities), as deserving of art historical and museological interventions. She depicts 'a new kind of claimant in the crowded field of litigants seeking restitution: survivors of the Armenian Genocide and their heirs', thus positioning the cultural legacies of 1915 as comparable to the decolonising movement currently sweeping museums worldwide (Zeitlian-Watenpaugh 2019: 1). Indeed, the results of the court case filed by the Armenian Catholicosate of Cilicia regarding the Canon Tables resulted in their amended provenance, clarifying that they had been taken from their original home, held in the possession of an Armenian family from the 1920s, acquired by the Getty and then donated to the museum by the Catholicosate. The findings imply that 'survivor objects', should have their complicated histories acknowledged in museum displays and records, at the very least.

Refugee movements and displaced craft traditions were another result of 1915: Moughalian tells the story of her grandfather David Ohannessian, a ceramicist from Ottoman Kütahya (Central Anatolia), who survived deportation to Syria and established a successful business in Mandate-Era Jerusalem. These migrants bring up complicated issues of identity, transplantation and taxonomy. Moughalian recounts jarring encounters such as purchasing one of Ohannessian's bowls, described as 'Iznik Style' (after the sixteenth century Ottoman style of ceramics it resembled) at Christies in London in 2007 (Moughalian 2019: 11).

Museums continue to face considerable controversies with the labelling of Armenian antiquities often gesturing to the power of their imperial overlords rather than giving any indication of Armenian agency. The most notable example is the British Museum's Hellenistic Anahita or 'Satala Aphrodite', which was discovered in Ottoman Anatolia in the 1870s and has been the subject of renewed campaigns to redisplay and rename it, and even to 'return' it to Armenia.<sup>2</sup> Unlike the campaign for Anahita, or the changed provenance of the Zeytun Gospels, the cases of Kevorkian, Minassian and Kelekian do not call for the artefacts they sold to be recognized as Armenian cultural patrimony: these complicated life stories merely imply that there should be some acknowledgement in museums of a trauma-tainted journey that lay behind the neat categories assembled in their displays.

Kevorkian, Minassian and Kelekian were not refugees from the genocide. They emigrated from the Ottoman Empire considerably before there was any state-led plan to eradicate Armenians. However, they left their homes under a climate that had turned hostile and would culminate in widespread massacres between 1894 and 1896. The Hamidian Massacres, which took place under Sultan Abdülhamid II were estimated to have killed between 150,000 and 200,000 (Astourian 2011: 65). They particularly affected Armenian commercial activities. The 1890s were a time of upheaval due to the Istanbul stock market crash as well as the rise of Armenian revolutionary parties staging terrorist events such as the occupation of the Ottoman Bank in 1896. Armenian civilians, and particularly elites, were used as scapegoats for the revolutionaries.

Kevorkian, Minassian and Kelekian all made their first contact with the V&A in the 1890s and sought to make a new life in London at this tumultuous time. Calouste Gulbenkian, from another Constantinopolitan merchant and money-changer family, similarly took the decision to relocate the firm of C&G Gulbenkian. Gulbenkian family traditions tell of rushing to a steamer to Alexandria, but the fact that a passport was issued two weeks after massacres began indicates 'a more orderly departure' (Conlin 2019: 50). Nevertheless, the Gulbenkians would have been held responsible in an Extraordinary Commission that was set up to investigate the massacres and which charged Armenian noble families with being responsible (Conlin 2019: 50). Thus, wealthy businessmen would have faced prosecution, at best, if they remained in the empire.

Kevorkian, Minassian and Kelekian were all from the region of Kayseri, known for its bankers, merchants, and jewellers, but their growing business operations were centred around Constantinople. Their Anatolian origins matched the Gulbenkians, from Talas in Kayseri – and who were trading partners with Hagop Kevorkian. The Gulbenkians used the resources of Anatolia to make their initial fortune: trading in mohair, wool, cotton, opium and other goods, then moving on to carpets, 'Oriental' antiquities and Caucasian kerosene (Conlin 2019: 9-31)

The story of Kevorkian, Minassian, Kelekian (and Gulbenkian) was by no means unique, nor was it a case of migration solely due to changing political conditions. Armenian shipping merchants boomed in Britain from the mid nineteenth century. *Edwards' Manchester & Salford Professional and Trades Directory* lists merchants with Armenian names, such as Mongoletsi Bothers, Mouradian D. & Co. and Seferian Khrosrof & Sons (C. P. Edwards & Co 1906: 286-7). For shipping merchants, there are eight-odd pages of largely Armenian names (C. P. Edwards & Co 1906: 355-62). Many of these shippers were based in Constantinople and established themselves in Manchester. Armenians were active in the trade of cotton and other textiles, but also proffered 'Oriental' goods, for which there was a burgeoning market in Britain.



Figure 1. Manchester Holy Cross Armenian Church, 1870, Exterior. Architects: Royle & Bennett.

A wealthy Armenian community developed in Manchester and a church in Gothic revival style [Figure 1] was commissioned in 1870 by architects Royle & Bennett (George 2002: 23). The culture of these merchants looked back to Constantinople: a textile collection within the church is a testament to their memories of home, with most pieces akin to those of Ottoman palace workshops. Paintings inside the church are of a similar manner to those in mid-nineteenth-century Armenian churches in the Ottoman capital. Glimpses of Armenianness can be found, such as the appearance of stained-glass windows from the inside of the church, forming letters of the sacred Armenian script [Figure 2], or the name of 'Massis' (Mt. Ararat, the holy mountain of Armenia, now in Turkey) inscribed on the entrance to a merchant's house in Didsbury.

It was only later that a process of re-imagining of Armenian identity as an ethno-national one began, with a focus on 'roots' as the first Christian nation and the repetition of a select group of symbols, medieval architectural models and other signifiers of Armenian uniqueness (Safran 2007: 33). Instead, these merchants continued to show the 'multiple viewpoints' characteristic of diasporic visual culture (Mirzoeff 2000).



Figure 2. Manchester Holy Cross Armenian Church, 1870, Interior view of stained glass. Architects: Royle & Bennett.

### Britain and the Armenians.

In Victorian Britain there was limited public consciousness concerning the 'Armenian question'. Gladstone promoted pro-Armenianism and the notorious Bulgarian Horrors pamphlet appeared in 1876. However, by 1895, the time of the Hamidian Massacres, the Liberals were replaced by a Tory government and the international situation demanded that the Ottoman Empire remain intact (Laycock 2009: 79). As Laycock explains: 'The fate of the Armenians remained distant and different enough to slip from the British public eye' (Laycock 2009: 83). It was only after a campaign by British Armenians and Armenophiles, promoting Armenians as a 'victim nation', an 'ancient nation' and as a 'civilization' which participated in European cultural traditions, that there was some degree of traction (Laycock 2009: 117-25).

The fact remained that Armenians were perceived – and treated – as culturally 'other'. The term 'Oriental' was used to describe (assumed) aspects of character. Gulbenkian was portrayed as a 'possessive "Oriental" who kept his "harem" of objects [his painting collection] close' (Conlin 2019: 156). Gulbenkian's former business associate, Georg Spies, published in his 1926 memoirs that he had a sense of 'oriental deviousness', explaining that: 'Whenever he sketched out the benefits of some syndicate or other he always did so in such a refined, ingratiating way that, to use an oriental phrase, he could slip a camel through the eye of a needle' (Conlin 2019: 172, citing Spies 1926/2002: 228). Gulbenkian was accused by Kenneth Clark (director of the National Gallery, where Gulbenkian planned to house his collection) in private correspondence to Anthony Eden as being 'of a somewhat suspicious temperament' and Clark worried about Gulbenkian's 'Oriental mind.' (Conlin 2019: 250). Gulbenkian is accused of commercial interests in the stipulations for his loan – a similar allegation brought against Kelekian.

Attitudes about Armenians show parallels with Jewish traders. Nineteenth-century representations of the dealer focused on lack of expertise, materialism, deception and Jewishness. Derogatory representations of Jewish dealers were an attempt, Briefel argues, 'to mitigate contemporary fears about counterfeiting and commodification of art'. Jewish

dealers were, thus, portrayed as a 'ruthless financier in contrast to the informed critic or true lover of art' (Briefel 2006: 117).

The V&A seems to have been an epicentre of anti-Jewish sentiment. The one-time director of the museum, J. C. Robinson, published an 1895 article in *The Nineteenth Century* in which he complained:

Where are now the Woodburns, Smiths, Buchanans, Farrers, John Webbs, or Domini Colnaghis of half a century ago? Patrons and purveyors alike of the old type are indeed almost an extinct race. To the modern dealer very often ignorance is an advantage, too much acquired knowledge and experience a snare. No wonder, then, that art dealing has fallen mainly into the hands of Abraham's posterity, by whom, and rightly from the mere commercial point of view, all works of art are "goods" preordained to be bought and sold for profit only... (Cited in Briefel 2006:120).

Victorian xenophobia was a psychological condition, with a characteristic sense of ambiguity (Tramp *et al.* 2013: 3) that meant that these two, very different, ethnic groups – Armenians and Jews – could be conflated.

In the twentieth century, associations of the foreign with the corrupt were further entrenched. At times, accusations of counterfeiting were explicitly fixed to Armenians, as Emil Hannover's 1925 handbook stated: 'The Armenian dealers are quite without scruples or conscience when it is a question of making out a patchwork of fragments to be an undamaged piece...' (Elliott 2006: 99 citing Emil Hannover, *Pottery and Porcelain: A Handbook for Collectors*, 1925).

Contrary to this image, Armenian dealers were trying to develop a reputation as connoisseurs and collectors through holding exhibitions and publishing catalogues, but they were also developing new professional modes of business, such as using photography to sell their wares. It was thus not only the ethnic in-between-ness of the Armenians that encouraged suspicions, but the inability of the V&A staff to control them.

### **Institutional Vision: The V&A and its Policies.**

The Museum of Ornamental Art (based at Marlborough House) was set up by design reformer Henry Cole following the Great Exhibition of 1851 (Robertson 2004: 1). It promoted an educational ethos and collected items designed according to 'sound principles' (Cohen 2006: 22-3), aiming, like the Exhibition, to improve product design and revive manufactured goods (James 1998: xiii). The museum was tied in 1852 to the Board of Trade and in 1856 to the Privy Council's Committee on Education (James 1998: xv).

Public educational initiatives (lectures, travelling exhibitions and publications) set the South Kensington Museum (which became the V&A in 1899) apart (Conforti 1998: xi). Prince Albert had a vision of 'useful learning' when visiting the Exhibition (Robertson 2004: 2). Henry Cole was also involved in the educational reforms of the 1850s that dealt with higher education and the V&A's purpose was originally equivalent to a university (Robertson 2004: 4).

Consecutive directors saw it as their moral duty to educate in the matter of taste, the principles of respective arts and categories of national styles (Cohen 2006: 17-9). Cecil Harcourt Smith wrote in 1910 of the mission to provide models for and aid the improvement of manufactures and crafts associated with decorative design (Harcourt Smith 1910: 10). He argued his reorganisation according to 'grouping by industries', along with technical subdivisions of crafts and historical displays by date, locality and country of manufacture, would make items 'more intelligible and useful to students' (Harcourt Smith 1910: 10).

Whilst the British Museum had 'been formed with scholarly motives' and its staff were university-trained antiquarians, those of the V&A were school leavers who had risen through the Civil Service, served in the Exhibition or worked as art teachers (Burton 2015: 1). Although there was increased academicism over the first decade of the twentieth century, with initiatives to develop curatorial expertise, writing of scholarly catalogues, and the 1908 Committee for Rearrangement (Hirsh and Thomson 1885: 19), staff remained reliant on outside advice.

The acquisitions policy suffered from lack of coherency. Henry Cole in 1863 stated that 'definite instructions' should be given.<sup>3</sup> There was a stress on 'purpose or utility', representing the decorative art of all periods and all countries and original works and tasteful works.<sup>4</sup> Yet, the 1908 Committee for Rearrangement reiterated the lack of collecting principles.<sup>5</sup>

The annual review of acquisitions, published from 1912, shows how vision was attempted to be implemented through purchases. There was a focus on how Islamic works could contribute to teaching and students' understanding of western industrial arts. The budget on Islamic pottery was justified as: '...it is of the highest importance that these stages of its evolution should be adequately illustrated in the Museum collections' (Victoria and Albert Museum 1913: 9).

Filling gaps – so that national styles were adequately represented – was a priority. In 1911, a Ghous textile was purchased showing a new feature amongst woven fabrics from Egypt, complementing what was already in the museum. This acquisition was also justified due to its relationship to a textile shown at the 1910 Munich exhibition of Muhammadan Art, thus indicating its pedigree according to the thought of the time (Victoria and Albert Museum 1912: 55).

Ideas of civilizational development and racial hierarchy were central to this thought. Design reformers such as Owen Jones and William Morris cited 'Persian' as the 'wellspring' of artistic feeling and refinement, despite the fact that the term 'Persian' was used to refer to a wide variety of Islamic Art, including Ottoman Iznik (Carey 2017: 24-5). The focus on didactic aims and documenting national styles, with a stress on civilizational value, served to minimize the commodity phase of the objects acquired.

The mission of the V&A was viewed to be opposed to trade and this was voiced not only through writings of directors such as J. C. Robinson in 1895, but in internal memos, reports and reviews. V&A staff viewed themselves as at war with the market: a 1912 review complained of increased public interest in Indian sculpture and pictorial art, making 'reasonably-priced' miniatures difficult to obtain. As a result, the items found on the market were those 'that left India before the Ancient Monuments Preservation Act [1904] came into force' (Victoria and Albert Museum 1913: 68).

The rivalry between museum and trade became especially pronounced over ceramics. The 1911 review noted that: 'In making purchases, attention has principally been given to recent developments in the study of Oriental pottery, both Persian and Far Eastern. With regard to the former, although many opportunities have occurred of acquiring important pieces, the prices have been prohibitive' (Victoria and Albert Museum 1912: 9). By 1913, keepers needed to focus on 'museum specimens' rather than more valuable items in high demand (Victoria and Albert Museum 1912: 11).

Kelekian, Kevorkian and Minassian played an important role in creating this lively market. In 1910 Kelekian wrote in a catalogue of his collection: 'So far, the scarcity of good specimens, their fragility, and the difficulty in procuring them, have kept the Persian potteries from becoming as widely known and consequently understood as they surely will be' (Kelekian 1910: 6) This later became a reality: a catalogue of the Gulbenkian Collection from 1963 stated: 'Mr. C. S. Gulbenkian's collection of Persian ceramics was built up at a time when faience, nowadays so fashionable, did not yet hold an important place in the market for antiquities' (Kühnel 1963: npn).

### **Kevorkian, Minassian and Kelekian in the 1890s and 'Oriental objects for disposal'.**

Minassian, Kevorkian and Kelekian all appeared on the scene in the 1890s. Krikor Minassian corresponded with the V&A from 1895 to 1938 but was primarily active in selling items between 1895 and 1905.<sup>6</sup> Hagop Kevorkian also had an efflorescence of correspondence from 1898 to 1910.<sup>7</sup> The V&A correspondence for Kelekian begins in 1892, but continues until 1954.<sup>8</sup> The V&A correspondence is unique, therefore, in terms of documenting the moment of arrival of all three. Their first letters show them introducing themselves with, as one keeper states of Kevorkian, 'Oriental objects for disposal'.

These early letters show their self-presentation as 'Oriental' merchants. Kevorkian's letter (dated 14 December 1898) is the most interesting from this perspective. The letterhead

shows that he traded under the name 'Hagop Kevorkian & Co, Oriental Merchants'. His letter, with business card attached, stated: 'I have the honour to inform you that I have just arrived from Constantinople and have brought different sorts of oriental objects of art that belong to the 15th-17th century'. Kevorkian requested an interview with the museum staff and signed the letter 'your obedient servant'.

In this letter Kevorkian categorizes his items as 'Oriental', even though many of them would be more accurately described as 'Ottoman'. His own identity and his items are connected through their 'Oriental'-ness. His letter manages to be both formal (signed 'your obedient servant') and haphazard (through connotation of the arrival being recent and with 'objects for disposal').

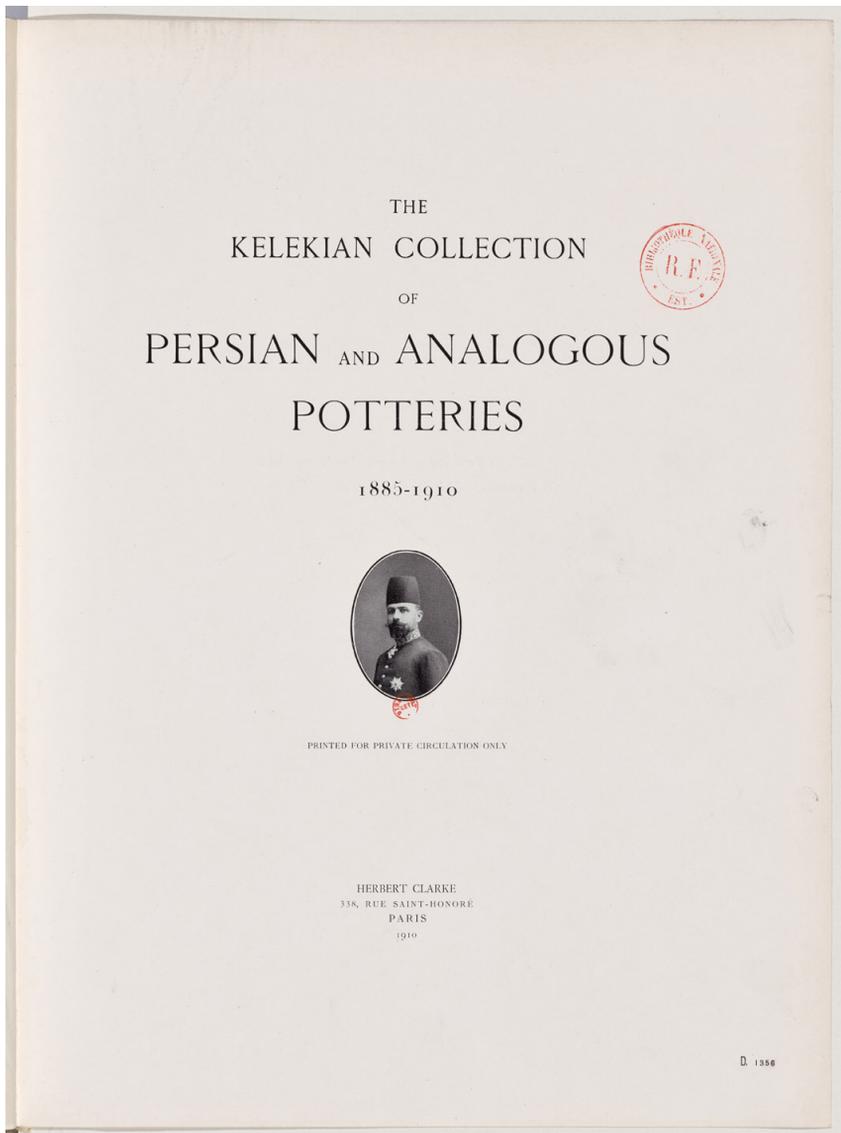


Figure 3. Front page portrait of Kelekian's 1910 book. Reproduced from Kelekian, D. (1910) *The Kelekian Collection of Persian and Analogous Potteries, 1885-1910*, Paris: Herbert Clarke. Bibliothèque nationale de France, with permission from the Kelekian Estate.

The tendency for Ottomans to designate themselves as 'Oriental' abroad was common in the late nineteenth century, particularly amongst those representing the culture of the empire. Former palace decorator, Armenian-Ottoman Sapon Bezirdjian, who relocated to Manchester in the 1880s, published a book of 'Oriental designs' for Victorian consumers (Wharton 2015). Armenian-Ottoman Christopher Oscanyan established an 'Oriental and Turkish Museum' in Leicester Square in 1854 to educate the British about Ottoman goods and traditions (Lessersohn 2017). Ottoman-Jew Elia Souhami Sadullah & Co devised rooms 'in Oriental style' for the Chicago Fair (Cohen 2014: 64-8). Cohen argues the term 'Oriental' and other exoticisms were not 'uncritically inherited traditions' but 'part of conscientious modern practice' (Cohen 2014: 73). For Kelekian, Minassian and Kevorkian, likewise, their 'Oriental'-ness showed their continued attachment to the empire in exile and asserted their authority to speak on objects drawn from the Middle East. In 1910, when Kelekian published a catalogue of his ceramics collection, he put himself on the front cover, in full beard and moustache, complete with fez and frock coat with imperial decoration [Figure 3].

The lists of 'articles submitted for purchase' in these early days vary in their nature (from bowls to textiles, armour to Korans). The length of the lists outnumbers subsequent offerings, indicating a swiftness of transfer and hoped-for transactions. The items were what would now be termed Islamic Art: Ottoman ceramics and textiles, with some Persian and Arabic objects. Many have an indexical quality: as a visible phenomenon showing symptoms of far-reaching social, political and cultural changes (Ataria *et al.* 2016: 69, citing Peirce 1932: 143-4). They are portable items, which could have been taken by these individuals on the steamer from Constantinople. Kevorkian, Kelekian and Minassian all offer tiles taken from buildings, some of which have their location specified. Enamelled terracotta tiles offered by Kevorkian in 1898 for instance are 'from a building near Angora' (Ankara).<sup>9</sup> All three offer bowls and other ceramics that are broken – the cheap price for which they are offered allows staff to justify their purchase as they 'can easily be repaired'.<sup>10</sup> The reason why these artefacts are for sale is rarely specified (sometimes an earthquake or other precursor is mentioned). Minassian's wares were described in an exhibition catalogue from 1925 as gathered from his wide travels (Jenkins-Madina 2000: 73). Whether these items were taken unlawfully is rather a grey area given the socio-political situation that these Armenians found themselves in. The Ottoman authorities were relatively slow to react to thefts and did not develop a revision of the Antiquities Law until 1906 (Shaw 2000: 59).

Although the objects proffered can overwhelmingly be associated with the Ottoman Empire, they were presented so that they would fit into the national styles that the V&A collected. Minassian's ceramics were described as Syrian, Turkish and Rhodian – meaning that they were most likely Iznik. Embroideries, velvets and other textiles were another group of wares supplied, and described as 'Turkish', again, to appeal to the designations of the V&A. A mixture of Persian and Arabic objects can be explained as being former possessions of Ottoman elites (where such tastes were common): for instance, Kevorkian's first items included a carpet, Persian manuscript and tiles ('taken from various mosques').<sup>11</sup> Over the following decade, Kevorkian was to purvey an eclectic mix of items: Persian tiles, vases, a Babylonian cup, armour, velvet carpet, copies of the Koran, Damascus faience, Ankara terracotta tiles, Turkish manuscripts, a prayer rug from Giordes (in Turkey), velvet from Scutari (in Turkey), velvet from Isfahan, a Persian saddle (inscribed with the name of 'king "the possessor"') and a *mihrab* ('much damaged'). Most items could be explained in terms of elite culture.

Migratory status is reflected through multiple addresses. Minassian's addresses began with London; Paris from 1916; then he made the most of the market for Islamic Art in New York (Jenkins-Madina 2000: 73). Kevorkian had a base in London (Bishopsgate) and Constantinople (Yıldız Han); in 1907 his address was *rue de la paix*, Paris; and then America.<sup>12</sup> Kelekian held addresses in Paris, New York and 'Indjijiler' in Constantinople circa 1900. By 1909, he had no Constantinople address. By 1919, he was based in Cairo, New York and Paris ('38 Kasr-el-Nil Cairo, 709 Fifth Avenue New York, 2 Place Vendome'). Escaping the war, he based himself in New York, became an American citizen around 1921 (Simpson 2000: 109) and died there in 1951.<sup>13</sup>

The expanding operations of these three dealers indicates not only their movement from the Ottoman Empire at a fraught time in its history, but also encapsulates the globalized

nature of the art trade. They moved from merchant trading houses (*han*) in Constantinople, to upmarket shops in Paris, London and New York. The establishment of multiple bases, which was common at the time. Goupil, for instance, established branches in London and New York (Helmreich 2005). However, the ability of Kelekian, Kevorkian, and Minassian to rapidly expand several bases was mainly due to the strength of communal networks at their disposal.

### Armenian Dealers and Persian Networks in the early 1900s.

In the early twentieth century, Persian goods took precedent amongst the items offered by these dealers. Kevorkian obtained large numbers of ceramics from excavations in Iran (Rhages, Arak/Astanah), mentioning items coming 'from the excavation' and 'in the ruins of the old Giabr Mosque'.<sup>14</sup> Skinner (V&A Keeper) later noted on the excavations at Arak/Astanah: 'This city, like Rhages (destroyed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century) must have lay a long time in ruins...'.<sup>15</sup> Kevorkian had hands in the right place at the right time.

Kelekian, too, confided in Wylde (V&A Keeper) about connections in Persia that enabled him to gain access to archaeological finds. Wylde stated that (Kelekian) 'informed me that he has arrangements with the persons engaged in excavating and collecting in Persia, by which all the principal objects found in Persia and brought to Europe are submitted to him so that he has the first refusal of all the best'.<sup>16</sup> Kelekian would use agents to search out what was new: he would take credit in his book, *The Potteries of Persia*, for the discovery of Kubatchi pottery through dispatching his men to the village (Jenkins-Madina 2000: 76). Contacts included influential businessmen and financiers: Kevorkian, for instance, collaborated with C&G Gulbenkian & Co, involved in the Middle Eastern and Caucasian oil trade. This important role of filling the V&A with its ceramics has been overshadowed by emphasis on Persian intermediaries and V&A staff (Carey 2017).

Kelekian touted his connections to the Persian government. In 1893, he served as commissioner for the Persian pavilion of the Chicago Exhibition (Simpson 2000: 95) and in 1902 was Persian consul in New York and exhibited wares at St Louis (Jenkins-Madina 2000: 75). He used the honorific title of *Khan* (Jenkins-Madina 2000: footnote 21; Simpson 2000: 95) and his letterhead by 1919 heralded him as 'Membre du Jury Exposition Universelle de 1900, Commissaire Générale de Perse a L'Exposition de St Louis' along with the lion, sword and sunburst coat of arms.<sup>17</sup> The nature of Kelekian's connection to the Persian authorities, however, remains unclear. Former Ottoman palace decorator, Sopon Bezirdjian, also served the Persian crown at the turn of the century, and this ability to work for the sultan, the shah (and the Egyptian khedive), fitted with the self-image as Orientals in exile and loyal servants to Middle East dynasts (Wharton 2015).

### Keeper-Dealer Dynamics in the 1890s-1900s

Warm relations with museum keepers were also crucial for Kevorkian, Kelekian and Minassian. Kevorkian would invite Skinner to his showroom, who would select items from those available and report back to the director.<sup>18</sup> Skinner was well known for developing friendships with dealers and collectors (Burton 2015: 3).

The V&A's keepers were to acquire items for study and fill gaps in the collection. Dealers would help in this mission through supplying items they thought would be of interest. Experts were called upon to weigh in and could help to justify purchases in terms of the museum's vision: in 1898, F. D. Godman and C. P. Clark described the tiles from 'Angora' as 'exceedingly decorative with rich conventional ornament in bright enamel colours and are of greater importance than any Oriental work in the Museum collections'.<sup>19</sup> These descriptions were a way to transform the purchase into an educative object. There was nothing unusual about the V&A's attempt to distance objects from their market: museums 'portray themselves... with public and intellectual obligations that far transcend narrow social or financial concerns and commitments' (Shelton 2001: 1). In the V&A this strategy was more striking, though, given the prominence of its use of purchase.

Armenian dealers, and Kelekian in particular, developed ways to distinguish themselves as professionals in their interactions with the keepers. Kelekian provided elaborate descriptions of provenance – he claimed a tile depicting Mecca used to be situated in the Pavilion of the

Holy Mantle in Topkapı Palace (Simpson 2000: 98). Kelekian supplied photographs of the more valuable items. These photographs also allowed the keepers to justify their purchases according to institutional policies – for instance, a Bishop's throne (offered by Kevorkian in 1905 with a photograph), is described by the keeper as 'a good example of Levantine or Eastern carving' and like a screen bought a few years ago.<sup>20</sup> Thus, it was both filling a gap and supplementing what was already in the collection.

Items that would be described today as Iznik formed a considerable speciality of Kelekian, Kevorkian and Minassian and presented a rare opportunity offered by their excellent Ottoman connections. These were often not in the best condition, for instance: 'one plate, broken, £4' (Damascus faience), and 'two large Damascus tiles, both broken and restored, £16'.<sup>21</sup> Due to their relative inexpensiveness, they were justified as purchases thanks to their price. Dealers also helped make them attractive to museum staff through their description according to the national styles of the time: Rhodian, Syrian and so on.

Rarer items, decorative arts set pieces, were often offered for higher than the keepers wished to pay. In 1902, the 'archaic perforated *mihrab* (much damaged)' was obtained for £260, when the keepers had aimed to pay £80.<sup>22</sup> Keepers could try to use external advice to reduce prices – as was the case when W. C. Godman was consulted in 1902 on ceramics presented by Kevorkian.<sup>23</sup> Sometimes they paid extra, as was the case with the *mihrab* (described as 'a unique specimen and a similar one may never be seen again'), or Bishop's throne, and this was usually justified according to their documentary value within the collection.

### Dealers become Collectors

In 1909, after nearly twenty years of business, two of the dealers changed their role in relation to the museum. Kelekian, in 1909, proposed to lend 'at least 20 specimens of antique Persian pottery' of the approximately thirteenth to fourteenth centuries.<sup>24</sup> This loan turned into seventy pieces that stayed with the museum until Kelekian's death. In the autumn of the same year, Kevorkian donated an item from a group of ceramics offered to the museum, as well as donating fifty-five photographs of Persian pottery.

Kelekian had already established a reputation as a collector. In 1895, he held an exhibition of his textiles at the Metropolitan Museum in New York (Jenkins-Madina 2000: 74). Kelekian was inspired by the lack of interest in Persian ceramics at the 1898 New York auction of Charles A. Dona's collection to hold a second exhibition at the Met (Jenkins-Madina 2000: 74). In 1907 he mounted an exhibition of textiles at Musée des Arts Décoratifs Paris (Jenkins-Madina 2000: 76).

In the years following their loans to the V&A, both Kevorkian and Kelekian held private exhibitions in London, with specially produced catalogues. In 1911 Kevorkian staged an exhibition and sale in London of his Persian ceramics: 28 items from Rhages, three from Ava (near Hamadan), 16 from Hamadan, 22 from Karaghan and 47 from Sultanabad (Kevorkian 1911). Both held exhibitions in New York: Kevorkian in 1912 (Kevorkian 1912) and Kelekian in 1914 and 1926 (Jenkins-Madina 2000: 73).

The activities of Kelekian and Kevorkian fit a pattern between the 1880s and 1910s of private collectors staging exhibitions and printing catalogues, resulting in their exerting considerable influence over the market and impact on developing theories of museum display implemented in institutions (Roxburgh 2000: 17). V&A senior staff reacted negatively to the power that Kelekian and Kevorkian exerted.

### Institution-Dealer Dynamics Post-1909 and Armenians as 'Foreign merchants'

V&A staff expressed concern about entering business relations with Kevorkian and Kelekian as a result of their loans. Whilst pondering whether to accept Kevorkian's gift of 1909, Wylde worried that the museum would be 'morally bound to purchase one of the other items' [that Kevorkian had offered for sale previously]. Museum Director Harcourt Smith promptly corrected Wylde, stating that they 'would not be bound to anything'.<sup>25</sup>

Mistrust between museum staff and collectors is rife in modern times, as Shelton writes: 'What historically was a symbiotic relationship, is today, when collecting is more popular than ever before, even more likely to be saturated with ethical ambiguity, distrust over intentions,

and ambivalence about the psychological motivations attributed to collectors' (Shelton 2001: 11). Yet, what is different about the early twentieth century is that this voicing of mistrust of loans by Armenians was culturally motivated.

Wylde later discussed a misunderstanding with Kevorkian. Wylde stated that 'it is the practice of such foreign merchants' to work with 'hawkers' and use them to bring their business activities to bear, resulting in the possibility that they would not be able to offer the items finally. Wylde was sceptical of the decentralized business model of dealers, who worked with trusted suppliers (often Armenian networks), and who offered items to institutions and individuals at the same time. In contrast to viewing the positive ability of the merchants to secure a range of items, Wylde foregrounded its precariousness.<sup>26</sup>

Dealers had caused considerable dissatisfaction amongst museum staff by 1909 for their manipulation of the ceramics market. Wylde himself mentioned at one point that prices of Persian ceramics had risen one hundred percent and '...will shortly be prohibitive to all but very wealthy collectors'.<sup>27</sup> Museum staff were reluctant to buy, but admitted that such items should be represented: thirteenth century Persian wares were seen as the precursors to Hispano-Moresque and ceramics students needed to know what 'the European potters were striving to attain when they turned their attention to lusted and other decorative pottery'.<sup>28</sup>

The much bigger loan by Kelekian, also offered in 1909, allowed further tensions to surface. When visiting Kelekian's collection in Paris to view the items, Wylde described them as 'finer than anything of the kind I have ever seen' and 'many of the pieces being practically perfect'.<sup>29</sup> Wylde justified acceptance of Kelekian's loan due to dated examples allowing works to be 'assigned to their proper periods'.

However, obstructions came from higher-up in the museum hierarchy. Harcourt Smith expressed worries that Kelekian was motivated by financial gain and that this would 'set a precedent'. He instructed conditions for the loan to 'safeguard the interests of the Museum'.<sup>30</sup> Bernard Rackham, another influential member of the board at the time, added that the V&A should 'never accept any loan objects which may eventually be offered for sale to other persons'.<sup>31</sup> Wylde, on this occasion, reassured that Kelekian would not put the items up for sale, stated that the offer was 'genuine'.

Wylde's defence is striking for his statement that 'While essentially a dealer, Mr. Kelekian is also an ardent collector'. Wylde added substantiation to this claim through describing how Kelekian had 'found it necessary to keep his most treasured possessions in the vaults of a bank in order to avoid being compelled to sell them to visitors at his shop.' Wylde argued that the value of the ceramics for students 'counterbalances the fact that it is the property of a dealer'.<sup>32</sup> Finally, the board concluded that this was 'a special case'.<sup>33</sup>

### **A Special Relationship? Kelekian and the V&A.**

Kelekian, at least within his correspondence, promoted a vision of his relationship with the V&A as a privileged one. In 1901, he wrote that he offered the vases of Harun al-Rashid 'at cost price, because it is for the museum'.<sup>34</sup> He stated later (in 1909, concerning his ceramics loan) that 'several American museums have asked me to send it to them', but he thought that the V&A would have them 'admirably displayed' and they would be 'understood and appreciated' in Britain.<sup>35</sup>

The keepers did appreciate the value of Kelekian's collection and fought to extend the loan on several occasions, for instance, in 1914, Wylde stated that 'It is a collection of permanent interest and I should be upset to see it removed'.<sup>36</sup> However, the issue of Kelekian's status and commercial interests kept reappearing: in 1922 when redisplaying the loan after the war, Rackham mentioned that 'the whole question of the loan from Mr Kelekian is somewhat debateable in view of the fact that he is still in active operation as a dealer'.<sup>37</sup> In an ironic reversal of earlier concerns, it was implied that Kelekian might be persuaded to thank the museum 'for accommodating his loan' with a present – 'even one of those splendid objects would be a substantial quid pro quo'.<sup>38</sup>

Kelekian was aware of the superiority complex of V&A staff over the Americans. He stated in a letter to Maclagan in 1937 that 'Many of the curators [in New York] are young, inexperienced people, tools in the hands of smart, international dealers'.<sup>39</sup> When offering a Gothic statue of St John, from the Jura *hospice de salin*, Kelekian wrote he would be 'so

happy if my favourite Victoria and Albert Museum would acquire this' and stated he would 'lose money' if they did.<sup>40</sup> Kelekian was however, again, the subject of suspicion and had to insist that the item was procured legitimately. Maclagan wrote he was sceptical of 'stories told by dealers', adding that staff had been 'shaken' by this episode and that it would be out of the question to purchase it.<sup>41</sup>

After this incident, correspondence was not revived by Kelekian until the late 1940s, when he became friendly with revered keeper Arthur Lane. In these letters, gentlemanly relations are reminiscent of those between Kelekian and Walters (Jenkins-Madina 2000: 72; Simpson 2000).<sup>42</sup> Arthur Lane also attracted Minassian back in 1938, who donated ninth-century Mesopotamian earthenware ceramics and wrote of 'tenderest recollections' of his interactions with keepers 42 years before.<sup>43</sup>

There was definitive change to the dealer-museum relationship in 1951, when Kelekian died at the age of 83. The ceramics did not have written instructions from the representatives of the estate.<sup>44</sup> Museum Director Leigh Ashton wrote to Kelekian's attorney saying that he had seen Kelekian in Washington the last year and Kelekian had 'expressed appreciation of the fact that this Museum had looked after his collection of Near Eastern pottery etc. for so long, and as on previous occasions, said that it had been his intention that the collection should eventually come here'.<sup>45</sup>

Again, prejudice reared its head. Ashton stated in minutes on 8 October 1951 that Kelekian 'threw himself out of a window (he was at the time engaged in an unfortunate love affair, though over eighty)'. Ashton implied that the museum had done Kelekian a service since the loan was only meant for two years, but ended up staying for 40. He repeated the notion that there was a 'tacit agreement' the collection should stay there and that Kelekian had told him in person that 'he intended it to come to us'.<sup>46</sup> The museum was concerned about losing the loan, which it had debated whether to accept. Ashton stated that 'the collection is much the most important in the world' and to lose it 'would be most undesirable'.<sup>47</sup>

The Museum eventually succeeded in buying fifteen items for £5,000. They did so through holding the estate to the prices that Kelekian had estimated in 1909, the time of the accession of his loan, and insisting that the prices quoted in 1951 were 'fantastic'.<sup>48</sup>

Certainly, losing the items would have been a great loss for the V&A and for the British public. However, one cannot help but think that the Armenian General Benevolent Union (pledged 80 per cent of Kelekian's estate), New York University Skin Cancer Unit (10 per cent) and Neurological Institute of New York (10 per cent) could have benefited from greater generosity from the museum.<sup>49</sup> The inheritance of the Kelekian Collection by the museum was supported by Kelekian's daughter-in-law Beatrice<sup>50</sup> and Kelekian's son, Charles, who stated that relations 'have always been most cordial'.<sup>51</sup> Perhaps they would not have agreed to such a deal had they known the comments behind the scenes.

## Legacy

Kelekian is an unusual case because of the size and quality of his loan. Despite the comments of Harcourt Smith and Rackham, Kelekian went to considerable lengths to prove that he was a collector and a professional. He explained to the board in 1909 his attitude towards his collection:

I consider it one of the finest collections in existence, both chronologically and artistically, of the best period of pottery making in the Near East. I have made the collection not at all in the commercial spirit, but because it was my personal ambition to so present this beautiful art to the world that it might become known and appreciated as it deserves.<sup>52</sup>

Kelekian added that he recently published a catalogue 'in order that my labour of years might be recorded'.<sup>53</sup>

Studies have sought to resituate merchants as humanists (Keblusek and Noldus 2011). Jews in the American South, although 'minoritized', engaged in benevolence as a search for belonging and to show their identity as ideal citizens in a time of poverty and growing anti-Semitism. They absorbed the practices of 'cultural citizenship' current in the South, not

to show their assimilation *despite* their otherness, but to shape these practices to their own vision of their community and to secure its future against uncertainties of claims of their unbelonging (Light 2014: 4).

Kelekian was clearly concerned in 1909 with his legacy. The 1909 Adana Massacres may have played some role. Kelekian had closed his Constantinople office sometime between 1900 and 1909. The massacres in 1909 were a second blow to the Armenian community, which had taken time to recover from those of 1894-6. The 1909 events were a counterrevolution following the 1908 Young Turk Revolution and eradicated the Armenian social and economic infrastructure in the prosperous city of Adana. Complicity of local notables and central government officials served as a harbinger of the failure of the revolution for minority populations (Der-Matossian 2011).

Kelekian therefore decided to focus on establishing his legacy elsewhere. His collection being displayed in the museum would, he noted, 'establish my credit for having made it'. To further this aim, he specified that 'the collection be plainly marked, during the time of its exposition at the Museum, the Kelekian Collection, and, in the event of its purchase by the Museum, it shall remain intact and be known as the Kelekian Collection'.<sup>54</sup>



Figure 4 'Rhodian Mosque Globe', (Kelekian 1910). Reproduced from Kelekian, D. (1910) *The Kelekian Collection of Persian and Analogous Potteries, 1885-1910*, Paris: Herbert Clarke. Bibliothèque nationale de France, with permission from the Kelekian Estate.

Kelekian's concerns were not only connected with his own identity, but with the status of Persian ceramics as an aesthetic category and field of study. Kelekian had been publishing catalogues since 1904 on aspects of Islamic art, most of which focused on Persian ceramics. These were monographs, with scholarly introductions, and were some of the earliest works in English on these subjects (Simson 2000: 101). In his self-published catalogue of 1910, Kelekian, again, explicitly stated that his intentions were not related to trade and upheld that Persian potteries should be viewed on the same level as the masterpieces of the Renaissance,

worthy of 'logical and luminous' study. He stated: 'My object in selecting the specimens which make up my collection has been to establish the right of the Persian potteries to be regarded as one of the powerful artistic impulses of all time' (Kelekian 1910: 5). Kelekian added that the curators of the major art museums of Europe, including the V&A, praised his ideas on the subject.



Figure 5. Kütahya Saucer showing St Sergius dated 1719, (Kelekian 1910). Reproduced from Kelekian, D. (1910) *The Kelekian Collection of Persian and Analogous Potteries, 1885-1910*, Paris: Herbert Clarke. Bibliothèque nationale de France, with permission from the Kelekian Estate.

Kelekian put forward a broad view of the genealogy of Persian ceramics that was in tandem with the V&A. He regarded Sultanabad as the pinnacle of Persian creative powers, but, as part of the family of Persian potteries, Kelekian also included Ottoman wares such as Iznik (or 'a Rhodian Mosque Globe', Figure 4). This 'conflation, and most probably confusion' of styles was highly symptomatic of the time (Jenkins-Madina 2000: 75).

In a significant departure, Kelekian included within his category of Persian Art, Armenian items such as a Kütahya Saucer showing St Sergius dated 1719 (Figure 5) and a mug dated 1787 with Armenian inscription. Both items are distinctively Christian: the first depicting a religious figure, the second the sacred Armenian script. Kelekian referred to Kütahya in his catalogue as a 'class of Persian pottery': for Kelekian, the reputation of Persian pottery was also the reputation of Armenian pottery.

There were relatively few Armenian works that appeared amongst the offers of Kelekian, Minassian and Kevorkian to the V&A. Such objects emerged in the correspondence from time to time: 'a Bishop's staff with head and mounts on silver gilt, Armenian, in four pieces',<sup>55</sup> or an 'Armenian manuscript on parchment' listed in 1900.<sup>56</sup> Greater attention was paid to Byzantine items, such as an 'ecclesiastical carved wooden chair' (Greek, possibly from Cyprus) offered by Kevorkian in 1905, which had a more significant potential value to the museum.<sup>57</sup> In a

state of affairs that mirrored the lack of recognition of the Armenian massacres of 1894-6 and the genocide of 1915, there was not a high degree of interest in Armenian items. Minassian, Kelekian and Kevorkian had to focus on marketing the Armenian items they did have (such as Kütahya ceramics) as Persian

This was also a matter of personal identity and survival. Kelekian worked in Europe at a time dominated by theories of the primacy of Aryan culture: Arthur Upham Pope's 1931 Exhibition of Persian Art and the publications of Jozef Stryzowski would represent the peak of this movement. In 1918, Armenian architecture was classified by Stryzowski as Aryan and this would lead to a narrow national style taking the place of hybrid forbears (Maranci 2001). At the turn of the century, 'Persian' already held predominance amongst Islamic arts. Kelekian was trying to promote Armenian art through affiliation. Like Japanese merchants working in early-twentieth-century America promoting a notion of Asian-ness that museums coveted (Chen 2010), Kelekian reimagined Armenian heritage as 'Persian'.

Including Armenian works in the canon was Kelekian's attempt to serve as representative of the community. Armenian artistic production 'had to be aware of its place of contribution, meaning its subject, minority status...' and producers were both 'representative and negotiator' (Chahinian 2008: 3). Kelekian was negotiating for recognition of Armenian traditions, soon to be made obsolete within the Ottoman Empire with the forced migration of ceramicists such as David Ohannessian from the city of Kütahya (Moughalian 2019).

## Conclusion

Commodity disavowal highlights the anxieties of V&A staff about their institutional role. It was, above all, senior management that encouraged discriminatory practices. Kelekian, Kevorkian and Minassian, as Armenians, were viewed with suspicion because of their in-between ethnic status (conflated with the persona of 'the dealer'), but also because of professionalizing practices they developed and the informal networks of their ways of working. The museum staff, as a result, tried to underline their status as tastemakers and undermine the dealers (Appadurai 1986: 32).

In contrast, Kevorkian, Minassian and Kelekian went to extremes to try to prove their status as collectors and to preserve their Armenian heritage, which was soon to be erased from their Ottoman homeland. They arrived as 'Orientals' with a range of Ottoman goods, and they ended up by repackaging Armenian Art as Persian. They pledged their devotion to 'the museum' above and beyond its American competitors, but behind closed doors, staff assassinated their character through assumed 'Oriental' traits.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Metropolitan Museum of Art, 'Metropolitan Museum to Open Renovated Galleries for the Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia and Later South-Asia', 28 September 2011. <https://www.metmuseum.org/press/news/2011/metropolitan-museum-to-open-renovated-galleries-for-the-art-of-the-arab-lands-turkey-iran-central-asia-and-later-south-asia>, accessed 9 March 2020.
- <sup>2</sup> Sakayan, M, 'The Curse of Anahit', *The Armenian Weekly*, July 18 2013, <https://armenianweekly.com/2013/07/18/the-curse-of-anahit/>, accessed 9 March 2020.
- <sup>3</sup> Victoria and Albert Museum, 'Subject Guide: V&A Acquisitions Policies', nd. <https://www.vam.ac.uk/info/va-archives>, accessed 6 July 2016.
- <sup>4</sup> Victoria and Albert Museum, 'Subject Guide: V&A Acquisitions Policies'.
- <sup>5</sup> Victoria and Albert Museum, 'Subject Guide: V&A Acquisitions Policies'.
- <sup>6</sup> V&A Archives, Minassian Nominal File MA/1/M2272, 1895-1905.
- <sup>7</sup> V&A Archives, Kevorkian Nominal File MA/1/K515, 1898-1910.

- 8 V&A Archives, Kelekian Nominal File MA/1/K221, 1892-1954.
- 9 V&A Archives, Kevorkian Nominal File MA/1/K515/52949, 21 December 1898.
- 10 V&A Archives, Kevorkian Nominal File MA/1/K515, 11 May 1899.
- 11 V&A Archives, Kevorkian Nominal File MA/1/K515, 14 December 1898.
- 12 V&A Archives, Kevorkian Nominal File MA/1/K515, 1907.
- 13 V&A Archives, Kelekian Nominal File MA/1/K221, 1951.
- 14 V&A Archives, Kevorkian Nominal File MA/1/K515, 12 October 1905.
- 15 V&A Archives, Kevorkian Nominal File MA/1/K515, 22 July 1907.
- 16 V&A Archives, Kelekian Nominal File MA/1/K221/4205/09, 17 September 1909.
- 17 V&A Archives, Kelekian Nominal File MA/1/K221/4772, 30 September 1919.
- 18 V&A Archives, Kevorkian Nominal File MA/1/K515, 14 December 1898.
- 19 V&A Archives, Kevorkian Nominal File MA/1/K515, 21 December 1898.
- 20 V&A Archives, Kevorkian Nominal File MA/1/K515, 16 February 1905.
- 21 V&A Archives, Kevorkian Nominal File MA/1/K515/90592, 24 June 1899.
- 22 V&A Archives, Kevorkian Nominal File MA/1/K515/80021, 2 January 1902.
- 23 V&A Archives, Kevorkian Nominal File MA/1/K515/80021, 28 February 1902.
- 24 V&A Archives, Kelekian Nominal File MA/1/K221, 1909.
- 25 V&A Archives, Kevorkian Nominal File MA/1/K515, 16 July 1909.
- 26 V&A Archives, Kevorkian Nominal File MA/1/K515, 21 August 1907.
- 27 V&A Archives, Kevorkian Nominal File MA/1/K515, 13 August 1909.
- 28 V&A Archives, Kevorkian Nominal File MA/1/K515, 13 August 1909.
- 29 V&A Archives, Kelekian Nominal File MA/1/K221/MA4205/09, 17 September 1909.
- 30 V&A Archives, Kelekian Nominal File MA/1/K221, 18 October 1909.
- 31 V&A Archives, Kelekian Nominal File MA/1/K221, 20 September 1909.
- 32 V&A Archives, Kelekian Nominal File MA/1/K221, 17 September 1909.
- 33 V&A Archives, Kelekian Nominal File MA/1/K221, 20 September 1909.
- 34 V&A Archives, Kelekian Nominal File MA/1/K221, 31 January 1901.
- 35 V&A Archives, Kelekian Nominal File MA/1/K221, 30 August 1909.
- 36 V&A Archives, Kelekian Nominal File MA/1/K221, 5 December 1914.
- 37 V&A Archives, Kelekian Nominal File MA/1/K221, 25 January 1922.

- <sup>38</sup> V&A Archives, Kelekian Nominal File MA/1/K221, 25 March 1922.
- <sup>39</sup> V&A Archives, Kelekian Nominal File MA/1/K221, 8 June 1937.
- <sup>40</sup> V&A Archives, Kelekian Nominal File MA/1/K221, 9 April 1937.
- <sup>41</sup> V&A Archives, Kelekian Nominal File MA/1/K221, 16 June 1937.
- <sup>42</sup> V&A Archives, Kelekian Nominal File MA/1/K221, 1949 and 1950, for instance letters of 17 January 1949 and 12 June 1950.
- <sup>43</sup> V&A Archives, Minassian Nominal File MA/1/M2272, 2 November 1938.
- <sup>44</sup> V&A Archives, Kelekian Nominal File MA/1/K221, 2 February 1951.
- <sup>45</sup> V&A Archives, Kelekian Nominal File MA/1/K221, 13 February 1951.
- <sup>46</sup> V&A Archives, Kelekian Nominal File MA/1/K221, 17 September 1951.
- <sup>47</sup> V&A Archives, Kelekian Nominal File MA/1/K221, 8 October 1951.
- <sup>48</sup> V&A Archives, Kelekian Nominal File MA/1/K221, 24 June 1952.
- <sup>49</sup> V&A Archives, Kelekian Nominal File MA/1/K221, 22 March 1952.
- <sup>50</sup> V&A Archives, Kelekian Nominal File MA/1/K221, 14 September 1951.
- <sup>51</sup> V&A Archives, Kelekian Nominal File MA/1/K221, 17 September 1951.
- <sup>52</sup> V&A Archives, Kelekian Nominal File MA/1/K221, 29 October 1909.
- <sup>53</sup> V&A Archives, Kelekian Nominal File MA/1/K221, 29 October 1909.
- <sup>54</sup> V&A Archives, Kelekian Nominal File MA/1/K221, 29 October 1909.
- <sup>55</sup> V&A Archives, Minassian Nominal File MA/1/M2272, 27 March 1903.
- <sup>56</sup> V&A Archives, Kevorkian Nominal File MA/1/K515, 24 October 1900.
- <sup>57</sup> V&A Archives, Kevorkian Nominal File MA/1/K515, 3 January 1905.

These complex life stories show how the legacies of collecting Islamic Art have been, and continue to be, simplified – whether depicted according to the V&A perspective or into an imperialist/post-colonial dichotomy. They also show how they involved trauma and discrimination beyond the better-known imperial orbit. But where does this leave us? As was stated earlier, this essay does not call for these objects to be renamed as Armenian, but perhaps their display might be modified to incorporate more detailed provenance descriptions that would honour stories like Kelekian's, Kevorkian's and Minassian's, rather than erase or debase them further.

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### Author

Dr Alyson Wharton-Durgaryan,  
Lecturer, University of Lincoln, School of History and Heritage,

University of Lincoln  
Brayford Pool  
Lincoln  
LN6 7TS  
UK.

Tel: +44 (0)1522 835035  
[AWharton@Lincoln.ac.uk](mailto:AWharton@Lincoln.ac.uk)

Alyson Wharton-Durgaryan completed her PhD at SOAS in 2012, then going on to join the History of Art Department at Mardin Artuklu University in Turkey as Assistant Professor, where she stayed until summer 2015. She is now Senior Lecturer in the School of History and Heritage at the University of Lincoln, which she joined in September 2015. She has published the monograph *Architects of Ottoman Constantinople: The Balyan Family and the History of Ottoman Architecture* (IB Tauris: London and New York, 2015), as well as articles in *International Journal of Islamic Architecture* and *Etudes Arméniennes Contemporaines*.