Sacred Precincts

The Religious Architecture of Non-Muslim Communities across the Islamic World

Edited by

Mohammad Gharipour
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Armenian Merchant Patronage of New Julfa’s Sacred Spaces

Amy Landau and Theo Maarten van Lint

Patronage of churches was one among a range of options for Armenian seventeenth-century New Julfan merchants to invest their wealth and publicly demonstrate their participation in the Apostolic community and elite Safavid circles. Shah ʿAbbas I (1587–1629) established New Julfa at the beginning of the seventeenth century to house Armenian long-distance traders he had aggressively deported from Julfa along the river Arax during his campaigns against the Ottomans. Julfa, in the contested Ottoman–Safavid frontier region, was a prosperous commercial town in the late sixteenth century that had profited from the silk trade.1 ʿAbbas forcibly migrated Julfa’s population and razed the town to prevent the Julfans from ever returning.2 In consideration of the Julfans’ wealth and mercantile connections, and, thus, the advantage they could bring to the Empire, Shah ʿAbbas I decided to position the Julfan community close to Isfahan’s center (Figure 17.1).3

Established at the beginning of the seventeenth century, New Julfa is located adjacent to the last Safavid capital of Isfahan, across the Zayanderud, the river to the south of the city. The seventeenth-century merchant and adventurer Jean-Baptiste Tavernier reports that from Isfahan, New Julfa was only half an hour’s distance for a man on foot at mid-day.4 The Armenian suburb was linked with Isfahan’s center of power, including the Dowlatkhana (palace precinct) by means of the Chaharbagh promenade that ran from north to south on both sides of the river and passed New Julfa on its easternmost side. The two parts of the Chaharbagh were connected by the Allahverdi Khan bridge, also known as Si-o-se Pul (Bridge of 33 [Arches]), which was named after a well-respected ghulam (lit. slave) and general of Shah ʿAbbas I.5 The Allahverdi Khan bridge linked the quarters of Isfahan inhabited by the Muslim Persian political elite with the mansions of the Julfan merchants on the south bank of the river. Before the end of the century, three further bridges

4 Tavernier journeyed through Iran, Turkey and India between 1631 and 1665. Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, Voyages en Perse et description de ce royaume, ed. Pascal Pia (Paris: Du Carrefour, 1930), 48.
FIGURE 17.1  Map of Isfahan with New Julfa, 1722
BLAKE 1999, MAP 3
gave access to the suburb from Isfahan.6 As the suburb was close in proximity and physically joined with the capital, in discussing New Julfa’s sacred architecture, one must see it in relation to Isfahan’s own built environment, as envisioned by the Safavid shahs and their power base.

New Julfa’s khwajas, the wealthier merchants,7 who organized and supplied the capital for commercial transactions, profited tremendously from the sale of silk.8 In 1619, they outbid European trading companies for the largest share of trading privileges.9 As described by Sebouh Aslanian, New Julfa became the central node of a vast trading network that extended from Manila in the East to Amsterdam in the West.10 Aslanian views the Julfan trade network as an example of a circuit, consisting of a nodal center and a number of satellite communities, or ‘dispersed nodes’ around it, connected to each other as well as to the nodal center. The satellite communities consisted of Julfan merchants residing outside New Julfa, briefly or for longer periods of time.11

At the heart of this expansive global system, New Julfa’s affluent merchants erected churches and monasteries with great speed. Around mid-century, a particular architecture and interior decoration was developed for New Julfa’s sacred spaces defined by brick domed buildings and elaborate interiors of gilded and painted stucco, tiled dadoes, and wall paintings representing the integration of European pictorial techniques and iconography. Indeed, by the second half of the seventeenth century there was a standardized approach to church decoration, as if the churches’ particular appearance was a visual marker of identity for the New Julfans. This coincided with a wave of church construction and renovation by the community.

It was also at that time that New Julfa became a congregating point for Christianity within Safavid Iran. In 1655, ‘Abbas II ordered the relocation of Christians from Isfahan to New Julfa. The suburb expanded to accommodate the relocated population, which, apart from Apostolic Armenians—enjoyed a privileged position in seventeenth century Safavid Iran, see the chapter “The Treatment of Armenians by the Safavids and the Privileged Status of New Julfa” in Vazken S. Ghougassian, *The Emergence of the Armenian Diocese of New Julfa in the Seventeenth Century* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1998), 55–104.

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included Latin missionaries, Syrian Orthodox, and Copts, as well as Catholic Armenians. In close proximity to the Court precinct, New Julfa thus became a focal point for various, and competing, branches of Christianity. Within this dynamic and often conflicted environment, the Apostolic Armenian merchants built sacred spaces in the most determined manner in each neighborhood of the suburb.

It is significant to see this building activity in relation to the New Julfans’ dhimmi status. Dhimma is “the term used to designate the sort of indefinitely renewed contract through which the Muslim community accords hospitality and protection to members of other revealed religions, on condition of their acknowledging the domination of Islam. The beneficiaries of the dhimma are called dhimmis, and are collectively referred to as ahl al-dhimma or simply dhimma.12 The institution expressing the subjection to Islam is the jizya, a poll tax paid by the dhimmi.13 Due to their wealth, their potential to strengthen the Safavid economy, and their interdependent relationship with the court, the Julfan merchants were excused from certain restrictions that their dhimmi status might impose on them.14 This applied to their building of conspicuously impressive sacred spaces. In fact, documentation suggests that the court itself was invested in creating a majestic Christian built environment in New Julfa.

The Armenian Julfan merchants of Safavid Iran thus straddled an interesting social space. Julfan merchants were of an external origin; they spoke a different language; and they were of a different ethnicity. At the same time however, these Armenian merchants were integrated economically, culturally, and politically. To this extent, they have been viewed in relation to the sociological rubric of ‘the Stranger,’ as defined by Georg Simmel. The stranger is a member of the group in which he lives and participates and yet remains distant from other—‘native’—members of the group on the basis of his ‘external’ origins.15 Whether one adopts Simmel’s paradigm or not, the complex social position and composite identity maintained by Armenian Julfan merchants in Safavid Iran is clear.

The approach here is to discuss New Julfa’s religious architectural forms and decoration as expressions of the Julfan community’s historical circumstances, as well as their communal and individual identity as Armenian Apostolic international merchants based in Safavid Persia and tied to Iranian socio-economic and cultural currents. This article will concentrate on merchant patronage of sacred spaces in the central node of the trading network. After the dynamics of the relationship between the Armenian merchants and the Safavid Crown in relation to New Julfa’s Christian sacred spaces are summarized, we shall describe the style of religious building and decoration in New Julfa.

Although a brief overview of the suburb is given, the focus is on the churches of Mec Meydan, the quarter (tasnak, lit. tenth part) that formed the commercial heart of New Julfa, namely Surb Astuacacin, Surb Bet’lehem, and the Cathedral, Surb Amenap’rkic’. Discussion of their architecture and decoration will emphasize the reciprocal relationship between Armenian and Safavid Persian building. It is most advantageous not to see similar forms and iconography under the

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13 Cahen, “Dhimma.”

14 The interdependence between the Armenian merchants and the Safavid state was observed in the late 1610s to early 1620s by Pietro della Valle, who writes: “The Armenians are for the King of Persia what the Genoese are for the King of Spain, in that neither can they live without the King, nor the King without them.” Pietro della Valle, Viaggi, iii, 90 as quoted by Lewond Alişan, Sisakan: Telagrun’tin Swmeac’ aśxarhi (Venice: San Lazzaro, 1893), 442.

15 For a recent comparison of the function of the Armenian merchants in Safavid Iran to that of the Jews at the Habsburg court, see Aslanian, Global Trade Networks, 1, and 235, note 2.
umbrella of ‘influence,’ but to see the shared characteristics as the result of regional forms, contiguous environments, and mutual investment in religious spaces in New Julfa to both differentiate and unite people within architectural and urban frames. Recent studies by Maranci have emphasized the importance of fully accounting for local power dynamics and their international aspects as expressed in choices for patronage of church building, emphasizing the subtle messages expressed by architectural form and location, decoration and epigraphy, as well as further textual and contextual aspects of a building in its geographical, social, religious and economic environments. This enables a precise reading of the architectural monument while avoiding the pitfalls a study of artifices presents that fails to take the variegated motives for their patronage into account. It firmly places architectural history into a wider historical context and thus contributes to a deeper understanding of the meanings an edifice conveys. Visual similarities between buildings in New Julfa and Isfahan represent the continuous human contacts and interrelations between Apostolic Armenians, Catholic Armenians, Catholic missionaries, and Muslims. For this reason, this article emphasizes patronage to underscore that New Julfa’s sacred spaces are the result of the hopes and ambitions of particular individuals.

We distinguish three types of patronage that can be linked to a certain degree to different socio-economic levels of the Armenian Community, and then we explore reasons for fervent mercantile patronage of sacred spaces in New Julfa to create a built environment in which Apostolic Christianity was featured. The aim is to show that the exterior and interior of these churches relate to the New Julfans’ connections and contentions with other religious communities in New Julfa and abroad. Finally we suggest that the decorative mode of New Julfa’s churches was exported along the lines of New Julfa’s network.

1 Investing in Christian Sacred Spaces: Armenian Merchants and Safavid Monarchs

The Julfan merchants and their community were part of an intricate web of relations within Safavid society. In the sixteenth century, before their deportation, these merchants had been highly successful, negotiating an international network radiating from Julfa on the Arax to Italy, the Netherlands, Russia, Constantinople, Smyrna, the Levant, and India. Although unlikely to have been conceived before the deportation, and implemented initially more through improvisation than based on an overarching vision, New Julfa formed part of Shah ‘Abbas’s political-economic strategy of Empire. Shah ‘Abbas provided the merchants

16 On approaches to the study of Armenian architecture, see Christina Maranci, Medieval Armenian Architecture: Constructions of Race and Nation (Louvain: Peeters, 2001), 239–253, which points out new ways to broach the subject, and her “Building Churches in Armenia: Art at the Borders of Empire and at the Edge of the Canon”, The Art Bulletin, Vol. 88 (2006): 656–675, which is an excellent example of a fruitful application of this in taking into account architectural, textual, and contextual evidence, giving proper and privileged focus to the interplay between local and international relationships in seventh-century Armenia.

with impetus, privilege, and protection. The area south of the Zayanderud where Shah 'Abbas settled the deported Julfa merchant families belonged to the Queen Mother; the royal household thus supplied land for the Armenians from its own possessions. The Armenian merchants were placed under the Queen Mother's protection and provided an important part of her income. The Shah created circumstances enabling the Christian merchants to contribute to the prosperity of the Safavid realm, while precluding Muslim sensitivities to hamper his project. The location of New Julfa, separated from the city by the Zayanderud, but connected to it by several sumptuous bridges, is a good example of both sides of this policy. Having burned and erased Julfa, deported and relocated its inhabitants, 'Abbas i encouraged them to rebuild so as to copy their lost home town, its mansions and churches—to which they were forbidden to return—and to resume their trading activity, now a royal concern. 

New Julfa formed part of the Shah's architectural vision for Isfahan, which had become the capital shortly after his accession to the throne. Isfahan expanded rapidly, and acquired grandeur and allure. New Julfa was supported to develop parallel to and in harmony with the Shah's center of power. The building of Christian churches should be understood in the context of intense architectural patronage within the royal grounds of the dowlatkhana (the palace precinct), the Meydan-e Naqsh-e Jahan (the Square of the Image of the World), and off the promenade of the char-bagh, where courtiers were given plots of land to build their mansions modeled upon the Shah's palace. Buildings on the Meydan-e Naqsh-e Jahan include the Masjid-e Shah (Royal Mosque), constructed between 1611 and 1638 by 'Abbas i and Shah Safi (1629–42) and was located opposite the elaborate bazaar. Between 1590 and 1602 'Abbas i built the Masjid-e Shaykh Lutf-Allah, and from 1598 to 1608, the palace of Ali Qapu on the opposite side of the Meydan. A major commission of the dowlatkhana was the Chehel Sotun palace, completed in 1647 by Shah 'Abbas II (1642–66).

Royal initiative included New Julfa's building projects. Permission was given to build religious architecture in New Julfa. In fact, there was royal encouragement of the building of religious spaces, often as a backdrop for the Court's ceremonial visits, as textual evidence bears out. Araq'el Dawrižec'i's Book of History, an important seventeenth-century source for Julfa history, lists the privileges the Armenian merchants in New Julfa enjoyed under Shah 'Abbas—and would continue to enjoy under his immediate successors.

"First of all, Shah 'Abbas was a friend of the Armenians and respected them, especially the Julfans ... He personally and constantly visited their homes, drank and ate their food without hesitation—for it is customary among the Persians to be squeamish with Christians [considering them unclean]. He also invited them to his home and his table and honored them as his own notables ... ['Abbas] on his own volition, ordered the construction of churches all over [New] Julfa and its environs; and a grand and tall church inside the walls of Isfahan. He favored the Christians and

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18 Ghougassian, Emergence, 60, 195. The Queen Mother's intervention on several occasions resulted in reversal of adversary measures, see Ghougassian, Emergence, 112 and 145–147.
20 Babaie et al., Slaves, 83.
21 Babaie et al., Slaves, 12.
22 For a study of this palace, see Babaie, Isfahan, 186–197.
23 Bouroumiout, Araq'el of Tabriz, 75–76, and Patmut'oun Araq'el Vardapeti Dawrižewywy (Valarsiapat: Mother See of Ējmiacin, 1896). This edition will be indicated by the abbreviation PAVD, thus: PAVD, 64–65.
personally ordered them to build churches. During the major holidays—Easter, Ascension, and others, he came to church and celebrated together with the Christians ... the Christians openly observed all their religious traditions and rituals—rang bells, called people to prayer, and observed, with great ceremony, the Feast of Theophany ...”

The historian’s words are corroborated by a firman Shah ʿAbbas had issued in 1614–15, where he enjoins the Armenians to build a cathedral:

“The present high order is issued, so that Armenian priests, clerics, elders, leaders and people living in the Royal Capital of Isfahan, will be able to hold their heads high, due to the special attention paid to them by our great kingdom. Let them know that there exists a friendly relationship between our great kingdom and the Christian states, particularly with the Lord Pope of Rome and His Majesty the King of Spain and that we are inseparably united in love with the Armenian nation ... Therefore, we wish to build for the Armenians a large, magnificent, high, and elegantly adorned church in the Capital, to serve as a place of worship for them, where they may pray according to their tradition and rites. We will send a messenger to the Holy Pope of Rome and ask him to send a Christian priest or cleric to the capital Isfahan to pray in the said church, so that the people may learn and we may also benefit from the prayers ... The Armenians, the Vazir and Mohebb ʿAli Beg in concord, should take with them skillful architects to the rear of Baghzerešk, the place that We have designated for the Church, where they should lay the foundations for the famous church according to the wishes of the priests and of the fathers. They should send the designs to Our Majesty, which we will study and order the builders to begin the work and bring the construction to completion. They must exercise great care in this matter, for which they will be assured of favours by Our Kingdom.”

Aŕak’eľ’s text and the royal decree indicate the court’s desire to create Christian urban spaces as the physical backdrop for the relationship between Muslim rulers and their Christian subjects. ʿAbbas i incorporated the building of a church into his own architectural campaigns, with a royal gift of land, the direct involvement of the darugha (superintendent) of Isfahan, Mohebb ʿAli Lala who oversaw the construction of the Masjid-e Shah as well, and the final authorization of the church’s design required from the Shah. Baghzereshk, next to which ʿAbbas i proposed a site for the new cathedral, was a garden located on the eastern edge of New Julfa, adjacent to Chahar-bagh, the artery that physically linked the royal precinct and New Julfa. Here there seems to be a vision of a unified aesthetic in the built environment.

The proposed church was never built: the Julfans successfully opposed the plan. The main reasons would have been that Apostolic Armenians perceived this royal decision as a threat to their religious autonomy and identity. The new building, purportedly intended for all Christian denominations, would mean the destruction of the church at Ēĵmiacin, the Mother See of the Armenian Church in Vałaršapat, where its head, the Catholicos, resided and which was traditionally perceived as the locus of its official

24 Bournoutian, Aŕak’eľ of Tabriz, 76 (PARD, 65).

25 Quoted from Ghogassian, Emergence, 204–205, Doc. No. 2 (Archives of All Savior’s Monastery, cab. 6, file 42, doc. 7). This was not the earliest permission given to build churches.


27 See Babaie et al., Slaves, 89–92.

28 The location of Baghzeresk is based on the information given in Ghogassian, Emergence, 205, note 5; it is mentioned also by Bournoutian, Aŕak’eľ of Tabriz, 171 (PARD, 200): “The place was located near an orchard. The Persians called the orchard Baghizirishk. The place was behind it and was adjacent to its western side.”
establishment in Armenia. The intended New Julfa Cathedral was to take over the function from Ėjmiacin. This becomes clear from Arak’el Dawrižec’i’s exceptionally negative language with regard to the Shah’s proposal, as he recounts how Khwaja Nazar, a leading merchant (and kalantar [mayor] from 1618 to 1636) who enjoyed the Shah’s confidence and hosted royal visits to his mansion, pursued and obtained its abandonment. The Shah began to implement his plan by having stones from the church at Ėjmiacin brought to New Julfa. ‘Abbas seemed to thus wish to lay waste to the See of Apostolic Armenian Christianity and have it relocated to the capital of his realm, and possibly even, given the mention of Catholic priests requested from the Pope to officiate there, to open it up to Catholicism. The Catholic Church was a complicating factor in the Apostolic Armenian merchants’ relations with the court, as it was attractive to Shah ‘Abbas as a conduit for good relations with European states. The presence in Isfahan and in New Julfa of Catholic missionaries and Armenian adherents of the Catholic Church, led to tensions within the community as well. Among the latter was the wealthy Šahrimeanane family, who were themselves patrons of sacred spaces in New Julfa and in Isfahan.

As Arak’el’s History shows, Ėjmiacin’s standing among Armenians and other Christians had suffered partly due to internal strife and self-interested leadership. The interventions of Khwaja Nazar over the years show that he attached importance to Ėjmiacin’s resurgence as the core of Armenian Apostolic self-definition. Arak’el relates that the danger of dismantling the Catholicosal see at Ėjmiacin was finally averted in 1627 when ‘Abbas, once more on the advice of Khwaja Nazar, decided to appoint as sexton of Ėjmiacin the saintly vardapet (archimandrite) Movsēs, whose itinerant preaching enjoyed great support among the Armenian population. A third intervention by Khwaja Nazar upon Shah Safi’s accession in 1629 obtained Movsēs’ appointment as Catholicos. Under his leadership the see began to re-establish its prestige. Khwaja Nazar

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29 For an introduction to the history and architecture of Ėjmiacin, see Armen Zarian, Arà Zarian, and Anahide Ter Minasian, Vagharshapat (Venice: Oemme, 1998).
31 Bournotian, Arak’el of Tabriz, 170–172 (PAVD, 199–201). Among those ‘Abbas visited were members of Khwaja Nazar’s family, see Bournotian, Arak’el of Tabriz, 75 (PAVD, 64), 169 (PAVD, 197).
32 They are mentioned in the decree quoted above, and by Arak’el as well, see Bournotian, Arak’el of Tabriz, 171 (PAVD, 200).
34 On this family, see Aslanian, Global Trade Networks, 149–150 and 283–284; a critical assessment of the literature, 285–286 (note 90). The conversion to Catholicism of the entire family does not seem to have taken place before the deportation to New Julfa. Aslanian (Global Trade Networks, 150 and 154, note 0.) mentions that in 1646 Khwaja Sarhat is said to have converted to Catholicism, and that in 1684 eleven family members converted in Julfa in the presence of a Carmelite missionary.
35 Instances of strife in Ėjmiacin are given in Bournoutian, Arak’el of Tabriz, see e.g. pages 172–203 (PAVD, 202–248).
36 For the election of Armenian Catholicos through the centuries, see Father Krikor Vardapet Maksoudian, Chosen of God: The Election of the Catholicos of All Armenians. From the Fourth Century to the Present (New York: St Vartan Press, 1995); for the period under discussion, esp. 82–84.
contributed to the preservation of Armenian Apostolic identity also in New Julfa itself through his patronage of Surb Geor (St George), built in 1611, which became the depository for the stones brought from Ēĵmiacin, turning it into an object of pilgrimage.38

Through the Shah’s encouragement, merchant patronage of New Julfa’s sacred spaces is thus embedded in the Shah’s project for Isfahan. The urban landscape served as a stage-set of sorts to court ceremonies and activities. Seventeenth-century Safavid shahs were in the habit of visiting New Julfa’s churches and houses with pomp and circumstance.39 An affluent setting served their interests at such occasions as it promoted a space, where both the Christian Armenian community and Isfahan’s European populations could live in a manner to which they were somewhat accustomed.

Khwaja leadership ensured that the Armenian Apostolic Church’s and thus the community’s identity was not compromised by court engagement with European Christian powers, that is, with the possibility of Catholic rivalry, a looming fear and a theme that permeates Julfan history. The combination of royal interest in Europe and merchant wealth facilitated the extraordinary blossoming of church building in New Julfa. The close relationship between building in New Julfa and Isfahan facilitated exchange of visual identifiers, such as painterly modes and architecture, as will be discussed later.

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2 Types of Church Patronage in New Julfa

New Julfa comprised various quarters including Mec Meydan, Pokʿr Meydan, Yacobĵanencʿ (Yacobĵan), Łaragēl, and Čʿarsu. Erevan, Dawrež (Tabriz), Gask, and Kočʿēr were established after 1655 when ʿAbbas II ordered Christians from Isfahan to be relocated to New Julfa, expanding the suburb to the south (Figure 17.2). The main axis of the suburb, running east–west, was Nazar Avenue, named after the influential Khwaja Nazar, mentioned above, who was kalantar of New Julfa between 1618 and 1636. On Julfa’s eastern end was the gate of the Armenian Apostolic Sarfraz family. On the opposite side, on the western end, was the gate of the Šahrimanians, the most powerful Armenian Catholic family.40

Churches were established in each quarter, often dominated by one particular family. Important information on these churches, their renovations, and patronage is given in Patmutʿiwn Nor Ĵułayu (History of New Julfa) by Tēr Yovhaneancʿ, published in 1880 and 1881. His main sources are the archives of All Savior Cathedral (Surb Amenapʿrkičʿ, known as Vank in Persian) comprised of Persian and Armenian decrees, wills, and manuscripts, to which is added information from church inscriptions. A total of twenty-five Apostolic churches are attested by Tēr Yovhaneancʿ, thirteen of which are listed by Carswell as still extant.41

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39 See, for example, Babaie et al., Slaves, 69–70.

40 Descriptions of the layout of New Julfa differ slightly over time and by author, often European travelers. See Yarutʿiwn Tēr Yovhaneancʿ, Patmutʿiwn Nor Ḷulayu or Ḷaspahan, 2 vols (New Julfa: Amenapʿrkičʿ Vankʿ, 1880–81), vol. i, 35–42, esp. 39–40 (Further abbreviated as TY i and TY ii); Herzig, “Armenian Merchants,” 67–80; Armen Hakhnazarian and Vahan Mehrabian, Nor Ījlfa (Venice: oemme, 1991), 12–13; Baghdiantz McCabe, Shah’s Silk, 82–86; Aslanian, Global Trade Networks, 40–41.

Merchant patronage took different forms. Three major types are discernable, and seem to relate to the socio-economic standing and the aspirations of those involved: khwaja patronage, collaborative patronage by members of the same community, and joint clerical and lay commissions. The first type is represented by buildings erected by the khwajas, the wealthiest of merchants. These churches, not unlike those of noble families in earlier Armenian tradition, generally carry the family’s name. For example, in the Pok’r Meydan quarter, Khwaja Nazar erected Surb Gēorg (St George) (1060/1611–12), known as Xoĵēnc‘ Žam (Church of the Khwaja’s), or as the church of Khwaja Nazar. In his own family’s memory, the merchant Xoja Ełiazar established two churches: Surb Yovhannēs Mkrtič‘ (St John the Baptist, 1070/1620–21) and Surb Katarinē Anapat Kusanac‘ (St Katherine Convent for Nuns, 1072/1622–23), both in Č‘arsu. Petros Velijanian founded the magnificent church of Betlehem (Bethlehem) in 1628, again in his name and in that of his family’s. In 1116/1667–68 in the quarter of K’očër, was built a

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42 TY II, esp. 179–190. Cf. Hakhnazarian and Mehrabian, Nor Djulfa. This building also has later seventeenth-century inscriptions.

43 TY II, 204–207 and 223–237.
church named Surb Nersēs (St Nerses), known as Surb Aweteacʿ, recalling not only the Annunciation (the meaning of Awetis and Aweteacʿ) but also referring to its builder, as was more often the case, Awetis Gilanian.44 While the establishment of those churches represents the result of one family’s investment, others carry the names of several families. Merchant families’ patronage was dedicated to particular aspects of a church, or spread over time.45 An example is Surb Astuacacin (Holy Mother of God, usually called St Mary’s), which, as discussed below, was constructed by Khwaja Awetikʿ in 1062/1613–14 and renovated by Gerak Ala between 1651 and 1666.46 This close connection between a church and a family, as demonstrated by these examples, fuelled church construction.

The second type of patronage is defined by churches known to have been built on the basis of shared initiative among individuals who came from the same community, such as Surb Stepʿanos (St Stephen, 1063/1614–15), in the Yakobjian quarter,47 as well as Surb Nikołayos (St Nicholas the Patriarch, c. 1630), which was paid for by the local population of the Łaragēl quarter.48 After the relocation of the Christians from Isfahan to New Julfa in mid-century, additional churches were built on popular initiative. These relocated Armenians, among which artists and craftsmen were well-represented, did not belong to the wealthier merchants, the khwajas. Elevated official politics, for instance, jockeying for the position of kalantar, is much less likely to have motivated their patronage, which would have been driven foremost by their piety and common provenance. In the Tabriz quarter, the relocated inhabitants founded a church in the name of St Gregory the Illuminator, referred to as either St Gregory the Illuminator or St Minas.49 An inscription around the interior of the dome documents that the church was founded in 1108/1659–60, during the reign of ‘Abbas ii, the Catholicosate of Tēr Yakob at the Holy See of Ēĵmiacin, and the episcopate of Dawitʿ in Jula; and that its construction was completed in 1112/1663–64 through the effort of the Dawriž and Naxijewan communities, i.e. those relocated from Isfahan.50 A wide range of individuals who contributed to the church’s building and decoration are mentioned: merchants, local laborers, vardapets, and their pupils.51 In the same year, the Erevancʿikʿ evacuees established Surb Amenapʿrkičʿ (All Savior’s) in their new quarter of Erevan. Named after the church they had previously built in Isfahan, this edifice was completed in 1118/1669–70.52 A written history of the building of the church, from which Ter Yovhaneancʿ quotes, contains much information about its patronage. Apart from donations and commissions, this could take the form of working on the

44 As Tēr Yovhaneancʿ explains, the church was called Surb Aweteacʿ in accordance with a local tradition of naming a church after its builder (in this case after Awetikʿ). The church is referred to as Surb Aweteacʿ in a number of manuscripts, see TY II, 209–211.

45 The relationships between the various donors associated with one particular church are beyond the scope of the present discussion.

46 There were further renovations in the 1840s. See TY II, 191–197.

47 TY 200–203; Hakhnazarian and Mehrabian, Nor Djalfa, 14, 65. The colophon of a Čašocʿ (Lectionary), commissioned by Khwaja Margar, mentions that scribe Sargis Merzuanici finished copying it in 1063/1614 after the church had been built. TY II, 200, cf. Vazgen Hakobyan and Ašot Hovhannisyan, Hayeren jëragreri hištata-karanner, 老婆 dar, Hator A (1601–1620 tʿtʿ) (Erevan: Academy of Sciences, 1974), 541 (no. 698). The church contains later seventeenth- and eighteenth-century inscriptions; mention is made of a carpenter Abraham who built the altar.

48 TY II, 207–209; Hakhnazarian and Mehrabian, Nor Djalfa, 14, 83.

49 TY II, 211–217.

50 Ibid., 211.

51 Ibid., 212–213.

52 Ibid., 218–223. This Church is not to be confused with the Cathedral which is also called Surb Amenapʿrkičʿ. It is also known as Surb Sargis. cf. Herzig, “Armenian Merchants,” 78.
construction or decoration of the church without requiring payment, as may have been the case with a certain Alfatʿun who helped build the church walls. According to Ter Yovhaneancʿ the paintings of the church all carry donor inscriptions. In 1115/1666–67, another community relocated from Isfahan built Surb Yakob Balatʿay (St James in the Gardens), also in the Erevan quarter.

The third type of patronage is represented by the Cathedral, Surb Amenapʿrkičʿ (All Savior’s Cathedral or Vank), built in Mec Meydan. The construction was begun around 1655 and the decoration concluded about ten years later. The Cathedral presents an interesting case of merchant patronage merging with that of church officials. In the Cathedral’s inscriptions the actual construction is accredited to Bishop Dawʿit Ĵułayecʾi (1652–83), while the decoration is attributed to merchant expenditure, namely that of Khwaja Awetikʿ.

Overall, reading through Tēr Yovhaneancʿ History of New Julfa, one is struck with the sheer number of churches erected and the wave of renovations that took place in the Safavid Period, especially during the later half of the seventeenth century and the early eighteenth century. In an effort to underscore their position and involvement in the community, Armenian merchants furnished the community with churches to house their faithful. For a historical comparison in the Islamic world, we might turn to the almost feverish building on behalf of Mamluk amirs in medieval Cairo who commissioned religious-civic complexes, including khanqahs and madrasas, through waqf endowments.

This activity on the part of the Apostolic merchants was taking place not only as an element of the Shah’s larger building projects for Isfahan, as discussed in the previous section, but in the context of building among other Christian communities in the suburb, as well. Missionaries also built and monastic complexes were restored, while others were founded, through the efforts of saintly clerics. Among the restored complexes were the Mother See at the Cathedral of Ejmiacin, two other churches in the same city of Valaršapat, Surb Hripʿsime and Surb Gayanē, the monastic complex of Yovannavank’, all in the Republic of Armenia, and Surb Tʿadei Vank’ in the north of Iranian Azerbaijan, as well as others. See Bourinotian, Aṙakʿel of Tabriz, 228–275, chapters 24–27 (Pavd 284–353).

churches and schools in New Julfa. Although chapels and convents were established in Isfahan, after the mid-century relocations New Julfa became the main residence of the missionaries. These included French Capuchins, Portuguese Augustinians, Italian Carmelites, and Dominicans as well. Ter Yovhananec’ lists seven Roman Catholic churches in his History of New Julfa. Armenian merchant patronage of these can be ascribed only to Surb Aweteac’ (Church of the Annunciation), which was built by the affluent and powerful Catholic Armenian family of the Šahrinaneans, who helped finance other Catholic establishments in Isfahan and New Julfa as well. The architectural representation of Catholicism in Iran may well have had an impact on Apostolic Armenian buildings and their decoration, as will be suggested later.

3 Mec Meydan Churches: Architecture, Decoration and Patronage

3.1 Churches and Patrons

Mec Meydan (the Great Square, referring to the district of that name around the square itself) was the commercial hub of the suburb. Seven Armenian Apostolic churches were built there. Surb Yakob (St James), one of the earliest churches to be erected in New Julfa, was constructed on popular initiative in 1607. Surb Nazareť (Holy Nazareth, now ruined), the patronage of which is unknown, dates to 1611. Khwaja Awetik’ undertook the construction of Surb Astuacacin (Holy Mother of God, usually called St Mary’s) in 1628, and the building was later redecorated through the auspices of the merchant Gerak Ala. Its precinct incorporates another church by the name of Surb Yakob. Surb Meydani Bet’lehem (lit. Bethlehem of the Meydan), consecrated in 1628, was commissioned by Khwaja Petros Velijanian. Muradenc’ Surb Yakob (St James of the Muradeans) was consecrated in 1634 under the patronage of the Muradean family. The Cathedral, Surb Amenap’rkič’ (All Savior’s), was built between 1655 and 1664 on the initiative of Bishop David, with support from the New Julfa merchant community. The date of construction of Surb Hogi (Holy Spirit) is unknown. It was also commissioned by a Khwaja Awetik’. Of these, four still exist: Surb Yakob, Surb Astuacacin, Surb Bet’lehem, and Surb Amenap’rkič’.

3.2 Architecture of the Mec Meydan Churches

Surb Astuacacin, Surb Bet’lehem, and the Cathedral, Surb Amenap’rkič’ merge seamlessly with the surrounding built environment and were erected within 250 meters of one another: Surb Bet’lehem is located adjacent to Surb Astuacacin (Figure 17.3), and the Cathedral was built just west of them. The architecture of Armenian Apostolic churches has been systematically studied by Carswell and Hakhnazarian, on whose description of the architecture the present discussion is based. The similarities of plan and construction among the

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60 In Isfahan, the Carmelites obtained a residence near the Maydan-i Mir; the Capuchins had a house near the royal palace. On the Capuchins, see François Richard, “Catholicisme et Islam chite au Grand Siècle autour de quelques documents concernant les missions catholiques au XVIIe s.,” Euntes Docete 33:3 (1980): 339–403. p. 341, and Tavernier, Voyages en Perse. For a further description of the European missionary presence in New Julfa, see André Daulier-Deslandes, Les Beautés de la Perse (Tehran, 1976), 22. The Dominicans were active among the Armenians from 1318 onwards, see van den Oudenrijn OP, “Uniteurs” Oriens Christianus 43 (1959): 95. In New Julfa the Dominicans’ house was in the district of Kočēr beside the Apostolic Armenian church of Surb Aweteac’ (also called Surb Nersēs), see TY II, 155, 209–211, 280; cf. Herzig, “Armenian Merchants,” 79.

61 For lists and descriptions, see TY II, 265; Hakhnazarian and Mehrabian, Nor Djulfa, 15; Richard, “Catholicisme et Islam chiite,” 380.

62 As Herzig (“Armenian Merchants,” 74) has pointed out, Carswell (New Julfa, 35) is mistaken in identifying this church with Surb Yakob Muradenc’.

63 TY II, 160–162; for further clarification, see Herzig, “Armenian Merchants,” 74–75.

64 Carswell, New Julfa, 19–20; Hakhnazarian and Mehrabian, Nor Djulfa, 13. See also the brief
churches are striking and betray a unified vision or aesthetic. This finds parallels with the particular style of the churches’ decoration, which will be treated below. The sacred spaces of New Julfa offer a view to the syncretism in architectural forms. As discussed by Carswell and Hakhnazarian, they represent a convergence of the Armenian architectural inheritance with elements of Safavid buildings.

These self-sufficient buildings make use of customary Persian building material and of some of the forms of Iranian architecture. Brick, rather than the natural stone of Armenian churches in Armenia itself, is the staple material used. A second element taken from Persian architecture is the slightly recessed pointed arch, occurring, for instance, in the domes (Figure 17.4). This feature

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*Description in Ghougassian, Emergence, 178, who, like Hakhnazarian stresses that elements of the outward architectural form may have been motivated by a desire to avoid provoking Muslim fanaticism. The present authors question this interpretation. See also Amy S. Landau, “Farangi-Sāzī at Isfahan: The Court Painter Muhammad Zamān, the Armenians of New Julfa and Shāh Sulaymān (1666–1694),” DPhil Thesis, University of Oxford, 2009.*
can be observed also in sixteenth-century Armenian church architecture in the direct environment of Julfa on the Arax, and its incorporation thus may predate the move to New Julfa.65 A Safavid interpretation of the pendentives supporting the dome and half dome is the tracery of the intersecting ribs, which can vary from a simple feature to an elaborate decorative scheme, as one can observe in Surb Amenap’rkič’ and Surb Bet’læhem (Figure 17.5).

Many of the churches feature a dome over a central square, thus fitting within the local Iranian architectural style. This established element of Armenian church architecture occurs in several—but not all—types of churches, domed basilicas (for example, Surb Gayanē), radiant type churches (such as Alt’amar) and cruciform churches (T’alin) which were constructed in Armenia from the early-medieval period onwards.66 The combination of the dome with the recessed pointed arch is a defining feature in, for example, Surb Bet’læhem, which has the largest dome in New Julfa. Some churches, like Surb Amenap’rkič’ have two domed squares, and there are even three in Surb Georg, where, as in other cases, vaulted bays cover the space between the domed areas. Where churches have north and south aisles the dome rests on arches rising from freestanding piers that are linked to the walls by further arches and vaults.

Surb Bet’læhem has a double dome. The outer one is considerably larger than the inner, which also has a precedent in Armenian church architecture.

65 Examples are Surb Astuacacin at Darašamb (1518), while Surb Step’anos Naxavkay dates from the seventeenth–eighteenth centuries and is thus contemporary with the buildings erected in New Julfa. See Adriano Alpago-Novello, Sorhul (Milano: OEMME, 1988), 88–93, and 80–87.

66 For the typology of Armenian churches and the examples given here, see Dickran Kouymjian, Index of Armenian Art: Armenian Architecture (http://armenianstudies.csufresno.edu/iaa_architecture/index.htm). Cf. Hakhnazarian, “Julfa,” who compares the architecture more closely with that from the Golτn and Erńjak provinces in Naxijewan, which include Julfa and Agulis.
architectural, although the onion-shaped form resembles those of the outer domes of the surrounding mosques, and are thus at variance with the usual Armenian conical ones (Figures 17.3 and 17.6). Once inside, the dome assumes the form familiar from historic Armenia. Light enters the churches through windows in either the walls or the drum under the dome, and where present, through a lantern. Belfries, usually situated on the roof, are common, although not always contemporary with the building. The freestanding one at Surb Amenap’rkič’ is an exception, and was added some forty years after completion of the cathedral. They are square, with the usual Armenian pointed roof that is absent from the central dome. They are highly visible and their form conveys an aspect of Armenian church architecture of great longevity.67

The layout of the churches was prescribed by liturgical requirements, and therefore the ground plan and division in various sections follow a traditional Armenian pattern. The altar area is characterized by a raised bema, while the area in front of it is slightly higher than that of the nave (Figure 17.6). All but one of the preserved churches have an octagonal apse with a half dome and vestries on the north and south sides. A further expected Armenian element is the construction of the altar, with heavy stones beneath a wooden structure on which a stone slab is placed. On the western side a balcony with a ceiling-high pierced wooden parapet, often decorated, provided a separate space for women attending mass.

The courtyard surrounding the New Julfa churches plays a significant role and in many cases there is more than one. While it never occurs

67 For these characteristics, see Carswell, New Julfa, 19–20.
within the church building itself, but occupies the space between the church and the surrounding walls, this feature of Armenian architecture shares functions with Safavid ones in that it supports leisure activities and public congregation (Figure 17.7). The churches’ courtyards often have their own well, storage space, kitchen, and ovens, and sometimes space for accommodation. Several churches have a (semi-)covered altar situated at one of the outer walls of the church in the courtyard, designed for open-air celebrations of the liturgy during the hot season. The Cathedral complex of Surb Amenap’rkic’ has an extensive courtyard on which various buildings are located from which the administration of the diocese was run. It once had a printing press and currently a library and museum are located in its grounds.

Positioned within their courtyards, with their domes similar to those of Safavid buildings, New Julfa’s Armenian churches blend in with the Isfahan urban environment. On the exterior, only the belfries, usually quite small, and some of the lanterns bear outward witness to inherited Armenian sacred architecture. The interiors, organized in accordance with liturgical practices as well as enveloped with narrative religious subjects, identify the buildings as Christian and clearly differentiate them from Muslim religious spaces.

3.3 Decoration of the Mec Meydan Churches

As mentioned earlier, by the final third of the century Apostolic churches were being decorated in accordance with a standardized approach characterized by gilded and painted stucco, tile-work, and murals illustrating Holy Scripture and

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68 The concept of the courtyard itself combines traditional Iranian architectural design with Armenian social and architectural tradition, see Hakhnazarian and Mehrabian, Nor Djuifa, 13.

69 As in Surb Step’anos, see Hakhnazarian and Mehrabian, Nor Djuifa, 13, 64.
narratives about saints’ lives in the Apostolic hagiographic tradition.\footnote{Poor state of preservation and whitewashing make it difficult to obtain a true sense of the original interior decoration in certain of New Julfa’s churches; in the Qajar period much renovation was carried out.}

The Cathedral, Surb Astuacacin and Surb Bet’lehem are analogous to the all-over decorative scheme in certain Muslim buildings. For the overall scheme, as suggested elsewhere, in both the mid-seventeenth-century Chehel Sotun and Surb Bet’lehem, we find large paintings at an intermediate level with a lower row of smaller paintings just above the tiled dado; and above these two rows of narrative paintings are arabesques and floral motifs painted in gold on blue—and polychrome on red or white.\footnote{See Amy S. Landau, “European Religious Iconography in Safavid Iran: Decoration and Patronage of Meydani.

The gilded and painted stucco and tiled dadoes of New Julfa’s churches find exact correlations in buildings throughout Isfahan and New Julfa. Textual evidence indicates that the Augustine convent and church in Isfahan, for instance, were similarly decorated.\footnote{Carswell, New Julfa, 28.} Similarities are also apparent between New Julfa churches and Safavid palaces such as the ‘Ali Bet’ghem (Bethlehem of the Maydan)” in Iran and the World in the Safavid Age, eds. Willem Floor and Edmund Herzig (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 441–462, and Amy S. Landau, “From the Workshops of New Julfa to the Court of Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovic: An Initial Look at Armenian Networks and the Mobility of Visual Culture,” in Metalwork and Material Culture in the Islamic World: Art, Craft and Text, eds. Venetia Porter and Mariam Rosser-Owen (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 413–426.}
Qapu, Chehel Sotun, and the Hasht Bihisht (1080/1669–70).73

Christian and Muslim religious spaces differ in that Julfa churches rely heavily on narrative painting. The murals of sacred subjects reportedly held significant interest for the Muslim visitor. For example, the eighteenth-century Armenian historian Xač’atur Julayec‘i recounts in Patmut‘iwn Parsic‘ (History of the Persians) that Shah Sulayman (1666–94) came to New Julfa’s Surb Amenap’rkē’ Cathedral and, among other subjects, discussed the wall paintings with the Armenian theologian, philosopher, and artist Yovhannēs Mrk‘uz (1642–1716).74 The French traveler and jeweler Jean Chardin claimed that Muslims came to the Cathedral as if to a theater for sheer amusement at the paintings. Religious narrative paintings in sacred places were a marker of religious difference, although interestingly their context was not, as stories of the prophets are richly represented in the Muslim Persian tradition.

Images of religious subjects from the ceiling to the dado define New Julfa’s Apostolic churches.75 European sources circulated by, or at least associated with Catholic missionaries, were reinterpreted. It is now generally accepted that rather than the Dutch woodcuts of Christoffel van Sichem II (1577–1658),76 New Julfa’s artists reconfigured van Sichem’s sources for church murals: the engravings in Evangelicae historiae imagines (Antwerp, 1593), and Adnotationes et meditationes in Evangelia (Antwerp, 1594) by Jerome Nadal, a celebrated Jesuit priest.77 The Imagines and the


74 Xač’atur Julayec‘i, Patmut‘iwn Parsic‘ (Valaršapat 1905), 155–156. Xač’atur Julayec‘i, the eighteenth-century author, noted that the questions and answers voiced by the Persian King and the Armenian theologian were written down and collected in a book. The text was written in Armenian on one side of the page and in Persian on the other. Xač’atur added that “this book is in our midst up to the present day” (Xač’atur Julayec‘i, Patmut‘iwn, 156). This lengthy and intricate debate is documented, in Armenian alone in Yovhannēs Mrk‘uz, Girk’ Patmut‘eun Arareal i Norn Žəlayu Srboy Amenap’rkē’i Gerahraš Vani Mśan Yovhannēs Ėzngeac‘ Vardapetin Vičabarun‘un x Šah Sliman Parsic‘ (The Book of History Made at the Marvellous Monastery of Holy All Saviour in New Julfa. Disputation of monk Yovhannēs the ascetic vardapet, with Shah Suleyman of the Persians) (Calcutta, 1797).

75 Decorated Armenian church interiors may have been more common than once assumed, assessing to which extent the copious decoration of the Julfa churches formed an exception is therefore difficult. See Sirarpie Der Nersessian, “Image Worship” in Études Byzantines et Arméniennes (Louvain: Imprimerie orientaliste, 1973), 405–415. Examples of elaborate interior decoration in Armenian churches are the murals in the church of the Holy Cross at Aght’amar (915–21), see Sirarpie Der Nersessian. Aght’amar: Church of the Holy Cross (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, [dist.] 1965), and the copious decoration of Surb Grigor Lusaworič‘ (St Grigor the Illuminator, 1245, also called after the merchant who commissioned it, Tigran Honenc‘). See Nicole Thierry and Michel Thierry, L’Église Saint-Grégoire de Tigran Honenc‘ à Ant (1245) (Louvain–Paris: Peeters, 1993).

Armenian Merchant Patronage Of New Julfa’s Sacred Spaces

Adnotationes included designs by Jan and Adriaen Collaert and the Wierix Brothers and represented one of the most richly illustrated and widely traveled series of scriptural history. Drawing upon the Imagines, the artists were drawing upon sources associated with missionary visual culture.78

78 The Armenian printing house that was established in Amsterdam in the late 1650s acquired van Sichem’s woodcuts (see Raymond H. Kévorkian, Catalogue des “Incunables” arméniens (1511/1695) ou chronique de l’imprimerie arménienne [Genève: Patrick Cramer, 1986, p. 6]) and used them extensively in its publications, most notably in the Armenian Bible which

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iii, 491–496, especially p. 491, points out that the Bible de Natalis is the title widely used by scholars for both the Evangelicae and Nadal’s own work Adnotationes; the two works were often bound together. The importance of Nadal’s compositions for the murals in Surb Amenap’r’kič’ is pointed out in Gavin A. Bailey, “The Jesuits and Painting in Italy, 1559–1690: The Art of the Catholic Reform,” in Saints & Sinners. Caravaggio & the Baroque Image, ed. F. Mormando (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1999), 151–178.

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Series of martyrdom images present in the friezes in Surb Amenap’rkich and Surb Bet’lehem represent a further example of adaptation of the iconography found in missionary visual culture. Scholarship has established that they are based on engravings of St Gregory the Illuminator’s martyrdom, made for Yovhannēs Julayec’h in Europe and brought back by him in 1646. What has remained outside the discussion, however, is that these violent, graphic martyrdom images are similar to engraved martyrdom cycles printed in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Examples of these are illustrations in Ecclesiae militantis triumphi (Rome, 1583) and Triumphus Iesu Christi crucifixi (Antwerp, 1608). They stem from missionary circles, in particular the Jesuits, who used them for their proselytizing efforts.

It is not known when the Julfans began to use missionary sources for church murals. In the Naxijewan area Julfa’s sixteenth-century communities had contact with the Catholic Armenian Fratres Unitoris or Miabanolk’h, the Armenian Catholic order founded in 1330 that had been successful in attracting Apostolic Armenians to Catholicism. The Julfans also traded with Europe. It is far from inconceivable therefore that incorporation of European elements in art and architecture, both religious and secular, had begun already among the Julfans on the Arax, and in continuity became a distinguishing feature of Armenian church decoration in New Julfa.

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79 For Yovhannēs Julayec’h travels to Italy, see Landau, “Farangi-Sāzi at Isfahan,” 199–201.

80 Analogous compositions also illustrate the Ecclesiae anglicanae tropaea (Rome, 1584) and Beati Apollinaris Martyris Primi Ravennatum Episcopi Res Gestae (Rome, 1586); for the circulation of this iconography, see Gavin Bailey, “The Jesuits and Painting in Italy, 1559–1696: The Art of the Catholic Reform,” in Saints & Sinners. Caravaggio & the Baroque Image, ed. F. Mormando (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999), 151–178. Cf. the oil paintings of the Madonna and Child flanking the main altar painting in the church of Surb Step’anos (St Stephen). Bailey has pointed out that these are based on the Salus Populi Romani, an image circulated by missionaries, largely the Jesuits, outside Europe.

81 The history of the Fratres Unitoris and of the Dominicans in Armenia is traced in van den Oudenrijn, “Uniteurs et Dominicains”; cf. note 57.

82 George A. Bournoutian, The Journal of Zak’aria of Agulis (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2003), 197, records the parallel case for seventeenth-century Agulis (some 40 km to the east of Old Julfa), where there were a dozen wealthy khwajas, several two- or three-story stone and brick mansions containing tall rooms decorated with wall paintings, and twelve churches in the ten or more districts. It is unclear whether this reflects the sixteenth-century situation as well.
Merchant Patronage in the Context of Relations between the Court and Catholic Missionaries

The merchants’ architectural commissions of sacred spaces stood as memorials and showed their participation in the Apostolic Armenian Community. Merchant patronage had gained in importance over time; in the seventeenth century Armenian society was no longer led by royalty or noble families, who would often consider the establishment of churches and educational institutions to be part of their role in society. The merchants of New Julfa continued a custom of taking responsibility for the continued safeguarding of the religious and cultural values of the community.

The financing of culture took on various forms, and included establishing churches, commissioning illuminated manuscripts, supporting printed publications, and founding schools. Furthermore, patronage offered an opportunity to pursue particular goals within the community as well, connected with prestige and, where available, political power and influence. Both elements, identity enhancement and the pursuit of influence, play an important role in merchant motivation for architectural patronage. Merchant patronage in New Julfa stood out from commissions by merchants in earlier periods by its sheer quantity. The Armenian suburb in Safavid Iran witnessed a boom in construction. Because of the phenomenal and unprecedented wealth of the New Julfan community the building of churches could occur on a much grander scale than ever before.

While the Mec Meydan district provided the Julfans with an aesthetically pleasing commercial center, it represented an arena for competitive merchant commissions as well. Tavernier’s words about the fame of Petros Velijianean show that patronage of secular and sacred space did not go unnoticed—it was in fact central to the appreciation of the richest khwaja families by the rest of the population: building within the boundaries of Mec Meydan was prestigious. The initiative to erect impressive structures—coinciding with ‘Abbas’s ambitions for the Armenians—the presence of three large ecclesiastical foundations in the district, and the patrons associated with them suggest that this was well understood. In Mec Meydan, economy, piety, and politics met. The principal patrons all played considerable roles in New Julfa’s community, in the economy of the Safavid Empire and in the Armenian Apostolic political aspirations: “The merchant class displayed no more than a passing involvement in these schemes for liberation,” Gerard Libaridian, “The Ideology of Armenian Liberation: The Development of Armenian Political Thought Before the Revolutionary Movement (1639–1885),” PhD Thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 1987, 9, quoted from Panossian, The Armenians, 100.


Not all merchants considered themselves obliged to uphold unfolding Armenian identity and to support its...
Church. Patronage of Surb Astuacacin, Surb Bet'lehem and Surb Amenap'rič' is announced through inscriptions throughout the buildings. Epigraphy, sometimes accompanied by portraits, would make it clear who the patrons were. These church inscriptions contain the formulaic expressions familiar from colophons of Armenian manuscripts and often enumerate the various family members in whose name the church is dedicated.

Inscriptions attest to Khwaja Awetik’’s foundation of Surb Astuacacin in 1062/1613–14. Further inscriptions document the building’s renovations between 1651 and 1666. Several paintings in this church were donated by another merchant by the name of Gerak Ała in 1666, who had repaired the church. One of the paintings, The Beheading of St John, said to have been brought by him from Venice, features a painting of the patron in supplantatory position, replicating the practice in Armenian manuscript illumination.85 Two different layers of patronage by Khwaja Awetik’ and Gerak Alä are announced epigraphically in this church.

Surb Bet’lehem, also known as Mēydani Bet’lehem and one of the most magnificent churches in New Julfa was founded in 1077/1628–29 through the patronage of Khwaja Petros Vēliĵanean.86 Throughout the church the names of Petros and Pōłos, sometimes along with Petros Vēliĵanean’s wife and four sons: Pōłos, Minas, Yovhannēs, and Łukas, are written. Petros’ portrait hangs today in the Bethlehem Church and his grave is located on the western side of the church.

Epigraphy and portraiture are not the only sources of information about the Vēliĵaneans and the foundation of Surb Bet’lehem. Its location adjacent to Surb Astuacacin, separated from it only by a narrow street, and its imposing size, figuratively (and perhaps literally) casting a shadow over Surb Astuacacin, as it were, required explanation. Stories were spun around Bethlehem’s construction. Two versions are preserved in Tēr Yovhananeam’s account.87 During Holy Week Khwaja Petros Vēliĵanean could not enter Surb Astuacacin for one of two reasons. The first was that there was such a multitude of worshippers in the church, that there was no room “not even at the door” (Mark 2:2). The other version of the story is that the patron of Surb Astuacacin, Khwaja Awetik’, forbade Khwaja Petros entrance to incite him to build a church as well. The result, the erection of Surb Bet’lehem, fits both versions as it has the largest known congregation area of all churches in New Julfa, and dwarfs that of Surb Astuacacin. It is likely that Surb Bet’lehem took precedence over Surb Astuacacin with its lavish European-style wall paintings,88 which were finished around mid-century and represented probably the first instance of European-inspired paintings in religious spaces—before Gerak Alä’s commission of European-style paintings for Surb Astuacacin and similar efforts, or Khwaja Awetik’’s contributions to the decorations of Surb Amenap’rič’. Through the gigantic building Surb Bet’lehem and its avant garde decoration, the Vēliĵanean family seem to have been expressing a leading role as devout builders, taste makers, and seemingly in community politics, with possible implications for further distinction in the Safavid realm.

Patronage of this stately church would certainly have enhanced the family’s prestige, and it has

85 It contains later inscriptions as well. Cf. Carswell, New Julfa, 41.
86 The inscription read: “in the course of twenty years it was completed by Khwaja Petros Vēliĵanean,“ (see Hakhnazarian and Mehranian, Nor Djulfa, 103–104; read 1628 for erroneous 1625.) Petros died in 1649. Cf. Ty ii, 179, giving the date of his death inscribed on his gravestone. Rev. Hamazasb (Hacob) Arakelian, Patkeragirk’-ułecʿuycʿ Nor Ĵułayi S. Betʿłehēm ekełecʿu. Negārnāme u rāhnamā-ye kelisā-ye beyt lehem jolfā-ye ışfahān. A Pictorial Guidebook to St. Bethlehem Church of New Julfa—Isfahan (Tehran: Nairi, 1999), 17: only the Armenian correctly mentions the ‘western’ entrance.
87 See Landau, “European Religious Iconography," where this is also mentioned.
88 Ibid.
been suggested that one of the sons of Khwaja Petros sought to become kalantar or leader of the Armenian Community of New Julfa in the 1630s. Following the nineteenth-century historian Alişan, Baghdiantz McCabe has suggested that there may have been a struggle for the succession as kalantar of Nazar, who had died in 1636. Nazar was a scion of the Šafrazeankʿ family—also called Šahixasenkʿ—which had provided the kalantar since New Julfa was founded, and would occupy the position until around 1660. McCabe conjectures that one of Khwaja Petros’s sons competed with Sa(r)fraz, who succeeded in obtaining the position in 1638, leaving the Vēliĵanean contender impoverished and forced to trade from India where the family had possessions.

The Cathedral, Surb Amenapʿrkičʿ, was begun around 1655 by Bishop Dawitʿ and the decoration concluded about ten years later. There is an inscription in the apse of the Cathedral indicating that the decoration is attributable to Khwaja Awetikʿ. The death of this merchant patron is recorded in an inscription located underneath a window on the north side of the church: “In the year 1118 (1669), on the 5th of February Khwaja Awetikʿ was transferred to Christ. And he had this church painted as a memorial to him and his deceased ones.” It has been suggested that this is the Khwaja Awetikʿ who had founded Surb Astuacacin.

New Julfa’s Armenian Apostolic sacred spaces performed various functions simultaneously. They were parish churches for the neighborhood in which they were established, and as such helped maintain the Armenian Apostolic identity of a population that experienced the double pressure of Catholic missionary zeal and of the lure of conversion to Islam. Moreover, they were family churches for the khwajas whose wealth had financed their establishment, and as such they proclaimed these khwajas’ elevated role in the community and within the wider social and economic structure of the realm. In this respect they were complementary to the mansions in which the khwajas lived, emphasizing their religious allegiance, whereas the sumptuous abodes, set in the seclusion of their walled gardens stressed the more worldly aspects of their taste, although here also one might find religious symbolism guiding the family values. The style of the mansions’ decoration was far from secluded or withdrawn, and contributed importantly to the development of artistic taste in the Safavid realm in their adoption of a Europeanizing style, as did some of the churches’ decorations. The churches were complementary to the mansions in another way as well, as a testimony of Armenian Christianity to the Muslim court elite that came to visit, sometimes led by the Shah himself. While in the gatherings in the khwajas’ houses painterly style might be the focus of attention, in the Churches the depicted scenes would become the topic of a religious discussion, such as between the learned vardapet Yovhannēs Mrkʿuz and Shah Solayman (1666–94) which took place in the splendid Cathedral.

Despite widespread identification with the Armenian Apostolic Church among Armenians throughout the centuries, the existence from very early onwards of Armenian Christians who, like the Byzantine and Catholic Churches, accepted the Christology set out at the Council of Chalcedon through the centuries, the existence from very early onwards of Armenian Christians who, like the Byzantine and Catholic Churches, accepted the Christology set out at the Council of Chalcedon

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89 On the Šafrazeankʿ or Šahixasenkʿ family, see Ghougassian, Emergence, 61.
91 "O readers[s] of this writing, I beseech you, remember the painter of this Holy altar [i.e. the one who had this altar painted], who always desirously longed for this matter, Awetikʿ mild of spirit, his deceased father Stepʿanos, Margarite who gave birth to him. [And] Nazar along with Ohan, my brothers – relatives, Gulšukʿ the son of Ambarišt, who is the left hand of Martiros, companion of [S]oltan Slim, in the year 1110 (1661), 25th of April." Ty II, 4.
92 Ty II, 4. Carswell (New Julfa, 25) gives a date that conflicts with the one offered here.
held in 451, must remind us that Armenian society was not homogeneous. Various Christian sects blossomed, remnants of Zoroastrianism persisted, and there were conversions to Islam. The latter might be the result of various factors. In the case of the merchants, the desire for economic and political gain would be tempting. Since the fourteenth century, Catholicism had been present in the area of Naxijevan of which Julfa formed part. The missionary efforts of the Dominicans and of the Fratres Unitores, or Miabanolk, bore fruit and conversions occurred in the area, also among the merchants. As was shown above, it did not preclude absorption into Apostolic Armenian painting of the religious imagery issuing from Catholic circles.

The establishment of the precise beginnings of the Europeanizing mode in Armenian art is hampered by the absence, it would seem, of reliable data from merchant mansions in sixteenth-century Julfa and surroundings. Unless it can be proven that the first adoption needs to be located there, one must assume that the formulation of the Europeanizing mode occurred in New Julfa. We may then suggest that the new artistic vocabulary was preferred over historic manuscript styles to project a sense of modernity and of the cosmopolitan nature of New Julfan merchants and their suburb. For their part, the Armenian merchants, who underwrote the expenses for churches and copies of Holy Scripture richly decorated with images, would not have been unaware of the global appeal of Europeanizing styles; such hybrid idioms were developing in other places too—in Mughal India, Eastern Europe, and East Asia. Nor would the impressiveness of European churches decorated with paintings have been lost on the Armenian merchants who traveled abroad. It should also be noted that European iconography already began to appear in the medium of the illustrated manuscript before or coterminous with merchant architectural commissions. Here we bear in mind that one of the earliest attestations of the Europeanizing style in religious spaces is Surb Bet‘elhem. The above considerations are associated with issues of prestige for the Velijan family, as touched upon above. Seeing that the westernized wall paintings of Surb Bet‘elhem date to the period between the late 1630s to the 1650s, the Velijan family may very well have played a central role in facilitating the adoption of a novel painterly idiom based on the European tradition for New Julfa’s religious spaces.

The Julfan merchants seem to have mediated the approach to architectural decoration through the veins of their network, as the Mother See of the Armenian Church, Ejmiacin (the Only-Begotten Descended) in Valarsapat and several churches in Melri, located on the road from Tabriz to Yerevan and Tiflis, bear out. The eighteenth-century interior decoration of Ejmiacin owes much to the Julfan style, mastered by Yakob, Yarut’iwn, and Yovnann Yovnat‘anean. In at least three of Meghri’s buildings are found Europeanized wall paintings that date to the period between the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries. These monuments are the Armenian churches of Surb Astvacacin (Holy Mother of God), Surb Yovhannēs (St John), and Surb Sargis (St Sergius). Evidence from Meghri and Ejmiacin provides two of the examples to support the thesis that the New Julfan approach to the decoration of religious spaces extended to other cities.


95 Two of New Julfa’s kalantars converted to Islam, Alapiri (kalantar in 1671) and Awet (kalantar in 1691); Ghougassian, Emergence, 294.

96 Zarian, Zarian and Ter Minasian, Vagharshapat, 32–33, 42–45.
5 Conclusion

This contribution has discussed Armenian Apostolic patronage of sacred spaces within the wider context of the cultural, religious, and political aims of an affluent dhimmi community residing in seventeenth-century Safavid Iran. It has sought to define the specific character of New Julfa’s Armenian sacred spaces and their merchant patronage.

New Julfan merchants invested significant wealth to demonstrate their participation in the Apostolic Armenian Community as well as their relationship with the Muslim elite. Both the Shi’a Safavid Shahs and the Christian Armenian merchants were interested in maintaining this relationship. The palace precinct and the Armenian suburb were contiguous spaces linked by a series of bridges across the Zayanderud. Proximity in conjunction with shared socio-economic interests on behalf of the Armenian and Muslim elite encouraged continuity of the aesthetic of the built environment. Armenian merchant churches made use of the same building techniques, materials, and certain forms as the sacred architecture of the Muslim Safavid elite. The associated aesthetic is particularly significant if one considers the interdependency between the Armenian economic elite and the Muslim political elite throughout the seventeenth century. This extends to the mutual interest in Europeanizing modes of representation on behalf of the court and the Armenian merchants.

Around the 1640s, a particular architecture and interior decoration developed for New Julfa’s sacred spaces, which served as a marker of identity for the central node at the suburb of the merchants’ global trade network. This coincided with massive church construction and renovation. The intention of this contribution was to show that need was not the main motive for the construction of sacred spaces, but rather that church building was an expression both of individual families’ ambition and of a shared identity of the Julfan Apostolic community. Within New Julfa, a dynamic and often conflicted suburb, Apostolic Armenian merchants postured through patronage with one another as well as with the Latin missionaries and Catholic Armenians.