

Temporary Exhibition of Khachkars : The Story of Armenian Cross Stones

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This exhibition offers visitors an opportunity to gain objective knowledge about the Caucasus region, specifically Armenia. Its several museum objects and stories are displayed in a specific spatial arrangement to facilitate learning. The description of the exhibition compares new and conventional approaches and analyzes principles underlying specific characteristics of Christian culture through the exhibition.

After consideration of the role of special exhibitions in museums, a discussion is presented of how museum exhibitions communicate with visitors to deliver information simply, transmitting general knowledge to museum visitors without using advanced technology of media communications.

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本稿は、2016年9月29日から10月11日まで国立民族学博物館（みんぱく）において開催されたイベント企画「ハチュカルーアルメニアの十字架石碑をめぐる物語」についての議論である。本展示は、アルメニアとキリスト教の文化的・精神的側面を日本の人々に紹介し、説明を与えるものであった。ここでは展示を企画し、作り上げた過程についても記述する。

本展示は、コーカサス地方、特にアルメニアについて客観的な知識を来館者を得る機会を提供した。複数の博物館資料や物語が、学ぶことを助けるように考えて空間的に配置された。展示に関する議論では、新しい方法と従来の方法が比較され、展示を通してキリスト教文化の諸特徴を強調する考え方が分析される。

博物館における特別展示の役割についての考察の後で、最先端のテクノロジーを使うことなく来館者に一般知識を伝え、単純な方法で情報を提供するには博物館展示が来館者とコミュニケーションをいかにとるべきかという議論を行う。

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1 Introduction

Cultural inheritance, part of which is collected, reserved and displayed in museums is the pride and wealth of every nation in the world. According to the International Council of Museums (ICOM), a museum is a “non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment” (ICOM 2004). Thus, museums are a storehouse of knowledge, which allows them to present elements of their own environment, the past, and the present to its audience. The National Museum of Ethnology (Minpaku) is a prime example of a museum and a research institution that “conducts anthropological and ethnological research to promote a general understanding and awareness of peoples, societies and cultures around the world through the collection and conservation of ethnographic materials and public exhibitions” (Minpaku 2015–16: 2). In order to expand on a certain topic to stimulate the visitors’ interests toward a new culture, temporary exhibitions are created. The special temporary exhibition—“The Story of Khachkar: Armenian Cross Stones” held at Minpaku from September 29 to October 11, 2016 strived to introduce a cultural aspect of Armenia and Christianity to Japanese people (Figure 1). The intent of this exhibition was to offer an opportunity for



Figure 1 A scene from the opening ceremony of the exhibition, “The Story of Khachkar: Armenian Cross Stones.”

Source: Exhibition Management Unit of the Information Planning Section, National Museum of Ethnology, Japan, 2016

visitors to gain objective knowledge about the Caucasus region, specifically Armenia through several museum objects and seven stories displayed in a specific spatial arrangement to facilitate learning. This is important because it was the first exhibition at Minpaku to concentrate on the subject of Christianity and the Caucasus region. Because this was the first exhibition of its kind in the museum where special spatial arrangement were introduced that made it easier for visitors to connect what they saw to other cultures.

In order to enhance the audience’s understanding and interaction with museum objects, various universal techniques, such as annotations, stories and brochures were provided. One of the points of this paper is to initiate a discussion on how museum exhibitions communicate with visitors to deliver information without using advanced technological communication media. The findings can serve as a model for future exhibitions.

The “Story of Khachkar: Armenian Cross Stones” exhibition was aimed at developing an understanding of Christianity and the Caucasus region through Khachkars to have a better appreciation of different religions and cultures across the world. This message was conveyed through manipulation of museum space and communication media to make it more accessible to those who had little previous exposure to other cultures. We tried to refrain from an in-depth religious exhibition in order to not deter the audience and make it easily approachable and interesting.

2 Theory of Museum Exhibitions and Communication

Both in academic circles¹⁾ and the broader cultural arena, the relationship between museums, exhibitions, and literature has not yet been fully investigated. In museology literature, there are different ways to discuss and analyze theories and practices on how to prepare and present exhibitions to the public. The primary function of museums is to display works and objects that offer direct and distinctive messages regarding specific objects and specimens. Through exhibitions and educational policies, museums play a key role in the development of cultural heritage (Pearce 1995: 15–16). In their analysis, Hooper-Greenhill and Kaplan describe museum exhibitions as goods of research that are organized and designed to communicate ideas (Kaplan 1995: 37–38). Museums communicate through senses—the primary sense being visual in a process that is both cognitive and cultural. This process incorporates the way people think about what they see and meanings they attach to exhibitions (Kaplan 1995: 37–38). Museums traditionally communicate via a variety of media; moreover, the introduction of new technologies provides the opportunity to expand new ways of communication, which allow the visitor to access the richness and range of collections at their own pace. However, these advanced technological methods can “present audiences with problems or orientation and spatial negotiations” (Kocsis et al. 2012: 107–125), which can compromise their understanding of the exhibition.

What exactly is a museum exhibition? Simply, an exhibition is a systematic representation of objects for the public. It is a unique means of social communication that encompasses new scientific, educational, cultural and social missions. Today, the museum exhibition is a complete spatial-objective system, where objects and other display materials are united around scientific and artistic ideas and concepts. In general, exhibitions are one of the main ways that curators and museum staff tell a story about their collection or site. There is a whole body of knowledge on the best designed exhibitions, the learning that occurs in museum settings, and how we can make exhibitions more meaningful and effective. Written interpretive material is one way that curators convey messages in an exhibition. They carefully craft only the most important, evocative and essential information about a theme or object they hope visitors will read. The design of an exhibition can communicate in non-verbal ways as well. Object selection, labels, and layout work together to give visitors a sense of the bigger message of the exhibition (Wineman et al. 2010: 86–109). It is common to attest that the exhibition is an instrument of communication that is unique to the museum. Commonly, exhibitions include objects for display purposes and may include audio-visual images and interactive experiences²⁾. An excellent example of such an exhibition is from the British museum, titled “A history of the world in 100 objects³⁾,” which relies heavily on advanced technological media. The findings can serve as a model for future exhibitions. Storytelling

helps visitors recognize the most important points identified by the curator and find their bearings to follow the main narrative routes. Thus, the spatial organization and the layout of the exhibition allow visitors to make connections. Canadian museologist Duncan Cameron coined the museum communication concept in 1968, describing it as a transfer of information and knowledge defined by a visitor to understand the “language of the exhibit,” and by the curator to create a “spatial story” (Hooper-Greenhill 1999: 46–50). The communication between visitors and the exhibition can be visual, verbal, an excursion, a lecture or a workshop. However, the spatial arrangement of the exhibition can play a vital role in communication as well; therefore, an open layout or a disorganized space inside the temporary exhibition may make the visitors feel lost, bewildered or frustrated. Our special exhibition about Armenian Khachkars was designed to stray from conventional methods of exhibition displays, and intended to present a novel way of communication with visitors. Through the staging of a workshop, the exhibition was designed to help visitors get more information and better understanding on a variety of religions in the world. In sum, the exhibition presented a distinct approach to the representation of culture and religion with an emphasis on personal experiences, participation through workshops, spatial arrangements and interaction with objects.

3 Visiting the Exhibition

Diverse cultures have original tangible and intangible elements that become symbols representing the entire nation. In Armenia such a symbol is “Khachkar⁴⁾”, the so-called cross stones. These monuments of Armenia⁵⁾ are not found anywhere else in the world. This exhibition was developed to showcase the features and the functions of Khachkar. The most common element of these monuments is a cross on a rosette or a solar disc, with the surrounding space engraved in intricate patterns of grapes, leaves, pomegranates, birds and interlaces. The cross is identified with the tree of life and salvation, which is seen as its main strength and faith. The cross sculpture becomes the main composition and an inseparable element of cross stone monuments. The central idea of the cross is both a religious manifestation, as well as an image of the four corners of the world—North, South, East, and West. Khachkar is a source of great pride for Armenians as a “khachagir” or “cross-bearing” nation, since it is a symbol of salvation and victory over death for Armenian Christians. Over the centuries the cross in Armenia became a true object of worship, taking on a dual divine significance—a symbolic meaning as the “sign” of Christ, the symbol of his victory over death, the memory of the site of his sacrifice; and a physical meaning, in the sense of a relic, the adoration of which was connected to faith in miraculous effects.

For the Armenian Khachkar exhibition, we decided to display objects accompanied with annotation-text panels (stories). These annotated panels were designed

to guide the visitors in a specific order:

- Story 0 The Land, The People**
- Story 1 Adoption of Christianity**
- Story 2 Churches and Monasteries**
- Story 3 Mystery of Cross**
- Story 4 Art of Khachkar**
- Story 5 Ornaments of the Khachkars**
- Story 6 Khachkar making traditions**
- Story 7 Armenian Diaspora and Khachkar**

The exhibition was arranged with panels forming a cross-shape in the center of the exhibition hall. The exhibition was intended to have a “circle-route” starting from the left side of the entrance as opposed to the standard linear route (Figure 2). This circular interior⁶⁾ route was designed to represent the symbol of eternity and everlasting celestial life that is often carved on Khachkars (Figure 3). As visitors entered the exhibition space, they first encountered the title banner and the description panel of the exhibition. Right in front, two stone Khachkars brought from Armenia were displayed. Moving in a clockwise direction to the left, visitors saw a directional mark for Armenia on the map to recognize where exactly in the Caucasus region Armenia is located. Still moving clockwise, visitors found themselves in one of the quadrants of the cross-shaped panels. This is where Story 0—The Land, The people—a general introduction to Armenia’, was displayed. In the same quadrant, on the other wall, visitors were presented with Story 1—Adoption of Christianity. This panel talked about the general dogmas of the Armenian Church, its relationships with Byzantium (East) and Rome (West), as well as the gradual deterioration in them, resulting in the split of the Armenian Apostolic Church.

Next, visitors moved to the second quadrant of the cross-shaped wall, where Story 2—Churches and Monasteries was displayed. The second story described the main and the oldest churches and monasteries in Armenia, classical and medieval Armenian architecture styles and the continual process of building churches. On the adjacent wall, Story 3—Mystery of Cross was presented, which informed visitors of the history of Khachkars and their unique identity.

In front of the second quadrant, in a separate corner of the exhibition hall, a special object was displayed. This was a Chrismatory⁷⁾ from Armenian Church in Aleppo, a plate similar to vessels holding oil, which served as a symbol of the Armenian communities in different corners of the world that share mutual understandings of Christianity and religion.

Behind the cross-shaped panels, at the back wall of the exhibition hall, a slideshow with the content of the exhibition was projected. The slideshow included photos of the Khachkars that were magnified to better view their intricate details.

As visitors reached the third quadrant of the cross-shaped panels, they encountered Story 4—Art of Khachkar’s, which represented the development of the art of

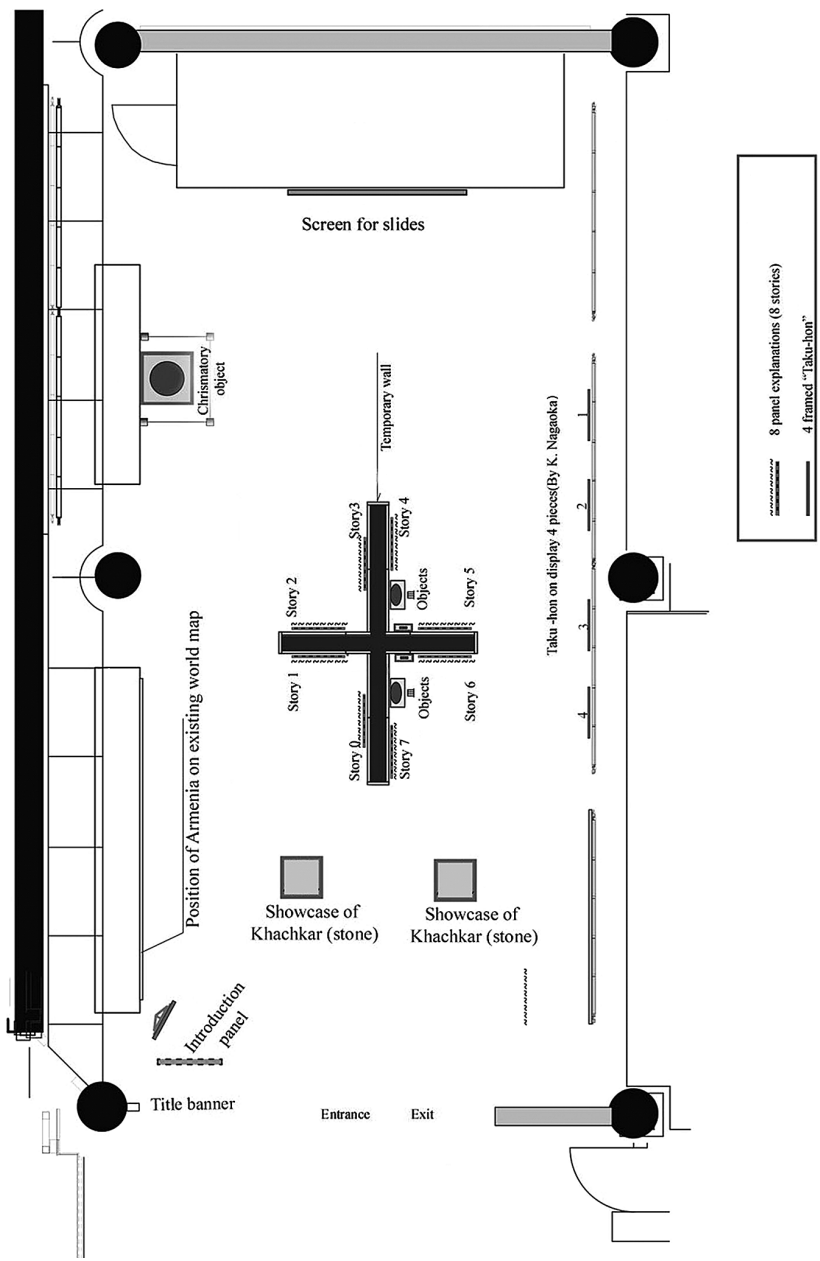


Figure 2 Floor plan of the exhibition showing location of each object and the spatial arrangement
Source: Exhibition Management Unit of the Information Planning Section, National Museum of Ethnology, Japan, 2016. English labels and alterations by author



Figure 3 Original Khachkar sample from the collection of Yerevan History Museum, Yerevan, Rock stone, 112×74×22 cm (Inv N 11555-2).
Copyright: Yerevan History Museum

the cross and Khachkars in different centuries. Additionally, ‘Story 5 –Ornaments of the Khachkars’ further described the symbolism behind Khachkar and the meanings of the engraved designs. Two objects were displayed in between the two stories. One of them was a wooden Khachkar—a property of Minpaku that had never been displayed prior to this exhibition. The other object was a wooden pattern plate that had cross-shapes engraved on its surface.

Moving along, on the wall directly facing the third and fourth quadrants of the cross-shape panels were four rubbed copies (*Taku-hon*) of Khachkars. The *Taku-hon* (Figure 4) were made by emeritus artist Professor Mr. Kunito Nagaoka⁸⁾, who has been dedicated to identifying and printing the motifs and inscriptions of cross stones in Armenia by using the ancient Chinese technique *Taku-Hon*. He created the motifs of the Noratus Old Cemetery and Noravank monastery on special Japanese paper.

Finally, the fourth quadrant of the cross-shape panel included ‘Story 6 –Khachkar Making Traditions’, which gave descriptions of Khachkar masters across Armenia and their unique styles. On the adjacent wall, ‘Story 7—Armenian Diaspora and Khachkar’ introduced different countries across the world that are home to replicas or originals of Khachkars including Japan. This quadrant mirrored the previous quadrant, since it also had a wooden cross stone from Minpaku, as well as a wooden pattern plate. This was the final section of the exhibition, after which the visitors exited out from the clockwise circle route.



Figure 4 Display of one of the *Taku-hon* made by emeritus artist Professor Kunito Nagaoka.
Source: Photograph by author, September 2016

In sum, the exhibition included four Khachkars (two wooden, two stone), two wooden pattern plates⁹⁾, and four *Taku-hon*, which together told the history of Christian Armenia and the Armenian people, and of Armenian cross stone art design, development and distribution. Upon finishing the exhibition tour, visitors would thus be familiarize themselves with the culture of Khachkar making, its importance as a religious relic to Armenians and its symbolism (Figure 5). Since Armenia was the first country to have accepted Christianity as its state religion, this exhibition serves as an excellent resource to introduce early Christian culture to the Japanese audience, increasing recognition and awareness.

Moreover, a separate workshop staged on two separate dates was held to further enhance direct communication of the information in the exhibition to visitors. This interactive workshop titled “Experimenting *Taku-hon* through Armenian Khachkars” (Figure 6) was held to enhance understanding and experience of Khachkars as symbols of Armenia. Visitors were given materials to make their own versions of Khachkar-*Taku-hon* in order to appreciate the intricate detail and beauty of these cross stones, as well as to briefly experience becoming “masters” of Khachkar carving. This allowed the visitors to connect on a deeper and spiritual level with the idea and symbolism of Khachkars that hold a vital value to Armenians as a Christian nation.



Figure 5 A general view from the Exhibition showing the spatial arrangement of the cross-shaped panels.

Source: Photograph by author, September 2016



Figure 6 Several views and examples of the process of making *Taku-hon* from the workshop, “Making *Taku-hon* through Armenian Khachkars.”
Source: Photograph by author, October 2016

4 Conclusion

Temporary exhibitions offer an opportunity to try out new and striking exhibition styles and techniques. This approach can provide a brief, but comprehensive understanding of scientific and artistic principles regarding specific topics implemented to be educational. “The Story of Khachkars: Armenian Cross Stones” exhibition was designed to provide exactly that—a precise and coherent introduction to Armenian culture through the national symbol of Khachkars.

The exhibition was a success as mirrored by the feedback provided by those who attended both the exhibition and the workshop. Most of the comments were positive, ranging from those interested in Armenian culture in general, those finding the cross intriguing and beautiful, and those interested in foreign countries. However, many visitors did not grasp the particular concept of the “circle route,” starting instead in a counterclockwise direction, which will have hindered their understanding of the artistic concept behind the spatial arrangement of the exhibition. Only

after acquiring more information from annotations, and actually physically walking in a circle to view the displays, could the intention and the idea behind the exhibition be perceived on a deeper, emotional, and sensorial level.

The exhibition was not intended to be a deep historical and religious explanation; instead, it was a general introduction to Armenian culture through the object of Khachkar. It goes without saying that people united by a national consciousness and culture try to live their lives reverently, worshiping the ways and customs of their ancestors. Armenia has managed to save its true spiritual riches—religion, culture and national symbols. Thus, this exhibition tried to present a small part of Armenia and its ties to Christianity through Khachkars to those who may have limited knowledge on the subject. Although there were quite a few Khachkars presented at the exhibition, the drawback was that these were replicas, or else quite small in scale. If the Khachkars were originals and bigger in scale, it would have attracted more visitors to the exhibition. However, given limits in financial and transportational resources, this was not able to be accomplished. Nevertheless, the intricate designs of the replicas and *Taku-hon* still had a great impact on visitors according to their feedback.

Taking into account the tight schedule, short duration, and limited budget of the exhibition, advanced technological communication was not utilized. Instead, slideshows were used to show photos representing Armenia, details of exhibition objects and Khachkars. Nowadays, visiting museums is an interactive experience, which encompasses visual, auditory, sensory, and cognitive perception. The exhibition communicated with the visitors not only with tangible objects such as the Khachkars, but also in an artistic and architectural manner, specifically via, the spatial arrangement of the exhibition. The Khachkars provided an opportunity for Japanese visitors to understand the development of Armenian culture and religion through this symbolic relic. The workshop further facilitated this direct communication by allowing a hands-on experience with *Taku-hon* that could connect Japanese people with Armenians and their involvement with Khachkars. The spatial arrangement also had a significant impact on communicating the exhibition to visitors. Namely, the intentional route in a clockwise circle manner imitated the Armenian eternity sign, an ancient Armenian national symbol of identity usually carved on Khachkars. Physically walking in the exhibition hall, the cross-shaped circle allowed the visitors to experience the concept of everlasting, celestial life and thereby to connect with Armenians symbolically.

What opened up a new phase in museum exhibitions was this innovative design for displaying culture, which challenged the traditional linear layouts of museum exhibitions. The creative design and approach of this exhibition may serve as a template for future exhibitions that can attract new visitors, exceed their expectations, and improve overall experience by changing behaviors and consciousness when visiting a museum.

I believe, and certainly hope, that *The Story of Khachkars: Armenian Cross*

Stones temporary exhibition will serve as a basis for a future contribution of an original Khachkar to Minpaku for its permanent exhibition display.

Notes

- 1) Here we consider one of the best examples of Museum journals: MUSEUM international, published by UNESCO since 1948—a major forum for the exchange of scientific and technical information concerning museums and cultural heritage at an international level. It provides a unique space, which enables readers and contributors to partake in cultural diversity through heritage around the world.
- 2) In this context we mostly refer to communication media and innovation technology that can be used in exhibitions. Examples can be 3D visualization, holographic images, space travel stimulation, touchscreen panels, augmented reality, etc.
- 3) This exhibition is considered to be a travelling exhibition, which allows the visitors to travel back in time and across the globe to see how humans shaped the world and were shaped by it through millions of years. It is a unique exhibition that is a continuous narrative journey made up of 100 stories considering a diverse range of cultures and peoples.
- 4) Khachkar (Armenian cross stones art—symbolism and craftsmanship) is inscribed in 2010 on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO.
- 5) Armenia is the site of one of the earliest developments of human civilization. Modern Armenia—a small, landlocked mountainous country in the southern Caucasus—comprises only a small portion of ancient Armenia. Armenia was the first country in the world to adopt Christianity as a state religion in 301. Throughout most of its history, Armenians and their plateau (Armenian Highlands) have been subject to various invasions, such as those by Turkish forces and Bolsheviks, who forced the government to sign treaties leading to its transition into a Soviet republic in 1920. Soviet rule lasted 70 years. Only after the collapse of the Soviet Union did, the Republic of Armenia gain its independence on September 21, 1991. A wholehearted people, who deserve the fruits of their hard labor, Armenians continue to add value to the rich cultural heritage that defines Armenia.
- 6) The exhibition was held in the Navy Space at Minapku (National Museum of Ethnology).
- 7) Chrismatory is an important piece of the Orthodox Church. It is a special plate similar to a vessel for holding oil.
- 8) Japanese artist Kunito Nagaoka became uniquely fascinated by Armenian Khachkars (Cross Stones). He has been motivated and inspired in his artistic work. After leaving his position as a professor at Seika University in Kyoto, he started his “*Taku-hon. Armenian Cross Stone*” project, which is dedicated to identifying and printing the motifs and inscriptions of the Cross Stones in Armenia by using the ancient Chinese technique *Taku-Hon*. He created the motifs of the Noradus Old Cemetery and Noravank monastery on a special Japanese paper.
- 9) From the National Museum’s collection, 4 objects were on display—2 plates, 2 wooden cross stones and Chrismatory.

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