

Artak Hambardzumyan

The Art of Khachkar-Making

El arte de construir khachkar

A arte de construir khachkar

Abstract | Resumen | Resumo

The *khachkar*, or Armenian cross-stone, has a unique cultural and artistic tradition originating in the fourth to the seventh centuries. Evolving from simple carved crosses to intricate compositions of symbolic motifs, it enjoyed a golden age spanning from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries. Today, contemporary masters like Artak Hambardzumyan continue the tradition through both new and restoration work. Khachkar-making combines sculpture, geometry, theology, and ornamentation, following a rigorous process—from design to installation—where each piece is both a spiritual act and an artistic creation. In over 50 countries, Hambardzumyan's works are to be seen in churches, public spaces, and cultural institutions, testifying to the *khachkar's* enduring relevance as heritage and living art.

El *khachkar*, o cruz de piedra armenia, cuenta con una tradición cultural y artística única que se remonta a los siglos IV al VII. Evolucionado desde simples cruces talladas hasta complejas composiciones de motivos simbólicos, alcanzó su época dorada entre los siglos XI y XIII. En la actualidad, maestros contemporáneos como Artak Hambardzumyan continúan la tradición tanto en nuevas obras como en trabajos de restauración. La elaboración de *khachkars* combina escultura, geometría, teología y ornamentación, y sigue un riguroso proceso, desde el diseño hasta la instalación, en el que cada pieza constituye a la vez un acto espiritual y una creación artística. Las obras de Hambardzumyan pueden contemplarse en iglesias, espacios públicos e instituciones culturales de más de 50 países, testimonio de la vigencia del *khachkar* como patrimonio y arte vivo.

O *khachkar*, ou cruz de pedra armênia, tem uma tradição cultural e artística única que remonta aos séculos IV a VII. Evoluindo de simples cruces esculpidas para composições complexas de motivos simbólicos, viveu um período áureo entre os séculos XI e XIII. Hoje, mestres contemporâneos como Artak Hambardzumyan continuam a tradição através de trabalhos novos e de restauração. A construção do *khachkar* combina escultura, geometria, teologia e ornamentação, seguindo um processo rigoroso – do design à instalação – em que cada peça é tanto um ato espiritual quanto uma criação artística. Em mais de 50 países, as obras de Hambardzumyan podem ser vistas em igrejas, espaços públicos e instituições culturais, testemunhando a relevância duradoura do *khachkar* como patrimônio e arte viva.



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1. *Khachkar* commemorating the 80th anniversary of the All Saints Armenian Apostolic Church in Chicago, 2024

2. *Khachkar* dedicated to the heroes of the 44-Day War, located in the courtyard of the Holy Spirit Church in Amsterdam, 2023

3. The *khachkar* located in the park at the entrance of Akhtala Monastery, 2024

This essay arose from an interview between Artak Hambarzumyan and the architect Seza Khorozian, helping shape and articulate these reflections.

An Armenian Phenomenon

The *khachkar*, or cross-stone, stands out globally as a uniquely Armenian phenomenon. No other nation has developed such a cultural form. While in other cultures carved stone may appear in the shape of gravestones, steles, or decorative facades, the *khachkar* is uniquely Armenian. *Khachkars* may be gravestones but also memorials, political statements, spiritual offerings, boundary markers, symbols of victory, and even stone manuscripts.

The art of *khachkar*-making emerged between the fourth and the seventh centuries. Early stones were very simple: crosses carved on quadrangular blocks. Their purpose was spiritual and commemorative, with an artistic language still developing.

It was in the eighth and ninth centuries that the canonical *khachkar* emerged, featuring a centrally placed cross standing over a rosette, symbolizing the path to eternity and rising up through reliefs of paradise garden motifs.

The Golden Age of *Khachkars*

Between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, *khachkar* art reached a remarkable level of refinement, with compositions resembling stone embroidery, containing intricate weavings and highly symbolic ornamentation. Designs featured birds, plants, and geometric patterns, each carrying theological meaning: the dove symbolized the Holy Spirit, the serpent represented victory, the palm tree stood for the Tree of Life, and grapevines evoked the gardens of paradise.



1. *Khachkar* in Hatsarat, Gavar, 2020

2. *Khachkar* in the courtyard of Marmarashen School, 2022. Dedicated to the fallen heroes of the 44-Day War from Marmarashen

This era was the tradition's creative heyday. Among its most distinguished masters were the architect and miniaturist Momik, known for his work at the church of Noravank and the surrounding *khachkars*, Poghos, sculptor of the famous *khachkar* at Goshavank, and Grigor, whose *khachkars* of Old Julfa in Nakhijevan remain a high-water mark, despite the loss of many of these stones.

From the early Christian period through the Middle Ages and into the present, the art of the *khachkar* has continued to evolve. Contemporary masters uphold and reinterpret the tradition with new methods and original approaches. I am honored to be one of its current practitioners.

Education and Transmission

I began working with *khachkars* in my school years. I often visited the studio of my uncle, Varazdat Hambardzumyan, whose work greatly influenced me. During vocational training at our school, while my classmates carved patterns in wood, I got a block of tuff stone and used my uncle's tools to carve my first *khachkar*. It came out so nicely that it was placed in the school museum. That was the beginning of my journey.

Later I enrolled at the Armenian State Pedagogical University in the drawing and drafting department, where I graduated and did my master's thesis on *Khachkar Art and Ornamentation*. Although I work primarily in my studio, I also travel extensively. My *khachkars* are installed in more than fifty countries, and I personally supervise their placement. For me, the art of the *khachkar* is not just a profession but a way of life.



Khachkar at St. Astvatsatsin Chapel in Arabkir, Yerevan, 2024

Teaching is an integral part of my practice. In my studio I work with students of various ages, many with prior experience in drawing but little familiarity with the material. This background is valuable, as it allows us to move beyond foundational instruction and to focus directly on essential aspects—understanding form, interpreting structure, working in space, and exploring the physical and symbolic properties of stone. I also receive tourist groups. These visits involve an introduction to the theoretical and practical dimensions of *khachkar*-making, giving visitors the opportunity to engage more closely with the tradition and witness the process of creation.

Over the years, many of my students have become masters in their own right. Some have founded workshops and carry forward the tradition independently. That, for me, is the most meaningful outcome of my teaching.

Visit to Artak's studio in Yerevan, 2022



Materials and Tools

Khachkars are carved in several types of stone from the Armenian highlands, including tuff, basalt, granite, and, on occasion, marble. Tuff, in my experience, is the most suitable material. Its relatively low density and fine-grained texture make it highly workable, while its light, warm coloration enhances the visual depth of carved reliefs with an interplay of light and shadow. Despite its fragility, tuff exhibits notable durability, and its physical and aesthetic qualities—combined with its strong association with Armenian cultural heritage—make it, in my view, the quintessential *khachkar* stone.

Tuff must be approached with care, as it is prone to breaking, and the sculptor must regulate the force of each hammer blow. This stone is responsive to the artisan—it responds to you, not the other way around. Basalt, by contrast, is dense and rough. It requires stronger blows and thus it is the sculptor who must respond to the stone. Basalt can last around 900 years, whereas tuff, thanks to its composition, can endure for over 1,200 years.

The tools used in carving are varied—primarily chisels and hammers, with the type selected depending on the motif or level of detail required. Some electric tools are also employed nowadays, particularly for polishing or shaping larger surfaces.

Modern technology has introduced new tools such as 3D carving machines, which can reproduce entire sketches. Yet *khachkars* made this way lack spiritual and cultural depth and often appear artificial. When a *khachkar* is carved by hand, the master breathes life and spirit into the stone. Infused with prayer, it becomes a spiritual companion.

The Creative Process

The process of creating a *khachkar* is, for me, a journey of the soul—a testimony to eternity inscribed in stone. I follow two main approaches when sculpting: one grounded on a carefully prepared sketch, and another relying on direct interaction with the stone, allowing it to guide the creative process.

In the first approach, I begin with a thorough study of the subject, drawing on religious symbolism and theology. This research yields a detailed sketch, serving as a blueprint for the final composition. The sketch is then transferred to the stone. I start by polishing the main surfaces with angle grinders, then rough out the recesses and protruding planes, establishing the primary vertical and horizontal



Work in progress at Artak's studio in Yerevan



Work in progress at Artak's studio in Yerevan

axes. From here, the *khachkar* begins to take shape. Next comes fine carving using traditional tools—hammer and chisel. At this stage, more than technical skill is required: the work must be guided by faith.

In the second approach, I dispense with drawings. The stone itself becomes a partner in creation. I observe its color, texture, energy, and features. Cracks or tonal variations often show how the composition should evolve and which way the cross should be placed. This is an intuitive process, yet it still involves strict respect for geometric principles and internal harmony.

Each approach has its own logic. The first relies on discipline, control, and carefully planned structure; the second allows for spontaneity and a responsive dialogue between the carver and the stone. Ultimately, creating a *khachkar* is not merely technical and artistic work; it is an act of devotion.

Geometry and Symbolic Structure

The symbols carved into a *khachkar* are not chosen at random. They follow established traditions and convey precise ideological and theological messages. Christian symbols dominate—above all, the cross, occupying a central position and embodying Christ's sacrifice and the promise of salvation. Around this, plant and animal motifs—leaves, flowers, vines, birds—symbolize life, rebirth, and heaven. Star and sun motifs represent divine light, eternity, and supreme wisdom. Interwoven geometric patterns express the concepts of infinity and the continuity of existence.



Work in progress at Artak's studio in Yerevan

Geometry is also essential to the composition. Each *khachkar* follows a carefully defined geometric structure that ensures a harmonious arrangement of symbols and enhances their spiritual resonance. The layout is governed by a principle of vertical symmetry: the composition revolves around a central axis, with the cross at its heart. From this center the ornaments unfold, extending toward the edges in balanced and ordered patterns.

Circles, sacred rings, and decorative bands—often bordered or framed with tuff—serve to organize the surface and define sectors of symbolic content. This modular structure is common in many *khachkars*, with each section reflecting a recurrent and coherent logic.

The symbolic and geometric dimensions of a *khachkar* are inseparable. Geometry is the framework through which meaning is structured and revealed, allowing the viewer to perceive not only visual clarity but also a spiritual and ideological message.

Stages of Execution

The creation of a *khachkar* follows a distinct series of stages from design to installation. Once the stone has been selected and prepared, I determine the dimensions according to the *khachkar's* intended function—commemorative, liturgical, or monumental. The design begins with the organization of the main elements: the central cross, concentric circles, interwoven bands, and ornamental details. Depending on the function, I may rely on classic motifs or introduce more innovative designs.

Particular attention is always given to the central cross—the work's symbolic and compositional core. The duration of the process varies, from weeks to months, depending on the scale, complexity, and techniques involved.



Work in progress in Artak's studio in Yerevan

Spiritual Demands

The most challenging aspect of *khachkar*-making is not so much the manual work as the spiritual labor. Each *khachkar* must be created with a pure mind and heart, because as well as an artifact it is a prayer carved in stone. Even when a familiar pattern is repeated, the result is never identical: the stone is unique, and the sculptor's spiritual state changes from day to day.

What makes the process unrepeatable is this inner guidance—the silent prayer that is to be embedded in the material. Technical challenges come only afterward. If the work is approached with the right spirit, the hand will not err and every difficulty can be overcome.

A Worldwide Presence

Khachkar-making is both a craft and an art—perhaps the most complete of arts. It draws upon a range of disciplines: painting, miniature art, geometry, drafting, sculpture, theology, ornamentation, music, manuscript tradition, history, philosophy, psychology, and artistic engraving. All of these converge in the making of a cross-stone.

This is a highly specialised field, requiring manual skill and also cultural and symbolic knowledge. From the initial sketch to the final carving, it is an art form combining precision, experience, and spirituality.

My *khachkars* are to be seen in Armenia and also abroad, often installed in churchyards or public spaces, usually at the initiative of Armenian communities or ecclesiastical institutions. They serve

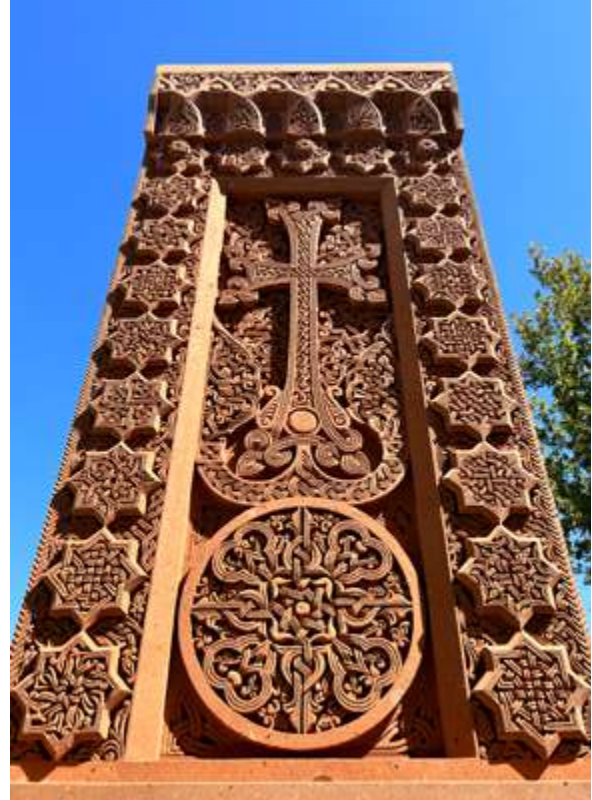
various purposes: commemorating the Armenian genocide, marking bonds of friendship between nations, accompanying newly built churches, or celebrating key events in the life of the diaspora.

In Armenia, my *khachkars* can be found in many significant and picturesque locations, in and around churches and monasteries. Abroad, they have been placed in sites such as Christ Church Cathedral in Dublin, St Mary's Cathedral in Sydney, or the square in front of the Council of Europe building.

These have been milestones in my career, reflecting not only the reach of the tradition but also its ability to become a cultural bridge—uniting nations, communities, and even different faiths.



Khachkar at St. Mariam Astvatsatsin Monastery in Tegheri, 2024

1. *Khachkar* in Yerevan, 20232. *Khachkar* at St. Gayane Church in Etchmiadzin, 2022

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Artak Hambardzumyan

Artak Hambardzumyan is a painter, sculptor, and master *khachkar*-maker. A graduate of the Armenian State Pedagogical University, he has been a member of the Artists' Union of Armenia since 2016. His stone-carved memorials and creative *khachkars* are to be found throughout Armenia, Artsakh, and over 25 countries worldwide, including the USA, France, Argentina, Egypt, and Bangladesh. His work often commemorates national heroes and historical events or marks sacred sites. Notable exhibitions of his output have been held at the Council of Europe, the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, and the Monastery of Akhtala. He has received numerous medals and awards for his artistic and cultural contributions. In 2025, his low relief of Saint Nerses Shnorhali will be installed at the Bzommar Monastery in Lebanon.

Seza Khorozian

Seza Khorozian is a master's student in historic preservation at the University of Notre Dame. She was born and raised in Aleppo, Syria, and is ethnically Armenian. In 2019 she moved to Yerevan, Armenia, where she studied architecture at the National University of Architecture and Construction, graduating in the spring of 2024. She will complete the Master of Science in Historic Preservation program in the spring of 2026.