

Community

Armenian monuments stand tall in Harvard photo exhibit

by Yvette K. Harpootian

BOSTON — Consider the beautiful *khatchkars*: they started out standing proud and tall. Majestic, detailed, ornate. They began to lean, looking weaker, until finally they were cracked, buried and demolished — leaving the heart of Armenia's culture, its religion, its very people, broken.

This is what the photo exhibit, *Armenian Monuments of the Nakhichevan Region*, by Argam Ayvazian and Steven Sim, reveals to its visitors. Panel after panel fill the Concourse Gallery corridors at Harvard with pictures of patterned pottery, rock drawings, tombstones, churches, and of course, *khatchkars*, or cross-stones.

The exhibit opened last week, and will run through November 19.

Argam Ayvazian, a researcher on the Armenian cultural heritage of Nakhichevan, is author of more than 20 monographs, including *The Historical Monuments of Nakhichevan* (1990). Ayvazian currently serves as deputy director of the Agency on Protection of Historical and Cultural Environment at the Armenian Ministry of Culture. He was born in the village of Arinj in Nakhichevan and has devoted his adult life to documenting and analyzing the historical monuments of the region.

Steven Sim, the Glasgow-based architect and art historian, has researched Armenian architecture since 1989, and is the creator of the "Virtual Ani" website, (www.virtualani.org). His visit to Nakhichevan was published in the 2006 book, *Destruction of Jugha and the Entire Armenian Cultural Heritage in Nakhichevan*. He was one of the last Westerners to see the hundreds of Jugha *khatchkars* destroyed by the Azeri military in 2005.

As I walked around the concourse looking at the panels, I couldn't help but notice the stonework outside: the bricks securing the apartment complex next door, the square stone floor covering the outdoor sunken garden area — both examples of simple useful stonework; both safe and secure, but without life and meaning. And the masterpieces in the photos, which were painstakingly and passionately crafted by our Armenian forefathers, have been demolished, swept up and taken away. This is depicted in the exhibit's series of "before and after" photographs, documenting the demolition of Armenian churches and *khatchkars* in the Jugha cemetery.

Setting the record straight

The Nakhichevan region, located in what is today Azerbaijan — part of the ancient Armenian historic lands and with an uninterrupted Armenian presence — is the site of thousands of endangered and destroyed Armenian monuments. As far back as 1648, there were reports of 10,000 fully decorated cross stones. By the beginning of the 20th century, there were only 6,000 *khatchkars* counted, some standing and others falling.

The destruction continued after 1922, with many of the *khatchkars* simply disappearing. In 1998, eyewitnesses on the Iranian border observed tombstones being excavated by a crane and loaded on railroad wagons, to be transported away and used as building material for foundations of new houses. This account is an astonishing testimony to the secret removal of Nakhichevan's Armenian patrimony in an attempt to



The site where the Jugha cemetery once stood.



The Concourse Gallery of Harvard University's Center for Government and International Studies, with its display of Nakhichevan's Armenian monuments.

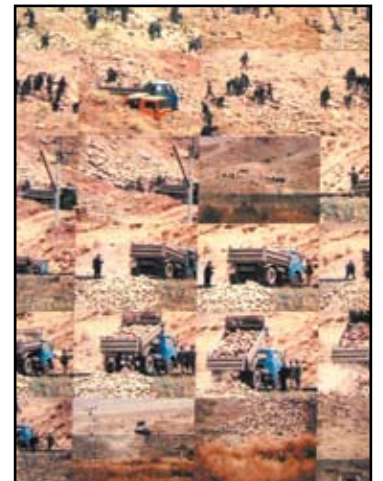


Photo documentation of the destruction of Jugha cemetery.



Photos of Nakhichevan *khatchkars*, in various stages of disrepair.



The exquisite detail on these *khatchkars* is in danger of being obliterated forever.

eradicate the evidence of ancient Armenian habitation of the region.

The Armenian Government has played an active role in the effort to raise awareness of this issue and to save what monuments are left. Armenia's Foreign Minister Vartan Oskanian wrote in a letter to UNESCO: "These *khatchkars* ... are unique tombstones in that they are simultaneously sculpture, archive and marker. Their removal is in line with Azerbaijan's mission to expunge the historical record and remove all documentation of Armenian presence on those lands."

The subject also came up during the late October meeting between Catholics of All Armenians Karekin II and UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in New York. (See the story elsewhere in this paper.)

On November 1, in conjunction with the exhibit, the National Association on Armenian Studies and Research (NAASR) hosted a panel discussion on the *Armenian Monuments of Nakhichevan*, chaired by Dr. James R. Russell, Mashtots Professor of Armenian Studies at Harvard; Argam Ayvazian; Steven Sim; and Anahit Ter-Stepanian,

exhibit curator and architectural historian at Sacred Heart University.

Ter-Stepanian organized this exhibit, and received support from Dr. Russell, and funding from COPRIM, an architectural company in Canada. She said: "This exhibit is very important because it brings awareness to the American community about the devastating state of the Armenian cultural heritage in Nakhichevan."

She noted that the attempts by Azeri officials to deny the historical Armenian presence in the region are exemplified by Hajifahraddin Safarli, the director of the Nakhichevan Department of History, Ethnography and Archeology Institute and National Academy of Science of Azerbaijan (NASA), who said: "There have never been monuments belonging to Armenians in the territory of Nakhichevan."

Against such revisionism, *Armenian Monuments of the Nakhichevan Region*, by Argam Ayvazian and Steven Sim, is a fascinating effort to set the record straight — and hopefully to contribute to the preservation of these Armenian artistic treasures before they are all destroyed.

The exhibit is on display from November 2 through November 19, at the Harvard University Center for Government and International Studies Concourse Gallery, 1730 Cambridge Street, Cambridge Mass. Related lectures are sched-

uled for Glendale, Calif., and New York City (see the sidebar box). For information on the exhibit at Harvard University, call the Davis Center at (617) 495-4037. The exhibition website is www.nakhichevanmonuments.org.

Discussions and lectures on Armenian monuments of the Nakhichevan region

Glendale Public Library, Glendale, Calif.

Sunday, November 11 – 6:00 p.m.

Argam Ayvazian will speak on the history of the Jugha cemetery *khatchkars* and the current state of the Armenian cultural heritage in Nakhichevan. For information call Mashdots College at (818) 548-9345.

Eastern Diocese of the Armenian Church of America, New York, N.Y.

Thursday, November 15

Steven Sim will speak on the problems of preserving the Armenian cultural heritage. For

time and information call the Diocese's Krikor and Clara Zohrab Information Center at (212) 686-0710.

Columbia University, New York, N.Y.

Roone Arledge Cinema (2nd floor Lerner Hall)

Friday, November 16 – 7:00 p.m.

Steven Sim will speak on "The Medieval City of Ani and its Contemporary Problems," sponsored by Columbia University's Armenian Center and Armenian Student Association. For information call Anahit Ter-Stepanian at (203) 913-4127.