

Deceptive Covers: Armenian Bindings on 18th Century Imprints from Constantinople

ABSTRACT

Armenian medieval manuscript bindings and book structures have been well described and understood, unlike later bookmaking by the Armenian diaspora communities around the Mediterranean in the early modern period. Historians of the book or book arts have used external decorative features, such as the tooling, to locate the craftsmen creating the bindings. Thus it has been suggested that Armenian books printed in Constantinople in the 18th century may have been transported to Europe through commercial routes to be bound. However, early printed Armenian books in the Library of Congress's collection show that the underlying structure of the bindings is based on medieval Armenian manuscript book making, while decorative features have a European aesthetic, implying that they were bound locally by Armenians. Using the findings of two surveys related to bindings on early printed Armenian books from Constantinople in the Library of Congress collection in Washington, D.C., and the Mesrop Mashtots Institute in Yerevan, respectively, the authors will discuss the evolution of Armenian binding. Changes in style, structure, and craftsmanship of bindings on Armenian books printed in Constantinople in the 18th century will be located within changes in the aesthetics and identity of the local Armenian community, and their commercial relationships with other Armenian diaspora communities in Europe.

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