PITCHER WITH ARMENIAN INSCRIPTION
Glazed ceramic, 1787
Courtesy of the Armenian Library and Museum, Watertown, MA

This small ceramic pitcher was produced in Holland for Armenian patrons. Reminiscent of Meissen china, the vessel bears the portrait of a married couple dressed in the style of wealthy merchants of the Ottoman and Persian empires. Note the embroidered belt and cuffed sleeves of the female figure. The male figure holds the scales of his trade. Bride and groom link their arms to a gold medallion topped with an elaborate crown, enclosing the Armenian letters t’o (Τ’) and yi (Υ), initials of the family name(s). The year is indicated with the T’ (t’iv: year) as 1787.

It may be that the pitcher was commissioned as a wedding gift. The crown holds particular importance within the rite of the Armenian wedding. At the culmination of the ceremony, the couple is crowned by God, recalling the royal ancestors of Christ, and the eternal crown of the martyrs. In this sense, we may read the crown not only as a common motif of European decorative arts, but one with particular meaning for an Armenian audience.

The pitcher offers a glimpse into the European tastes of the Armenian merchant community in the latter eighteenth century. Judging from other surviving examples of this type of object, as found, for example, in the Armenian patriarchate of Jerusalem, an active market for Dutch porcelain existed among wealthy Armenians in the Ottoman and Persian empires. Produced as an export, travelling by sea to its new owners, and displayed, surely, as an object of interest in its new home, the pitcher provides precious and intimate evidence for the widespread trade networks between Europe and Asia during the early modern period.

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