PRIEST’S ROBE (Cope)
Silk brocade textile with machine lace gold trim and metal clasp, 1870
Surabaya (Java), Indonesia
Courtesy of the Armenian Library and Museum, Watertown, MA; donated by Dr. J. C. Johannes

This silk brocade robe offers insight into the Armenian community of Surabaya in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The textile features large roundels enclosing abstract floral motifs, highlighted by gold metallic thread. Machine-made lace, perhaps added later, edges the hem and the center front opening; the inside is lined with rose-colored silk and printed cotton. It is clasped by a metal buckle, sewn onto a piece of velvet, which preserves an inscription in Armenian (now partially obscured by the holes and threaded loops of the fastenings). The left part of the buckle indicates that it was a gift in memory of an individual surnamed Abgaryan; the right part names the children as donors and the partially legible date of 19[...]. Although this robe awaits sustained and detailed study, its lace edging, lining, and the metal buckle suggest the refurbishing of late-nineteenth-century fabric.

By the 1880s, the trade network of Armenian merchants reached Surabaya, although there is evidence for Armenians in Indonesia from 1656. In the eighteenth century, an Armenian settlement of merchants is known from Surabaya and several prominent families arose. In the early twentieth century, a new wave of Armenians, primarily from Iran, migrated to and settled in the region. In 1923, the Manuck and Arathoon Armenian school and library were established, and four years later, the Armenian church of Saint George was consecrated, although it shared its clergy with the church of Saint John in Batavia (Jakarta). At that time, there were three hundred Armenians living in Surabaya, but the number dwindled by the middle of the twentieth century.

In its original form, the robe, it is likely, predated the founding of the church of Saint George; it is possible that it was given as a gift to the church and at that time refurbished with lace and its present metal clasp. In any case, its wearer took part in a time-honored tradition. Since the medieval period, the clergy of the Armenian church have worn sumptuous and colorful fabrics, adding a visual and aural impact to the rite of the liturgy.

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