

WISDOM KEEPERS

Living Symbols of the
Armenian Highlands

2025

Seek not the paths of the ancients;
seek that which the ancients sought.

Matsuo Basho



*An international exhibition at the
Museum of Armenian Ethnography
and the National Liberation Movement
bridging Myth, Matter, and Memory
through Armenia's Ancient Dragon
Stones*

Location:

*Armenia Ethnography Museum and
the National Liberation Movement
(SARDARAPAT), Araks, Armenia*



ARTISTS

**Albert Vardanyan (Armenia),
Alice Maselnikova (Czech Republic/Sweden),
Artak Hakhverdyan (Armenia),
Avetik Vardanyan (Armenia),
D.Aram Donabedian (USA),
Edgar Grigoryan (Armenia),
Gevorg Sargsyan (Armenia),
Harutyun Karapetyan (Armenia),
Hrachya Vardanyan (Armenia),
Jan Doms (Netherlands),
Juliana Schreiber (Germany),
Karen Asatryan (Austria),
Karen Barseghyan (Armenia),
Mkrtich Tonoyan (Armenia),
Varujhan Diloyan (Armenia).**

CURATION

NIGRUM ARCA Insight studio

Invited curator:

Elena Melkumova (Netherlands)

WISDOME KEEPERS: Living Symbols of the Armenian Highlands exhibition unfolds a space where myth, matter, and imagination converge. At the heart of this project are the ancient vishapaqars – carved dragon stones of the Armenian Highlands. These monumental forms once stood at water springs, marking sacred intersections of earth and sky.

More than archaeological artifacts, the Vishaps are portals of living memory. They speak through their silence – of elemental power, cosmic order, and ancestral presence, encoded in the essential patterns of life. This exhibition unveils the Vishap not as a relic of the past but as a transmitter of meaning across time, where artistic expression, land-based research, and mythic consciousness meet.

Rather than illustrating the vishap as a static artifact, the artists engage its presence as a point of departure. Their practices span sound, image, form, and movement— each work becomes a form of listening, of observation, of contemplation. Through this poetic and perceptual engagement, the vishap begins to act again—not as monument, but as medium.





Through archeological objects and different forms of art, the dragon stone becomes a multidimensional threshold – a bridge between the visible and the invisible, the ancient and the emergent. Its form echoes both natural and cosmic structures, patterns that reflect the intrinsic design woven into the fabric of life, from sacred landscapes to imagined futures.

The setting of the Museum of Armenian Ethnography and the National Liberation Movement adds a resonant layer of meaning. In this context, the Vishap is more than a symbolic figure of myth: it becomes a contemporary emblem of memory, continuity and belonging. Just as the museum preserves the story of national resistance and cultural heritage, this exhibition reawakens the Vishap as a symbol of rootedness in a time of global uncertainty, an ancestral signal that resonates with Armenia's ongoing relationship to land, history, and self-determination.



Exhibition doesn't look back to build the future from fragments of nostalgia, but searching for a form of living dialogue—a way of relating to the land, to ancestry, to form and myth, through a language that is still evolving. Because the vishap ultimately is a medium: it channels across scales and centuries, encoding relationships between biosphere and mythosphere, stone and consciousness.

The Vishap is not just remembered; it remembers. It offers a language older than words, rooted in the land, encoded in stone and the essential patterns of life, and reimagined through contemporary vision. These forms act as wisdom keepers, holding a continuity of insight across generations. This exhibition is a field of connection, where mythic memory and imaginal future meet. A threshold. A signal. A message spoken in the grammar of the earth itself.



AVETIK VARDANYAN

The exhibition is not a return, but a continuation – where symbolic meaning and living systems reflect one another in a shared rhythm of presence, perception, and becoming. In this evolving grammar, in a time of global uncertainty, reclaims the vishap not merely as a relic of the past, but as a transmitter of meaning across time – a signal from the deep past that speaks to our future.

*CURATORIAL TEXT BY
ELENA MELKUMOVA*

ARTAK HAKHVERDYAN

3D DROWINGS



WISDOM KEEPERS

Selected Artworks





The threshold is a symbol and ideogram of entrance and hospitality, home and border, outside and inside. We don't see the threshold; we trample and cross it, and it gets lost under feet and dust ... — what memories it has, what stories it could tell, what secrets it knows that will never reach us.

With this threshold Gevorg Sargsyan makes the invisible visible, the lost found, and the seemingly worthless a jewel After carefully cleaning it of household dust, he presents it to us as a museum specimen, as a treasure. The decayed and lived threshold is no longer a mere threshold; it is the limit of our infinity.

VISHAPAGORG (CLASSIC DRAGON CARPET)
Syunik-Artsakh | 17th – 18th Century

The Artifact

This monumental textile is a premier exemplar of the Armenian “Vishapagorg.” Entrusted to the Museum of Armenian Ethnography through the mediation of Catholicos Vazgen I, it serves as a vital bridge between medieval iconography and the living traditions of the 18th century.

Visual Language

At the heart of a madder-red field lies a complex lattice of serrated bands, framing a series of uniquely drafted palmettes. The iconography centers on the Vishap—the primordial dragon-serpent of the Armenian Highlands. Here, the dragons are depicted as crowned, ivory-bodied guardians, their forms decorated with intricate floral and stippled patterns.

Symbolic Synthesis

The composition features a rare continuity of form, echoing the 14th-century classical prototypes. Notably, the wide ivory border contains “swastika-like” interlocking dragons—a profound visual metaphor for cosmic rotation and the eternal flow of water and time.

Technical Data

Dimensions: 530 x 257 cm
Medium: Wool on cotton foundation
Provenance: Gift of Gevorg Bakrjyan (1988) Collection:
Museum of Armenian Ethnography (Inv. 7013 / G-3087)





In WISDOM KEEPERS, the verticality of the vishap is not only a sculptural form but a conceptual thread. This vertical axis — reaching from earth to sky, from matter to meaning — finds a powerful echo in the works of Albert Vardanyan and Jan Doms. Each artist offers a distinct reflection on continuity, rupture, and navigation, both personal and collective.

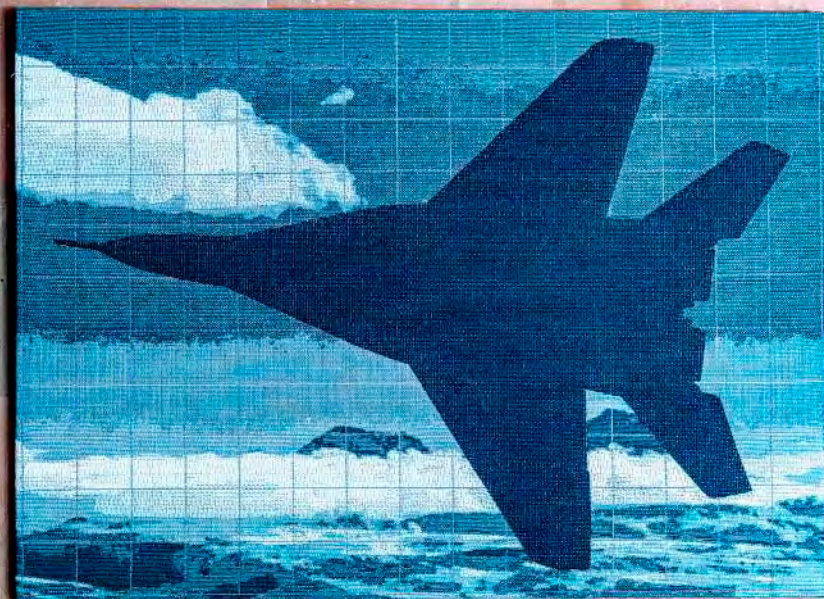
Albert Vardanyan's sculptural work is composed of stacked stones — some present, some missing. The column suggests growth and elevation, but also fragility: remove one stone, and the structure is at risk. It becomes a quiet meditation on migration, memory, and the delicate act of holding together. As with the vishap, which once stood at sacred thresholds, Vardanyan's column speaks of unity—of maintaining the line even when parts are lost. It is a monument to resilience through recollection.

**ALBERT VARDANYAN
JAN DOMS**

Jan Doms's tapestry in collaboration with Juliane Schreiber presents a visual dialogue between Mount Aragats — Armenia's highest peak—and a plane. The mountain is rendered as a timeless guardian, while the plane introduces a subtle undercurrent of geopolitical tension. Aragats here functions not only as a geographical landmark but as a cultural one — less mythologized than Ararat, yet perhaps more intimately tied to the nation's spirit. Rather than a direct threat, the aircraft becomes a symbol of navigation within a charged atmosphere, evoking questions of presence, sovereignty, and surveillance in the Armenian landscape.

Together, these works trace different kinds of ascent — material and symbolic, geological and emotional. They transform the vertical gesture of the vishap into contemporary reflections on homeland, displacement, and guardianship.

TEXT BY
ELENA MELKUMOVA



Silent and wise, the serpent moves gracefully through its realm, carrying within it a reservoir of ancient knowledge. Its presence is both calm and unsettling—each subtle movement stirring a quiet shiver, as if awakening memories rooted in genealogical and mythological time. This wisdom is not declared but concealed, embedded in its very being, sensed rather than understood.

Then, suddenly, one serpent encounters another. They draw near, their movements measured and deliberate, communicating without words, beyond any visible gesture. What unfolds is an unspoken accord—a recognition that transcends individuality. In this suspended, timeless moment, their meeting becomes more than an encounter; it transforms into a ritual of continuity.

Here, something extraordinary takes place—an event that exists beyond the boundaries of the physical world, where knowledge is not exchanged but reaffirmed. It is an act of preservation and transmission, honoring inherited wisdom while quietly ensuring its passage into the future, holding within it the promise of renewal and a brighter continuity.

TEXT BY
AVETIK VARDANYAN





With thin, translucent layers of colour, Alice Máselníková creates dreamlike images that draw on mythological atmospheres—grotesque figures, elusive creatures, and quiet metamorphoses between human and animal forms, merging with the landscapes that hold them. Her works carry echoes of classical and medieval art, and are rich with symbolism tied to plants, flowers, and trees. In her muted palette, we enter a strange, melancholic realm where the beautiful and the uncanny meet.

For WISDOM KEEPERS, Máselníková presents works shaped in response to the emotional texture of the Vishap. Her small, irregularly shaped oil paintings on linen suggest presences, figures that might be drawn from Armenian mythology or conjured from the memory of the land itself.

Máselníková's work, like the vishap stones, suggests a threshold between worlds—between material and myth, seen and sensed. In her images, symbolic forms don't declare themselves directly but seem to emerge slowly, inviting reflection rather than explanation. They speak not of fixed meaning, but of the fluid space where identity, nature, and story begin to intertwine.

TEXT BY
ELENA MELKUMOVA



The painter is a sending and receiving station. He sends questions into the silence & waits... He is guided by a signal, a sound, a reverberation. Most of all a painting needs life, exuberance. It is vision and truth that matter, however obscured we might find them. The painter is not a theoretician but a discoverer. Work, not theory, points the way.

My painting is not about appropriation or spontaneity. Rather, a state of mind is brought to bear on the physical-metaphysical world. It is an inquiry into the nature of reality and being. Though my work may appear abstract and may present multivalent readings, it is, after all, rooted in the transformation of the commonplace.

From 2015-2016 I lived in Armenia where I created these works. There I found convergences of people, histories, myths, landscapes – where dragon stones mark the presence of dragon guardians, keepers of the springs, lakes and rivers. And yet, dragons are also associated with the chaotic power of the elements and the first act of creative order.

The symbol of the serpent has long been one of potentiality, shedding its old skin, transforming itself, embodying both positive and negative aspects. It is that potentiality that interests me in this body of work, that is to say, the relationship between the meeting and meaning of contrasting energies. Indeed, painting is a crossing place that reverberates with possibilities in answer to that beautiful question: Why do we exist?



TEXT BY
THE ARTIST

DAVID ARAM
DONABEDIAN

2025

SARDARAPAT



Hrachya Vardanyan and Juliane Schreiber bring together two traditions—painting and Jacquard weaving—to explore land as a living archive and carrier of ancestral codes. The work emerges from Vardanyan's painting series *The Return of the Dragon Carpet*, where layered abstract landscapes and zigzag motifs evoke both carpet iconography and the coiled strands of DNA—a symbol of memory, identity, and interconnection.

The translation to Jacquard weaving by Juliane Schreiber becomes its own kind of revelation. Where the paintings grow organically, the loom works through precise binary logic - warp and weft crossing with mathematical clarity. Yet in this seeming opposition emerges profound harmony. Like genetic code expressing infinite variations from simple base pairs, the woven threads carry forward the essential DNA of the original paintings.

**HRACHYA VARDANYAN
JULIANE SCHREIBER**



This work reveal our dual inheritance: the biological inheritance encoded in our cells, and the cultural memory woven through shared experience. The serpent sheds its skin season after season, always itself yet always renewed. The DNA strand unwinds and rewinds. These carpet exist in the same beautiful paradox – precise technique with organic life, tradition speaking through discovery.

Together, the artists bridge ancient craft with contemporary thought—not to simulate experience from a distance, but to enter into direct, embodied relationship with land, memory, and form.

TEXT BY
ELENA MELKUMOVA

Military vehicles are displayed in a public park, covered with traditional Armenian carpets, including “Dragon carpets.” The carpets show visible wear and damage, carrying the memory of generations. Draped over the machines, they partially soften and visually “disarm” them without physical alteration. This nonviolent intervention takes place in the Park of Victory against fascism—a site of military memory, especially significant on May 9.



**MKRTICH
TONOYAN**

Meaning & Interpretation

The work operates through contrast: war and destruction versus art, craft, and culture. The vehicles symbolize violence and state power, while the carpets represent home, tradition, and identity. Their combination—echoing military camouflage practices—creates tension between destruction and heritage.

Rather than removing or denying war, the piece reframes it, prompting reflection on memory, identity, and cultural continuity. The carpets act as active, almost mythical agents, recalling Oriental tales where they transcend space and reality. This is not a clash of civilizations, but of technologies: what is made for death versus what is made for life. And ultimately, life prevails.

*TEXT BY
THE ARTIST*



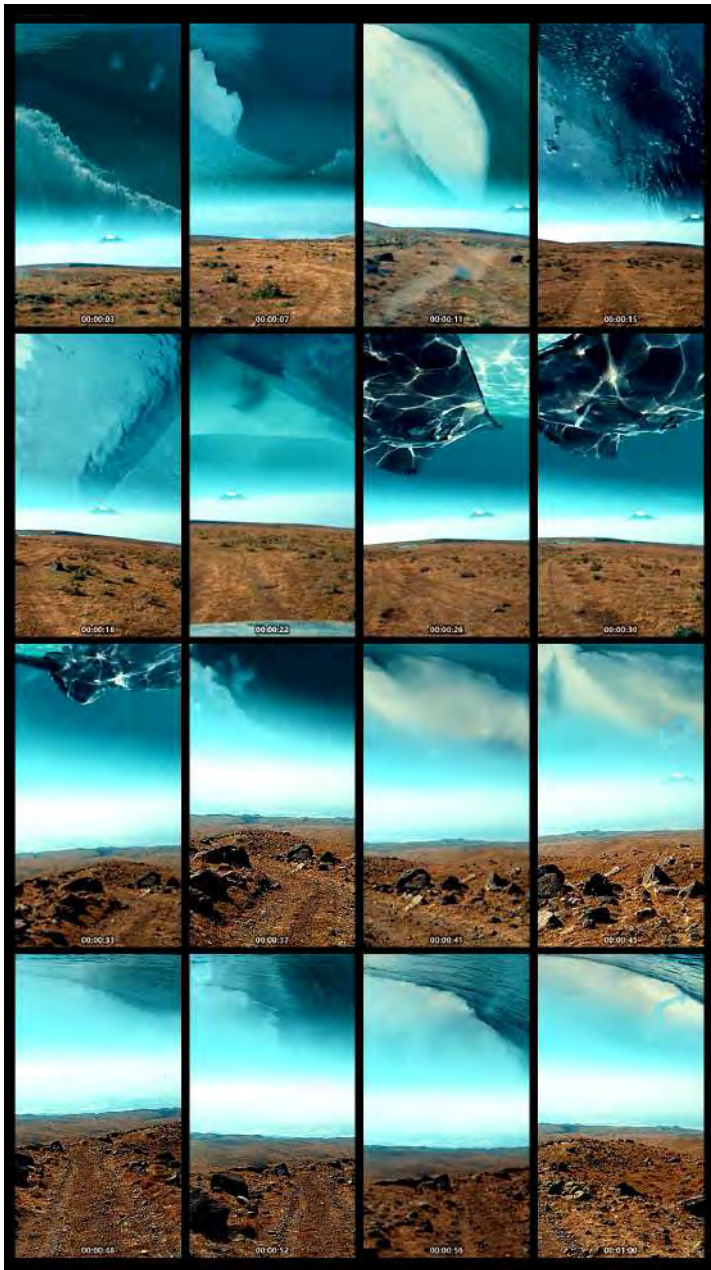
The world condenses to a singular point, where the volume that elicits the sensation of cosmic motion continually revolves. We often perceive our life's activities as movement, contrasting them with creativity, which seems static and wordless— something to approach, observe, and leave behind.

Edgar Grigoryan transforms this rigid perspective with his work. We stand before his creation, unmoving and silent, and what appears still begins to spin, crafting its own realm of space, time, and velocity. The linear composition crafted by the artist suddenly departs from its static state, generating shifts in our consciousness, perceptions, and worldview.

TEXT BY
AVETIK VARDANYAN



**EDGAR
GRIGORYAN**



Every day, we encounter landscapes and objects, most of which we tend to overlook, yet some persist in our memory, whether consciously or subconsciously, due to their connection to personal experiences.

The new digital materialism, engaging in a dialogue with art, endeavors to grapple with the intricacies of the natural and artificial environment. New digital technologies enable us to perceive the world “from an external standpoint,” circumventing associated risks and responding according to the preferences of the users. However, the concerns of the artist are distinct. Primarily, it's a summons to the surroundings and objects, an effort to liberate them from the confines of subject- object understanding. The landscapes that envelop us become the principal protagonists.

Each work of art should not merely be viewed as a reflection of the virtual world but as an object possessing its own distinct reality.

TEXT BY
THE ARTIST

**KAREN
BARSEGHYAN**

2025

SARDARAPAT

An irresistible force compels you, step by step, stone by stone, breath by breath, through superhuman effort and devotion, to separate yourself from the rules of the world and ascend toward the rocky slopes of unreachable mountains, where clouds drift in surrender to the silence of stone, where waters wash away the names of the winds, and where time vanishes.

The path upward — hopeless yet certain — in your eyes, spirals between blue windows, shapes new worlds within you. Worlds that are destined to become symbols of being, not of achieving.

At the summit, between breath and stone, memory and becoming, ascent and disappearance, *between the mountains and the sea*, you suddenly cry out from the pain of self-revelation — the pain that marks the fact of your encounter with the Vishapaqar (dragon stone).

The Vishapaqars — silent and proud — do not call, yet they wait; do not speak, yet they remember; do not shine, yet they blind with their humility. Sometimes standing, sometimes bowed and broken, sometimes buried and invisible — but always there, between the sky and the earth: timeless.

There, above, at the edge of the impossible, the Vishapaqars do not respond — they simply exist, becoming a threshold, a doorway to the possibility of our being.

You stand before the Vishapaqar, and an incorporeal dialogue begins.



“...
And Your name
And Your place
And Your color
The sky
And my love
And Your shadow
And the stones
And the clouds and the winds
And My fear
My longing
And Your call
And Your strength
And Your gaze
And Your presence
My soul
And Your memory
And my memory
And Your silence
And my heart
Your warmth and your coldness
Your wisdom
And the winds
And the rivers
...”
Open the door, enter
.....
Can you?

TEXT BY
AVETIK VARDANYAN

A Collaboration with
Karen Asatrian

In the cinematic exploration of WISDOM KEEPERS, the visual journey is guided by the composition “Ararat”—the opening movement from Karen Asatrian’s album ARAHET.

Captured through the evocative cinematography of Varuzhan Diloyan, the film creates a space where the tangible basalt of the Highlands meets the intangible spirit of myth. Central to this narrative is a deep intellectual dialogue between archaeologist Arsen Bobokhyan and artist Hrachya Vardanyan. Together, they explore the ideas beyond the material artifacts, discussing the context of vishapaqars in relation to contemporary art and the activation of ancient memory in the modern world.

The synthesis of archaeological insight, conceptual vision, and Karen Asatrian’s melodic depth invites the audience into a meditative ritual: to perceive the vishap as both a monument of the past and a living signal for the future.



Technical Credit for the Film/Catalogue

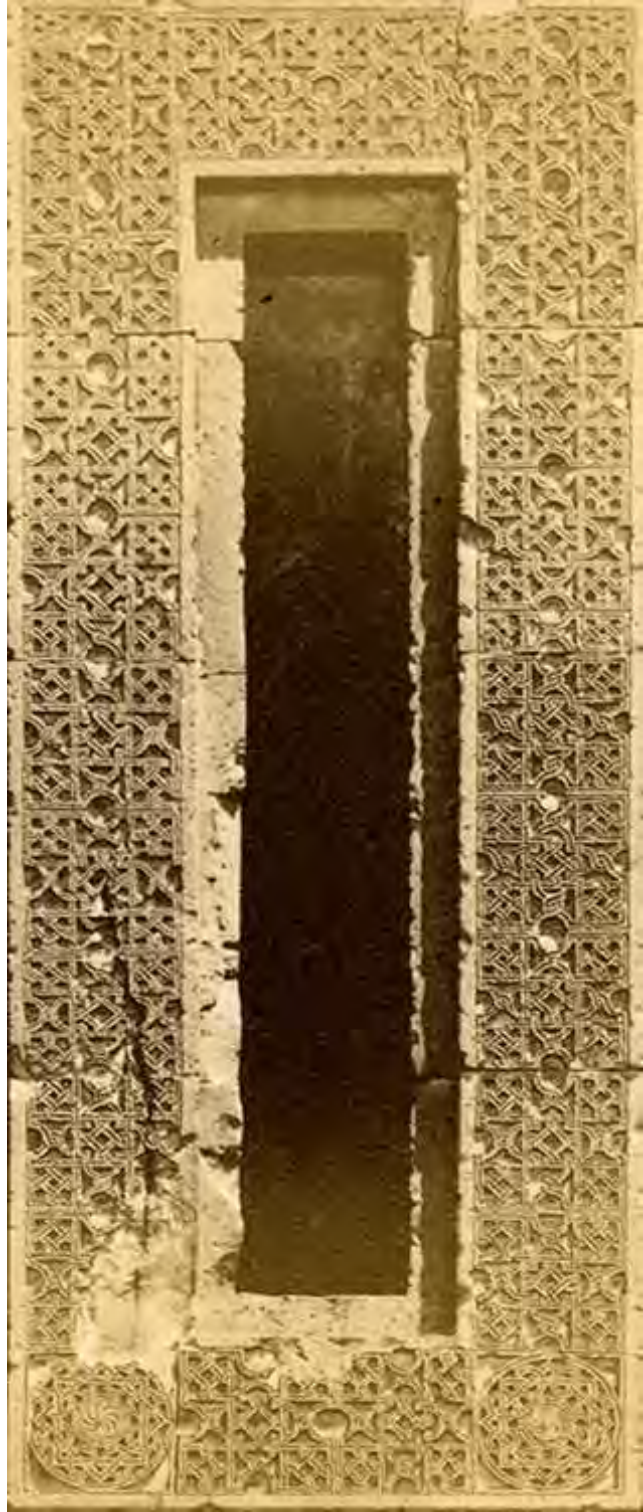
Music: “Ararat” from the album ARAHET

Composer: Karen Asatrian

Cinematography: Varuzhan Diloyan

Dialogue & Research: Arsen Bobokhyan and
Hrachya Vardanyan

Concept & Production: NIGRUM ARCA
Insight Studio





Tradition is not the worship of ashes,
but the preservation of fire.

Gustav Mahler



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ROOTED IN TRANSDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH AND LAND-
BASED AESTHETICS, LIVING SYMBOLS OF THE
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PRODUCTION PLATFORM COMMITTED TO
REINTERPRETING CULTURAL HERITAGE AND COMPLEX
IDEAS THROUGH CONTEMPORARY VISUAL LANGUAGES.



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