



The Genocide Education Project

Armenian “Bird Letters” (Trchnakir) Letter Art

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The Mesrop Mashtots Institute of Ancient Manuscripts (“Matenadaran”)
Lesson created by Jackie Kemper, 2022 GenEd Teacher Fellow



Introduction:

Understanding other cultures means exploring language, beliefs, art, and central to Armenian identity is the unique language and alphabet, their deeply held religious identity, and their unique expression of these two components in the Illuminated Manuscripts. These ancient texts were and still are revered by Armenians as expressions of their religious devotion and their shared history, whether they live in Armenia or in the diaspora. When we choose to teach about hard history, we should make sure students understand who the victims and survivors are, and how they lived and expressed themselves before genocide. This lesson introduces students to the Armenian people through their language, art, and history. This activity is appropriate for 5-12 grade social studies, English language arts, and art students.

Rationale:

This lesson can be used as an introduction to Armenian culture, as an examination of Illuminated Manuscripts, and after studying the Armenian Genocide. During their study of the Armenian Genocide, students should be introduced to illuminated manuscripts. During the genocide, the Turks destroyed most of these manuscripts, but some of these sacred texts were saved by Armenians as they fled from the Turks.

Objectives:

Understand the cultural importance of the Armenian alphabet and its preservation. Trace the history of the Armenian Alphabet and explore its significance as an early Indo-European language.

Students draw their initials using Armenian letters, decorating them in the Armenian “Trchnakir” (“bird letters”) style.

Materials Needed: Two-Three 50 minute class periods

- [Armenian Manuscripts Gallery Wall](#)
- The Significance of the Armenian Language
- Big Paper Silent Discussion Quotes
- Armenian letter sounds
- Armenian letters
- “Bird Letter” decorations
- Computer with internet access
- 11x14 construction paper
- Markers, pastels, rulers, pencil



Armenian “Bird Letters” (Trchnakir) Letter Art Activity

Lesson Plan: (60-80 minute class periods)

Day 1:

- **Gallery Walk Introduction:** Students complete a gallery walk of Armenian illuminated manuscripts housed at the Matenadaran. Have a class discussion using the following guided questions. (Optional: Virtual tour of Matenadaran - matenadaran3d.am/en)
 - What stands out to you as you view the pictures?
 - Choose one photo that resonates with you, why does it stand out?
 - What does it say about the importance of manuscripts?
 - What can art reveal about a culture?

- **Independent/Group Work:** Students complete [The Significance of the Armenian Language](#) activity to gain background information on Armenian Illuminated Manuscripts and the Armenian language.

- **Big Paper Silent Discussion:** Many Armenians tried to rescue these precious books as they tried to save themselves from the Turks and Kurds. Please watch this story about one family’s journey of escape and the rescue of a sacred text, and its return to Armenia. [Rescued & Returned: An Ancient Armenian Bible](#).

Using quotes from the video and one from Movses Khorenatsi, who is considered the Father of Armenian History, conduct a [Big Paper Silent Discussion](#). Students can rotate around the room to respond to their classmates. Upon completion, have a brief class discussion on the importance of preserving language, manuscripts and history.

Quotes:

"For although we are a small garden, and are very limited in number, and deprived of power, and have been conquered by other nations many times, still in our country there have been many feats of courage worthy of being immortalized in writing, which, however, none of them cared to record in books..." - Movses Khorenatsi

"Today’s donors, and we ourselves, are the guardians of our nation’s valuables. These are the testimonies of our nation’s precious memories, for our following generations."

- Gevorg Ter-Vardanyan (Depositories Department)

"With a deep respect and affinity for our heritage, we all felt a sense of pride and gratitude for our parents’ and grandparents’ role in preserving this ancient manuscript and helping put the pieces of our nation back together."

- Roxanne Makasdjian



- **Journal Reflection:** Reflect on what you have learned today. How can artifacts and language tell the story of a people? What does the journey of the Charsanjak Gospels reveal about Armenian culture and beliefs?



Day 2:

- **Reflection:** Students begin by reflecting on (in their journal or verbally with a partner) the following prompts using the accompanying quote:

- What is the importance of a name?
- Why is your name important to you?
- Does it matter to you that your name is pronounced and spelled correctly? Why? How might our names reflect our cultural identity?
- How do names connect you to others?
- What does the following quote by Ralph Ellison mean to you?

“It is through our names that we first place ourselves in the world. Our names, being the gift of others, must be made our own.”

- **Students will create Armenian “Bird Letters” (Trchnakir) by using Armenian letter pronunciation to discover the first letter of their name in Armenian.**

- **Step 1:** Watch [“Armenian Letters' Pronunciation” posted by Armenieinfo](#): to find the pronunciation of the first letter of your name. This is a fun film with people making the [“Armenian Alphabet”](#)
- **Step 2:** Using a 11x14 size construction paper, sketch the letters in pencil. Be sure that they are large and spread apart so that they can be illustrated effectively.
- **Step 3:** Use a marker or pastel chalk to outline the letters. Note: If you chose to use pastels, the letters must be large or it will be challenging to illustrate them.
- **Step 4:** View Samples of letters and choose which style is preferred (birds or simple designs).
- **Step 5:** Decorate around the name with other Armenian Symbols (ie...Armenian crosses, Forget Me Not Flower - symbol of genocide remembrance, etc...)



Student Handout: The Significance of the Armenian Language

Introduction: Begin with a gallery walk of pictures of [Illuminated Manuscripts](#). What stands out to you as you view the pictures? Choose one photo that resonates with you, why does it stand out? What does it say about the importance of manuscripts? What can art reveal about a culture?

Background Information: Independently or in pairs, work through the following sources and answer the questions

Watch the video [Armenian letter art and its cultural expressions](#)

1. Discuss the importance of the Armenian Alphabet/language.
2. How is the language rooted in culture?
3. After learning about the genocide and the diaspora, how might language carry even more importance to Armenians?

Read [Mesrop Mashtots - The Creator of The Armenian Alphabet](#) and answer the following questions:

1. What major event prompted Mashtots to create the Armenian alphabet? By creating the alphabet, what were Armenians able to avoid?
2. What was the first book translated into Armenian?
3. Identify three ways Mesrop Mashtots is remembered today. What does this reveal about his importance to Armenians?

Read "[Armenian Alphabet is Catalyst for Cultural Endurance](#)" and answer the following questions:

1. Why is Mt. Ararat significant to Armenians? How is it also heartbreaking?
2. When were Armenian Bird Letters first used?
3. How is the story of the Homily of Mush similar to the story of Armenia itself?
4. How is the Book of Narek a muse for Vasken Brudian?
5. Armenians not only keep the alphabet in their home, they also keep it at Ayp ou Pen Park. Why do you think they value their alphabet and language so much?

Big Paper Silent Discussion: Many Armenians tried to rescue these precious books as they tried to save themselves from the Turks and Kurds. Please watch this story about one family's journey of escape and the rescue of a sacred text, and its repatriation to Armenian. [Rescued & Returned: An Ancient Armenian Bible](#)

Journal Reflection: Reflect on what you have learned today. How can artifacts and language tell the story of a people? What does the journey of the Book of Gospels (Dadaian Bible) reveal about Armenian culture and beliefs?



Big Paper Silent Discussion Quotes:

“Today’s donors, and we ourselves, are the guardians of our nation’s valuables. These are the testimonies of our nation’s precious memories, for our following generations.”

- Gevorg Ter-Vardanyan
(Matenadaran Depositories Department)



“For although we are a small garden, and are very limited in number, and deprived of power, and have been conquered by other nations many times, still in our country there have been many feats of courage worthy of being immortalized in writing, which, however, none of them cared to record in books...”

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Armenian to English Alphabet Pronunciation and Transliteration Guide

Note: For the purposes of this guide, the Western Armenian dialect pronunciation is used. The Armenian alphabet includes a number of similarly-pronounced letters (used variably based on Armenian etymology.) The guide includes notes indicating which letter is more commonly used for names. Also noted are suggestions for approximating English sounds that don't have an equivalent letter/sound in Armenian.









Armenian Alphabet	Sound	Example and usage	Audio
Ա 	“ah”	<p>father</p> <p>like the 'ah' in “father”</p> <p>Note: There is no Armenian letter pronounced like the short “a” in “ant”; You can choose to use “U” as in “father” or “L” as the “e” in “Fred”</p>	Play
Բ 	“p”	<p>purple</p> <p>like the “p” in “purple” (but not used as the first letter of personal names; instead, “Փ” is most often used for personal names to transliterate the “p” sound.)</p>	Play
Գ 	“c”	<p>cup</p> <p>like the “c” in “cup” (but not used as the first letter of personal names; instead, “Բ” is most often used for personal names to transliterate the “c” sound as in “cup” or “k” as in “Kate.”)</p>	Play
Դ 	“t”	<p>tall</p> <p>like the “t” in “tall” (but not used as the first letter of personal names; instead “Թ” is most often used for personal names to transliterate “t” sound)</p>	Play











<p>t</p> 	<p>“yeh” “eh” tʒ=“ay”</p>	<p>yellow // end</p> <p>When used as the first letter of a word, pronounced “y” like “yellow.”</p> <p>When used in the middle of a word, pronounced like “eh” in “end.”</p> <p>When joined with “ʒ,” i.e. “tʒ,” pronounced like the long “a” in “pay”</p>	<p>Play</p>
<p>z</p> 	<p>“z”</p>	<p>zest</p> <p>like the “z” in “zest”</p>	<p>Play</p>
<p>e</p> 	<p>“eh”</p>	<p>elephant</p> <p>like the “e” in “elephant”</p>	<p>Play</p>
<p>u</p> 	<p>“uh”</p>	<p>bus</p> <p>like the “u” in “bus”</p>	<p>Play</p>
<p>ʈ</p> 	<p>“t”</p>	<p>tiger</p> <p>Like the “t” in tiger (most often used for personal names starting with the “t” sound, like Tom)</p>	<p>Play</p>
<p>ɟ</p> 	<p>“jh”</p>	<p>measure, je t'aime</p> <p>like the “s” in “measure” or the French “j” in “je t'aime”</p>	<p>Play</p>
<p>h</p> 	<p>“ee”</p>	<p>meet</p> <p>like the “ee” in meet</p>	<p>Play</p>



















L		“l”	long like the “l” in long	Play
h		“kh”	bach like the German pronunciation of “ch” in the name of the composer “Bach”	Play
ɔ		“dz”	kids like the combination “ds” in “kids”	Play
g		“g”	go like the “g” in “go”	Play
h		“h”	hello like the “h” in “hello”	Play
ts		“ts”	lets like the combination “ts” in “lets”	Play
r		“gh”	liberté (French pronunciation) like the French pronunciation of “r” in “liberté”	Play
j		“j”	joke like the “j” in “joke”	Play



<p>ʍ</p> 	<p>“m”</p>	<p>mom</p> <p>like the “m” in “mom”</p>	<p>Play</p>
<p>ɜ</p> 	<p>“h” / “y”</p>	<p>hat / year</p> <p>like the “h” in “hat” when placed as the first letter of a word, but most often not used as the first letter of personal names; instead, “ɜ” is most often used for personal names to transliterate the “h” sound).</p> <p>like the “y” in “year” when placed in the middle of a word; when placed after another vowel, it gives the vowel a long sound: Uɜ=I as in “I am”; ɛɜ=AY as in “pay”, Oɜ=OY as in “oink”</p>	<p>Play</p>
<p>ɹ</p> 	<p>“n”</p>	<p>number</p> <p>like the “n” in “number”</p>	<p>Play</p>
<p>ʃ</p> 	<p>“sh”</p>	<p>shoe</p> <p>like the “sh” in “shoe”</p>	<p>Play</p>
<p>ɹ</p> 	<p>“v” / “o”</p>	<p>vocal / low</p> <p>like the “v” in “vocal” when placed as the first letter of a word or name; otherwise like the “o” in “low”; (but not used as the first letter of personal names; instead, “ɹ” is most often used for personal names to transliterate the “v” sound as in “violin” or “v” as in “Veronica.”)</p>	<p>Play</p>
<p>ʃ</p> 	<p>“ch”</p>	<p>chair</p> <p>like the “ch” in “chair” (most often for personal names beginning with the “ch” sound, instead of “ʃ”)</p>	<p>Play</p>

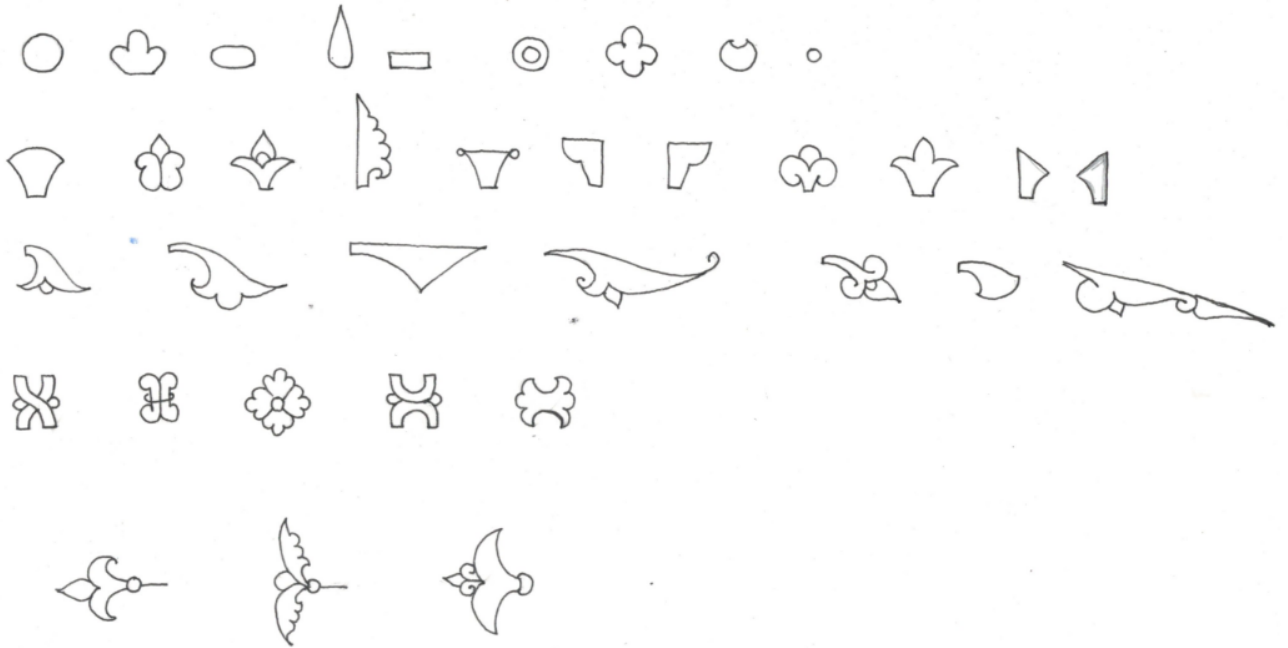


	"b" 	bat like the "b" in bat	Play
	"ch" 	chat Like the "ch" in chat (but not used most often for personal names; "Q" is used instead)	Play
	"Rr" 	perro (Spanish: dog) like the rolled Spanish 'r' in "per ro "; (used most often for personal names to transliterate the "r" sound, instead of "r")	Play
	"s" 	sand like the "s" in sand	Play
	"v" 	violin like the "v" in " violin "	Play
	"d" 	dog like the "d" in " dog "	Play
	"r" 	run like the "r" in " run " (but not used as the first letter of personal names; "R" is used for personal names)	Play
	"ts" 	bits like the "ts" in " bits "	Play

(Audio recordings courtesy of [Learn101](#) and Norayr Daduryan.)

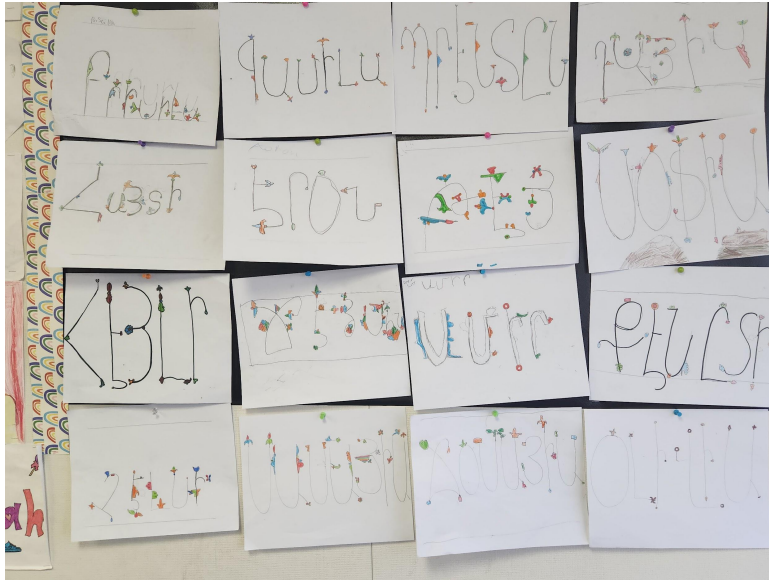
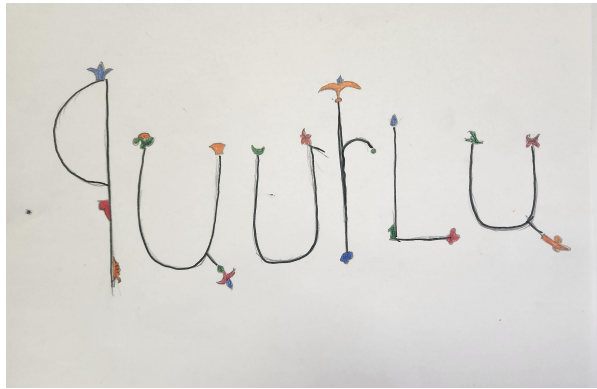
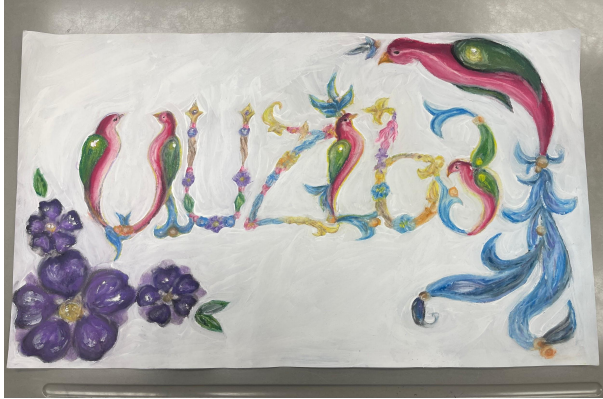


Armenian Letter Art Decorations

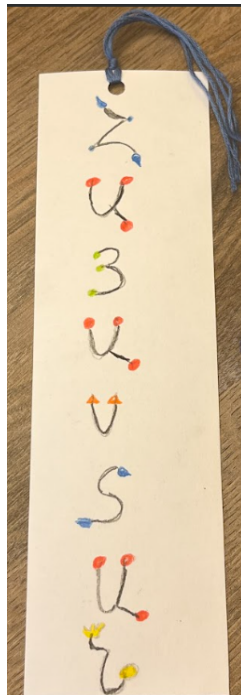


Examples

Designs by students:



GenEd Teacher Fellows making bookmarks at "Matenadaran," the Mesrop Mashtots Research Institute of Ancient Manuscripts.



Bird Designs Using Pastels

