

**A Brief History of the Armenian Studies Program at Fresno State**  
**1960 (1977)-2024**

Prof. Barlow Der Mugerdechian  
Director, Armenian Studies Program

Armenian Studies courses have been taught at Fresno State for sixty-four years. Dr. Richard Hovannisian of UCLA taught Armenian courses through extension in 1960-1962. Dr. Louise Nalbandian of the History Department began teaching Armenian history at Fresno State in 1967, soon developing a broader program, including language and culture classes. Serpouhie Messerlian taught Armenian language courses beginning in 1970 and Dr. Arra Avakian taught a variety of Armenian culture and history courses from 1970- 1973.

Upon Dr. Nalbandian's untimely death in late 1974, the University pledged to open an international search to select a candidate to head a new Armenian Studies Program. After an unsuccessful initial search, a second search resulted in the hiring of Dr. Dickran Kouymjian (Columbia University), who at the time was teaching in Paris. He took up his duties in the spring semester of 1977, ending a two-year hiatus at Fresno State. Dr. Kouymjian was appointed as Director and charged to develop an Armenian Program of the highest standards.

In the years since Dr. Kouymjian's arrival the Armenian Studies Program developed an international reputation in terms of excellence in teaching, quality of scholarship, and active student and community outreach. In the variety and depth of courses offered, the Program quickly became the most dynamic undergraduate Armenian Studies Program in the United State (and perhaps anywhere), teaching hundreds of students each semester.

The Armenian Studies Program has successfully integrated its courses in the general curriculum of the University. Armenian and Armenian Studies offerings were very quickly accepted into the required university undergraduate General Education Program in the areas of language, history, art, cultural studies, and literature.

The Program has been recognized for its record of faculty scholarship and for its outreach program bringing the Armenian community of Fresno closer to the University.

The Program growth has been matched by an increase in scholarship/grants available to students taking Armenian or Armenian Studies courses.

### **The Center for Armenian Studies**

The Center for Armenian Studies was established in the Fall of 1988, when the Armenian Studies Program moved from its tiny office in San Ramon 5, into a suite of offices in the newly constructed Leon S. Peters Business Building. Thanks to the generosity of community donors, Armenian Studies found a permanent home in the Peters Business Building.

The Center, located in Room 384, is a place for students and faculty to interact. Currently it houses the Armenian Studies Program, the Sahatdjian Armenian Studies Library, the Avedian Armenian Studies Archives, the newspaper Hye Sharzhoom/Armenian Action, the Armenian Students Organization, and the Index of Armenian Art. The Bedrosian Conference Room and the Mirigian Gallery, on the same floor as the Program, are direct offshoots of the Program and its community supporters.

### **The Haig and Isabel Berberian Chair of Armenian Studies**

A two-year campaign culminated with the establishment of the Haig and Isabel Berberian Chair of Armenian Studies in December, 1988, and Dr. Kouymjian was appointed as the first holder of the Chair in March of 1989. The Berberian Endowed Chair provides financial support for a distinguished Armenologist. The endowment honoring the philanthropist Haig Berberian and his wife was established by a major gift from their son-in-law and daughter, Dr. Arnold H. and Dianne Gazarian. Other friends have made significant contributions to this endowment.

### **Henry S. Khanzadian Kazan Professorship in Modern Armenian and Immigration Studies**

The Kazan Professorship was originally established through a generous gift by Henry and Victoria Kazan of Juno Beach, Florida and Long Island, New York. The endowment supported a senior professor who taught equally in the History Department and the Armenian Studies Program. Special areas of concentration are modern Armenian history,

history of the Armenian Genocide, and the history of immigration to North America. Since 2000 the position has been housed entirely in the School of Arts and Humanities and is called the Henry S. Khanzadian Visiting Professorship in Armenian Studies.

### **Henry S. Khanzadian Kazan Visiting Professor in Armenian Studies**

This specially designed endowment allows the Armenian Studies Program to invite, for one semester each year, an internationally recognized scholar in contemporary Armenian affairs. The professor teaches a single course on a subject related to modern Armenian history, including the Genocide of 1915 and the formation of the Armenian Republic. In addition, the scholar is required to present three public lectures on a single topic, which are to be published in the Kazan Armenian Studies series.

Twenty distinguished scholars in Armenian Studies have served in the position of Kazan Visiting Professor in Armenian Studies at Fresno State: Richard Hovannisian (UCLA) (2000), Robert Hewsen (Rowan College) (2001), Barbara Merguerian (NAASR) (2003), Ara Sanjian (Haigazian University) (2003), James Reid (UCLA) (2006), Levon Chookaszian (Yerevan State University) (2006), George Bournoutian (Iona College) (2009), Abraham Terian (St. Nersess Armenian Seminary) (2010), Barlow Der Mugrdechian (Fresno State) (2011), Sona Harutyunian (Ca Foscari University) (2013), Myrna Douzjian (UCLA) (2015), Roberta Ervine (St. Nerses Seminary) (2016), Khatchig Mouradian (2017), Yektan Türkyilmaz (2018), Ümit Kurt (2018), Ari Sekeryan (2020), Ohannes Kilicdagi (2020), Suren Manukyan (Yerevan State University) (2021), Hrag Papazian (Fall 2022), and Simon Maghakyan (2024).

### **The M. Victoria Karagozian Kazan Endowment Fund for the Armenian Studies Program**

Henry S. Khanzadian Kazan and M. Victoria Khanzadian Kazan made a gift of their East Quoque, New York, home to Fresno State in 1997. Thanks to that second generous donation by the late Kazans, the university has received a special endowment for (a) general support of Armenian Studies Program activities, and (b) financial resources for research, publications, and conferences related to Armenian studies.

### **Armenian Studies Program Faculty**

The Armenian Studies Program has had many full-time and part-time teachers who assisted Dr. Nalbandian, Dr. Kouymjian, and Prof. Der Mugrdechian in teaching a variety of courses. Serpouhie Messerlian, Dr. Arra Avakian, Flora Tchaderjian, Hagop Karamanlian, Mark Malkasian, Hagop Terjimanian, Jimmie Baloian, Richard Hagopian, Ralph Setian, Michael Krekorian, Van Der Mugrdechian, Nazik Arisian, and Arakel Arisian are among those who have taught Armenian language, history, and Armenian studies courses.

In the Fall of 1985, Prof. Barlow Der Mugrdechian, a graduate of UCLA, was hired as a full-time lecturer in the Program, giving an added position to the Program. This second position in Armenian Studies has been funded by the University for twenty-five years. He teaches courses in Armenian language, art, literature, culture, and history. Der Mugrdechian received his B.A. from Fresno State and was one of Dr. Kouymjian's very first students.

Dr. Isabel Kaprielian (University of Toronto, Ontario, Canada) was appointed in Fall of 1997 as Henry S. Khazadian Kazan Professor of Modern Armenian and Immigration History, with cross appointment in the History Department. She taught courses in Armenian history, the Armenian Genocide, and Armenian immigration, before she retired in 2006.

Dr. Kouymjian, who began teaching at Fresno State in 1977, retired from the University in May 2008, after a career spanning thirty-one years as Director of the Program and holder of the Berberian Chair, the first endowed chair on the Fresno state campus and the first fulltime chair in the 23-campus system of California State University.

Prof. Der Mugrdechian was appointed Coordinator of the Armenian Studies Program and Director of the Center for Armenian Studies in August 2008.

Dr. Hagop Ohanessian has been teaching Armenian Studies courses since 2014.

Dr. Sergio La Porta (Harvard) joined the faculty in August of 2009, as the Berberian Chair in Armenian Studies. His area of expertise is in medieval Armenian history and theology. In 2019, Dr. La Porta was appointed as Associate Dean of the college of Arts and Humanities.

Dr. David Zakarian (University of Oxford), joined the Armenian Studies Program as the new Haig and Isabel Berberian Professor of Armenian Studies in fall of 2024.

### **Courses and instruction**

Over the past thirty years more than 6,000 students have taken Armenian and Armenian Studies courses at Fresno State. The core of the Armenian Studies Program is the study of Armenian history, language, and an introductory course on Armenian Studies. Courses on Armenian literature, William Saroyan, Armenian architecture, Armenian manuscript painting, Armenian minor arts, Armenian Genocide and modern political activism, the Armenian diaspora, history of the Armenians in Fresno, Armenian film history have been taught regularly. Web based instruction was pioneered by Dr. Kouymjian, particularly in Armenian art, thanks to his textbook *The Arts of Armenia*, available with hundreds of illustrations on the Armenian Studies Program website. A varied group of one-unit classes has been offered on Fridays and Saturdays to the campus and the community at large. The Armenian Studies Program has always been active in the community promoting the study of Armenian topics and bringing an awareness of Armenian issues.

### **Hye Sharzhoom**

The first issue of *Hye Sharzhoom* was published in April of 1979, as a special insert into the *Daily Collegian* newspaper on campus, to commemorate the anniversary of the Armenian Genocide. Since then, *Hye Sharzhoom* has grown to have an international readership of more than 6,000.

*Hye Sharzhoom* is currently a supplement to *The Collegian*. *Hye Sharzhoom* is published quarterly with the goal to inform the public about activities of the Armenian students on campus, and to report on Armenian Studies Program events and activities. Students in the Armenian Students Organization and the Armenian Studies Program are involved in the process of writing, editing, and preparing articles published in the paper. 2023-2024 marks a milestone for *Hye Sharzhoom*, its 45th anniversary, which symbolizes the strong maintenance of the Armenian culture on campus today. It is the oldest regularly issued Armenian student newspaper published anywhere in the world.

### **Special Programs, Exhibits, and Symposia**

International exhibits have made their stops at Fresno State throughout the years. In November of 1978 an international symposium on “David of Sassoun: The Armenian Folk Epic after a Century” was organized by Dr. Kouymjian to commemorate the centennial of the discovery of centuries old oral epic. A seminar on David of Sassoun was held in conjunction with a symposium on the following day with the participation of artist Varaz Samuelian, composer Earl Robinson, and professor of Theater Arts at Fresno State, Edward Emanuel.

In October of 1981 it was the International Exhibition of Armenian Architecture (fourth to the eighteenth century) shown at the Conley Art Gallery. The exhibit was conceived and prepared by a team of Italian and Armenian architectural historians in Milan, Italy. It was acclaimed throughout the world as a model of its kind, bringing to the western public a comprehensive view of the church architecture of an Eastern Christian people, the first to accept Christianity as a state religion in the early fourth century.

In 1981 the Armenian Studies Program commemorated the Centennial of the Armenian community in “Fresno: The First Hundred Years (1881-1981),” with a series of events and a special Saturday class on “The Armenians in Fresno.” The two-week festival included a showing of Saroyan films, dramatic readings of his plays, and a symposium on the works of William Saroyan.

In the fall of the same year, after the death of William Saroyan, Prof. Kouymjian organized a campus wide, three-week “William Saroyan Festival,” November 2-22, with the first ever exhibit of Saroyan painting curated by the late William Minschew of the Art Department, a production of Saroyan’s play “My Heart’s in the Highlands,” directed by Jan Bryan of the Theater Arts Department, a William Saroyan Film Festival, two conferences, one entitled “William Saroyan and His Writing” and the other “Who Was This Man Saroyan,” which brought to campus the writer’s son Aram, his Paris lawyer, the late Aram Kevorkian, Prof. Gene Bluestein of the English Department, the Fresno artist and close friend Varaz Samuelian, Archie Minasian, Saroyan first cousin also poet and painter, as well as close friends Frank Moradian, Louise Dodgson, and Gail Sarkisian. There was also a photographic exhibit in the Madden Library and readings of

Saroyan stories by Arnie Nixon and others. On the occasion of the Festival there was a special 28-page booklet-program published with original essays by Dr. Kouymjian. Symposia on Saroyan were also held in 1991 (“William Saroyan after a Decade”) in 1999 (“Saroyan at 90”), and in 2008 (“William Saroyan at 100”).

Many other workshops, mini-conferences, and outreach activities have been organized over the past forty years.

### **Armenian Studies Program Archives**

The Armenian Studies Program archives are rich in the variety of materials that have been donated over the years. Film archives, the Index of Armenian Art, the Saroyan archive, and a collection of books and photographs, and unpublished survivor accounts and autobiographies have enriched the research activities of the Armenian Studies Program. In addition, the Special Collections of the Madden Library contains a wealth of Armenian archival materials, much of it deposited by the Armenian Studies Program.

### **Armenian Studies Program Lecture Series**

The Fresno State campus has always been an attraction for the numerous guests of the Armenian Studies Program, among them: His Holiness Vazken I, Catholicos of All Armenians; His Holiness Karekin II, Catholicos of All Armenians; His Holiness Karekin II Sarkissian, Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia; His Holiness Aram I, Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia; His Eminence Archbishop Torkom Manoogian, Armenian Patriarch of Jerusalem; His Eminence Archbishop Shnork Kaloustian, Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople; John Guiragossian, Foreign Minister of Armenia; Congressman Charles (Chip) Pashayan, Ambassador Leonidas Chrysanthopoulos; Archbishop Tiran Nersoyan, Archbishop Vatche Hovsepian, Ambassador Robert Shugarian, Ambassador Arman Kirakossian, Baroness Caroline Cox, Richard Hovannisian, Vartan Gregorian, Aram Saroyan, Hank Saroyan, Diana Der Hovanessian, Radick Martirossian, George Bournoutian, Arthur Tcholakian, Levon Keshishian, Aram Kevorkian, Nona Balakian, Peter Balakian, Lucy Manuelian, Peter Najarian, Jack Antreassian, Levon Marshlian, Set Momjian, Frunze Dovlatian, Levon Chookaszian, Vahakn Dadrian, Charles Garry, Leo Hamalian, Ludmila Haroutunian, Ara Sarafian, Ben

Bagdikian, Yair Auron, Karlen Mooradian, Patrick Cazals, Jack Goddard, David Kherdian, Robert Thomson, Donald Miller, Leonardo Alishan, Robert Edwards, and numerous other educators, religious leaders, and community leaders from throughout the world.

Through the cooperation of the Philip Lorenz Keyboard Concert Series, pianists such as Vardan Mamikonian, Armen Babakhanian, Sergei Babayan, Vahan Mardirossian, Nareh Arghamanyan, Shahan Arzruni, and cellist Alexander Chaushian have performed on the Fresno State campus. Composer and artists Robert Amirkhanian also appeared at Fresno State, along with a variety of other musical performers.

### **Armenian Studies Program Website**

The Armenian Studies Program website, [armenianstudies.csufresno.edu](http://armenianstudies.csufresno.edu), is internationally recognized. It is the most visited academic website on the Fresno State campus and provides a wealth of information and resources for the student and community member alike. Recent statistics indicate show that on an average there are 10,000 visitors a day, some 3 to 4 million a year, with 35% of the visitors originating from abroad.

### **Churches of Armenia: A Legacy to the World**

A 1987 vacation to Turkey was the beginning of a twenty-year odyssey that took Richard and Anne Elbrecht on what became a passion – photographing and documenting Armenian churches in the historic homeland of the Armenian people. As an outcome of their visits with Dr. Kouymjian, Berberian Professor of Armenian Studies and Director of the Armenian Studies Program, and encouraged by his enthusiasm, they decided to donate their archive of 157 photographs, “Churches of Historic Armenia: A Legacy to the World,” to the Armenian Studies Program at California State University, Fresno, where the photographs have become a permanent part of the Armenian Studies Program Web site, making them available to the world. The Elbrechts’ goal has already been accomplished: the 157 images have been digitized at Fresno State under the direction of University Photographer, Randy Vaughn-Dotta and are now available on the newly-designed Fresno State Armenian Studies web site – [armenianstudies.csufresno.edu](http://armenianstudies.csufresno.edu).



### **Index of Armenian Art and Index of Armenian Architecture**

The Index of Armenian Art, initiated by Dr. Dickran Kouymjian at the American University of Beirut in 1972, was transferred to Fresno State in 1977. Parts I and II of the Index featured a chronological database of early Armenian illuminated manuscripts to the year 1100. Today the Index is found on the Armenian Studies Program website, with each illuminated manuscript accompanied by a collection of color slides. There is also an architectural component.

The Index of Armenian Art was organized by Dr. Kouymjian as a research tool to aid Armenian art historians. The purpose of the IAA is to document the appearance of manuscript illuminations and later to encompass all photographic art prior to the 20th century. The large project is an ongoing one for the Armenian Studies Program.

### **Arts of Armenia**

The Arts of Armenia is a site on the history of Armenian art, with 300 color photos, found on the Armenian Studies Program website. *The Arts of Armenia* was written by Dr. Kouymjian and published as a separate book by the Gulbenkian Foundation. It is used in its electronic format on the Armenian Studies website by students each semester for the Armenian Studies 20 (Arts of Armenia) course and was used this past spring as a supplementary resource in Prof. Thomas Mathews course on Armenian art at Oxford University.

### **Armenian Students Organization**

The Armenian Students Organization was officially recognized on campus in 1974. Since then, the organization has been active in promoting Armenian culture on campus. They have organized annual Armenian Genocide commemorations, invited speakers, and been involved with the publication of the Hye Sharzhoom newspaper. Prof. Barlow Der Mugerdechian has been the long-time advisor.

### **Armenian Studies Annual Film Festival**

The Armenian Studies Program has been holding its Annual Film Festival for the past eleven years. The Festival attracts film entries from throughout the world and has become a favorite of the Fresno community. Many young filmmakers' careers were launched through the festival and earlier ad-hoc manifestations of it in the 1980s in conjunction with the History of Armenian Cinema taught regularly by Prof. Kouymjian. A number of films from the Diaspora, and also the works of well-known filmmakers from Armenia have premiered thanks to the Armenian Studies Program.

### **Armenian Studies Program Scholarships and Grants**

The **Harry and Mary Topoozian Armenian Studies Merit Scholarship Fund** was established by a gift from Mr. Harry Topoozian. An outstanding achievement scholarship will be awarded to a student who has excelled in scholarship, leadership, and community service. Any student enrolled in Armenian Studies courses is eligible.

### **The Armenian Studies Program Dickran Kouymjian Writing Award**

In 1997 the Armenian Studies Program Advisory Board decided to establish an endowment fund for excellence in writing from the proceeds of the 20th Anniversary Banquet honoring Professor Kouymjian. Each year a prize will be given for the best student essay, term paper, or literary work in any discipline on a topic related to Armenia or the Armenians.

The **Norma and Bob Der Mugrdechian Armenian Studies Endowed Scholarship** has been established to provide scholarships for students who are studying, or have declared a major, in the area of Armenian Studies.

### **Scholarship Funds**

Students working toward a minor or simply enrolling in Armenian courses are eligible for scholarships administered by the Program. These include the Armenian Professional Society of San Francisco; G. Franklin Antoyan Endowed Scholarship; the Armenian General Benevolent Union Greater Fresno Chapter Endowed Scholarship; the Nerces and Ruth Azadian Memorial Scholarship; the Clara Bousian Bedrosian Armenian

Scholarship; the Donald Garabedian Endowed Scholarship; the Albert and Isabelle Kabrielian Scholarship for Armenian Studies; the Koren and Alice Odian Kasparian Scholarship; the Charlie Keyan Endowed Scholarship; the Thomas A. Kooyumjian Family Foundation Scholarship; the Charles K. and Pansy Pategian Zlokovich Scholarship; the Bertha and John Garabedian Charitable Foundation Scholarship Fund; the Haiganoosh (Agnes) and Simon D. Peterson Family Scholarship; the Ralph Shabazian Endowed Armenian Scholarship; the Walter Sepetjian Scholarship; the Genevieve Tatoian Scholarship; the Harry & Mary Topoozian Armenian Memorial Scholarship; George & Shenora (Kirishian) Adishian Armenian Endowed Scholarship; the Valerie J. Badvelian Armenian Memorial Scholarship; the Kirkor and Mary Bedoian Memorial Scholarship; the Yervant, Rose, and Hovannes Levonian Educational Grant; the Pete Peters Endowment; John and Lucille Melkonian Scholarship; the Ashod and Clara Makarian Armenian Memorial Scholarship; the Knarik Clara Margossian Armenian Memorial; the Leon S. Peters Foundation Scholarship; the Jeff & Jason Ahronian Scholarship; the Ayvazian Family Foundation in memory of Elizabeth Ayvazian; the Dr. Vartan and Sossie Djabrayan Scholarship in memory of Sossie's beloved parents, Nazareth and Nvere Ohannessian; the Ronald J. Garabedian II Armenian Legacy Scholarship; the Vartiter, Richard, Marian, Ralph, Carol, Vernon, John, and Vars Hovannisian Scholarship; the Armen Kandarian Foundation Scholarship; the Elizabeth Koojoolian Armenian Memorial Scholarship; the Isabel Lion Armenian Memorial Scholarship; the James L. Melikian and L.A. Brothers Scholarship; the James and Connie Melikian Scholarship; the Franklin Der and Elsie Ohanesian Memorial Scholarship; the Robert V. Saroyan Family Scholarship; the Joel and Jill Armenian Scholarship; and the Thomas and Malia Mooradian Armenian Scholarship.

### **The Future**

The Armenian Studies Program at Fresno State looks forward to the coming years. The Program will continue to grow and continue in its role as the most active undergraduate Armenian Studies Program in the United States.