



# The Genocide Education Project

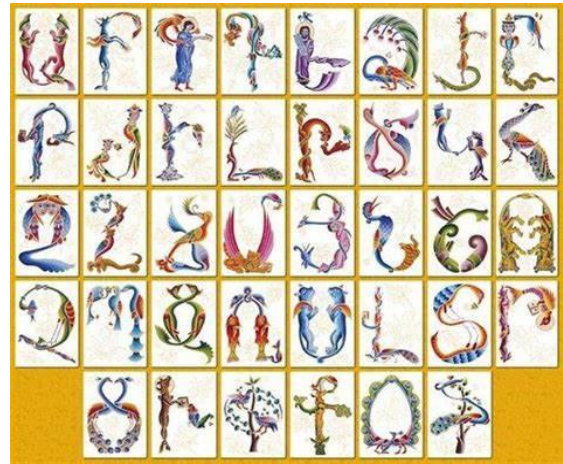
1

## Armenian “Bird Letters” (Trchnakir) Letter Art in Illuminated Manuscripts

Activity developed by Lilit Vardumyan, Miniaturist/Instructor,  
The Mesrop Mashtots Institute of Ancient Manuscripts (“Matenadaran”)  
Lesson created by Jackie Kemper, 2022 GenEd Teacher Fellow

### Rationale:

Exploring Armenian culture is an excellent way to provide a foundation for an effective teaching unit about the Armenian Genocide. An introduction to Armenian culture serves to humanize Armenians and their experiences, allowing students to better grasp the historical event and its impacts. Central to Armenian identity is the unique Armenian alphabet and language, as well as Armenians’ deeply held religious identity. These two foundational aspects of Armenian identity find unique expression in ancient illuminated manuscripts, hand-scribed and decorated texts still revered by Armenians around the world as expressions of their worldview through language, religious devotion, and shared history. This lesson introduces students to the Armenian people through those same aspects of their identity, and it can be used to begin lessons leading into the Armenian Genocide, as the preservation of the Armenian language became more urgent and existential in the wake of the genocide and survivors’ dispersal outside of their homeland.



### Sequence:

Grades 5-12  
World History  
U.S. History  
English Language Arts  
Art  
50-100 minutes

## Student Outcomes:

Students will:

- Explore the cultural and historical importance of the Armenian alphabet and the illuminated manuscripts.
- Examine the impact of the Armenian Genocide on the Armenian language and culture.
- Create Armenian “Trchnakir” (“bird letters”) by transliterating their names into Armenian.

## California State Standards:

**Visual Arts (VA:Re7.1.5–12)** – Perceive and analyze artistic work.

**Visual Arts VA:Cn10.1.5–12** – Connect personal and cultural context to meaning in art.

**ELA RI.5–12.7** – Integrate information from visual and media sources.

**ELA SL.5–12.1** – Participate effectively in collaborative discussions.

**ELA W.5–12.9** – Draw evidence from informational texts to support analysis.

**HSS 6.6, 7.1, 10.5** – Analyze cultural developments and belief systems.

**HSS 10.6, 11.11** – Examine human rights violations and cultural survival.

**HSS 10.9, 11.11** – Analyze global conflicts and responses to genocide, including cultural preservation.

**HSS Historical Interpretation** – Analyze how culture is expressed through language and writing systems.

**CASEL SEL Standards** – Self-Awareness and Social Awareness.

## Materials Needed:

- [Gallery Walk Journal/Discussion](#)
- [Armenian Manuscripts Gallery Wall](#)
- [The Significance of the Armenian Language](#)
- [Rescued & Returned: An Ancient Armenian Bible](#) video
- [Big Paper Silent Discussion Quotes](#)
- [Reflection/Journaling](#)
- [Armenian letter sounds](#)
- [Armenian Letters Art Decoration](#)
- [Examples of Designs by Students](#)
- Computer with internet access
- 11x14 construction paper
- Markers, pastels, rulers, pencils

## Process (50-100 minutes):

### Step 1:

Gallery Walk Introduction: Students should consider/answer the [Gallery Walk Journal/Discussion](#) Prompts and complete a gallery walk of [Armenian illuminated](#) manuscripts housed at the Matenadaran.

### Step 2:

Students should work alone, in pairs, or in small groups to complete [The Significance of the Armenian Language](#) activity of the Student Resources for Armenian Bird Letters to gain background information on Armenian Illuminated Manuscripts and the Armenian language.

### Step 3:

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

### Step 4:

Using the [Big Paper Silent Discussion Quotes](#) from the video and 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.

### Step 5:

Students reflect on (in their journal or verbally with a partner) the importance of names in identity and culture using the [Reflection/Journaling](#) prompt in the Student Resource for Armenian Bird Letters.

### Step 7:

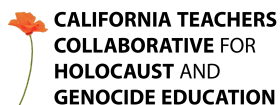
Students will create Armenian “Bird Letters” (Trchnakir) by using Armenian letter pronunciation to discover the first letter of their name in Armenian.

- Watch [“Armenian Letters’ Pronunciation” posted by Armenieinfo](#): to find the pronunciation of the first letter of your name. The [Armenian to English Alphabet Pronunciation and Transliteration](#) guide is an excellent resource for determining how to transliterate English into Armenian.
- Using construction paper, sketch the letters in pencil. Be sure they are large and spaced apart so they can be illustrated effectively.

- Use a marker or pastel chalk to outline the letters. Note: If you choose to use pastels, the letters must be large, or it will be challenging to illustrate them.
- View Samples of letters and choose which style is preferred (birds or simple designs).
- Decorate around the name with other Armenian Symbols (ie, Armenian crosses, Forget Me Not Flower - symbol of genocide remembrance, etc.)

### Differentiation/Enrichment:

- Have students take a virtual tour of [Matenadaran](#) to see more manuscripts. The Matenadaran houses illuminated manuscripts from other regions as well.
- Instead of transliterating their entire names, have students transliterate their initials.
- Use bookmarks or different types of paper, as well as paints, to add variety.
- Have students complete a 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?
- Students can read the poem, [Words to My Son by Sylva Kaputikyan](#), and reflect on the importance of the Armenian language to Armenians and as a catalyst for maintaining cultural identity.



*This curriculum is a project of the California Teachers Collaborative for Holocaust and Genocide Education, established by the JFCS Holocaust Center, with support from the California Department of Education, Marin County Office of Education, and the State of California.*

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

## Gallery Walk Journal/Discussion prompts

What stands out to you as you view the pictures (consider the use of symbols, colors, media, etc.)?

Choose one image that resonates with you. Why did you choose it?

Why might these manuscripts be so important to Armenians?

What can art reveal about a culture?

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**The Significance of the Armenian Language: Use the links provided to answer the questions.**

Watch the video [Armenian letter art and its cultural expressions](#) & answer the following questions:

1. Discuss the importance of the Armenian Alphabet/language.
2. How is the language rooted in culture?
3. After learning about the Armenian Genocide and the Armenian Diaspora (Armenians living outside of their homeland), how might language carry even more importance to Armenians?

Read [Mesrop Mashtots - The Creator of The Armenian Alphabet](#) & 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 [A sanctuary of ancient knowledge, the Matenadaran thrives in the digital age](#), & answer the following questions:

1. Besides the Bible, what other texts were translated into Armenian and copied?
2. How are these Armenian manuscripts "birth certificates" for Armenians?
3. How is the Matenadaran preserving these texts for the future?

Read [Heroines of Homilies of Mush rescue remembered](#), & answer the following questions:

1. How long have Armenians been printing books in their language?
2. Why did the women have to divide the Homilies of Mush?
3. How did each half of the book wind up in the Matenadaran?
4. Examine the statue, ["Demeanor of Eternity"](#) (Վարք Յավերժութեան). How does this honorary memorial encapsulate the importance of the rescue of the Homilies of Mush?

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

## Reflection/Journaling

*"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."*

-Ralph Ellison

- 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?

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...”*





- Movses Khorenatsi








*“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

## 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"	fa <b>th</b> er  like the 'ah' in "fa <b>th</b> er"  <b>Note:</b> There is no Armenian letter pronounced like the short "a" in "a <b>n</b> t"; You can choose to use "Ա" as in "fa <b>th</b> er" or "Է" as the "e" in "Fr <b>e</b> d"	<a href="#">Play</a>
Ք 	"p"	pu <b>r</b> ple  like the "p" in "pu <b>r</b> ple" (but <b>not</b> used as the first letter of personal names; instead, "Փ" is most often used for personal names to transliterate the "p" sound.)	<a href="#">Play</a>
Շ 	"c"	cu <b>p</b>  like the "c" in "cu <b>p</b> " (but <b>not</b> used as the first letter of personal names; instead, "Ք" is most often used for personal names to transliterate the "c" sound as in "cu <b>p</b> " or "k" as in "Ka <b>t</b> e.")	<a href="#">Play</a>
Դ 	"t"	ta <b>ll</b>  like the "t" in "ta <b>ll</b> " (but <b>not</b> used as the first letter of personal names; instead "Թ" is most often used for personal names to transliterate "t" sound)	<a href="#">Play</a>

Է		<p>“yeh”</p> <p>“eh”</p> <p>ԷՅ=“a y”</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 “Յ,” i.e. “ԷՅ,” pronounced like the long “a” in “pay”</p>	<a href="#">Play</a>
Զ		“z”	<p>zest</p> <p>like the “z” in “zest”</p>	<a href="#">Play</a>
Է		“eh”	<p>elephant</p> <p>like the “e” in “elephant”</p>	<a href="#">Play</a>
Ը		“uh”	<p>bus</p> <p>like the “u” in “bus”</p>	<a href="#">Play</a>
Թ		“t”	<p>tiger</p> <p>Like the “t” in tiger (most often used for personal names starting with the “t” sound, like Tom)</p>	<a href="#">Play</a>
Ժ		“jh”	<p>measure, je t'aime</p> <p>like the “s” in “measure” or the French “j” in “je t'aime”</p>	<a href="#">Play</a>
Ի		“ee”	<p>meet</p> <p>like the “ee” in meet</p>	<a href="#">Play</a>

L		"l"	long like the "l" in long	<a href="#">Play</a>
Խ		"kh"	bach like the German pronunciation of "ch" in the name of the composer "Bach"	<a href="#">Play</a>
ճ		"dz"	kids like the combination "ds" in "kids"	<a href="#">Play</a>
Կ		"g"	go like the "g" in "go"	<a href="#">Play</a>
Հ		"h"	hello like the "h" in "hello"	<a href="#">Play</a>
Ձ		"ts"	lets like the combination "ts" in "lets"	<a href="#">Play</a>
Ղ		"gh"	liberté (French pronunciation) like the French pronunciation of "r" in "liberté"	<a href="#">Play</a>
Ջ		"j"	joke like the "j" in "joke"	<a href="#">Play</a>
Մ		"m"	mom like the "m" in "mom"	<a href="#">Play</a>
Յ		"h" / "y"	hat / year like the "h" in "hat" when placed as the first letter of a word, but most often <b>not</b> used as the first letter of personal names; instead, "Յ" is	<a href="#">Play</a>

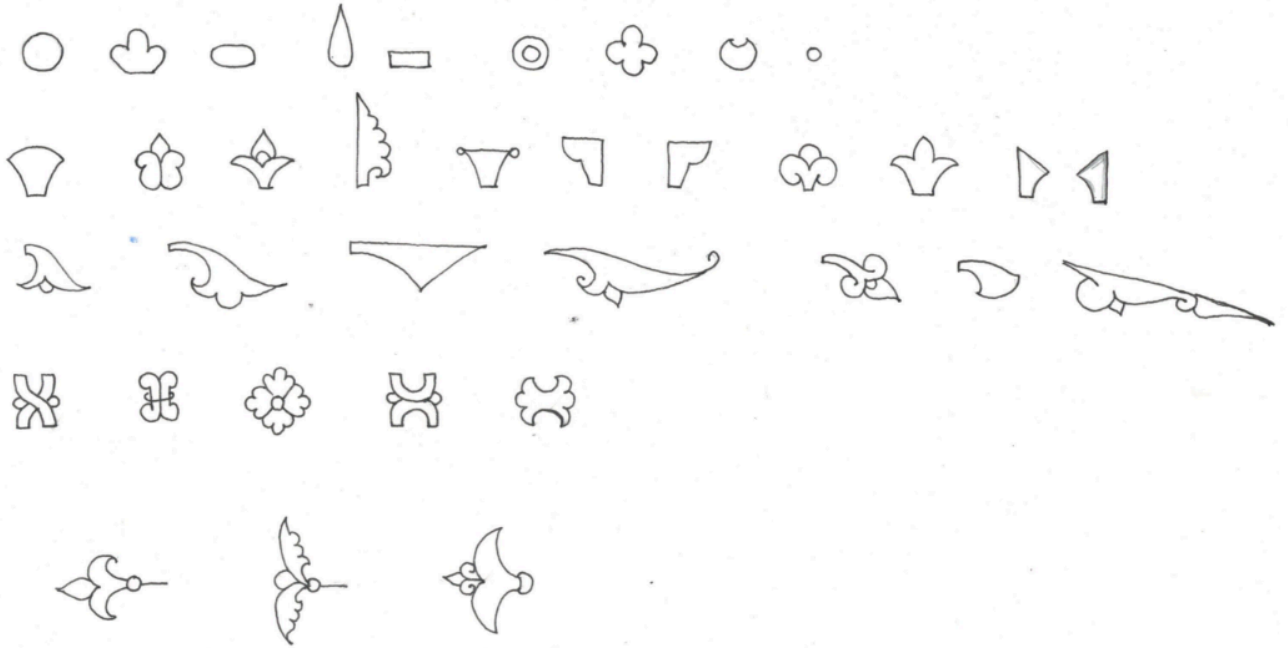
			<p>most often used for personal names to transliterate the "h" sound).</p> <p>like the "y" in "year" when placed in the middle of a word; when placed after another vowel, it gives the vowel a long sound: ԱՅ=I as in "I am"; ԵՅ=AY as in "pay", ՕՅ=OY as in "oink"</p>	
Ն		"n"	<p>number</p> <p>like the "n" in "number"</p>	<a href="#">Play</a>
Շ		"sh"	<p>shoe</p> <p>like the "sh" in "shoe"</p>	<a href="#">Play</a>
Ո		"v" / "o"	<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 <b>not</b> used as the first letter of personal names; instead, "Վ" is most often used for personal names to transliterate the "v" sound as in "violin" or "v" as in "Veronica.")</p>	<a href="#">Play</a>
Չ		"ch"	<p>chair</p> <p>like the "ch" in "chair" (most often for personal names beginning with the "ch" sound, instead of "Չ")</p>	<a href="#">Play</a>
Բ		"b"	<p>bat</p> <p>like the "b" in bat</p>	<a href="#">Play</a>
Չ		"ch"	<p>chat</p> <p>Like the "ch" in chat (but <b>not</b> used most often for personal names; "Չ" is used instead)</p>	<a href="#">Play</a>

<p>Ռ</p> 	<p>"Rr"</p>	<p>perro (Spanish: dog)</p> <p>like the rolled Spanish 'r' in "perro"; (used most often for personal names to transliterate the "r" sound, instead of "Ր" )</p>	<p><a href="#">Play</a></p>
<p>Ս</p> 	<p>"s"</p>	<p>sand</p> <p>like the "s" in sand</p>	<p><a href="#">Play</a></p>
<p>Վ</p> 	<p>"v"</p>	<p>violin</p> <p>like the "v" in "violin"</p>	<p><a href="#">Play</a></p>
<p>Տ</p> 	<p>"d"</p>	<p>dog</p> <p>like the "d" in "dog"</p>	<p><a href="#">Play</a></p>
<p>Ր</p> 	<p>"r"</p>	<p>run</p> <p>like the "r" in "run" (but not used as the first letter of personal names; "Ր" is used for personal names)</p>	<p><a href="#">Play</a></p>
<p>Ց</p> 	<p>"ts"</p>	<p>bits</p> <p>like the "ts" in "bits"</p>	<p><a href="#">Play</a></p>
<p>Վ</p> <p>Ռ</p>  	<p>"V"</p> <p>"w"</p> <p>"oo"</p>	<p>have</p> <p>like the "v" in "have" (but not used at the beginning of words or names;</p> <p>When used together with "Ր", ie "ՌՎ," at the beginning of a word, it sounds like the "w" in water</p> <p>When used with "Ր," ie "ՌՎ," in the middle of a word, it sounds like the "oo" in "food")</p>	<p><a href="#">Play</a></p> <p><a href="#">Play</a></p>

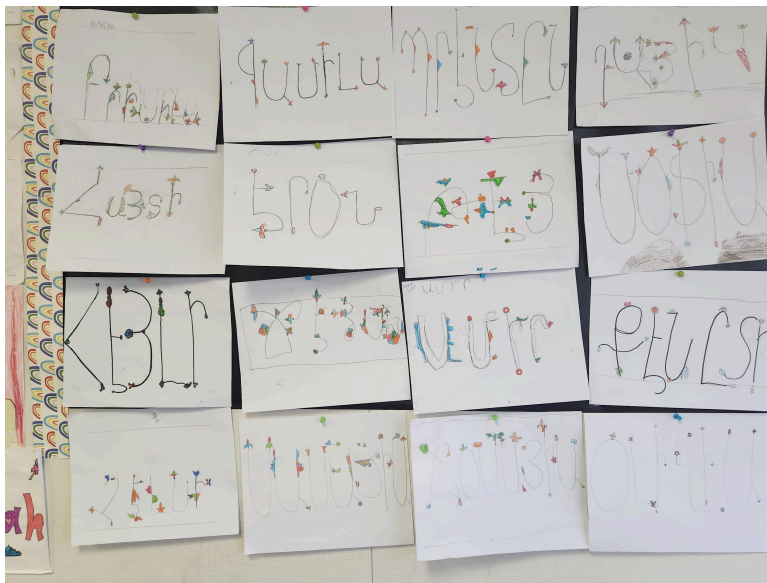
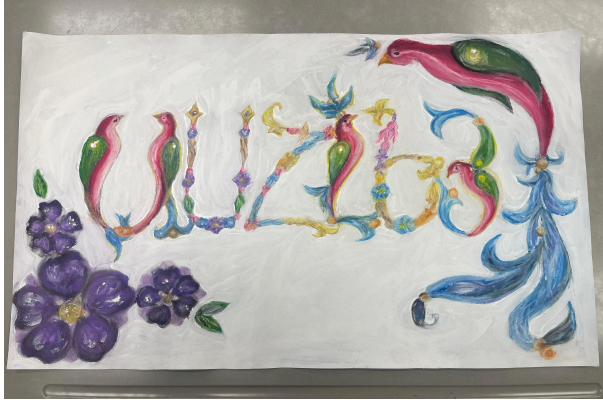
<p>Փ</p> 	<p>“p”</p>	<p>“pop”</p> <p>like the “p” in “pop” (used most often for personal names starting with the “p” sound, instead of “P”; also used within personal names when transliterating the “p” sound )</p>	<p><a href="#">Play</a></p>
<p>Բ</p> 	<p>“k”</p>	<p>kite</p> <p>like the “k” in “kite” (used most often for personal names starting with the “k” sound, instead of “Q”; will be used throughout personal names when transliterating to duplicate the English “k” sound )</p>	<p><a href="#">Play</a></p>
<p>Օ</p> 	<p>“o”</p>	<p>bone</p> <p>like the “o” in “bone”</p>	<p><a href="#">Play</a></p>
<p>Ֆ</p> 	<p>“f”</p>	<p>fight</p> <p>like the “f” in “fight”</p>	<p><a href="#">Play</a></p>

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

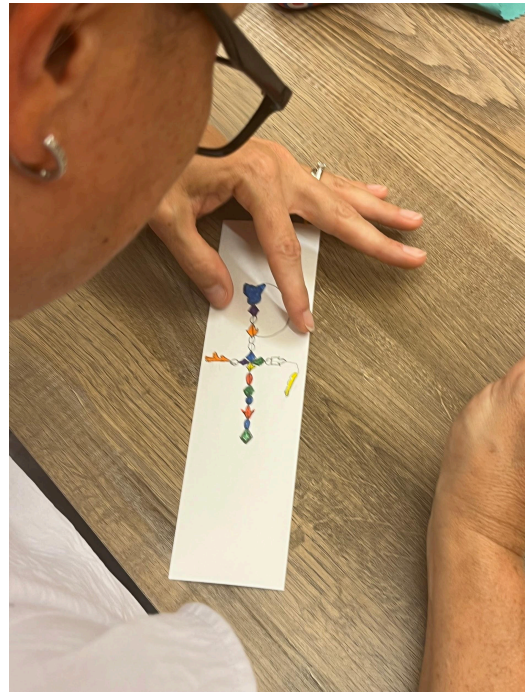
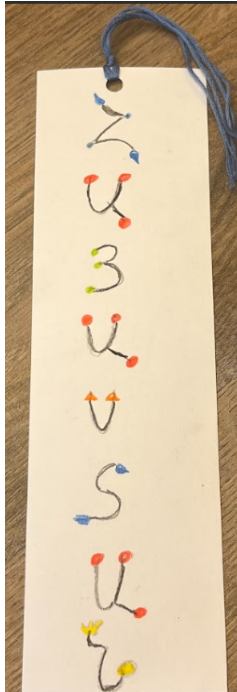
## Armenian Letter Art Decorations



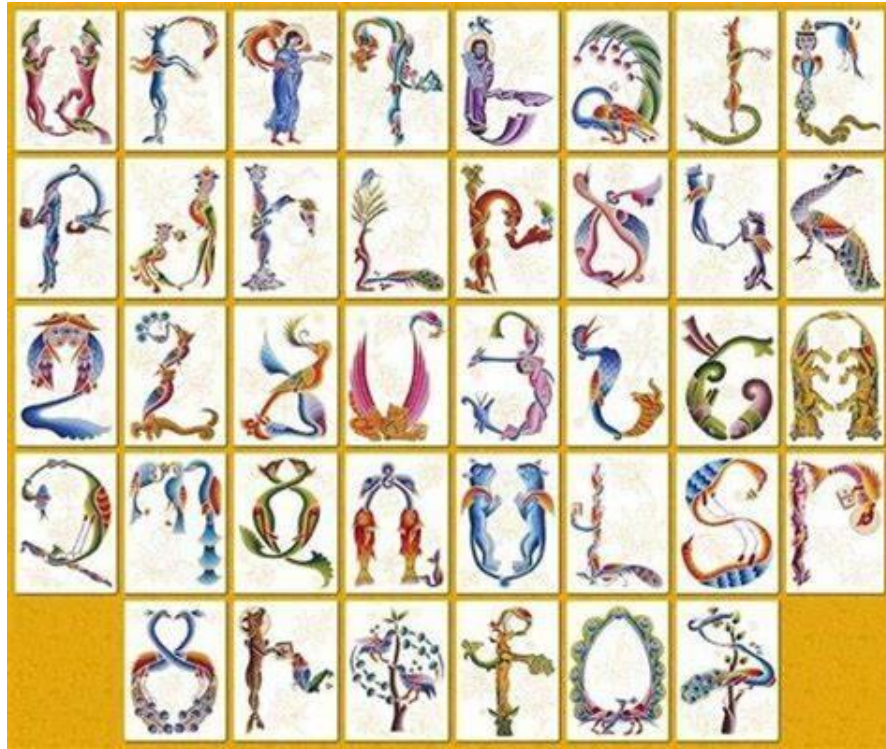
Examples of designs by students:



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



## Bird Designs Using Pastels



## References:

- ArmenieInfo. (2011). *Armenian Alphabet*. YouTube. Retrieved October 22, 2025, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GZK36zBDIes>
- ArmenieInfo. (2012). *Armenian Letters' Pronunciation*. YouTube. Retrieved October 22, 2025, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HoD6a19jym0>
- Big Paper: Building a Silent Conversation Teaching Strategy*. (2008, February 24). Facing History. Retrieved October 22, 2025, from <https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/big-paper-building-silent-conversation>
- Dagdigian, J. (2013, August 06). Heroines of Homilies of Mush rescue remembered. *Horizon Weekly Newspaper*. <https://horizonweekly.ca/en/14064-2/>
- The Genocide Education Project. (2018). *Rescued & Returned: An ancient Armenian bible*. YouTube. Retrieved October 22, 2025, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SCV1LohDLrQ>
- Learn 101. (2018). *Armenian Alphabet*. Learn 101. Retrieved October 22, 2025, from [https://learn101.org/armenian\\_alphabet.php](https://learn101.org/armenian_alphabet.php)
- Mirzoyan, V. (2019, August 27). *Mesrop Mashtots - The Creator of The Armenian Alphabet*. Armenia Discovery. Retrieved October 22, 2025, from <https://armeniadiscovery.com/en/articles/mesrop-mashtots-the-creator-of-the-armenian-alphabet>
- Topchyan, G. (2021, September 08). *A sanctuary of ancient knowledge, the Matenadaran thrives in the digital age*. h-pem. Retrieved October 22, 2025, from <https://www.h-pem.com/en/Stories/2021/09/08/a-sanctuary-of-ancient-knowledge-the-matenadaran-thrives-in-the-digital-age/102>

UNESCO. (2019, December 11). *Armenian letter art and its cultural expressions*. YouTube.

Retrieved October 22, 2025, from

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c-saqVCmxDo&t=143s>

