

Critics' Forum

Visual Arts

Public Art in the Armenian Diaspora

By Adriana Tchalian

Public art is commonly defined as art available for the public to see, regardless of whether it is situated on public property or supported by public funds. Public art can consist of sculpture, murals, paintings, frescoes, carvings, photographs and even graffiti. We can add that public art also conveys a sense of public purpose and may be created by more than one individual, or anonymously.

Most contemporary Armenian visual artists express little interest in public art. They work primarily in the vein of Modernism (a point I made in my earlier article on Postmodernism, *Good Art, Bad Art: Where Is the Armenian Avant-Garde?*), a movement that began in the late nineteenth century. At the center of the Modernist aesthetic is the heterosexual male artist—described by cultural critic Jean Baudrillard as the “heroic genius”—directing his personal vision from the easel.

The central role of the artist in Modernism is due in large part to the movement's preference for painting as the artistic vehicle of choice. Angst-ridden and confused, this Artist-as-Hero conveys his virtuosity in a male-female struggle between paint and canvas, using it to convey and construct his vision of the world. Like Arshile Gorky, Emil Kazaz, Hagop Hagopyan, and a legion of other contemporary Armenian artists, the quintessential artist works outward from the self, the ego.

Though generally commendable by contemporary standards, this chronometer of the Modernist artist has long been replaced by the microchip of Postmodernism. Postmodernism takes Modernism a step further, shifting the emphasis away from the work of art itself to the *concept* it conveys, questioning in the process the very possibility of creating art.

The emphasis on the Modernist self in the Armenian context is evident in our art. What little public art we have in the Armenian Diaspora consists largely of memorials dedicated to the victims of the Armenian Genocide of 1915. There are 139 Armenian memorials—commemorative plaques, inscriptions and monumental sculpture—throughout the world, the most well-known of which is the Genocide Monument (1968) in Armenia's Dsidernakaberd Memorial Park, designed by architects Sashur Kalashian and Lyudmila Mkrtchian.

There are 27 other Genocide memorials in Armenia. That number is exceeded only by the memorials in France, 35 in all. The United States has 21, Lebanon has 5, while Uruguay and Venezuela have one each. Other countries with Genocide memorials include Poland, Belgium, Austria, Switzerland, and Italy.

California is one of the few places outside of Armenia to offer public art that does not relate to the subject of Genocide. These include the statues of *William Saroyan* (1950) and *David of Sassoun* (1950) in Fresno by the artist Varaz Samuelian (1917-1995).

Other examples from California include the work of Armenian artist Henry Lion (1900-1966), who created public art for the city of Los Angeles. His work includes the bronze doors to the Los Angeles City Hall's Spring Street entrance (1932); the *Pioneer Fountain* in Carthay Circle (1924); the *Power of Water* fountain in Lafayette Park (1937); the eagle medallion on the Federal Courthouse (1930); the Cabrillo statue in San Pedro; and the bronze statue of *Felipe de Neve* (1932).

Another example comes from California artist May Sun (Escudero-Fribourg Architect Team), who designed the Hollywood/Western Station of the Metro Rail (1999), which features Armenian symbols on the floor of the station (alongside Mayan and Chinese pictograms).

Apart from these examples, there is hardly anything significant offered by way of public art in the Diaspora. So perhaps the answer to what lies in the future of Armenian public art may very well be found in our ancient past. I am thinking, in this case, of the prehistoric Armenian monoliths of Karahundj. These monoliths can serve as an inspiration for artists who want to break out of the cocoon of Modernism and into the greater dialogue taking place around them.

Prehistoric monoliths, and namely Karahundj, are perhaps the best example of public art in the history of the world. But what is most significant about these structures is that they were most likely produced—from beginning to end—by an entire community, as opposed to a single artist or a group of artists. Everyone from the stonemasons all the way on up to the astronomers (given the structures' astronomical nature) took part in the creation of these structures. They really are public art at its best.

The monolith has become a cultural icon in its own right in recent decades. Stanley Kubrick's renowned film, *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), touches on the mystery behind this simple shape. In the opening scene of the film, apes congregate around a sinister-looking found object—the monolith—and puzzle over its meaning.

Much the same way, people today express a curiosity about Karahundj and other prehistoric monoliths. Their totemic form and enormous scale give them the appearance of structures that are ancient and modern at the same time. Located in the Sissian region of Armenia, Karahundj is believed to be one of the oldest examples of prehistoric stone circles. It even predates the monoliths of Stonehenge (3100 BC), located in Wiltshire, England, perhaps the most famous of these fascinating structures.

Karahundj can serve as the inspiration for a modern version of the monolith, built from local stones and conceived by the community at large. I can imagine the population of a city, along with individual artists or a group of artists, creating and developing such a

project from beginning to end. The result would represent a genuinely collective effort on the part of a community, not unlike the prehistoric communities that built monolithic structures.

With its simple design—a mere rectangle—a modern monolith would be universal in nature. And like the ancient monuments at Stonehenge and Karahundj, the artist and the work of art in such a contemporary monument would be one and the same—the structure would not represent the work of an individual but rather the community that houses it. Perhaps only in such an effort can we move beyond the exclusive role of the individual artist and finally begin to pose the question of what lies beyond the boundaries even of Postmodernism.

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