

Critics' Forum

Visual Arts

An Asian Aesthetic: The Art of Joseph Giraco

By Adriana Tchalian



Is there an Asian aesthetic in contemporary Armenian visual art? It certainly appears so. Unlike the European influences that have dominated Armenian art for over a century, there now appears to be an Asian influence emerging in the work of certain diasporan artists. The painter Joanne Julian, for instance, who has studied throughout Asia, has painted a series of “Zen Circles.” Sara Anjargolian’s travel photography of Thailand and Laos is also a movement in that direction.

But perhaps the best example of the Asian aesthetic in Armenian art is offered by none other than long-time painter Joseph Giraco, an icon in Armenian artistic circles. Giraco’s paintings of abstract, slender lines and muted colors are familiar to many. But what is the significance of the images? Where do they originate?

Like many contemporary Armenian artists, Giraco’s work is informed primarily by his exposure to Western modes of painting and expression. And his classical education and training have simply amplified the influence of European art—Giraco studied for a number of years at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, and his work is therefore steeped in the tradition of Modernism.

But even early in his career, Giraco was painting in a primitive, child-like manner that he then developed into his signature abstract style. The spare, clean lines and uncluttered spaces in these paintings, even at this early stage in his career, suggest the simplicity of Asian designs and motifs. They also suggest the influence of natural imagery in both Western and Asian paintings.

This relationship between nature and art is an important feature throughout the non-Western world, particularly in the art of China and Japan. A good example is offered by Chinese landscape paintings of a thousand years ago, in the Northern Sung period (960-1127), to name just one. “Music and the sea have inspired me more than anything else,” explains Giraco. “I find that nature is the best teacher a painter can find.”

An additional parallel between Giraco’s paintings and many Asian models is the complete absence of human figures. Natural scenes in Asian art generally depict images of primal beauty, completely devoid of human influence. The titles of some of Giraco’s paintings suggest this predominance of the simple beauty of the natural world and its source in the Asian tradition: *Water Forest*; *Oriental Charm*; *Bamboo*; and *Third Galaxy*.

The last of these titles suggest one additional aspect of Joseph Giraco’s art that should be pointed out, one that also looks back to Asian influences in Western traditions—the role of the unconscious. As I suggested earlier, the influence of the Asian aesthetic in Giraco’s work is present in Western art and culture, though the artist himself may (willingly or unwillingly) be unconscious of it. It also goes largely unnoticed by the Armenian viewing public.

The painting *Third Galaxy* mentioned above, for instance, and others in the same vein resemble nebulas in deep space, a visual projection of what lies deeply hidden in society and culture, both Asian and Western. The painting seems to depict the moment of realization itself, the coming to consciousness, or its loss, like witnessing the birth (or death) of a star.

Giraco’s paintings are exhibited in many venues internationally: the Armenian Museum of Paris; the Armenian National Museum of Yerevan; the Institute of Nuclear and Theoretical Physics in Naples, Italy; and the French Embassy in Lebanon.

The beauty and elegance of Giraco’s watercolors are undeniable. And yet, although their style has developed and matured gracefully over the years and been influenced by both Western and Eastern modes of expression, it is tempting to ask what direction it will assume in the future. We can only wait and see.

All Rights Reserved: Critics Forum, 2005

Adriana Tchalian holds a Masters degree in Art History and has managed several art galleries in Los Angeles.

You can reach her or any of the other contributors to Critics' Forum at comments@criticsforum.org. This and all other articles published in this series are available online at www.criticsforum.org. To sign up for a weekly electronic version of new articles, go to www.criticsforum.org/join. Critics' Forum is a group created to discuss issues relating to Armenian art and culture in the Diaspora.