

Critics' Forum

Visual Arts

A Gem in the Rough: The Appreciation of Armenian Art

By Jean Murachanian

For the last decade or so, the number of art galleries in Southern California has been steadily growing. A notable addition to the group is Stephanie's Fine Art Gallery, a bold and innovative gallery specializing in Armenian art. Beyond its unique emphasis on Armenian art, Stephanie's is particularly distinctive because of the vision of its founder and owner, Linda Stepanyan.

Stepanyan opened the gallery ten years ago, because she wanted to bring her appreciation of Armenian art to a wider audience. Stepanyan's goal is to not only assist Armenian customers in their purchases of Armenian art, but perhaps more importantly to bring the world of Armenian art to the attention of non-Armenians. As Stepanyan herself says, "when other nations appreciate Armenian art it makes me proud of what I am doing.... It makes me happy and gives me more motivation."



Jean Carzou, Souvenir de Tolède (oil on canvas)

Stepanyan's keen eye and personal preference has led her to focus the gallery's collection on modern and contemporary art created by artists of Armenian descent, sourced from an extensive network of dealers located throughout Europe. In terms of the modern period (or what Stepanyan refers to as the "classical" period of Armenian art), the gallery includes work by Armenian artists working in Europe or Istanbul from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century.

Artists in this category include such well-known names as Jean Carzou, Jean Jansem, Hovsep Pushman, and Edgar Chahine. Other artists represented in the gallery's collection include Léon Tutundjian, Arsène Chabanian, Ohannès Alhazian, and Sarkis

Diranian. Contemporary artists represented include those of Armenian descent living in the United States – primarily Los Angeles, with many hailing originally from Armenia, the Soviet Union or the Middle East – or Europe, including such contemporary artists as Koko, Emil Kazaz, Galust Grigoryan, and Sasho.



Galust Grigoryan, Family (oil on canvas)

This dual focus on contemporary and more modern/“classical” art by artists of Armenian descent helps the gallery more easily bridge the gap between the two periods. For instance, when customers come in looking for work produced by better-known artists from the modern period, such as Carzou and Jansem, Stepanyan takes the opportunity to educate them about the work being produced by contemporary Armenian artists, as well as perhaps lesser-known artists of the modern period. Stepanyan argues that there are many contemporary (and modern) Armenian artists who, though perhaps not well-known, have nonetheless produced brilliant works that, like gems waiting to be discovered,

deserve to be appreciated and collected. She points to the example of Vincent van Gogh, who was unknown during his lifetime but, as we are all undoubtedly aware, now commands record prices affordable to none but the wealthy art collector or well-endowed museum.

Stephanie's customer base is comprised of both Armenians and non-Armenians. Many of the non-Armenian clients are in the movie industry in Los Angeles and are, ironically, generally well-informed about art and appreciate the work of modern artists Chahine, Pushman, and Carzou. Stepanyan was thrilled recently to offer one of her customers a refrigerator panel painted by Carzou in 1958 that was originally part of a charity fundraising exhibition in Paris organized by the Galerie Carpentier. The exhibition, titled "The Nobility of the Everyday Object," comprised ten refrigerators, each painted by different well-known French artists, including Salvador Dali, Jean Cocteau, Bernard Buffet, Georges Mathieu, and Léonor Fini. The exhibition was described by Cocteau as "a victory over the negative style of emptiness." By way of example, Stepanyan suggests that a panel from this series painted by Carzou would normally sell for several thousand dollars, while one created by Buffet could cost as much as \$200,000.



Gallery Owner, Stepanyan

The existence of galleries such as Stephanie's can clearly have a meaningful impact on the recognition of art created by artists of Armenian descent. They educate the general public about Armenian art and culture and provide a much-needed forum for up-and-coming contemporary artists. In expanding the awareness of Armenian art to a wider audience, such galleries serve to bolster its value within the broader art community.

Stepanyan's observations suggest that such value goes beyond its price or the accessibility it affords or denies to potential patrons. Not surprisingly, lesser-known pieces are relatively more affordable, while that affordability nonetheless seldom makes

them more attractive to purchasers. There is some evidence, however, that non-Armenian patrons are also more open to new or lesser-known artists, including those of Greek and Russian descent, whose art and culture have traditionally received more active local support.

There is perhaps no better way to improve on this trend than by actively supporting the production – and enjoyment – of Armenian art. After all, there is nothing like seeing and appreciating the real thing, by spending time in one of the numerous galleries and venues that feature the works of artists of Armenian descent, both in and outside of Southern California.

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