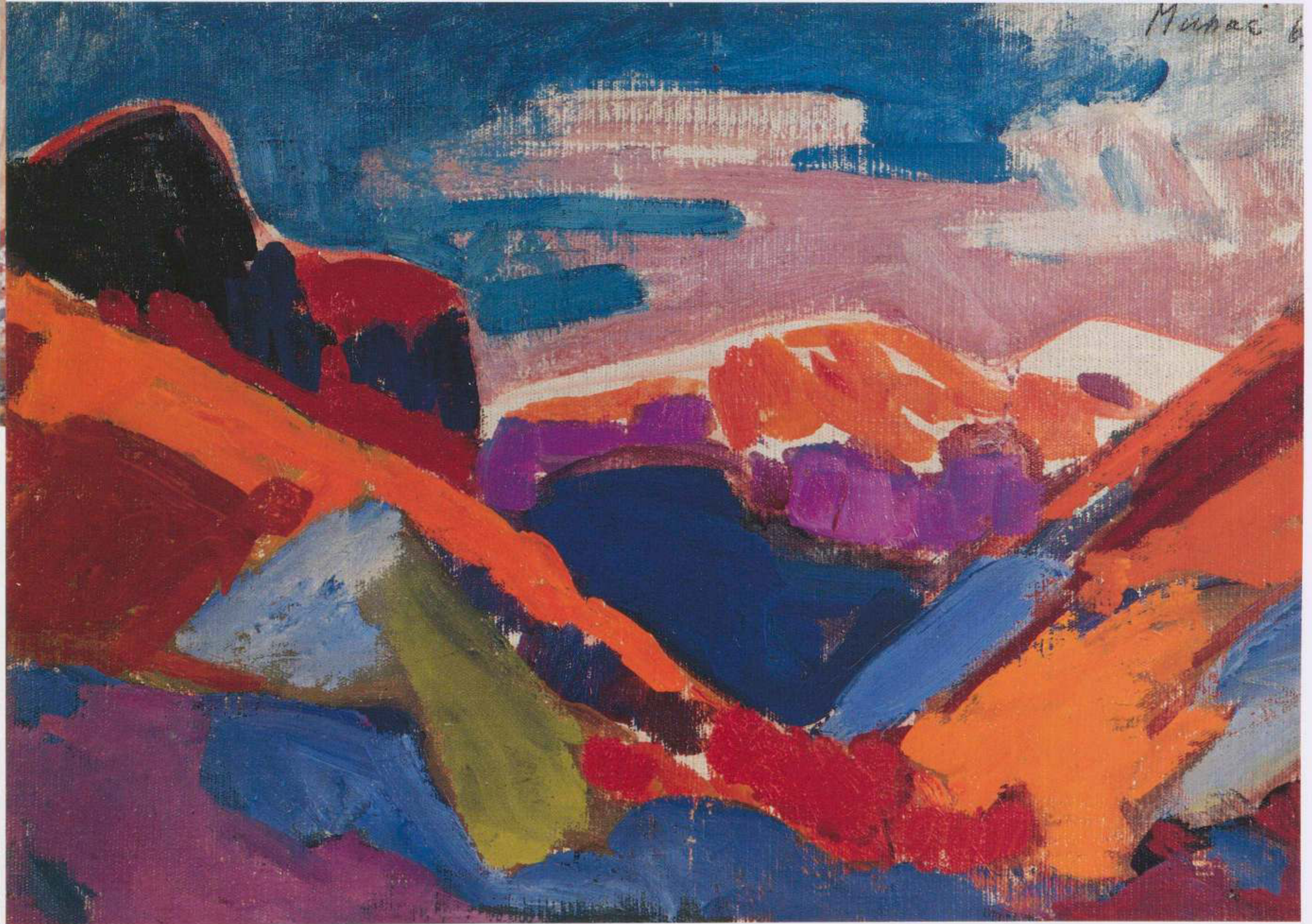
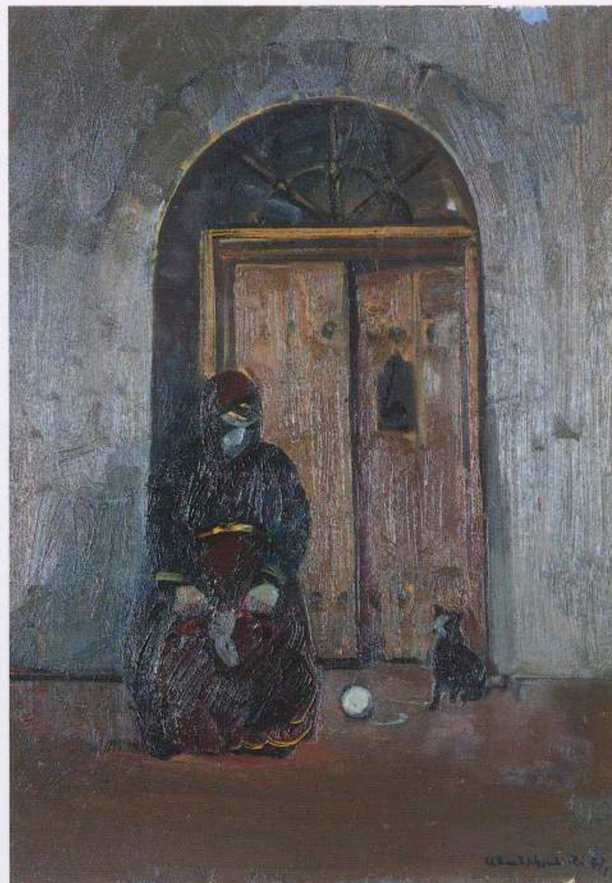


Pl. 10:1
Minas Avetissian
(Untitled), 1961
Oil on canvas
34 × 48.5 cm

Pl. 10:2
Ardashes Hounanian
Cathedral, 1973
Gouache on paper
96.5 × 66.9 cm



Pl. 10:3 (*above right*)
Hagop Ananikian
Woman at the Door, 1971
Oil on canvas
69.5 × 50 cm

Pl. 10:4
Hagop Hagopian
Outskirts of the Village, 1981
Oil on canvas
73 × 100 cm

Pl. 10:5
Raphael Atoyan
Our Courtyard, 1970
Oil on canvas
90 × 71 cm

Pl. 10:6
Hagop Hagopian
No to the Neutron Bomb!,
1977
Oil on canvas
194 × 298 cm

10 | Light in darkness

The spirit of Armenian nonconformist art

Vartoug Basmadjian

Different cultures unveil different perceptions of light.

—George Yakoulov[1]

Despite being one of the smallest republics of the Soviet Union, the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic made a significant and distinct contribution to the development of Soviet nonconformist art. Special circumstances and the unique characteristics of Armenian art set it apart from the art produced in Moscow, Leningrad, and other centers of the Soviet Union. Indeed, Armenian art has nurtured its lively independence and national integrity so successfully through the centuries that even when Armenia was incorporated into much larger political entities bent on crushing its spirit and threatening its very existence, its culture survived.

This remarkable resilience and tenacity stems, in part, from the fact that Armenia is one of the oldest cradles of civilization: its art can be traced back almost three thousand years. The capital of present-day Armenia, Yerevan, dates from the seventh century B.C. As Erebouni, it was an active cultural center, and the art of that period developed in the form of sculpture and wall-paintings. In the Hellenistic period, Armenia expanded its borders and, through trade with the West, its culture was influenced by Greco-Roman art.

The adoption of Christianity as the official religion of Armenia in A.D. 301 ushered in a new era. Pagan temples and statues were destroyed and a Christian art prospered. The invention of the Armenian alphabet in the fifth century helped put a national stamp on the native art and literature. The art of medieval Armenia found particularly lively and beautiful expression in illuminated manuscripts (around thirty thousand of which have survived) and in the elaborately carved stone crosses, called *khachkar*, that punctuate the Armenian landscape.

During the subsequent centuries, short periods of Armenian self-rule were generally followed by much longer periods of foreign domination (by the Arabs, Seljuks, Persians, Ottomans, and Russians). The Turkish persecutions of the Armenian people at the end of the nineteenth century culminated in the twentieth century's first genocide: in the 1915 massacres, over a million Armenians were killed. Those who survived this holocaust fled to different parts of the world and formed the Armenian diaspora. The art of the diaspora tended to develop in parallel with the art of the host countries. Of necessity, the art of Soviet Armenia (which became a Socialist republic in 1920) followed the general outlines of Soviet Socialist Realism as it was defined in the late 1920s and later imposed by the Communist political apparatus through the Artists' Union and the Ministry of Culture. Until Stalin's death in 1953, these strictures distorted the natural evolution of Armenia's art and disrupted ties with its national past, especially its religious heritage.

As a form of defiance, a number of nonconformist artists turned for inspiration to the rich Armenian cultural tradition. This strong link with the past helps explain the historical and religious orientation of artists such as Ardashes Hounanian, whose work draws on church architecture and *khachkars*, and Garen Sembatian, whose work depicts fanciful medieval castles, battles, and events of a heroic past in a naive, almost childlike manner. Other artists drew their inspiration from the familiar Armenian landscape—the mountains, deserts, fields, and vineyards—and from the colorful life of the rural villages and markets. The works of such painters as Martiros Sarian, Minas Avetissian, Bagrat Grigorian, and Hagop Hagopian often deal with these themes using styles that range from Postimpressionism to realism.

These historic, religious, landscape, or genre paintings can be recognized as Armenian primarily because of their distinctive Armenian content. But another feature that identifies much of the best contemporary painting as Armenian is the characteristic use of color—bright, warm, natural hues. The artists who use this palette range from Postimpressionists, such as the late Martiros Sarian and his followers, including Minas Avetissian, to abstract painters such as Seyran Khatlamajian and Viguen Tadevossian. While the use of color by these artists may vary slightly from one to another, each uses the bold reds and blues of traditional Armenian art. One finds these same hues in the medieval illuminated manuscripts of Toros Rosslin and Sarkis Bidzag.[2] As Garig Basmadjian has noted:

> The eternal source of inspiration for all Armenian art . . . remains in the local colors: the sun, the multicolored tufa stones of pink, red, ochre . . . the blue sky, cloudless for more than three hundred days a year—set against the white majestic background of Mount Ararat.[3]

Martiros Sarian (1880–1972), who dominated Armenian art for almost a century, was born in Nor Nakhichevan, an Armenian trading center near Rostov-on-Don. Beginning in 1897, he studied painting for ten years at the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture under Konstantin Korovin and Valentin Serov. He then exhibited with a number of groups, including the Blue Rose (1907), and took part in major exhibitions of the Golden Fleece (1907), the World of Art (1910–16), the Union of Russian Artists (1910–11), and the Four Arts Society (1925–29).

During the early years, Sarian's work was influenced by Oriental motifs, but these soon gave way to a major concern with the juxtaposition of light and dark and the use of pure color to delineate form. These qualities later led French critics to dub him "the Blue Fauve" during his retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Paris in 1980. Sarian spent his mature years in Yerevan, painting the Armenian sun and sky, mountains and valleys, farms and villages, markets and people. Little by little, Sarian's paintings became synonymous with Armenia. His colors became the Armenian colors and influenced a whole generation of artists.

Because of its great distance from Moscow, Armenia was able to preserve the identity of its art despite the demand of the Soviet regime that all artists conform to Socialist Realism. This physical and cultural distance attenuated the stultifying effect of dogmatic Party control. The ability and skill of the Armenian leadership in fending off direct interference in Armenia's cultural affairs also played a part in maintaining a degree of cultural independence. Many local Party officials were Armenians first and Party loyalists second. It is also fair to say that the loyalties of cultural officials were seldom challenged, since most postwar Armenian art was largely representational and did not seriously deviate from the strictures of Socialist Realism.

As a consequence, the best Armenian artists—including most of the nonconformist artists—were among the more than five hundred members of the Artists' Union in the Armenian Republic. The Union included artists of all schools: Socialist Realist hacks (the bulk), Postimpressionists (quite a few), Surrealists (some), Photorealists, Abstract Expressionists, and so forth. Similar situations existed in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Georgia, where artists with proper formal training were almost never excluded from the Artists' Union. Furthermore, the Armenian nonconformist artists generally did not use their art as a political platform for attacking the system; their art was created in spite of the system.

This does not mean that Armenian artists did not face limitations on what they were allowed to represent or that there were no artists who operated outside of what was officially acceptable. The nonconformists were always well aware that if they went beyond established limits they might have their works withdrawn from exhibitions, be disqualified from commissions, lose their jobs, or even worse. Real limits to artistic freedom were recognized, but they were wider, more flexible, and more bearable in Armenia than in Moscow, Leningrad, or Kiev.

In short, because the dominant ethnic group in Armenia had a strong, well-integrated cultural heritage, sustained by its own language and traditions and further reinforced by the physical distance from Moscow, the official artists were able to retain some significant degree of artistic independence. In the Cold War years, what was tolerated and even exhibited in Yerevan would have merited bulldozer treatment in Moscow.[4] In 1972, for example, art critic Henrik Igitian, along with Minas Avetissian and other artists, managed to obtain permission from the authorities to create the Museum of Contemporary Armenian Art, which became the first museum of independent contemporary art in the Soviet Union. Artists donated works to the museum and, since Igitian did not want to fall into an "inverted" suppression of official art, the museum was declared open to all artists. However, almost none of the official artists offered their works. Although many of the works exhibited in the museum would have been considered acceptable for official exhibitions in Moscow or Leningrad, a significant number of the works were in the style or spirit of the unofficial artists of these cities and would have been excluded from officially sanctioned exhibitions there. Surrealism, abstraction, and other art styles that were beyond the pale elsewhere were displayed side by side with the more official paintings. This small museum unquestionably played a unique and important, even a critical, role in furthering the development of modern art in Armenia in the 1970s and 1980s and continues as a tribute to the courage and vision of Igitian and those nonconformist artists who joined him in its creation.

Early development of nonconformist art The breathing space created by the thaw following Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin's crimes in 1956 provided the

necessary conditions for a virtual renaissance of cultural life in Armenia. Books that had long been banned were once again published. Pound, Yeats, and Eliot were translated. Musicians experimented openly. Concerts and poetry readings were organized. The film industry got a wake-up call by the presence of the pathbreaking movie director Sergei Paradjanov.[5] Books on Cézanne, Van Gogh, and Picasso became available on the Art Institute's bookshelves. True, one still needed special permission, but armed with a letter vouching for one's "seriousness" as an art student, one could now borrow these books from the library. It was a time of excitement and enthusiasm for all who were hungry for freedom, self-expression, and artistic creativity.

The Armenian art world was small enough to discourage the development of competing groups or schools of art. Each artist tended to do his or her own thing. The artists' ateliers became the pulse of the capital. It was there that the artists and the poets would meet with visitors and students, scientists and philosophers; it was there that discussions on philosophy and artistic theory would be followed by poetry readings, music, the latest humor from Radio Yerevan, and a bottle of Armenian cognac.

This artistic revival was assisted by a number of factors. Some of these, such as cultural exchange groups and foreign exhibitions and concerts, were common to all the republics in the Soviet Union. Other factors, however, were specifically Armenian. One of the smallest Soviet republics, Armenia was the only one which counted as many of its countrymen in the diaspora as it had within its own borders. Those in the diaspora were not all self-proclaimed exiles; some had been forced to leave western Armenia to escape the 1915 massacres. Beginning in the 1930s and continuing up to the 1950s, some of these forced exiles returned to their homeland, which had become a part of the Soviet Union, with great hopes and dreams, but were met, unfortunately, with a variety of Stalinist repressive measures. The artists among them were no exception. Most artists were not actively persecuted for failing to embrace Socialist Realism; they were simply ignored. Those artists from the diaspora who survived through the difficult Stalinist years proved to be major influences on the generation of artists who emerged after Stalin's death.

Yervand Kotchar (1899–1978) was the most important artist of the Armenian diaspora to return to his homeland. Born in Tbilisi and educated at Vkhutemas (Higher State Art Technical Studios) in Moscow, he settled in Paris in 1923 and had his own personal exhibition there three years later. Kotchar created "Painting in Space," an art form somewhere between painting and sculpture; this art was designed to go beyond the two-dimensional aspect of abstract art, to evolve into space and, as he said, conquer it. Kotchar exhibited with Braque, Chagall, Matisse, and Picasso at the Paris exhibition "Panorama of Contemporary Art" in 1929.

Kotchar emigrated to Armenia in 1936, and became a member of the Artists' Union the following year on the eve of the great purges. Accused of anti-Soviet propaganda in 1941, he was imprisoned and his sculptures were destroyed (including a Surrealist plaster bust of Stalin). Two years later, he was released following the intervention of his childhood friend Anastas Mikoyan, a member of the politburo and Stalin's trusted specialist on foreign trade. In the years that followed, rather than compromise his artistic principles, Kotchar maintained a low profile to keep out of trouble.

In the late 1950s, Kotchar's presence in Yerevan was central to the cultural atmosphere of the capital. For the younger generation of artists, listening to the "maestro" speak about the art scene in Paris in the 1920s was equivalent to having access to a whole library of books on avant-garde art. When Kotchar's monumental work depicting the Armenian hero David of Sassoun was erected in Yerevan in 1959, it became, after Mount Ararat, the most powerful and popular symbol of Armenia.

In contrast, Bedros Konturajian (1905–1956), a one-time student of Fernand Léger in Paris, never managed to come to terms with Soviet life after he moved to Armenia in 1947. Eventually, without a workshop, without artist's materials, and hungry and desperate, he committed suicide in 1956.

Another important diaspora artist who returned to the homeland was Haroutiun Galentz (1910–1967), a survivor of the 1915 Turkish genocide who escaped with other orphans to Syria and then to Lebanon. In 1946 he moved back to Armenia with his family. Since he did not bend to Socialist norms, he too was ignored as an artist until 1962, when he had his first one-man show in Yerevan. His choice of color, his impulsive brushstrokes, and his simplified forms produced an art which was fresh and unashamedly optimistic. His student and wife, Arminé Galentz (b. 1920), still lives in Yerevan and continues to paint in the spirit and style of her late husband.

Alexander Bazhbeuk-Melikian (1891–1966) was also an important influence on the Armenian art of the 1960s and 1970s. He lived in Tbilisi, the colorful capital city of Georgia which has always had a large Armenian population and been a major center for Armenian art.[6] A decade younger than Sarian, Bazhbeuk-Melikian painted in a theatrical, Postimpressionist style, often using subdued, dark

backgrounds to set off his figures. His unique source of inspiration was the passionate and sensual female figure. His women, acrobats and dancers, are sure of their beauty, natural in their movements, and comfortable with their nudity. It is surprising that so much *joie de vivre* could be expressed by an artist who lived on the edge of poverty, crowded with his family into a single room and sometimes having to burn his pictures to make space for new ones. At other times, he had to stop painting because he could not afford new art materials. Only after his death did the cultural bureaucracy realize the stature of this great talent. His daughter, Lavinia Bazhbeuk-Melikian (b. 1922), is also an artist, having studied at the Surikov Institute of Art in Moscow before moving to Yerevan. Since 1962, when she participated in a group exhibition with Minas Avetissian, she has been an active member of the artistic scene in Yerevan.

Gevork Grigorian (1898–1976), known as Giotto, was also born in Tbilisi, where he studied at the School of Art and Architecture. He later attended Vkhutemas in Moscow from 1920 to 1921. He lived most of his life in a Tbilisi basement in abject poverty. Whether he painted a still life or a portrait, his subject filled the whole space of the canvas to the very edges, giving us a privileged close-up view and forcing us to imagine the larger reality. Grigorian's palette was limited to browns, yellows, and greenish-blacks; these colors express his pain and suffering without acknowledging the accompanying desperation. With great mastery, he provided the alternative to what has been called the "tyranny of the beautiful" in Tbilisi Armenian art.

The 1970s: The next generation of nonconformist artists The 1970s were a decade of experimentation and artistic self-discovery in Armenia as elsewhere. As soon as the Soviet system allowed some degree of laxity, the younger generation of artists turned for inspiration to the "masters" who lived among them and whom they loved and respected. This was a major reason why Pop Art, Sots Art, Conceptual Art, and happenings did not find fertile ground in Yerevan in the 1970s, as they did in Moscow. The spirit of Armenian artistic innovation flowered in response to the solid presence of tradition, inspired by the older generation of avant-garde artists. For some artists, this turn to tradition meant a return to the roots of Armenian culture.

The most brilliant talent of this new generation was Minas Avetissian (1928–1975). Born in the north Armenian village of Jajur, he was educated in Yerevan and at the Academy of Fine Arts in Leningrad. It was in Leningrad that he befriended Henrik Igitian, with whom he later created the Museum of Contemporary Art in Yerevan. The prime inspiration for Avetissian's painting is the Armenian land, in particular his native village of Jajur, which figures prominently in a number of his major paintings. It is said that Avetissian gave back to the Armenian village its national identity by expressing its particular rhythm, its traditional values, its down-to-earth concerns, and its infinite wisdom. His canvases burst with color inspired by both the bright Armenian sunlight and the medieval Armenian illuminated manuscripts (Pl. 10:1). Avetissian's mentor, Martiros Sarian, spoke with admiration of him as the artist who "dared to paint the sun."

Avetissian was so beloved that he soon became "Minas" to everyone, including the village folk who, strangely enough, warmed to his modernist rendition of their village. Then tragedy struck. In 1972, Avetissian's studio in Yerevan inexplicably burned to the ground, destroying over a hundred of his best canvases. Despite the profound shock he experienced, Avetissian resumed painting immediately and produced a number of late masterpieces. Then, one fateful day in 1975, a car swerved onto the sidewalk and struck and killed him. After his death, tragedy continued to haunt Avetissian. In 1988, a major earthquake destroyed a building housing seven of his murals, as well as his house in Jajur, which had been made into a museum.

Hagop Ananikian (1919–1977) and Raphael Atoyan (b. 1931) both found artistic inspiration in their hometown of Leninakan (presently known as Gumri). Their canvases are silent reflections of the memories of their childhoods, attempting to bring back to life the everyday people and places recorded by each as a child and expressed with nostalgia. Ananikian's paintings have an unfinished quality that helps evoke a certain atmosphere, character, and moment (Pl. 10:3). In Atoyan's work one feels the desire to return to all that was once specifically Armenian—baking *lavash* (Armenian bread), the village church, the grapevines, even "our door" (Pl. 10:5). Thus nostalgia becomes a subtle political statement.

Ardashes Hounanian (b. 1922) turned to the beginnings of Armenia's religious culture for inspiration. Whether his painting represents a *khachkar* (stone cross) (Fig. 10:1), the interior of a church, or a more abstract composition, the same mystical-religious atmosphere permeates his work (Pl. 10:2). There is an otherworldly quality to his landscapes, places where one would not wish to tread for fear of unwittingly disturbing the past. Alexander Kamensky has this to say about his paintings: "Hounanian's complex rhythms seem to be set to a strange music.

Fig. 10:1
Ardashes Hounanian
Stone Cross, 1971
Gouache on paper
99.1 × 69.3 cm

Armenian tradition is the key to his creations and they certainly have a lot to say to the world. . . . His compositions are visions which speak to us, of legendary worlds and constructions which remind us of crystal—sometimes massive and solid and at other times fragile and translucent."[7]

Hagop Hagopian transformed the color of the Armenian landscape, moving from the bright palette of Sarian, which dominated for decades, to a darker palette made up of more desolate shades. Born in Egypt in 1923 and educated in Paris, Hagopian moved to Armenia in 1962. He sees an Armenia in which there are no people in colorful dress; for him, the fields are dry, the trees are desiccated, the vines are barren. Clouds do not bring rain and power pylons outnumber the trees in the rocky landscape. In this silent and almost monochromatic world, there is a sense of sadness and anxiety (Pl. 10:4). Even when human figures are included in his canvases, we cannot see their faces. They are either hidden in semi-darkness, or turning away, or covered by some object. In *No to the Neutron Bomb!*, 1977 (Pl. 10:6), the heads have completely disappeared, taking with them the bodies, and we are left with a horde of overcoats marching in protest, clearly a bit too late.

In Hagopian's still lifes (which are hardly "still"), curious juxtapositions, such as a basket of fragile eggs next to menacing garden tools (Pl. 1:16) or empty gloves reaching toward a fish, communicate the same uneasy feelings and pregnant silences as his barren landscapes. Hagopian, nevertheless, was given the honorary title "People's Artist" and was considered an official painter. Given his somber vision and the hidden messages implicit in his work, this award was testimony to the sometimes arbitrary classification system of Armenia's artistic officialdom. It is also a tribute to Hagopian's artistic talent.

Some Armenian nonconformist artists, such as Gayaneh Khachaturian, turned to painting the realm of the fantastic and surreal. Khachaturian was born in Tbilisi in 1942 and is another of the small number of important Armenian artists who have chosen to live there. In her paintings, she depicts a disquieting world of innocent-looking animals and people engaged in seemingly innocent actions (Pl. 10:7). Each canvas is an episode in a ritual, the exact significance of which remains a mystery to the observer. Nevertheless, one is always enchanted as much by her fantastic world as by her bold use of color.

Edward Kharazian (b. 1939) also turned to painting the fantastic early in his career. Contrary to Khachaturian, however, his world is not at all menacing. The creature who finds the golden egg (Pl. 10:8) is a rather likeable

character, the village fool or sage who can at any moment disappear into the background. In Kharazian's later paintings, the background becomes more and more dominant and the figures are transformed into organic forms virtually floating across the surface. Kharazian then further simplifies the forms, dilutes his colors, and produces poetic, almost transparent, abstract compositions.

Martin Petrossian (b. 1936) is another artist who explores the realm of fantasy. His is the world of Armenian folklore and fable, as he has reviewed and edited it. Knights, sages, and mythical animals find themselves in the same compositions as modern women and men. Petrossian's style combines an almost naive approach with a sublime, philosophical one. He uses pastel colors in his paintings and no colors at all in his graphic works so as not to obscure the sensitivity of his line.

Robert Elibekian was born in Tbilisi in 1941. The son of a theater director, he often accompanied his father to work. The wonder of the stage provided a colorful and intense alternative to everyday reality for the budding artist, and he has managed to incorporate this magic into his canvases. The actresses and other models in his paintings perform with subtle elegance and control and express their deepest emotions with understatement and balance (Pl. 10:11). As Russian art historian Dmitri Sarabianov has remarked, Elibekian takes us into a world of pure sentiments where "there is no action, time is at a standstill and motion is suspended. In this world, every detail has an autonomous value."[8]

Varoujan Vardanian (b. 1948) had his first one-man exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Yerevan in 1976. In the catalogue, Henrik Igitian calls Vardanian's work "virile lyricism." Vardanian's world combines the allegorical and the dramatic, and his favorite genre is the female portrait or the multiple portrait. His use of color is both subtle and forceful and his texture is refined and original (Pl. 10:10).

Nonconformist Armenian art of the 1970s is also marked by Expressionist tendencies. Ruben Adalian (b. 1929) paints canvases that are expressions of passionate, sometimes violent, sensations. Tortured human forms, headless figures, and hermaphrodites are his symbols of the tragedy of the human condition (Pl. 10:9). While Adalian's debt to Kotchar is unquestionable, there is an added psychological agitation in Adalian's work. Rudolf Khachaturian (b. 1937), another student of Kotchar, experimented with the distorted human form early in his artistic career. At the end of the 1960s, he showed a number of these works to a Moscow art committee, which censured him and threatened him with expulsion from the Artists' Union. He returned to Armenia with a clearer appreciation of the artistic freedom in his own republic. Later, he succeeded in gaining deserved acclaim in Moscow for his exquisite portraits and still lifes executed in pencil and sepia.

A number of artists adopted an art form on the frontier of realism and Postcubism. Bagrat Grigorian (1939–1992) produced paintings of landscapes and villages in which he reduced these scenes to their simplest forms, superimposing swatches of color as a child would use building blocks to construct the composition (Pl. 10:13). The resulting works have a fresh, childlike quality (Pl. 10:15). Henry Elibekian, the brother of Robert, was born in Tbilisi in 1936, and after living for a while in Moscow and Kiev finally settled in Yerevan in 1972. Painter, sculptor, and stage designer, he has explored in sequence every artistic school and genre. His still lifes are executed with a perfect balance of impulsiveness and control (Pl. 10:16).

Ruben Hovnatanian (b. 1940) depicts a number of different planes in his paintings. He achieves this effect either by actually representing each object with its volume and shadows or by superimposing linear structures where no light source exists. In this latter group of works, only color is used to create the composition of the painting and its transparency. The palette of Raffi Adalian (b. 1941) was restricted to earth colors in his early, finely worked still lifes. These had a characteristic texture, thick in some places and barely painted in others, smoothed out in some areas and coarse in others. His later work is almost white on white. The play of texture that was achieved by the use of paint in his early work is now expressed by other materials stuck onto the canvas.

At his very best, Garen Sembatian (b. 1932) is the most refreshing artist of his generation. He simplifies reality to its elemental forms, thereby transforming and elevating it to a magical and universal plane. His schematic figures, with their black outlines and energetic strokes of color, are reminiscent of children's drawings (Pl. 10:17). The simpler his images get, however, the more we are aware of the legendary symbols of the paintings. Sembatian's simple forms are thus most effective when they awaken the primitive force of our subconscious.

Both Viguen Tadevossian (b. 1944) and Seyran Khatlamajian (1937–1994) show an emotional quality parallel with the art of Arshile Gorky. While Tadevossian is the more lyrical of the two in his finely executed drawings and his abstract canvases (Pl. 10:14), Khatlamajian has the more vibrant line. Freed of the constraints of figurative art, these artists create a visual structure, which, at its best, can be considered a plastic formula for the

Pl. 10:8 (*right*)
Edward Kharazian
I Found the Golden Egg, 1979
Gouache and pen and ink on paper
33.9 × 48 cm

Pl. 10:7 (*left*)
Gayaneh Khachaturian
Procession of the White Court, 1985
Oil on canvas
81.6 × 87.2 cm

Pl. 10:9 (*left*)
Ruben Adalian
(Untitled), 1981
Oil on canvas
86.5 × 59 cm

Pl. 10:10
Varoujan Vardanian
The Palace of the Angels, 1977
Oil on canvas
81.5 × 100 cm

Pl. 10:11
Robert Elibekian
Nude Models, 1972
Oil on fiberboard
131 × 111.5 cm

Pl. 10:12
Serge Essayan
(Untitled), 1973
Oil on fiberboard
61 × 79.5 cm

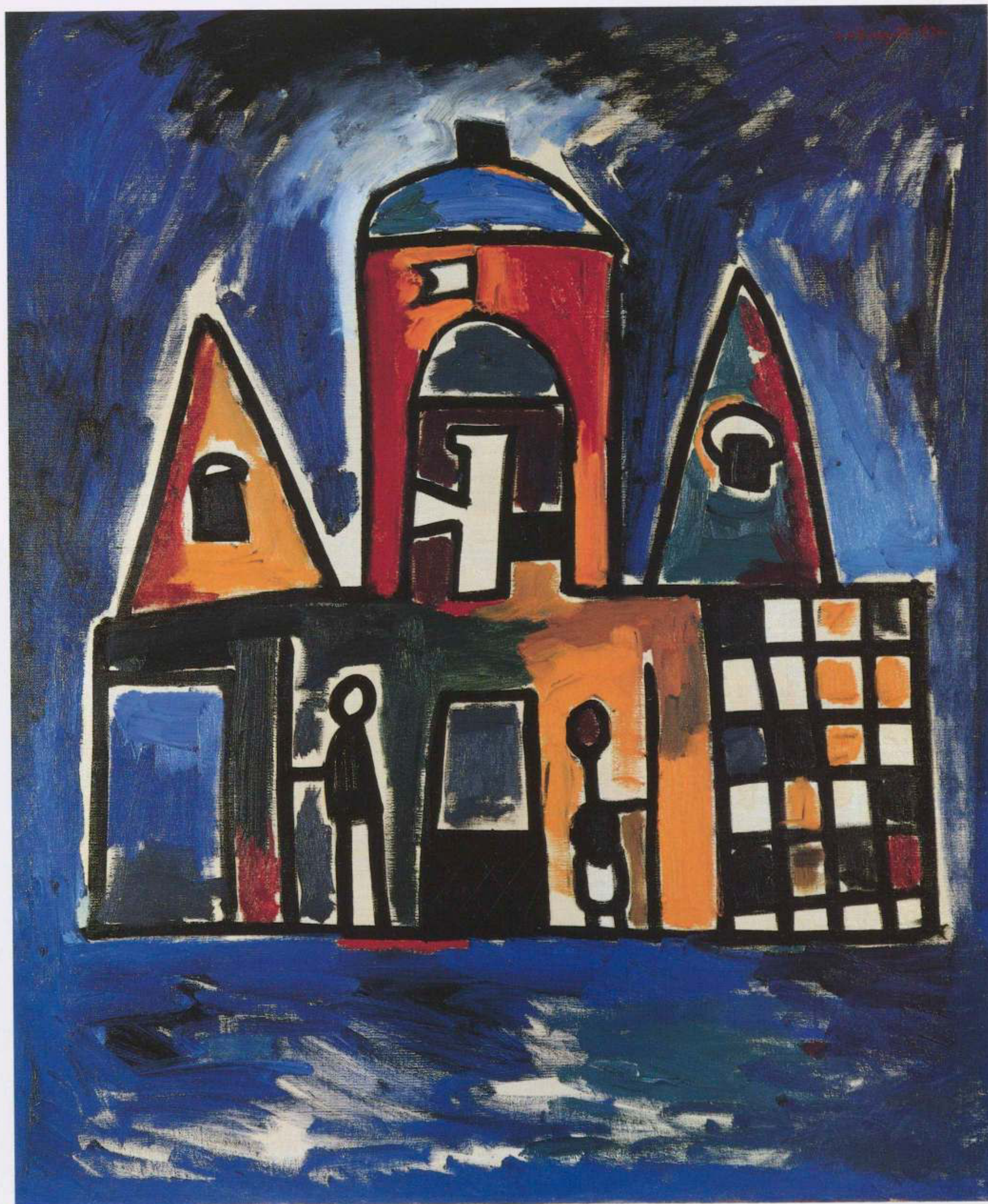
Pl. 10:13
Bagrat Grigorian
(Untitled), 1975
Tempera on paper
51.3 × 73.1 cm

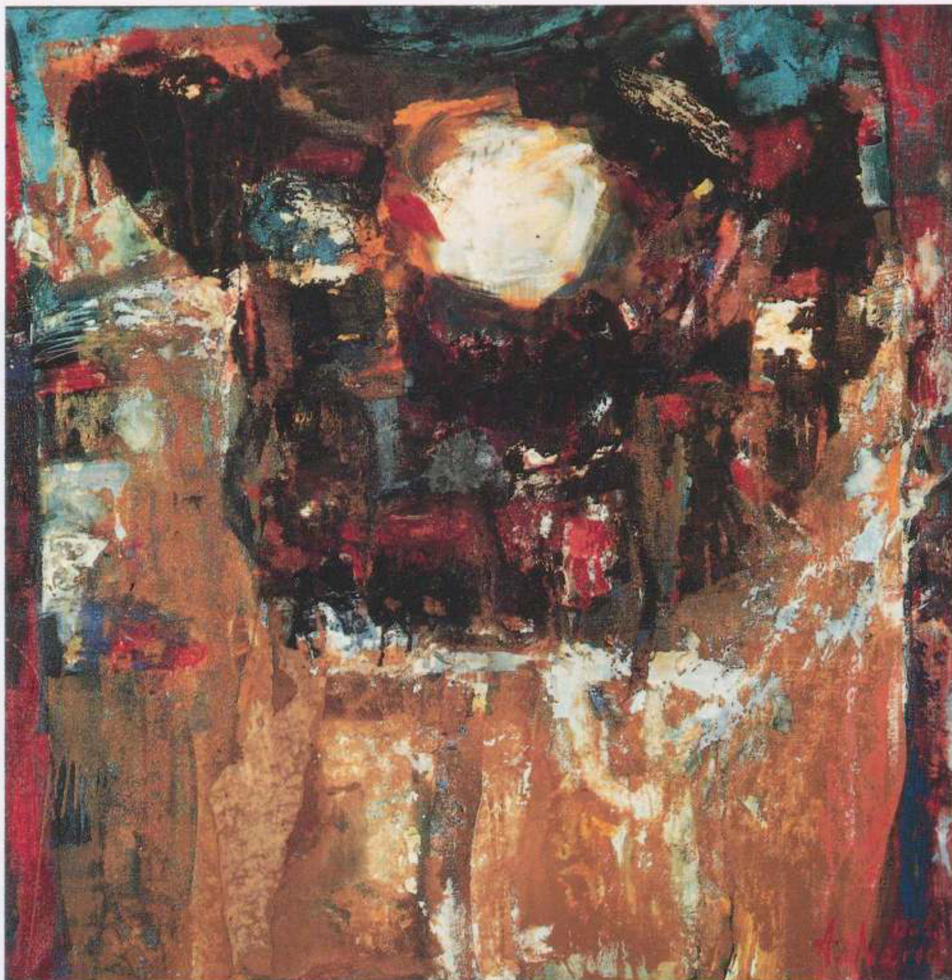
Pl. 10:14
Viguen Tadevossian
Refraction, 1977
Oil on canvas
80.2 × 96.5 cm

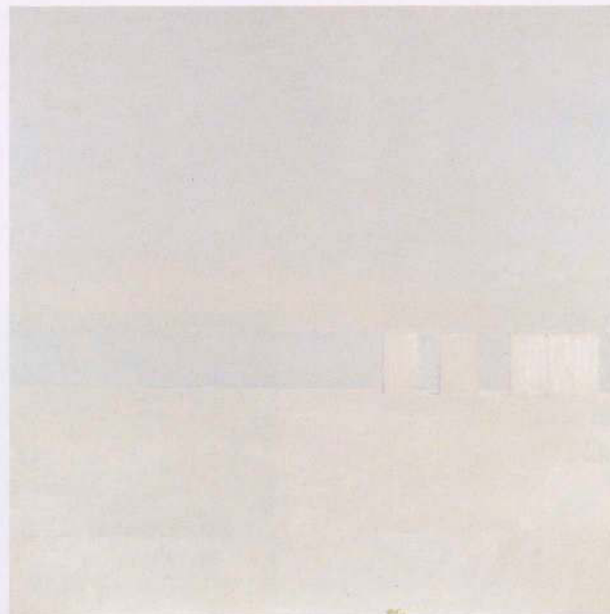
Pl. 10:16
Henry Elibekian
Still Life, Bowl with Fruit, 1976
Oil on fiberboard
47.2 × 58 cm

Pl. 10:15
Bagrat Grigorian
(Untitled), 1982
Acrylic on canvas
48.3 × 58 cm

Pl. 10:17
Garen Sembatian
Castle in the Air, 1974
Oil on canvas
120.5 × 99.7 cm







Pl. 10:19
Yurii Bourjelian
The Beach, 1985
Oil on paper
100.2 × 100.2 cm

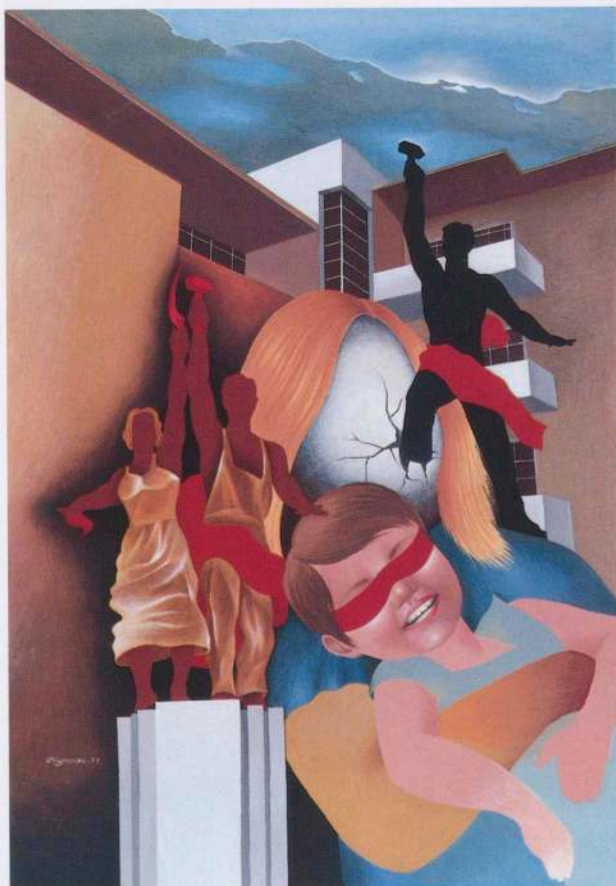
Pl. 10:21
Aram Kupetsian
Guitar, 1979
Oil on illustration board
70.3 × 50 cm

Pl. 10:18
Nareg Antabian
Agony, 1985
Mixed media on canvas
100 × 100 cm

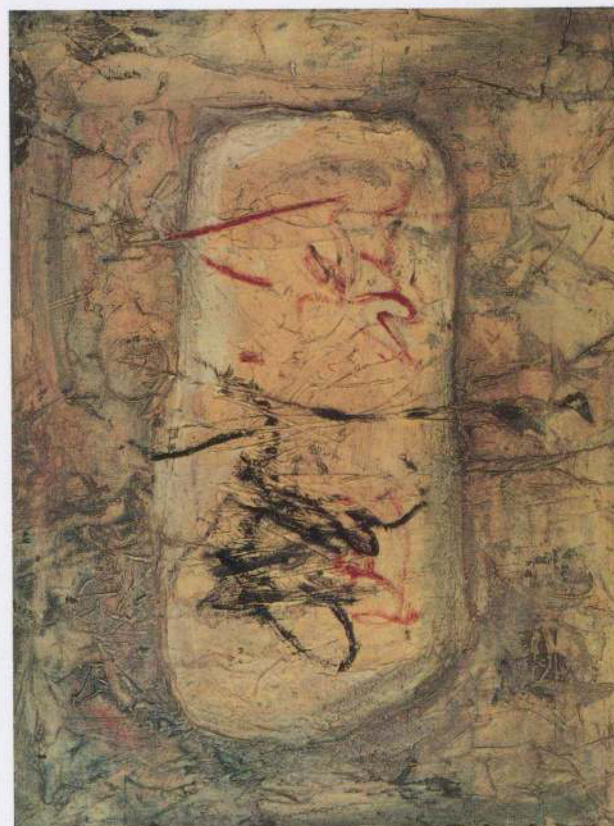
Pl. 10:20
Vagrich Bakhchanyan
Teenager Thinking Over His Future, 1975
Collage, graphite, and colored pencil on paper
43.7 × 30.4 cm

Pl. 10:22
Seyran Khatlamajian
Apricot Tree, 1972
Oil on canvas
54 × 73 cm

Pl. 10:23
Soren Arutiunian
(Untitled), 1977
Gouache on paper
35.4 × 25.1 cm



Pl. 10:24
Kiki (Grikor Mikaelian)
Composition, 1973
Mixed media on canvas
79.5 × 59.5 cm



Armenian spirit: a polyphonic harmony of colors penetrated by sharp and thorn-like lines (Pl. 10:22). This coexistence of peaceful harmony and dramatic disturbance is found in works of many Armenian artists, reflecting the troubled course of Armenian history.

Not all of the Armenian nonconformist artists lived in Yerevan or Tbilisi. Moscow was home to a number of them, including Serge Essayan, who was born there in 1939. His canvases are poetic compositions of human figures in infinite space. He has painted a series of canvases on the theme of the Armenian massacres, reflecting his deep involvement with the Armenian past (Pl. 10:12). Yurii Bourjelian (b. 1921) depicts almost abstract, ethereal landscapes (Pl. 10:19), while his son, Michael Bourjelian (b. 1946), paints Hyperrealistic boxes and perfume bottles. Another Moscow artist of Armenian origin is Aram Kupetsian (b. 1928), who almost exclusively paints still lifes in a Postcubist manner (Pl. 10:21). Both Vagrich Bakhchanyan (b. 1938), whose medium includes phototransfers (Pl. 10:20), mail art, and readymade objects, and Soren Arutiunian (b. 1950), whose art is Surrealistic (Pl. 10:23), now live in New York City. The connection of these artists' work with Armenian themes is less evident.

Artists of the 1980s: The most recent nonconformists

During the 1980s, a new generation of artists emerged in Armenia. These younger artists did not remember the Stalin years and had been brought up in an atmosphere of relative openness. Armenian artists of the older generation, including Sarian, Kotchar, Bazhbeuk-Melikian, and Gevork Grigorian (Giotto), were no longer alive and thus could not exercise a day-to-day influence. Furthermore, the younger artists now had the choice of building on the work of the older generation or rejecting it.

Armen Grigorian (b. 1960) was the founder of the Third Floor Group, so named because during an exhibition at the Artists' Union their works were relegated to an obscure third-floor conference room away from the main exhibition area. Grigorian has managed to free himself from national limits. In an effort to facilitate the communication of his ideas, he incorporates textual material and real objects into the Action Painting on his huge canvases. Even the subject matter of his paintings (metal-studded leather jackets, motorcycles, etc.) is new by Yerevan standards.

Another influential member of the Third Floor is Grigor Mikaelian (b. 1956), known as Kiki. His paintings, by his own admission, are an expression of secret and inexplicable forces within himself, which, once transferred to canvas, become art. On large canvases, with broad and impatient strokes, using mainly black, Kiki develops the same theme with great mastery (Pl. 10:24).

In the paintings of Armen Hajian (b. 1955) it is not the anatomy of the objects depicted that is important, but their luminous radiation. Color becomes form, and the different layers of superimposed color reflect different intensities of physical, spiritual, and psychic radiation. By contrast, the work of Nareg Antabian (b. 1961) is both explosive and reflective. Texture is such an important ingredient in his abstract compositions (Pl. 10:18) that he does not even shy away from scorching some parts of his paintings to create the necessary controlled accident.

Ashod Bayandour (b. 1947) is the oldest member the Third Floor Group, which has been influenced by American painting and the new wave of Expressionism of the 1980s. "For me, painting is man's way of continuing God's creative process," he says. Known for his graphic work in the 1970s and his innovative approach to painting in the 1980s, Bayandour is now creating installations.

Even before Gorbachev, the Armenian capital was experiencing the first manifestations of change. Gorbachev's *glasnost* validated and accelerated this process. High-ranking officials in the art world were replaced by members of a younger and more tolerant generation. Ara Shiraz, a noted sculptor, became the president of the Armenian Union of Artists. More artists were encouraged and allowed to exhibit, so more artists became members of the Union. Previously, to become a member, an artist not only had to have formal training but also had to have had at least three exhibitions. After *perestroika*, there were no restrictions on exhibiting and, therefore, the requirement of three exhibitions was no longer an effective bar to membership for "undesirables."

Unfortunately, the cultural progress under *glasnost* and *perestroika* was halted by the major earthquake in 1988, which changed all of Armenia's national priorities. Survival took first place; the arts were overshadowed by other pressing needs. As a result, Armenia is now passing through a particularly difficult period of her history. On the road to building a democracy, this newly independent republic is facing a frail economy, a war in Karabakh, the absence of basic necessities, and more. Most of the artists discussed in this chapter still live in their native land. In the absence of canvas and paint and even electricity and fuel, they continue to create an unfettered Armenian art which is more and more universal in expression, the roots of which go back thousands of years.

Notes

1. George Yakoulov, *Autobiography* (Yerevan: Art Gallery of Armenia, 1967), p. 16.
2. Toros Rosslin (active in the mid-thirteenth century) was probably the greatest medieval Armenian artist. He introduced scenes of everyday life into evangelic miniatures. Sarkis Bidzag was active in the first half of the fourteenth century in Cilicia.
3. Garig Basmadjian, Introduction to *Armenian Colors: 12 Contemporary Artists from Soviet Armenia*, exh. cat. (New York: AGBU Gallery, 1978), n.p.
4. On Sept. 15, 1974, an open-air exhibition of nonconformist art was organized on a piece of Moscow wasteland. The authorities arrested the organizers and sent bulldozers and water cannons which destroyed a number of canvases. The exhibition came to be known unofficially as the "Bulldozer Exhibition." It paved the way for a second and successful open-air exhibition two weeks later in Izmailovsky Park.
5. Sergei Paradjanov (1924–1990), artist, set designer, and film director, is best known for his films *Shadows of Our Forgotten Ancestors*, *Horses of Fire*, *The Color of Pomegranates*, *The Legend of Suram Fortress*, *Ashik Kerid*, and a series of documentaries on major artists such as Niko Pirosmani.
6. In the nineteenth century, the two main Armenian cultural centers were Tiflis (now Tbilisi), the Russian administrative center of the Caucasus, and Constantinople (now Istanbul), capital of the Ottoman Empire. Yerevan, then small and provincial, was under Persian rule until 1828. In 1823, the first Armenian printing house in the Caucasus was opened in Tiflis. The Armenian Dramatic Society was founded there in 1901, and the Union of Armenian Artists in 1916. When the Union organized its first exhibition in Tiflis in 1917, forty-five artists participated.
7. Alexander Kamensky, Preface to *Ardashes Hounanian*, exh. cat. (Yerevan: Armenian Artists' Union, 1968).
8. Dmitri Sarabianov, quoted in *Robert Elibekian* (Beirut: Garni, 1992), p. 7.