

A Century of French-Armenian Painting (1879-1979)

Zakarian ● Chabanian ● Mahokian ● Atamian ● Chahine
Polat ● Gulbenkian ● Tolvanian ● Alhazian ● Katcha-
dourian ● Heran-Chaban ● Heraut ● Topalian ● Tutun-
djian ● Carzou ● Kniazian ● S. Topalian ● Jansem ●
Alecian ● Jeranian ● Berberian ● Kazazian ● Tchakmak-
ian ● Daderian ● Kazandjian ● Barsoumian ● Assadour

Foreword

Half of the Armenian population lives outside Armenia, dispersed throughout the world. During the past century, Paris has become the most productive center for Armenian artists living outside Armenia. More than three hundred have worked in the French capital.

The aim of this exhibition is to present for the first time a century of French-Armenian painting (1879-1979) with characteristic works by thirty of the most representative Armenian artists from France.

In 1879, Zakar Zakarian, the first French-Armenian artist of importance, exhibited a still life painting at the Cercle Volney in Paris. One hundred years later, the current exhibit represents five generations of French-Armenian artists. The diversity of subjects and individual styles, as well as the influence of various schools of painting hardly interfere with what is inherently Armenian about all these works.

Historically, Armenian painting has developed from a 2000 year old tradition of murals, medieval miniature painting (illuminated manuscripts), khachkars (carved stone-crosses) and Armenian carpets with their colorful hues and restrained patterns.

Oil painting, or properly speaking, "easel painting," did not have a place in the history of Armenian art before the 1830's. Paradoxically Armenian easel painting began outside the boundaries of Armenia, in spite of the fact that in the 19th century the majority of the Armenian population lived in Armenia.

The founding father of Armenian easel painting, the greatest Armenian seascape painter Aivasovsky (1817-1900), lived and worked in the Crimea, while the great portrait painter Hagop Hovnatanian (1806-1881) worked in Tiflis.

It was not unusual for Armenian artists to leave their homeland and study abroad. The less ambitious stayed in the country, limiting themselves to decorative or commissioned work. Eastern Armenian artists left for Petersburg, Moscow or Tiflis, while Western Armenian artists chose Rome, Munich and Paris.

Since the 1840's, Western Armenian artists have come to Paris, studied art and returned to their native country. After the first genocide of the 20th century in 1915, when half of the population of Western Armenia was put to death and the other half dispersed around the world, most Armenian artists found refuge in Paris.

In the 19th century, Western Armenian artists came to Paris to escape the harsh rule of Ottoman Turkey, as voluntary exiles; after 1915 they became forced exiles. Both forms of exiles obliged them to take Armenia with them to Paris, and that nostalgia is silently reflected in their works.

These artists, taking refuge in an international art capital, found it very difficult to survive. Alienated, barely able to speak French, they met in cafes and spoke Armenian with each other. The outcome of these meetings gave birth in 1926 to "Ani," the Union of Armenian Artists, which was founded by great Armenian artists such as Pushman, Katchadourian, Chahine and Mahokian.

The aim of this association was to bring together in a fraternal society the Armenian artists of France and Europe, organize exhibitions/sales, introduce Armenian art to both the Armenian and the non-Armenian public and develop the national traditions outside the motherland.

The first exhibition organized by "Ani" was held in Paris at the Galerie George Petit in 1927. Works by the following Armenian artists were on display: Aivasovsky, Pushman, Sarian, Mahokian, Chabanian, Atamian, Katchadourian, Chahine, Polat, Heran-Chaban and others.

The second exhibit was held in Brussels in 1928; the third in Antwerp in 1929 with 172 works on display. In this exhibit, the young Carzou participated for the first time.

The fourth and last exhibit was held in Paris in January, 1930 at the Galerie George Petit.

In 1931, "Ani" was replaced by another association called the "Union of Free Armenian Artists." Their first exhibit took place in June, 1931 in the halls of the Moorat-Raphaelian Armenian College in Sevres. The following artists participated in this exhibit: Atamian, Chahine, Schiltian, Gulbenkian, Katchadourian, Topalian, Carzou and many others.

The Union of Free Armenian Artists organized yearly exhibits on an almost regular basis from 1931 until 1947, when the movement died. Its most important show was in 1945 at the Studio Caumartin in Paris, and the participants were Carzou, Jansem, Tutundjian, Topalian, Gulbenkian and others.

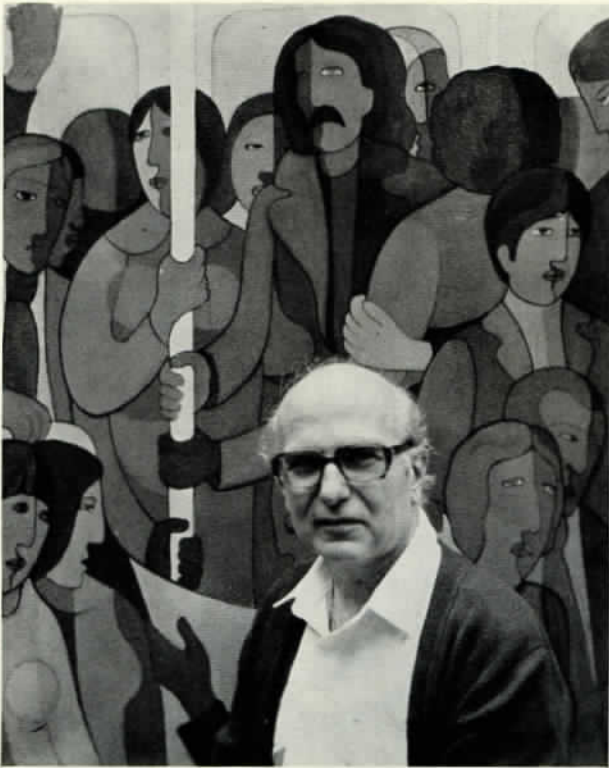
The cycle perpetuates: Armenian artists continue to be drawn to Paris. An important influx took place in the 1950's and 1960's. These artists, most of whom came from Lebanon, not only sought to study and live in the art capital but were also attracted because of the French-Armenian artistic climate and tradition established earlier in the century.

In the late sixties, a new association of French-Armenian artists called the "Toros Roslin Union of Artists" was founded in Paris, but it failed to bring together all the Armenian artists, limiting itself to a small group of people.

One may question what percentage of the French-Armenian art of the past century belongs to national traditions and to what extent these works reflect Armenian characteristics. I believe that the artists presented here, who have been creating outside their mother country for the last hundred years, despite the influences of prevailing French schools of painting, continue to speak in one language. That language is Armenian. The spiritual link with their roots is not severed.

Paris, 1979

Garig Basmadjian

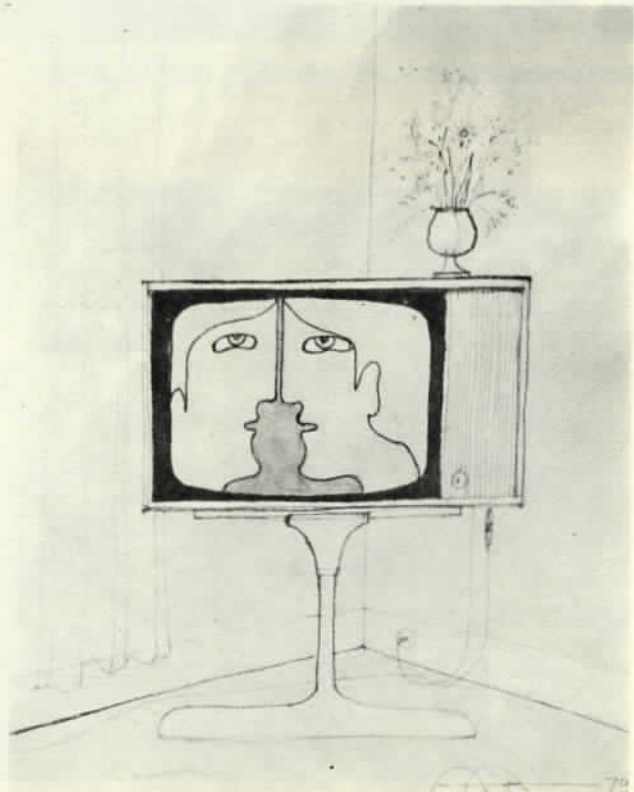


Neighborhood, *watercolor*, 1978

Alecian

Aram Alecian was born in Istanbul in 1920 and studied there at the school of Fine Arts under Leopold Levy. At the age of 18 he left for Milan to pursue studies in scenography. At the outbreak of World War II he returned to Istanbul and became an architect.

Alecian settled in France in 1956, and has since shown his paintings at such galleries as Duncan, Mouffe, Camion and La Mandragore. He exhibits on a regular basis at the Galerie Aleph in Paris.



Television, *watercolor*, 1979