

ARSHILE GORKY'S PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHTS IN HIS LETTERS

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Arshile Gorky or Vostanik-Manuk Adoian (1904-1948) is one of the innovators of American painting of the 20th century, whose name has been included in many encyclopedias of science and art. Gorky is considered as the founder of surrealist expressionism in world painting.

The Armenian painter had a difficult fate. When he was four years old, his father, Sedrak Adoian, left his native village of Khorgom, went to the United States and settled in the Armenian-populated town of Watertown near Boston.

Before leaving Khorgom, he presents his son Vostanik with a pair of big peasant slippers, which can later be seen in Gorky's surrealist paintings.

With his younger sister Vardush and his beloved mother Shushanik Gorky walked for many days on foot with the survivors of the Armenian Genocide, first to the center of Armenian Christianity in Etchmiadzin, then to Yerevan, where he stayed until he was 16 years old.

Subsequently, by the invitation of his relatives, he travelled with great privations with his sister, first arrived in New York and then settled in Watertown.

Gorky was involved in painting from an early age, then received his painting education in New York and earned a great reputation; he was considered one of the 4000 most famous people in the world, from the past to the present. In the *Dictionary of Biography to People Past and Present*, published in London in 1976, we read about Arshile Gorky:

"Gorky, Arshile (1904-48), American painter, b. Armenia. Influenced by Picasso, Mirò; leader of Abstract Expressionists, used color to achieve emotional effect" [1, p. 215].

Key words: Arshile Gorky, letters, philosophy, surrealism, expressionism, painting, Khorgom, patriotism, mother, America.

Introduction

Arshile Gorky tried with all his art to regain his lost homeland – Western Armenia, Cilicia, Van, Khorgom. His goal is reflected in the letters he wrote to his sister Vardush.

At the same time, he shared with his sister his own philosophical thoughts on painting and art, which enrapture with their wise depth and can become a guide for artists of all nations of the future.

His biographers gave the following explanation as to why Vostanik-Manuk Adoian became Arshile Gorky. Arshile Gorky crossed the Golgotha of genocide, the horrific scenes of which accompanied him throughout his life. He wanted to deny this injustice with his art, and 16-year-old Vostanik was looking for a new name and surname for

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himself: Gorky as a cousin of the great Russian writer and Arshile as a parent of the Armenian royal Arshakuni dynasty [8, p. 19].

It is believed that Gorky, like Arshile, likened himself to the protagonist of Homer's Iliad, Achilles.

In each case, he seized it, despite obstacles we can hardly imagine. His paintings are now on display in some of the world's most famous galleries. I have seen them in museums of New York, Los Angeles, New Jersey, Washington, Philadelphia, San Francisco, the George Pompidou Museum of Contemporary Art in Paris, the Tate Museum of Contemporary Art in London, the Madrid Museum of Contemporary Art and elsewhere.

In his letters, Gorky dreamed of rediscovering his birthplace, Khorgom, Van, Aghtamar Monastery, his homeland. He achieved his goal since it is written under his pictures that he was born in Armenia, even the name of the village of Khorgom is mentioned.

Methods

Our reference to Arshile Gorky's letters is based on the comparative method. I am very familiar with the works of medieval Armenian miniature painters. I have been in Van, in the former Armenian villages around it, I have twice seen the Holy Cross Church on Aghtamar Island, the Monastery of Varag. Copies of Toros Roslin miniatures are hanging in my house. Copies of Armenian miniatures are also posted on the walls of the Chair of Ancient Armenian Medieval Literature and its Teaching Methods, which I chair.

Gorky admits that he was greatly influenced by the works of Pablo Picasso and Paul Cézanne. He also talks about the influences of Joan Mirò and Wassily Kandinsky. I have seen most of the works of these artists in Barcelona, Washington, Paris, Madrid, London, Boston, Moscow, Hartford, Buenos Aires and elsewhere. I have been to the house-museums of Joan Mirò, Pablo Picasso, Claude Monet. This basic knowledge contributes to an accurate understanding of Arshile Gorky's philosophy of art.

The letters of the genius parted from his motherland

In 2005, the Armenian translation of Arshile Gorky's letters was published in Yerevan with a rich foreword by the famous art critic Shahan Khachatrian.

Gorky's letters begin from 1937 and end in 1948.

In becoming a representative of his art the artist pays great attention to the contribution of his infinitely beloved mother Shushanik, who was the daughter of a priest, faithful to humanitarian and Christian sanctities; she died of starvation in Yerevan in a hut on the ground, dictating to her son a letter addressed to her husband Sedrak [3, pp. 17-21].

Here is what M. Lader writes about Mrs. Shushanik's influence on her son, according to Gorky himself.

“Mother’s thoughts were so correct, so valid for so many things in life and especially nature... Mother was a poetess of aesthetics. Mother was queen of the aesthetic domain” [8, p. 12].

The artist’s mother adored nature and beauty. She taught her son to be proud of being born Armenian.

In Gorky’s letters we see his progress in the field of art painting.

Philosophers have studied the relationship between art and life since ancient times. In this regard, there are interesting observations in the monumental work *Definitions of Philosophy* by David the Invincible – a prominent Armenian philosopher of the late 5th and early 6th centuries AD, a brilliant representative of Aristotelian orientation in Neo-Platonism philosophy. The Armenian medieval philosopher compares the two important spheres of human intellectual activity and concludes: “Now, as we said a while ago, art and scientific knowledge differ from each other in the sense that scientific knowledge is infallible in its essence, in its subject, and art is infallible in its essence, but only seems infallible in its subject” [2, p. 95]. David the Invincible notes that the subject of art can be the abstract, but the material world is constantly changing, flowing for both art and science.

As for Gorky, he says about the variability of art: “Beloveds, some people say art is eternal, that it never changes. Nonsense. Art does change. Man changes. Man changes the world and in the process himself and his art. That is basic to my outlook. It is, I think, objectively true and not merely a subjective attitude” [5, p. 53].

According to Gorky, every artist or sculptor brings with him the elements of its own people’s art. He considers very important the achievements of the ancient civilized world – Urartians, Sumerians, Hittites, Egyptians and Greeks. According to him, every true artist should be aware of the art of the past.

The letters often speak of Picasso’s worldview and his art of painting: “Cubism, therefore, does not originate with Braque and Picasso, but culminates in them. Picasso modernizes cubism by relating it to urbanization, to the technologically advanced world of this century” [5, p. 33].

Gorky was well versed in Armenian medieval miniature painting and architecture. His favorite Armenian painters were Toros Roslin (first half of the 13th century) and Sarkis Pitsak (first half of the 14th century) from Cilician Armenia. The great painter was convinced that Armenia has given the world great artists, whom, unfortunately, the world does not know: “With such beauty is it a wonder our homeland produced so many artists? No, it is no wonder. The wonder is that they are unknown outside the homeland. Toros Roslin is the Renaissance. What electricity the man contains. For me, he is the greatest artist the world produced before the modern age and his use of dimension is exceeded solely by cubism” [5, p. 119].

The artist is concerned with the perception of art. Man loves what he understands. The artist creates based on his personal experience, but it is just as important to immerse oneself in the experience of another and to connect them.

Gorky saw the roots of his own experience in his home village of Khorgom and in Van. He missed the places of his childhood, the Armenian apricot, the aroma, taste and smell of which he could feel in distant America. He missed the salty white shores of Lake Van, the beloved valleys, the animals that live there. He had always considered himself a part of his homeland, **which was thrown too far away due to terrible storms.**

Here is the great artist's faith that he was able to implement: "Our beautiful Armenia which we lost and which I will repossess in my art. In my art there will always be the soul of Armenia. I shall resurrect Armenia with my brush for all the world to see and when we return to clay as we all must, then perchance they might say, 'as a son of the Armenian mountains he offered his modest share to the accumulation of our world's great culture', and as our poets sing, 'cast down to earth the jewelled wine goblet so that my parched lips too can drink'" [5, p. 115].

The painter really knew the Renaissance painters, sculptors, and architects very well. In the early days of his art he was as close to their realism as he was to the French Impressionists. It is enough to remember the impressionist painting he painted in 1924 through the blue veil of Park Street Church in Boston. In those years he often visited the very rich Boston Museum of Fine Arts, which was rich in paintings by such famous Impressionist artists as Monet, Renoir, Alfred Sisley, Camille Pissarro and Edgar Degas.

His letters show a keen acquaintance with the works of art and life of such titans as Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo.

Yervand Kochar, a genius painter and sculptor of the second half of the 20th century, whose youth was spent in Paris, is also an innovator of art. Fortunately, we have a number of printed articles and speeches from him that are extremely valuable. Kochar says: "Fear to extinguish the fire of your soul, which distinguishes man from beast" [10, p. 15].

Surrealism had a special fascination in Gorky's painting art.

The Manifesto of Surrealism was published in 1924 by André Breton, a physician by profession.

Surrealism brought together famous and young poets such as Paul Eluard, Louis Aragon and others. Louis Aragon wrote in *Le Paysan de Paris* in 1924: "Voici la machine à chavirer l'esprit, le surréalisme, fils de la frénésie et de l'ombre" ("Here is the machine to take away the spirit, the surrealism, the son of frenzy and shadow") [4, p. 173]. Later, Aragon left the surrealists.

André Breton liked Gorky's paintings very much and wrote an opinion for his exhibition when his paintings were exhibited in Julien Levy Gallery. André Breton (1896-1966) left medicine, first embracing Dadaism and then switching to Surrealism [9, p. 700].

In 1944 or 1945, Gorky and Breton finally met and became good friends [8, p. 82], despite the fact that Breton did not speak English and Gorky did not speak

French. It should be noted that Breton had a great understanding of Gorky's method of painting and appreciated it.

Gorky is a philosopher-painter, in his paintings different spheres of human life are created by such abstract methods that are understandable only to educated people. This, of course, does not apply to the portrait of his mother based on the photo, which depicts 12-year-old Arshile and his mother with beautiful and profound eyes. Based on this photo, the artist painted several versions of different years. The picture has an influential power; after seeing it once, it impresses in the viewer's memory forever. In the article *The Genius in Exile* Dormont describes the warm ties between Shushanik and Vostanik. The mother always took her young son to church with her. The boy, looking at the frescoes of the angels on the walls of the church, hid his head in his mother's apron, because he saw the black angel. Gorky had always hated the evil in people, but he had felt it all his life. The famous German philosopher Immanuel Kant studied in detail the struggle between good and evil in human nature [7, pp. 490-513].

In 1938, based on the photograph, Gorky restored the portrait of his mother, whose eyes express such powerful kindness, as if they wanted to destroy evil with that very look. In a letter to his sister Vardush from Lincoln, Virginia, in July 1943, the painter wrote about Armenian eyes: "Our eyes. The eyes of the Armenian speak before the lips move and long after they cease to" [5, p. 99].

Later, in a letter from New York to Vardush in January 1947, Gorky did not associate his method of painting with surrealism. In his opinion, some surrealists' thoughts about life are rather strange, light-minded and light-hearted. Art must always remain sincere. Maybe his ideas are different because he is Armenian and they are not: "Art must be serious, no sarcasm, comedy. One does not laugh at a loved one" [5, p. 155].

In Gorky's opinion, man strives for infinity, he rebels against the limited, he seeks new horizons in art. The painter sees infinity even in Armenian apricots. In his opinion, Armenia is full of infinities. New ideas are given birth in his mind by things seen in his childhood: Aghtamar, the Monastery of Varag, the Charahan Saint Nshan church, Mher's door on the rock of Van. There is much infinity in them, which has become the standards of his art.

Gorky knew the history of Armenia very well. He mentioned that Armenians were the first in the world to discover the invention of iron, to create artistic art at the time of Artaxias and Tigran. They became the first Christian country in the world and established the Armenian Apostolic Church. They continued to build new monasteries, churches, temples and palaces according to the glorious traditions of their ancestors. The Armenians had royal families as Bagratunis, Orbelians, Rubinians. "The city of Ani, built by the Bagratunis, had 1001 churches and although it was destroyed by the Turkish barbarians, many of its great structures still stand" [5, p. 167]. He considers the Holy Cross Church of Aghtamar to be one of the most advanced works of art in the history of architecture.

The painter mentions the architect Trdat, who rebuilt the ruined dome of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople centuries after the Byzantine king Justinian.

The greatest architect of Constantinople was an Armenian named Sinan, whom the Turks forced to forget that he was Armenian. Aivazovsky, the famous Russian sea painter, was also Armenian.

The following words by Gorky, written on May 4, 1947, sound so relevant: "We are a race of artists. And art is far superior to war, because art creates while war destroys. Art preserves beauty, while war produces only ugliness and unhappiness. Someday the world will become better acquainted with the art of Armenia. Publicity has never been the determiner of quality. More often it has been the underminer of it. Armenia has not only been at the crossroads of the world, but has built them with its own sinews [5, p. 169]"

At the end of his book, Lader included a bibliography of Arshile Gorky's exhibitions, as well as books, articles and films about him. It is very impressive. Van – the capital of the Kingdom of Urartu, flourished during all the periods when Armenia had statehood.

It is no coincidence that the French Armenologist Yves Ternon repeats the famous saying about Van: "Van in this life, Paradise in the next life" [11, p. 25].

Atom Egoyan's *Ararat* is among the films dedicated to Arshile Gorky, for which the Canadian-Armenian director received the "Golden Palm Branch" at the Cannes Film Festival in 2002. Atom Egoyan had invited the Hollywood most famous actors and, first of all, the worldly famous Charles Aznavour, to star in the film. In 2002, on the eve of Christmas, the American organization Miromax, which had received the right to screen the film *Ararat*, received 2,000 applications from the Turkish government to ban the film [6, p. 107].

Conclusion

Arshile Gorky is famous not only in American painting, but also in the world. He opened a new page in the history of world painting.

It was not accidental. Childhood impressions, the architectural monuments of Van and its surroundings, the nature of Armenia, Mount Ararat, the medieval Armenian miniature painting, the perfect architecture of the Holy Cross Church with magnificent frescoes, left an indelible impression on the child genius. Those impressions were revived in his abstract and colorful paintings, in which he found his lost homeland and relatives.

Gorky's letters reflect his philosophical definitions of true art. He really restored his peaceful, developed, creative homeland for humanity with his paintings.

Gorky's letters are especially a guide for young people entering the field of painting and art; through these letters the philosophy of true art becomes clear.

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ԱԵԼԻՏԱ ԴՈԼՈՒԽԱՆՅԱՆ*

Հղման համար. Դուլխանյան, Աելիտա: «Արշիլ Գորկու փիլիսոփայական խոհերը նրա նամակներում»: *Արվեստագիտական հանդես*, N 1 (2022): 200-207. DOI: 10.54503/2579-2830-2022.1(7)-200

Արշիլ Գորկին նշանավոր է ոչ միայն ամերիկյան, այլև համաշխարհային կերպարվեստում: Նա նոր էջ է բացել աշխարհի կերպարվեստի պատմության մեջ: Դա պատահական չէր: Մանկության տպավորությունները, Վանի և նրա շրջակայքի ճարտարապետական հուշարձանները, Արարատ լեռը, միջնադարյան հայ մանրանկարչությունը, Սուրբ Խաչ եկեղեցու կատարյալ ճարտարապետությունը՝ շքեղ որմնաքանդակներով, անջնջելի հետք են թողել մանուկ հանճարի սրտում: Այդ տպավորությունները վերակենդանացան նրա գունեղ նկարներում, որոնցում նա գտավ իր կորցրած հայրենիքն ու հարազատներին:

* Խ. Աբովյանի անվան ՀՊՄՀ հայ հին և միջնադարյան գրականության և նրա դասավանդման մեթոդիկայի ամբիոնի վարիչ, ՀՀ ԳԱԱ թղթակից անդամ, ՀՀ մշակույթի վաստակավոր գործիչ, բանասիրական գիտությունների դոկտոր, պրոֆեսոր, aelita.dolukhanyan@gmail.com, հոդվածը ներկայացնելու օրը՝ 24.01.2022, գրախոսելու օրը՝ 10.03.2022, տպագրության ընդունելու օրը՝ 20.05.2022:

Գորկու նամակներից երևում են նրա փիլիսոփայական սահմանումներն իսկական արվեստի մասին: Նա, հիրավի, իր կտավներով մարդկության համար վերականգնեց իր խաղաղ, զարգացած, ստեղծագործ հայրենիքը:

Գորկու նամակները հատկապես ուղեցույց են նկարչության և արվեստի բնագավառը ոտք դնող երիտասարդների համար, այդ նամակների միջոցով հասկանալի է դառնում իսկական արվեստի փիլիսոփայությունը:

Բանալի բաներ՝ Արշիլ Գորկի, նամակներ, փիլիսոփայություն, գերիրապաշտություն, էքսպրեսիոնիզմ, գեղանկարչություն, հայրենասիրություն:

ФИЛОСОФСКИЕ РАЗДУМЬЯ АРШИЛА ГОРКИ В ЕГО ПИСЬМАХ

АЭЛИТА ДОЛУХАНЫАН*

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Аршил Горки известен не только в американском, но и мировом изобразительном искусстве. Он открыл новую страницу в истории мирового изобразительного искусства.

И это было не случайно. Впечатления детства, архитектурные памятники Вана и его окрестностей, гора Арарат, средневековая армянская миниатюра, великолепные фрески церкви Святого Креста оставили неизгладимый след в его памяти, что нашло отражение в его красочных картинах, в которых он обрел потерянную родину и родных.

Письма А. Горки являют собой его философские раздумья о подлинном искусстве и могут служить путеводной звездой для молодого поколения, избравшего путь служения искусству.

Ключевые слова: Аршил Горки, письма, философия, сюрреализм, экспрессионизм, живопись, патриотизм.

* Заведующая кафедрой древней и средневековой армянской литературы АГПУ им. Х. Абовяна, методики ее преподавания, член-корреспондент НАН РА, заслуженный деятель культуры РА, доктор филологических наук, профессор, aelita.dolukhanyan@gmail.com, статья представлена 24.01.2022, рецензирована 10.03.2022, принята к публикации 20.05.2022.