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ARA BEKARYAN'S PAPERS ON ARMENIAN ART IN THE “SOVIET ART” JOURNAL

Key words: Ara Bekaryan, "the Soviet art", publications, art journal, art criticism, XX century Armenian painters' artworks, exhibition reviews.

Introduction

Ara Bekaryan, an outstanding Soviet Armenian artist, a professor at the Institute of Theatre and Fine Arts, was a graduate of Leningrad I. Repin Institute for Painting, Sculpture and Architecture of the Russian Academy of Arts in 1939, and had his works exhibited domestic state and international exhibitions. Bekaryan also published about thirty papers on art history in reputable Armenian and Russian journals and periodicals.

The present article aims to provide an insight into Ara Bekaryan's art critical papers published in the “Soviet Art” Journal. In these papers, which reflect the artist's critical view, his understanding of the specifics of art, vast knowledge of the field, Bekaryan reviews exhibitions, analyzes the artworks of his contemporaries, discusses their lives and oeuvre and focuses on issues of contemporary art, providing us with interesting and insightful critical analysis of art and giving workable solutions. It was his firm belief that “the art of painting in Armenia which by all means is thriving now would gain more value if our historical thought of art could serve its purpose by identifying the virtues and vices of artworks, criticizing them in order to support and hence giving impetus to the ascent of our art”¹.

Ara Bekaryan's Art Criticism on the Pages of The “Soviet Art” Journal

The artist's first article on the pages of “The Soviet Art” appeared in 1957 in

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¹ Քեքարյան 1961, 51:

the second issue of the "Soviet Art" under the title "The Book and the Picture: the Painter's Maturity" and was dedicated to Grigor Khanjyan². Bekaryan dwells on Khanjyan's illustrations of Hovhannes Toumanyán's "Gikor", "Sako from Lori" and Vahan Miraqyan's "The Hunter from Lalvar", addressing their strengths and weaknesses. Among the main features which guarantee a good illustration Bekaryan points out integrity of the characters, loyalty to the author's idea, and knowledge of the context and artistic and technical mastery of the interpretation.

In the "The Hunter from Lalvar" Bekaryan praises the artist's skilful rendering of the nature and the people of Lori. In contrast to Alvard the image of Avag Hunter is deemed to be well thought-out. "He seems to be the embodiment of custom (*adat*) with his imposing posture, the rifle in his hand... with his senile beard in the wind", states the critic³.

Bekaryan highly appreciates all the eight illustrations of "Gikor", in particular the choice of the episodes, the bold, novel and unique compositional arrangements, the artistic quality and emotional impact of the color, the ability to penetrate and express the main hero's psychological state and the knowledgeable rendering of the reality and everyday life of Tiflis. "What was impossible to put through writing was said with a brush", the author states⁴. He further compares "Gikor"'s illustrations exhibited in Soviet and international exhibitions, namely in Warsaw, Shanghai and Nanjing, to complete pieces boasting well-selected scenes and expressive moments. At the same time, Bekaryan believes that the artist could have made a more appropriate choice of techniques, as "in printing, the illustrations of oil paintings lose some of their nuances"⁵.

In Khanjyan's illustrations of "Sako from Lori" Bekaryan sees a progress in the choice of technique appropriate for book illustration. While the choice of episodes and the interpretations of Sakos' character Bekaryan considers persuasive, he also suggests that the work would gain if the topographic locality area was also presented here, as the Lori Gorge, the Debed River and the fortress had been sources of inspiration for Tumanyan. "They all exist in reality and it would be better if they weren't overlooked by a gifted painter with a sharp eye"⁶.

² Բեքարյան 1957, 31–35:

³ Բեքարյան 1957, 31:

⁴ Բեքարյան 1957, 32:

⁵ Բեքարյան 1957, 33:

⁶ Բեքարյան 1957, 35:

In the 11th issue of the journal published in the same 1957 under the title “New Names, New Paintings” Bekaryan reviews the Republican Exhibition dedicated to the fortieth anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution⁷. The greatest achievement of the Armenian painting of the last forty years Bekaryan considers to be its national uniqueness. Bekaryan dwells on the works of promising Armenian artists of the young generation such as Levon Kojoyan, Tigran Tokmajyan, Meruzhan Harutyunyan, Henrik Siravyan, Ashot Melkonyan, Arakel Arakelyan, Mikayel Gyurjyan, who “love the landscape of today’s Armenia, who live the life of our nation and who express their thoughts and emotions in the ways congruous with contemporary man’s perception without simpler or formalism”⁸. Bekaryan highlights both the achievements and flaws of the artists’ works in the hope to see their further development in the nearest future. Bekaryan approves of Kojoyan’s exhibited artworks “Afternoon”, “Spring in the Gardens” and “The Spring Motive”, at the same time advising the painter to paint also thematic compositions, in which he could be a success too. In his former student Tokmajyan’s artwork “Threshing Floor” Bekaryan notices hastiness, lack of tries, which brings to unpersuasive and static posture of a woman’s figure. Bekaryan considers this issue to be important for painters of all types and addresses it also to M. Harutunian, A. Arakelyan (“Wave of Revolution”) and M. Gyurdjian (“Evening Song”). In the meantime Bekaryan speaks highly of Arakelyan’s “Bjni”, “Mount Ara”, “Evening” and “Storks”, Gyurjyan’s “Autumn” and “Afternoon”, Harutyunyan’s “Aragats” and “Evening”, as well as “Morning” and “Sunset” by Artashes Abrahamyan and “An evening Moment” and “Roofs” by Slavik Paronyan. Highlighting the executive mastery in “gifted painter” Siravyan’s “Bjni” and “Yerevan”, Bekaryan advises him to overcome one general flaw: the monotony of colors and tones. According to the author, V. Sharambeyan’s “Dilijan” landscape is full of lyricism and well-done in several parts of the painting. The only observation Bekaryan makes is that the tulip in the foreground, incongruous with the landscape, makes it hard for observers to define which the main part is. Ashot Melkonyan’s “The awakening of spring” and Tigran Simonyan’s “Fishermen of Sevan” – works of high quality, were sent to a Jubilee exhibition in Moscow. In conclusion of the article Bekaryan asserts that he

⁷ Բեքարյան 1957, 55–61:

⁸ Բեքարյան 1957, 55:

“presented a few painters from the youngest generation, who were taking shape as artists but inspired great hopes thanks to the versatility of their interests and artistic inclinations and the aspiration to see the nature and life, perceive the genuine and to express all this with sincere and unique expression...”⁹.

A few years later, in 1961, in the 10th issue of the “Soviet Art” Bekaryan writes a review on Mariam and Yeranuhi Aslamazyans’ exhibition held in Yerevan Artist’s house, in the building of Armenian Union of Artists, providing an insightful analysis of their art¹⁰. In his description of Yeranuhi Aslamazyan’s art Bekaryan points out serenity, harmony of colors and lyricism, which, according to him, were the reflection of the painter’s “lyric, thoughtful and balanced”¹¹ nature. Her brush veils Lake Sevan, Mount Ararat, Meghri, Bjni, Ayrivank Mountains with soft tonal transitions. In “Milkmaid”, “Indian woman Devi Pelle”, “Mother’s Portrait” and a number of other works the same features become more vivid and the drawing “gives breath and life to the character”¹².

When speaking about Mariam Aslamazyan’s art, Bekaryan points out that “in her means of expression, colors and lines she is stingier, sometimes even austere”, adding that “skillful contrasts of colors give a unique charm and brilliance to her canvases and testify her audacious nature”¹³. Bekaryan believes these features to make her art unique and charming and to make the works “The Song of the Hero”, “The Return of the Hero” and a number of other canvases created during the Great Patriotic War being perceived as fresh and up-to-date. Bekaryan further continues to compare the art of two sisters, stating that Yeranuhi Aslamazyan attaches much importance to multi-figure compositions, whereas Mariam likes to be laconic and prefers having fewer figures, as evidenced in Yeranuhi’s “In the Gardens of Armenia” and Mariam’s “The Song of the Hero” and “The Return of the Hero”. When speaking about the portrait genre in the sisters’ art, Bekaryan considers Mariam Aslamazyan’s “Young Woman in the Komsomol”, “Gyulli’s Portrait”, “Sick Baji” and Yeranuhi Aslamazyan’s “Milkmaid”, “Kolkhoznitsa”, “Grandmother” to be their best portraits as “these canvases due to the mastery of execution, the wealth of color scale, the expressive

⁹ Բեքարյան 1957, 61:

¹⁰ Բեքարյան 1961, 48–51:

¹¹ Բեքարյան 1961, 49:

¹² Բեքարյան 1961, 49:

¹³ Բեքարյան 1961, 50:

drawing testify once more the artist's love for a human"¹⁴. In the genre of still life the artists' attachment to Armenian entourage is evident. "The harvest of our country's fields, the boon of gardens, house objects get breath and life under the artists' brush", adds the author, mentioning Yeranuhi Aslamazyan's "Blooming Cactus" and "Hortenzia" and Mariam Aslamazyan's "Autumn Flowers". In fact this general trait – Armenianness inherent in the sisters' works, according to Bekaryan, is rendered not by the depictions of Ararat, Aragats or the portraits of Armenians, but "by a peculiar breath, such a breath and impress that only an Armenian artist could give"¹⁵. Bekaryan further discusses Aslamazyans' graphic and ceramic artwork, which he believes complement and enrich their collections. The author also highlights the role both sisters have in advancing and promoting Soviet-Armenian art as "they have said their respected word about the talented people of our country, our enchanting nature on every possible occasion, be it at all-union, republican exhibitions, or the ones organized abroad"¹⁶. Bekaryan suggests that their art should be featured on calendar covers and cards to gain a wider recognition in the country.

In 1963, the "Soviet Art" Journal published Bekaryan's article "The Value of True Art", where he criticizes abstract painting¹⁷. Bekaryan ponders upon the reasons of its spread in Armenia, pointing out the young painters' quest for following contemporary art trends, the impact of foreign press and the temptation of freedom to paint without necessity to gain mastery. Furthermore, he considers that artists see abstract painting as a way of getting rid of "falsely realistic art saturated with inauthentic pathos, which existed till 1953"¹⁸. In his harsh criticism of abstractionism, the professor and critic urges young artists "firstly to identify what message they convey before searching for the ways of expression, as this is the only way of creating vital and meaningful novelty in art"¹⁹.

In the same 1963, in the second issue of the journal under the title "With the Force of One's Land" Bekaryan, six years after his first publication, recurs to Khanjyan's art this time dwelling on Khanjyan's genre scenes, landscapes and still

¹⁴ Բեքարյան 1961, 50:

¹⁵ Բեքարյան 1961, 50:

¹⁶ Բեքարյան 1961, 51:

¹⁷ Բեքարյան 1963, 20:

¹⁸ Բեքարյան 1963, 20:

¹⁹ Բեքարյան 1963, 20:

life paintings, tracing his creative path from "The Merry Ride" to "The Twilight"²⁰. The painting "Twilight", exhibited at a Republican exhibition in 1963 in Yerevan Painter's house became a pretext for an insightful analysis. Bekaryan considered the painting "Merry Ride" exhibited in all-union exposition in 1952 to be a starting-point for the artist's "merry ride" towards making a progress in painting. All further works state the message which he wanted to convey in his first large-scale work – the love towards life, the joy of life, and express the sharp eye to see the noble, the beautiful and the lyrical in seemingly simple scenes. They also bear the mark of Khanjyan's individuality, high professionalism, power of keen observation and wide creative interests. Bekaryan doesn't aim at analyzing all the works created during the discussed ten years, he highlights only some of them. Sisian landscapes: "Evening in Areni", "Women from Zangezour" and "Goris" evoke love for the people and the country in a viewer. "Papul Mother" is a good example of a psychological portrait, which is impossible to look at without emotion. The success of "Fishermen in Sevan" (1957), the recipient of a gold medal in Moscow and a participant of exhibitions in Moscow, Brussels, Paris, New York and Latin America, Bekaryan ascribes to the painter's great professional mastery which was expressed in well-built composition, in drawing, in the right choice of characters, in the colour structure, and mostly - to Khanjyan's sincere and deep love for his heroes. Bekaryan also admires Khanjyan's Parisian series, successfully exhibited in Yerevan and Moscow, "in which he remained loyal to his inner aspirations and individuality"²¹: "Louvre", "On the bank of the Seine", "Evening café", "At an exposition", etc. They bear the mark of melancholy, Bekaryan thinks. As for "The Twilight", "it is distinguished both by the thoughtful and philosophically wide perception of the theme, and by the harmony of artistic forms and the mastery of implementation"²². Bekaryan believes that the fact of Khanjyan being the youngest Corresponding Member of the USSR Academy of Fine Arts is indicative of the reality that he had a great talent and enjoyed people's love and respect.

In 1964 the "Soviet Art" Journal in an article entitled "Artist's Vocation" published critical speeches pronounced by Ara Bekaryan, Ruben Drambyan, Ghukas Chubaryan, Artashes Abrahamyan, Sargis Muradyan, Suren Chilingaryan

²⁰ **Բեքարյան** 1963, 10–14:

²¹ **Բեքարյան** 1963, 13:

²² **Բեքարյան** 1963, 13–14:

and Ruben Parsamyan at the closure of the “One Piece Exhibition” in Yerevan Painter’s House on December 11, which concerned not only the exhibition, but also issues of modern painting in general²³. Bekaryan does not consider the exhibition weak, with a few exceptions – result of wrong selection made by admission commissions, and offers a solution – to unite three different commissions and to select by definite criteria. But there is a more important issue, a common flaw, which Bekaryan addresses in his article. He suggests that an interesting and important topic or technical virtuosity cannot make a true piece of art, because the most important element is artistic interpretation, a true disclosure, which can only be a result of true aspiration, heartfelt topic, inner perception of a theme, where **an artist has things to voice. The author gives advice “to paint what you love and love what you paint”**²⁴ in order to create meaningful art.

In the same year, in the 7th issue of the Journal Bekaryan published an **interesting, informative analysis of Arpenik Nalbandyan’s creative oeuvre under the title “The Path of a Paintress”**²⁵. Bekaryan believes that Arpenik Nalbandyan was formed as a professional painter during her studies and work in the Tbilisi State Academy of Arts, where the main focus was placed on accurate structure, volume and form. Her paintings dating back to this period include “In Thoughts”, “Self-Portrait”, “A Sitter” and “A Girl in a Red Hat”.

The artist started the next stage in her career in Yerevan, where her work was influenced by Martiros Saryan, Hakob Kojoyan and Sedrak Arakelyan and was more closely tied to the notion of plein-air. Her paintings dating from this period include “Kolkhoz Woman at Rest”, “The Curious”, “Near the Spring”, “Granny’s Tale”, “A-students”, “An Interesting Book”, etc. Bekaryan asserts that these paintings fill in the gap of the Soviet Armenian art for thematic, compositional scenes of contemporary life thanks to the psychological depth of the imagery, as well as compositional arrangements, fully expressing the subjective line. Her painter signature further evolves towards laconism, more transparency and “sonority” of color, technical mastery and psychological depth, which is evident in **the works like “Self-portrait” and “Still-life”**. The paintings done in Bjni, “At the Spring”, “Weeder”, “A Highlander Girl”, are marked by “active use of milieu, inner and meaningful interconnectedness of the figures and great vital

²³ **Բեքարյան** 1964, 12:

²⁴ **Բեքարյան** 1964, 12:

²⁵ **Բեքարյան** 1964, 26–33:

persuasiveness”.

Bekaryan also highlights 1962 as a **progressive step in the artist's creative work**. Her **“airy color palette rich in reflections of places generalizes, gets decorative orderliness and becomes vital and trembling. Cold and warm tones get into meaningful contrast...”**²⁶. The works dating from this period include **“Khndzoresk”**, **“Little Aram's Portrait”**, **“Little Suzie”**, **“Lads”**, etc.

The praise of motherhood, internal and external beauty of a woman and her **labor dominate the artist's work in all their grace and beauty**. Overall Bekaryan characterizes the paintress, who excelled in various genres, who depicted a human, life, labor, native nature, fruits and flowers with a unique sense of color, **with seriousness, enthusiastic love and psychological depth**, as **“one of the representatives of the Soviet art, thanks to whose efforts this field of our culture underwent its further stage in the formation of national school, starting from the mid 1940s”**²⁷.

After the silence of eleven years, in 1975, on the eve of the 30th anniversary of the Great Patriotic War, Bekaryan publishes **his article “They Were Three Comrades”**²⁸, where he reminisces about Koryun Simonyan, Levon Tonakanyan, and Vanik Karapetyan - painters and soldiers, who fell during the Second World War. Making a short and warm reference to their human image, the character of their art and their personal histories, Bekaryan notes with pain that they were killed for **“the sake of the nations' future”**. **“They were truly talented young men who had many things to say”**, he concludes with bitterness²⁹.

Bekaryan's last article in the Journal was published in 1978 under the title **“Artist's Breathtaking World”** which **was a review of Meruzhan Harutyunyan's solo exhibition** hosted in the Painter's House in the February of the same year³⁰. Bekaryan describes Harutyunyan as a restless artist, in a constant quest, who creates artworks in various genres. Bekaryan notes that the painter's frugal and dominating color palette moves the viewer and helps to create highly poetical artworks, as **“Girl With Fruits”**, **“Ada's Portrait”** and **“Artist's Wife”**. **“His numerous exhibited landscapes are odes to native nature”**, states the author,

²⁶ **Բեքարյան** 1964, 31:

²⁷ **Բեքարյան** 1964, 26:

²⁸ **Բեքարյան** 1975, 43–45:

²⁹ **Բեքարյան** 1975, 45:

³⁰ **Բեքարյան** 1978.

adding that besides the landscape genre Harutunyan also worked with enthusiasm on thematic canvases, such as “The Red Morning”, which “resembles a triumphal march”³¹.

Conclusions

A gifted artist and a professor, Bekaryan in his articles published in the “Soviet Art” Journal reviews exhibitions, analyzes artworks of his contemporaries, outlines their creative paths, ponders upon their input in the Soviet-Armenian art and provides deep insights into art-related theoretical issues. His professional analysis and criticism always rest upon objective criteria – he speaks about technical mastery, compositional arrangement, colors, lines and forms and emphasizes the importance of the emotional component, of harmonious interpenetration of form and content, which he considers the key to true art. Another factor which he attaches a lot of importance to is the presence of national identity in art. Bekaryan gives plenty of pieces of friendly and valuable advice in order to foster further development and improvement of the art of younger generation and the Soviet-Armenian art in general. Bekaryan’s nine articles published on the pages of the “Soviet Art” are interesting both for art lovers and professionals.

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³¹ Բեքարյան 1978.

մին. հրատ., հ. 7, էջ 26–33:

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ՄՈՒՐԱԴՅԱՆ Շ.

Ամփոփում

Բանալի բառեր Արա Բեքարյան, «Սովետական արվեստ», հրապարակումներ, արվեստաբանական հանդես, արվեստի քննադատություն, XX դարի հայ գեղանկարիչների ստեղծագործություններ, ցուցահանդեսների լուսաբանում:

Արա Բեքարյանը հեղինակել է մոտ երեք տասնյակի հասնող արվեստաբանական հոդվածներ և հրապարակումներ, որոնք լույս են տեսել հեղինակավոր հայալեզու և ռուսալեզու ամսագրերում և թերթերում: Հոդվածի նպատակն է առաջին անգամ լուսաբանել «Սովետական արվեստ» ամսագրի էջերում գետեղված հայ արվեստին առնչվող նկարչի հոդվածները: Բեքարյանն անդրադարձել է կերպարվեստի արդի խնդիրներին և իր ժամանակակիցների արվեստին՝ բարձր գնահատելով Գրիգոր Խանջյանի, Արփենիկ Նալբանդյանի, Մարիամ և Երանուհի Ասլամազյանների և մի շարք սկսնակ նկարիչների դերն ու նշանակությունը հայ կերպարվեստի զարգացման գործում:

ИСКУССТВОВЕДЧЕСКИЕ СТАТЬИ АРА БЕКАРЯНА В ЖУРНАЛЕ «СОВЕТСКОЕ ИСКУССТВО»

МУРАДЯН Ш.

Резюме

Ключевые слова: Ара Бекарян, «Советское искусство», публикации, искусствоведческий журнал, художественная критика, работы армянских художников XX

века, рецензии на выставки.

Ара Бекарян является автором тридцати статей и публикаций, изданных на страницах авторитетных армяноязычных и русскоязычных журналов и газет. В журнале «Советское искусство» было издано множество концептуальных и аналитических материалов по армянскому искусству, в которых художник затрагивал актуальные проблемы изобразительного искусства и искусства своих современников. Предметом его исследования стало творчество Григора Ханджяна, Арпеник Налбандян, сестер Аслам-зян и ряда начинающих художников, сыгравших заметную роль в развитии армянского изобразительного искусства.