

## THE WORLD THROUGH THE LENS OF THE PHOTOGRAPHER ARA GÜLER

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The art of photography appeared in Turkey between the XIX and XX centuries. In the beginning, because of the high price of the service, only the rich could afford it.

The first photography studio in the Ottoman Empire was established in the Bera district of Constantinople (presently, the Beyoglu district of Istanbul), where most of the population was Christian. Here, in 1857, Pascal Sebah of Armenian descent opened a photography center. He was one of the few to be awarded the Third-Class Order of the Medjidie by Sultan Abdulmejid. Unfortunately, all his photographic works were burnt in the great fire of 1881. The sons of Sarraf Mikayel Abdullahyan – Vichen, Gevorg and Hovsep Abdullah, also occupy an important place in the history of Turkish photography. They held a monopoly on dissemination of photography throughout the Empire. In 1836, the Abdullahyan brothers became special photographers for Sultan Abdul Aziz. In 1867, near the Russian Embassy in Bera, they opened a photography studio named "Abdullah Brothers". A great number of photographers of Turkish and foreign descent, working in Turkey, namely, the Gulmez brothers, Ashil Samanj, Jerome Savajian, the Papazyan brothers, Antoine Zilipojian, Othmar Pfersci, Ismayin Nesmi, Ahmed Polat and others, furthered the development of Turkish photography. Ara Güler is one of those, who played a big part in the history of photography, having created with his outstanding works a whole new world in that field.

**Key words:** Ara Güler, photography, photojournalist, the Eye of Istanbul, exhibitions, Turkey, photojournalist.

## Introduction

Many scholarly and journalistic studies, carried out by Armenian, Turkish and other researchers, bring out an undeniable fact: almost all the fields of culture in Turkey, photography among them, were founded and developed thanks to Armenians. The art of photography appeared in Turkey between the XIX and XX centuries. In the beginning, because of the high price of the service, only the rich could afford it.

The Armenian-Turkish photojournalist Ara Güler, who lived and worked in Turkey, is ranked among the most famous photojournalists of the XX century. He did not deem his photographs as works of art, but just documentary images. However, on close examination, one can assert that they are true artworks.

From 1950 to the end of his life, Ara Güler worked as a photojournalist and collaborated with a number of agencies, participated at international exhibitions.

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The photographer received many awards for his outstanding oeuvre. As a photographer, Ara Güler got acquainted with many eminent persons, among them, besides the leaders of Turkey, were Bertrand Russell, Winston Churchill, Arnold Toynbee, Salvador Dali, Marc Chagall, Federico Fellini, Picasso, Dustin Hoffman, Sophia Loren, Albert Hitchcock, Tennessee Williams, William Saroyan, Aram Khachaturian, Sergey Parajanov, to name but a few. Their photographs were placed on the covers of books and popular magazines.

### **Ara Güler. Biographic overview**

Ara Güler is one of the most prominent representatives of modern photographic art (Fig. 1). He was born in Istanbul on August 16, 1928, to Armenian parents. Güler's father, Tachat Terteryan, originally from Shapin-Garahisar, owned a pharmacy in downtown Istanbul. At the age of six, he was sent to Istanbul to study, which is why he escaped the tragic events of 1915 in his hometown. In 1934, the law on surname was adopted, and Tachat Terteryan had to change his surname to Güler, which means "smiling face". Güler's mother Verjin was born into a wealthy Egyptian-Armenian Shahian family. Ara was the couple's only child [13].

Ara Güler received his primary education at the Getronaqan Armenian High School, then attended theater classes with the founder of modern Turkish theater Muhsin Ertugrul. With the knowledge that he had gained about theater and dramatic art, he wrote as many as nine plays. Besides these, he wrote over seven hundred short stories, most of them in Armenian. They were published in the Armenian periodicals of the time [4]. He studied economics at the University of Istanbul. The future photographer's dream was to become a screenwriter or film director, but he was to earn worldwide recognition in another field – the field of photography which, a hobby in the beginning, grew into profession soon enough [8].

**"I started living with the cinematography, I didn't know that I would become a photographer..." [11].**

He collaborated with a number of newspapers, magazines and agencies:

- In 1950, still a university student, he worked for the "Yeni Istanbul" newspaper. He was the first to capture the sensational fact of damaging Kemal Ataturk's statue by a radical Turk and send the photo to the world's leading newspapers.
- In the editorial office of the "Hayat" magazine, where he worked until 1961, he got the position of Head of the Photography Department.
- In 1958, when "Time Life" opened its branch in Turkey, Ara Güler became a Middle East correspondent for that prominent company.
- In 1958, he became the photographer-journalist, covering Middle East for the "Paris Match" and "Stern" magazines. About this time, he became a member and reporter for the world-famous "Magnum Photos" agency.

However, Güler's real career as a photojournalist began in the 60s, after the completion of his military service.

- In 1961, the British “Photography Yearbook” included him in the list of the best seven photographers of the world; the artist was the only one from Turkey to be accepted as a member of the American Society of Magazine Photographers.

- In 1962, he was awarded the German “Master of Leica” honorary title, and the Swiss “Camera” periodical dedicated a special edition to his works. That year was special for Güler not only for the awards and high recognition received from the European professional organizations, but also for new creative achievements. The collection titled “Classics” was published, which also included photos by some other Armenian artists.

- In 1967, the renowned Japanese “World Photography” magazine published the works of Ara Güler and Richard Avedon.

- In 1971, his photographs were placed on the covers of Lord Kinross’ “Hagia Sophia” and Jean Leymarie’s “Picasso, Metamorphoses et Unite”, dedicated to Picasso’s 90th birthday anniversary.

Güler’s photography series featuring nature, people and historical monuments of Turkey are included in the most popular collections, albums, and other publications, one of which is the book dedicated to the architect “Mimar Sinan” [10].

- In 1975, he visited the USA, where he organized a photo exhibition titled “Creative Americans”. During this period, Ara Güler for photographing purposes met many outstanding people, such as Bertrand Russell, Winston Churchill, Arnold Toynbee, Salvador Dali, Marc Chagall, Federico Fellini, Picasso, Dustin Hoffman, Sophia Loren, Albert Hitchcock, Tennessee Williams, William Saroyan, Aram Khachaturian and others. Photographing Picasso was of special significance for Güler, since the artist was known for his reluctance to pose for photographers [5].

- In 1975, he directed a documentary *The End of the Hero* about dismantling and destruction of the warship “Yavuz”.

- In 1980, he published the book “Ara Güler: Photographs”, and in 1989, the photographs of celebrities from the field of cinema, collected over the years, were published in his “Ara Güler’s Movie Directors”.

Güler’s photographs found their place in the National Museum of Paris, the George Eastman Museum in Rochester (USA), the Sheldon Collection of the University of Nebraska, the Ludwig Museum in Cologne, in private collections in Boston, Chicago, New York, and elsewhere. His works were displayed at such international photo exhibitions as “First Flashes” in Montreal, “10 Masters of Color Photography” in New York, at the “Photokina” Fair in Cologne, etc. [3, p. 130-142].

A great deal of his works and his archive are stored in the Ara Güler Photography Museum, established in Istanbul in 2018 on the photographer’s 90<sup>th</sup> birthday, a few months before he passed away.

Here are some of Ara Güler’s awards, prizes, and medals: *Master of Leica*, Germany (1961); the *First Prize in Photojournalism* by the Turkish Association of Journalists (1979); *Successful Communications Award* by the Faculty of Communication of the Istanbul University (1995); *Purhan Felek Services to the*

*Media Award* by the Turkish Association of Journalists (1999); *Order of Merit* by the Armenian Patriarchate of Turkey (2000); *Légion d'honneur* medal, France (2002); *Photographer of the Century*, Turkey (2000); *Grand Award for Culture and Art*, Turkey (2005); *Lucie Lifetime Achievement Award*, USA (2009); *Vermeil Medal of the City of Paris*, France (2009); *Leica Hall of Fame Award*, Germany (2016), etc. [1].

### Ara Güler's Photographic Works

Ara Güler is the most famous photographer of the XX century, representing Turkey. His magnificent black-and-white pictures are true chronicles of life. He calls himself a photojournalist, not a photographer, since for him, photography has no artistic value. That didn't hinder him from creating truly valuable images, appreciated all around the world.

Güler described the process of photo shooting as follows:

"The photographer's presence should not be noticed. Otherwise, the composition will turn into a masquerade. I always try to be very discreet. The photographer should be a silent witness" [12]. It is his black-and-white captures of the city and its citizens that brought him worldwide fame. The city had always been his main target, and as a *silent witness* of the life in the capital, Güler was nicknamed "The Eye of Istanbul".

The photographer traveled a lot. He visited Armenia, the Middle and Near Eastern countries, such as India, Bangladesh, Burma, as well as the Western countries – America, France, and elsewhere.

In his oeuvre, we can see various genres of photography. What attracts most in his artworks is their aesthetics and sensibility. Simple landscapes and people's eyes look so real in his pictures. The artist always aspired to tell us a story, hence he focused on the disappearing parts of the city. Black-and-white photographs of the Gumgapi fishing district are the best examples of this. In those years, Gumgapi was a small fishermen's village. A few years later, when the "Sahil Yolu" (Coastal Road) was built, this spacious fishing port acquired a completely different look and became a part of the city. The technology of the time was not advanced enough to print color photographs, but the photographer, knowing that the village of Gumgapi was to be destroyed, went there to take color photographs. Over time, they turned red and went out of order. Therefore the history of the Gumgapi fishermen is now available only in the black-and-white version [1].

One of his arresting pictures represents the Gumgapi fishermen boats out in the sea. Their multitude makes an impression of an endless chain. The composition is quite balanced. The boats follow one after another forming rows, however, the boats in the foreground seem to stand out from the rest, like the ones in the front right corner (Fig. 2).

The focus of his lens was targeted at fishermen in different moments of their labor: sailing, sorting and selling the catch, resting in cafes after the workday, etc. (Fig. 3).



1. Ara Güler



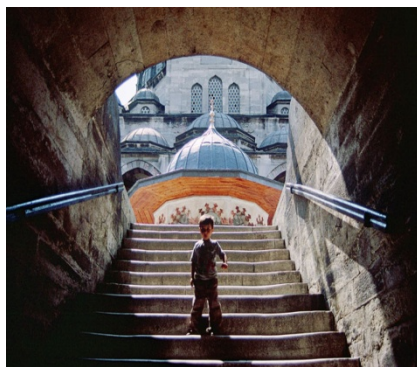
2. The Gumgapi Fishermen



3. Armenian Fishermen at Gumgapi



4. Untitled



5. Untitled



6. Two Chairs and a Leaving Ship



7, 8, 9, 10. Children



11. Arab with His Servant



12, 13. Salvador Dali (Paris, 1971)



14. Armenian Khachkar



In another scene, the photographer captured the life of people living in the suburbs. Ara Güler could skillfully bring life into his photographs. Thus, in two of his pictures we see the same scene, showing how the presence of a child adds expressiveness and liveliness to the dull and lifeless composition (Fig. 4, 5).

Another noteworthy photograph is “Two Chairs and a Leaving Ship”. According to Ara Güler, it was a love story (Fig. 6).

He took many photos of children playing, coming up to the artist and asking to be photographed (Fig. 7, 8, 9, 10). Güler seems to deliberately connect the iconic buildings of the city and the ordinary working people’s life side by side.

During one of his trips, he took a picture of an Arab with his servant. It is an illustration of the social inequality and injustice in the lives of these two characters (Fig. 11).

One of Güler’s basic principles is to never ask his models to pose for him. He tries to capture them in their actual mood and situation. Perhaps, this is one of the secrets of the photographer’s success.

As we mentioned above, he also took excellent photo portraits that made a major contribution to the history of photography. In them, he immortalized some famous people of his time: artists, actors, film directors, composers, writers, art critics, politicians.

Having taken a portrait picture, the photographer never sought to meet the person again – not because he was indifferent to his heroes, but because he took his pictures accidentally, walking around the city and just catching the moment. Meanwhile, the impression Ara Güler’s photos make is that they are selected shots from a directed movie.

**Salvador Dali.** Dali is represented in a semi-reclining position in an armchair in a luxuriously furnished environment. Notice that he fit in only half of the armchair. His clothes, pose, and look convey his violent temperament (Fig. 12, 13).

He also touched on Armenian topics: khachkars, churches and common people. Ara Güler tried to present the world in a way that many people are not ready to see. He sensed transformations, reconstructions in the city and in the people’s lives; he wanted to preserve each and every detail for history (Fig. 14).

### **Exhibition at the National Gallery of Armenia in 2013 and a Conversation Between Güler and a Group of Students**

In 2013, the National Gallery of Armenia opened Ara Güler’s exhibition titled “Barev dzez” (Hello), featuring over 100 photographs made in Armenia, Turkey and other countries. The photographer donated over 130 prints to the Gallery. Speaking at the press conference before the exhibition, Ara Güler said: “I started living with cinema, I didn’t know that I would become a photographer. I took up photography when I realized that I could give something more with it”. Ara Güler said that it was important for him to capture a character unprepared, that beauty is not important because it is fleeting. At the end of the press conference, the title of Honorary



Member of the National Association of Photographers of Armenia was bestowed upon Ara Güler by the President of the Association Sergey Hakobyan.

The Exhibition of Güler's works continued through the summer. A separate section represented his photos taken in Armenia. The rest of the exhibits were portraits of famous people and photographs of landscapes, urban views from around the world; here also belonged the images of Istanbul. During his stay, Ara Güler was received at the Department of Journalism of Yerevan State University. An excerpt from the question-and-answer session between Ara Güler and the students is brought below:

**- Mr. Güler, who was your first teacher, and do you remember the first photo you took?**

- I didn't have a teacher, I "invented" everything on my own. I was a gifted child (laughs). But seriously, there was no teacher at that time. We all had a camera at home and took family pictures, but my first professional photo I took in 1948, when the statue of Atatürk was demolished.

**- Does a photographer have to have talent, or can he become a professional if he works hard?**

- I don't think it has anything to do with talent. First of all, a photojournalist must be a "comprehensive" and smart person to instantly grasp the situation. You can't let the time slip. You have to catch the moment. Photography is the visual story of journalism. I am not a photographer; I am a photojournalist presenting news. The history should be written with the photographs we take. Yet don't think that whoever picks up a camera is a journalist.

**- You also took the picture of William Saroyan. Can you tell us when and how you met him?**

- I think it was in 1976, the year of the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the discovery of America. I was supposed to shoot American celebrities, but I couldn't find Saroyan. I wrote letters, I literally chased him. No result. I finally caught up with him in Paris. That's where I photographed him. He was a remarkably interesting person; he knew everything about everything. His favorite person was the girl of his next-door neighbor, who always waited for him to come out to shake his hand.

**- If you had had a chance to live another life, would you become a photographer again?**

- Yes, I would be a photographer, but there is one thing I always regret. I would like to become an architect because the most important thing is to leave a mark on this world. It can be just a wall [7].

### Conclusion

Today, Ara Güler's works are exhibited in the world-famous galleries, stored in the collections of the National Library of France, the Ludwig Museum in Cologne, the Sheldon Collection at the University of Nebraska, as well as in private collections

in Boston, Chicago, and New York. His photographs were published in many photo albums. They make a valuable contribution to the photographic art of Turkey [9].

“I don’t plan anything in particular when I take photos, but I run around the city, ready to take photos at any moment, because I see everything around me – the city, the people – as if through the lens. My world is the lens of the camera” [13].

The world-famous photographer died in 2018 at the age of 90. A few months before his death, the Ara Güler Photography Museum opened in the historical building of the Bomonti Brewery in Istanbul. There, the artist’s photographs, written stories, paintings, books, notes, videos, photographic equipment, and personal belongings are exhibited.

Like the photographer Antoin Sevruguin of Armenian-Georgian descent eternalized the historical and cultural monuments of the XIX century Iran, so did Ara Güler, who documented the contemporary world in his photographs.

Ara Güler left for us the truth as it is. Over the years, his heritage acquired shades of melancholy and nostalgia. But in their moment of capture, of the rapid click of the shutter, they were the breath of the hour [2, p. 67-71].

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## ԱՇԽԱՐՀԸ ԼՈՒՍԱՆԿԱՐԻՉ ԱՐԱ ԳՅՈՒԼԵՐԻ ԼՈՒՍԱՆՑԻԿՈՒՄ

## ԻՎԵՐԹ ԹԱՋԱՐՅԱՆ \*

**Հղման համար.** Թաջարյան, Իվեթ: «Աշխարհը լուսանկարիչ Արա Գյուլերի լուսախցիկում»: *Արվեստագիտական հանդես*, N 2 (2022): 167-178. DOI: 10.54503/2579-2830-2022.2(8)-167

Գիտական ու լրագրողական բազմաթիվ ուսումնասիրություններ, որոնք իրականացվել են հայ, թուրք և այլազգի մասնագետների կողմից, անհերքելիորեն վկայում են այն մասին, որ Օսմանյան կայսրությունում և Թուրքիայում մշակույթի գրեթե բոլոր բնագավառները, այդ թվում նաև լուսանկարչությունը, հիմնադրվել և զարգացել են հայերի շնորհիվ: Ծագումով հայ Արա Գյուլերը համարվում է XX դարի ամենահայտնի ֆոտոլրագրողներից մեկը, որն ապրել և ստեղծագործել է Թուրքիայում: Նա իր լուսանկարները չէր համարում արվեստի ստեղծագործություններ, այլ ընդամենը վավերագրական կադրեր: Սակայն այդ վավերագրական պատկերներն ուսումնասիրելով, կարող ենք փաստել, որ դրանք իսկական արվեստի գործեր են:

1950-ից աշխատել է որպես ֆոտոլրագրող և համագործակցել մի շարք գործակալությունների հետ, ակտիվորեն մասնակցել է միջազգային ցուցահանդեսների: Լուսանկարչի բարձրարժեք ստեղծագործություններն արժանացել են զանազան բարձր պարգևների: Արա Գյուլերը լուսանկարելու նպատակով հանդիպել է բազմաթիվ աշխարհահռչակ անձանց, որոնց թվում են, բացի Թուրքիայի ղեկավարներից, Բերթրան Ռասելը, Ուինսթոն Չերչիլը, Առնոլդ Թոյնբին, Սալվադոր Դալին, Մարկ Շագալը, Ֆեդերիկո Ֆելինին, Պիկասոն, Դաստին Հոֆմանը, Սոֆի Լորենը, Ալֆրեդ Հիչքոքը, Թենեսի Ուիլյամսը, Վիլյամ Սարոյանը, Արամ Խաչատրյանը, Սերգեյ Փարաջանովը և այլոք:

**Բանալի բաներ՝** Արա Գյուլեր, լուսանկարչություն, ֆոտոլրագրող, Ստամբուլի աչքը, ցուցահանդեսներ, Թուրքիա, ֆոտոլրագրող:

\* Մեսրոպ Մաշտոցի անվան հին ձեռագրերի գիտահետազոտական ինստիտուտի Արևելագիտության բաժնի ավագ գիտաշխատող, ԵՊՀ Հայ արվեստի պատմության և տեսության ամբիոնի դասախոս, արվեստագիտության թեկնածու, դոցենտ, yvettetaj@yahoo.com, հոդվածը ներկայացնելու օրը՝ 06.09.2022, գրախոսելու օրը՝ 17.11.2022, տպագրության ընդունելու օրը՝ 15.12.2022:

## МИР В ОБЪЕКТИВЕ ФОТОГРАФА АРА ГЮЛЕРА

ИВЕТ ТАДЖАРЯН\*

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Многочисленные научные и журналистские исследования, осуществленные армянскими, турецкими и другими специалистами, неопровержимо свидетельствуют о том, что почти все сферы духовной культуры в Османской империи и Турции были заложены и развиты благодаря армянам. Сюда относится также искусство фотографии. Один из самых известных фотожурналистов 20-го века, армянин по происхождению Ара Гюлер жил и творил в Турции. Он не считал свои фотографии произведениями искусства, а всего лишь документальными кадрами. Однако изучив их, мы можем констатировать, что перед нами – настоящие произведения искусства.

С 1950-х годов Ара Гюлер работал фотожурналистом и в этом качестве сотрудничал с рядом агентств, параллельно активно участвуя в международных выставках. За свои высококлассные работы фотограф был удостоен многочисленных наград. С целью фотографирования Ара Гюлер встречался со многими всемирно известными личностями, среди них, наряду с руководителями Турции, были Бертран Рассел, Уинстон Черчилль, Арнольд Тойнби, Сальвадор Дали, Марк Шагал, Федерико Феллини, Пикассо, Дастин Хофман, Софи Лорен, Альфред Хичкок, Теннеси Уильямс, Вильям Сароян, Арам Хачатрян, Сергей Параджанов и др.

**Ключевые слова:** Ара Гюлер, фотография, фотожурналист, Око Стамбула, выставки, Турция, фотожурналист.

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