



ABRAHAM MEGERDICHIAN, *EEMIN SHINADZ PANERUS* (THE THINGS I'VE MADE)¹

ROBERT MEGERDICHIAN
rma@cadcafmservices.com

INTRODUCTION

The machinists at the General Electric aircraft engines plant in Lynn, Massachusetts knew him either as Abe or Abie. They could not pronounce nor did they care that his Armenian surname was Megerdichian. They only knew that he was among the best and most skilled of the machinists at the factory.

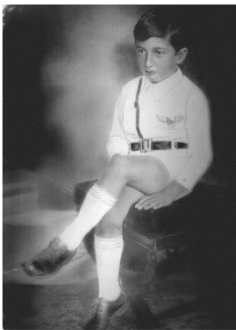
They flattered him by asking if he would mind if they watched him when he made his artistic pieces. He had previously thought that at fifteen letters long his actual name, DerMegerdichian, was too long for Americans, so he opted to shorten it. He was wrong in his assumption, and for the rest of his life he corrected those who struggled with the pronunciation of his name. The name means that somewhere along the lineage of the family of Megerdich, the baptizer, there had been a clergyman. Toward the end of his life he conceded and unofficially called himself Abe Mitchell. Like his abbreviated moniker, his life was cut too short, only 59 years. He had already received his anniversary gemstone tiepins at work, with the last being for 40 years of service. He was marking days off the calendar to retire at 60 years old. He envisioned spending his time with family, working for his church and its Armenian language school, or in his garden, bicycling, stamp collecting and, not least, at his beloved metalworking hobby. He contemplated starting a small business. One option was to graduate from being a reasonably good amateur photographer to a professional one. Another option was to convert his garage into a machine shop and take custom orders for metal miniatures he would machine. Cancer changed everything.

Abraham Megerdichian was my father. To me he was, and is, Dad, and my mother, Mom. My intent here is to describe how my Dad seamlessly combined his love of his Armenian heritage with his skill as a master machinist to create metal artwork for family and friends.

¹ For more information about Abraham Megerdichian and his art see www.abesartwork.wordpress.com .

EARLY YEARS

Dad was born in 1923 in Franklin, Massachusetts, a suburb midway between Boston, Massachusetts and Providence, Rhode Island and a place he later reminisced about as being “cow country.” His father, Hagop (Jacob), was born in 1895 in the agricultural area of Malatia, Turkish Armenia, where it was said “grapes (were) the size of apricots, apricots the size of melons, and melons the size of watermelons.” Having lost four of five sisters, including twins, during the Armenian Genocide, Hagop immigrated before 1922 as a young man to join his uncle, Haroutune (Harry) Bullukian, who owned an established oil delivery business in town. Dad’s mother, Mary Bezirdjian, was also born in 1895. She left Gessaria, not far from Malatia, in summer 1922 with her brother, Hovaness (John), destined for Marseilles. As it turned out, he stayed behind in France, marrying and settling in what was known as the soap district. Dad would one day travel to Marseilles to visit his uncle and his wife. Mary traveled on to the United States, coincidentally to Franklin. She was betrothed to a man she had not met. When she finally met the man, she was less than impressed and vowed she would not marry him. Threatening to return home, she stayed with relatives in town. Very soon Hagop got word from his uncle that an unattached Armenian woman was in town, a rarity at the time. Men tended to emigrate, work, send money home and eventually return to the old country. Hagop proposed to Mary the day after they met. She is alleged to have said, “I like this one and will marry him.” Hagop, aged 28 and Mary, 23, were married at the Armenian church in Boston on September 24, 1922, only forty-one days after Grandma arrived in this country.



Abraham, age 6, 1929, East Cambridge, Massachusetts; Kelley Grammar School Graduation, 1938, East Cambridge, Massachusetts. Abe is 9th from right, top row; Abraham with parents, Mary and Hagop, circa 1942, East Cambridge, Massachusetts
(Photos courtesy Robert Megerdichian)

Hagop soon moved with Mary and Abraham from Franklin northward to Cambridge, across the Charles River from Boston, to seek better work opportunities. The earliest extant photograph of Dad was taken in 1929 in East Cambridge when he was six years old. He entered public school not knowing any English, but learned quickly at the now demolished Kelley Grammar School. While a student at Rindge Technical High School in Cambridge, Dad enrolled as one of a dozen students in a special machining class. It was wartime and machinists were urgently needed. Dad graduated in 1942, but because the United States was in conservation/recycling mode, and paper was in short supply due to the war, he received no yearbook.

Upon graduation Dad immediately got a position as a junior machinist at General Electric, commuting fifteen miles each way. Within one year he enlisted in the United States Navy, completed his training and shipped out aboard an amphibious landing ship for the Philippines. Dad was assigned the duty of being ship's cook and given *The Cook Book of the United States Navy* and the *Guide for Cutting Beef*. On occasion and as necessary he did some machining aboard ship, especially when the need arose to replace a part for his industrial kitchen equipment. With his curiosity and culinary and mechanical problem-solving skills he eventually became called a tinkerer by his shipmates, an apt title he relished at work and at home long afterward. Dad returned stateside in 1946 and secured his former position at General Electric.

How Mom and Dad met is perhaps emblematic of how courting was done in the Armenian American and other ethnic communities post World War II. In the Boston area Hagop had gotten work as a deliveryman for an Armenian bakery located in Watertown, one town over from Cambridge and the home of the Hood Rubber Company, where many other Armenians found work. (It is said that when Armenians arrived as immigrants in America and the Ellis Island inspectors asked them their destination, they responded with the one or two English language words they knew – Vat-r-town.) Among Hagop's stops was the Babigian family of Lynn, which lived not far from General Electric. On his first delivery to them, Hagop climbed the three flights to the top floor and found Dikran and Vehanoush with their three daughters. The oldest was Ojen, better known as Eugenia and later as Jenny. Hagop discretely told Dikran he had a single son. The matchmaking had begun. Within two years Jenny completed her nursing training, and they married in 1951 at the Armenian church in Watertown. The couple then moved into the second floor plus the partially finished attic of the two-family house Dad had bought in Cambridge, complete with a grapevine and arbor. In keeping with true Armenian tradition he had his parents live with them. Medzpapa (Grandpa) would climb the ladder in his suit jacket, tie and hat to trim the vine and gather the leaves and grapes.



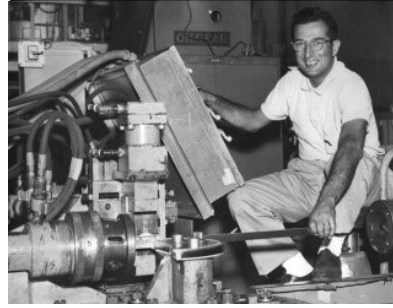
Eugenia, Nursing School Graduation, 1950, Lynn Hospital, Lynn, Massachusetts;
Hagop trimming grapevine, 1950s, Cambridge, Massachusetts; Abraham (lower right)
with crewmates of LCI 685, 1945, Mindoro, Philippines
(Photos courtesy R. Megerdichian)

ABE'S PERSONALITY

Before describing Dad's metalwork, it is necessary to appreciate his personality. He was sociable and imaginative. He loved being around people and made friends easily, staying with the closest of them for decades. All through his life he reached out to people beyond his family, particularly if they were Armenian like him. By the time he entered the service he had already honed his friendly, outgoing nature, and had established deep friendships with fellow Armenians through membership in the Armenian Youth Federation. In the military his personable disposition may have influenced his superiors to make him cook. Perhaps he had told them he had learned how to cook from his mother, which would have been a truism. As a sailor Dad nurtured a good working relationship with his galley steward, the only black man among the crew. Dad was popular with his other crewmates as well.



Abraham (third from left) with crewmates of LCI 685, 1945, Shanghai, China; Abe
with Hagop Megerdichian (left) and Dikran Babigian (right)
(Photos courtesy R. Megerdichian)



(Abraham) Abe (seated left), 1960, with fellow machinists, General Electric, Lynn, Massachusetts; Abe at bending machine, General Electric, Lynn, Massachusetts
(Photos courtesy R. Megerdichian)

Home from the war and back in civilian life Dad got on well with his future father-in-law, Dikran, helping him by doing handiwork in the basement and garage. Dad's fellow workers who had known him at General Electric have said Abe was the one who always asked them how they were doing when they or their family members had health issues. At Christmas time Dad would bring Armenian cognac to toast the holidays and welcome in the New Year. Maybe his action was not exactly condoned, nor would it likely be tolerated today, but with his sparkling personality, Dad's higher-ups looked the other way and accepted a drink when offered. Dad's actions were a welcome respite from the din and drone of the factory, which he combated with the use of a small radio at his work station, playing his favorite music of popular male singers like Frank Sinatra and Perry Como.

MACHINING WITH HUMOR

Wikipedia defines machining as *“a process in which a material [often metal] is cut to a desired final shape and size by a controlled material-removal process. The processes that have this common theme are collectively called subtractive manufacturing, which utilizes machine tools, in contrast to additive manufacturing [3D printing], which uses controlled addition of material.”*²

The machines that machinists use can be very large, expensive to purchase and operate and not easily accessible outside the realm of a factory. Examples are lathes, milling machines, drilling machines, bending machines, etc. The hand held tools used to measure and cut the metal are also expensive and require great skill and training to use properly and safely. Machinists cut metal with extreme precision, and tolerance for variation is very small. The modern-day technical term for “machining” is CNC, meaning that the process is computerized. Right until the end of his career Dad did not use or like CNC

² Wikipedia *Machining*. 2022, November 20. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Machining>.

equipment, just beginning to appear on factory floors at that time. His ability to create the precise parts he did was based on his skill, not a computer.

By the time I was born in 1953, Dad had already begun making various metal household items for Mom in his free time. Though the objects may not have been considered romantic gifts, he gave some of the items to her nonetheless. During his twenty-minute lunch break, Dad would use his heavy equipment to re-form the scrap metal he acquired at work into a rough impression of the object he intended to turn it into. Then he would refine the object with the same equipment and at his home workshop with the use of hand tools, followed by hours of buffing to make the finish as smooth as possible. Finally, he would perform any assembly. He crafted *Vases* and *Candle Holders* and *Snuffers* in various sizes and shapes. Made of brass, copper, or aluminum, some were two inches tall while others weighed three pounds and were adjustable in height. In the 1950s smoking was ever present, so Dad made lots of *Ashtrays*, many of which he gave away. Among other favorite gifts he created for friends were handheld *Dinner Bells* topped with cast brass eagles. In all likelihood Dad's experience with making implements for his naval galley influenced his crafting similar objects for his domestic kitchen. He machined a solid aluminum *Rolling Pin*, a *Bacon Rasher Weight*, a *Meat Tenderizer*, a *Mortar and Pestle*, a *Napkin Ring*, multiple *Pans*, *Pin Cushions*, *Salt and Pepper Shakers*, and M- and butterfly-shaped *Trivets* for the dining table. In addition, he made a *Lawn Sprinkler*, *Necktie Holders*, *Paint Scrapers*, *Saws*, a *Slingshot*, a *Soap Dish*, and a *Tennis Racquet Key Holder*. I estimate it took Dad about one month on average to create one of his objects. All the while, Abe never forgot nor neglected his Armenian heritage. For his church he re-crafted rejected metal discs used on aircraft engines into *Collection Plates* which he lined with maroon felt. He crafted and donated a cross for the altar.

He was a proud Armenian American machinist on the east coast of the United States, following metalworking traditions for which Armenians had long been well known. Although he made metal implements and jewelry items, he differentiated himself from the generations of other Armenians who pounded metal as smiths do or melted metal as jewelers do. Rather, he took metal which happened to be scrap, and reformed it into new shapes. In the language of today, his repurposing of rejected metals was industrially green and his carbon footprint was small. In ancient language he preferred to give rather than receive. Throughout the duration of his metalworking hobby, Dad created over 425 objects, many of which he gave away. For many of them, he punched the date into the metal on the bottom of the object and, with the steel die he had made, his AM monogram.



AM Monogram and Date. (Photo by R. Megerdichian); AM Monogram Die
(Photo by Scott Sutherland)

Dad never sold one piece even though he was offered the equivalent of several weeks' pay for at least one piece, his "*Piano Music Box with Bench*", (1973).



Piano Music Box with Bench, (1973); *Woman's Ring, J Script, #1*; *Woman's Ring, J Script, #2 with Ring Box* (Photos by S. Sutherland)

Dad machined dozens of jewelry pieces, mostly as gifts for Mom. He made her stainless steel rings, some with variations of the letter J (for Jenny), and an aluminum box to hold a ring. He made coin pendants and aluminum earrings, some in the shape of 1960s space capsules. Aluminum *Armenian Crosses* were a particular favorite. Dad left behind a handful of similar crosses in an unfinished state, intended as future gifts for others. He also made several jewelry items for the rest of us in the family, including himself, some with "stones" inserted, like his *Man's Ring with Crystal*. What was remarkable about Dad's jewelry was that he was by no means a jeweler or a gemologist, and he never employed precious or semi-precious stones or metals. In 2015 I presented examples of Abe's jewelry to the head of the jewelry department at the North Bennet Street School, a prestigious craft/trade/artisanship school in Boston, Massachusetts. Among the pieces were a stainless steel ring that incorporated industrial grade ball bearings and another into which Dad had cut

a notch. She said Dad's creations were as contemporary when he made them as anything being produced in 2015.

Dad's humor traversed a wide range. His art could be subtle, as in his *Denture* (1975) or his *Panic Button* (1982), or it could be startling, as in his *Breast* (1974) or *Penis* (1980). Dad was willing to make fun of himself and be laugh-out-loud funny, as when he and Mom won first prize in the comedic category at the church masquerade party.



Earrings, Spacecraft; Armenian Cross; Woman's Ring with 21 Bearings (Etruscan granulation method) (Photos by S. Sutherland)



Woman's Ring, Notched; Denture, (1975); Panic Button, 1982
(Photos by S. Sutherland)

Dad was a family man, but some of the things he did in conjunction with the art he created can only be described as humorous. When my sister was a young girl, she developed a love of the color purple, which was not exactly mainstream at the time. Dad acquired some lavender paint and then painted nearly anything he could with it in her honor. My little red wagon suddenly morphed into lavender. Around the same time, he made a replacement handle for it when the original handle somehow broke. In 1976, after I had graduated from college, Dad made me his miniature version of the same wagon.

When my sister got engaged, Dad had a friend find him a *Crane's Headache Ball*, the heavy steel ball that hangs from a construction crane, usually after hours, to keep the suspended cable from whipping around in the wind. Dad



Abe and Jenny Megerdichian, Costume Party First Prize, Comedic Category, 1970s, Watertown, Massachusetts (Photo courtesy R. Megerdichian); Robert Megerdichian with wagon, circa 1955, Cambridge, Massachusetts (Photo by Abraham Megerdichian); *Child's Wagon with Wood Blocks*, 1976 (Photo by S. Sutherland)

came across a chain and connected it to the ball, then painted the entire assemblage the same lavender color as the wagon. As a gag and as a way to keep his future son-in-law at the bridal shower for my sister, Dad lugged the



Rings (Photo by R. Megerdichian)

forty-two-pound device into the shower venue amidst all the women and secured the device around the poor fellow's leg. Later, as a housewarming gift for the couple Dad made a two-part aluminum *Frog Key Holder*, hinged at the rear end. He had machined out (hollowed) its belly to create a tiny storage space for the house key. Following Dad's intent, my sister placed a key inside and put the frog under a bush, where it lived for years. On another occasion Dad made for Mom an actual house key as an appendage on a flat 6" diameter aluminum plate, on which he etched, "*THE KEY TO HAPPINESS.*"



Crane's Headache Ball; *Frog Key Holder* (Photos by R. Megerdichian); *Soap Box Racer*, 1959, Cambridge, Massachusetts (Photo by A. Megerdichian)

Dad's *joie de vivre* was always apparent, and his imagination was boundless, as will be obvious by the end of this paper. Having created so many artworks with such a wide range of subject matter, it is an understatement to say that he

was imaginative. He helped my sister and me build a *Soap Box Racer* and taught me how to use a small lathe to turn corks into whimsical little artworks. Dad was one heck of an imaginative guy who made home a happy place indeed.



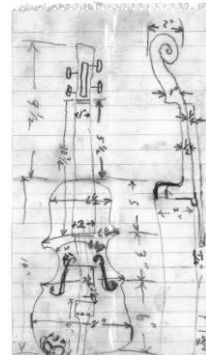
Cork Display, 1964; *Toothpick Stand with Swords*, 1968 (Photos by S. Sutherland); Abraham (center, waving) and Eugenia Megerdichian (lower left, on floor) with friends, circa 1968 (Photo courtesy R. Megerdichian)

Mom and Dad's closest friends were five other couples, all Armenians from church. The twelve of them were inseparable and had known one another since the 1930s. Nearly every month for years, Mom and one of the other women would talk by telephone on a Saturday morning, and by six o'clock they would all convene at a group member's home, usually ours, for *choreg*, cheese and *mezze*. To honor their special friends, Dad made a *Toothpick Stand with Swords* (1968). He knurled the hilt of the sword differently for each of the twelve swords, one per person, so that each member could distinguish their sword from the others. After a few glasses of Scotch, I am not certain the different hilts made much difference. The nights would close with strong Armenian coffee. I am pleased to say that my wife, Becky, and I are close friends with the children of Mom and Dad's friends, and one of their grandsons is the conservator of Dad's art collection.

TINKERING

Tinkerers tend to be conservative by nature, for they seek to maximize and extend the usefulness of things but in a different form. They are experimenters, willing to try a new approach or method, and yet another if the first failed. As with other tinkerers Dad set up a home workshop as early as the 1950s. With handheld tools, machine tools he had made himself and fasteners within arm's reach, he tinkered on all types of things, including trucks for me as a young boy. In all likelihood Dad acted like other tinkerers in that he did not make many preliminary sketches of his artwork, and if he did, they were on whatever medium he had available. There are only two extant examples of Dad's sketches. One was of the violin he was to make, complete with dimensions he took from the actual violin my sisters used when they played in the school orchestra. The other sketch, without dimensions, is of a forklift truck. Dad drew

it on a computer programming card typical of the boxes full of strictly ordered cards used to run a simple program. The sketches were a precursor to the hobby of years of machining objects that were to come.



Abraham Megerdichian, 1953, home workshop, Cambridge, Massachusetts. (Photo by Eugenia Megerdichian); Abraham Megerdichian's sketch on a computer programming card for a forklift truck, circa 1982; Abraham Megerdichian's sketch with dimensions of a violin (Courtesy R. Megerdichian)



Forklift with Block, 1982; *Buffer/Grinder machine* (Photos by S. Sutherland); Abraham Megerdichian with his *Shish Kebab Machine*, 1969, Cambridge, Massachusetts (Courtesy R. Megerdichian)

As a tinkerer Dad made his own machines, among which was a *Shish Kebab Machine*, and he made the wooden handled skewers too. Originally he attached to it a motor to rotate the skewers on gears, but over time he modified the device to work with a hand crank. He would joke that he had fed thousands lamb with that machine. Dad made other machines - an air compressor set on wheels, a wood-sanding machine which utilized the rubber rollers from an antique washing machine, and a band saw. The motors for all machines were salvaged from old washing and other machines Dad had procured. The only

machine Dad made that still exists is a *Buffer/Grinder*. I believe it works, though I am reluctant to try since the motor wires are old and may not be safe.

The years from 1967 until his death in 1983 were the period of Dad's greatest artistic productivity. Although he created industrial and utilitarian objects throughout this period, right up to his passing, it was during these years Dad reached a higher level of design and execution in the objects he created. As a machinist he had a toolbox full of the hand tools he used for his work. He crossed the line into artistry when he created his miniature version of the *Machinist's Toolbox with Tools* (1981), replete with tiny versions of the forty tools in the actual box. Of all the objects he created, the *Toolbox* was Dad's favorite. In the year before he had made a tiny *Carpenter's Toolbox with Tools* which could fit in the palm of his hand.



Abraham Megerdichian's machinist's toolbox (Photo by R. Megerdichian); *Machinist's Toolbox with Tools*, 1981; *Carpenter's Toolbox with Tools*, 1980
(Photos by S. Sutherland)

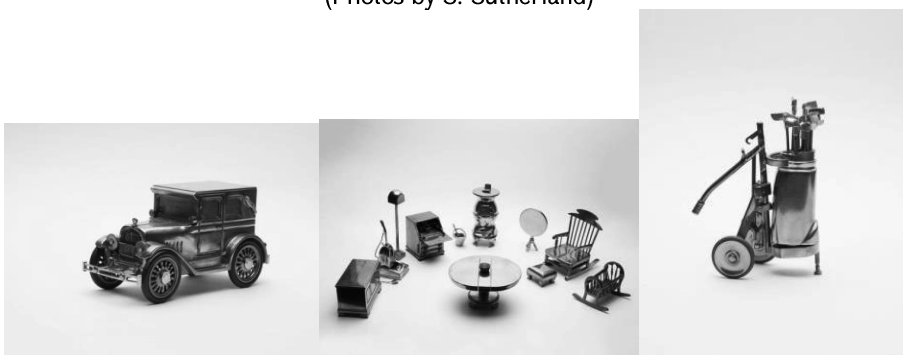
For fourteen consecutive years Dad showered us family members with a wide range of gifts that displayed his artistry and consummate skill as a machinist. Some of the items were based on models. Among the items he produced during those years are his *Pool Table with 2 Cues, Bridge, Rack and Balls* (1969), *Pitcher* (1970), *Sailboat 1, Eugenia Boston* (1971), *Potted Rose* (1972), *Deer Candle Holders* (1973), *Mouse and Cheese* (1974), *Antique Car* (1975), *Furniture Set with Vacuum Cleaner* (circa 1976), *Golf Set with Cart* (1977), *Roller Skates* (1978) based on Mom's actual skates from the 1930s, *Train Set* (1979), *Tricycle* (1980), *Pickup Trucks* (1981), and *Futuristic Cars* (1981 and 1982). All are miniatures except for the *Deer Candle Holders*.



Pool Table with 2 Cues, Bridge, Rack and Balls, 1969; *Pitcher*, 1970; *Sailboat 1, Eugenia Boston*, 1970 (Photos by S. Sutherland)



Potted Rose, 1972; Deer Candle Holders, 1973; Mouse and Cheese, 1974
(Photos by S. Sutherland)



Antique Car, 1975; Furniture Set, circa 1976; Golf Set with Cart, 1977 (Photos by S. Sutherland)



Eugenia Megerdichian's roller skates, 1930s (Photo by R. Megerdichian);
Roller Skates, 1978; Train Set, 1979 (partial view) (Photos by S. Sutherland)



Robert Megerdichian with tricycle, Christmas, 1954 (Photo by A. Megerdichian);
Tricycle, 1980; Pickup Trucks, 1981 (Photos by S. Sutherland)



Futuristic Cars, 1981 and 1982; *Nut Picture Frame*, 1982; *Cactus Plant in Pot*, 1982
(Photos by S. Sutherland)

Dad remained artistically productive even in his last months. Among the latest items he created are his *Nut Picture Frame* (1982) with a portrait of my then fiancé, Becky, and me; two *Cactus Plants in Pots* (1982) for Mom, and a solid aluminum *Van* for a friend. There are those who claim the *pièce de résistance* of the collection is the *Violin with Bow and Case*. Others have called Dad's later works his most artistic, namely the *Futuristic Cars*, *Owl Paperweights*, and *Tricycle*. Throughout his productive period, he maintained a close friendly relationship with a fellow Armenian church member who owned a business making brass lanterns, who was undoubtedly a tinkerer too., Dad made objects as gifts for him in return for his lacquering Dad's objects to prevent fingerprinting.



Cactus Plant in Pot 2, 1982; *Van*, 1982; *Violin with Bow and Case*
(Photos by S. Sutherland)



Futuristic Cars (Photo by Scott Sutherland); *Owl Paperweights Pair*, 1979
(Photo by Mim Fawcett)

ARMENIAN INTERESTS

Dad's relished being a father and working on his metal artwork gave him great pleasure. Yet it was being a devoted member of our church which he took with utmost seriousness. He served multiple two-year terms as a member of the Board of Trustees and committed twenty-five years to the board of the Saturday Armenian School. The *serpazan* (archbishop) honored him in 1982 with a plaque for his dedicated service, which Dad absolutely treasured as one of his greatest achievements. Both Dad and Mom enjoyed their church membership and partook of as many of the social functions there as they could.

Armenian was the preferred language among Dad and his parents. Like Dad, Mom was born in the United States and spoke Armenian. She always highlighted her happy association with her foreign-born lady friends from church, the women she called "Armenian Armenians." But Dad took his love for Armenian language to the next highest level. I recall bringing dates home to introduce them to my family. Dad always favored the Armenian ones, especially if they spoke Armenian. The non-Armenians would be surprised when Dad would say a few words to them in Armenian. I would reproach him, but his response was always that they had to learn.



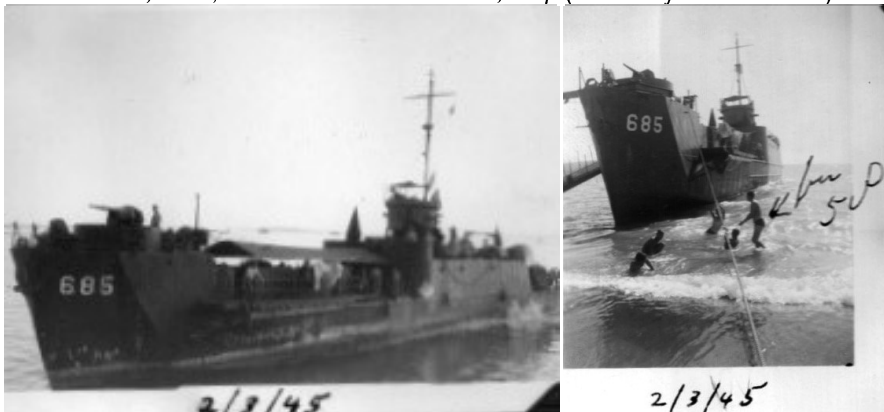
Abraham Megerdichian with achievement award, 1982; Abraham Megerdichian (left) with church friends cutting meat, Watertown, Massachusetts; Eugenia Megerdichian (left) with church friends cutting onions, Watertown, Massachusetts
(Photos courtesy R. Megerdichian)

ABE'S CONFOUNDING ART

On the surface Dad's art was joyful and expertly executed. What is not so obvious is why he created what he did or did not. I suppose had Dad lived, he may have crafted an Armenian alphabet in metal. Although he was committed to the preservation of the spoken Armenian language, his reading and writing in Armenian were not his strengths. Of course he could have copied a letter of the alphabet or created words in Armenian in metal, but he did neither. As already mentioned Dad served in the Navy, so it is understandable that he might want to make some military-themed objects such as his aluminum *Cannon* (1970) or his solid copper one with steel cannonballs, made before 1970. Similarly, his solid brass *Ship*. It is his choice of the type of ship Dad crafted that makes one wonder. His choice was a destroyer, also known as a tin can, yet he served aboard an LCI, short for Landing Craft Infantry, a 150-foot-long, squat, flat-bottomed amphibious ship designed to transport supplies and marines short distances, right up onto the beaches of islands in the Philippines, where he served. Why didn't Dad model his art piece after an LCI? Could it be he may have preferred to have served on a sleeker, and perhaps more dangerous, destroyer?



Cannon, 1970; Cannon with Cannonballs; Ship (Photos by S. Sutherland)



Abraham Megerdichian's ship, LCI 685 (Landing Craft Infantry), 1945; Abraham Megerdichian swimming with shipmates of LCI 685 (Landing Craft Infantry), 1945. Abraham labeled photo, "It's me", in Armenian (Photos courtesy R. Megerdichian)

In 1973 Dad created his full-sized *Candlestick Telephone*, nearly twenty pounds of solid copper. Such a phone was in vogue fifty years before Dad made his version. One may question what hold nostalgia had over him that he would recreate such a phone. The piece is a sign of how much he loved us as family since he schlepped this creation from his workplace to his car, not exactly close by. When we asked him at the time, he merely said, “Yeah, what of it?” On a smaller scale, in 1979 Dad made his *Garbage Pail*. He modeled it after a device that many urban folks like him had in their back yards. At the time a garbage man (they were all men then) came to the back yard, stepped on the foot pedal to open the lid to the garbage bucket that was set inside in a concrete casing that was installed in the ground, and took out the pail into which homeowners deposited their food waste. The man carried the pail to the hopper truck and dumped the contents into the truck. It is hard to imagine that anyone other than the designer of such a functional device could have had any interest in such an inherently unpleasant device. But Dad did. He apparently got a charge from another gift he made for Becky, toward the end of his life. It was a *Knife* (1983), complete with Becky’s name and the year engraved onto it. Could Dad actually have thought the knife was a fitting gift for a bride-to-be?



Candle Telephone, 1973; *Garbage Pail*, 1979; *Garbage Pail*, 1979
(Photos by S. Sutherland)



Garbage pail, actual, closed position; *Garbage pail*, actual, open position
(Photos by R. Megerdichian); *Knife*, 1983 (Photo by S. Sutherland)

When I was only a few months old, Dad made me a set of toy trucks. I reiterate - I was only a few months old. He created a nearly 3-pound *Tractor* and painted it with who knows what type of paint. He made three interchangeable trailers for the Tractor: The *Box Trailer*, the *Car Carrier (with ramps)* and the *Log Carrier*. None of the pieces had the smoothest of edges and the carrier's logs were actually broken broomsticks, complete with jagged edges and likely leaded paint. The paint may be excusable since the effects of lead paint on children were probably not known at the time Dad made these pieces, but rough edges? Perhaps Dad was thinking that someday, like now, I would "appreciate" the trucks from decades earlier. Or maybe Dad never intended these objects as toys. It is hard to tell. Appropriateness of gifts was a concept that Dad apparently had different views on.



Tractor with Box Trailer, 1953; Tractor with Car Carrier (with ramps), 1953; Tractor with Log Carrier, 1953 (Photos by S. Sutherland)

Dad called his piscine creation a *Whale* (1971), though it looks more like a fish, with a vertical, as opposed to horizontal, tail fin. I wonder if Dad knew the difference, or if he even cared. Perhaps he was simply amusing us, or exercising artist's prerogative. Two other of Dad's industrial pieces are baffling. From a machinist's point of view, his *Trash Can with Lid* (1974) is quite an exquisite piece of machining, with its sloping and fluted walls, soldered-on handles, and tight tolerance and snug-fitting lid. Well intentioned, he made it as a gift. Who would really appreciate a trash can except perhaps Oscar the Grouch? In 1981 Dad created his full-size, solid brass *Blowtorch*, just before he began to feel unwell. It is difficult to understand what his motivation could have been to create and tote such an 18-pound behemoth. Maybe he guessed he had some disease and wanted to "incinerate" it. Perhaps he had a premonition, for a year later he did contract cancer, which he called the "Big C." Two later pieces that are baffling are his *Ashtrays* (1982), or at least what may be mistakenly called ashtrays. The slots for the cigarettes, typical of ashtrays, are missing. By the time Dad made this pair, he was in chemotherapy treatment despite having stopped smoking years before. I have a suspicion that Dad may have made the pieces for Mom's grandmother, Yepraxi, whom we called Mayrig. She lived to 101 years, and right up until she entered the nursing home, she burned *khoong* (incense) in her bedroom.



Whale, 1971; Blowtorch, 1981; Trash Can with Lid, 1974 (Photos by S. Sutherland)



Ashtrays, 1982; Backgammon Board, 1967 (Photos by S. Sutherland)

Dad was not a gambler. At least I never knew him to be, but he was taken in by the concept of dice and incorporated dice into a multitude of his pieces. Perhaps he had won big at a floating craps game on his ship during his time in



Robert Megerdichian playing on Abraham's *Backgammon Board* with sister and grandmother in background, 1967
(Photo by A. Megerdichian)

the Navy. As with most of his naval service, he never mentioned any gambling. He did, however, have some affinity for backgammon, though he did not play. Being Armenian, it was not so unusual that he would make a few sets for actual use. He created one in 1967, the largest of several, though smaller than commercially sold boards. The board is aluminum, as are the opponent's "stones." The opposing stones are brass. Dad did not make the tiny white dice and likely obtained them from one of the novelty shops prevalent years ago and at which he worked briefly. My sisters and I played hundreds of games on that set, often in front of the half watchful eye of Dad's mother when she lived with us. As

Armenians we tended to play with great enthusiasm, slapping down the stones

loudly. Knowing that, Dad made his *Backgammon Board* out of metal anyway, adding to the already noisy decibel level.

As gifts of art Dad did make several sets of 2" *Dice* in aluminum and in brass. I cannot say I have seen too many, if any, solid metal dice paperweights on people's desks. Perhaps that was part of Dad's rationale for making them. Or maybe he was experimenting with making perfect cubes – more challenging technically than it sounds.

The most curious of Dad's dice-themed pieces was a 2 5/8" wide single object. Intended as a gift, Dad wrapped it with excess, metallic wallpaper from his kitchen, when such loud paper was fashionable back in the 1970s. Obviously on a die, the dot indentations appear through the paper and in their expected locations on each face. However, one has to ask, "Where was the die's mate?" "Who was the gift for?" My mother? Not too romantic, especially since he had already made other dice. Answering the questions means un-wrapping the gift to see if Dad dated it, and correlating the date to a holiday or family member's birthday. However, Dad may not have dated the die. Let it suffice that Abe has kept us guessing about this piece. Dad played around more with the theme of dice. Examples are various bookends, some being heavy brass ones with large dice mounted flat. Others have the dice secured in a seemingly precarious diagonal position on a corner. For some the dots are unpainted and for others the dots are painted black or with machinist's blue. What is curious about one of these sets and on other pieces in the collection is small stick-on numbers. Not knowing what the numbers stood for, I have intentionally left them intact. After much speculation as to the purpose of the numbers, eventually I hypothesized they represented the weight. My suspicion proved correct; each of the bookends weighed 16 pounds, the very number shown. Why was this important to Dad? A logical but unproven answer may be that he paid for the scrap metal by the pound. Maybe, but the scraps would have been heavier BEFORE he machined them to their finished form. My personal favorite pair of dice bookends was particularly artistic. When each of us in the family graduated, Dad machined for us a "book", on which he engraved our names, years of graduation and school names. He even gave Mom hers, though many years after she had gotten her nursing degree. The books shown are curious in that they are unfinished, that is, they have no names on them. Who were they for? Dad was obviously planning to gift them in the future.

Mom enjoyed entertaining and using napkin rings, then fashionable. So Dad made her a set of 15 *Copper Rings* – not a dozen or a baker's dozen, all likely cut from one 2" diameter pipe. It is not clear why he chose an odd number of 15. Our dining room table did not seat that many. As a gag gift, Dad cut another copper pipe into 17 equal rings, each 1/2" high. He then interconnected the rings into a chain that resembles a child's paper creation. Unlike paper artwork

where the pieces of Scotch™ tape are visible, Dad's assemblage shows no seams. Machinists and metal workers have scrutinized this artwork and found no telltale sign of how Abe connected the rings. When we family members asked Dad the trick, he said it was a secret. Someday I will find out what it was. I recall we hung this artwork on the family Christmas tree one year. At just over 1-pound total weight the suspended artwork bent the pine branches down to their limit. Dad found that humorous.



Dice, circa 1978; Die; Dice Bookends with Books (Photos by S. Sutherland)

A final curiosity is Dad's *Savings Bank for Half Dollars*. Always encouraging us children to save, Dad made each of us a steel savings bank as a Christmas present in 1979. Each was the size of a half-gallon milk container and painted a distinguishing color of black, rust red or gold. There is a slot on the top, through which a half dollar would comfortably squeeze. Dad seeded each bank with a ½ dollar coin and encouraged us to put those special coins into the banks as often as possible. Half dollars were more commonly in circulation then. The mystery with the banks is that Dad provided no way to open them. Since they were welded, opening the banks requires the use of an acetylene torch. Here is the conundrum: "Are the banks to be opened when full, OR, are the banks to remain as pieces of art, regardless of how much money is inside?" "How many half dollars do the banks hold?" "Is there any sort of personal note inside?" Opening them would obviously ruin the artwork. It may have been Dad's intent that we kids would ask *him* to pry open the banks when they became full. But then, perhaps the banks were all a joke that Dad enjoyed playing on us. Either way, Dad did not live long enough for the banks to fill up.

"THE THINGS I'VE MADE"

We will never know Dad's intentions or inspirations for his large number of art pieces, or whether they held hidden meanings. We do know that over time we had a great accumulation of his objects. Dad built shelves in the living room of our home to display the pieces he had given us as presents for Christmases, our birthdays and graduations, or his and Mom's anniversary, or for no particular reason for so many years. His gifts, always meticulously wrapped, were always the weightiest small packages, and always opened last at Christmas. After a while, I admit, we would open them and say under our breaths, "another

heavy little gift from Dad.” He would express his satisfaction with a sly grin. Eventually the shelves filled up. Dad then constructed a wooden crate, which he lovingly called the *soondoog*, to house the overflow of metal art. It was outrageously heavy with its angle-iron reinforced vertical edges, heavy-duty handles on the ends, hinged plywood lid, hasp for a lock in front, and castors. Soon the *soondoog* also filled up, and Dad locked it. It was to sit in that condition for thirty years unnoticed and collecting dust.

Despite being healthy all his life, Dad got sick in 1982. When he enlisted in World War II, the Navy gave the sailors cigarettes, allegedly to calm them down. Dad entered service as a non-smoker and returned stateside fully committed to the habit. Fortunately, by the 1960s he had quit, attributing his success to what he called an old Armenian custom of putting in his mouth a pair of whole cloves every time he craved a cigarette. He claimed the trick worked, although he admitted he had to be careful not to swallow the spiky cloves. Regardless of having given up smoking, he fell victim to the cancer that would ultimately take his life after half a year. Dad’s passing occurred only months before Becky and I were to be married. Dad and Mom had offered to clear their tenant from the first floor of our home so that Becky and I could live there. We agreed with hesitation and on the condition we would stay only for one year. After Dad died and Becky and I were living in that apartment, we came to realize Mom needed us upstairs. She and Becky became fast friends and had a wonderful *khenami* (in-law) relationship, one that far outlasted our original time commitment. Our two sons were born, grew up, and graduated, all while we lived in that apartment.

One day in autumn 2013, Becky and I were cleaning out the basement when she asked, “What’s in the box?”

“I don’t remember exactly,” I said. “Things Dad made.”

“It’s been in our basement since we got married thirty years ago,” she said. “I think it’s time to open it, don’t you?”

“Sure, if only I knew where the key is,” I said, wondering.

After searching Dad’s tool closet and workbench, I realized the key had to be in one of the coffee jars Dad the tinkerer had suspended from the floor joists in the basement. Inside one jar were several Eagle Lock keys joined together with white string, attached to a stiff but crumbling paper label. On the label, Dad had written *Eemin shinadz panerus*, the Armenian words for “the things I’ve made.”

When my sisters and I were young, Dad had forced us to attend Armenian language school. Finally, and with some irony, that schooling had paid off. I yelled upstairs to Becky, “I think I found the key.” She came to the basement, and we looked pensively at one another as I put the key into the lock. It fit. I turned the key, and miraculously, the eagle’s talons loosened. Then, I removed

the lock from the hasp, flipped up the hasp and opened the lid. Toward the top of the cavity, Dad had built a wooden frame that held three rough-sawn redwood trays he had constructed. The trays were lined with graph paper, on which were strewn dozens of miscellaneous objects - drills, calipers, plastic cards with information on screw threads and tap drill sizes, fingernail-sized jagged metal fragments, and rejected tiny bicycle seats and jewelry that Dad had machined. Before Becky and I removed the trays, we turned to one another. This was it, the mother lode of metal art Dad had made us as a family. With the trays now laid out on the floor, we peeked inside the box.



Soondoog; *Soondoog* key, which Abraham labeled “*The Things I’ve Made*”, in Armenian (Photos by R. Megerdichian); *Demitasse Cup with Saucer*, 1975 (Photo by S. Sutherland)

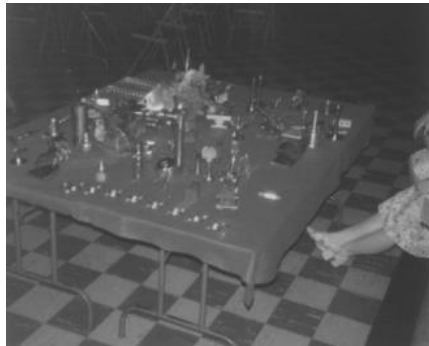
Dad had packed the *soondoog* with the least heavy pieces toward the top. He had carefully positioned one item atop another in the most expeditious manner possible. Like excited children, Becky and I extracted the objects one at a time, each one solid metal and heavy: solid brass *Ashtrays*, aluminum *Butterfly Trivets*, a copper *Demitasse Cup with Saucer* (1975), a baseball-sized stainless steel *Teapot* (1975), and an aluminum *Baseball* (1980). Then came some larger, heavier objects: a brass *Wagon with a Keg* (1980) and an *Asphalt Roller* (1974), both about the size of a shoebox; a full-sized solid aluminum *Baseball Bat* (1980) and a hard-to-lift *Candlestick Telephone* (1973) made of copper.

For nearly two hours, Becky and I removed pieces of art from the crate and placed them on the concrete floor in the basement. We felt as if we were in a movie - *Raiders of the Lost Ark* or *National Treasure*. Not knowing what to do next, we left the objects on the floor and closed the precious *soondoog*. We went upstairs and talked and talked. We eventually agreed that we had to at least document and photograph the collection. I devised an identification system, giving a unique name and coding number to each piece, and creating a spreadsheet to record each piece by name, number, weight, and size. I was to learn later that the system I devised was remarkably similar to a proprietary museum cataloging system called PastPerfect.



Wagon with Keg, 1980; Asphalt Roller, 1974 (Photos by S. Sutherland)

After weeks of documenting the pieces, I invited my family to discuss what to do with the art. Becky and I posited that Dad's handiwork should be considered as art and, as such, should be shown publicly. I reminded everyone that Dad had exhibited his art three times in the 1970s - once in our church hall and twice in public libraries in the Boston area, both times through the help of two women from church who worked at the libraries. Mom, who was now in her 80s, fondly recalled Dad's displays, yet she worried. She felt that the pieces were Dad's personal gifts to us; therefore, they were private. I contended that we owed it to others to have an opportunity to view Dad's art, suggesting that we solicit a museum to display some of the pieces. Family members disapproved, uniting in a skeptical chorus of concerns about safety, security and insurance. Mom said, "If we lose just one piece, I'll simply die."



Eugenia Megerdichian at display of Abraham's art, circa late 1970s, Watertown, Massachusetts (Photo by A. Megerdichian); Abraham Megerdichian with art display, circa late 1970s, Watertown, Massachusetts (photo by Eugenia Megerdichian)

Nevertheless, we came to an agreement. The family would sanction my quest to get the items displayed provided that I resolved logistical issues. Since that family discussion in 2013, I have displayed Dad's art at some twenty venues, including museums, libraries, universities, banks and elder housing facilities in

New England and beyond. Among the institutions are the Boston and the Providence Children's Museums, the Museum of Science in Boston, and the Mini Time Machine Museum of Miniatures in Tucson, Arizona. In addition, I have had numerous articles published, and I have appeared on several TV and radio broadcasts. I dreamed of establishing a museum dedicated to Dad's art. To learn more to accomplish that goal, I enrolled and ultimately received in 2022 a Master's Degree in Nonprofit Management. In addition, I have gathered a committed group of supporters who have offered their expertise in appraisal, art conservation, graphics, machining training, marketing, photography, and web design. The culmination of their committed work has been the creation of the website of the collection: www.abesartwork.wordpress.com.

Just before the onset of the COVID pandemic, I received a telephone call from an Armenian friend/attorney I had not heard from in years. He had known Dad well. He told me that he was aware of the exhibitions of Dad's art and the work I am doing to promote it. He said that Dad had made several items for him years ago and that he felt compelled to return the items to me because he believed they belonged back with the collection. I was taken aback by his generosity. Around the same time, while I was at my sister's house one day, she showed me a vase that Dad had made for her sister-in-law. She and her husband had down-sized and come across the vase. They reiterated nearly word for word what my friend had said. As a result, the collection of Dad's artwork actually grew by an amazing half dozen pieces.



Vase, 1975, returned to the Megerdichian Collection (Photo courtesy R. Megerdichian); Vase, 1975, returned to the Megerdichian Collection (Photo by S. Sutherland)

I have come a long way during the past eight years with Dad's collection. I have brought out a formerly crated accumulation of unique metal objects for the public to see, enjoy and ponder. I have educated hundreds, if not



Dec. 27, 1971



Abraham Megerdichian, 1971;
Abraham and Eugenia
Megerdichian, circa late 1970s,
Boston, Massachusetts (Photos
courtesy R. Megerdichian)

thousands, of people about who one particular Armenian was, and how his creativity can affect their lives. There is much work to be done. More institutions need to be found to exhibit the art and more needs to be written about my father and his art. Opening Abraham Megerdichian's *soondoog* has, indeed, changed my life. Finding your personal treasure, whatever it is, can change yours.

ԱՐՐԱՀԱՄ ՄԿՐՏԻՉԵԱՆ. ԻՄԻՆ ՇԻՆԱԾ ԲԱՆԵՐՍ

(Ամփոփում)

ՐՈՊԵՐԹ ՄԿՐՏԻՉԵԱՆ

rma@cadcafmservices.com

Յօդուածը կը ներկայացնէ Աբրահամ Մկրտիչեանի կենսագործունէութիւնը իբրեւ մարդ, արհեստաւոր եւ մետաղեայ մանրակերտեր ստեղծագործող:

Աբրահամ ծնած է Ֆրենքլին (Մեսէչուսէցի շրջան), 1923ին: Ան զաւակն է 1895ին Մալաթիա ծնած, Եղեռնին իր ընտանիքին անդամներուն մեծամասնութիւնը կորսնցնելէ ետք Մ. Նահանգներ հաստատուած Յակոբին, որ 1922ին կը կազմէ իր ընտանեկան բոյնը Պոստոնի մէջ: Աբրահամ երկրորդականը աւարտելէ ետք կը պաշտօնակոչուի Ճենըրլ Էլեքթրիք ընկերութեան Լին (Մեսէչուսէց) գործարանի մեքենաշինութեան բաժինը: Ամերիկեան բանակի զինծառայութեան աւարտին ան կը վերամիանայ իր ծայառած ընկերութեան,

որ կը պաշտօնավարէ 40 տարի:

Յօդուածին մէջ հեղինակը կը մանրամասնէ այն երազները, զորս իր վաղամեռիկ հայրը հիւսած էր՝ հանգստեան կոչուելէ ետք իր կատարելիք ստեղծագործական աշխատանքներուն, անոր ընկերային նկարագրին, ճարտար ձեռքերուն, ստեղծագործ միտքին ու մետաղեայ մանրակերտերու կիրքին մասին: Խորքին մէջ, Աբրահամ ընկերութիւն պաշտօնակոչուելէ կարճ ժամանակ ետք արդէն իսկ ձեռնարկած էր մետաղեայ մանրակերտերու շինութեան, որոնցմէ ոմանք մեքենացուած էին, ուրիշներ ունէին յարդարանքային գործառոյթ, իսկ ոմանք՝ կենցաղային գործածութիւն: Գեղագիտական եւ արուեստի նուրբ ճաշակով յատկանշուող այս գործերը ուն եցած են անհատական երեք ցուցահանդէսներ:

Հեղինակը կու տայ համապարփակ պատկեր մը իր հօր ստեղծագործական կեանքի թաւալքին ու զարգացումներուն եւ թէ ինչպէս այդ ստեղծագործութիւններէն շատերը կ'արտացոլացնեն արուեստագէտ արհեստաւորին կեանքին ու կենցաղին առնչուող պարագաներ, սէր՝ հանդէպ ընտանիքը, բարեկամական եւ ընկերային միջավայրերը, հայ եկեղեցին եւն.: