


ARMINE PETROSYAN*

Junior Researcher

Institute of Arts, NAS RA

armine.petrosyan@arts.sci.am

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SELF-PORTRAIT AS A SEARCH FOR SELF

Abstract

Hmayak Hakobyan (1871–1939), as a representative of Armenian realist painting at the turn of the 19th–20th centuries, devoted a special place in his oeuvre to the subgenre of the self-portrait. The artist's six self-portraits (painting and drawing), preserved in the collections of the National Gallery of Armenia, serve as a unique key for revealing the stylistic characteristics of his works and the impact of the dramatic events of the period on his inner world.

This article aims to study Hakobyan's self-portraits through chronological and comparative analysis, highlighting his application of the principles of academic realism and his progression from the depiction of external likeness to psychological self-examination.

For Hmayak Hakobyan, the self-portrait is a means of deeply analyzing his own image and revealing his worldview through art, even serving as a kind of diary that reflects human psychological states and stages of life. The artist's self-portraits represent not only his personal journey but also his emotional world and creative explorations.

The painter remains consistently faithful to the artistic principles of classical realism, employing a restrained yet harmonious palette of brown, chestnut, black, white, and gray tones.

His self-portraits are executed with high technical skill, perfect mastery, and adherence to academic principles, characteristic of realist painting. They clearly convey the artist's mood, inner world, and way of thinking. Drawing on

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the traditions of Russian realism (Repin) and European masters (Rembrandt), the painter elevated the self-portrait from a mere image to a philosophical exploration of the human soul. This approach brought a new depth and vitality to Armenian realism. Hakobyan's art is free from Dürer's symbolism, yet it is imbued with a pursuit of self-observation and physical precision.

Keywords: self-portrait, Hmayak Hakobyan, realist principles, self-expression, drawing, painting, self-examination

Introduction

The self-portrait is regarded as a distinct form of self-analysis. This subgenre represents a unique dialogue between the painter and his image. The functions of the self-portrait are diverse, ranging from the depiction of the artist's likeness and self-affirmation to social commentary and psychological revelation. Interestingly, the self-portraits of artists suffering from various neurological disorders have even served as a basis for diagnosing their pathologies.

In the Middle Ages and the Early Renaissance, artists typically depicted themselves within group or religious compositions as secondary figures, which served as a kind of documentary proof of the artist's professional presence or as a confirmation of authorship. The Renaissance period, being transformative in nature, elevated artists from the status of craftsmen to that of devoted practitioners of art. The humanist ideology of the Renaissance enabled the artist to regard himself as an independently thinking individual. Albrecht Dürer's meticulous and symbolic self-portraits laid the foundation for the individualization of the genre. Through his self-portraits, Dürer established the functional significance of this subgenre. He deliberately emphasized his creative and human value, presenting himself with a pathos reminiscent of a religious figure. Leonardo da Vinci, in his self-portrait, focused not on outward appearance but on the inner world.

In the Baroque period, the self-portrait acquired an unprecedented psychological depth and dramatic quality. Rembrandt van Rijn is considered the absolute pinnacle of the self-portrait subgenre. He created nearly one hundred self-portraits, documenting all stages of his life - from youthful ambition to the wisdom and disillusionment of old age.

Later, the Impressionists continued to develop the genre, conveying not only visual impressions but also expressing social and artistic ideas. Vincent van

Gogh's self-portraits, which often reflect profound psychological distress, became symbols of emotional intensity and mental suffering.

The Self-Portraits of Hmayak Hakobyan (1871–1939)

According to art historian M. Ayvazyan, "The self-portrait offers an opportunity to become acquainted with the image of Armenian artists of different generations - to recognize them outwardly and to engage with their inner world, to understand their creative principles as well as their moral and aesthetic positions..."¹ Hmayak Hakobyan is also included among these artists.

Hmayak Hakobyan² was born in 1871 in Trabzon. He studied at the Nersisian School in Tiflis and at one of Europe's leading art education centers, the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts in Munich. He later lived and worked in Tiflis, leaving behind a substantial legacy that includes landscapes, portraits, still lifes, and more. The artist's oeuvre encompasses almost all genres; however, portraits and self-portraits occupy a special place, distinguished by their refined aesthetic taste, meticulous execution, psychological depth, and harmonious color schemes characteristic of classical realism. Hakobyan's role in the development of Armenian realism is undeniable and of significant importance, as his work contributed to the introduction of European academic art, the deepening of psychological portraiture, and the preservation of the realist tradition.

Hmayak Hakobyan, a prominent painter of the Tiflis Armenian realist school, presents himself as a subtle investigator of line, color, and expressive forms, a quality particularly reflected in his self-portraits. The artist's self-portraits can be regarded as chronological autobiographical records, in which his inner experiences, self-perception, and the re-evaluation of his own "self" are expressed.

Alongside the strict preservation of external likeness, the self-portrait serves as an expressive means of revealing inner reality, emotions, life experiences, and existential anxieties. Beyond its autobiographical significance for the individual, the self-portrait also carries socio-cultural imperatives: each self-portrait is created in accordance with the aesthetic, ideological, and philosophical orientations of its time. Therefore, the process of self-identification encom-

¹ Aivazyan 1985, 7; see also Petrosyan 2023, 133.

² For the biographical data, see Martikyan 1983, 84–109; Hmayak Hakobyan (1871–1939) 1948, 3–24; Hmayak Hakobyan 1871–1939 2012, 89.

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passes not only personal but also collective identity, clarifying the artist's place within society and the cultural tradition.

The artist's creative path is closely linked to Tiflis, a cultural center of the Caucasus at the end of the 19th century, where he received his initial education. However, his artistic formation was decisively shaped by his studies in Germany. Upon returning to Tiflis, the artist primarily worked in the genre of portraiture, which became the cornerstone of his painting practice. This choice was influenced by several factors: (1) the portrait represented one of the highest manifestations of academic realism, requiring excellent draftsmanship, knowledge of anatomy, and the ability to conduct a psychological analysis of the subject; (2) Tiflis, as a center of intellectuals, the commercial elite, and the clergy in the South Caucasus, had a strong demand for both personal and official portraits; (3) Hmayak Hakobyan was, by nature, an introvert, interested in exploring the deeper layers of the human soul. Portraiture allowed him to capture not only external likeness but also character.

An interesting observation on two types of self-portraits comes from Russian director Anatoly Efros: "In one, the artist is concerned with his external appearance; in the other, with his inner world... There, he engages in self-reflection; here, in self-commentary, one calmly declares, the other emotionally confesses".³ A vivid confirmation of these words can be seen in the self-portraits of Rembrandt van Rijn and Hmayak Hakobyan.

The renowned British art historian and critic James Hall notes how human beings have represented themselves in art throughout different historical periods. He emphasizes that self-portraits are often more candid than an artist's other works. Hall underscores the following idea: "The artist paints a self-portrait not only to show who he is, but also to indicate where he stands in the history of art." According to Hall, the self-portrait does not merely record identity but "constructs" it, creating an authorial discourse of selfhood.⁴ These theoretical approaches are fully reflected in Hmayak Hakobyan's art, transforming into introspective psychological states.

The artist's self-portraits are executed with high technical skill, perfect mastery, and adherence to academic principles, characteristic of realist painting. The self-portraits clearly convey the artist's mood, inner world, and way of

³ Kruse 2004, 16; Efros 1979, 115; see also Petrosyan 2023, 136.

⁴ Hall 2014, 41.

thinking. The backgrounds of the self-portraits are often brown, with chestnut tones, typical of classical art.

On the psychological level of the canvases, one can discern an attempt at self-knowledge, which is absent in his earlier works.

The portraitist reinforced technical mastery through principles such as anatomical accuracy, the modeling of volumetric form, and the classical use of light and shadow. This knowledge was vital for the subsequent development of Armenian painting.

Hakobyan's art is free from Dürer's symbolism, yet it is imbued with a pursuit of self-observation and physical precision. Both artists, however, base their work on the perfection of draftsmanship.

Hmayak Hakobyan's psychological connection to the self-portraits of Rembrandt, the Dutch master of the Golden Age, is manifested through the use of dramatic chiaroscuro and dark backgrounds. In Hakobyan's mature works (for example, Fig. 3), the influence of Rembrandt's chiaroscuro is clearly evident. Stepan Aghajanyan and Hmayak Hakobyan are both "realist-psychologists," yet Hakobyan's colors are denser and more academic, whereas Aghajanyan's palette, influenced by the French school, is more transparent.

Hmayak Hakobyan's collection of self-portraits constitutes a unique visual diary, allowing one to trace the artist's personal and creative development. They demonstrate that the artist regarded the genre not merely as a technical exercise, but as a profound instrument for inner self-examination and psychological analysis.

Notably, the work *Self-Portrait* (Fig. 1) was likely created during the period of the artist's formal studies. The canvas represents a perfect example of academic realism. The contrasting use of light and shadow imparts dramatic volume to the face, while the color palette is restrained, dominated by dark, earthy tones that emphasize the young artist's focused presence. The figure appears self-assured, with an open, direct, and searching gaze, characteristic of an artist entering a phase of self-affirmation. In this work, Hmayak Hakobyan is depicted frontally, wearing a white shirt and a black jacket. The precision of facial features, the penetrating depth of the eyes, and the harmonious balance of the black-and-white tonal contrasts underscore the young artist's determination and inner strength, while the skillful application of chiaroscuro imparts dimensionality to the face.

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The work *Self-Portrait* (Fig. 2), created between 1900 and 1910, exhibits a certain stylistic freedom. In this portrait, an inner pensiveness is noticeable, although the dramatic tension characteristic of his later works is not yet present. Depicted in a three-quarter view and wearing work attire, this portrait bears certain similarities to Rembrandt van Rijn's 1630 self-portrait. The color palette is dominated by warm brown tones, through which the artist conveys reflection and inner tension.

Particularly noteworthy is the *Self-Portrait* (Fig. 3), which can be considered Hmayak Hakobyan's most psychologically intense self-portrait. The artist's gaze is not directed at the viewer but at himself, filled with concern and inner drama. The figure symbolizes the artist's struggle to confront a harsh reality. The stark contrast of light and shadow, one side illuminated, the other in darkness, can be interpreted psychologically as an inner conflict or as a chasm between the individual and the world. The dark background engulfs the figure, intensifying the sense of isolation. The dramatic expression of the face is interpreted not only as a personal crisis but also as a response to a tragic period in Armenian history (World War I, the Genocide). This portrait, painted with an easel, is distinguished by the delicate modeling of light and shadow, and its color palette closely resembles the brownish tones characteristic of Rembrandt.

In the *Self-Portrait* (Fig. 4), the artist's figure appears calmer and more melancholic. The dark color palette and subtle tonal transitions are stylistically reminiscent of Rembrandt's late self-portraits, where the emphasis is placed on the inner world, reflected in the monochromatic and dark hues.

In his drawn self-portraits, Hakobyan's skill is evident, with the image executed in pencil or graphic media with precision. The *Self-Portrait* (Fig. 5), a drawing, presents the artist's professional persona, possibly at work. Despite the swift pencil strokes, the psychological accuracy of the facial expression is preserved. The concise, precise, and clearly executed line work conveys the figure's inner severity and concern, emphasized through a misty gaze and tightly pressed lips.

The *Self-Portrait* (Fig. 6) is remarkable for conveying the weight of the years lived. The deep wrinkles on the master's forehead, his sorrowful gaze, and the predominance of dark tones testify to his psychological experiences. The overall tonality of the work and the tragic quality of the figure are reminiscent of the traditional approaches in Armenian portrait art.

Conclusion

Thus, the self-portrait is indeed a continuously evolving genre in the history of art, simultaneously reflecting the artist's inner world and the cultural and technical context of the period. It allows the artist to express his "self," capture the uniqueness of facial features, and experiment with new techniques, materials, and the interplay of light and shadow. Hmayak Hakobyan's self-portraits are exceptional not only for the multilayered richness of their artistic language but also as a personal, temporal, and psychological narrative.



Fig. 1. *Self-Portrait* (1896), oil on canvas, 49 × 31.5 cm

Fig. 2. *Self-Portrait* (1900–1910), oil on canvas, 24 × 19.7 cm



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Fig. 3. *Self-Portrait* (1915), oil on canvas, 41 × 33 cm



Fig. 4. *Self-Portrait*, oil on canvas, 42 × 31.5 cm

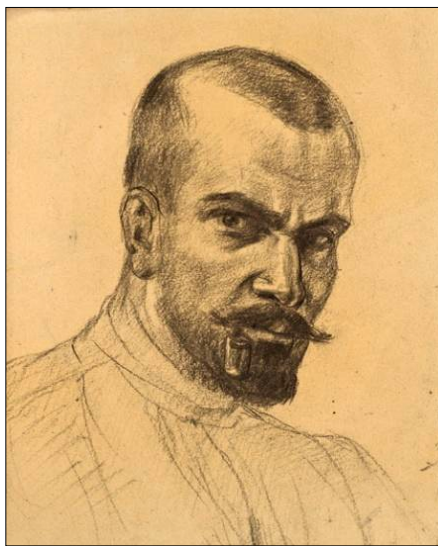


Fig. 5. *Self-Portrait*, pencil on paper, 24 × 20 cm



Fig. 6. *Self-Portrait*, oil on canvas, 46 × 37.5 cm

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ԱՐՄԻՆԵ ՊԵՏՐՈՍՅԱՆ

կրտսեր գիտաշխատող

ՀՀ ԳԱԱ արվեստի ինստիտուտ

armine.petrosyan@arts.sci.am

0009-0004-7274-1788 

ԻՆՔՆԱԴԻՄԱՆԿԱՐԸ՝ ՈՐՊԵՍ ԻՆՔՆԱՈՐՈՆՈՒՄ

Ամփոփում

Հմայակ Հակոբյանը (1871–1939), որպես XIX դարի վերջի – XX դարի սկզբի հայ ռեալիստական գեղանկարչության ներկայացուցիչ, իր ստեղծագործության մեջ առանձնահատուկ տեղ է հատկացրել ինքնադիմանկարի ենթաժանրին: Նկարչի վեց ինքնադիմանկարները (գեղանկար և գծանկար), որոնք պահվում են Հայաստանի ազգային պատկերասրահի ֆոնդերում, ծանայում են իբրև յուրօրինակ բանալի՝ բացահայտելու աշխատանքների ոճական առանձնահատկություններն ու դարաշրջանի դրամատիկ իրադարձությունների ազդեցությունը նրա ներաշխարհի վրա:

Հոդվածի նպատակն է ժամանակագրական և համեմատական վերլուծության միջոցով ուսումնասիրել Հմ. Հակոբյանի ինքնադիմանկարները՝ վերհանելով նրա կողմից ակադեմիական ռեալիզմի սկզբունքների կիրառումը և անցումը՝ արտաքին նմանությունից դեպի հոգեբանական ինքնաքննություն:

Հմ. Հակոբյանի համար ինքնանկարը միջոց է իր կերպարը խորագնին վերլուծելու և կերպարվեստի միջոցով բացահայտելու իր աշխարհընկալումը, անգամ վերածվելու յուրատեսակ օրագրի՝ արտացոլելով մարդկային հոգեվիճակներ, կյանքի փուլեր: Արվեստագետի ինքնադիմանկարները ներկայացնում են ոչ միայն նկարչի անցած ուղին, այլև նրա հուզական աշխարհն ու ստեղծագործական որոնումները:

Նկարիչը մշտապես հավատարիմ է մնում դասական ռեալիզմի գեղարվեստական սկզբունքներին՝ օգտագործելով սահմանափակ, բայց ներդաշնակ գունապնակ՝ շագանակագույն, դարչնագույն, սև, սպիտակ և մոխրագույն երանգներով:

Նրա ինքնադիմանկարները արված են բարձր տեխնիկայով, կատարյալ վարպետությամբ և ակադեմիական սկզբունքով, ինչը բնորոշ է ռեալիստա-

կան գեղանկարչությանը: Ինքնադիմանկարներում հստակորեն արտացոլված են նկարչի տրամադրությունը, ներաշխարհը, մտածելակերպը: Հարելով ռուսական ռեալիզմի (Ռեպին) և եվրոպական դասականների (Ռեմբրանդտ) ավանդույթներին՝ գեղանկարիչը ինքնադիմանկարը դարձրեց ոչ թե լոկ պատկեր, այլ մարդկային հոգու փիլիսոփայական վերլուծություն: Նման մոտեցումը հայ ռեալիզմին հաղորդեց բովանդակային նոր որակ և շունչ: Հմ. Հակոբյանի արվեստը գերծ է Ա. Դյուրերի սիմվոլիզմից, սակայն հազեցած է ինքնադիտարկման և ֆիզիկական ճշգրտության ձգտումով:

Բանալի բառեր՝ *ինքնադիմանկար, Հմ. Հակոբյան, ռեալիստական սկզբունքներ, ինքնաարտահայտում, զծանկար, գեղանկար, ինքնաորոնում:*