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MONUMENTAL PAINTING BY HOVHANNES MINASSIAN IN PUBLIC SPACES

Abstract

Mural painting is one of the most significant forms of monumental art, characterized by its organic and conceptual relationship with the architectural environment and its capacity to shape the artistic integrity of space. Executed through techniques such as fresco, tempera, glue-based paint, encaustic painting, and oil, mural painting is inherently intended for long-term existence and functions as a bearer of historical and cultural memory. The origins of this art form date back to prehistoric rock paintings and later developed extensively within ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman civilizations, where it acquired religious, ideological, and symbolic meanings.

This article is devoted to the study of murals created in public spaces by Hovhannes Minassian. Although the majority of these works have not survived over time, they occupy an important place in the history of Armenian monumental painting, reflecting the artistic thinking and spatial-decorative explorations of the 1960s. The research is based on preserved photographs, archival materials, and contemporary testimonies, aiming to reconstruct the artistic and historical-cultural significance of the lost murals. This approach makes it possible to reassess Minassian's contribution and to emphasize the crucial role of monumental art created in public environments in shaping the cultural life of the period.

Keywords: *Hovhannes Minassian, mural painting, fresco, fine arts, monumentalism, heritage, painting.*

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Monumental Painting by Hovhannes Minassian in Public Spaces

Introduction

Mural painting, as an independent and multifaceted field of monumental art, is distinguished not only by the diversity of its techniques but also by its profound integration with the architectural environment. It functions as a medium for shaping space and conveying ideas, uniting painting and architecture into a coherent artistic system. Murals executed in public settings have played a particularly significant role in expressing the aesthetic ideals, social perceptions, and cultural priorities of their respective periods.

Within the context of Armenian art of the second half of the twentieth century, the development of monumental painting is closely linked to the artistic articulation of public spaces. From this perspective, the murals created for public venues by Hovhannes Minassian, primarily during the 1960s, are of special scholarly interest. Although the majority of these works have not survived, they constitute important evidence of the artistic thinking, ideological orientations, and the formation of a monumental visual language characteristic of the period.

The aim of this article is to examine and critically interpret Minassian's murals created in public spaces by identifying their artistic features, technical solutions, and historical-cultural significance. The study is based on preserved photographs, archival materials, and contemporary testimonies, seeking to reconstruct the place of these lost works within the broader framework of the development of Armenian monumental art.

Mural painting is one of the most significant forms of monumental art, representing a branch of painting executed on walls, plastered surfaces, ceilings, and various architectural planes, and occasionally on canvas, paper, or other materials. It is defined not only by its technical characteristics but also by its organic and conceptual relationship with architecture, often shaping the artistic integrity of space and embodying a synthesis of architecture and fine art. Predominantly realized through fresco, glue-based techniques, encaustic painting, tempera, and oil, mural painting is inherently intended for long-term existence. These techniques ensure both artistic expressiveness and durability, allowing mural painting to function as an enduring carrier of historical and cultural memory. Its origins trace back to the earliest stages of human civilization, with early manifestations found in Paleolithic rock art, later developing extensively in ancient Egyptian, Assyro-Babylonian, and Greco-

Roman cultures, where mural painting acquired religious, ideological, and symbolic significance, reflecting prevailing beliefs, social structures, and aesthetic ideals.

Historical Foundations and Contemporary Relevance of Mural Painting

Mural painting achieved particularly wide dissemination in Byzantine art, where it became one of the principal expressive means of Christian iconography. Byzantine murals, distinguished by their symbolic visual language, stylistic rigor, and profound theological content, exerted a significant influence on the formation of medieval Armenian art. Within Armenian ecclesiastical architecture and painting, Byzantine traditions were reinterpreted and transformed, giving rise to a distinctive national style manifested in the murals of medieval monasteries and churches. In this sense, mural painting may be regarded as one of the most important expressions of Armenian culture, reflecting not only artistic thinking but also the spiritual and ideological worldview of a given era.

To this day, monumental mural painting has not lost its relevance. In contemporary art, it continues to evolve, assuming new forms and ideological emphases. Worldwide, pictorial interventions on the walls of buildings in urban environments have become widespread, often aiming to reinterpret public space and endow it with new aesthetic and cultural meanings. In recent decades, numerous examples of newly created murals can also be found on the streets and building façades of several Armenian cities, attesting to a contemporary revival of monumental painting. This phenomenon is frequently associated with the Street Art movement, whose practitioners seek to express their ideas within public space through various mural techniques. However, so-called “Street artists” often do not fully recognize that the expressive medium they employ possesses a centuries-old history, rich traditions, and a well-developed technical system.

Nevertheless, regardless of creative approaches, mural painting continues to preserve its significant artistic and cultural value. It not only shapes the aesthetic image of the urban or architectural environment but also contributes to the organization of public space, endowing it with a distinctive identity and cultural memory. Thus, mural painting may be understood as an art form that

Monumental Painting by Hovhannes Minassian in Public Spaces

simultaneously fulfills aesthetic, social, and cultural functions, serving as an important means of creative dialogue between space and the individual.

In the twentieth century, a renewed interest in monumental painting emerged, particularly in Mexico, where muralists such as Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco created large-scale works with non-ecclesiastical themes.¹ The Soviet Union likewise accorded special importance to monumental art, viewing it as an effective means of demonstrating the power and grandeur of the newly established state. The walls of new public and residential buildings were adorned with colorful murals and mosaics intended to glorify the ideal of the Soviet “New Man”.

From the mid-1940s onward, monumental-decorative art in the Soviet Union entered a period of active development, despite less than ideal conditions. This growth was largely driven by the necessity of reconstructing buildings destroyed during the war and by the opportunity to articulate new artistic statements. Buildings of public significance occupied a central place in this process. Artists began working with diverse media murals, mosaics, stained glass whose development varied across Soviet republics, including Ukraine, the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) and the Caucasus.² In these regions, the evolution of monumental-decorative art was shaped not only by Soviet ideological demands but also by local artistic traditions. Each republic sought to combine state commissioned themes with its own national cultural heritage, producing distinctive artistic solutions.

Monumental Art in the Soviet Postwar Context and its Development in Armenia

Naturally, one of the dominant themes of monumental painting during this period was victory in the Great Patriotic War, a focus dictated by historical necessity. This accounts for the triumphant character, form, and visual rhetoric of many works, which aimed to emphasize the resilience and courage of a people who had defeated Nazism. Monumental artists were entrusted with influential public spaces metro stations, concert halls, theaters, markets, hospitals, cultural centers where mural imagery contributed to the broader democratization of art. At the same time, monumental art was expected to

¹ <http://www.vltramarine.ru/mag/art/public/862>

² Weimarn 1981, 88–93.

Karamyan O.

solemnly underscore the strength of the victorious nation, the power of communist ideology, and the unity and friendship of the Soviet peoples. National motifs were frequently incorporated into compositions, color schemes, and decorative forms. While in Ukraine and the Baltic republics monumental art often aligned with minimalist modern architecture, producing restrained yet expressive compositions, in the Caucasus richer color palettes, traditional ornamental motifs, and historical-cultural themes were more prevalent.

In Armenia, monumental-decorative art likewise experienced a significant phase of development, particularly in the second half of the twentieth century. Newly constructed public buildings-cultural centers, theaters, educational institutions, and administrative complexes-provided artists with opportunities to employ murals, mosaics, fresco and stained glass. These works frequently combined socialist ideological themes with imagery drawn from Armenian history, culture, and nature. By the mid-1950s, monumentalism also penetrated cafés and clubs, integrating historical themes and expanding its technical repertoire to include metalwork, ceramics and glass.

Conceptually, monumental art is generally understood as a form of large-scale, spatial art that defines the visual and architectonic composition of a specific architectural environment and whose coloristic and formal structure corresponds to that purpose. Thus, during the Soviet period, monumental-decorative art became not only a crucial component of architectural design but also a powerful means of ideological and artistic communication, synthesizing various art forms into a unified artistic space in which architecture and fine art functioned as an integrated whole.

Minassian as a Monumentalist

The works created during Hovhannes Minassian's student years were modest in scale and ambition. However, his earliest paintings produced in Armenia already stood out for their vivid color palette and carefully structured planar compositions, reflecting at least in part-a sense of continuity with earlier masters who had depicted Armenia before him. This initial phase was followed by an unexpected and decisive shift marked by sharp contrasts and an inclination toward abstraction. A tension emerged between two artistic principles in which the artist had not yet fully found himself. Yet it was precisely through

Monumental Painting by Hovhannes Minassian in Public Spaces

this confrontation that a new artistic world was formed the world of Minassian's the monumental artist.³

Within the Armenian artistic context, Hovhannes Minassian was among those masters who boldly sought to integrate their individual artistic identity into the demands and imperatives of a new era. Of particular significance is the fact that he was the first in Armenia to revive several classical techniques that had been forgotten for centuries. This achievement was crucial not only for Minassian's own artistic development but also for the broader evolution of Armenian monumental painting. By reactivating ancient technological methods, he reopened a path toward artistic principles long established in medieval Armenian art, especially in the traditions of ecclesiastical fresco painting, such as the frescos of the St. Mesrop Mashtots Church of Oshakan.

The application of classical techniques required meticulous study of materials and technological processes.⁴ Minassian employed natural pigments, specially prepared layers of plaster, and phased working methods characteristic of medieval mural painting. This approach enabled the creation of works that were not only artistically expressive but also technically durable and resistant to the passage of time. At the same time, these revived techniques were not limited to the mechanical reproduction of historical methods; they were reinterpreted within the framework of contemporary artistic thinking, combining traditional technologies with new compositional and ideological solutions. As a result, a distinctive creative approach emerged in which the experience of the past served as a foundation for modern artistic expression.

This process also served as an important stimulus for younger artists, who began to show increased interest in the technical and conceptual possibilities of monumental painting. Consequently, a professional milieu was formed in which the study of classical traditions and their creative application became one of the key factors in the development of Armenian monumental art.

Minassian's murals may be divided into two main groups: works created for public spaces and ecclesiastical murals. This article focuses on the murals executed in public environments, which, unfortunately, have not survived. Despite their physical loss, these works occupy an important place in the history of Armenian monumental painting as testimonies to the artistic thinking,

³ **Tatikyan** 1975, 88–91.

⁴ Interview with Hovhannes Minassian's son.

Karamyan O.

ideological orientation, and spatial-decorative solutions of their time. The study seeks to reconstruct the artistic and historical-cultural significance of these murals on the basis of preserved photographs, archival materials, documentary evidence, and contemporary accounts. Such an approach allows not only for a reassessment of their place within the overall development of Armenian monumental art but also for highlighting the important role played by artistic interventions in public spaces in shaping the cultural life of the period.

Minassian's preferred technical media were oil paint and tempera. Beginning in 1960, he increasingly devoted himself to monumental works intended for practical application within architectural settings. One of his earliest and most notable realizations was the mural *"Round Dance"* (fig. 1), executed in the lobby of the Palace of Culture of the Kirov Chemical Combine in Yerevan. This work represented a distinctive synthesis of painting and architecture and posed a new artistic proposition that attracted considerable public attention.

In *"Round Dance"*, the simplification and generalization of the dancers' bodily volumes create a smooth, rhythmic composition; expressive linear elements convey a sense of movement, while the luminous color palette evokes joy and vitality. The Palace of Culture itself was a typical public institution of the Soviet period, designed to organize the cultural and social life of workers. Its spacious lobby functioned not merely as a transitional area but as a site of cultural communication. Minassian's monumental mural was conceived to enrich this interior environment artistically and to underscore the building's social significance.⁵

The composition of *"Round Dance"* conveys a spring-like mood concentrated at the center and expanding into the surrounding space. The dance unfolding within the image seems to generate an audible rhythm, as if music itself emanates from the movement. Against a light green and blue background, vivid colors: red, yellow, and violet accentuate the emotional outbursts of young dancers. Through linear rhythms and a sequence of blue, yellow, and white tones, the artist achieved a harmonious and life affirming scene. This work corresponds closely to the cultural atmosphere of the Khrushchev era "Thaw" characterized by a retreat from ideological rigidity

⁵ Voronova 4, 1976, 23.

Monumental Painting by Hovhannes Minassian in Public Spaces

toward everyday life, nature, and emotional sincerity. Youth and innocence here are liberated from disciplinary control and the heroic idealization typical of Stalinist cultural propaganda.

In terms of simplified forms and flat color treatment, *“Round Dance”* may be cautiously compared to Henri Matisse’s *“La Dance”* (fig. 2), which likewise employs a circular composition of dancing figures united by rhythmic movement. In both works, dance functions as a symbol of life and energy; however, while Matisse’s forms are more abstract, Minassian preserves a distinctly national and ethnographic character.⁶

In this context, *“Round Dance”* can be viewed not only as a decorative monumental mural but also as an expression of the artistic mentality of its time. Minassian consciously abandons heroic and idealized representations in favor of natural human movement, immediate emotion, and the simple joys of life qualities that became especially prominent in the cultural climate of the 1960s. Unfortunately, the mural has not survived and is known today only through archival documentation and recollections.⁷

Another significant example of Minassian’s monumental work was realized at the Grinding Machine Factory in Leninakan (Gyumri), one of the important industrial enterprises of the Soviet period. The factory complex included infrastructure serving the social needs of workers, among which the workers’ canteen occupied a special place as a space for rest and communication. The artistic design of this interior was regarded as a means of cultural enrichment, and it was within this context that the fresco *“Flute”* (fig. 3) was created in 1963–1964 by H. Minassian. The aforementioned structure formed an integrated complex, the overall composition of which was developed in collaboration by A. Melkonyan and R. Petrosyan.⁸

Minassian’s *“Flute”* in certain respects recalls *“La Musique”* (Fig. 4). In both works, the musical theme is presented through simplified and decorative forms. The figures are harmoniously integrated with nature, while chromatic and formal solutions serve to establish an overall sense of rhythm and harmony. In *Henri Matisse*, the color planes are considerably more intense, whereas in

⁶ **Aleksei Bobrikov**, <http://xz.gif.ru/numbers/51-52/surovo>

⁷ See the same source.

⁸ *Catalogue*, 1974. Compiled by Gohar Khostikyan and Martin Minassian.

Karamyan O.

Minassian's work the forms are associated with monumental decorative thinking and an architectural conception of space.

The industrial frieze "*Builders, Miners, Welders*" (Fig. 5), created by Minassian in 1968 and formerly located in the workers' workwear store in Yerevan, has unfortunately not been preserved. Judging from photographic documentation, these works clearly embody the characteristics of the "Severe Style" of the 1960s.

This refers to a realist tendency within Soviet art that was characteristic of the 1950s–1960s. In defining their creative orientation, the masters of this movement turned to the pre-Stalinist period of Soviet visual art, encompassing the entirety of the 1920s and the early 1930s. The term "Severe Style" was introduced into art discourse by the art historian Aleksandr Kamensky. This style is marked by artists' depictions of the lives of their contemporaries, emphasizing their willpower and capacity for labor. Its underlying premise was that the everyday diligence of the Soviet individual constituted heroism in itself—heroism rooted in simplicity yet marked by hardship. The art of the Severe Style is generalized and laconic, characterized by the use of flat color planes and a canonized approach to figuration. Ultimately, the Severe Style represented an intellectual shift in Soviet visual art, brought about by a new generation of artists.⁹

For a comprehensive scholarly understanding of the full essence of the "Severe Style" it is essential to examine the movement that preceded it, namely the Soviet "Thaw." These two successive currents stand in clear opposition to one another. The "Thaw" marked the end of the Stalinist era in the sphere of culture. It continued to reproduce the subjects and objects, evaluative criteria, and thematic priorities established during the Stalinist period, yet did so in a markedly freer manner—as if breathing and living more fully—allowing for repose and a renewed focus on ordinary, everyday situations.

The principal confrontation between the "Thaw" and the "Severe Style" occurred primarily within the domain of painting. For the painters of the "Thaw" such as Zardaryan, Levitan, Yablonsky, Gavrilov, Bogaevsky, and Zagonek the revival of themes related to nature, rather than everyday life, was of primary importance.

⁹ **Aleksei Bobrikov**, <https://ithaca-66.livejournal.com/35704.html>

Monumental Painting by Hovhannes Minassian in Public Spaces

By contrast, the "Severe Style" is devoid of all forms of illusion and, without leaving room for compromise, relentlessly offers what it presents as a "truthful" interpretation of the human being, history, and nature. Stripped of ideals, it is austere, bleak, and desolate in character.

It excludes miracles and recognizes only the primacy of labor. The concept of heroism within this framework is devoid of explicit exaltation and instead presupposes inward concentration, restraint, and physical as well as moral exhaustion. Life, as articulated here, is stripped of vivid coloration and emphatic expressions of joy. The central figure of the "Severe Style" is the individual who rejects philistine formalism-an ordinary human being, detached from social classification, outwardly indistinguishable, for whom neither age nor gender is of significance. This figure may be understood as the naked human standing upon bare ground, whose weariness derives from the realization that the world must be constructed anew, from the very beginning, and exclusively through one's own labor.¹⁰

Workers, welders, and miners appear, as if through an evolutionary process, to have gradually transformed from primitive laborers into cultivated agents of civilization. This bearer of immense willpower is characterized by a muscular and formidable physique, the emphasized scale of the hands, and abrupt transitions of volume and color. These heroes more precisely, builder-workers are recast as fearless titans confronting a formidable nature. They emerge as figures soaring within the domains of civilization. Their labor is grounded not in physical convulsion but in inner tension, one that arises from moral disposition rather than corporeal strain. The emphasis thus shifts from brute strength to will.

Synthesizing the essence of these three works by Hovhannes Minassian, it may be asserted that they do not constitute a single stylistic formula, but rather articulate a unified field of artistic problems: a shared philosophy of nature and a common anthropology, which, through an evolutionary and professionally grounded process, brings to culmination all the ideas concentrated within it.

Hovhannes Minassian demonstrably possessed a multifaceted mastery of his craft, underpinned by refined artistic sensibility, whether working in painting, self-portraiture, sculpture, mosaic, fresco or historical mural composition.

¹⁰ See the same source.

Karamyan O.

It should be noted that a portion of Minassian's monumental legacy has unfortunately not been preserved. One such example is the fresco *"Fish"* (1962), which was installed on the façade of the bathhouse building of the Yerevan Polytechnic Institute and created in collaboration with A. Aleksanyan. This work, like many other examples of public art, has not survived the passage of time.

It is also noteworthy that the artist developed a number of sketches intended for a monumental decorative program for the Cinema House of Yerevan. However, due to various circumstances, these projects were never realized and did not reach their final execution (Fig. 6, Fig. 7)

Conclusion

In conclusion, it may be stated that the murals created by Hovhannes Minassian in various public spaces during the 1960s represent not only the artist's individual creative explorations but also a comprehensive reflection of the aesthetic and ideological transformations of the period. In the murals *Round Dance*, *Fish* and *Flute* (1961–1964), the simplification and generalization of volumes, a luminous, almost idyllic color palette, and a clearly articulated rhythmic structure give rise to harmonious and fluid compositions. Here, the relationship between human beings and nature is presented as an integrated whole: bodies in motion, rendered through softly expressive contours, convey a sense of joyful dynamism and freedom. This approach may be interpreted as an artistic manifestation characteristic of the Khrushchev "Thaw" marked by a turn toward nature, primordial purity, and a metaphorical return to a "Lost paradise" where humanity does not yet stand in opposition to its environment but rather coexists with it.

At the same time, the industrial frieze *Builders, Miners, Welders* (1968) signifies a new phase in Minassian's artistic thinking. Here, the visual language aligns with the principles of the "Severe Style," characterized by rigid geometric forms, heavy monumental rhythms, and an emphasized material weight of the physical world. The forces of nature and the man-made environment quarries, metal pipes, reinforced concrete volumes are transformed into a unified vortex, within which the human figure appears not as a passive observer but as an active agent. Minassian's heroes the builder-workers merge with the industrial environment, becoming both an integral part of it and the force that overcomes it.

Monumental Painting by Hovhannes Minassian in Public Spaces

The juxtaposition of these two phases demonstrates that Minassian's monumental art evolves between harmonious idyll and tense industrial heroism, responding sensitively to the social, ideological, and artistic challenges of its time. Consequently, his murals emerge as significant testimonies of Armenian visual art of the 1960s, while simultaneously preserving a lasting relevance and a profound humanistic dimension.

It is important to note that a comprehensive study of the ecclesiastical-themed murals of Hovhannes Minassian is currently ongoing and will be presented in a separate article.

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Interview with Hovhannes Minassian's son <http://www.vltramarine.ru/mag/art/public/862>



Fig. 1 "Round Dance", (*"Shurjpar"*) 1961–1962, tempera, mural painting, 270 × 940 cm, foyer of the Palace of Culture of the S. Kirov Chemical Combine, Yerevan

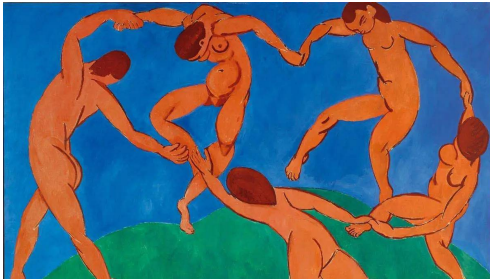


Fig. 2 Henri Matisse's "La Dance", 1910, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg

Fig 3. "Flute" (*"Srting"*), 1964, 520 × 940 cm, workers' canteen of the Grinding Machine Tools Factory, Leninakan (not preserved).

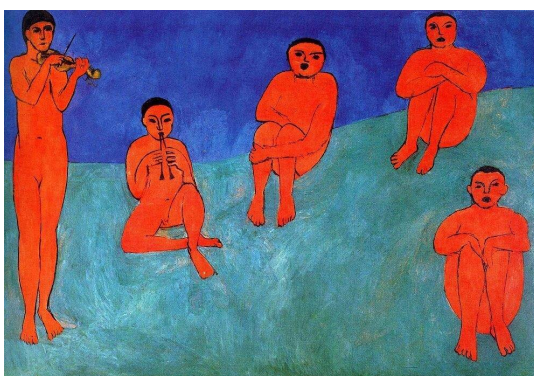


Fig. 4. Henri Matisse's "La Musique", 1910, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg

Monumental Painting by Hovhannes Minassian in Public Spaces

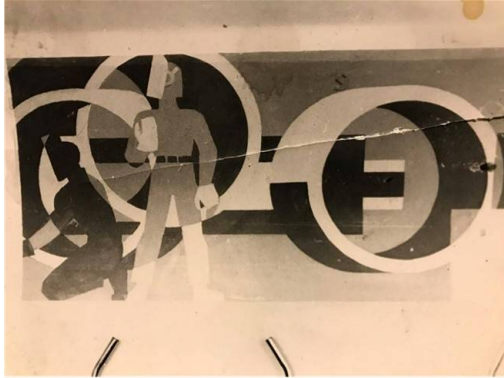


Fig. 5. Industrial frieze “*Builders, Miners, Welders*”, 1968, mural painting, workers’ workwear store, Yerevan, oil on canvas (the work has not been preserved; only photographic documentation survives).



Fig. 6



Fig. 7 1971-1972

Fig. 6. 7. Sketches intended for a monumental decorative program for the Cinema House of Yerevan, 1972

**ՀՈՎՀԱՆՆԵՍ ՄԻՆԱՍՅԱՆԻ ՄՈՆՈԻՄԵՆՏԱԼ
ԳԵՂԱՆԿԱՐՉՈՒԹՅՈՒՆԸ ՀԱՍԱՐԱԿԱԿԱՆ ՎԱՅՐԵՐՈՒՄ**

Ամփոփում

Տարբեր հասարակական վայրերում ստեղծված Հովհաննես Մինասյանի 1960-ականների որմնանկարները ոչ միայն անհատական ստեղծագործական որոնումների, այլև ժամանակաշրջանի գեղագիտական և գաղափարական վերափոխումների ամբողջական պատկերն են: 1961–1964 թվականներին արված «Շուրջպար», «Ձկնիկներ», «Սրինգ» որմնանկարներում ծավալների պարզեցումը և ընդհանրացումը, լուսավոր, գրեթե իդիլիական կոլորիտը և հստակ ռիթմիկ կառուցվածքը ձևավորում են ներդաշնակ, սահուն հորինվածքներ: Այստեղ մարդու և բնության հարաբերությունը ներկայացվում է իբրև ներդաշնակ ամբողջություն. շարժման մեջ գտնվող մարմինները մեղմ արտահայտչական գծերի շնորհիվ հաղորդում են կենսախիռո դինամիկա և ազատության զգացում: Այս մոտեցումը կարելի է մեկնաբանել որպես «Ձնհալի» դարաշրջանին բնորոշ՝ դեպի բնություն, նախնական մաքրություն և «կորուսյալ դրախտ» վերադարձի գեղարվեստական արտահայտություն, որտեղ մարդը դեռևս չի հակադրվում միջավայրին, այլ գոյակցում է նրա հետ:

Միննույն ժամանակ, 1968 թվականին ստեղծված «Շինարարներ, լեռնագործներ, զոդողներ» ինդուստրիալ ֆրիզը նշանավորում է Մինասյանի արվեստում նոր մտածողության փուլ: Այստեղ գերիշխող է «խստաշունչ ոճին» համահունչ լեզուն՝ խիստ երկրաչափական ձևեր, ծանր, մոնումենտալ ռիթմեր և նյութական աշխարհի ընդգծված կշիռ: Բնության և տեխնաժին միջավայրի տարերքները՝ քարհանքը, երկաթյա խողովակները, երկաթբետոնե ծավալները վերածվում են համընդհանուր հորձանուտի, որի մեջ մարդը հանդես է գալիս ոչ թե որպես դիտորդ, այլ գործող ուժ: Մինասյանական հերոսները՝ շինարար-բանվորները, ծուլվում են արդյունաբերական միջավայրին՝ դառնալով նրա անբաժան մասը և միաժամանակ՝ հաղթահարողը:

Monumental Painting by Hovhannes Minassian in Public Spaces

Այս երկու փուլերի համադրումը ցույց է տալիս, որ Մինասյանի մոնումենտալ արվեստը զարգանում է ներդաշնակ իդիլիայի և լարված ինդուստրիալ հերոսապատման միջև՝ արձագանքելով ժամանակի հասարակական, գաղափարական և գեղարվեստական մարտահրավերներին: Նրա որմնանկարները դառնում են 1960-ականների հայ կերպարվեստի կարևոր վկայություններ՝ միաժամանակ պահպանելով արդիական հնչեղություն և խորքային մարդասիրական իմաստ:

Բանալի բառեր՝ Հովհաննես Մինասյան, որմնանկար, որմնանկարչական ձևավորում, կերպարվեստ, մոնումենտալիզմ, ժառանգություն, նկարչություն: