

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Art Review | 'Arshile Gorky: A Retrospective'

### From Mimic to Master of Invention

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PHILADELPHIA — Two stories are well known about the Armenian-American artist Arshile Gorky. One is that he came to a terrible end, a suicide in his mid-40s, after a hammering series of catastrophes. The other is that he took a very long time — around 20 years, until he was in his late 30s — to become the artist who painted some of the most magnetic and heart-rending pictures of the 20th century.



Museum of Modern Art/Artists Rights Society, New York York

Arshile Gorky: A Retrospective “Water of the Flowery Mill,” from around 1944, is in this show at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Before that he was many other artists. He was Cézanne, Picasso, Léger, Miró, André Masson and Roberto Matta, more or less in that order, as he assiduously and almost selflessly emulated a succession of existing personal styles to teach himself how to be a painter.

This unusually long learning curve in his relatively short life can give a chronological survey of his art, like the magisterial “Arshile Gorky: A Retrospective” at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, an unbalanced shape. Gorky’s protracted apprenticeship was followed by distinctive wonders: the rustling and throbbing landscape in “Water of the Flowery Mill”; the penumbral, narcotized mood piece called “Soft Night”; the meat-colored “Agony,” which suggests a slab of burned flesh and dates from 1947, the year before Gorky died.

What’s surprising about the Philadelphia show, though, is how much it feels of a piece, even if it doesn’t look like it. Stylistically, eclecticism rules as you move from Gorky playing Cézanne, to Gorky doing Cubism, to Gorky the Surrealist. Constant throughout, though, is an impression, as strong and invisible as a force field, of physical and psychic concentration.

It radiates from meticulously drawn, plotted, eraser-smudged and redrawn studies for paintings and from the painted, scraped-down, piled up, scratched-into surfaces of the paintings themselves, which betray revisions made to incorporate new formal and technical information that Gorky gleaned from prowling museums, poring over art magazines and talking with artists.

And much as he was one of the great absorbers in art, Gorky was also one of the great pretenders in life. The two roles, both about survival through invention, are closely related. Just as he changed aesthetic identities, he changed personal histories.

He was born Vosdanik Adoian in Armenia near the Turkish border, probably around 1902; he gave different dates at different times. His father, a trader and carpenter, emigrated to the United States in 1908 to avoid being drafted into the Turkish army, leaving behind a wife, Shushan, and children.

In a 1912 studio photograph a moony, preteenage Gorky poses beside his mother, who is seated and wearing an apronlike gown embroidered with flowers. The portrait was

probably made to be sent to America, to remind the absent husband and father that his family was waiting to join him, though for one of them this would prove impossible.

By 1915 the Turkish government initiated what became a systematic genocide of the Armenian population in and near Turkey. Gorky and his family became refugees, often on the move, repeatedly subjected to exposure and food shortages. His mother sickened, and in 1919, at 39, she died of starvation in his arms. A year later he made it to the United States, first staying with his father in New England, but soon striking out on his own. At which point the self-invention began.

He was no longer Armenian. He was now a Russian named Arshile Gorky, a cousin of the writer Maxim Gorky. He was a painter; he had, precociously, already studied with Kandinsky and exhibited in Paris. Far from being a shy, bookish, provincial youth, he was a cosmopolite, a bohemian genius prepared to cut a swath through the cultural world of New York, where he settled in 1924.

His story was, of course, full of holes. Did he even know that “Maxim Gorky” was itself a pseudonym for a writer named Alexei Peshkov? It didn’t matter. This was America. You could be what you wanted to be. And what he wanted to be — this is the core of truth in his story — was an artist, even if one very much in the making.

The retrospective, organized by Michael R. Taylor, curator of modern art at the Philadelphia Museum, scrupulously tracks that making, or self-making. Among the Gorkys in the opening gallery, for example, are a view of Staten Island rooftops rendered à la Cézanne, graphite portraits in the manner of Ingres, and Picassoid deconstructions of a Greenwich Village studio interior.

Certain early pictures, though, fall outside the program of self-training through imitation. In 1926 Gorky began two large paintings based on the 1912 photograph of himself and his mother. He paints the figures essentially as they are in the photo, no distortion, no fooling around. Stylistically, Picasso and Matisse are there as he paints, but they’re also

beside point. Gorky doesn't subject himself to their styles, but uses them to shape a fixed and talismanic memory of his life, his real life.

He isn't trying to be some other artist. He's trying to be himself, and at this stage in his career the effort is awkward. Both paintings have clearly been thought and rethought countless times, and with every rethinking seem to have become harder to grasp, less complete. In the end he left them, like the weaving on Penelope's loom, unfinished, as if waiting for the sitters to return and resume their places.

Although he kept one of these paintings with him all his life, he appears to have stopped work on both around the time of his final stylistic immersion, into Surrealism. This began around 1939, when World War II drove Surrealist artists to New York, among the first to arrive being Matta, from whom Gorky learned to thin his paint to a wash and to loosen up his hand.

The show heavily emphasizes the Surrealist influence on Gorky, on the grounds that it has been underestimated, even denied in the past. But the influence is obvious and acknowledged now, so the issue feels overplayed in the catalog and in a large gallery given over to Gorky's Surrealist phase.

The mere presence of the great painting titled "The Liver Is the Cock's Comb," with its slaughterhouse motifs and air of monstrous jollity, would have clinched the point. But here it has been surrounded by many — and I would say too many — related pictures, all hung against a chocolate-brown band that zigzags over the wall. The idea is to suggest Surrealist zaniness. The effect is to diminish the dynamism of the art and make the wall labels jump out.

With Surrealism, Gorky once more proved himself an ardent student. He examined his model, mastered its particularities, took it in and made something surpassingly personal of it. What that movement gave Gorky was spontaneity, and after decades of discipline he was ready to make optimum use of it, to let art and emotion flow together. In many

paintings of the early 1940s they do, and almost for the first time you sense his work relax into joy.

In 1941 he married a woman he adored. In 1943 they had a daughter. His career was going well. He was spending months in the countryside, rediscovering, or imagining, the love he had felt for the farmlands of Armenia as a child. Many of his marvelous abstract landscapes — bathed in autumnal Keatsian mist, their forms as pulpy and sweet as peeled ripe fruit — come from this time.

But emotionally more ambiguous paintings do too. “The Liver Is the Cock’s Comb” dates to 1944. So does “How My Mother’s Embroidered Apron Unfolds in My Life,” another memory painting, but in this case abstract and chaotic, like a close-up, baby-at-the-breast view of fraying fabric.

In 1946 Gorky’s life started to unravel with shocking force. His studio burned, with a significant loss of work. He had debilitating, humiliating surgery for rectal cancer and sank into a depression. Over the next year his marriage foundered; his wife had a fling with his mentor-friend Matta. In 1948, after losing the use of his painting arm in a car accident, Gorky hanged himself.

Knowing about this end naturally darkens our view of all that came before, but darkness really was there early with his family’s life as refugees and his mother’s death, and despite the relocations and reinventions, it never withdrew. What kept life manageable was art, and specifically the practice of art, a practice that Gorky turned into an art, a kind of yoga of learning, looking, focusing, doing, redoing, humbly, pridefully, hourly, daily.

Creation was salvation. That sounds romantic, but why put it any other way? Gorky was a Romantic, though that only becomes fully evident in his art at the end. If the Philadelphia show seems to take a long time to get to the end, the great stuff there is worth the wait. And besides, you’re getting some of it all along the way, in art that is all one thing, all one life.

“Arshile Gorky: A Retrospective” runs through Jan. 10 at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Benjamin Franklin Parkway at 26th Street. It then travels to the Tate Modern in London and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles.

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