

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

London
**Evening
Standard**
standard.co.uk

ARTS & EXHIBITIONS NEWS

Arshile Gorky is mother's boy

By Brian Sewell, Evening Standard 11.02.10



[Armenia](#), the oldest of Christian countries, was once a land where art and architecture flourished. It was, like Britain, a far outpost of the Roman Empire, but, unlike this country, did not sink into a dark age with that empire's retrenchment, division and fall. In what is now north-eastern [Turkey](#) and beyond its borders there, are the remains of great churches and monasteries, architectural marvels, mathematically ingenious, the masonry crisp cut.



Melancholy: The Artist and his Mother — "here is more than personal tragedy, here is a greater grief for his identity"

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

In some, the paintings that decorated their walls still survive, despite the attempts of Muslims to wreck and ravage them for their too evident human imagery; their ghosts find definition in more resistant sculptural reliefs and, on a smaller scale, in manuscripts and miniatures.

Absorbed into the Ottoman Empire by the westward march of the Turks, Armenia lost her borders and her nationality, but the heritage of a great culture, laid down more than a thousand years before, established patterns that were still current late in the 19th century. It was to these that any boy with burgeoning talent as an artist was compelled to turn for his education — for there were no art schools — to the painted images and gingerbread sculpture of the churches that were so much part of his daily life. Of these, Arshile Gorky was one — a boy with a passionate urge to draw.

Now perceived to be the last Surrealist and the first American Abstract Expressionist, Gorky was born in Armenia in 1904, we think, in a village near the city of Van. Many of the churches to which he had access were destroyed during the course of the last century; Armenians had long been persecuted, their response to pogrom so pacific that in 1915 the Turks contemptuously embarked on a policy of genocide so total that none survived — even now the wary traveller from the west does not utter the word Armenian.

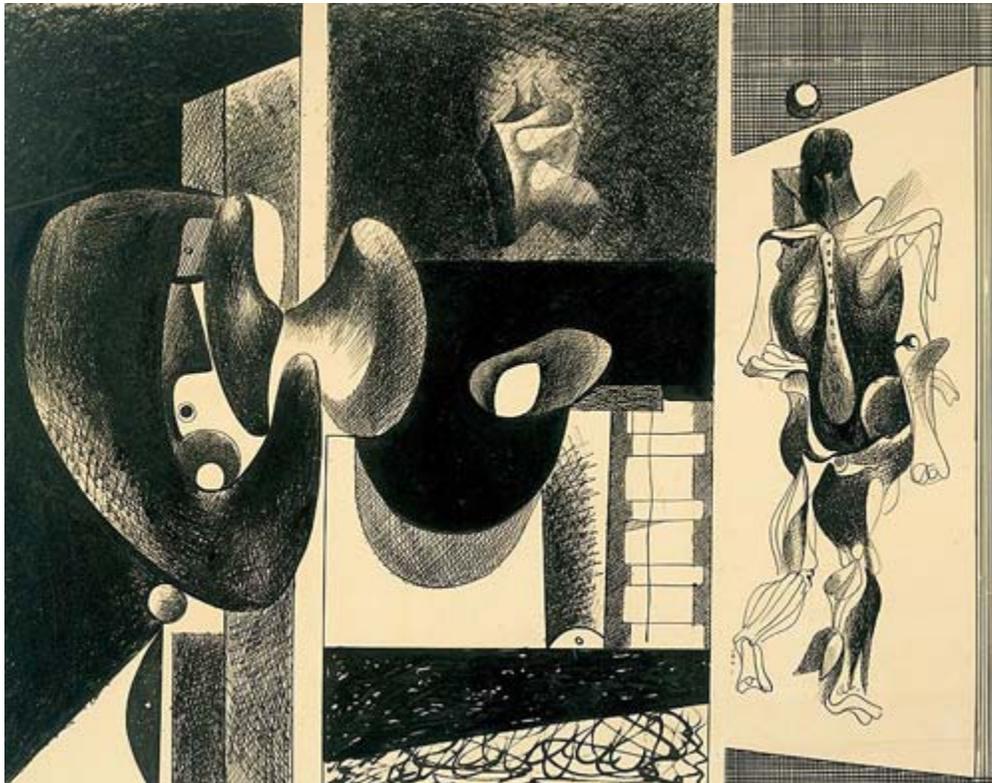


"Small husband": the 1912 photograph of Gorky and his mother which was the inspiration for the picture above

A quarter of a century ago, seven ruined churches were rotting in the hills near Van; constantly quarried for hearthstones and doorsteps, they may by now be utterly destroyed but, by the grace of God, the church of the Holy Cross still stands on the deserted island of Akhtamar in the great Lake of Van, with substantial examples of wall paintings and carvings of which Gorky was aware. His letters demonstrate how powerful were his recollections of childhood, and how much being an Armenian meant to him — I respond to modern life as an Armenian from Van," he wrote from exile in [America](#). Man cannot escape the sensibility of his time..." He was, indeed, in thrall to it.

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

The traditional images of Armenian art are frontal and hieratic. In painting the proportions are elongated, but in sculpture they are stunted; faces in both are oval, the eyes large, unfocused and deep-socketed; what sense of volume there may be is implied by line and the sculpture is in low relief. These were the formulae that little Gorky carried with him when, with his mother and sister, he fled in 1915 into the Russian borderland to the north-east; there, in 1919, in his arms, his mother died of starvation and grief, and his long journey to America began. He was fortunate; chance could so easily have sent him on the genocidal marches that wiped out more than a million Armenians when the Turks drove them south to die either en route or in the desert near Aleppo. The appalling events that were in some measure the experience of all Armenians in Turkey during and after the Great War formed Gorky's mind, burdening him with melancholy that was to overwhelm him.



Dark: one of Gorky's splendid drawings, Nighttime, Enigma and Nostalgia

He escaped to America in 1920, hoping to join his father who had emigrated there years earlier to avoid being drafted into the Turkish army. The reconciliation failed. Living in [Boston](#), Gorky developed a museum habit — western cultures absorbed at random. Moving to New York in 1925, he joined the Grand Central School of Art as a student — perhaps still only 21 — but swiftly graduated to the status of monitor-teacher (I suspect the school was less grand than its name suggests) and remained there until 1931.

America was hardly the place for a would-be painter between the wars — [Paris](#) was pre-eminent, and even [London](#) could claim to be an intellectually livelier place until [New York](#) was given its chance by the Second World War. Gorky was neither well taught in the technical sense nor exposed to long traditions and established stimuli that could convert him from provincial fumbler into metropolitan genius. He

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

became a mere imitator. As [Cézanne](#) was in high fashion, Gorky clumsily and tentatively tried his brushwork and colour without understanding the purpose of either. Aware of [Picasso](#), presumably from illustrated magazines rather than direct experience, he tried his hand at decorative abstractions of still life reduced to flat patterns. When Picasso developed a mannerism of cool tones and heavy intersecting lines, jagged and angular, unrewarding to the point of emptiness, Gorky mimicked him. To Picasso's large, heavy semi-classical faces his response was powerful and emotional, recognising in them a character that recalled Armenian art — but he broke new ground in imitating them.

The Picasso paths exhausted, Gorky turned to Miró for mentor and produced jazzy imitations of no merit. He became a Surrealist, though only in the most debilitated sense, and fell under the influence of Matta, a tag-end member of that by then desuetudinous group. What little originality there is in Gorky's work is in the paintings of the mid-Forties, when his landscape abstractions struck an authentic personal note — but had his scribbles and drips not been adopted with enthusiasm by American painters and noisily promoted as Abstract Expressionism, these paintings too would seem as negligible as all the others. [Tate Modern](#) has given Gorky a far larger and grander exhibition than he deserves, for he is, at best, a minor painter, often uncomprehending and incompetent. Many visitors, unaware of the unrelenting propaganda that since his death in 1948 has presented his work as “the last great flowering of Surrealism and the first great flowering of modern American painting” (Tate Gallery exhibition catalogue 1965), will wonder why they have paid a tenner to look at so many canvases that are obviously no better than dim-witted imitations. His early paintings suggest that he hardly knew how to control the consistency and texture of paint or with which brushes to apply it, and that for at least the first decade he was a clumsy and ignorant amateur.

The case is different with his drawings; these suggest that he responded with sensibility, intelligence and a high degree of technical skill to the academic teaching of drawing in his day, that in drawings he could express far more expertly any interest he had in form and volume, light and space, and that with extraordinary skill he could imitate in graphite, and in pen and ink, the related techniques of etching. I am convinced that in two portrait studies of the later Thirties, he had looked intelligently at those masters of economy, Ingres and Cocteau, and that in the paintings of a decade later it is the drawn line that lends order to the chaos of surreal forms, often Dalí-like, in a fantasy of hubbub and disorder.

To assume, as the jabberwocky-driven critic Clement Greenberg did, that Gorky was a painter of more than national importance" is to assume that he knew what he was doing. He did not. His paintings were a combination of idiom — first borrowed and then habitual — with happy and unhappy accident. In the late works, the images scribbled, doodled, smudged and the colour scrubbed on to the canvas or, occasionally, thinly staining it with a wash, as in contemporary Parisian tachisme, he was released from all formal responsibilities. It is easy to see how these characteristics could be enlisted as justification for the genius of unpremeditated spontaneity in the unconscious mind and hand claimed by his immediate contemporary [Willem de Kooning](#), and by the slightly younger [Jackson Pollock](#), both of whom served to bolster Gorky's reputation as the stud who sired their rough and ready kind of gestural Abstract Expressionism. We should blame him for the scribbles of [Cy Twombly](#) too.

A pair of early paintings may, for their immediate appeal to the emotions, slow the sane man's hurrying pace. They are near identical portraits of Gorky and his Mother as they were in 1912, based on a photograph taken then, but not begun until 1926 or so. Neither is finished; on one he spent a decade, on the other at least half as long again, but there is little evidence of heavy reworking or adjustment and nothing to suggest how much their development was inter-dependent. Hieratic, ancient Armenian in a formula revised through the eyes and harmonies of Pink Period Picasso, they date from a thousand years

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

before. Into them Gorky put many layers of meaning: they tell us of his memories of Van, perhaps even of the enthroned [Virgin Mary](#) carved on the wall of Akhtamar, of his small husband's responsibility for his mother in the absence of his father, of a certain social status implied in his dapper shoes and the collar of his overcoat (is it velvet or Astrakhan, both a sign of difference perhaps important to a man who has had to earn a pittance as a labourer in factories?), and of a whole nation driven from ancestral land and property; here is more than personal tragedy, here is a greater grief for his identity — I am an Armenian"; here too he expresses fellowship with Picasso's wider-ranging melancholy imagery.

Gorky came to a wretched end. In January 1946 fire destroyed the contents of his studio — two dozen paintings, his books and "all the drawings of these past three years ...". In March rectal cancer was diagnosed, colostomy the consequence. Recovering, during the summer, he completed 292 drawings "and they are good too," he said. How could they be? — the sane man asks — and in February 1947 a reviewer damned them as doodlings of only psychological interest. In December, Gorky was depressed enough to ask his daughter Maro, then not quite four, to choose the tree from which to hang himself. Six months later, by then demoralised by increasing estrangement from his family, a road accident broke his neck and disabled his painting arm; his rage and depression worsening, on 16 July 1948 his wife and children left him. Five days later Gorky hanged himself — with an already broken neck it was, perhaps, an easier death than we might think.

Greenberg immediately extolled him as "one of the most important painters of his generation anywhere in the world" — and that, of course, is the gospel of this exhibition. Alas, much though I would like him to have been the Armenian Michelangelo, very little in our thoroughly mendacious art world could be further from the truth.

Arshile Gorky is at Tate Modern (020 7887 8888, www.tate.org.uk) until 3 May. Daily 10am-6pm (Friday and Saturday until 10pm). Admission £10.