JOURNEY INTO ART

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Category: Opinions

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12 January 2013

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Keghart: When did you emigrate to Canada?

GP: In 1955 we moved to Quebec City, sailing on the last voyage of Cunard Line's Franconia. I will never forget the icebergs in the middle of the Atlantic. The ship stopped. It was nighttime; the stars were so big and bright. Later in life they reminded me of Van Gogh's "Starry Night".

Keghart: How has your art developed as you have matured and gained experience?

GP: My art developed by mistake. Earlier on I had never thought art was something people did seriously. Much later, while visiting major galleries during my travels that I realized how wrong I was. Nevertheless, I never thought that I would be good enough to pursue the vocation full time. As a result, I scraped through high school with a diploma in machine shop and auto mechanics. I had one period of art a week. My art teacher--John Bennet--suggested I change courses and take art full time, as he thought I had artistic talent. However, I just wanted to finish high school in the easiest way possible. Art was still a passive endeavor. After graduating, jobs did not exactly fall into my lap. I enrolled at Ryerson University in Toronto. Professors there urged me to find another path to my future. Not having money, I learned to play the accordion so as to become a professional musician. I formed the first all-Armenian band in Toronto. At last some money was making its way into my wallet, but still no art.

Drawn at age ten

Keghart: How and when did you make your crucial decision to become an artist?

GP: It was not until I met a person who saw one of my mediocre paintings and suggested that I enroll at the Ontario College of Art in Toronto. I enrolled in a four-year advertising design course. Advertising, they told me, would be the only way I might make it in art. But again, after graduating I couldn't find a job. My grandmother would sit in the living room and watch me come home with my portfolio in hand and a sad look on my face. She always encouraged me. The ad agencies said I had a good portfolio but that they were looking for experienced designers. At my last interview I said to the creative director: "Give me the job so that I will have experience". That didn't sit well. I abandoned my portfolio and joined a band with a manager who booked the group in Holiday Inns around the world, as well as on cruises. As we were being measured for our stage uniforms, I received a call from an art director at Foster Advertising, the second biggest ad agency in Canada. Foster hired me as freelancer, but within a week I became a full-time art director.

Although I won awards, I was disillusioned with the industry and quit to run my own studio for the next 15 years. A career turning point came in 1983 when I created a poster titled "On the Waterfront Toronto". It took Toronto by storm and brought me into the art publishing industry. Following the fame of the poster, I was hired by the biggest art publisher in Canada. That's how I became the official artist of Expo '86. I also began doing posters of major cities in North America. Traveling around the world with a backpack, I was taken aback by the poverty and starvation. As a result, I have donated art work to numerous non-profit organizations. UNICEF (United Nations Children's

Fund), which customarily uses one artist and only once from each country picked five of my designs. Thus, I was nominated to receive the Order of Canada and was featured in the "Canadian Who's Who".

On the Waterfront Toronto

Keghart: What are your artistic preoccupations or subjects?

GP: My subjects vary because I am commissioned on a project basis: one day a factory, the next a sports personality, a landscape for a calendar. I believe an artist should not restrict himself to a single subject.

Keghart: Tell us about the pleasures of painting. How is it different from expressions of other art forms?

GP: In fine art you know what you want at first, but don't always end up with your wishes. That's what makes it interesting. Things evolve in front of your eyes--the artist changes his mind a dozen times. He will have doubts, especially if the creation is not going the way he wants, but at the end the rewards are great.

Keghart: Have you exhibited your work in Armenian institutions?

GP: I have donated my art to the Armenian churches in Toronto where they have held one-man shows. They always do an excellent job... inviting dignitaries, organizing receptions and presenting my work in a professional manner. On one occasion a framed painting was presented to Jean Chretien, two weeks before he became the Prime Minister of Canada. Another memorable moment was the presentation of one of my paintings to John Evans, the former US ambassador to Armenia. I believe he was recalled because he acknowledged the Genocide. Another remarkable occasion was the exhibition of my Armenia paintings in a one-man show in Glendale, California.

Keghart: What are you working on now?

GP: I am moving from my 3,000 sq. ft. home-studio to an apartment less than half the size. I don't know where I will store over 300 paintings. I am in limbo now; I will not take assignments until I settle down. I might start again in California where I have worked with fellow Ontario College of Art graduate and friend Bernard Berberian. I might spend more time in the south of France where I was born. The light there is exceptional: that is why most of the French impressionists painted there. As one gets older one looks for warmer climates. I am also working on "Canada--an Artist's Journey". It will be a coffee-table book of all my Canadian paintings, if money can be raised for the project.

Keghart: What would you like to do next artistically?

GP: The next subject matter will be what the next phone call brings.

Keghart: Is there a group of Armenian-Canadian artists who get together, exchange ideas and socialize?

GP: A couple of years ago I met Rafi Anderian, the renowned "Toronto Star" newspaper illustrator. He told me he would like to paint in his own creative way, as opposed to illustrating editorials. A few months later, he e-mailed me some of his creations. I was very impressed. Armenians have an unbelievable array of talent. Armenian artists should definitely meet and exchange ideas.

Keghart: Do you have an Armenian Genocide Centenary project?

GP: I would love to have an Armenian Genocide Centenary project. A while back I created a stamp to commemorate Hrant Dink. I worked with former MP Sarkis Assadourian. The design was sent to Yerevan. I hope the project takes off.

Keghart: How should the Armenian community in Canada support its artists, including emerging artists?

GP: The Armenian community in Canada is doing its best to support Armenian artists, especially the ones who are emerging. The community is involved in so many other important things that perhaps not enough time and effort is spent towards this. We should present framed artwork to government dignitaries who, in turn, would become familiar with our community and support us. Mayor Rob Ford has my work in his office. As many as possible politicians should have the work of Armenian artists in their offices. All of them should know who we are. I am ready to help.

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