# WE ARE OUR MOUNTAINS

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**Category:** Opinions

**By Harry Mardirossian**, Toronto, 28 December 2022

***Architect Mardirossian's article was written almost two years ago while the Republic of Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabagh) was still present. Following the 2023 vicious attack by Azeri armies it ceased to exist, and 120,000 native Armenians were forced to flee***. **Keghart.org**

Over the ages, civilizations have erected monuments that have become permanent symbols. As an example, the pyramids in Egypt represent their time and place. In the more recent period, the Eiffel Tower designed by Gustave Eiffel symbolizes Paris. His unique design has impacted the people of the times such that they have honored him by justly branding the tower nothing else but Eiffel.

Meanwhile, a modest sculpture titled "The Little Mermaid" at the Baltic Sea shore, by Edvard Eriksen, has become the symbol of Copenhagen. The Rialto Bridge of Venice, the Trevi Fountains of Rome, or the equestrian sculpture of David of Sassoun of Yerevan all are like badges of their place.

Today, how possible is it to imagine Paris without its Eiffel Tower?

I list the above examples to appreciate a similar creation, that beyond any doubt, has all the attributes. Over half a century ago an Armenian sculptor, against all odds, has shaped a monument symbolizing a "Place" in Artsakh, titled "*We Are our Mountains"*.

**Sarkis Baghdasarian,**

Sarkis was born in Banazour, Artsakh (or Nagorno Karabagh) on September 5, 1923. At the age of seven, his family moved to Yerevan. He served in the Soviet Army during WW-II. Later, he graduated from the Yerevan's Art Institute, in 1948. In his early phase, he achieved impressive results with his sculptures. He became famous first in the Armenian SSR, and later in the USSR. During his lifetime, his works were well sought after by many cities and institutions in the USSR and later in Bulgaria, France, Italy and at last during the EXPO '67 in Montreal, Canada.

**The Birth of a Symbol**

In 1965, on the fiftieth anniversary of the Armenian genocide, throughout the world several commemorative monuments were erected. The Soviet regime started to allow unprecedented freedoms of travel abroad and tolerated previously suppressed expressions in public. Armenians of the ASSR began to test the authorities' patience with slogans like *"Our Lands, Our Lands"*. By such actions they were able to achieve the unthinkable. In fact, the erection of the Genocide Monument at Yerevan's Tsitsernakaberd for the 1.5 million Armenian genocide victims of 1915, politically set a new bar. Modern and bold architectural design standards produced outstanding buildings.

The people of Artsakh, tacitly watched these developments in their neighboring ASSR. They realized the old Stalinian ranks had expired. Soon after, in 1965 the Artsakh administration unofficially invited Sarkis Baghdasarian a native of the land, to exhibit his sculpture collection in Stepanakert. This exhibition prompted a suggestion to the artist to create a sample that would reflect the collective

will and aspirations of Artsakh people. In fact, his "Artsakhtsis" (previously exhibited in Carrara, Italy) became the primary model.

The selection of the site was made through a confidential consultation process between the Artsakh authorities and the artist. Finally, in 1967 "We are our Mountains" monument was born and placed on a secluded hilltop, near the capital Stepanakert. The Azeri authorities manifested their unease about the project. Let us remember that in the USSR in those years, the inter-ethnic issues were resolved in a different mode. To appease the emotions of the Azeri administration, in 1969 Baghdasarian sculpted a memorial dedicating it to the Azeri victims of Chardakhlu, in Azerbaijan SSR, and the case was closed.

**We Are Our Mountains**

Today, this monument passively sits along the highway leading from Stepanakert to Khojalou. The Armenians renamed this town to Ivanian, from its time of recapture until the recent 44-Day War. Baghdasarian's father Ivan was a constructor and Sarkis adopted some of his dad's construction techniques. The monument resembles a building made of Tufa-stone clad, with a concrete filled core.

The sculpture's physical mass exhibits several mysteries. It represents an elderly Man and Woman physically buried into the earth up to their necks, where their undetected feet seem to touch the core of the earth. The onlooker has the impression that the bodies of the couple have been sucked into quicksand. They are deprived of their arms and hands, they are tacit. The woman has a multi-layered mouth-band, while the man's lips are unnoticeable. They seem to be tormented but patient with a sarcastic smile. The onlooker may confuse these figures with similar examples like those on the shores of Easter Islands or of the fallen elaborate heads on Nemruth Dagh.

It is evident that the consultants of this monument have done their utmost to be politically ultra-correct, yet to maintain the will of the people of Artsakh. The chosen name also has a diplomatic twist. It was officially named "The Grandpa and Grandma", while for the public consumption still remains *"We Are Our Mountains".*

Generally, the reception and acceptance by the masses of such monuments varies vastly. While the French have immortalized their symbol by the name of the author Eiffel, others remain indifferent or choose to forget the artist altogether.

Venice's Rialto bridge was a product of a competition with a list of select Renaissance architects like Michelangelo, Palladio and Sansovino. However, an unnoticed designer Antonio da Ponte won the competition, whom today is hardly remembered. A darker example is St. Basil's Cathedral has been the symbol of Moscow for centuries. Legend has it, that the Tsar Ivan the Terrible during the inauguration of the edifice ordered his guards to blind the Yakovlev brothers' eyes, simply to forbid them to repeat their design elsewhere. When compared with other nations, Armenians also fall behind in the appreciation of their top-notch artists or architects. I am certain that many visually can

identify this monument, while only a few know that Sarkis Baghdasarian is its sculptor.

This memorial is the symbol of the de facto State of Artsakh. The design occupies the centerpiece of this state's emblem exhibited on the National Flag, the Parliament Building and, on its soldier's respected epaulet.

Let the art critics today argue about this monument's unconventional use of material, its inarticulate plastic mass, its siting, or their facial passive expressions. The acceptance by the public at large specially by the diaspora, and internationally, is proof of its success.

As I write these lines today, once again Artsakh is in turbulence and is cut off from the world by the Russo/Azeri forces for over fifteen days. In as much as Artsakh remains in this standoff, the ultimate purpose of this monument will still carry on its initiated mission.

During the seventy years of Soviet regime, the Armenians did not succumb to the will of the Azeris. Though today Azerbaijan has the upper hand, after thirty years of inconclusive wars, the core existential issue remains in a stalemate.

September 5, 2023 is the centenary birthday of Sarkis Baghdasarian. I only hope that Armenians all over the world will take due measures, rightly so, to appreciate this giant's masterwork. Interestingly, such simple artistic expressions are more powerful than blood shedding political upheavals. In fact, this monument is a peace-loving universal statement of Artsakh people.

Perseverance, endurance and steel-will are needed for the times to come. Knowing the people and the history of this region, we should remain optimistic, hoping once again they will endure this latest test with their typical ingenuity and dignity.

I trust Mamig and Babig's  silenced voices soon will erupt to the world loud and clear. Sarkis Baghdasarian will continue to aspire not only the people of Artsakh but the people of Armenia and its diaspora with a duty to continue in the pursuit of this monument's message for many generations to come till its fulfillment and final victory.

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# There are no comments yet.