

WE ARE OUR MOUNTAINS

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By Harry Mardirossian, Toronto, 28 December 2022

Over the ages, civilizations have erected monuments that have become permanent symbols. As an example, the pyramids represent their time and place. In more recent times, 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 Eiffel.

Meanwhile, a modest sculpture at the Baltic Sea shore by Edvard Eriksen named "The Little Mermaid" is the symbol of Copenhagen. The Rialto Bridge symbolizes Venice, the Trevi Fountains Rome, the equestrian sculpture of David of Sassoun Yerevan.

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

I site the above examples to appreciate a similar creation, that beyond any doubt, has all the attributes to symbolize a "Place" created by an Armenian sculptor.

This artist, against all odds, authored the monument "***We Are our Mountains***", that has been the symbol of Artzakh over a half a century.

Sarkis Baghdasarian

Sarkis was born in Banazour, then called 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 in 1942. Later, he graduated from the Yerevan's Art Institute, in 1948. At 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 sculptor Sarkis Baghdasarian (left in photo)



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 compressed public expressions. Armenians of the ASSR

began to test the authorities' patience by slogans like "*Our Lands, Our Lands*". By such actions they were able to achieve the unthinkable. In fact, the erection of the Genocide Monument for the 1.5 million Armenian victims in 1915, set a new bar both politically. New and bold architectural design standards produced unprecedented modern buildings.

The people of Artzakh, tacitly watched these developments in the neighboring ASSR. They realized the old Stalinian ranks had changed. Soon after, in 1965 the Armenian administration unofficially invited Sarkis Baghdassarian a native of Artzakh, to exhibit his sculpture collection in Stepanagert. This exhibition prompted a suggestion to the artist to create a monument that would reflect the collective will and aspirations of Artzakh people. In fact, his "Artzakhtzis" (previously exhibited in Carrara, Italy) became the primary model for the monument.

The physical siting of the monument took place through a tight consultation process between the Artzakh 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 to the project. Let us remember that in those years in the USSR 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 [Chardaklu](#), in Azerbaijan SSR, and the case was closed.

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Today, this monument passively sits along the highway leading Stepanagert to Khojalou, which Armenians after the recapture named it Ivanian till the 44-Day War. Baghdasarian's father Ivan was a constructor and Sarkis adopted some of his dad's construction techniques. The sculpture is a building made of Tufa stone exterior, with a concrete filled core.

The sculpture's physical mass exhibits several mysteries. It represents an aged Man and a 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 pair have been sucked into quicksand. They are denied their arms or 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 other 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 Artzakh. Their name also has a diplomatic twist, officially was named "The Grandpa and Grandma", while for the public consumption still remains "*We Are Our Mountains*".



Generally, the public

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

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 no one remembers. St. Basil's Cathedral has been the symbol of Moscow for centuries. Legend has it, that the Tzar 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 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 the sculptor.

This memorial is the symbol of the de facto State of Artsakh. Its design occupies the centerpiece of its 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 unkosher 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.

September 5, 2023 is the centenary birthday of Sarkis Baghdasarian. I only hope that Armenians will take due measures 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.

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.

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 test with their typical ingenuity and dignity.

I trust Sarkis Baghdassarian's monument will continue playing an important role for the years to come, patiently waiting for its final victory.

Comments



Boghos – 2023-01-10 10:25:51

Beautiful!