

VERNISSAGE -- A MOSAIC OF ARMENIAN CULTURAL TREASURES

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 By Tom Vartabedian

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What's your pleasure? Is it jewelry? Woodwork? Pastels? Ceramics? Books? Coins, stamps and medallions? Hardware?

The eye sets upon a cache of skeleton keys? Another table held electronic bits and old razors. Something for everyone, goes the sales pitch. You feel like a child running amok in grandma's attic.

If anything, the shopping paradise represented a cornerstone in a mosaic of cultural art.

"The spirit of art is alive and well," a merchant told me. "Ancient traditions and culture are reinvented and reborn each week. Tourists love this place. So do our residents."

More important than the merchandise was the manner in which these vendors bonded. The competitive attitude ran parallel with a sense of economic well-being. I was on a mission to bring home gifts for my family. Friends also passed along their requests.

While one opted for a gold Armenian cross, another wanted a cloth doll. A painting of Ararat was on the list. So was a tavlou board, duduk, some CDs, lace and handicrafts. If I arrived with two suitcases, the return trip would be enough to fill four.

I was quick to learn that "vernissage" was a French word that entered the parlance of Yerevan



during the late 1970s by Armenian artists who wanted to bring fruits of their labor to the people.

A largely dormant concrete park during the week, the place blossoms on weekends in the heart of the capital city by a monument dedicated to the late painter Martiros Saryan.

A fascinating potpourri of historic artifacts was tastefully blended with contemporary goods to entice the most discriminating shoppers both young and old. Lawns of the park disappear under rows of paintings, indicating the spirit of art was alive and well here.

A child was seen holding two bags of merchandise she had purchased. Elsewhere, a woman in her 80s was bargaining with a craftsman. They went back and forth before settling on a price.

I picked up three dolls. The dealer gushed forth with a tempting offer. Buy another and the fifth one would be free. She also included a ceramic urn in case one broke during transit.

The man with the crutch selling bookmarks appeared cloned. He was everywhere with his hands extended. Paying no attention to proper protocol, I assumed he was the bearer of gifts. I took one, thinking it was complimentary.

I may as well have robbed the jewelry counter at Tiffany's.

Two merchants left their booths and chased me down, annoyed that I had taken advantage of a handicapped man. One of his bookmarks was jutting from my pocket --- the one I had assumed was free.

"He was expecting some money," one guy said in Armenian. "He survives on what he earns here. Please show some respect."

Without a moment's hesitation, I returned to the lame derelict and paid him perhaps three times what the craft was worth, out of chagrin. Far be it for me to leave the country with a tarnished reputation. As the day wore on, I managed to exceed my anticipated budget.

A visit to Vernissage left me with an impression of how a certain class of people made the best of their artistic talents --- sharing it with others to keep the economy stable. The view of Mount Ararat from afar was an added bonus.

