

**SERGEY GORODETSKY, AN APOLOGIST OF APPRECIATION AND
POPULATIZATION OF ARMENIAN FINE ARTS
(On the occasion of the 140th birthday)**

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The famous Russian poet, writer, publicist, translator and public figure Sergey Gorodetsky’s (1884-1967) pro-Armenian literary-cultural, social-political activities during the First World War and the years following is largely connected with Western Armenia and Transcaucasia¹. A witness of the tragic events suffered by the Armenians in Western Armenia, settling in Tiflis in early 1917, he started working at the city’s conservatory, conducting aesthetic courses and at the same time working in the newspaper “The Caucasian Word”, where a special section “Art and Literature” was opened on July 7, 1917. Articles, reviews, essays, related to art and literature issues, were published in that section title every week, largely owing to the efforts of S. Gorodetsky, who coordinated the works of that section. Soon, however, an interesting psychological phenomenon appears. His skills in the field of painting and poetry, finally, started to dominate in his life and he carried out useful activities in parallel to the publishing ones, starting with painting first. It is known that the large and charming world of Western Armenia, “like an eternal poem”, has simultaneously become a source of inspiration for him, and S. Gorodetsky has painted memorable monuments, picturesque images of nature. By the way, his painting skills were once noticed by the outstanding Russian painter I.E. Repin².

S. Gorodetsky was of the opinion that “...sight progresses faster than all other senses”³. On December 3, 1917, “The Caucasian Word” published the first article of his “Children’s Creativity” article series, where he suggested to the readers to send the works painted by children aged 5-12 to the editorial office for organizing an exhibition.

That initiative was undoubtedly the birth of not only a talent and preference for painting, but also a relationship with children (it was in the process when orphans in Western Armenia were gathered), and it has an interesting result. With the sent

¹ For details, see Zakaryan 2010; 2015.

² Alexander Blok 1981: 5. C. Gorodetsky’s watercolor paintings and pencil drawings in Western Armenia are in the Museum of Literature and Art of the Republic of Armenia. S. Gorodetsky’s Archive, N 57-73.

³ Safrazbekyan 1980: 106.

materials, on January 21, 1918, a one-day exhibition of “Children’s Creativity” was opened in the three halls of the newspaper’s editorial office. About forty children’s paintings were presented. The exhibition finds a great response among the public of the city. An almanac of works by Armenian, Russian, and Georgian children was published with the help of the received income, under the title “Paradise Eagle”⁴.

The Russian poet then continues the popularization of visual arts with the great figures. With his efforts, the “Van-Erzurum-Trebizond” exhibition was organized and on March 3, 1918 it was opened in two rooms of the editorial office of the newspaper “The Laborer”, where the historical monuments of those cities were presented with watercolor images, photographs and measurements of B. Ryabov, N. Severov and M. Kern. The exhibition attracts the interest of the general public, scientific circles of the city; museums were negotiating to acquire the exhibited collection. At the opening ceremony, Gorodetsky makes a report on the antiquities of Van. This is then repeated until the exhibition closes, which runs for a week⁵.

On April 1, the second exhibition of children’s paintings with more than 300 paintings opens in the editorial office of journal “Ars”. At the opening, Gorodetsky made a report “Happiness and sadness through children’s paintings”⁶.

Along with all this, in “The Caucasian Word” S. Gorodetsky appeared with a number of critical articles dedicated to applied arts. This aspect of his activity is particularly noteworthy, because he was shaped as an art critic in Tiflis. Gorodetsky’s merits can be appreciated in the valorization and popularization of Armenian fine art painting, sculpture, as well as applied arts.

Here we should note about one memorable fact in the history of Armenian fine arts. Fine art flourished in the Armenian environment in the first quarter of the 20th century, clearly dictating the demand to form unions and be displayed. In 1916, the Union of Armenian Artists was founded, and the distinguished artist Yeghishe Tadevosyan was elected its chairman. In 1917, the first exhibition of Armenian artists was opened, a historical event in the history of Armenian culture, which was received with great enthusiasm and turned into a real celebration.

Having addressed the issue of organizing exhibitions in press and speeches, as mentioned above, Gorodetsky becomes one of the best critics of the artists represented in this, as well as in the second exhibition of Armenian artists organized in 1919. His subtle and insightful comments are priceless, which certainly stimulated the development of fine arts, contributed to the formation of the attitude and taste of the art-loving public.

In an informative article entitled “At the Painters” published in “The Caucasian Word” dedicated to the 1917 exhibition⁷, the priority was given to sculpture. The starting

⁴ The Caucasian Word, 1918, March 20. One copy of the almanac is in the Museum of Art and Literature (Archive of S. Gorodetsky, N 53).

⁵ The Republic. 1918, March 1; 1918, March 3; The Caucasian Word, 1918, March 6; The Renaissance, 1918, March 6.

⁶ Horizon, 1918, April 14, 1918, April 16.

point is that “Mountain nature, huge mountain ranges and massive boulders are above all the work of a sculptor.” This idea, mostly related to H. Gyurdjyan, extends to painting as well. “The artist of the Caucasus,” adds Gorodetsky, “is the artist of pure and clear form.” Examining the “true, monumental” art of Gyurjyan from this perspective, the author of the article sees another feature coming from the French psychological sculpture of the time - the mastery of imprinting psychology on that national characteristic - monumentality.

Yeghishe Tadevosyan and M. Saryan are characterized by the distinctive originality of art among painters. Examining the paintings “Waiting for Passengers”, “Hot Country” and “Fairy Tale” highlights Tadevosyan’s preference for making “light in nature, color on the palette” and creating light games. Saryan’s uniqueness is the “simply heartfelt” sensuous purity of colors, his tendency to create musical color syntheses in his portraits.

S. Gorodetsky’s article dedicated to the second exhibition of the Union of Armenian Artists entitled “Exhibition of the Union of Armenian Artists”⁸ is more extensive. This exhibition opened in April 1919 in the Hall of Tiflis University, presented the works of about fifty artists, a large place was devoted to painting and graphics. This time, Gorodetsky had the opportunity to appreciate many people with his innate sense and talent for painting, broad artistic knowledge and taste. The works of M. Saryan and Yeghishe Tadevosyan, V. Gayfechyan and H. Ter-Tadevosyan, G. Sharbabchyan and S. Khachatryan, P. Terlemezyan and V. Akhikyan, finally the world-famous Edgar Shahin and others were featured.

Considering Armenian painters as “sun-worshippers”, Gorodetsky discerns the unique aspects of each of them, with broad-mindedness he values one’s compositional skills, another’s analytical skills, the third’s planar skills, the fourth’s drawing skills, and the fifth’s mastery of coloring.

In Gayfechyan’s graphic drawings and etudes, which show us the crowd in the park, the group of people in the cafe, Gorodetsky captures the skill of weaving forms with the chaos of nervous lines in the abundance of light, of keeping the rhythm in the chain of shadows.

The works of the next “sun worshiper” H. Ter-Tadevosyan are characterized by the same artistic penetration, which no longer splits, but thickens the air and light, as if making the rays of light weighty. “Like a physicist, he sees the light of the rays on the object and surprisingly captures the plane of the fall of the rays,” writes Gorodetsky, then explaining one of the artist’s best works (“The Gypsy Woman”): “the heavy light crushed everything, flattened it and could not suppress and mute only the reddish-yellow color on the headscarf. Light kills volume, flattens everything. And Ter-Tadevosyan knows that very well.”

⁷ The Caucasian Word, 1917, February 11.

⁸ The Caucasian Word, 1919, May 12; Gorodetsky 1980: 100-107.

In Saryan's paintings, "The sun like before... spreads over the world like a yellow velvet... but the fabric has started to waver, to rise a little, and here is life, everyday life, comfort." There are warm, hearty objects, harmony of everyday life. Persia has found itself in its own home".

The "Sun worshiper" Grigor Sharbabchyan has also been highly appreciated by Gorodetsky. His ethnographic paintings, together with S. Khachatryan's work "Sacrifice in the Armenian Monastery", should find a place in the regional museum.

The sixth "sun worshiper" Stepan Gabaev, "... presented two amazingly bright paintings "Persia" and "Ordubad". Both are in warm, almost tangible rays. And as in the Persian Basin, there is a tale in the mountains of Ordubad, and that tale, which is very interesting, is told in the language of a realist."

Yeghishe Tadevosyan's work "From the Life of Armenians" (where the fairy-tale is born from the tragic), the landscapes "Bosporus in the Morning", "Beirut", "Sevan Monastery", "Ararat" have also been highly appreciated.

Having finished his speech about "sun worshipers", S. Gorodetsky adds: "These six complete the circle of artists who depict the sun as such, with its power to rule unquestionably over our vision. The rest of the masters and young people depict the world either according to the old rules of luminaries or in gloomy tones." Then, with subtle observations, mostly in a few words, the article refers to one of the "lovers of darkness" Adam Medzibolotsky, Ruben ("in the exhibition, Ruben's corner smells like real libertinism"), Hakobyan, V. Akhikyan, S. Yerkanyan, doctor Zargaryants, "great master" Zakaryan ("who created undeniably cozy still lifes"), Edgar Shahin, Panos Terlemezyan, graphic designer Alexander Kulmin, sculptors Gilchevskaya ("caricature sculptures are better than ordinary sculptures"), Mikayel Mikayelvan, Gyurdjyan ("... effective, magnificent busts"), Karikoka ("... still lifes... which are very different from the artist's other works"), Kirakosyan, Sergey Mari ("the brave image"), Tarkhanyan, Florenskaya ("the painful paintings"), Vano Khojabekyan and Kocharyan ("the frescoes, works that deserve great attention..."). As for Yu. I. Tairova's collection, Gorodetsky writes, "We will devote a separate article to her work pursuing the idea of the revival of Armenian applied art."

However, one should not think that Gorodetsky's examined articles are just composed only of praises. Clear, sharp, free from exaggeration, his characteristics also contain important observations and remarks. Thus, thoroughly assessing Yeghishe Tadevosyan's talent, at the same time, he notices that "the figures do not succeed at all for the maestro", he makes some remarks regarding offers S. Khachatryan's creative career, too. His warning to Ter-Tadevosyan is no less important. Asserting that his works "Market", "Twilight", "Street in Samarkand" "can be drunk for a long time like the sun", he notices: "However, we are in danger of getting drunk with mastery. Mastery is a disease, a kind of sclerosis, hardening and even woodiness. Living talent must be afraid of it and overcome with an unbridled desire to go forward and forward."

These are such sound and subtle assessments, critical observations and conclusions, which have not lost their resonance and value to this day. They are the characteristics and generalizations of a person with a broad knowledge of arts, high taste, and a talent for painting, which cannot be ignored by the historian or theoretician of Armenian fine arts.

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