

Chant Avedissian

With his Armenian-Egyptian background and academic studies in art and design abroad, in Montreal and Paris, one might expect the notion of a fixed identity to present an issue for Chant Avedissian. But the artist has a very rational approach to it: 'I carry an Egyptian passport and therefore, I'm an Egyptian, period.' 'Of course,' he adds, 'holding a passport of a country does not mean you fully embrace or are fully aware of the culture of that people... You pick and choose what you want. It is not a matter of pre-packaged culture that you just carry with you.'¹

The fact of belonging to different worlds—as Avedissian does—often makes us more sensitive to the particularities and influences of diverse cultural elements. In his usage of a range of cross-cultural elements that are inspired by the customs and traditions of different civilisations and times, Avedissian creates strikingly hybrid visual works that become imprinted in the mind as kaleidoscopic icons.

The different versions of the work entitled *Icons of the Nile* consist of portraits of Egyptian public figures: popular singers and movie stars; politicians and intellectuals, among them King Farouk (1920-1965), President Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918-1970); famous singers, such as Umm Kulthum (1898-1975) and Abdel Halim Hafez (1929-1977); and movie stars like Shadia (b. 1931) and Hind Rostom, otherwise known as 'the Marilyn Monroe of Egypt' (1931-2011). These portraits are combined with scenes referring to Egypt's recent past and present, which function as symbols of the dramatic changes incurred by the sociopolitical and cultural climate of the Arab world in general—and of Egypt in particular—in the twentieth century.

Avedissian's prolific and multi-faceted output includes photography, costume and textile design and painted stencils on corrugated cardboard, such as the *Icons of the Nile*.² His stencils series tries to safeguard Egypt's ancient and recent history and culture. He states, 'a big part of the stencils was to invent an identity.'³ He appropriates the heritage of Egyptian iconography, the geometry of Arab architecture, the arabesques of Islamic art and the plant motifs of Ottoman textiles. He began work on the series in 1991, during the Gulf War; and these works indicate a turning point in his career. They cover more or less the history of Egypt, up until the 1970s, starting with the Revolution of 1952, in which Nasser overthrew the constitutional monarchy of King Farouk and established a republic. Avedissian was born in 1951; and the turbulent birth of this new state coincided with the first twenty years of his life. It was the Egypt that the artist grew up in.

Avedissian draws his subject matter from the billboards and popular media of 1950s and 1960s Egypt. These include magazines, newspapers, TV broadcasts and 'Egypt's golden age of the movies'⁴, with its voluptuous divas and profusely moustached movie stars, all of which provide a nostalgic, imaginative and humorous commentary on contemporary popular culture. He calls these works 'reflections of the Orientalist vision of the Egyptian looking at his own culture', and adds, 'I wanted to disturb the traditional concept of 'painting' and incorporate the Egyptian artistic heritage

¹ Hratch Tchilingirian, Armenian International Magazine (AIM), August-September 1999, Vol. 10, No. 8 & 9, *Looking to the East*. Chant Avedissian rediscovers and redefines Egyptian visual art, p. 79.
oxbridgepartners.com/hratch/index.php/publications/articles/88-looking-to-the-east-chant-avedissian.

² Rose Issa, Press release for the exhibition Chant Avedissian, 'Icons of the Nile', Leighton House Museum, London, 1995: 'The Fine Arts-trained Avedissian refuses to work in oil on canvas. Instead, he mixes his own pigments and uses the stencil technique to transfer the image on to card or locally made paper that can be rolled into scrolls. The stencil technique itself necessitates a simplification of line and colour, and thus becomes similar to the hieroglyphic concept of representation.'
<http://roseissa.com/past%20exhib/Chant-Avedissian-Icons/past-exh-press34.html>

³ Sadia Shirazi, EUROPE, EUROPE, EUROPE: interview with Chant Avedissian in *Jadaliyya*, 22 June 2015. First published as *Europe, Europe, Europe* in *Thresholds* 33: Formalisms, 2008
http://www.reviews.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/21928/europe-europe-europe_chant-avedissian-with-sadia-sn

⁴ Rym Ghazal in *The National*, January 29, 2015
<http://www.thenational.ae/arts-lifestyle/the-review/when-the-stars-shone-from-cairo-remembering-egyptian-cinemas-dream-factory>

that is so closely linked to writing and the art of calligraphy.⁵ The work is fuelled by his fear that Egypt's history and culture eventually might disappear, a pressing issue for many countries in an increasingly globalised and homogenised world.

The artist's relationship with the well-known Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy (1900-1989), generally referred to as 'The Middle East's father of sustainable architecture', famous for his mud-brick houses and use of indigenous building techniques, has been of crucial importance to the development of Avedissian's own work. Fathy—who Avedissian assisted for ten years—acknowledged the importance of natural and traditional building styles, long before this idea became fashionable in the West.⁶ Shahira Mehrez, a historian, art collector and friend of the Fathy's was another major influence on Avedissian. As the artist says, Mehrez 'helped me financially and culturally by giving me access to all her art book collections, Egyptian costumes collections, and Egyptian crafts collections. She organised in her flat my first and only textile show, designed by Hassan Fathy; and a few years later we continued to collaborate by shifting to costumes, still making use of her books and traditional Egyptian costumes collections. She knew I worked at Fathy's for free; but she believed in the process, whereas all my friends thought I was mad working for no money. We stopped collaborating after that, as I didn't have the intention or knowledge to go into fashion, which is a big industry.'⁷

Fathy's use of local materials and crafts inspired Avedissian to account for the traditions of rural artisanship, craftsmanship and the use of ordinary resources. Avedissian is intrigued by Arab desert life and admires the provisional dwellings of the Bedouins, who can easily pack up and take all their belongings with them. This freedom of movement, of easily moving one's home and possessions, gave him the idea to make the corrugated cardboard stencils or scrolls, which are easy to produce, change, pack and transport; and can be rearranged in a different order, thus telling alternative stories.

Avedissian's usage of stencils not only allows for multiple results, it invites them. He uses these to create different versions of a painting or a portrait, giving them altered backgrounds or changed attire, like a set stage that retains its basic scenographic elements but changes its props. 'I love the idea of not doing something just once', he explains.⁸ Apart from their engaging themes, the painterly quality of the stencils combined with their character as cut-outs is noteworthy for its bright colours, complicated meandering patterns and continuous repetitions and rhythms. These create movement, harmony, unity, space and ambience. Patterns, repetition and calligraphy are the main ingredients of traditional Islamic art, which of course has been a great inspiration to Avedissian. His real masterpiece, though, was the adobe mud-brick: 'Putting three bricks together to make a wall, to make a pattern, it's magic. You put two together and in the middle one more, and you stack them up to build a wall. Or you tilt one brick vertically, at an angle, or overlap one brick with another. It all starts there and you end up with a girl holding a Kalashnikov.'⁹

The so-called *Nubian Doors* are another important component of Avedissian's oeuvre. The famous Nubian houses, decorated with beautifully painted doors, were another indigenous source of inspiration for him. *Nubian Doors* showcases sacred Egyptian animals such as the bee, the ibis, the jackal and the crocodile, who stand respectively for the sun god Re, the god of the moon Thot, the god of the dead Anubis and the female demon of fear, Ammut. With the use of these ancient symbols, Avedissian stresses the origins and continuity of Egyptian culture, which spans many millennia. Although these door decorations appear to have originated in old tradition, they were

⁵ Tchilingirian, 1999, pp. 77-79

⁶ Amira Elhamy, The Middle East Observer, 27 January 2016
<http://www.meobserver.org/reviving-a-success-story-written-by-the-egyptian-architect-hassan-fathy/>

⁷ Email sent by the artist on 12 March 2017

⁸ Shirazi, 2008

⁹ Shirazi, 2008

actually only invented around 1925 by Ahmad Batoul, a Nubian builder's assistant who was responsible for the finishing touches to the then newly built houses.¹⁰

All in all, Avedissian's work testifies to his constant intellectual and artistic struggle against what he calls the 'Western, colonial and imperialistic influence on Eastern art'.⁽¹¹⁾ He strongly opposes the general tendency to evaluate the latter by European or Western standards. As he grapples with Western influences, his art becomes the result of the fraught tension between East and West.⁽¹²⁾

In her book *Modern Egyptian Art 1910-2003*, Liliane Karnouk questions the extent to which Egyptian artists should or could assimilate to Western art forms. 'For many Egyptian artists,' she describes, 'assimilation to the modern age is felt as being as deadly to Egyptian identity as pollution is to the Sphinx.'¹³ This feeling of unease, or even protest, is detected in several of Avedissian's interviews, where he claims 'I do not do art, (...) I have to do what I do, as an Armenian born in Egypt and against all Western influences. I don't do art. I do fighting against influences. I paint, it's not political art, but it's an attitude.'¹⁴

Islamic artistic expression is predominantly a decorative art form. Geometric shapes, calligraphy and organic patterns make up the three non-figural types of decoration in Islamic art. The geometrical and organic designs usually feature repeated and overlapping polygons and circles, or of rhythmic patterns of interlacing foliage and tendrils. The Occidental preoccupation with figuration and the human body has seemingly made Islamic and Western art mutually exclusive, or at least inherently contradictory. However, the emergence of Western art movements at the onset of the twentieth century, such as abstract—specifically Constructivist—art, has led us to re-evaluate Islamic art and its relation to Western aesthetic developments.

Both art forms have a lot in common; and although Constructivism as such might not directly be indebted to geometric Islamic art, the similarities between the two do exist. Modern and contemporary abstract Oriental art, such as Avedissian's, is in turn very similar to Constructivist painting and its later counterparts, in spite of Avedissian's ideal of an unaffected and 'unpolluted' modern and contemporary 'Eastern' art practice. Can any artist avoid the influences of the past? When we look at Lyubov Popova's and Varvara Stepanova's fabric and textile fashion designs of the 1920s^{15 16}, for instance, we notice a striking resemblance to Avedissian's own pattern stencils (1991-1999), as well as his costume sketches and drawings¹⁷. There are ample instances that illustrate the resemblances between Islamic and Russian Constructivist designs, whatever the explanation of that might be.

¹⁰ Ernst Hans Gombrich, *Reflections on the History of Art: Views and Reviews*, University of California Press, 1987, p. 31, cited from Marian Wenzel, 'House Decoration in Nubia', University of Toronto Press, 1972
https://books.google.be/books?id=275zvEoivcoC&pg=PA31&lpg=PA31&dq=gombrich+wenzel+nubia&source=bl&ots=rE68oD_5Hp&sig=jC8al2gBlTqEiM7GHizKHVPldbo&hl=nl&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwicwtHUz6nSAhUDtBoKHecndJoQ6AEINjAF#v=onepage&q=gombrich%20wenzel%20nubia&f=false

¹¹ Tchilingirian, 1999, pp. 77-79

¹²¹² Tchilingirian, 1999, pp. 77-79
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¹³ Liliane Karnouk, *Modern Egyptian Art 1910-2003*, American University in Cairo Press, Cairo and New York, 2005, p. 98
https://www.jstor.org/stable/27933988?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

¹⁴¹⁴ Tchilingirian, 1999, pp. 77-79

¹⁵¹⁵ Christina Lodder, 'Liubov Popova: From Painting to Textile Design', Tate Papers, no.14, Autumn 2010,
<http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/14/liubov-popova-from-painting-to-textile-design>

¹⁶ Evgenia Dorofeeva, The Russian Fashion Blog, 'Constructivism in Russia in the 1920s', June 2013
<http://www.russianfashionblog.com/index.php/2013/06/constructivism-russia-1920s/#axzz4ZL4KINqP>

¹⁷¹⁷ Sabrina Amrani, Chant Avedissian, List of gouaches on corrugated paper, panels and bands, details and digital images with explanations, February 2017

For many years, Avedissian has been concentrating on painting patterns. Moving between modernity and tradition, his intricate artistic and aesthetic research combines elements of Constructivism with features of Islamic art, generating surprising relationships between Constructivist art and ancient calligraphy. These works are characterised by repetition and a variety of patterns, rhythms and motifs. Repetition arises from the frequent recurrence of the same object, colour or shape in a regular, rectilinear or cyclical way, to create interest, movement, harmony and unity. A pattern is a combination of distinct elements or shapes that are repeated in a systematic arrangement, such as mosaics, lattices, spirals, meanders, waves, symmetries and fractals. Rhythm is a variegated repetition of different elements, which can be random, regular, alternating, flowing, increasing or diminishing, like notes in a score. In visual rhythm, the motifs become the beats. Motifs originate from units of patterns, or combinations of elements, such as stamps, tiles, building blocks and modules. Motifs can be arranged in a plurality of sequences, be they repetition, rhythm or pattern.

The corrugated cardboard Avedissian that uses for his paintings, stencils and panels already has a pattern of its own; the ribbings in it even remain visible underneath the painted surface. He only uses the cardboard in one direction, with the corrugations in a horizontal position. Thus, the stencils can be rolled up and are easy to pack, store and transport; and can be hung up again upon arrival at the next temporary destination¹⁸. His pattern paintings, panels, cut-out stencils, and bands are painted with gouache, which reinforces the already matte surface of the cardboard. The predominant colours are red, yellow and blue; mostly bright and clear, but sometimes soft and subdued.

His motifs range from geometrical shapes, such as circles and spirals, squares, rectangles, triangles and other polygons; and different star forms such as pentagrams, hexagrams and octagrams, to organic and floral forms such as pomegranates, lotuses, blooming palmettes, grape-vines, date-palms, papyrus and bamboo. Combined, these produce extremely complicated and beautiful patterns. In addition to the aforementioned elements, Avedissian also uses the crescent moon and star and the so-called 'Çintemani'—an ancient motif that formed the basis of the traditional design for Iznik Tiles during Ottoman times—consisting of a combination of design elements, which are referred to as 'tiger stripes' (a pair of undulating horizontal lines) and 'leopard spots' (three dots in a triangular position).

The calligraphic, arabesque and geometric elements that belong to the decorative canon of Islamic art and architecture rarely contain a symbolic meaning. Islamic art even seems to avoid the use of symbolism¹⁹. Rather, Islamic art strives for mathematical elegance and aesthetic attractiveness in its patterns and arabesques. And so does Avedissian. His work expresses his desire to establish a meaningful continuum between ancient, modern and contemporary Eastern art and aesthetics, without imposing a definite or unique meaning.

It might be clear that Oriental art forms and practices have been of crucial significance to Avedissian's artistic development. But despite his denial of the importance of Occidental art to his own work, one cannot overlook that modern Western art has indeed made its imprint on him. And not just in the ways mentioned above; but also in how Avedissian's work reminds us of the paper cut out works by Henri Matisse, which Avedissian no doubt is familiar with. However, his aversion to a supposed Western cultural hegemony²⁰, which still is prominent in the art world, has led him to the

¹⁸¹⁸ Shirazi, 2008, Avedissian: 'The scrolls were done initially for a birthday party; you put it on the walls and afterwards take it off. You don't live with the scrolls.'

¹⁹¹⁹ Thomas Arnold, 'Symbolism and Islam', *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, Vol. 53, No. 307, Oct., 1928, p. 155
https://www.jstor.org/stable/863786?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

²⁰²⁰ Shirazi, 2008, Avedissian: 'I grew up until the age of eighteen with Paris as the centre of culture: in the house, in school, in my surroundings, in the French cultural institute in Cairo, in Egyptian cinema. I mean if you see Egyptian movies, everyone goes to Europe- the doctor is coming from Europe; they go to Europe to bring the machines. I mean the guy thinks his wife is having an affair with another man, he takes the child and he goes to Europe. This is in a famous Egyptian film. The wife goes to the villa of her husband and his mother says, the guy is not here and your son is not here and tomorrow morning they are going to Europe this is a very big event - the guy goes to

invention of his own innovative voice. If one were to try to situate Avedissian's practice in terms of culture and geographical affinities, I would claim that it springs from a truly Levantine spirit. That South-Eastern part of the Mediterranean—the Levant—where 'cultures met, borders blurred, and religions and people cross-bred for better or for worse'²¹. This special, sophisticated but decidedly Oriental brand of South-Eastern cosmopolitanism, which sadly waned after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the onset of Arab nationalism. That place where Arabs, Greeks, Armenians and Jews co-existed and understood one another, despite the fact that they spoke different languages and practiced different religions. Though he is too young to have experienced the Levant's late nineteenth and early twentieth century heyday, to me Avedissian is clearly a child of this legacy; this place that is now a nostalgic 'far away' but nevertheless constitutes a latent second skin underlying Avedissian's work.

Katerina Gregos

Europe. He doesn't go to Sudan, he doesn't go to Afghanistan, he goes to Europe. So we grew up thinking Europe is the centre. You walk in the street and the birds sing that, 'Europe, Europe, Europe.'

²¹ Adina Hoffman quoted in 'Whatever is Left of the Levantine Spirit?' by Elie Chalala in *Al Jadid: A Review & Record of Arab Culture and Art*, Vol. 19, No. 69, 2015. See also: <http://www.aljadid.com/content/whatever-left-levantine-spirit>