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Armenian Genocide Art as Evidence of its Existence

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between art and the Armenian Genocide, and how art can be used as evidence for the traumatic past of the Armenian people that was a result of these catastrophic events. Specifically, I will explore how certain visual art pieces contribute to the existence of the Armenian Genocide. The artwork created by survivors and descendants of the Armenian Genocide provide examples with what the Armenian people endured in order to survive the Ottoman Turks' attempt to annihilate them. The Armenian Genocide has yet to be recognized as a genocide by many countries and has been denied of its existence by the Turkish government. However, the preservation of art surrounding the topic of the Armenian Genocide rejects the attempt to remove the Armenian Genocide from history, and ultimately sheds light on this neglected moment in history.

Keywords: Armenian Genocide, The Ottoman Empire, art, genocide, culture, artwork

The artwork from survivors of the Armenian Genocide and their descendants can be used as evidence that the Armenian people suffered through great tragedies and atrocities that were a result of the Armenian Genocide. Artwork created by the victims of the genocide, as well as by Armenians today who share their families' genocide stories through their artwork, give proof to the emotional and physical sufferings to the Armenians during 1915-17 and even before.

Although Turkey continues to deny that the Armenian Genocide ever occurred, Turkey cannot deny the fact that during 1915, around two million Armenians were forced to leave their homeland. Over 1.5 million Armenians perished at the hands of the Turks. Additionally, because of the geopolitical relations involved, it would be very difficult to get any sort of recognition for the Armenian people (Suny, 2016). The criteria for what is considered to be a genocide¹ fits with what the Ottoman Turks did against the Armenian people, as indicated below:

¹ *In the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:*

- a. *Killing members of the group;*
- b. *Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;*
- c. *Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;*

The Turkish government intended ‘to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such’; its agents ‘kill(ed) members of the (Armenian) group’, ‘caus(ed) serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group’, and ‘deliberately inflict(ed) on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part. (I. 2014, 236)

Although Turkey might deny what happened, and despite other countries not speaking about this topic because of the geopolitical climate, there is no denying that through artwork, there is evidence that the Armenian people went through horrific tragedies which, ultimately, supports the existence of the Armenian Genocide.

The tension between the Armenians and the Turks has been around long before the Armenian Genocide occurred. The Armenians occupied the area in and surrounding the Ottoman Empire since prior to the first century C.E. According to Cohan, the Armenians get their name from “Hayastan,” “which comes from the name Haik, a descendent of Noah ... and “stan,” which means “land” in Persian (Cohan 2005, p.333). The Armenian people are very religious Christians, as they were the first nation to become Christian (Cohan, 2005). There were many Muslim groups living in the same area that the Armenian people occupied, causing the Armenians to face many hardships throughout the centuries. Some of the earliest massacres of the Armenian people date back to 1453, when the Seljuk Turks took control of Anatolia, once part of Armenia, and founded the Ottoman Empire (Cohan, 2005). The Christian Armenians were oftentimes oppressed by various Muslim groups because they made up the minority in the Ottoman Empire region. As a result, the Armenian people had more taxes and laws placed upon them that restricted them, as compared to the Turks. Additionally, because of the relationship between the Armenians and the Russians, the Ottoman Turks saw Armenians as a threat, which

d. *Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.*

was a catalyst for tensions between the two groups that eventually led to the Armenian Genocide (Cohan, 2005).

The beginning stages of the Armenian Genocide began with the massacres in 1894 through 1896. These killings were known as the Hamidian Massacres, during which 100,000 to 300,000 Armenians were killed. This mass murder occurred under the control of Abdul-Hamid II, who ordered these killings to punish the protests of the Armenians as a response to the discriminatory laws that they were being subjected to. In order to survive, Armenians either had to flee to continental Europe or the United States, or convert to Islam (Cohan, 2005). These massacres were brought to the attention of many countries that were not a part of the Ottoman Empire thanks to the hundreds of thousands of unarmed Armenians who were obliterated by the Ottoman Turks without hesitation. These past mass killings of Armenians at the hands of the Ottoman Turks ultimately led to the greatest massacre of all, the Genocide in 1915.

The annihilation of the Armenian people that began in 1915 didn't happen by accident, as some may say. Since the climate of wartime was so rare, the Turkish government needed to take advantage of the setting of World War I in order to take care of problems they were having in various areas under their rule (Matosyan, 2014). Evidence for these claims are stated below:

A collection of documents published in 1919 by Dr. Johannes Lepsius contains German Ambassador Hans von Wangerheim's report (Constantinople, June 17, 1915) to Chancellor Theobold von Bethmann-Hollweg on this subject 'Recently, Minister of Interior Talaat Bey has unequivocally stated to Dr. Mordtmann-who currently works at the Imperial Embassy-that the Turkish government wishes to take advantage of the war and completely settle the scores with its domestic enemies (local Christians), without having any disturbing diplomatic intervention on the part of foreign states'(Matosyan 2014, 293)

The Ottoman Empire entered World War I and fought against the Russians, however they were defeated by the Russians in 1914. Ottoman Turks used the Armenians as scapegoats, blaming them for their defeat in the war. The Turks saw the Armenians as a threat and wanted to get rid

of them. A small group of Ottoman politicians, known as the “Young Turks” created this idea of nationalist thinking to start (‘Turkification’ of the Ottoman Empire). The “Young Turks” who were involved in the attacks against the Armenians were Ottoman reformers or modernizers (Matosyan, 2014). They wanted to preserve their Turkish heritage, and get rid of anything, or anyone, that might stand in the way of this goal (Suny, 2016). In order for their power to remain within the Turkish society, they used a number of political techniques, including violence, as Suny states: “Violence was inscribed in the Young Turks efforts to survive in power and secure the empire” (Suny 2016, p.211). One of the great foreshadowing moments of the events that would occur later on was the disarming of the Armenian soldiers, who were one of the first groups of Armenians to be systematically killed by the Turks. Furthermore, on April 24th, 1915 the removal of Armenian intellectuals and political leaders from Istanbul began to commence and they were later murdered by Turkish authorities led to a disappearance of Armenian strength and knowledge, leaving many hopeless (Suny, 2016).

This led to the mass killing and migration of the Armenian people during the time period of 1915 to 1917 which left over 1.5 million Armenians left dead in the deserts in the Middle East. Many people witnessed the horrific tragedies carried out by the Turks, including the U.S. Ambassador Henry Morgenthau which he states in his memoirs:

At Angora all Armenian men from fifteen to seventy were arrested, bound together in groups of four, and sent on the road in the direction of Caesare. When they had traveled five or six hours and had reached a secluded valley, a mob of Turkish peasants fell upon them with clubs, hammers, axes, scythes, spades, and saws. Such instruments not only caused more agonizing deaths than guns and pistols, but, as the Turks themselves boasted, they were more economical, since they didn’t involve the waste of powder and shell. (Matosyan: 2014, 295)

In addition, Turkish people used suffocation methods in order to be economic and smart with their time. For example, there were multiple times where Turkish authorities would put

Armenians in an enclosed space and covered the door with straw and set the space on fire so that the Armenians would suffocate. It was even witnessed from Aram Andonian (Antonyan), who wrote that he saw 1,500 Armenian orphans given to a local official, Ahmad Bey. He put the orphans in a cave and covered the front with wet hay, then set the cave on fire. Thus, the orphans died from suffocation (Matosyan, 2014).

Along with the physical damage caused by the Ottoman Turks, there was, and still is, psychological damage caused by the Armenian Genocide. Whether the damage is from someone who physically went through the Genocide, or decedents of family members who went through it, the psychological damage will always follow the Armenian people (Kay 2015). Avi Kay points out the various psychological issues that have occurred as a result of the Armenian Genocide and how little research has gone into this field. However, from what little research that was conducted, he brings up some main points about what the Armenian people went through during the Genocide and what the Armenian people are still going through today because of these horrific events. One thing that contributes to this psychosocial damage is how the Genocide is still being denied by many countries, including Turkey and the United States. Ellie Wiesel stated: “[the] continued Turkish denial of the Armenian Genocide can be viewed as a double killing of the victims,” causing damage to not only the people affected by Genocide but the modern Armenian people (Kay 2015, p.114). The Turkish Government has, and still is, lobbying many countries to deny the occurrence of the Armenian Genocide.

As years pass, more and more evidence proving the occurrence of the Armenian Genocide is disappearing from the public’s eye. One of the countries that has been under the influence of Turkey is the United States. Although the United States has recognized the Armenian Genocide as such, there is still a sense of quietness that remains with this historic

moment. Orwell stated, “Political language is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind,” which then causes problems and catastrophes all over the world (Orwell, 1946, p.10). Ultimately, because of the political relationship between Turkey and many other powerful countries, the public are often unaware what the Armenian Genocide is and its brutal history. Since little physical evidence left proof of the Armenian Genocide, the catastrophe should be recognized by powerful countries so that this piece of human history doesn’t get buried in obscurity forever.

One of the most important things that can be used as evidence that the Armenian people suffered great loss and devastation from the Armenian Genocide is the artwork that came from the people who survived the tragedy, as well as contemporary artists who have heard stories that came from previous generations. Art is a vital way to understand the past and is one of the ways to understand what happened in the past without actually being there. There are many depictions in art that give viewers a way to see what happened in the lives of the artists. The color, style, technique and items or people within the scene being depicted are all resources for the viewer to use in order to understand the artist’s story. This art is a way for the viewer to understand what the artist endured throughout their life (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2012). This is especially relevant for artists who went through some form of trauma. In many cases, distraught artists cannot verbally talk about their experiences because it causes them too much distress. This idea becomes very critical after the Armenian Genocide when people could not share what they experience during that time. Many stories of what happened during the Armenian Genocide were lost from generation to generation because of the fear that various horrors might be brought up if these stories were to be shared. Thus, art is one of the only ways for people to learn about the experiences of various Armenians who went through the Genocide.

There were many orphans who survived the Armenian Genocide. These orphans moved to all different parts of the world, many of these orphans were not able to discuss with anyone what they experienced during this time period. These events were too brutal for them to choose to actively think about. Many of them personally witnessed what the Ottoman Turks did to their families, but they were too scared to share their stories (Murachanian, 2009, cited in Hovannisian, 2014). However, art was one way through which these Armenian survivors could document the trauma that they experienced. Art allowed for the survivors to communicate what they went through without speaking a word. They did not have to explain their art, but it still gave them a voice with which to share the horrible actions of the Ottoman Turks. The artwork created by the survivors of the Armenian Genocide is one of the most important forms of evidence supporting the fact that Armenian people suffered through great cataclysm in order to preserve their culture and beliefs against the Ottoman Turks. Since most of the survivors of the Armenian Genocide are no longer alive today, there are not many people left with firsthand experiences that they can share as evidence to support the Genocide occurrence (Murachanian, 2009, cited in Hovannisian, 2014). Nevertheless, the artwork created from these Genocide survivors helps to keep their stories alive and brings truth to what really happened during this time period.

One person that witnessed the massacres of the Genocide is named Léon Tutundjian. Tutundjian was only a boy when he witnessed the Armenian Genocide firsthand and escaped his homeland in order to survive. He later moved to Paris, where he studied art and became a famous artist. Like many other survivors of the Armenian Genocide, he never verbally talked about his experiences, but he was able to express what he experienced through art (Murachanian, 2009, cited in Hovannisian, 2014).

The idea of the Trauma Theory helps describe the art created by Tutundjian and how it relates to his experiences from the Genocide (Murachanian, 2009, cited in Hovannisian, 2014). Trauma Theory is a way to understand the past with a psychoanalytical approach (Murachanian, 2009, cited in Hovannisian, 2014). Alice Miller, a psychoanalyst for Trauma Theory has found connections between young children who are faced with horrific events and their artwork as adults. Miller says, “the works of writers, poets, and painters tell the encoded story of childhood traumas no longer consciously remembered in adulthood” (Murachanian, 2009, cited in Hovannisian, 2014, p.123).

Many of the pieces that Tutundjian made were self-portraits, which symbolized the trauma he encountered when he was a child, and he was forced to leave his mother and homeland behind. Additionally, his work contained very little information about the background of the Genocide, which could explain his disassociation with the world after the Genocide. It is believed that Tutundjian changed his style multiple times throughout his 1000 pieces, because he was looking for something that could express what he was feeling inside, his “internal misery” (Murachanian, 2009, cited in Hovannisian, 2014, p.123). These changes in his artwork may have allowed him to better cope with the tragedies that he experienced during the genocide.

The way Tutundjian’s self-portraits were designed correlates with the idea of the loss of identity that he went through during the Armenian Genocide. The loss of identity was something that many Armenians who survived the Armenian Genocide felt. For example, one of the most important things to the Armenian people is their Christianity: “In 301 AD, Armenia became the first nation to adopt Christianity as a state religion, establishing a church that still exists independently of both the Roman Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox churches. During its later political eclipses, Armenia depended on the church to preserve and protect its unique identity”

(People and Historical Highlights, 2005, p. 3). One of the many things that was taken from the Armenians during the Genocide was their land, which included the sacred churches that are very significant in the Armenian heritage (L., 2014). This left the survivors unconnected with their surroundings, especially for Tutundjian, as this becomes an important theme in his pieces and helps give the viewer a look into his life after the horrific events.

Surrealism was a useful art style that worked for Tutundjian, since he experienced such horrific events at such a young age. This is because the movement deals with the “dreams and the unconscious,” which could have allowed him to address the events he went through that his conscious mind wouldn’t let him speak about. Psychoanalyst Alice Miller states that “whenever creative adults have been traumatized as children, evidence of their ordeal will be apparent in their artwork,” which correlates with Trauma Theory (Murachanian, 2009, cited in Hovannisian, 2014 p.123). Miller also believes that painters often tell the story of their childhood trauma that they can’t consciously remember as an adult through their work. Freud’s repetition theory, which is when a repeated image is used that makes the person return back to scene of the trauma, is evident in Tutundjian’s self-portraits as a young boy which could be an association of him working through the trauma he experienced as a child (Hovannisian, 2014, cited in Murachanian, 2009). The artwork created by Tutundjian told the story of what he went through and how he has coped with his emotions. Some examples include how he only used parts of his body which could symbolize how nothing is whole for him after what he had experienced. Additionally, his backgrounds usually contained nothing as if it was an oblivion and it didn’t exist, which could relate to the detachment of his relationships. Finally, the way “he portrays himself reveals a psyche that is fractured and disconnected from himself and the world around him” (Murachanian, 2009, cited in Hovannisian, 2014, p.124). This is evident in his piece *Yellow*

Mask c. 1930 (see Appendix A), where he is seen secluded from the rest of the trees in the image, which could imply that he was alone and disconnected from the world around him. In most of his work all of these symbolisms are evident, even when he gets to his final stages of being an artist. One self-portrait, *Untitled* c.1965 (see Appendix B) in particular showed this same style, however this image formed a smile, which could symbolize that he will always have the pain of the Armenian Genocide with him but he worked through most of his pain thus creating a smile (Murachanian, 2009, cited in Hovannisian, 2014, p.138). Ultimately, Tutundjian created his art with a purpose, to spread awareness of what he went through as a child and the struggles he faced thanks to the Armenian Genocide.

Arshile Gorky was another artist who experienced the Armenian Genocide firsthand and became an artist later on in his life as a way to express what he went through. Gorky was forced to leave his home behind because of the Armenian Genocide. Gorky was displaced from his home in Armenia and relocated to America, “the verb ‘displace’ implies movement by external force, whether removal from a place or the act of replacing” (Theriault, 2009, p.14). This was because “the Armenians were driven off their ancestral lands, which were then reoccupied by Muslims from Turkey and the Islamic world” (Theriault, 2009, p.14). Gorky’s work, especially those made during the abstract period, created a “displacing effect for the viewer” (Theriault, 2009, p.14). Ultimately, the story he told in his work leaves a puzzling feeling on the viewers, which reflects the deeper emotion and themes he experienced as a result of the Genocide in his work.

One of the main contributing factors of the Armenian Genocide was the relationship between Turkey and Armenia, which was very tense as a result of the Turks often taking over the Armenian homeland. Furthermore, the religious difference between the two people led to the

Turks boost in nationalism and “economic unrest” (Therault, 2009, p.14). Additionally, before the 1915 genocide, “Armenian communities were victimized through exclusionary government policies, theft, murder, rape, and kidnapping by Turkish soldiers, citizens and bands of nomadic Kurds and included political oppression of Armenians by the Ottoman Empire from 1894 to 1896, when two hundred thousand Armenians were killed” (Therault, 2009, p.15). Gorky had firsthand experience with the Armenian Genocide. He fled along with his two older sisters, his mother, and his younger sister. They all ended up in the eastern most region of the Armenian kingdom, which at that time was under the control of the Soviet Union. Gorky’s father, Setrag, came to America before the rest of his family sent just enough money for Gorky’s two older sisters to come to America. Gorky’s mother ended up dying in 1919 from starvation, thanks to the Turkish blockade of Armenian food supply from the west (Therault, 2009). In March 1920, Gorky and his younger sister finally arrived in America on the *SS President Wilson*. Once he reunited with his family, he ended up becoming estranged from them. Therault believed, “Gorky may have been angry that his father had, from his son’s point of view, allowed his family members to suffer and in particular his mother to die” (Therault, 2009, p.16). Trauma theory as described by Dominick LaCapra can help give an explanation for Gorky’s hardships with his family. Often Gorky would demonstrate how important his Armenian heritage was to him through his paintings. Ultimately, the trauma that Gorky experienced as a result of the Armenian Genocide shaped his life in such a way that his artwork is a representation of his experiences.

One of the most famous pieces created by Gorky is a painting entitled *The Artist and his Mother* c.1936 (see Appendix C), a replica of a portrait of him and his mother taken in his homeland of Armenia. To the viewer, the piece appears as if it is fading, just like his mother was

fading from his memory at the time the painting was created (Gotthardt, 2018). In an interview done with Gorky, in 1945, The Museum of Modern Art asked:

“What in your ancestry, nationality, or background do you consider relevant to an understanding of your art?” Gorky’s answer credited only his childhood, and the memories of Armenia that continued to fill his mind: “I was taken away from my little village when I was five years old yet all my vital memories are of these first years,” he wrote. “These were the days when I smelled the bread, I saw my first red poppy, the moon, the innocent seeing. Since then these memories have become iconography, the shapes, even the colors; millstone, red earth, yellow wheatfield, apricots etc. (Gotthardt 2018)

This piece carries the various emotions that Gorky experienced as a child and how he faced the hardships of the Genocide. Within the piece there are a number of connections that relate to the experiences that Gorky went through during Armenian Genocide. The loss of his mother and the vanishing memory of her connect to the figures in the painting. The two figures in the painting seem disconnected from each other, as the child appears more further back than the mother. Additionally, the unfinished hands within each of the figures suggest that neither of them can connect with each other after his mother died of starvation during the genocide leaving Gorky alone to survive (Arshile Gorky the Artist and His Mother.). The experiences that Gorky had to overcome and the work he created from these catastrophes is proof of the Armenian Genocide. The evidence is justified in his work and the need to exhibit why he created what he did. His pieces tell the story of the damage caused by the Ottoman Turks, the disruptive and cruel actions that are embedded in the Armenian people forever.

Additionally, Gorky expressed himself through Surrealism. This art movement allowed him to express what was on his mind at a subconscious level. In his piece *Agony* c.1947 (see Appendix D), the traumatic memories he experienced as a child in his homeland of Armenia are apparent. The colors, textures and forms used in this painting depicts a sorrowful scene that

Gorky himself is contained in (Museum of Modern Art). The emotion behind this piece reveals the truth that had been concealed by the Turkish government. The truth behind the starvation, rape and countless murders were all buried away in the desert, just like the innocent bodies of the Armenian people who perished during the Armenian Genocide. The experiences of the survivors of this horrific Genocide have forever been embedded in their brains, which is the proof of the destruction of the Armenian people ordered by the Turkish government.

There were many Armenians who left their homeland in order to survive the Armenian Genocide. The Armenian Diaspora was thus developed, and new traditions were formed outside of the traditional ways of Armenian life. Many Armenians who survived the Genocide came to the United States to seek a new life outside their detrimental past (Abbamontian, 2007, cited in Hovannisian, 2014). Today, many Armenian Americans still find it necessary to bring about the experiences their people and families went through in order to try to keep their culture alive.

One outlet for contemporary Armenians whose families went through the Armenian Genocide is creating artwork. Ramil Grigorian Abbamontian states: “for Armenian Americans, the Genocide adds up to more than a historical tragedy; it remains the shaping event of their lives, and the reason they came to fashion a new life on a new continent. To ask that they forget is to ask them to forget who they are” (Abbamontian, 2007, cited in Hovannisian, 2014, p.177). The Armenians who survived the Genocide had to leave their homes and come to new countries, one of which was the United States of America. Armenian Americans came together to form a strong bond based on what they went through prior to leaving their native land. In modern time, artists are still communicating what happened to the Armenian people through their work, but there are questions that are brought about from this. For Armenian descendants who create art based on the Armenian Genocide but was not physically alive or present during Armenian

Genocide: “is it even possible to represent such a catastrophe and, more significantly, can it be represented by artists who have not experienced it firsthand?” (Abbamontian, 2007, cited in Hovannisian, 2014, p.177). How does one represent something that is so traumatic through art? And how does the Genocide effect these contemporary artists and their artwork? Although these artists didn’t experience the genocide firsthand, they are witnesses of the aftermath of the genocide and how it has effected their families and those that they know who did live through it. Furthermore, Abbamontian states that “their works articulates the testimony of the Genocide and necessarily transform viewers into witnesses as well, confirming the reality of this event and preventing it from vanishing into oblivion” (Abbamontian, 2007, cited in Hovannisian, 2014, 2014, p.178). In other words, the work created by the Armenian people helps to tell the stories of their families and what truly happened in 1915. These artworks depict what the Ottoman Turks did, and the reality of the mass murder that the Armenian people went through.

One of the many symbols in contemporary artists’ works is the need for political and social justice for the Armenian people. The Turkish denial of the Armenian Genocide and their lobbying for other countries to do the same has activated within these artists a creative mindset (Abbamontian, 2007, cited in Hovannisian, 2014). Descendants of survivors of the Armenian Genocide find it necessary to bring about the justice deserved by their families. The tragedies that the Armenians faced in the early 20th century goes unrecognized by the public. In order to heal from these horrific events, the Armenian people must first get the recognition of others for what they went through (Abbamontian, 2007, cited in Hovannisian, 2014). For this to happen, Armenian artists have created bold statements within their work for this message to be understood.

Zareh is one artist that has fueled his work with the anger felt over the fact that the Armenian Genocide has been denied by so many people for so long, and denying the Genocide and its survivors with the necessary recognition. His family experienced the Genocide firsthand. Many of his family members perished in the Genocide, including his paternal grandfather Ohanness, who was shot in the head by Turkish soldiers before his body was dumped into a hole with other helpless bodies (Abbamontian, 2007, cited in Hovannisian, 2014, 2007). One of his installations, *Turkish Soup Made with Armenian Bones* c.1998 (See Appendix E), referenced the disgrace acts committed by the Ottoman Turks. Depicted in this piece of work was a “middle-aged man, clad in traditional Turkish costume and fez, [who] operates a push-cart bearing the title words with ‘bones’ mixed in ‘blood’ visible through the transparent container atop the square base marked with the inscription, ‘Approved by U.N.’” (Abbamontian, 2007, cited in Hovannisian, 2014, p.179). This installation was put in many different locations around the busy streets of California, in order to shock the most viewers as possible. This piece of work not only described what happened to the Armenian people in 1915, but also what is currently happening to them in modern times. The Ottoman Turks got away with murder, and the United Nations has done nothing, and is doing nothing, about it (Abbamontian, 2007, cited in Hovannisian, 2014). This piece depicts the agony and horrors the Armenian people faced during Genocide, as the Armenian people were being carelessly killed and thrown into piles.

Zareh’s ideas for this installation was to bring the public’s attention to the inhumanity of the Armenian Genocide. Zareh’s intention for the audience of this installation was that when people see the installations “they may feel saddened. One of my goals in doing this is I wanted them to think about what has happened, what some humans have done to other people” (Abbamontian, 2007, cited in Hovannisian, 2014, p.181). However, many people who viewed

the installation wondered about the ethnicity of the artist, why he created it, and if it in actuality mocked what had happened. Another way of seeing the installation, stating “could Zareh’s anger at the perpetrators’ denial have triggered an unconscious attempt to understand what fuels this type of inhumanity?” (Abbamontian, 2007, cited in Hovannisian, 2014, p.181). Ultimately, there were many who criticized and praised this work. Some stated that this piece kept the memory of the Armenian Genocide alive and showed how those who lived through it survived. Others thought that it was a disgusting and confused piece; even some Armenians thought the installation was a disgrace because the Armenians didn’t become the Turks soup (the Armenians weren’t obliterated by the Turks, as planned) but they were able to survive.

In addition, Zareh created the performance *The Red Trees of the Armenian Genocide*. With this piece he was able to answer the question “are there any other witnesses to a genocide that is denied?” (Abbamontian, 2007, cited in Hovannisian, 2014, p.182). This piece was performed to share the stories of the Armenian people and what they went through during the Genocide. The performance was in a specific formation that related to the fact that the Turks believe that the deaths of the thousands of Armenians who were killed during the Genocide was “inevitable and (an) unplanned aspect of war” (Hovannisian, 2014, p.182). There was a part of the performance in which everyone came together in a tight circle, which Abbamontian suggests represents Zareh trying to unite with other Americans and protest for what they believe in. Within this performance, the performers are carrying blood-stained branches, which Zareh used to demonstrate the trees as natural symbols of peace but that are now covered in blood to represent the death of the victims. Abbamontian states that “the ill trees become the ‘living’ proof, the natural witnesses, confirming the reality of the Genocide” (Abbamontian, 2007, cited in Hovannisian, 2014, p.184). Additionally, the branches could symbolize the land taken from

the Armenian people and who were left with no home and with a fragmented identity.

Ultimately, Zareh portrayed works of art that truthfully depicted what happened to the Armenian people in a nouveau and abstract way. Despite his pieces creating controversy, they opened up the eyes of the public to what happened to the Armenian people in 1915 and why it is still being debated of its existence today.

Another contemporary artist whose family was involved in the Armenian Genocide was Alina Mnatsakanian. She created a performance piece entitled *Box/Cross/Dismemberment/Genocide* c.1997 (see Appendix F), which opened the eyes to public about the political problems of the Genocide. This performance starts out with a box unfolding into a cross, including images of Christianity and the importance of the Crucifixion to the Armenian people, which was one of the main causes of the Armenian Genocide. Within each of the sides of this cross, there are old photographs, letters, and cast body fragments that relates to the Armenian Genocide (Abbamontian, 2007, cited in Hovannisian, 2014). The performance starts out in silence before Mnatsakanian, wearing all black with a red shawl around her neck, emerges and unfolds the box to reveal the cross hidden inside. Within the box, there are candles and seeds. She lights the candles throughout the room and plants the seeds around the opened box. After a moment of silence, Mnatsakanian exits the room, leaving the audience in complete silence (Abbamontian, 2007, cited in Hovannisian, 2014).

This performance was intended to shed light on the political situation of the Armenian Genocide rather than to honor the genocide. Mnatsakanian's uncle, who survived the genocide but witnessed his family's murder, gave her an understanding for what he went through and put those emotions in her artwork. Mnatsakanian states that "I have something in me, a memory, a scar." (Abbamontian, 2007, cited in Hovannisian, 2014, p.185). This drive in her allowed her to

create performance pieces that starts the conversation of what the Armenian people went through and how the Ottoman Turks got away with murder with no reparations (Abbamontian, 2007, cited in Hovannisian, 2014). Ultimately, the performance recognizes the facts of the events that happened during the time of 1915 through art, which contributes to the evidence of the Armenian Genocide.

Mélik Ohanian a French born artist of Armenian heritage, he is well established within the fine art community. One of his most recent works, created controversy before it was even made. Ohanian was going to create an urban installation within the city of Geneva titled *The Streetlight of Memory*, that would be supported by the Geneva-Armenian community and was to be completed for the 100th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide (Aktar, 2018). Within the design of the lamps there were to be teardrops replacing the ordinary lamp designs, and there were to be Armenian poets' names engraved on the lamp post itself (Melkonian, 2017). However, the Turkish Lobbyist were against this, since the installation was connected to Armenian community and the Armenian Genocide (Melkonian, 2017). Aktar states:

The first location chosen in the historic centre of Geneva was rejected after numerous objections. The city council hesitated when the Swiss federal government intervened and raised reservations about the next site, in Ariana Park next to the UN. The intervention of the then Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu and his implicit, customary threats played a role in the federal government's intervention. The legal hustle and bustle got longer and longer and the monument could not be completed by 2015 (Aktar, 2018).

Because of these resistance by the Turkish government, Ohanian redesigned the installation (see Appendix G) and took it to Venice, Italy, where he took the original streetlamps designs but had them crumbled within one another creating this dismantled chaotic mess (Melkonian, 2017). Although, Ohanian was later able to produce the original design in Geneva, the backlash from the Turkish government provides evidence that they are unwilling to accept the existence of the

Genocide and are threatened by the Armenian community bringing awareness to these unforgettable tragedies.

Overall, the artwork created by Armenian Genocide survivors and their descendants provide evidence for the horrors and devastations the Armenian people went through. Over 1.5 million Armenians perished at the hands of the Ottoman Turks and there can't be reparations until there is recognition, both of which is rightfully deserved by the Armenian people. The damage caused by the Ottoman Turks is still present today, and as Turkey continues to deny any events relating to the Armenian Genocide there will be increased damage and anger for the Armenian people to face and endure. This anger, sadness and despair is present in the art created by the survivors and their descendants. The memory of what happened to the Armenian people is still embedded within them, and which will never be forgotten (Murachanian, 2009, cited in Hovannisian, 2014). Adolf Hitler once said "Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?", but in fact the plans of the Turks did not succeed. Armenians survived the horrible catastrophes and were able to overcome the adversity.

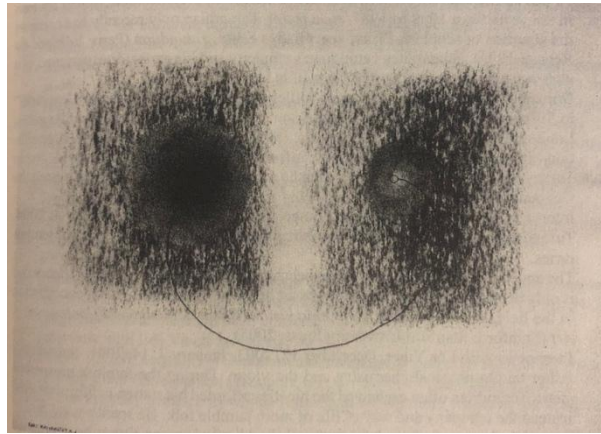
Art is one of the only ways for Armenians to communicate what happened to their fellow Armenians in 1915. Within the artwork that has been created, there is evidence of the suffering, trauma and grief which was a direct result of the Armenian Genocide. The Armenian people deserve recognition and acknowledgement for what they went through and what they are still going through, and this art brings them in the right direction. Art spreads awareness of the inhumane actions performed by the Turks, and these facts will one day be recognized for what they truly were. Until these facts are recognized, descendants of survivors of the Armenian Genocide will continue to spread awareness of what their families and their people have lived through and experienced through the various art pieces and performances that they create.

Appendix

A:



B:



A: *A Yellow Mask* c. 1930 by Léon Tutundjian.

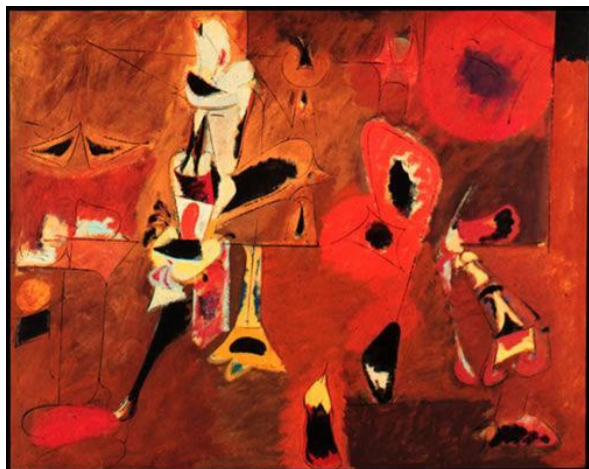
Image source: <https://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/Yellow-mask/5FB670AE148A705F>

B: *Untitled (Self-Portrait)* c.1965 by Léon Tutundjian. Source: Léon Tutundjian-TRAuma in ART by Jean Murachanian in *The Armenian Genocide* Edited Volume by Richard Hovannisian p. 139

C:



D:



C: *The Artist and His Mother* c. 1936 by Arshile Gorky.

Image source: <http://collection.whitney.org/object/2171>

D: *Agony* c.1947 by Arshile Gorky

Image source: <http://www.theartstory.org/artist-gorky-arshile-artworks.htm>

E:



F:



E: *Turkish Soup Made with Armenian Bones* c. 1998 by Zareh.

Image source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%22Turkish_Soup_Made_With_Armenian_Bones

F: *Box/Cross/Dismemberment/Genocide* c. 1997 by Alina Mnatsakanian

Image source: <http://www.alinamn.com/index.php/what/genocide>



G: *The Streetlight of Memory* c. 2015 by Mélik Ohanian

Image source: https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/opinion_turkish-obstruction-keeps-armenian-genocide-memorial-in-public-eye-/43124786

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