Looking to the East

Chant Avedissian rediscovers and redefines Egyptian visual art

By HRATCH TCHILINGIRIAN

If you've traveled through London's Heathrow Airport or flown on British Airways in the last few years, chances are you've seen Chant Avedissian's paintings—representing Egypt. It is one of a series of colorful art deco British Airways plane tails representing different nations around the world.

Cairo-born Avedissian, 48, is well-known for his monoprints, made from cut stencils, each a different reworking of traditional textile designs with meticulously-detailed miniature patterns, large collages and other multi-medium creations. These have been exhibited in a dozen countries around the world, including South Korea, England, Lebanon, Canada, Bahrain, the US and Cyprus. Today, Avedissian is one of the few artists in Egypt, or in the Middle East, who redefine "Egyptian," "Arabic," or "Eastern"

art. Rose Issa, who was curator of Avedissian's 1995 exhibit at the Leighton House Museum in London, compares Avedissian's trajectory and contribution to those "19th century writers, who revolutionized declining Arabic literature by not only translating international novels but also introducing a new prose and style and encouraging indigenous concepts and dialects."

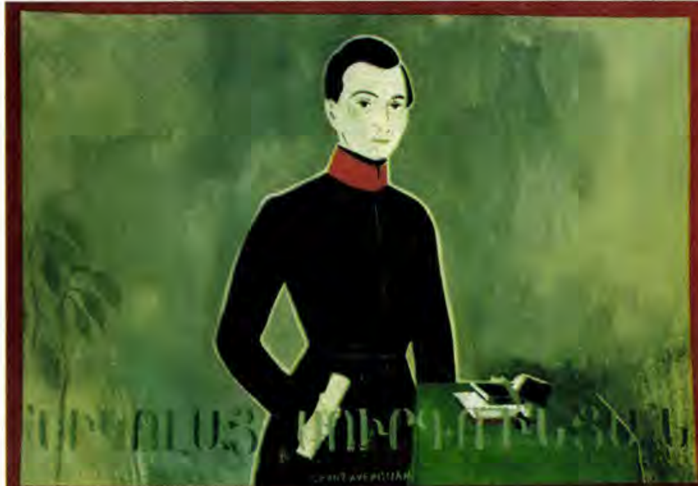
Avedissian's "rediscovery" of indigenous artistic creation goes back to his long association with Egyptian architect Hassan Fathi, who is considered the Arab world's best known architect and one of the first masters to encourage the use of local material and craftsmanship in buildings.

Having studied painting in Montreal—where he lived for three years in his early 20s—and applied arts in Paris, in 1980 Avedissian returned to Egypt. For a decade, Avedissian compiled Fathi's archives, filing, cataloging, and imposing order on mountains of academic papers and architectural plans. Avedissian traveled throughout Egypt photographing Fathi's extensive buildings for a book. His fascination with Fathi's focus on ancient Egyptian art led to his search "for the essence of an Egyptian way of doing and seeing."

The Gulf war, in January 1991, was a turning point for Avedissian.

"I went to Luxor, in Upper Egypt, for a long stay, at a time when we all knew the Gulf War was imminent in the very heart of the Middle East," explains Avedissian. "Luxor looked like the setting of the movie *The Shining*. Five star hotels, red carpets, glittering decorations, elegant hotel personnel, luxurious boats on the Nile and spectacular Pharaonic monuments," he continues. "But this highly touristic town was totally empty, except for its sparse inhabitants. Everything looked strange; the usual reality was shifted to a totally different value system. The real owners of the temples and tombs had them back to themselves. Egyptian schoolboys and girls became the sole visitors of the temples. Extremely vibrant with musical instruments and songs, their wonderful homage to the ancient ruins was quite in contrast with the generally silent tourists burdened with heavy guide books, listening to obscure Egyptologists try to clarify the complicated god system."

Avedissian stayed in Luxor for three months, "in a small room, in a small hotel, in front of the Karnak temple," he explains. "This super 'mediatized' Gulf war took place for three days within, what was for me, the strangest media blackout. My visit to the temples in this atmosphere made the sense of time vanish despite the mega-media war."



Opposite page: Chant Avedissian's British Airways painting commissioned in 1997; his signature appears in Armenian on the lower part of the plane. *Top Left:* Avedissian at the Great Wall of China. *Left inset:* British Airways credit card with Avedissian's art as background. *Above:* Nicolai Surgunian; *Below:* Egyptian diva Um Kalthum. *Next page:* Mother Theresa. All portraits are gouache on recycled paper.

It was in Luxor that a lady asked Avedissian to do a painting of her idol, singer Um Kalsum, the Arab world's most famous artist. "Not having painted for some 10 years," says Avedissian, "I decided to make a stenciled painting of the diva."

This became the creative catalyst for a series of "dialectic" works for Avedissian. His stencils present bits of visual life in Cairo. They are, as he describes, "reflections of the orientalist vision of the Egyptian looking to his own culture. I wanted to disturb the traditional concept of 'painting' and incorporate the Egyptian artistic heritage so closely linked to writing and the art of calligraphy." He has used Latin and Armenian scripts as well in his paintings.

"There is no room for paintings in an Arab house and so I started to produce textile hangings. There is, really, no room for chairs in an Arab house," says Avedissian, whose room resembles a box, a wooden platform with matting and sliding paper screens. A ladder leads to his workshop up on the second level where everything is neatly stored in various-size boxes.

His visit to China, where he spent considerable time and started to learn the language, provided him with a different perspective. "Why visit London, New York or Paris when the West is here, in Cairo. Cairo can be more West than the West," he says a-matter-of-factly. "But in China," he continues, "they do not care what lies in the West. Mention Egypt and they might have heard about the Pyramids but nothing else. This gives space." Avedissian makes his case, with this: "In Egypt I am Armenian, in Europe I am Egyptian, but in China these definitions mean nothing."

Avedissian constantly challenges the taken-for-granted assumptions of his interlocutors. "I do not do art," he declares with the voice of a victor. "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."

His constant intellectual and artistic fight against "Western, colonial, imperialistic" influence on "Eastern" art makes him controversial, and perhaps a true "post modern" artist. "We must go to the East," Avedissian says with conviction.

He elaborates his views when discussing artistic values in Armenia—where he visited for three months—and the Diaspora.

"Armenians' notion of artistic value is based on European criteria," he says, "even though they hardly know what Europe or European is. Armenians have always used European criteria to evaluate their own culture. We do not need this," he says with determination.

"In Armenian cultural discourse, we are constantly comparing our art with tasteless European art, starting with our opera to the art galleries to the philharmonic orchestra. We are always trying to have European standards. Why shouldn't we compare our art with other cultures, say Chinese, Mongolian or Kazakhi?"

His anger goes further: "The racist, fascist power of what you find in Paris, London, New York and Tokyo are in Armenians' heads. An Armenian can be as good by playing Chinese music as playing Chopin or Beethoven. Very few Armenians know the names of Chinese artists. This is cultural colonialism, I would say even auto-colonialism by Armenians."

As in the Middle East, in Armenian cultural discourse more weight and legitimacy is given to 'high' culture than 'low' or indigenous culture, which are often considered 'uncivilized.' "We are fighting on many aspects," says Avedissian. On one hand, the "internal and external perceptions of ourselves and the other," and, at the same time, "European versus non-European aspects of creativity."

He advocates a global rather than particularistic, Western-centered view of art. "If people in Armenia are studying English or French in school, they must also learn Chinese or Japanese, so that the influence of British or French culture is slowed down and a wider perspective is instilled in people," says Avedissian.

He provides an example. "Take Aznavour. He is a fantastic artist and for 70 years he has gone from one peak to another in France. The respect people in Armenia accord to him is a respect accorded to a Europeanized Diaspora Armenian. The Middle Eastern Diaspora Armenian artists are not as much appreciated as the Europeans."

More concretely, Avedissian discusses the reaction of Armenians to his art. "The work I do could be considered Ottoman or Islamic, and this creates a reaction among the Armenians. A young Armenian looked at one of my paintings and the first thing he said pointing to a motif was 'This is an Ottoman symbol'," Avedissian says, visibly angry.

"We have to realize that we live in countries around the world that are not European and we are attracted to countries or cultures where Armenians have been completely absorbed or intoxicated by the local culture.

"An Armenian might come to my exhibit because I'm Armenian, not because he likes my style. That's very pleasant and nice. But he is coming wearing European spectacles; starting from his pants to his tie, he is 'European'."

While generally Armenians' collective orientation, both in Armenia and the Diaspora, tend to lean toward the West, going back to at least the 19th century, there are exceptions.

"You do not see that 'European hysteria' in the writings of Yeghishe Charents," points out Avedissian with relief. "To me, he is one of the greatest writers in the world. And it starts with the language. Language is one of the greatest powers that Armenians have, because when you write in Armenian, it cannot be French or British or something else. Thank God we have our language, otherwise we would have become something else by now."

On the other hand, "Visual art in Armenia is Western," he says sadly. "You go to any museum in Armenia, it's the same thing. Armenian 'classical' artists—for example Hagop Hovnatanian (1806-1881)—are always compared with European artists and evaluated based on accepted European 'norms.'"

Inevitably, questions of identity are central to Avedissian. "My answer to the question of identity is difficult," admits Avedissian. "Unfortunately, I define myself only and exclusively by my passport. This sounds funny, but the ultimate place where you know who you are is the police station, where you have to declare and prove who you are. It has happened to me in Yerevan, in Cairo and elsewhere. You can say you're Armenian only if you are holding an Armenian passport and live in Armenia. If you have two passports, then you are two persons. I carry an Egyptian passport and therefore I'm an Egyptian, period."

Avedissian has a pragmatic approach to the question of identity. Instead of defining it in terms of culture, he defines it in terms of citizenship. "If you travel with an American passport you are treated differently than if you are carrying a Lebanese or Egyptian passport. The 'civilized world' deals with you differently depending on your passport or citizenship. When France refuses to give me a visa because I'm Egyptian, how can I love or respect French culture or art? How can I appreciate the cultures of countries when they don't even recognize me as a person? I could care less about Shakespeare's entire literary corpus if I can not go to England, say, tomorrow. But, if you are an American, you do not need a visa. This is colonialism."

Nevertheless, he realizes that it is not as simple as all that. He explains: "Of course, holding a passport of a country does not mean you are fully embracing or are fully aware of the culture of that people. If you hold an Armenian passport, it doesn't mean you are fully aware or appreciative of Armenian culture. You pick and choose what you want. It is not a matter of pre-packaged culture that you just carry with you."

For Avedissian, culture is also connected to authority. "The ultimate reality is that authority imposes culture," he says. "We could sit in a room and talk about Shakespeare or the Monastery of Geghard in Armenia. But, in the final analysis, in order for you to visit Geghard and then go to Paris and Cairo and later to New York, you need a certain passport and certain amount of money or resources." He admits, "We do not live in an equal world."

Then he asks, "What kind of cultural appreciation takes place in an unequal world?" ■