The Historical Present

Two Scholars Provide New Perspectives on the Past

Hourig Sourouzian examining a statue at the Cairo Museum.

By HRATCH TCHILINGIRIAN

Putting together the dismembered body parts of gods – discarded in museum warehouses around the world – is not an easy job. But for archeologist and Egyptologist Hourig Sourouzian, 51, it is a professional passion. Painstakingly searching, identifying and matching pieces of heads, torsos and legs of ancient statues has made Sourouzian one of the most sought-after experts of Egyptian art.

One of her recently restored five-meter tall statues (consisting of 236 pieces) was exhibited at the Cairo Museum. The pieces had come from five different places. Another Sourouzian find was the body of a statue whose head, alone, had been on display at the museum for years. In another case, a headless statue in Egypt was made complete with the cast reproduction of the head found by Sourouzian at the Louvre in Paris.

Sourouzian's groundbreaking research has led her to document over 500 ancient Egyptian royal statues from the 19th Dynasty (1320-1200 BC), including those of Ramses the Great who, by himself, was responsible for 300 statues.

A typical Diasporan, she was born in Baghdad, raised in Lebanon and is a German citizen currently living and working in Egypt.

Born into a family of art lovers where the children received books instead of toys, Sourouzian received her primary education at Beirut's Nishan Palanjian School with "two dreams" in her heart. "First, I wanted to become a journalist and second, I wanted to go to Armenia," she remembers.

In the mid-1960s with a growing wave of emigration from Lebanon to the West, the Sourouzian family found themselves in "a terrible place, Montreal," she says. "In Canada, we spent three extremely difficult winters; especially coming from Lebanon, that was not easy."

The curious Sourouzian moved to Paris and studied history of art at Ecole du Louvre, focusing on Egyptian art and archeology, and learning to read hieroglyphics. She received

her doctorate from Louvre in 1982 with high distinction.

After writing a thesis on an Egyptian monument, which was later published in Paris, she worked at the Louvre Museum's Egyptian section for one year. But her first real experience with Egyptian art and archeology was gained in Karnak, Upper Egypt, where she was sent to work at a French-Egyptian archeological center. "I liked it very much and decided that this is what I want to do for the rest of my life," says Sourouzian with a big smile. "But my dream to dig in Armenia, especially Urartian monuments, the pictures of which I had seen as a child, remained in my mind."

In Egypt, she moved from one archeological project to another, but always kept her links with France. In 1995, she completed a second doctorate at the University of Sorbonne-Paris IV, receiving the Doctorat d'etat" and producing a six-volume dissertation on the 19th Dynasty of Egypt.

Today, she is a visiting professor at the American University of Cairo and the University of Munich in Germany. Meanwhile, she continues her archeological digs and publishes her research. In addition, for three years until 1997, Sourouzian was Cultural Affairs Counselor for the Armenian Embassy in Cairo, working on cultural and artistic exchanges between Egypt and Armenia. She is also involved with several projects with Egypt's Minister of Culture. Most recently she was in charge of an exhibit of Egyptian art in Florence.

As for her interest in Armenian art, she remembers with surprise – and a touch of anger – that while studying at the Ecole du Louvre, Armenian art was hardly mentioned. "Imagine, in four years of study" she says, "I only heard once about Armenian art. This made me very sad. Armenians were mentioned in passing when discussing Gothic architecture and how they had found a solution to carry the dome of a building. That was the only time Armenian art was mentioned."

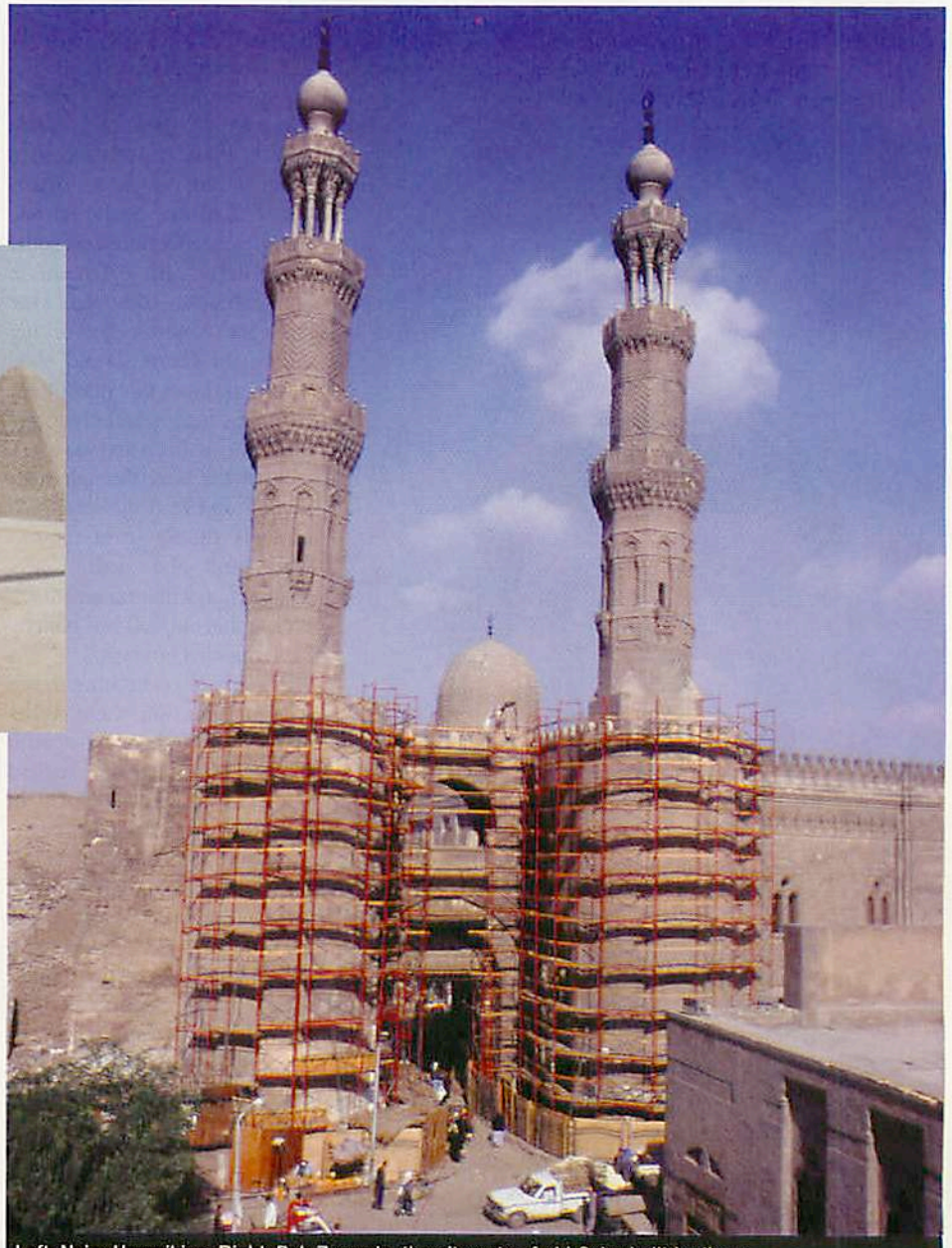
But, throughout her professional career, Sourouzian never forgot her dream about Armenia.

Her first visit to Armenia was right after the 1988 earthquake. Sourouzian and her colleague, architect and art historian Nairy Hampikian traveled to Armenia several times between 1989 and 1993 and surveyed the damaged architectural and historical monuments in the earthquake zone. They sent their reports to international institutions, including UNESCO, the World Monument Fund and the German Association of Monuments with the hope of drawing attention to the enormous damage and to seek funds for restoration work.

"When I met Nairy," explains Sourouzian, "We discovered that we have similar interests despite our different professional expertise."

Hampikian, Cairo-born, in her 30s, has a unique combination of expertise: she is an architect, a restorer and an art historian.

She first studied restoration of architectural monuments and history of architecture at the American University of Cairo (AUC) and then at the ICCROM in Rome, where the science of restoration is quite advanced. In



Left: Nairy Hampikian. Right: Bab Zuwayla, the city gate of old Cairo built by three Armenian brothers in the 12th century during the reign of Badredeen al-Gamali al-Armeni.

1982-1984 she studied in Armenia at the Polytechnic Institute's Department of Restoration, wrote a thesis on Armenian buildings in Egypt and came back to Egypt to work on restoration of historical buildings.

At AUC, Hampikian received a Master's Degree in Islamic Art and Architecture. "I wanted to research Armenian and Islamic architecture simultaneously, because I believe there is an important connection between the two. Generally, experts have studied either one or the other, but not the two together," she explains. Indeed, she had an advantage over other scholars as she was trained in both Armenian and Islamic art and could read original sources in both languages. "If you do not consult or look into primary Arabic sources, you will see only half of the truth," she says.

Hampikian, who received her doctorate from the University of California Los Angeles, Department of Archeology, in 1997, has directed several important restoration projects, under the supervision of the German Institute of Archeology – among them the Minaret of al-Salihiyya Madrasa and the Mausoleum of al-Salih, a circa 1250 monument dedicated to the last Ayyubite Sultan of Egypt. Currently, she is the director of a major conservation project at the Bab Zuwayla, sponsored by a four-year grant from the American Research Center in Egypt and the Egyptian Antiquities Project.

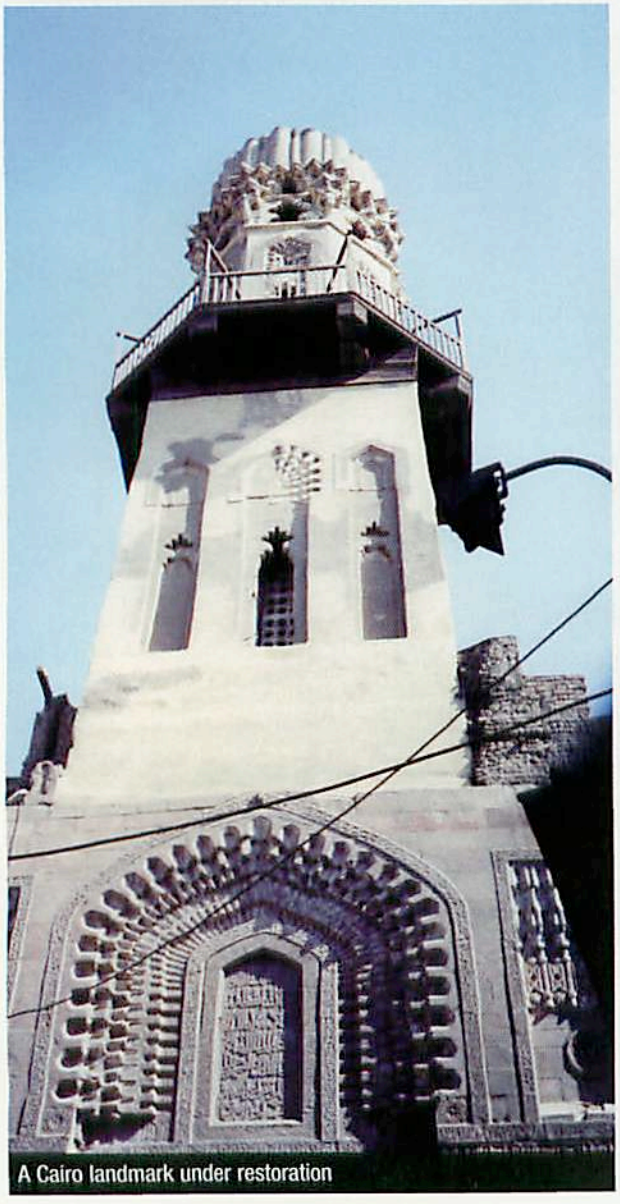
Bab Zuwayla was the city gate of Al-Kahira, the old city of Cairo, during the Fatimid Dynasty (12th-13th centuries). "This gate in what is now known as the old city was built by Armenian brothers," explains Hampikian.

She is currently conducting further research to determine what exactly these "three Armenian brothers did." Some historians claim they are Syrian, some say they are Coptic, and some say they are Armenian. Hampikian says that one of the walls she is currently working on in old Cairo should shed further light on this question.

"This wall is literally in my hands, I can touch and see every inch of the wall through scaffolding and read the signs and symbols of the stone masons who built the wall," says Hampikian, with excitement. "It is clear that the wall was built by the Armenian brothers."

She is also checking to see what connection these walls and these brothers have with the architecture of the ancient Armenian capital city of Ani, in what is today Eastern Turkey.

From Ani to Cairo? Hampikian explains that one of the most prominent figures in the Fatimid period was an Armenian vezir (prime minister) called Badredeen al-Gamali al-Armeni, who was brought to Egypt from Syria. Hampikian says that the first nucleus of the Armenian community in Egypt was formed in the 11th century, when the city of Ani fell. Many Armenians came to Egypt via Syria, helped by Badredeen's high position in the royal court. The number of Armenians in Cairo grew so rapidly that the Patriarch of Jerusalem himself came to Egypt and installed one of his relatives as the first Archbishop of the Armenian community in Egypt.



A Cairo landmark under restoration

Hampikian is quick to add, "I'm saying that these monuments and walls were built by Armenians, not out of pride, but because I discovered a truth. Armenians, as refugees, have been builders everywhere they've established themselves. To be refugees, spread all over the world, is not a matter of pride. It means that your home country was unstable. There are two schools of thought on this. Some say, proudly, that Armenians built great monuments and are great builders all over the world. I do not share this view. It is not a matter of pride that Armenians built the first church in Singapore; it is simply a matter of truth, a historical reality. Yes, Armenians built great monuments in Egypt, but we have to also remember or acknowledge that at the same time, there was the destruction of Ani."

Hampikian's connections with Armenia have been more frequent as she studied there and used to visit every year since her graduation. "I had a very nice connection with Armenia," she explains. "One of my dreams is to have a restoration project in Armenia, which right now is almost being realized."

Her association with Sourouzian came immediately after the earthquake in Armenia. While after the 1988 earthquake people in Armenia expected primarily humanitarian aid and health care, the two scholars wanted to do offer something in line with their expertise.

"We thought there aren't many people who can help Armenia with its damaged monuments," says Hampikian.

"We thought, we are not millionaires, but we can contribute our scientific knowledge and network of connections for the reconstruction effort," continues Sourouzian. "We both love monuments and we thought that there would be a lot of medical and humanitarian assistance, but monuments would not even make the list of needs. When you have a natural disaster, art and culture are almost forgotten. We got organized very quickly, through our own means, and went to Armenia. During three consecutive visits, we surveyed all the monuments in the earthquake zone, village by village, city by city."

Together, they surveyed and catalogued some 1000 historical buildings and monuments. This was a first – in kind and scope. It was the first time in any country that destruction and damage of cultural monuments in an earthquake zone were surveyed and recorded in detail by experts.

As a result of the reports they prepared, groups of experts from Germany, Italy and the US went to Armenia and conducted their own research. However, "the Karabakh war interrupted the project," Sourouzian explains with disappointment. "These researchers were afraid of the war and left Armenia. Then came the collapse of the Soviet Union and the economic hardships which followed, immediately after independence. So, while some work is continuing today, the bulk of the project remains incomplete."

Still, Hampikian and Sourouzian gave a series of lectures and presentations in Egypt, Europe and North America and collected about $10,000 for restoration work.

"We gave the money to local experts in Armenia who started work on Astvatsungal, a monument near Yerevan," says Hampikian. "This was a nice beginning for further long-term work in Armenia."

The team plans to restart the project again and restore some monuments for the 1700th anniversary of the establishment of Christianity in Armenia.

"Restoration means preserving what you have in the present not reconstruction of what was in the past," explains Sourouzian. "The old school used to think that restoration meant reconstruction – by adding a fallen dome or wall. This mentality is no longer valid. They used to do that in the Soviet Union. The Egyptians used to do the same. The 'new' school of thought leans more toward preservation of what exists and prevention of further deterioration. The visitor to these monuments should see the old, the ancient, and not what has been reconstructed in the 20th century.

"My fear is that in Armenia they will be tempted to reconstruct old churches and monuments on the occasion of the 1700th anniversary; it is difficult to change the mentality and say you should preserve what has come down through the centuries and not add or reconstruct through modern intervention," warns Sourouzian.

Through their work in Armenia, Hampikian and Sourouzian have also developed professional and personal ties in Egypt. Currently, they are involved in a large project with a grant from the World Monument Fund to do work at the great temple of the Third Pharaoh involving restoration and preservation of monuments. But Armenia is never out of mind. They are also submitting grant proposals to international organizations for assistance in the restoration of historical monuments in Armenia. ■

Perspectives on the Diaspora

Nairy Hampikian and Hourig Sourouzian are scholars of ancient history, art and archeology. Yet, they hold clear opinions on the "reality" of the Armenian Diaspora.

NAIRY HAMPIKIAN

To be a Diaspora is not something for one to be happy or proud about. The Diaspora is a reality. I say this consciously. This is a sad reality. When you read history, whenever the community in the Diaspora is happy, with bustling intellectual and cultural life, you see that people are being massacred in Armenia or going through horrible times.

There are many who look at the history of the Diaspora communities outside the context of Armenia. This results in a different picture of reality. By themselves, Diaspora communities might look prosperous and well off, but the larger context – developments in Armenian life elsewhere – tells a different story.

We have to remember that Diaspora communities did not come into existence in a vacuum. There has always been input from the 'motherland' which brings freshness to the community. Los Angeles today is a good example of this. The discussions in Los Angeles today are the same as at the turn of the century in Egypt, right after the genocide. People were debating about the shape of the dome of a church they want to build, they were having heated arguments about fundraising, and so on.

You can find connections between building churches and monuments in Egypt and the turn of events in Armenia. Studying Armenian architecture in Egypt was a wonderful way of researching my Diaspora identity.

The Diaspora can justify itself only by contributing to Armenia. What you build in the Diaspora is temporary – you build palaces, great monuments, etc. In time, they become part of the respective culture and heritage of that country. One sees this process over and over again in history. Look what happened to the Armenians in Ethiopia and Sudan – what you build and establish is ultimately not yours. It is temporary and only a matter of time. What I'm saying is neither depressing nor a source of pride. It is the reality.

HOURIG SOUROUZIAN

We have two personalities as Diasporans: we are born Armenian and we are citizens of a given country. But we are raised as Armenians regardless of citizenship.

The day I landed in Armenia, I realized that being an Armenian in the Diaspora does not mean anything. The work that needs to be done is in Armenia. You have to live there in order to be an 'ideal' Armenian. Otherwise, being a typical Diasporan does not mean much. I hope that my final destination and the last phase of my career will be living and working in Armenia: to do what I do now, but in Armenia.

The Diaspora is always transitory. A church building in Los Angeles or Sydney or Paris does not have the same historic value as the churches in Armenia. For example, an Armenian church building in Egypt that resembles the church architecture of Ani was sold to the Coptic Church. History will probably not even record that this church was once Armenian. Perhaps only those who recognize the characteristics of Armenian architecture will identify it as an Armenian building. And unfortunately, the Armenian community that was around that Armenian Church is no longer there.

Armenian organizations in the Diaspora expect individuals to work or contribute to community life following a set mode or mold and this inhibits individual creativity. We do not support each other in the Diaspora. We support individuals who are successful outside the community; that's when we embrace them. I used to think that being affiliated with community organizations was part of having a sense of belonging, but since Armenia's independence, and since going to Armenia, I no longer think that you need to be affiliated with any organization in the Diaspora. I believe, with Armenia's independence, the question of identity has been wonderfully resolved. I feel a sense of belonging only to Armenia and not to any Diaspora organization or structure.