



WITNESS OF HIS TIME

The Oppressed and the Rejected Find Dignity with Norikian

By HRATCH TCHILINGIRIAN

The different faces I paint have the same agony and suffering," says Krikor Norikian, 58 – popularly known as Norik – who is one of the Diaspora's most well-known painters. "I don't know where that agony comes from. It's from nature, from human suffering. It's from my past, my family and my life experience. It might come from a specific source, but it is universal."

Joseph Tarrab, who wrote the introduction for Norikian's latest book, says that even when the characters in Norikian's paintings "surround themselves with flowers and mandolins, they still belong, by their carriage, their peasant garb and a kind of pathetic awkwardness ...to those who, at each turning-point in history, let themselves be smashed, victims of the tyrannic, omnipotent father, ever invisible but ever present in his very absence."

Indeed, mankind or rather womankind in Norikian's paintings are "meaningfully reduced to its most vulnerable members, women and children."

At least two women were very significant in Norikian's life. "My mother was a woman to be worshipped," he says with awe. And, all these years later, he still feels the same about his grandmother with whom he lived as a teenager because she lived near his school.

"When I start painting, I don't have a specific thought or theme in mind, I just start, like a title-less novel or story. When I sit before a white canvas, I feel in a vacuum, in an empty space, I'm transformed into another world, another reality," explains Norikian.

"I feel that I don't know anything. Then my hand gestures start; inspiration comes, calm and intense, with complete faith and dedication, by preserving my self – who I am. It is a battle between the canvas and myself – there is something that goes on between you and the canvas. There is a power, energy that directs your hands and brush," he continues.

Born in Beirut's Bourj Hammoud neighborhood, Norikian received his primary education at a Jesuit school under the watchful eyes of Catholic friars. "In school, instead of paying attention to the class, I used to draw all the time and got punished for it," he remembers.

He recalls being a "rebellious teenager" as well, playing at theater and painting on walls with pieces of black coal. "I used to be reprimanded all the time," says Norikian, the son of a mason.

Unlike others of his generation, Norikian was not involved with



the Armenian community in Lebanon. It was only later as an accomplished artist that he was somewhat drawn in. "For me, party and politics was my art. I am not interested in Armenian politics, neither right, nor left," he says as a matter-of-factly.

At 14, Norikian worked with his uncle in a printing shop to earn a living. He was still indecisive about a career. "I was very handy," he remembers, "I could learn quickly as long

as the base was provided." But, obviously, "My only passion was painting. I wanted to become a painter."

Between 1959 and 1967, Norikian studied fine art in Lebanon, Italy and France. At 25, his first exhibit of prints was displayed at the *L'Orient* newspaper gallery in Beirut. His first introduction to the Armenian community came in 1971 when he won the first prize at the AGBU-sponsored "Armenian Painters of

the Middle East" exhibition. Subsequently, his works were exhibited in Canada, Germany, Argentina, France, and the US.

In 1994 a collection of his works of the last two decades was published under the title *Norikian: Humanism of the Other Man. 1976-1994*. Recently, the book was launched in California and Canada.

"I paint to know, to learn why am I living," says the reclusive artist. But, "I haven't



reached a point where I'm painting the way I want." Through the canvas, "I want to express pain, injustice of humanity," he says. And express he does.

One of the most striking features of his paintings is the dominant depiction of women and children who seem mature but ageless. Men are virtually absent from his canvas.

"I haven't figured out why I use women in my paintings," Norikian wonders himself.

"But, I use the canvas to protest, to complain to the viewer."

There is a subtle, poetic sexuality in his paintings. He explains that unlike the desecrated sexuality in modern art, whose roots go back to the Renaissance, he prefers esthetic, reserved sexuality. "The sexuality is in the mood of the painting rather than in the depiction," he explains. "Nudity says something, it's not literal."

Of course, there's a marketing concern here, too, says Norikian laughingly. "Armenians don't buy nudes – the husband wants it, but the wife doesn't."

Human suffering and devastation caused by the civil war in Lebanon are also central themes in Norikian's paintings. In the context of the war, "I used to paint the immigrant," he says, but "I became an immigrant myself," referring to his move to Paris in 1976 to escape the war.

"Any human disaster moves me, whether the war in Lebanon, the earthquake in Armenia or Turkey, I feel the pain of the mother holding a broken child," he says, the melancholy obvious. "I paint to escape from the disaster of the past. I don't paint to amuse the public, not to be displayed in salons - I paint to find out why I live."

Norikian wonders, "Why am I born Armenian? Born not in my own homeland but in a distant land. This is the major agony for me."

Nevertheless, he insists that art doesn't have national boundaries, it's universal. "When it comes to art and they speak about Armenian art, I get angry. The importance is not that it is Armenian, but it is human freedom." Ultimately, "art cannot be explained, nature is God's creation, art is man's creation."

Norikian's fans agree with the critic Tarrab, that "Norikian is a witness of his time committed to the ethical-artistic struggle for the reinstatement and the respect of the Face and the rights of the Other, of women, children, the weak, the unloved, the oppressed and the rejected."

