

Critics' Forum

Visual Arts

The Community's Museum: Art and History at the Ararat-Eskijian Museum

By Ramela Grigorian Abbamontian



Like many of the artifacts contained within, the Ararat-Eskijian Museum (AEM) is a hidden treasure awaiting discovery. Nestled quietly in Mission Hills on the campus of The Ararat Home of Los Angeles, the museum is the physical manifestation of the dream of one individual, genocide survivor Luther Eskijian, who created the museum “to preserve our Armenian culture and historical treasures for generations to come.”

In 1989, at the age of 78, genocide survivor Luther Eskijian embarked on a quest to realize his 30-year-old dream of creating a museum where his collection could be used to preserve the cultural identity of the Armenians. “I have been a collector of historical artifacts, coins, maps, art, documents and books since my early childhood. I was drawn to collecting these items first for their historical value, second, because of their beauty, and finally, to preserve these collections for others to enjoy,” notes Eskijian in the Founder’s Statement. Using his connection with the Ararat Home (as its volunteer advisor of many years), he proposed adding a museum and a sanctuary to the site. Working diligently as architect and general contractor for about four years, Eskijian, at the age of 82, witnessed the fruits of his dream when the museum opened its doors in 1993.

The mission of the museum is clearly articulated on its website (www.ararat-eskijian-museum.com): “The Ararat-Eskijian Museum ... was created to enrich, inspire and educate the

community through the display of artworks and exhibits, presentation of programs, and collection of research materials featuring the history and cultural heritage of the Armenian people.” A detailed list that follows expounds how the museum aims to achieve this mission, including collecting valuable items, accepting the community’s contributions of artifacts, focusing on research and education, housing a library (of primarily genocide-related materials), and offering cultural programs. These are ambitious aims for a tiny museum, yet as a review of its most recent activities will soon illustrate, the museum appears to tirelessly strive for these goals. These efforts fill a critical need because, as its mission statement reminds us, the museum “serves the largest Armenian community in the Diaspora and is the only Armenian museum on the west coast.”

In its 6,000 square feet—relatively small exhibition space—the museum’s impressive and eclectic collections include antiquities, decorative arts, drawings, historical documents, musical instruments, paintings, prints, rugs, sculptures, stamps, coins, and textiles. Considering the inspiring story of the museum’s founder, its collections, its programming, its role as a site of remembrance, and its close relationship with the community, we might conclude that though young and still nascent, the museum is nonetheless an important thread in the fabric of the community and a powerful vehicle of its preservation.

Like most small museums, AEM is staffed primarily by volunteers and a few paid employees. The powerhouse behind the museum’s operations is Maggie Mangassarian-Goschin, who began volunteering at the museum in 1998 and has since dedicated countless hours to making its mission a reality. In fact, she can easily be considered the museum’s unpaid director and—as most directors in small museums will attest—wears a number of different hats, including programming, staffing, curating, and even housecleaning and maintenance. Though the small group of staff and volunteers are clearly dedicated to the museum, more volunteers are always needed to achieve the large-scale goals of the museum.

A key feature, though not the entire focus, of the museum is its presentation of the 1915 Armenian Genocide. Visitors to the museum are greeted by the “Mother Armenia Rising Out of the Ashes,” the bronze sculpture flanking the entrance. Dedicated to the victims as well as survivors of the 1915 Genocide, this living memorial has elicited a myriad of reactions from viewers, most notably prayers, tears, and flowers placed at her feet. Museum staff has often glimpsed the elderly residents of the Ararat Home deep in thought beside the woman and child figure. One wonders: what are they thinking and remembering? What are *their* personal stories? And more to the point, who preserves them? These critical questions further reinforce the essential role of the museum in the community.

In another section of the small area dedicated to the Genocide, artists Nora Nalbandian and Guilda Deirmendjian have painted “The Der Zor Memorial Mural,” a tortured desert landscape pervaded by light and vibrant colors from above, in what seems to represent the hope of God. A box of human bones retrieved on a Der Zor mission by some museum members sits in front of the mural, a reminder of the unmarked graves of the victims. Initially, the alcove was intended as a silent site of meditation. Yet as the number of non-Armenian visitors increased, so did their

questions. “What is this mural about?” “Where are the bones from?” The museum has since recognized the visitors’ concerns and has added extensive wall text and photographic reproductions to tell the story of the Genocide. Though the text at times almost overpowers the silent testimony of memory, it is a necessary addition, since one of the museum’s goals, as Goschin reiterated in a recent interview, is to introduce Armenian culture and history to the non-Armenian public. Without the labels, there is always the risk that visitors would admire the objects simply for their beauty, instead of as emblems of historical value.

The rest of the collection, as delineated earlier, is quite diverse—not uncommon among collectors like Eskijian, who amass an assortment of objects through the years. That large collection of objects, along with the museum’s small exhibition space, poses a challenge in creating appropriate and cohesive displays. But surprisingly, the varied selection also presents a more expansive view of Armenian history, marking its origins (the oldest items date from 2500 years ago to the Urartian and Hittite periods), its Christian faith, its persecution, and its contributions to various neighboring countries.

Like its collection, the museum’s programs are also eclectic and varied, and include film screenings, art exhibitions, lectures, and musical performances. Its programming has burgeoned rapidly in the last couple of years (a look at the website’s Events section will confirm this), triggered—according to Goschin—by the exhibition organized by three UCLA graduate students who temporarily adopted the museum to curate a student art exhibition entitled “In Celebration of Life: Armenian Identity and Culture of the Diaspora” (April 2002).

The museum’s impressive list of programs features such prominent scholars and artists as filmmaker Michael Hagopian, historian George Bournoutian, art historian Levon Chookasjian, and genocide scholar Vahakn Dadrian. (Audience numbers at these events range anywhere between 50 and 100.) Another step in the right direction has been the museum’s recent collaboration with other major Armenian institutions, a move they intend to—and in fact, should—pursue, in order to introduce the museum to new audiences and continue offering quality programs. Notably, AEM has joined forces with NAASR (National Association for Armenian Studies and Research) and recently jointly hosted the lecture, “‘Kiss My Children’s Eyes’: A Search for Answers to the Armenian Genocide through One Remarkable Photograph” (March 2006). The lecture featured Pulitzer-Prize winning *Boston Globe* investigative journalist Stephen Kurkjian, who discussed his quest to identify the group of Armenian men standing under Turkish guard in front of a building in Gesaria (Caesarea) in 1915.

Currently, the museum is in the midst of preparing a teacher workshop for the Fall to introduce teachers—first from Armenian private schools and then from area public schools—to the collections and the different ways of integrating the various items in the collection into educational courses, including Social Studies, History and English. Also in the works are a High School Volunteer Program and the continuing development of relations with university professors to help them encourage their students to visit the museum. Another long-term goal of the museum is supporting local artists. To that end, the museum recently curated “The Visual Poetry of the Homeland: The Photographs of Vahé Perroomian and Ara Meshkanbarian,” (September to October 2005). In the accompanying “Dialogues with the Artists: Interview and

Reception,” the public was introduced more intimately to the artists’ motives and inspirations. While the museum would like to do more in terms of supporting local artists, it does not yet have the manpower, time, or funding to organize exhibitions on a more consistent basis.

Founder Eskijian reminds the public on the museum’s website that, “The Ararat-Eskijian Museum belongs to all Armenians.” And in its mission statement, the museum “encourages the community to contribute historical artifacts and actively participate in the preservation of family histories and experiences.” In this way, the museum has become a living repository, each donated item breathing new life into its growing collection.

While the museum endeavors to be a place for the community, it also desperately needs support. This need is especially critical for a museum dedicated to a small ethnic community. Ideally, a reciprocal relationship should exist between the two—the museum preserving the community’s culture and heritage and allowing it to take pride in its accomplishments, with the community in turn allowing the museum to thrive with its support. In Ron Chew’s article “In Praise of the Small Museum” (*Museum News*, March/April 2002, p.38), Steve Olson (at the time of the article, Assistant Director of the Museum of Church History and Art) warns that “if you added up all the collections in the country, numerically, most of the artifacts would be found in small museums. If we don’t help the small museums, we’re literally risking the fabric of our own heritage.”

Is the museum, then, solely for Armenians? Goschin and other museum staff would reply that it is not, and like most Armenians, express their desire to share their rich culture with others. But the museum also inspires Armenian and non-Armenian visitors alike to reflect on their own cultures and recognize similarities with those of others by emphasizing the common need to preserve their stories for future generations.

The museum is currently open only on Saturdays and Sundays, between 1 and 5 pm, as well as the first Tuesday of every month after the Women’s Guild Luncheon at the Ararat Home. Admission to the museum and to all events is free.

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