

Critics' Forum

Visual Arts

Genocide Memorials: Symbolism, Ritual Use, and Meaning

By Jean Murachanian

This year, April 24 falls on Easter Sunday, a coincidence that is symbolically significant, at once tragic and hopeful. Naturally, the confluence also presents scheduling difficulties for many members of the Armenian community. In recognition of that fact, the commemoration program at the Genocide memorial in Montebello, California, for example, will take place the day before, on April 23rd.

Such mundane conflicts, however, also offer opportunities for addressing their symbolic significance. As Bishop Anushavan Zhamkochyan, Dean of Theology in the Faculty of Yerevan State University, suggested recently about the convergence of sacred days, while encouraging acknowledgment of the dual significance of April 24, "We should first pay tribute to the memory of the innocent victims of the Genocide and then pray for the Resurrection. There is something symbolic in this coincidence. And the existence of the Armenian people symbolizes Resurrection itself. We proved that people can revive themselves after a massacre and become even stronger."

The convergence of the two commemorations suggests several questions, particularly with regard to expressions of Armenian identity: Is remembrance of the Genocide made more meaningful at a monument? Is participation in a memorial event more about asserting Armenian identity, particularly given its precarious nature in the Diaspora, or is it more about demanding recognition from the Turkish state? How does the meaning of commemoration change, if at all, across different monuments in the Diaspora and in the homeland? In an effort to answer these questions, I consider the history and significance of five key Genocide memorials in different parts of the world.ⁱ What follows is a preliminary look at those Genocide memorials, chosen based on importance and visual innovation, with a focus on architectural symbolism, ritual use, location, and inscriptions.

Before discussing some of the memorials, I would like to first consider their history. It is important to recognize, in particular, that these public monuments were erected after the 50th anniversary of the Genocide. Prior to 1965, commemoration of the Genocide was maintained within the Armenian community. Between the world wars, the scattered survivors were preoccupied with making new lives for themselves in the aftermath of trauma. Hesitant to attract negative attention in their new host countries and lacking political acumen, they privately honored their dead in austere ceremonies. By the Second World War, the Armenian Genocide had become the "forgotten genocide" due to persistent Turkish denial and the shocking magnitude of the Holocaust.

It was not until 1965, in an era of political protests by civil rights groups and feminists that Armenians began to assert themselves. By this time, Armenians had sufficiently established themselves in their new countries of residence and realized that recognition was critical to Armenian history, identity, and healing. Their efforts were enhanced beginning in the 1980s, with the involvement of the second and third generations, who because of their distance from the Genocide and keen understanding of political processes were able to advance the cause. There are now hundreds of Genocide

memorials throughout the world, many on public lands with inscriptions declaring government recognition at various levels.

In **Montebello, California** a tall, slender, abstract memorial was dedicated on April 24th, 1965 in a public park. The monument resembles the rising crown found in Armenian Church architecture. While the simplicity and modernity of the design is fitting for a metropolitan city like Los Angeles, it is also indicative of restrictions on literal religious references on public sites.



The Genocide memorial in Montebello, California

The location of the site also looks back to its founding. Although most Armenians in Los Angeles now live in Glendale, Hollywood, or the San Fernando Valley, from the late 1950s to the early 1970s the city of Montebello was a thriving center of Armenian civic and cultural life. Now, each April 24th Armenians from all over Los Angeles visit the monument. Many in the community include it in a list of sites they visit that day, such as the Turkish Consulate, Little Armenia, the Glendale Civic Center, and Armenian churches and schools. The various activities, which include commemoration ceremonies, speeches, marches and rallies, also often attract congressmen and other important political figures.

Recognition by the Turkish state and United States government are key goals. As visitors to the site told me in interviews, the monument serves as an important gathering place for Armenians as well as a powerful reminder to the rest of the world of the events of April 24th. The monument's memorializing function is clearly depicted in the inscription, which reads: "This monument, erected by Americans of Armenian descent is dedicated to

the 1,500,000 Armenian victims of the Genocide perpetrated by the Turkish Government 1915-1921, and to men of all nations who have fallen victim to crimes against humanity.” As with other Genocide monuments, this one expands its memorializing function by identifying the perpetrators of the act, as a prelude to recognition. Evidence of its effectiveness is close at hand. On April 1 of this year the State of California erected a sign on the 60 freeway directing travelers to the “Armenian Genocide Martyrs Monument,” the first time the words “Armenian Genocide” have been utilized on public land in the United States.

Another monument on public land but erected much more recently is the *khachkar* memorial in **Sydney, Australia**, dedicated March 5th, 1999. It is located in a garden area on the ninth floor of the New South Wales (NSW) Parliament. The intricately carved red *khachkar*, imported from Armenia, is set in Sydney sandstone above a mounted brass plaque that contains the full text of the Armenian Genocide Commemorative motion passed unanimously in the NSW Parliament on April 17, 1997. The placement of the memorial and its inscription together attest to the Australian government’s acknowledgement of the Genocide. As Parliament member John Watkins has said “the memorial will be a public statement to all visitors to Parliament House of the reality of the genocide and the importance with which the NSW Parliament holds the commemoration.”

Khachkars (ancient Armenian cross stones) in Genocide memorials function as multi-layered symbols: as tombstones, or markers of death and remembrance; as expressions of the stability and uniqueness of Armenian culture; and as signifiers of the unwavering Christian faith of the Armenian people. Appropriately, they also symbolize rebirth (through Christ’s resurrection) and triumph (Christianity over paganism and, as suggested by Bishop Zhamkochyan, the survival of the Armenian people). As memorials, they do not typically mark the actual place of burial but rather create new sites for mourning and remembering.

The one exception is the church complex memorial at **Der Zor, Syria**, whose significance lies in its identity as the end point of the deportation marches. The surrounding desert thus serves as a large burial site, housing mass graves. The site was consecrated on May 5, 1991 and was sponsored by the Armenian Apostolic Church of Syria and the Great House of Cilicia.



The courtyard of the Genocide memorial, Der Zor, Syria

The complex consists of a courtyard, chapel, and underground burial memorial and museum. The courtyard includes several *khachkars* and an eternal flame. The focal point of the chapel is an underground grave consisting of a central marble column around which have been set the remains of Genocide victims. The remaining space is a Genocide museum, providing an important educational component.



The underground memorial, Der Zor

The coincidence of secular with religious traditions continues here. On April 24, 2005, the 90th anniversary of the Genocide, the Catholicos of Cilicia, Aram I praised the will of the Armenian people for survival, while placing the importance of the memorial in context and in those same terms: “the chapel at Der Zor has a different significance from all the churches in the world; it is a haven for our victims. . . . Our martyrs walked through this desert. They died, but gave us life through their faith and sacrifice.” The site is visited in conjunction with a pilgrimage from another church memorial at Margade, Syria, about an hour away. The significance of Der-Zor makes it an important pilgrimage site for Armenians around the world.



The Genocide memorial in Margade, Syria

A striking figural monument on church property in **Bikfaya, Lebanon** was dedicated on April 24, 1965. The memorial was sponsored by the Lebanese-Armenian community and the Armenian Apostolic Church of Lebanon. It is located on a small hill on the grounds of the Armenian Monastery of the Catholicate of Cilicia in Bikfaya, within the sheltered space of the Church in an area that invites public gathering. Annual commemoration activities alternate every other year with a chapel monument in Antelias, Lebanon.

The Bikfaya memorial is made of bronze, in the shape of an abstract female figure. She is kneeling with her arms and upper body stretched toward the sky. Her posture is at once humble and forceful. Her position suggests that of a woman in prayer, beseeching

the Almighty, another allusion to the Christian faith of the Armenian people she is meant to represent. Her solid massive legs are firmly grounded in the earth, signifying the importance of land to the sustainability of her people and implying that she will not cede that ground easily.



The Bikfaya Genocide memorial, Lebanon

The inscription (translated from Armenian and Arabic) reads “This monument, commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide, was erected with the cooperation of the whole Armenian Community in Lebanon, to celebrate the rebirth of the Armenian nation and to express gratitude to our country, Lebanon.” While recognizing the Genocide, the dedication also celebrates the resurrection of the Armenian

people and their gratefulness to their adopted country, a characteristic feature of post-1965 memorials.

An important monument in the homeland is located in the capital city of **Yerevan**, in present-day **Armenia**. The memorial was dedicated on April 24th, 1968. The impetus for its erection was a demonstration that took place on April 24th, 1965, when thousands of Armenians marched on Yerevan. A short time later, Soviet authorities granted their comrades the right to build a commemorative monument. The abstract nature of the memorial is indicative of Soviet restrictions at the time, particularly with regard to religious references, and even more severe than comparable ones elsewhere.



The Tsitsernakaberd monument in Yerevan

The memorial is located in a park at the top of a hill in Tsitsernakaberd, just outside downtown Yerevan. Each April 24th thousands pay their respects in a pilgrimage ceremony that reinforces the monument's memorializing function through reenactment. Visitors must symbolically relive the deportation marches by ascending a long, winding hill before arriving at the memorial complex. Once there, they encounter a basal wall, 100 meters by three meters, running along the platform of the site lists the names of the towns and villages where the massacres took place. In 1995, the post-liberation Armenian government erected a museum next to the site. The museum includes victim remains from Der Zor, Genocide photos by German military photojournalist, Armen T.

Wegner, and various documents. Next to the museum, foreign statesmen have planted trees in memory of the Genocide.



Tsitsernakaberd, stone blocks surrounding eternal flame

The site includes a granite stele, rising 44 meters, once again symbolizing the survival and spiritual rebirth of the Armenian people. It consists of two sections separated by a fissure, representing the unity of Armenians in the Diaspora with those in present-day Armenia. The focal point of the monument consists of 12 inward-leaning basalt slabs encircling an eternal flame symbolizing the victims of the Genocide. The massive stone blocks recall traditional Armenian *khachkars* and represent the 12 lost provinces in present-day Turkey. Every April 24th a ceremony is performed by clergy around the eternal flame, which is surrounded by rows of flowers brought by the many pilgrims, set in a circle around the flame.



Tsitsernakaberd, flower circle set around eternal flame

The religious ceremony performed at the Tsitsernakaberd Genocide memorial brings us back to the issue we started with, the coincidence this year of both a secular commemoration and a religious holiday on April 24th. As the discussion of the various memorials suggests, Armenian identity and Christian faith are inextricably linked. The memorials hint at the powerful symbolic connection between the two. It has often been suggested, for instance, that the Armenian people would have long ago assimilated if not for their Christian faith, which prohibited union with non-Christians. Perhaps more importantly, the co-commemoration of Easter and April 24th lends each a parcel of the other, suggesting at once how history can take on an almost religious significance, while a unifying faith can provide the impetus for survival and rebirth.

As we have seen from this small sampling, Genocide memorials serve as vehicles for the expression of such connections by serving several functions at the same time: remembrance of the victims; assertions of Armenian identity; declarations of Christian faith; unification of the Armenian people; gratitude to adopted countries; identification of the perpetrators; celebration of rebirth; and education and recognition. In recent years, as the Armenian Genocide has increasingly threatened to become the “forgotten genocide” again, emphasis has shifted to the role of Genocide memorials in securing recognition, in making known the horrors of genocide and the dangers of intolerance. It has also increasingly become apparent that securing recognition depends on struggling to forge an Armenian identity while arguing for its preservation. Complicating matters is the fact that, as a result of the struggle for recognition, much of our identity is now linked with this catastrophe. As several scholars of trauma have noted, recognition is a necessary component of healing, presenting the possibility that, in many respects, the Armenian community may be unable to heal and move beyond its tragic past. But if we are to take the significance of the monuments seriously, then the coincidence of the secular and the sacred they suggest bears a hopeful message as well: *Krisdos haryal i merelots. Orhnyal e harutyun' Krisdosi.* (Christ is risen from the dead. Blessed is the resurrection of Christ.) If, as Bishop Zhamkochyan suggested, “the existence of the Armenian people symbolizes Resurrection itself,” then surely the struggle for recognition will bear fruit.

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ⁱ I should note that while I have personally visited only two of the sites considered, Montebello and the Tsitsernakaberd memorial complex in Yerevan, Armenia, I have benefited from the research conducted by the Armenian National Institute (ANI), which has documented 135 memorials in 25 countries, and from the superb visual imagery provided by photographer Hrair “Hawk” Khatcherian, some of which are reproduced here. I would also like to acknowledge Sarkis Balmanoukian, architect of the church complex memorial at Der Zor, Syria, for granting me an interview in 2005.