Arshile Gorky (pronounced /ˌɑrʃiˈliː ˈɡɔrkiː/, born Vostanik Manuk Adoyan; Armenian: Արշիլ Գորկի, Վոստանիկ Մանուկ Ադոյան), (April 15, 1904? – July 21, 1948) was an Armenian-born American painter who had a seminal influence on Abstract Expressionism. As such, his works were often speculated to have been informed by the suffering and loss he experienced of the Armenian genocide.[1]

Early life

Gorky was born in the village of Khorgom, situated on the shores of Lake Van. It is not known exactly when he was born: it was sometime between 1902 and 1905. (In later years Gorky was vague about even the date of his birth, changing it from year to year.) In 1910 his father emigrated to America to avoid the draft, leaving his family behind in the town of Van.

In 1915 Gorky fled Lake Van during the Armenian Genocide and escaped with his mother and his three sisters into Russian-controlled territory. In the aftermath of the genocide, Gorky's mother died of starvation in Yerevan in 1919. Arriving in America in 1920, the 16-year old Gorky was reunited with his father, but they never grew close. At age 31, Gorky married. In the process of reinventing his identity, he changed his name to "Arshile Gorky", even telling people he was a relative of the Russian writer Maxim Gorky.
Career

In 1922, Gorky enrolled in the New School of Design in Boston, eventually becoming a part-time instructor. During the early 1920s he was influenced by Impressionism, although later in the decade he produced works that were more postimpressionist. During this time he was living in New York and was influenced by Paul Cézanne. In 1925 he was asked by Edmund Greacen of the Grand Central Art Galleries to teach at the Grand Central School of Art; Gorky accepted and remained with them until 1931.\[7\] In 1927, Gorky met Ethel Kremer Schwabacher and developed a lifelong friendship. Schwabacher was his first biographer. Gorky said:

The stuff of thought is the seed of the artist. Dreams form the bristles of the artist's brush. As the eye functions as the brain's sentry, I communicate my innermost perceptions through the art, my worldview.\[8\]

Notable paintings from this time include *Landscape in the Manner of Cézanne* (1927) and *Landscape, Staten Island* (1927–1928). At the close of the 1920s and into the 1930s he experimented with cubism, eventually moving to surrealism. The painting illustrated above, *The Artist and His Mother*, (ca. 1926–1936) is a memorable, moving and innovative portrait. His *The Artist and His Mother* paintings are based on a childhood photograph taken in Van in which he is depicted standing beside his mother. Gorky made two versions; the other is in the National Gallery of Art Washington, DC. The painting has been likened to Ingres for simplicity of line and smoothness, to Egyptian Funerary art for pose, to Cézanne for flat planar composition, to Picasso for form and color.\[9\]

*Nighttime, Enigma, Nostalgia* (1930–1934) is a series of complex works that characterize this phase of his painting. The canvas *Portrait of Master Bill* appears to depict Gorky's friend, Willem de Kooning. De Kooning said: "I met a lot of artists — but then I met Gorky... He had an extraordinary gift for hitting the nail on the head; remarkable. So I immediately attached myself to him and we became very good friends."\[2\] [3] [4] [5] Although some claim the portrait is actually a portrait of a Swedish carpenter who Gorky gave art lessons to.\[6\] However recent publications contradict the claim that the painting is of de Kooning but is actually a portrait of a Swedish carpenter Gorky called Master Bill who did some work for him in exchange for Gorky giving him art lessons.\[6\]
Arshile Gorky. *The Liver is the Cock's Comb* (1944), oil on canvas, 73 1/4 x 98" (186 x 249 cm). The painting represents the peak of Gorky's achievement and his individual style, after he had emerged from the influence of Cézanne and Picasso. [11]

When Gorky showed his new work to André Breton in the 1940s, after seeing the new paintings and in particular *The Liver is the Cock's Comb*, Breton declared the painting to be “one of the most important paintings made in America” and he stated that Gorky was a Surrealist, which was Breton's highest compliment. [12] The painting was shown in the Surrealists' final show at the Galerie Maeght in Paris in 1947, [13]

Michael Auping, a curator at the Modern Art Museum in Fort Worth, saw in the work a "taut sexual drama" combined with nostalgic allusions to Gorky's Armenian past. [14] The work in 1944 shows his emergence in the 1940s from the influence of Cézanne and Picasso into his own style, and is perhaps his greatest work. [11] It is over six feet high and eight feet wide, depicting "an abstract landscape filled with watery plumes of semi-transparent color that coalesce around spiky, thornlike shapes, painted in thin, sharp black lines, as if to suggest beaks and claws." [11]

**Tragedy and death**

This peak period of Gorky's work was cut short. His final years were filled with immense pain and heartbreak. His studio barn burned down, he underwent a colostomy for cancer, his neck was broken and his painting arm temporarily paralyzed in a car accident, and his wife of seven years left him, taking their children with her. Gorky hanged himself in Sherman, Connecticut, in 1948, at the age of 44. He is buried in North Cemetery in Sherman, Connecticut.

**Personal life**

His daughter, the painter Maro Gorky, married Matthew Spender, son of the British writer Sir Stephen Spender.

**Legacy**

Gorky's contributions to American and world art are difficult to overestimate. His work as lyrical abstraction [15] [16] [17] [18] [19] was a "new language." [15] He "lit the way for two generations of American artists". [15] The painterly spontaneity of mature works like "The Liver is the Cock's Comb", "The Betrothal II", and "One Year the Milkweed" immediately prefigured Abstract expressionism, and leaders in the New York School have acknowledged Gorky's considerable influence.

But his oeuvre is a phenomenal achievement in its own right, synthesizing Surrealism and the sensuous color and painterliness of the School of Paris with his own highly personal formal vocabulary. His paintings and drawings hang in every major American museum including the National Gallery of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Metropolitan and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York (which maintains the Gorky Archive), and in many worldwide, including the Tate in London.

A number of English translations of letters allegedly written by Gorky in Armenian to his sisters are now considered to be fakes produced by Karlen Mooradian, a nephew of Gorky, in the late 1960s and early 1970s (especially those expressing nationalistic sentiments or imparting specific meanings to his paintings). The letters often described moods of melancholy, and expressed loneliness and emptiness, nostalgia for his country, while bitterly and vividly recalling the circumstances of his mother's death. The contents of the fake letters heavily influenced the authors of books written about Gorky and his art during the 1970s and 80s.

A plane crash in 1962 took 95 lives and 15 of his paintings and drawings. [20]
In June 2005, the family of the artist established the Arshile Gorky Foundation, a not-for-profit corporation formed to further the public's appreciation and understanding of the life and artistic achievements of Arshile Gorky. The Foundation is actively working on a catalogue raisonné of the artist's entire body of work. In October 2009, the Foundation relaunched its website to provide accurate information on the artist, including a biography, bibliography, exhibition history, and list of archival sources.\[21\]

In October 2009 the Philadelphia Museum of Art held a major Arshile Gorky exhibition: Arshile Gorky: A Retrospective\[22\]\[23\] On June 6, 2010, an exhibit of the same name opened at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in Los Angeles.\[24\]

Gorky in fiction

Gorky appears in Atom Egoyan's movie Ararat as a child in Van and later as an adult survivor of the Armenian Genocide living in New York.

Gorky appears as a character in Charles L. Mee's play about Joseph Cornell, Hotel Cassiopeia\[25\] and is briefly mentioned in Kurt Vonnegut's novel Bluebeard.

Stephen Watts's poem The Verb “To Be” (Gramsci & Caruso, Periplum 2003) is dedicated to Gorky's memory.

References

[1] Arshile Gorky and the Armenian genocide (http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1248/is_n2_v84/ai_18004719)
[17] "L.A. Art Collector Caps Two Year Pursuit of Artist with Exhibition of New Work" (http://artdaily.org/index.asp?int_sec=2&int_new=371124), ArtDaily. Retrieved 26 May 2010. "Lyrical Abstraction ... has been applied at times to the work of Arshile Gorky"
[21] Arshilegorkyfoundation.org (http://arshilegorkyfoundation.org)
Further reading


External links

• Arshile Gorky (http://www.moma.org/collection/artist.php?artist_id=2252) at the Museum of Modern Art

• Artcyclopedia (http://www.artcyclopedia.com/artists/gorky_arshile.html)


• Arshile Gorky Biography: Hollis Taggart Galleries (http://www.hollistaggart.com/artists/gorky.htm)

• Whistler House Museum of Art, Lowell, MA – Drawings & Paintings by Arshile Gorky: Mina Boehm Metzger Collection (http://www.whistlerhouse.org/)

• The Arshile Gorky Foundation – The official website for information on the artist (http://www.arshilegorkyfoundation.org/)
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