

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

THE LATE SOVIET CHARM OF KANTIANISM:
WILHELM MATEVOSYAN'S ART HISTORY

by
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I dedicate this thesis to the soldiers who fought in the 2020 Artsakh war.

ABSTRACT OF THE PROJECT OF

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The wide range of political and cultural reforms launched in the Soviet Union after Stalin's death in the 1950s affected every aspect of life in the country. As a result of the reformatory policies of this period known as the Khrushchev's Thaw a broad and complex anti-Soviet discourse emerged in the Soviet Union that was retrospectively conceptualized as National Modernism. Art historian Wilhelm Matevosyan (1931-2001) is in the vanguard of the academic, art historical front of this discourse.

Taking up the cultural policies of the Thaw as a background, this thesis examines the appeal of Kant and neo-Kantian aesthetics for Wilhelm Matevosyan's scholarship from within the complexity of National Modernism. It is argued that a vague Kantian horizon is discernible in the scholarship of the art historian formed in opposition to the late Soviet official art history. This horizon appears through the ideal of the autonomy of art and the defense of the individuality of the artist in Matevosyan's works as well as the formalist method of art history he develops in his scholarship.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

On the first page of one of the latest works in art historian Wilhelm Matevosyan's oeuvre, *Conversations with Saryan*, published in 2002, one can read: "To all those who gave their voice for the independence of Armenia."¹ For an anti-Soviet intellectual such as Matevosyan, who began his career in art history in the wake of the processes known in the Soviet history as the Thaw (1954-1964),² the collapse of the Soviet Union and the gaining of the independent national state in 1991 was a dream come true. The cultural policies of the post-Soviet Republic of Armenia can arguably be seen in line with the broad and complex anti-Soviet discourse emerging as a result of political and cultural changes in the Soviet Union during the 1960s.³ This involves intellectuals from a wide range of areas of the cultural sphere: Matevosyan himself was in the vanguard of the academic, art historical front of this discourse. However, the fierce opposition to the ideology of the late Soviet Union launched by the anti-Soviet intellectuals of this generation, that eventually came to be institutionalized in the policies of the independent state, is largely conditioned by the very same Soviet policies. The philosophical backbone of this relation between the Soviet establishment and the anti-Soviet intellectual opposition can be seen as a battle between dialectical materialism and idealism.

¹ Wilhelm Matevosyan, *Zrutsner Saryani Het* (Conversations with Saryan). Yerevan: Sargis Khachents, 2002, 5.

² The term first appeared as a metaphor of reforms initiated after Stalin's death in Ilya Ehrenburg's novel *Ottepel* (The Thaw), first published in the spring of 1954 in the periodical *Novy Mir*

³ This view is articulated by Angela Harutyunyan in relation to the policies implemented by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Armenia during the early 1990s. See Angela Harutyunyan, *The Political Aesthetics of the Armenian Avant-Garde: The Journey of the "Painterly Real," 1987-2004*. Rethinking Art's Histories. Manchester University Press, 2017, 190-192.

The schematic contradiction set by the Stalinist establishment around the 1930s between dialectical materialism and philosophical idealism lived through the aftermath of Stalin's death and prevailed during the Thaw. In this context, the idealist philosophy for the generation of the 1960s became a redeemer from Soviet ideology identified in turn with the materialist tradition. In this context, for the anti-Soviet intellectuals of the 1960s, the Kantian specter acquires absolute authority as a signifier of the opposition to official Soviet dictates based on a schematized version of dialectical materialism. The figure of Kant looms large especially in the anti-Soviet front of art history. Taking up the cultural policies of the Thaw as a background, this thesis examines the appeal of Kant and neo-Kantian aesthetics for Wilhelm Matevosyan's scholarship from within the complexity of the anti-Soviet discourse of the 1960s. I argue that a vague Kantian horizon is discernible in the scholarship of the art historian, which was formed in opposition to the official late Soviet art history. This horizon appears through the ideal of the autonomy of art and the defense of the individuality of the artist in Matevosyan's works, as well as the formalist method of art history he develops in his scholarship.

For a retrospective conceptualization of this anti-Soviet discourse in which Matevosyan was involved, I turn to art historian Vardan Azatyan's position that sees the Thaw as yet another instance of the disintegration of the Bolshevik revolutionary project. Considering it as an "inverted offshoot of historical materialism"⁴ Azatyan formulates this discourse as "Soviet Armenian National Modernism."⁵ According to Azatyan, the two main pillars of this paradigm are an essentialist understanding of the nation emptied out of class contradictions on the one hand, and aspirations of European

⁴ Vardan Azatyan, "National Modernism." In *Sweet Sixties: Specters and Spirits of a Parallel Avant-Garde*, Sternberg Press, 2013, 108.

⁵ This formulation first appeared in Vardan Azatyan, "Disintegrating Progress: Bolshevism, National Modernism, and the Emergence of Contemporary Art Practices in Armenia." *ARTMargins* 1, no. 1 (February 2012): 73.

modernism conceived as an antidote to the Marxist-Leninist ideology of the Soviet Union on the other hand. This thesis examines Matevosyan's scholarship in order to show some of the characteristics of what can be termed an Armenian National Modernist art historiography, which is grounded in the belief in modernist aesthetic autonomy animated by Kantian ideals, and advances a discernable nationalist agenda. This specific Kantian horizon that speaks of itself most distinctly in Matevosyan's work cannot be pinned down to a specific school from the European reception of Kant since, in the Armenian context, this "Kantianism" was formed within the boundaries of Socialist Realism. It was not developed through any systematic reading of Kant and his followers. Rather it came from drawing upon the scattered fragments of idealist philosophy and aesthetics that were published before the restrictions of the Stalinist regime in the 1930s or were made available during the Thaw's tamed de-Stalinization.

The appeal of Kantian philosophy for the discipline of art history is far reaching. From Heinrich Wölfflin's formalism to Erwin Panofsky's defense of humanism, Clement Greenberg's apologia for post-World War II American abstract painting, and all the way to Barnett Newman's invocation of the Kantian sublime, the Kant's ideas and authority played a major role in contouring the shape of art and art history of the last century. However, the perception and use of Kantian philosophy by artists and art historians is often framed by their own historical circumstances, and respective aesthetic, ideological, and art historical problems on hand. The rather Kantian "dream of pure philosophy," as identified by Mark A. Cheetham in his *Kant, Art, and Art History: Moments of Discipline*, proves itself futile when it comes to Kant's influence on the sphere of art. Constructing his work around the "savage," "situated" reception of Kant in the discipline of art throughout the decades, Cheetham states: "There is no pure Kant

and no secure border between the many areas that he has influenced.”⁶ My thesis takes this premise of a diffused and historically situated Kantian influence to explore Kant’s appeal to late Soviet Armenian art historiography through the work of the art historian Wilhelm Matevosyan. This work is both novel and original, not only in the Armenian context that lacks a critical and historical examination of post 1960s’ art historical practices, but in Soviet and post-Soviet art history in general.⁷

Matevosyan’s years of active production up until 1973,⁸ coincided with the institutionalization of Soviet Armenian National Modernism at the beginning of the 1970s⁹ in the period known as Stagnation under Leonid Brezhnev (1964-1985). Nevertheless, I view Matevosyan’s scholarship against the background of the processes of the Thaw and the emergence of this anti-Soviet discourse within it as a turning point in the history of the Soviet Union and as one that was formative for his work. As I argue, the leanings toward Kantian aesthetics that Matevosyan and his peers developed within this discourse were informed by the urge to debunk the Soviet principles of Socialist Realism as it was perceived in the 1960s. Constrained by the logic of opposition to the Soviet principles of art, this group of art historians who received Matevosyan as “the Teacher” read the scattered fragments of idealist philosophy and aesthetics that became

⁶ Mark A Cheetham, *Kant, Art, and Art History: Moments of Discipline*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001, 5.

⁷ Azatyan mentions Matevosyan’s endorsement of neo-Kantian aesthetics in his discussion of national modernism in Azatyan, “Disintegrating progress,” 75.

⁸ Matevosyan had a stroke in 1973 after which was almost unable to work. The studies published after that date are only edited versions of his work before the stroke. As literary critic Yuri Khachatryan remembers, Matevosyan “...considered the stroke as death and divided his life into two parts, as he used to humorously put it – before death and after death.” Yuri Khachatryan, “Wilhelm Matevosyan: Momy Vor Ayrvum Er Ev Luysy Vor Hasnum e Mez” (Wilhelm Matevosyan: The Candle That Was Burning and the Light That Is Reaching Us). In *Yereq Kisadem: Saryan, Kojoyan, Arutchyan* (Three Profiles: Saryan, Kojoyan, Arutchyan), Yerevan: Sargis Khachents, 2002, XL.

⁹ In 1972 the first Museum of Modern Art in the Soviet Union was founded in Yerevan as a result of the efforts of the main apologist of national modernist aesthetics Henrik Igityan. The opening of the museum marks the moment of the institutionalization of this anti-Soviet discourse in the Soviet Union. See Azatyan, “National Modernism,” 109.

available as a result of the policies of the Thaw with almost a religious fervor. The specificity of the reception of Kantian and neo-Kantian philosophy and aesthetics by these art historians in late Soviet Armenia was conditioned by their eagerness to find an escape from Soviet ideology, on the one hand, and the scarcity of the literature they found as an alternative to Soviet official literature, on the other. From a close reading of Matevosyan's work and interviews with his peers an authoritative specter of Kant arises, which these scholars paid reverence to. Although there are testimonies of Matevosyan being influenced by specific neo-Kantian thinkers such as Johannes Volkelt, Wilhelm Windelband, Georg Simmel, Ernst Cassirer, Erwin Panofsky, and, most of all, Heinrich Wölfflin, my thesis will show that the multilayered tradition of Kantianism in Matevosyan's scholarship remains precisely as a specter of an alternative, an indistinct horizon perceived as merely an antidote to the ideology of the Soviet Union.

Joining the Institute of Art of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR in 1955 as a PhD student, Matevosyan gradually formulated a firm position on the autonomy of art while viewing it as the self-expression of an artist's individuality. Through his close personal and artistic ties with one of the cornerstones of modern Armenian art, Martiros Saryan (1880-1972), and his reading of neo-Kantian aesthetics and modernist art criticism, Matevosyan's art historical method claimed to see art from a purely formal perspective. From this vantage point, he re-imagined the work of pivotal artists in the tradition of Armenian art, an endeavor which in turn reveals the political agenda of Matevosyan's art history. His efforts were to uproot the trajectory of the development of Armenian art from the history of Soviet art and reposition the artists' legacy within European modernism while also revealing their ties to Armenian ethnic/national culture. This move, however, was not exceptional to Matevosyan's scholarship. The desire to

locate the development of twentieth-century Armenian art within the currents of Western modernism, while concurrently rooting this art in an ethnic/national perception of Armenian culture, can be seen as the axis around which the art and criticism of the 1960s, retrospectively conceptualized as National Modernist, were evolving.

After Stalin's death in 1953, Nikita Khrushchev became the First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. His famous "secret speech" in the 20th Congress of the CPSU in 1956, titled "On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences" marks the beginning of a chain of reforms known as Khrushchev's Thaw. The First Secretary's task in this momentous speech was to criticize Stalin and several of his allies without undermining the merits of the Communist Party, its devoted workers, and general policies. Consequently, the subsequent period was one of a tamed de-Stalinization in most spheres of social life in the Soviet Union. In addition to other reforms towards the improvement of the country's economic state, Khrushchev's administration closed the gulag labor camps, announced multiple amnesties, and reopened the central libraries that were previously closed by the Stalinist regime.¹⁰ By criticizing Stalin for distancing himself from the Communist party and centralizing his power, the new First Secretary tried to loosen the hierarchic structure of the Party. The central governance of the country from Moscow gave way to a more horizontal structure granting more authority to the local governments of the Soviet Republics.

The policy of decentralization was also reflected in the reevaluation of the criteria for Socialist Realism as a method of representation. The rigid principles of art,

¹⁰ More on Khrushchev's reforms see in Donald A. Filtzer, *The Khrushchev Era: De-Stalinization and the Limits of Reform in the USSR 1953-1964*, Red Globe Press, 1993

such as *partiinnost'* (party-mindedness), *klassovost'* (class consciousness), *ideinnost'* (ideological commitment),¹¹ established in the mid 1930s with a strong emphasis on party and class interests, gave way to milder cultural policies under Khrushchev at the end of the 1950s. *Narodnost* (national/popular spirit) and *sovremennost* (contemporaneity) became the main features of art production promoted by Khrushchev and party organs. The First Secretary accentuated these two aspects of art in the Soviet Union in the context of new political developments in the country in his speech at the Writer's Congress in May 13, 1957.¹² Three years later, in 1960, the Soviet Union's main official art journal, *Iskusstvo* (Art), published an editorial, titled "The Most Important Thing Is Contemporaneity." While drawing attention to the innovative character of fine arts the editorial also criticized modernism for depriving art of its "national uniqueness,"¹³ thus clearly delineating the official politics of repositioning the criteria in art for the 1960s.

The gradually modified principles of Socialist Realism, emerging cultural ties with the West in the context of the Cold War,¹⁴ and relatively horizontal governmental structure, which gave more authority to the local governments of the Soviet republics, resulted in a paradigm shift of cultural discourses in the republics from an orthodox

¹¹ These principles were established by Andrey Zhdanov in the Soviet Writers Congress in 1934. See Andrei Zhdanov, "Soviet literature: The Richest in Ideas, the Most Advanced Literature," in *Problems of Soviet Literature: Reports and Speeches at the First Soviet Writers' Congress*, ed. H. F. Scott (New York: International Publishers, 1935). For more on the Zhdanovite criteria see Leonid Heller, "A World of Prettiness: Socialist Realism and its categories" in Thomas Lahusen, Evgeny Dobrenko (eds) *Socialist Realism in Search of Its Shores*, (Duke University press, 1997), pp. 51-75

¹² Nikita Khrushchev's speech in the meeting with writers in the Central Committee of the CPSU, 1957 <https://refdb.ru/look/2134279.html>.

¹³ "Sovremennost - glavnoe!" *Iskusstvo* 9 (1960): 5.

¹⁴ In 1958 the U.S.-USSR cultural exchange agreement was signed by the United States and the Soviet Union the immediate result of which was the American National Exhibition in Moscow in 1959. Besides, an important organ contributing for these cultural ties was *Amerika*, a Russian-language magazine published by United States Information Agency and distributed in the Soviet Union. See Marilyn S. Kushner, "Exhibiting Art at the American National Exhibition in Moscow, 1959: Domestic Politics and Cultural Diplomacy", *Journal of Cold War Studies* Vol. 4, No. 1, Winter 2002, pp. 6-26.

Stalinist ideology to re-emerging national discourses and increasing affiliations with Western culture. The generation of artists in Soviet Armenia emerging in the wake of the implementation of the cultural policies of the Thaw, amongst whom are Minas Avetisyan, Aleksandr Grigoryan, Henrik Siravyan, Arpenik Ghapantsyan, and others, stretched the categories of *narodnost* and *sovremennost* in their search for modern forms in Armenian national culture. Their work was supported by several art critics of the same generation, such as Henrik Igityan, Shahen Khachatryan, Poghos Haytayan, and others. In the writings of these figures, the Socialist Realist criteria of national/popular spirit accentuated during the Thaw became a gateway from which to pursue the ethnic/national uniqueness of Armenian culture. The criteria of contemporaneity, in turn, reconnected the unique national form with European and American modern art movements. In an article on Minas Avetisyan, the main apologist critic of this movement, Henrik Igityan argued that Avetisyan, along with other painters of “the new generation,” continued the work of the pivotal artists, such as Martiros Saryan, Hakob Kojoyan and Sedrak Araqelyan, in reviving the medieval traditions of Armenian painting with fresh forms. Igityan concludes: “One believes in Minas’s art and believes in it first and foremost because it stems from the soil, from the traditions of national art. At the same time, it is modern and speaks in a unique and fresh language.”¹⁵

Although Wilhelm Matevosyan himself was not very supportive of the art of this new generation that came onto the scene through the cultural policies of the Thaw, the general ideological direction of his scholarship - that of seeing Armenian art exceptionally within the trajectory of European modernism while at the same time

¹⁵ Henrik Igityan, “Arvest, Vorin Havatum Es” (Art That One Believes In). *Grakan Tert*, August 7, 1964.

viewing it as embedded in its the ethnic/national tradition – should be seen in the context of this anti-Soviet aesthetic front of the Thaw. It is not incidental that in his discussions of the pivotal artists of Armenian art mentioned by Igityan, Matevosyan frequently refers to the insights expressed by Igityan in his articles. The pursuit of national Armenian art and modernist interests were also characteristic of the scholarship of other art historians who came on the scene in the wake of Khrushchev’s Thaw. Among them are specialist of medieval Armenian art Lilit Zaqaryan (Ella), one of the founders of Theatre Studies in Armenia Henrik Hovhannissyan, as well as their colleague of a slightly younger generation, Vigen Ghazaryan. While operating within this broad anti-Soviet discourse enabled by the Thaw, each of these art historians had their specificities. Their perception of Soviet ideology, the intensity of their opposition to it, and alternative methods developed by them to overcome that ideology all differed in nuances. These scholars were also inclined towards philosophy and theory to different extents.

Among them, Matevosyan can arguably be seen as the most engaged in philosophical and theoretical alternatives that provided a basis for their ideal of a new scholarship in the country. It is precisely because of his deep engagement with the philosophical bases of art history that Matevosyan’s figure features in the writings of his peers as “the Teacher” while his scholarship is characterized as “high art history.”¹⁶ Echoing Kant, this ideal of art historical scholarship sees an artwork according to universally established stable laws of aesthetics almost irrespective of the historical context of the production and reception of art. The authority of Kant and neo-Kantian aesthetics on these intellectuals, in turn, reveals the logic of the opposition to the Soviet

¹⁶ Vigen Ghazaryan, “Wilhelm Matevosyany Arvesti Tesaban Ev Mshak (Wilhelm Matevosyan: An Art Theorist and Cultivator).” In *Usumnasirutyunner* (Inquiries), Yerevan: Sargis Khachents, 2014, 15.

ideology in its condensed form since Kantian idealism as a signifier of purity comes to secure their escape from what they saw as the contaminated layers of Soviet ideological reality.

In their search for alternatives to Soviet ideology within the sharp and schematic opposition set by the Stalinist establishment between dialectical materialism and philosophical idealism – a schema that lived on even after Khrushchev's de-Stalinization efforts - the works of Kant and neo-Kantian philosophers, as well as other idealist thinkers, became crucial for this generation of art historians. Besides the Kantian influence, their network of references included a tradition of Italian idealist thought, representatives of which were Giambattista Vico (1668-1744) and Benedetto Croce (1866-1952). Croce, in turn, was foundational for the Italian art critic Lionello Venturi (1885-1961) whose views on modern art shaped Matevosyan's, as well as his peers', position towards European modernism. Croce's engagement with both Kantian and Hegelian idealisms can be seen as a bridge toward the influence of Hegelian philosophy in some of these scholars' work. However, the investigation of the traces of this tradition of thought on the anti-Soviet art historians of the 1960s is a task of another study.

The revived questions of national identity among the art historians of this generation prompted an interest in medieval Armenian art. Many of the art historians who worked within the discourse of National Modernism, such as Zaqaryan, Ghazaryan, and others were specialized in Armenian medieval studies. Other scholars, among whom are Hovhannissyan and Matevosyan, turned to medieval studies while basing their main research on the Armenian art of the twentieth century. Matevosyan's scholarship can be characterized as an effort to re-imagine the tradition of the Armenian

art of the twentieth century according to his aspirations of European modernism through ethnic/national unity and in tune with his ideals of the autonomy of art and individuality of the artist. Throughout his career he had completed two studies on medieval art that were published posthumously – “Margare”¹⁷ and “On the Question of the Relationship between the Iconological Scheme and Artistic Individuality in Medieval Armenian Art.”¹⁸ Both of these works can be considered within the aesthetic and ideological agenda of the art historian. However, this thesis puts the main stress on Matevosyan’s efforts of re-imagining the Armenian art of the twentieth century within the currents of European modernism.

Nazareth Karoyan, one of the main protagonists of the contemporary art scene in the newly independent Armenia, reflects upon the context of the anti-Soviet front in Armenian art in the wake of Khrushchev’s Thaw in 1994.¹⁹ In an article titled “Within the Labyrinths of Establishing the Alternative Tradition” Karoyan lays a trajectory of development of “modern or alternative art” the culmination of which was the “postmodern aesthetics” of the art of the 1980s, a movement that heralded contemporary art in Armenia. Karoyan starts this trajectory with the art of the 1960s which he conceptualizes as “national avant-garde.” Considering the work of the generation of the 1960s as formative for the “alternative” art of the next two decades,

¹⁷ The word “margare” translates from Armenian as “the prophet.” It refers to the name of an Armenian miniature painter from the thirteenth century.

¹⁸ Both studies were included in Wilhelm Matevosyan, *Usumnasirutyunner* (Inquiries). Yerevan: Sargis Khachents, 2014.

¹⁹ Karoyan wrote this text in 1994 on the occasion of the exhibition of contemporary Armenian art what opened in Bochum. However, the article was left out of the exhibition catalogue and was only published a year later in *Garun* magazine. See Nazareth Karoyan, “Within the Labyrinths of Establishing the Alternative Tradition.” *Garun*, no. 8 (1995) 90-4, and *Garun*, no. 9 (1995) 90-5.

the art critic nevertheless articulates his doubts about “the attempt at combining the values of the avant-gardist vanguard and national identification.”²⁰ In Karoyan’s view the definition of the avant-garde is somewhat incompatible with national identification. The art critic leaves an open end to this question claiming that there is no need to overestimate it as “postmodernism solves the problem of the avant-garde by making the latter impossible.”²¹ What is revealed here is the critical difference that Karoyan draws between the generation of the 1960s and his own. Within the same umbrella of being “alternative” Karoyan makes a clear demarcation between the premise of historical continuity animating the national avant-garde and the consciousness of what he calls the postmodern current of the 1980s which “renounced the historical imperative inherent to modern consciousness.”²²

Thus, Karoyan’s formulation can be seen as an attempt at defining his and his peers’ position within the current of Armenian art. It is the agenda of institutionalizing the “alternative tradition” (that is, a tradition alternative to Soviet orthodoxy in art) that prompts the art critic to highlight the “alternative” dimension in the art of the 1960s to an extent that he calls it “avant-garde.” In a move that he identifies as “modernist historical consciousness” Karoyan ends up forming a historical trajectory of this alternative tradition which begins from the 1960s with its final destination in the postmodernism of the 1980s, a perspective that can attest to the continuity of the perception of Armenian art between these generations.

In the beginning of the 1990s there was another reflection about the context of the 1960s by writer Ruben Angaladyan. Published as an entry to the catalogue titled

²⁰ Karoyan, “Within the Labyrinths”, *Garun*, no. 9 (1995), 93.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

Abstraksionizmy Hayastanum (Abstractionism in Armenia)²³ Angaladyan's piece starts with Khrushchev's Thaw which in his view "made visible the more or less honest and real image of the development of art in the West and at the same time this very process led to self-awareness."²⁴ Mapping the development of abstract art in Armenia in the 1970s and 1980s Angaladyan's stress is on the "chaotic, pathetic [amount of] information" that was available to the artists in the late Soviet Union. The scattered fragments of information on the art of the West resulted in the fact that the new artistic style developed in the 1960s in Angaladyan's view was not based on conscious choices of aesthetic principles. Although mentioning the opposition this generation had with the official policies Angaladyan focuses on the artists' intuitive search for new forms due to the lack of information conceptualizing the art of the Thaw as "national intuitivism."

These two formulations by Karoyan and Angaladyan reveal different angles of the same discourse. While "national avant-garde" accentuates the opposition of these artists to the official policies of the 1960s, "national intuitivism" puts the emphasis on the specific ways the scattered information from the West the flow of which was made possible by Khrushchev's administration affected the art of the Thaw. Both of these views, however, are embedded in the currents of the development of art of their time. Writing in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union they hardly position the processes of the Thaw and the anti-Soviet discourse emerging from it within the overall history of the Soviet Union and fail to see Khrushchev's reforms in relation to the Soviet political project in its entirety.

It was only in 2010s that a historical perspective on the Soviet Union as a political project became possible in Armenia. In an article published in 2012 titled

²³ *Abstraksionizmy Hayastanum* (Abstractionism in Armenia), Yerevan, Shaghik, 1994.

²⁴ Ibid.

“Disintegrating Progress: Bolshevism, National Modernism and the Emergence of Contemporary Art Practices in Armenia” art historian Vardan Azatyan views the emergence of contemporary art in Armenia from the perspective of the disintegration of the Bolshevik revolutionary project. Azatyan starts the article with the uncanny image of putrescence of the spirit described by Marx in *The German Ideology*. “When the last spark of its life had failed, the various components of this *caput mortuum* began to decompose, entered into new combinations and formed new substances.”²⁵ The art historian argues that the *caput mortuum* is the Bolshevik project itself and “the highly complex process of disintegration of this project constituted the very history of art in Soviet and post-Soviet Armenia.”²⁶ The 70 years of Soviet history is seen in this account as a complex process of the disintegration of the Bolshevik project giving birth to multiple “new substances” on its way. The anti-Soviet discourse emerged from the policies of the Thaw is seen as yet another “new substance” which Azatyan conceptualizes as “National Modernism.”²⁷ The two main ideological foundations of this discourse are the revival of an essentialist understanding of the nation emptied out of class contradictions, and European modernism thought as an antidote to the Marxist-Leninist ideology. In another article titled “National Modernism”²⁸ Azatyan argues: “Entirely the product of the Soviet context, national modernism marked the final disintegration of the internationalism of the Soviet revolutionary tradition, a tradition based on the necessary dialectical relationship between the nation and class.”²⁹ Here the art historian concentrates mainly on National Modernist art practices and art criticism

²⁵ Karl Marx, *The German Ideology* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1998), 33. cited in Azatyan, “Disintegrating Progress”, 62.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid. 73.

²⁸ Vardan Azatyan, “National Modernism.” In *Sweet Sixties: Specters and Spirits of a Parallel Avant-Garde*, 107-120. Sternberg Press, 2013.

²⁹ Ibid. 109.

identifying the factors that animated this discourse: “on the one hand, the Soviet Union’s partial opening toward Western modernism and, on the other, as a result of the revived Russian ethnocentric Orientalism toward Armenia (and the Caucasus in general).”³⁰ In Azatyan’s view the discourse of National Modernism is not inherent only to the art practices of the Thaw. It is rather a broad and complex cultural discourse dominating in late Soviet Armenia from the 1960s on. In his obituary to art historian Lilit Zaqaryan (Ella), Azatyan touches upon the art historiography of National Modernism as well:

Ella was a unique member of a circle of art historians who came to the scene in the 1960-70s. With their devotion to the ideas of national cultural awakening and modernist interests, these art historians aspired to overcome the bureaucratic outlook inherited from Stalinism and the calcified character of the ‘academic’ scholar as a narrow documentarist and uncritical apologist of ‘realism’ in our art history.³¹

Thus, Azatyan’s scholarship on Soviet art and history provides an important angle of positioning the discourse of National Modernism within the broad context of the history of the Soviet Union. In contrast to a number of accounts on Socialist Realism in Soviet Studies that saw the implementation of the politically mandated mode of representation under Stalin in relation to the revolutionary avant-garde aesthetics of the beginning of the century,³² Azatyan’s position rather revolves around the complex

³⁰ Ibid. 108.

³¹ Vardan Azatyan, “Kyanqy Stegtsagortsutyun Lilit Zaqaryani Hishatakin: Mahakhosakan” (Life as a Creation: In the Memory of Lilit Zaqaryan, an Obituary). *Arteria*, March 2017. <http://www.arteria.am/hy/1499106398>.

³² For example, although implemented differently this approach can be seen in works by Boris Groys and Evgeny Dobrenko. See Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship and Beyond*. Translated by Charles Rougle. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992. And Evgeny Dobrenko, *Aesthetics of Alienation: Reassessment of Early Soviet*

dialectic of class and nation critical for the Bolshevik project and fundamental for understanding the genealogy of the canon of Armenian fine arts. In this view, the Leninist dialectic adapted locally by the national communists that saw "the national liberation struggle as intertwined with class struggle"³³ was schematized throughout the history of the Soviet Union affecting the art practices in the country. Azatyan reveals the complexity of the artistic method of Socialist Realism by referring to a critical issue for the Soviet Union as a country – that of nations or nationality.

Basing his thesis on the premise that the history of the Soviet Union should be seen from the perspective of the disintegrating progress of the Bolshevik revolutionary project Azatyan's view runs counter to the cultural studies' approach in Armenia dealing with Soviet history that see the Soviet Union as merely a colonizing empire. The main propagator of this latter position is media and cultural theorist Hrach Bayadyan. The basis of Bayadyan's work is postcolonial studies through the lens of which he sees the Soviet past of Armenia.³⁴ Taking up the theoretical armor provided by the works of Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Homi K. Bhabha and many others Bayadyan's call is to think about the post-Soviet condition through postcolonial theory while reevaluating its key concepts and adjusting them to the specificities of post-Soviet Armenia. I hold that this logic of taking up a ready-made theory and imposing it on the object of research runs a risk of being misguided by the boundaries

Cultural Theories. Translated by Jesse M. Savage. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2005.

³³ Azatyan, "Disintegrating Progress," 65.

³⁴ Over the last decade Bayadyan has published multiple articles on the subject in online periodicals in Armenia. Many of these articles as well as the author's methodological perspective can be found in his later book. See Hrach Bayadyan, *Yerevakayelov Antsyaly Khorhrdahay Ardiakanutyanyan Patumner* (Imagining the Past: Narratives of Soviet Armenian Modernity). Yerevan, 2020.

of that same theory.³⁵ Instead the method implemented by Azatyan calls to take seriously the ideology of the time while conducting its critique immanently.

It is within this methodology and the logic of the disintegrated progress proposed by Azatyan that the work of another art historian Irina Shakhnazaryan should be seen. Specialized in the Armenian art of the beginning of the century Shakhnazaryan's work can be characterized as a critical step beyond the Stalinist schematization of the Bolshevik project in an effort to reveal the intentions and policies of the Bolshevik leadership of the 1920s in Soviet Armenia.³⁶ Taking seriously the ideology of the Leninist Bolsheviks Shakhnazaryan reveals in her work the nuanced cultural policies of the 1920s which then were homogenized and retrospectively revised by the Stalinist administration from the 1930s on.

My current work, too, sees the processes of the Thaw from the perspective of the history of the Soviet Union as a disintegrating progress of the Bolshevik revolutionary project. I position my work within the efforts made by both Azatyan and Shakhnazaryan to reveal the twisted dynamic of the Stalinist policies and go beyond the merely anti-Soviet sentiments prevailing in the scholarship in Armenia up until now. If Azatyan's view provides a methodological ground for the examination of this specific period in Soviet history and its negative connection to the discourse conceived as its antidote,

³⁵ It is the boundaries of post-colonial criticism that makes Bayadyan see, for example, an "ambition to create a counter-hegemonic culture" by the artists of the 1920s in the Soviet Armenia, a view that cannot be supported either through historical examination or by taking these artists' intentions seriously. Bayadyan, *Imagining the Past*, 51.

³⁶ Irina Shakhnazaryan, *Heghaphokhutyun Realizmy. 1920-Akanneri Banavechery Hay Kerparvesti Shurj* (The Realism of the Revolution: The Debates on the Armenian Art of the 1920s). Unpublished. Yerevan, 2020; Irina Shakhnazaryan, "'Haykakan Vochi' nor Hangrvany. Khorhrdahay Arvesti Skzbnavorumy" (The New Destination of the 'Armenian Style' and the Emergence of Soviet-Armenian Art). *Armenia 2018: Realities and Perspectives / Identity 3*, vol. 2 (ed. by Ashot Voskanyan). Yerevan: Armenain Research Center in Humanities, 2020; Irina Shakhnazaryan, "Kanants Azatagman Khndiry 1920-Akanneri Khorhrdahay Mamuli Ejerum" (The Issue of Women's Liberation in the Pages of the Soviet-Armenian Periodicals of the 1920s). In Serakanutyuny Haykakan Hamateqsterum (Sexuality in the Armenian Contexts), 417–80. Yerevan: Socioscope, 2019.

Shakhnazaryan's work on the cultural policies of the Bolshevik government of the turbulent 1920s in Soviet Armenia provide a historical background against which the processes of the Thaw of the later decades can be situated. These efforts to critically rethink the post-Soviet perception of the Bolshevik project reveal a retrospective identification of the Soviet Union with Stalinism, and a respective identification of the entire philosophical tradition of materialism with its Stalinist schematization. I consider the Kantian lore in the works of the anti-Soviet intellectuals of the 1960s to be an outcome of this Stalinist schematization of dialectical materialism.

In what follows I will reveal a horizon of Kantian influences in the scholarship of Wilhelm Matevosyan situating his work within the broad discourse of National Modernism seen as an instance of the disintegration of the Bolshevik revolutionary project. The thesis consists of three chapters. In the first chapter titled "Kant in Soviet Armenia and Wilhelm Matevosyan" I situate Matevosyan within the loose group of art historians who started their career in the wake of the Thaw, then I will proceed to uncover the dynamic of Khrushchev's de-Stalinization efforts and the anti-Soviet sentiments emerging from it. I argue in this chapter that it is the specific characteristics of the de-Stalinization policies of the Thaw and the reception of Kant in the Soviet Union up until the 1960s that condition both the reverence these scholars paid to his philosophy and the vagueness of their references to Kant and neo-Kantian art history. The chapter also looks into Kantian traces in the Armenian humanistic scholarship of both the pre-Soviet years and the first decade of the establishment of the Soviet Armenia, traces that were purged by the Stalinist policies in the 1930s. This shows how

the distortion of the Armenian tradition left the anti-Soviet scholars of the 1960s to re-import Kant into the Armenian literary tradition from scratch, a move that was to deprive them of their own tradition yet again.

The second chapter of the thesis is titled “Wilhelm Matevosyan and ‘The Master’.” It traces a transformation in Matevosyan’s scholarship from serving in the vanguard of the cultural policies of the Thaw to forming anti-Soviet aesthetic views that can be characterized as National Modernist. The chapter uncovers the art historian’s close personal and artistic connection with an artist considered as the architect of the Armenian national style of painting, Martiros Saryan (1880-1972). The revival of Saryan’s legacy after its Stalinist criticism from the mid-1950s became one of the pillars of National Modernism. Matevosyan’s engagement with European modernism and neo-Kantian aesthetics in many ways can be traced through his friendship with Saryan. The scattered fragments of philosophical idealism and neo-Kantian formalist aesthetics that became available to the art historian as a result of the policies of the Thaw as well as the authoritative figure of Saryan helped him to form his ideals of art against Soviet Socialist Realism. After the mid-1960s Matevosyan firmly stands on the grounds of justifying the autonomy of art while seeing the work of art as the self-expression of the individuality of the artist. It is from this perspective that the art historian proceeds to re-imagine the tradition of Armenian art in accordance to his ideals.

The last chapter titled “The Aspiration of ‘Pure Vision’” attempts to see Matevosyan’s work through the perception of the art historian and his scholarship by the intellectuals inspired by him. In the eyes of his peers Matevosyan’s oeuvre presents an ideal of art historical scholarship that is armed with universally established formal

laws and perceived against the principles of Socialist Realism. Through the analysis of Matevosyan's studies on artists Sedrak Araqelyan and Hakob Kojoyan the chapter uncovers in Matevosyan's method the influences of Heinrich Wölfflin's principles of art history and neo-Kantian perceptual psychology widely circulated at the turn of the century German academy. However, this analysis also reveals the negative connection Matevosyan's scholarship has with Socialist Realist art history, a fact that runs counter to the attempts made both by him and his peers to present the art historian as exempt from his own historical conditions.

Ultimately through Matevosyan's oeuvre this thesis uncovers central aspects in a tradition of art history that was animated by Kantian ideals perceived as an antidote to Soviet Socialist Realism of the 1960s.

CHAPTER II

KANT IN SOVIET ARMENIA AND WILHELM MATEVOSYAN

In a study on the Armenian art history of “the new era” art historian Wilhelm Matevosyan discusses an important figure of the emergence of Armenian art historiography in the beginning of the century, Garegin Levonyan (1872-1947). While praising the contribution Levonyan made to publishing the first ever periodical on art in the Armenian context, *Gegharvest* (1872-1947), Matevosyan goes on to criticize his aesthetic views:

From the way he opens up specific problematics it would seem, and he himself hints at it, that for example in his stance on the beautiful, he comes close to the Kantian principle of its pure, autonomous self-sufficiency. However, the process of his judgment shows otherwise. In his judgments in general the starting points adopted as bases are constantly changing and crumbling; the way the questions are posed and developed are in constant flux, slipshod and random.”³⁷

Matevosyan conducted this study in the early 1990s as a researcher at the newly independent Armenia’s Institute of Art of the National Academy of Sciences.³⁸ In an early version of the text, presumably handed to the Institute for peer review, one reads a handwritten note “[the text] is well written, with historical sensibility, historical approach, strict criteria and characteristics... I call the author’s attention to my

³⁷ Wilhelm Matevosyan, “Nor Shrjani Hay Kerpervesti Patmutyunits” (From the Armenian Art History of the New Era). In *Usumnasirutyunner (Inquiries)*. Yerevan: Sargis Khachents, 2014, p 102.

³⁸ The National Academy of the Sciences is the successor of the Academy of Sciences of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic. The Institute of Art is until now a branch of the Academy.

comments; if acceptable, it should be easy to revise.”³⁹ Although it was impossible to find out who was reviewing Matevosyan’s text at that time, both from the criteria of the evaluation and from other comments on the study it becomes obvious that it is a specialist of an older generation whose sympathies are toward Socialist Realism.⁴⁰ On the page about Levonyan, the reviewer mildly confronts Matevosyan’s accusations pointing out in a friendly way that he had gone too far. The study was published only posthumously in 2001 by the independent publishing house Sargis Khachents, and although the publishers claim that the final version was not confirmed by the author, the comparison of the two versions shows that he did make some changes based on the comments. The discussed paragraph on Levonyan, however, stayed exactly the same: the stakes for Matevosyan were higher when it came to Kant for it was the philosopher’s authority that was hovering over his resolutely anti-Soviet method of art history.

In the study he mainly bases his analysis on two articles published in *Gegharvest* by Levonyan in 1908, “Aesthetic Problematics: The Idea of the Beautiful”⁴¹ and “Aesthetic Problematics: What is Taste?”⁴² Here Levonyan’s main intention was first and foremost pedagogical. Drawing a historical overview of the philosophical discussions on the idea of the beautiful he predominantly uses Kant’s idea of “disinterested pleasure” in contradistinction to “gain and profit”: “In our everyday life the main obstacle for the development of taste and aesthetic sensibility of every

³⁹ Wilhelm Matevosyan’s fund in State Museum of Literature and Art after Eghishe Charents (GAT).

⁴⁰ On the margins of the page about Armenian realist painter Gevorg Bashinjaghyan’s views on realism, the reviewer writes: “He was right after all, hell with your Kandinsky and Picasso.” See Wilhelm Matevosyan’s fund.

⁴¹ Garegin Levonyan, “Estetikakan Khndirner: Geghetskutyan Gaghapary” (Aesthetic Problematics: The Idea of the Beautiful). *Gegharvest* 1 (March 1908), pp 1-5

⁴² Garegin Levonyan, “Estetikakan Khndirner: Inch e Tchashaky?” (Aesthetic Problematics: What Is Taste?). *Gegharvest* 2 (1908), pp. 1-4.

individual is interest and utility.”⁴³ Thus, in Levonyan’s case, Kant’s authority is evoked to refine his readers’ aesthetic sensibility without going further into the philosophy itself.

The author concludes the second article with an educational warning:

What to do then? What a difficult situation is created when there is no certain norm or limit for the sense of taste. How should one discuss and critique the works of fine art? First of all, the spiritual must prevail over the material in a person, and thus the question of utility needs to be excluded from aesthetics. Secondly, one needs to form an opinion in a calm and impartial manner, without prejudice, with one’s own understanding and according to one’s own taste...⁴⁴

Although, as Matevosyan himself mentions, Levonyan states earlier in the article that his sympathies are toward Kant’s idea of the beautiful, the final remark quoted above shows that he was evoking Kant in his own historically specific moment as a pedagogical aid. It is a situated approach to Kant’s philosophy where his starting point is that there is no “norm or limit for the sense of taste,” while Kant’s idea of “disinterested pleasure” discussed in the article helps to educate his public on appreciating art without considering its usefulness and without prejudice. The articles are written at the turn of the last century, a period when fine arts as a professional scope of activity was just starting to be established and acknowledged among Armenian intellectual circles mainly residing in Tbilisi, Georgia at the time. Being trained as an artist in St. Petersburg and having studied in Leipzig for a year⁴⁵ before the publication of the periodical *Gegharvest*, Levonyan takes up the pedagogical task of enlightening the wider public on aesthetics and fine arts, grounding this task upon the authority of

⁴³ Ibid. 5.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 7.

⁴⁵ For more on Levonyan's life and work see S. B. Harutyunyan, “Garegin Levonyan.” *Patmabanasirakan Handes* 1 (1970), pp. 229–235.

Kant's philosophy: a case that merits interest on its own in terms of the history of the reception of Kant's philosophy in Armenia. For Matevosyan, however, Kant's authority and influence in Armenia is not seen within a historical trajectory. Rather, it is judged by the criterion of an ahistorical and accurate correspondence to his philosophy. Being heavily influenced by Kantian philosophy himself, Matevosyan could not help but establish a clearly demarcated territory of Kant's philosophy by banishing from it Levonyan's situated usage of the philosopher as "slipshod and random." This characterization itself can be seen as indicative for a scholar with Kantian affiliations, as Kant's philosophy, as scholars who study Kant closely have highlighted, "is marked by a constant preoccupation with limits, boundaries, and prescriptions of proper disciplinary behavior."⁴⁶

Wilhelm Matevosyan was a central figure in a loose group of art historians that included Henrik Hovhannissyan, Vigen Ghazaryan and others, who started their careers in Soviet Armenia in the mid-1950s with a strong anti-Soviet agenda and an eagerness to "reconnect Armenia with European modernity, something they saw aborted by the Bolsheviks."⁴⁷ Ironically, in their efforts to debunk Soviet principles of art and scholarship it was the revival of Kantian philosophy during the 1960s in the Soviet Union that became formative for their scholarship. Both limited by the typically Stalinist schematic polarization of materialism and idealism from the mid 1930s on and benefiting from Khrushchev's reforms toward a tamed de-Stalinization, these scholars' methods can be seen within an indistinct horizon of Kantianism, a vague but authoritative network of references seen through the single aim of invalidating the

⁴⁶ Cheetham, *Kant, Art, and Art History*, 11.

⁴⁷ Azatyan, "Disintegrating Progress, 11.

Soviet ideals of art. This horizon appears not only through Kant himself but also through a complex network of texts of European neo-Kantian philosophers and formalist art historians, such as Georg Simmel, Nicolai Hartmann, Ernst Cassirer, Heinrich Wölfflin, and others. The main characteristic of this network, its indistinctiveness, can be attributed to the status of idealist philosophy in the Soviet Union: despite the context of Khrushchev's cultural liberalization, scholarly adherence to idealism in the late Soviet Union was still unacceptable. One can find very few direct references to Kant's philosophy in the works of these art historians published before the collapse of the Soviet Union. The excavation of the layers of references informing their scholarship resembles an archeological fieldwork. Kant appears as an authoritative specter in personal conversations and anecdotes almost absolutized as the savior from Soviet ideology. The multilayered and divergent tradition of neo-Kantian philosophy and art history is seen by these scholars as merely an antidote to Marxism and Leninism.

To trace Kant's appeal for this group of art historians this chapter takes its cue from Mark A. Cheetham's rather "un-Kantian and frequently anti-Kantian"⁴⁸ method. In contrast to Matevosyan's approach of judging Kant's influence according to an ahistorical criterion, I follow Cheetham in constructing the reception history of Kant's philosophy not through the ideal of "pure philosophy,"⁴⁹ but rather through the historically conditioned "savage receptions"⁵⁰ that formed the authoritative figure of Kant in the discipline of art history. In his book *Kant, Art, and Art History: Moments of Discipline* Cheetham proposes that "the shape of Kant's reception depends in large measure upon what I will describe as 'concurrency,' the specific temporal and 'placed'

⁴⁸ Cheetham, *Kant, Art, and Art History*, 5.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

contexts in which his ideas are received.”⁵¹ Thus, I will investigate in this chapter the somewhat paradoxical dynamic of Khrushchev’s de-Stalinization efforts and the anti-Soviet sentiments emerging from it within which Kantian philosophy was situated in Soviet Armenia. I argue that it is on the basis of this dynamic, and within it, that Kant’s reception was possible by this group of art historians. The specific possibilities of Kant’s reception determine in turn both the reverence these scholars paid to his philosophy and the vagueness of their references to Kant and neo-Kantian art history.

Matevosyan received his PhD in 1960 from The Institute of Art of the Academy of Sciences of Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1960 and from then on worked at the Institute as a researcher until his death. It is in this institution that the art historian met his lifelong allies and friends, historian of theater Henrik Hovhannissyan, art historian Vigen Ghazaryan, specialist of medieval miniature painting of an older generation Levon Azaryan and others. Hovhannissyan later remembers, “Wilhelm Matevosyan was the only person in this institute with whom I could have conversations. He was very well versed in aesthetics and philosophy.”⁵² After the collapse of the Soviet Union, these scholars, along with the active figures of the art scene such as Shahen Khachatryan,⁵³ Henrik Igityan,⁵⁴ literary critic Yuri Khachatryan and others gathered around the Sargis Khachents publishing house founded by Sergei

⁵¹ Ibid., 5.

⁵² My conversation with Hovhannissyan, 15.01.2019

⁵³ Shahen Khachatryan was the director of the Martiros Saryan House Museum from 1967 and of the National Gallery of Armenia from 1991 to 2003.

⁵⁴ Igityan is the founder of the Modern Art Museum in Yerevan (1972) and is considered to be the patron of many artists associated with National Modernism.

Khachikoghlyan in 1993.⁵⁵ With its publications of literature not formerly sanctioned in the Soviet Union, this institution can be seen as a practical attempt to re-connect Armenian thought with European modernism mainly through the practice of translation. Within the first years of its existence in the 1990s Sargis Khachents translated into Armenian and published the writings of Paul Cézanne, Denis Diderot, Paul Gauguin, Henri Matisse, Vincent van Gogh, Charles Baudelaire, as well as photographer Brassai's conversations with Pablo Picasso.⁵⁶

Khachikoghlyan states that Matevosyan's intellectual impact was key to the overall conception of the publishing house.⁵⁷ In literary critic Yuri Khachatryan's words, it meant "to give to each and every reader the perfect library [Matevosyan] imagined in the form of a book published in Armenia, in Armenian."⁵⁸ Khachatryan's later description of Matevosyan indicates their ideological affinities: "He was an individual who read Kant *in the original*. His art history was not based on Soviet art history, but rather on the fine thinkers of the pre-Soviet era, from the beginning of the century. That's where he was coming from, the Marxist-Leninist fatuous lies of sixty years were non-existent for him."⁵⁹ The main principle adapted by the Sargis Khachents publishing house can thus be seen in bypassing the "Marxist-Leninist fatuous lies" and establishing a connection with European modernism inspired first of all by Matevosyan's

⁵⁵ It is only Henrik Hovhannissyan who, although sympathized with the activity of Sargis Khachents, never seems to have been formally included in the editorial board of the publishing house.

⁵⁶ Paul Cézanne, *Namakner, Zruytsner* (Letters, Conversations), Yerevan, Sargis Khachents, 1994; Denis Diderot, *Salonner* (Salons), Yerevan, Sargis Khachents 1994; Paul Gauguin, *Noa Noa, Araj ev Heto, Hodvatsner ev Namakner* (Noa Noa, Before and After, Articles and Letters), Yerevan, Sargis Khachents, 1994; Henri Matisse, *Hodvatsner, Namakner, Zruytsner* (Articles, Letters, Conversations), Yerevan, Sargis Khachents 1999; Vincent van Gogh, *Namakner* (Letters) Yerevan, Sargis Khachents 1999; Charles Baudelaire, *Estetika, Qnnadatutyun*, (Aesthetics, Critique) Yerevan, Sargis Khachents 1999; Brassai, *Zruytsner Pikasoyi het* (Conversations with Picasso) Yerevan, Sargis Khachents 1997.

⁵⁷ My conversations with Sergey Khachikoghlyan, 26.08.2020, 24.09.2020, 13.10.2020.

⁵⁸ Yuri Khachatryan, "Wilhelm Matevosyan," XXVI.

⁵⁹ My conversation with Yuri Khachatryan, 2.09.2020.

scholarship. The latter's role within this group of scholars is best summed up by art historian Vigen Ghazaryan in a text written in 1998 about Matevosyan:

He is richer and more encyclopedic as an interlocutor whose many ideas are spreading among us through lively conversations, conversations that have been fruitful for Levon Azaryan, a talented historian of medieval art – older than Matevosyan himself –, for the brilliant theatre and literary critic Henrik Hovhannissyan, as well as for the writer of these lines. Many ideas are taken from him by literary critics, painters and those who love and appreciate art – in a word, by those who consider themselves students and disciples of the Teacher, Wilhelm Matevosyan.⁶⁰

In line with Ghazaryan's characterization of Matevosyan as "the Teacher," Khachikoghlyan goes as far as to compare the dynamic of their relationship to the imagery of the iconic statue of Mesrop Mashtots, the inventor of the Armenian alphabet and his disciple Koryun. This statue, by sculptor Ghukas Chubaryan made in 1962, is located in front of the building of Matenadaran, the Mesrop Mashtots Institute of Ancient Manuscripts. It presents a monumental figure of the teacher along with his disciple kneeling in front of him showing outmost respect and devotion, an iconography that has since become imprinted on the minds of several generations of Armenians.

⁶⁰ Vigen Ghazaryan, "Wilhelm Matevosyan" 9.



Figure 1 *Ghukas Chubaryan*, The Statue of Mesrop Mashtots, 1962, *Basalt*. Mesrop Mashtots Institute of Ancient Manuscripts, Yerevan.

The statue was installed in the context of the celebration of Mashtots in the aftermath of Khrushchev's policies, which prompted national awakening in many of the Soviet republics.⁶¹ In 1962, Mashtots's 1600th birthday⁶² was celebrated in almost all of the academic institutions in Soviet Armenia.⁶³ Many publications came out to honor the first teacher and translator Mashtots as the cornerstone of the Armenian literary tradition.⁶⁴ In the beginning of the fifth century when the Armenian kingdom was divided between the rule of Byzantine and Sasanian empires, the very existence of Armenian identity was in danger. In this context, Mashtots took up a mission of

⁶¹ Vardan Azatyan calls this phenomenon "the post-Stalinist nationalism of Khrushchev's Thaw". See Azatyan, "Disintegrating Progress," 72.

⁶² In Armenian literary tradition Mesrop Mashots is believed to be born in the year of 362.

⁶³ G. Kirakosyan, "Mashtotsyan Orery Hayastanum" (Mashtots Days in Armenia). *Patmabanasirakan Handes* 3 (1962): 267–69.

⁶⁴ See for example, Leo. *Mesrop Mashtots*. Yerevan: Yerevan State University Press, 1962. The main academic journal, *Patmabanasirakan Handes* published a number of articles on Mashtots during the same year. One of the prominent examples is the editorial to the second volume of the journal by Ashot Hovhannissyan. See Ashot Hovhannissyan, "Mashtotsyan Greri Patmakan Nshanakutyuny" (The Historical Significance of Mashtots's Letters). *Patmabanasirakan Handes* 2 (1962): 3–14.

inventing the Armenian alphabet, founding Armenian schools and starting the translation of the Bible. The laying of the foundation of the literary tradition by Mashtots is seen as an existential salvation in a dire political situation of the 5th century Armenia. The establishment of the tradition of translation is also considered a historical move toward rooting Christianity in Armenia, which previously had been preached in Assyrian or Greek and therefore remained incomprehensible to the wider public.⁶⁵ The celebration of Mashtots as a national hero in the beginning of the 1960s stressed the civilizational aspect of his heroic work thanks to which “the treasury of world thought became the possession of Armenians ... and the Armenian nation in turn was called upon to enter that treasury and participate in it with its independent abilities.”⁶⁶ Through the translation of the Bible and a number of works by Ancient Greek philosophers into Armenian, this revolutionary movement was to connect Armenian culture with Western tradition once and for all. As a result of Mashtots’s endeavor “...in the conflicts with Iran the representative of the West became a nation which through centuries had been under the Iranian flag.”⁶⁷

Thus, for this generation of scholars inspired by the revival of Mashtots within Soviet reality as a result of Khrushchev’s reforms, Mashtots became important not only as the inventor of the alphabet but as a savior who connected Armenian culture, which was under the threat of assimilation and annihilation, to Western thought. Seeing the Soviet years as a threat to the Armenian identity inherently attached to the Western literary tradition, these intellectuals were once again seeking salvation in translation. The comparison with the iconography of Mashtots and his disciple is hence not

⁶⁵ See more on this in Hovhannissyan, *The Historical Significance*, 3-14.

⁶⁶ Leo, *Mesrop Mashtots*, 83.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 135.

incidental, at least on the symbolic level when one considers the politically and dramatically charged longing for what these scholars took to be Western philosophy and art history, which was not sanctioned or welcomed by the Soviet state apparatus. This sentiment is exemplified by Ghazaryan's introduction to Matevosyan's work in the latter's book *Usumnasirutyunner* (Inquiries), posthumously published by Sargis Khachents, where the former characterizes Matevosyan's scholarship by stating:

These characteristics set him apart from both the older generation of art historians of the time and those who had emerged from the art historical schools of Moscow or Leningrad, making of his studies blood-veins toward Austro-German and Italian art historical schools that were fed by neo-Kantianism, Vico, Hegelianism and Croceism.⁶⁸

Ghazaryan's comparison of Matevosyan's studies to blood-veins as a life-saving necessity reveals the author's perception of the Austro-German and Italian art historical schools as life forces: this brings to light the nearly religious fervor these scholars had toward alternatives to the Soviet principles in art history. However, this logic of the alternative itself generates both the deference toward idealist philosophy in a wide sense and the indistinctness of the problematics they were dealing with in this philosophy.

Kant's appeal to this group of art historians in late Soviet Armenia can be revealed through this juxtaposition of indistinctness and deference. His name appears in retrospective conversations or texts about their art history, and Kant himself comes out as a figure whose greatness is indisputable. At the same time, substantial conversations of the specific problematics of his philosophy are not always explicitly stated.

⁶⁸ Vigen Ghazaryan, "Wilhelm Matevosyan" 8.

Khachikoghlyan remembers that “Kant’s books were always on his [Wilhelm Matevosyan’s] nightstand, he used to read them like a symphony you know but continue to enjoy.”⁶⁹ According to him the art historian read all of the Critiques but most of all admired *The Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Prolegomenon*. To my question about Matevosyan’s philosophical allegiances, Ghazaryan reveals his own perception as well: “He was very well-versed in philosophy and naturally knew perfectly the greatest among them, Kant.”⁷⁰ Historian of Armenian theatre Henrik Hovhannissyan also openly announces his sympathies: “I am led by Kant, the basis of my art historiography is Kant and neo-Kantianism. I always tell a PhD student, ‘unless you read the hundred and seventy pages of Kant’s Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgement - there is no Armenian translation of it, it’s in the 5th volume -, you cannot enter art history.’”⁷¹ Hovhannissyan is referring to the Russian translation of Kant’s works, published in the early 1960s by the Institute of Philosophy of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR during the Thaw.⁷² The above-mentioned fifth volume consists of “the works on aesthetics,”⁷³ namely the *Critique of Judgement* and Kant’s first introduction to it. Hovhannissyan’s reference to this Soviet publication calls for looking into Kant’s reception in the Soviet Union throughout the decades of its existence in order to reveal the complex political stakes in which the appeal of Kant was situated.

⁶⁹ My conversation with Sergey Khachikoghlyan, 24.09.2020.

⁷⁰ My conversation with Vigen Ghazaryan, 2.09.2020

⁷¹ My conversation with Hovahnnissyan, 15.01.2019.

⁷² Immanuel Kant, *Sochinenija v Shesti Tomah* (Works in Six Volumes). Edited by Valentin Asmus, Arsenij Gulyga, and Teodor Oizerman. Vol. 5. 6 vols. Moscow: Mysl’, The Institute of Philosophy of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR, 1966.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 6.

Kant was first translated into Russian in 1803,⁷⁴ and different translations of his main works were available in Russia before the October Revolution in 1917.⁷⁵ However, Kant's works were not translated and republished during the first decades of the foundation of the Soviet Union. Prior to World War II a volume was published consisting of works from Kant's pre-critical period which had been translated by Boris Fokht.⁷⁶ Historian of philosophy Aleksey Kruglov mentions that this was the second volume of a planned two-volume publication devoted solely to Kant's pre-critical period the first volume of which never got published.⁷⁷ The lack of Kant's publications in the Soviet Union can be seen as an outcome of the sharp and schematic contradiction set by the Stalinist establishment between dialectical materialism and philosophical idealism, the epitome of which is considered the publication of the book *The History of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks): A Short Course* in 1938.⁷⁸ As "the central text of the Stalin-era canon"⁷⁹ this book was commissioned by Stalin in the early 1930s and became a compulsory reading in the Soviet Union until his death in 1953. It was to centralize the Party education and indoctrination according to Stalin's own perception of the Party history that in many cases justified the Great Terror.⁸⁰ By schematization and oversimplification the book constructs the orthodox Party line, and defines

⁷⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Kantovo Osnovanie Dlja Metafiziki Nravov* (Kant's Foundation for Metaphysics of Morals). Translated by Ya. Ruban. Nikolaev, 1803.

⁷⁵ For a full list of Kant's works translated into Russian before the Revolution, see http://kant-online.ru/?page_id=283

⁷⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Sochinenija:1747–1777* (Works: 1747–1777). Edited by Boris Slivker. Translated by Boris Fokht. Vol. 2. 2 vols. Moscow, 1940.

⁷⁷ Aleksey Kruglov, "Filosofija Kanta v Rossii posle 1945 goda" (The Philosophy of Kant in Russia after 1945) *Kant-Online*, November 29, 2013. <http://kant-online.ru/?p=681>.

⁷⁸ The book was a commission of the Central Committee of the CPSU(B.). *Istorija vsesojuznoj kommunisticheskoj partii (bol'shevikov). kratkij kurs* (History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks): Short Course). OGIZ Gosizdat, 1938.

⁷⁹ David Brandenberger, and M. V. Zelenov. "The Short Course on Party History." *Stalin Digital Archive*, n.d. <https://www.stalindigitalarchive.com/frontend/the-short-course-on-party-history-bradenberger-zelenov>.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

historical and dialectical materialism, in sharp contradistinction to idealism and metaphysics.

During the years of World War II this polarization was at its peak. In 1944, a decree was issued by the Central Committee of the All-Soviet Communist Party of the Bolsheviks, entitled “On the Shortcomings and Errors in the Coverage of the History of German Philosophy of the late 18th and early 19th Centuries.”⁸¹ The decree was in relation to the discussion of Hegel in the third volume of the book series *History of Philosophy*, published in 1943⁸² and dedicated in large part to German classical philosophy. Clarifying the Party line on the matter, this text published by the highest rank of the political establishment, the Central Committee, mandates a specific view of Kant, Fichte and Hegel in the philosophy of the Soviet Union.

The biggest accusation in the decree was that, in their characterization of Hegel’s dialectic and German classical philosophy in general, the authors of the volume were too generous toward the idealist philosophers and failed to clearly demarcate the differences between the idealism of Kant, Fichte and Hegel and the materialism of Marx and Engels. “The authors of volume three did not take into account that the contradiction between the idealist dialectics of Hegel and the Marxian dialectical method mirrors the contradiction of the bourgeois and proletarian worldviews.”⁸³ Selectively quoting Marx, Engels and Lenin, as well as Stalin himself, this decree makes a direct and vulgar connection between class belonging, worldview and

⁸¹ “O nedostatkah i oshibkakh v osveshhenii istorii nemeckoj filosofii konca XVIII i nachala XIX vv” (On the Shortcomings and Errors in the Coverage of the History of German Philosophy of the Late 18th and Early 19th Centuries.) *Istoricheskij Zhurnal* 5–6 (1944): 10–14. Published also in *Bolsheviki*, 7–8 (1944) 16–17

⁸² Georgy Alexandrov, Bernard Bykhovskiĭ, Mark Mitin, and Pavel Yudin. Vol. 3. *Istorija filosofii* (History of Philosophy). Moscow: The Institute of Philosophy of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR, 1943.

⁸³ “On the Shortcomings and Errors.”

philosophical thinking, thus establishing the tradition of German idealist philosophy as clearly opposite to Marxism and dialectical materialism while nearly denying any substantial continuity between the two. Although this document should first and foremost be read within the context of the war with Nazi Germany as an effort to hold German idealism accountable for the worldview that caused World War II,⁸⁴ the schematized contradiction between idealism and materialism in philosophy at a political level was characteristic of Stalinist policies starting as early as the mid-1930s.

After Stalin's death in 1953, reforms toward a tamed de-Stalinization under Nikita Khrushchev's administration were initiated in every aspect of social life including academia. Khrushchev's "Secret Speech" in the 20th Congress of the Party in 1956 formally ended the Short Course's monopoly on the history of the All-Union Communist Party. However, as historians David Brandenberger and Mikhail Zelenov claim "party history would never stray too far from the text's precepts and postulates."⁸⁵ Khrushchev's task was to criticize Stalin and several of his allies without undermining the merits of the Communist Party and its general policies, the history and ideology of which had already been retrospectively revised by Stalin himself. Nevertheless, during Khrushchev's Thaw the Stalinist paranoia of searching for "enemies of the nation" was halted and replaced by liberalization policies that opened up the USSR toward the Western world.

It is within these reformatory policies that the revival of Kant in the Soviet republics needs to be considered. In 1963, the first volume of the six-volume

⁸⁴ The red thread in the decree is the accusation that the authors omitted the fact that "in his works Hegel held the point of view of German nationalism and the purely Prussian principle of domination over other nations." One example of a state-approved approach to German classical idealism during the war is a book by Valentin Asmus *Fashistskaja fal'sifikacija klassicheskoi nemeckoi filosofii* (The Fascist Falsification of German classical philosophy), Moscow, 1942. Interestingly, Asmus was one of the editors to the six-volume publication of Kant in the 1960s.

⁸⁵ See Brandenberger and Zelenov, "The Short Course on Party History."

publication of Kant's works came out. The introduction to the volume by Teodor Oizerman can be considered as one of the early attempts at rethinking the Stalinist contradistinction between materialism and idealism and acknowledging the succession between the two traditions in philosophy. In his text Oizerman clearly states:

"...German classical philosophy theoretically prepared the necessary prerequisites for the transition from metaphysical materialism to dialectical materialism without which scientific socialism would have been inconceivable."⁸⁶ Treating Kant's oeuvre as a whole, the introduction is an effort to rethink Kant within Soviet ideology and give a Marxist account to the philosopher's system. "Without studying the most important works of this thinker it is impossible to conceive the history of dialectics and the role German classical philosophy played in it. It is also necessary to know Kant's works in order to criticize contemporary bourgeois philosophy, many directions of which one way or another are coming from the reactionary sides of Kantianism."⁸⁷

However, despite the efforts to rehabilitate Kant in the Soviet Union the same logic of contradiction between idealism and materialism is at work in Oizerman's text when it comes to the evaluation of Kant's philosophy. After differentiating between the philosopher's pre-critical and critical periods, the author claims: "It needs to be taken into consideration, of course, that this terminology is by no means scientific since by 'pre-critical' philosophy Kant refers to materialism and to a certain extent the rationalistic theories of XVII century, and calls the idealist system of views created by him criticism."⁸⁸ It is worth noting that the translation of the works from the pre-critical

⁸⁶ Teodor Oizerman, "Immanuil Kant - Rodonachal'nik Klassicheskoy Nemeckoy Filosofii (Immanuel Kant - The Forefather of the Classical German Philosophy)." In *Sochinenija v Shesti Tomah* (Works in Six Volumes), 1, Moscow: Mysl', The Institute of Philosophy of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR, 1963, 8.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p 5.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p 16.

period done in the 1930s by Boris Focht is included as the first two volumes in the new publication of the 1960s. This fact in a way shows the discrepant dynamic of Khrushchev's reforms as critical toward Stalinist policies while at the same time maintaining some continuity within the ideology of the Party, which in turn, through Stalin's active efforts, had already been identified with him.

The sketchy context drawn above shows that the relationship some of the art historians of the late Soviet Armenia had with Kantian philosophy should be seen within a complex juncture in which the reception of Kant was situated in the Soviet Union. On the one hand, as an outcome of Stalinist schematization this philosophy was seen by the scholars of anti-Soviet sentiments in the 1960s as an ultimate alternative, a redeemer and a way to bypass the Soviet ideology. On the other hand, although it was possible to find pre-Soviet publications of Kant in 1950s, it was the revival of Kant and neo-Kantian thought during Khrushchev's cautious efforts toward de-Stalinization that made his works widely available and opened them up for academic discussion.⁸⁹ A case in point is Hovhannissyan's reference to the six-volume publication of Kant's works in the 1960s, which he suggests to his students to read up until now. In a way, the terms of opposition to the Soviet ideology in the 1960s were already set by the same ideology and its metamorphoses. One can even argue that these terms also shaped the frame of the intellectual references of the first decades of the newly independent Armenia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Unaware of the complex ties the Armenian intellectual tradition had with Kantian philosophy before the Stalinist purge – during both the pre-Soviet years and the first decade of the establishment of Soviet Armenia – the anti-

⁸⁹ For a list of academic engagements with Kantian philosophy in the Soviet Union the overwhelming majority of which were published after the mid 1950s, see http://kant-online.ru/?page_id=4313.

Soviet scholars re-imported Kant into the Armenian literary tradition from scratch, a move that was to deprive them of their own tradition yet again.

The first translation of Kant in the Republic of Armenia was the *Prolegomenon* published in 2000 by the Sargis Khachents publishing house. In the introduction to the publication the translator Sergey Stepanyan writes:

As for our plans, the pursuit does not end with the *Prolegomenon*; it starts with it. *The Critique of Pure Reason* is in the process of translation, and after its publication we intend to introduce to the Armenian reader other prominent works of classical philosophy. The basis for this program is one important principle: to try to master the most significant monuments of philosophical literature in as short a period of time as possible. In this sense the translation of Kant's work into Armenian is not a matter of preference: in this thinker we have the intellectual axis around which gather all kinds of trends in Western thought, whether in opposition or in agreement.⁹⁰

The rush and urgency expressed in this excerpt characterizes the way in which the intellectuals who later gathered around the Sargis Khachents publishing house saw the Soviet reality of seven decades as a tragic interruption of the “golden age of national spiritual awakening”⁹¹ of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Stepanyan finds the remedy to this perceived deprivation in his efforts to fast forward to Kant and “all kinds of trends in Western thought.” It goes without saying that Marxism is not included in this trajectory of Western thought, just as Kant was once excluded from the Soviet philosophical literature under Stalin. The founder of Sargis Khachents

⁹⁰ Stepanyan, Sergey. “Kanty Ev Ir Prolegomennery” (Kant and His Prolegomenon). In *Prolegomenon*. Yerevan: Sargis Khachents, 2000, XXX. The editor of Stepanyan's translation of this work is Levon Abrahamyan, one of the first philosophers studying Kant in the Soviet Armenia in the 1960s.

⁹¹ Azatyan, “Disintegrating Progress,” 72.

Khachikoghlyan states that Stepanyan translated *Prolegomenon* from the same copy Matevosyan used to keep on his nightstand. It was the art historian who prompted the translation and gave his personal copy to Stepanyan. Uncoincidentally, the two works of Kant mostly praised by Matevosyan, *The Critique of Pure Reason* and *Prolegomenon*, are the only works by the philosopher translated into Armenian and published by Sargis Khachents until now.⁹²

Khachikoghlyan remembers that “when [the *Prolegomenon*] was published [Matevosyan] proudly put it on his bookshelf and used to say, ‘I know, I gave [him] the book, I urged him to translate it, I looked at it and gave my opinion in the process. Now I see it and can’t believe that there is a Kant in Armenian.’”⁹³ However, Matevosyan could not know that Stepanyan’s was not the first translation of Kant into Armenian. It was Varazdat Teroyan (1887-1938), a graduate of the Department of Philosophy at the Sorbonne University, who first undertook the task of translating the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Prolegomenon* at the beginning of the twentieth century, a work that has been actively forgotten after he became a victim of Stalinist purges at the end of the 1930s. Teroyan and his family were active members of the Armenian conservative party Dashnaktsutyun that was hitherto banned under the Soviets, and the philosopher was deeply involved in the academic, political and social life of the country both during the short years of the independent Republic of Armenia (1918-1920) and the first decade of the formation of the Soviet Republic of Armenia in the 1920s.⁹⁴

⁹² The *Critique of Pure Reason* was published only five years after Matevosyan’s death. See Immanuel Kant, *Zut Banakanutyun Qnnadatutyun* (Critique of Pure Reason). Translated by Sergey Stepanyan. Yerevan: Sargis Khachents, 2006.

⁹³ My conversation with Khachikoghlyan, 24.09.2020

⁹⁴ Ruben Sahakyan, “Varazdat Teroyani Kyanqy Ev Gortsuneutyuny” (The Life and Activity of Varazdat Teroyan). In *Gitakan Ev Hraparakakhosakan Ashkhatutyunner* (Scientific and Publicist Works), 5–26. Yerevan: The Institute of Philosophy NAS RA, 2006.

Along with pedagogical work and many translations done at the beginning of the twentieth century Teroyan was the initiator of the first Armenian Philosophical Society, the bylaws of which were declared to Soviet Armenia's Commissariat of Internal Affairs in 1923.⁹⁵ The bylaws state a clear intention to ensure “the study of philosophical scholarship and its problematics as well as the development of appropriate literature in Armenian.”⁹⁶ Although there is no further evidence of the activity of the Society, the members who signed and sent the letter to the Commissariat were Hakob Harutyunyan, Karapet Meliq-Ohanjanyan, Missak Khostikyan, Khurshud Meliq-Parsadanyan and Harutyun Mirza-Avagyan. Except for the last member, all the others were graduates of different universities in Europe who “related to philosophy one way or another”⁹⁷ and had their impact on the development of the humanistic disciplines in the newly established Soviet Republic of Armenia.

The information about the academic activities of these scholars is scarce as the majority of them later became victims of the Stalinist purge. It is known, however, that in the early 1920s many of them were in close collaboration with the Soviet government. Teroyan himself was included in “the Committee of Philosophical Terminology at the Marxism-Leninism Institute” where he worked on philosophical dictionaries from French and German into Armenian.⁹⁸ One of the rare biographies of the philosopher

⁹⁵ See, Ruben Sahakyan, “‘Hay Pilisopayakan Ynkerutyun’ Stegtsman Patmutyunits” (From the History of the Creation of the “Armenian Philosophical Society”). *Lraber Hasarakakan Gitutyunneri* 3 (2007): 224–29. Ashot Grigoryan, “‘Mayr Araxi’ Ev ‘Hayr Hrenosi’ Mijev: Missak Khostikyann u Nra David Der Philosoph Avartatchary” (Between ‘Mother Araxes’ and ‘Father Rhine’: Missak Khostikyan and His Dissertation David the Philosopher). In *David Pilisopan* (David the Philosopher), by Missak Khostikyan. Nerqin Grots. Yerevan: Johannissyan Institute, 2020, 388-390.

⁹⁶ “Nakhagits Kanonadrutyun Hay Pilisopayakan Ynkerutyun” (A Layout of the Bylaws of the Armenian Philosophical Society). In *David Pilisopan* (David the Philosopher). Yerevan: Johannissyan Institute, 2020, 257.

⁹⁷ Grigoryan, “Between ‘Mother Araxes’ and ‘Father Rhine’”, 389.

⁹⁸ Sahakyan, “The Life and Activity of Varazdat Teroyan” 17. It is unclear from Sahakyan’s formulation whether the mentioned institute was the Armenian branch of the Marx-Engels institute

published in 2006 claims that most of the translations done by Teroyan were commissioned by the Soviet authorities.⁹⁹ Besides the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Prolegomenon* Teroyan also translated works of classical philosophers such as Descartes' *Method of Doubt*, Spinoza's *Ethics* and Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* as well as works of philosophers contemporary to him, such as Wilhelm Windelband's *A History of Philosophy*.

Although the influence of neo-Kantianism on Teroyan's work is not studied, the translation of one of the major works of Windelband – the leading figure of the Baden school of neo-Kantianism – widely circulated in European academic circles at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century¹⁰⁰ is not surprising if one considers that many of the scholars including Teroyan himself as well as revolutionary figures in Armenia at the time received their education in major European universities. Windelband was especially important for literary critic and philosopher Hayk Gyuliquevkhyan (1886-1951), a Marxist and a Bolshevik who was actively involved in the work of laying the institutional basis of the Soviet Republic of Armenia during the 1920s.¹⁰¹ Gyuliquevkhyan studied in Jena, Leipzig, Zurich and Heidelberg at the beginning of the twentieth century. It is at the University of Heidelberg that the

established in 1919 in Moscow or Teroyan was working in Moscow himself at the time. However, this major academic institution in the Soviet Union was renamed "Institute of Marxism-Leninism of the CC CPSU" only after 1956. This minor nuance reveals Sahakyan's view as itself was altered by the changes established during the Thaw.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ For more on Windelband's history of philosophy the wide circulation of the book *A History of Philosophy* see Gerald Hartung, and Valentin Pluder, eds. *From Hegel to Windelband: Historiography of Philosophy in the 19th Century*. De Gruyter, 2015. Also, Páez, Jacinto. "The Neo-Kantians and the Polemic on the History of Philosophy." *Studia z Historii Filozofii* 3, no. 10 (2019): 5–26.

¹⁰¹ Gyuliquevkhyan moved to Armenia in 1920, worked as the editor of several newspapers, such as *Communist*, *Karmir Shirak* and *Verelq*. In 1923 assumed a position in the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Armenia. He has also been the vice-rector of the Yerevan State University during the years 1924-1927. See V. Ghazanjyan, "Anvani Gitnakann u Mankavarjhy" (The Famous Scholar and Pedagogue). *Patmabanasirakan Handes* 1 (1986): 55–62

scholar attended classes by Windelband and “undertook the writing of his dissertation”¹⁰² under his supervision. Although Gyuliquevkhyan continued his studies after the Stalinist purges, the influences of neo-Kantianism in his scholarship are long buried.¹⁰³ However, a nuanced study of Gyuliquevkhyan’s oeuvre can reveal an interesting vein of Marxist neo-Kantianism in Soviet Armenian scholarship.

Another line of scholars inspired by neo-Kantian philosophy in early twentieth-century Armenia is revealed in the first academic publication of philosopher and theologian Missak Khostikyan’s dissertation translated into Armenian. Khostikyan started his studies at the Gevorgyan theological Seminary in Etchmiadzin in 1896, then moved to study philosophy at the University of Marburg and Strasburg, eventually defending his dissertation at the University of Bern’s Department of Philosophy in 1907. In an article titled “The Rigorous Scholarship and Poetic Aesthetics of the ‘Witness’: Missak Khostikyan’s Religious Philosophy,” Vardan Azatyan presents a philosophical engagement with his legacy. Among other problematics the article sheds light on the role played by Kant’s idea of the “categorical imperative” in Khostikyan’s thought tracing it to the German Protestant tradition formative for the philosopher. Azatyan then goes on to uncover an entire line of influences Kant had on the Armenian literary tradition:

In this also Khostikyan is a successor of a specific tradition of the nineteenth-century Armenian enlightenment: Kant’s categorical imperative

¹⁰² Ashot Hovhannissyan, “Husher Antsyalits: H. Gyuliquevkhyan Tsndyan 80-Amyaki Artiv” (Memoirs from the Past: On the 80th Anniversary of Hayk Gyuliquevkhyan’s Birthday). *Lraber Hasarakakan Gitutyunneri* 3 (1966): 73.

¹⁰³ The majority of articles on Gyuliquevkhyan dismiss his connections to neo-Kantianism. An example of this is Ghazanjyan, “Anvani Gitnakann u Mankavarjhy.” One of the rare, if not only, testament of his connection to Windelband can be found in Hovhannissyan, “Memoirs from the Past”.

in its time had inspired Nazaryants¹⁰⁴ as well as Petros Shanshyan¹⁰⁵ and Stepan Voskan.¹⁰⁶ Kant was of special importance for Khostikyan's reformist professors at the Seminary: they were direct followers of neo-Kantian protestant theology to a degree that one might speak of an "Etchmiadzin neo-Kantian tradition" the last representative of which was perhaps Khostikyan.¹⁰⁷

The efforts to unveil traces of neo-Kantianism in the Armenian tradition from the beginning of the twentieth century are yet insufficient. And although there is little research done in this area, at least two discernable lines of scholarship influenced by neo-Kantian philosophy can be detected in the Armenian intellectual tradition of the turn of the century. In the 1920s, the Bolshevik government of Soviet Armenia valued these scholars' contributions and welcomed their professional expertise in the construction of the newly established republic. Their differences with each other, and even oppositions to Marxism as a school of thought,¹⁰⁸ can be seen as an integral part of the turbulent environment of the decade. The Stalinist regime, however, could not tolerate scholars of their pedigree. Many intellectuals of the early twentieth century who had connections with the Western world, including Teroyan and Khostikyan, were not considered credible members of Soviet society under Stalin and were assassinated during the Stalinist purges at the end of the 1930s. Their work was mainly destroyed

¹⁰⁴ Stephanos Nazaryants (1812-1875) is a publisher, publicist, historian of literature and one of the pioneers of the Armenian enlightenment

¹⁰⁵ Petros Shanshyan (1819-1889) is a publicist and pedagogue.

¹⁰⁶ Stepan Voskan (1825-1901) is a publisher, publicist, translator and pedagogue.

¹⁰⁷ Vardan Azatyan, "'Vkayi' Gitutyunn u Geghagitutyuny: Missak Khostikyani Kronapilisoayutyuny" (The Rigorous Scholarship and the Poetic Aesthetics of the 'Witness': Missak Khostikyan's Religious Philosophy). In *David Pilisopan* (David the Philosopher), by Missak Khostikyan, Nerqin Grots. Yerevan: Johannissyan Institute, 2020, 449.

¹⁰⁸ Having a religious pedigree Khostikyan, for example, was absolutely opposed to Marxist ideology. See Grigoryan, "Between 'Mother Araxes' and 'Father Rhine'," 385.

and has since been actively forgotten, while many of the Bolshevik officials who provided opportunities for them in the 1920s fell victim to the same repressions.¹⁰⁹

With the annihilation of entire traditions of scholarship as a result of Stalinist policies the perception of the pre-Soviet “golden age” Matevosyan and his peers were imagining, was itself altered. The work of many of these prominent thinkers and scholars laid the very institutional basis of the Soviet Republic of Armenia during the 1920s. Their assassination and exile during the Stalinist purge prepared the ground for a total identification of Stalinism with the Soviet Union in the eyes of the generation of the 1960s. The political and ideological complexity, which was characteristic of the first decade of the Soviet Republic and which allowed a wide range of specialists to contribute to social life, was grossly oversimplified and schematized through the brutal political act. Stalin’s logic of polarization resulted in the fact that, in retrospect, the word “Bolshevik” was seen as an insult for the anti-Soviet intellectuals in the 1960s. Thus, the return of the old Bolsheviks from exile after their rehabilitation during Khrushchev’s Thaw created a dramatic atmosphere of misunderstanding.

Among those old Bolsheviks who returned from exile in the mid 1950s was Ashot Hovhannissyan, the first People’s Commissar of Enlightenment of Soviet Armenia, who had played a major role in the cultural life of the 1920s. His dramatic return epitomizes the irreversible distortion in Matevosyan’s and his peers’ perception of the 1920s. Hovhannissyan was one of the many Armenian students who studied in Europe at the beginning of the century. Throughout the years of 1906-1913, he studied philosophy and history at the universities of Jena, Halle and at the Ludwig-Maximilian

¹⁰⁹ As an example, one of Teroyan’s translations done at the beginning of the twentieth century was unveiled and published only in 2010, see Immanuel Kant, *Zut Banakanutyun Qnnadatutyun* (Critique of Pure Reason). Translated by Varazdat Teroyan. Yerevan: Academy of Sciences, RA, 2010. Meanwhile, the first attempt to approach Khostikyan’s oeuvre was in 2020, see Missak Khostikyan, *David Pilisopan* (David the Philosopher). Nerqin Grots. Yerevan: Johannissyan Institute, 2020.

University in Munich. Combined with his revolutionary activities and invaluable contribution to the formation of the institutional apparatus of the cultural life of Armenia in the 1920s, this highly complex thinker is also considered as one of the founders of Armenian historiography.¹¹⁰

In an early version of Matevosyan's book *Conversations with Saryan*,¹¹¹ there is a testimony of the friendship between Hovhannissyan and the author. Talking about the Armenian poet Eghishe Charents, Matevosyan condemns his alliances with the Bolsheviks and sympathies toward Lenin during the 1920s. In response to his accusations, Martiros Saryan, one of the cornerstones of the Armenian fine arts of the modern era, states (though not in opposition to Matevosyan's evaluation of Bolshevism):

Dear Wilhelm, so what can we do if he accepted the idea of communism, if he had communist or Dashnak friends... so what? Are you condemning me now for having both Nikol Aghbalyan and Alexander Miasnikyan as close friends?¹¹² Should I condemn you for having Ashot Hovhannissyan as a friend, although I know very few friends of this kind who have extremely opposite views (and I know both of you very well)?¹¹³

¹¹⁰ Vardan Azatyan, "Voch Eghitsi Cheghyal Zor Inch Eghevn': Ashot Hovhannissyani Avartachary Ev Nra Grotsun Patmagrutyuny" (That Which Has Been Cannot Seize to Be: Ashot Hovhannissyan's Dissertation and His Active Historiography). In *Israyel Orin Ev Hay Azatagrakan Gaghapary* (Israel Ori and the Armenian Liberation Idea), by Ashot Hovhannissyan, 567–710. Nerqin Grots. Yerevan: Johannisyan Institute, 2016.

¹¹¹ Wilhelm Matevosyan, *Zrutsner Saryani Het* (Conversations with Saryan). Yerevan: Sargis Khachents, 2002.

¹¹² Nikol Aghbalyan was the Minister of Education and Culture of the First Republic of Armenia during the years of 1919-1920. Aleksandr Miasnikyan was an Armenian Bolshevik revolutionary who in 1921 became the Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars of Armenia, the newly installed government of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic. Saryan brings up these two figures as an example of two extreme oppositions.

¹¹³ Wilhelm Matevosyan's fund in State Museum of Literature and Art. Saryan's relationship with Hovhannissyan started at the beginning of the century. It was Hovhannissyan's efforts as the People's Commissar of Enlightenment of Soviet Armenia at the beginning of 1920s that many intellectuals were invited to contribute to the process of the creation of the country's institutional infrastructure. One of these "fellow travelers" was Saryan himself.

The book is a series of dialogues between Matevosyan and Saryan retrospectively documented by the art historian.¹¹⁴ Although the above-mentioned testimony is in all of the four versions of the text stored in Matevosyan's archive, it did not make it into the book itself. The author erased it in the last version before publication in line with his desire not to have anything in common with the Bolsheviks – a move of retrospective self-purification characteristic of his methods in general. When asked about Matevosyan's friendship with Hovhannissyan, literary critic Yuri Khachatryan lashed out: "Being friends with Ashot Hovhannissyan is not a big deal. It is not something honorable. For me, he is the most objectionable person among Armenians, the fiercest Bolshevik of all."¹¹⁵

Through this identification of the old Bolsheviks involved in the foundation of Soviet Armenia with Stalinism, the anti-Soviet scholars of the 1960s maintain the same logic of Stalinism that erased and distorted their own tradition. Incidentally, in his intellectual biography of Hovhannissyan, Azatyan describes the position Hovhannissyan was in after his rehabilitation as "an anachronism from times erased."¹¹⁶ Azatyan's formulation indicates the impassable gap between Hovhannissyan and his friend Matevosyan which could not be overcome. A typical example of this deeply rooted misunderstanding is expressed by Khachikoghlyan:

After one of [Matevosyan's] papers got published, Hovhannissyan called him to his office and said, 'listen, who do you think you are deceiving? Are you trying to sneak in neo-Kantian philosophy here? These illiterate [censors] of the Central Committee understand nothing: you are not giving

¹¹⁴ The conversations are not dated, however in his introduction the author states that they took place throughout the decade of his friendship with Saryan, from the late 1950s up until the artist's death in 1972. In the postscript, the publisher Sergey Khachikoghlyan states that Matevosyan started to write the dialogues down from the end of the 1980s and worked on the book up until 1998.

¹¹⁵ My conversation with Khachatryan, 2.09.2020.

¹¹⁶ Azatyan, "Ashot Hovhannissyan's Dissertation and His Active Historiography," 698.

any names, but I do see what kind of ideas and philosophy you are developing underneath. Be wary, I will bring up your case. Of course, he would not do anything, Hovhannissyan was an honest man – a materialist with a shallow worldview, but honest. He went to Germany at the peak of neo-Kantianism, studied with its founder Otto Liebman and others (by the way, he was not the only one, there was also another one, Gyuliquevkhyan). They were sent to become human,¹¹⁷ but came back and instead became Bolshevik revolutionaries.¹¹⁸

Khachikoghlyan’s sentiment perfectly sums up the inverted Stalinist logic that confines these thinkers’ perception of idealism in contradiction to materialism. Here the materialist philosophy is ripped off of all its relevance and inherently identified with Stalinism in contradiction to which idealism is seen as a salvation. It is within this perception that Western thought is seen as homogenized and as almost identical with idealism. Because of the same Stalinist schematization, the eager desire articulated in Stepanyan’s introduction for mastering “all kinds of trends in Western thought,” which necessarily centers around Kant, was overshadowing the already inherited complex ties Armenian scholarship had with that same thought.

Hovhannissyan and his childhood friend Gyuliquevkhyan indeed attended the lectures of Otto Liebman at the University of Jena in 1906. In an article written on the occasion of Gyuliquevkhyan’s birthday, Hovhannissyan describes the journey they both took from their hometown Shushi to Europe against the background of their intense political engagement with the ideological clashes between the Marxists and the representatives of nationalist parties after the revolution of 1905. Claiming that they

¹¹⁷ “To become human” is an expression in Armenian that characteristically refers to receiving education. On the accentuation of education constitutive of the Armenian enlightenment movement, see Lusine Chergeshtyan, “Serakanutyun Sahmanagitsy: Knoj Derakatarutyun Veraimastavorumy 19-rd Dari Hay Parberakan Mamulum” (The Border of Sexuality: The Reevaluation of the Women’s Role in the Armenian Periodicals of the 19th Century). In *Serakanutyuny Haykakan Hamateqsterum* (Sexuality in the Armenian Contexts), Yerevan: Socioscope, 2019, 302.

¹¹⁸ My conversation with Khachikoghlyan, 26.08.2020.

both embraced Russian social democracy only after starting their studies in Jena, Hovhannissyan in the article does not oppose their political commitment to the neo-Kantian scholarship they were getting acquainted to at the University. He then goes on to mention other neo-Kantian professors of Gyuliquevkhyan in Leipzig and his preoccupation with Windelband's thought.¹¹⁹ In contrast to "Windelband's Armenian student,"¹²⁰ Gyuliquevkhyan, Matevosyan's perception of neo-Kantianism was formed through the scattered fragments either published as a result of Khrushchev's Thaw or pre-Soviet translations into Russian. This indistinct horizon of neo-Kantianism was embraced in isolation with the promise to present a strong opposition to Soviet ideology, in general, and in order "to debunk Soviet principles of realism in art"¹²¹, in particular.

Thus, as I have discussed throughout this chapter, the specificity of the late Soviet Armenian aesthetic neo-Kantianism which I attempt to reveal mainly through the figure of Matevosyan should be seen within this logic of schematized opposition set between idealism and materialism in the Soviet Union under Stalin. The polarized homogenization of these two monumental traditions of thought, one of which was completely identified with the ideals of the Soviet Union retrospectively usurped by the Stalinist policies, resulted in an unambiguous reverence toward Kantian idealism and neo-Kantian formalist aesthetics among the anti-Soviet intellectuals in the 1960s. It is within this logic that both Matevosyan's ideal of Armenian art and his methodology of art history is unraveled in the upcoming chapters.

¹¹⁹ Hovhannissyan, "Memoirs from the Past", 73.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Azatyan, "Disintegrating progress," 75.

CHAPTER III

WILHELM MATEVOSYAN AND “THE MASTER”

Wilhelm Matevosyan entered Soviet Armenian art historiography in 1955, at the very beginning of the processes of tamed de-Stalinization after Stalin’s death in 1953. The liberalization policies of the Thaw launched by Khrushchev had their impact on the academic life of the country and became formative for the art historian. It is in the spirit of these reforms that Matevosyan wrote his first scholarly article on one of the cornerstones of Soviet Armenian art Martiros Saryan which became life changing for the art historian.

Martiros Saryan (1880-1972) is a truly constitutive figure of the Armenian art of the twentieth century who is nearly considered to be “*the* architect of what is now conceived as the Armenian national style of painting.”¹²² Receiving his artistic education at the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture in the studio of modern painters Valentin Serov and Konstantin Korovin at the turn of the century, Saryan had already earned his place in the art scene in Russia before the October Revolution in 1917. Inspired by Russian Impressionism and Symbolism his early works were discussed and praised among the intellectual circles of Moscow during the 1910s. Already an established artist he was invited by the first Bolshevik government of Soviet Armenia to contribute to the construction of the cultural life of the new country. During the 1920s he became pivotal both for the institutional establishment of art and the formation of the Armenian style of painting in the socialist country. However, after the institution of the doctrine of Socialist Realism with its schematized ideological

¹²² Azatyan, “Disintegrating Progress,” 67.

categories from the mid 1930s on, Saryan's art was criticized as both bourgeois and formalist. In the wake of the Thaw the legacy of the artist was being rehabilitated after its Stalinist critique. The first article by the young art historian Matevosyan, titled "On the Question of the Evaluation of Martiros Saryan's Artistic Evolution" was inspired by the processes of revision of the artist's legacy started from the mid 1950s.

This article became the opportunity for the art historian to meet Saryan himself and start a friendship transformative for his scholarship. In its beginnings as the vanguard of the cultural policies of the Thaw Matevosyan revisits his ideal of Armenian art through the personal and artistic close connection with Saryan. The scattered fragments of philosophical idealism and neo-Kantian formalist aesthetics available to the art historian through the policies of the Thaw help him to form a firm justification of the autonomy of art while allowing him to see the work of art as the self-expression of the individuality of the artist. Armed with these methodological tools Matevosyan's scholarship grows into an anti-Soviet front of the late Soviet Armenian art historiography, one that can be seen within the discourse retrospectively conceptualized as "National Modernism." From this perspective Saryan's work appears within the tradition of European modernism at the same time remaining closely attached to the ethnic/national character of the Armenian medieval art.

During the 1960s Saryan's figure yet again became important for the artists and art critics, now constituting an anti-Soviet front. Saryan came to epitomize the ideal of art for this generation which "originated in the depths of the national consciousness and necessarily aimed at modernization."¹²³ For Matevosyan, however, the friendship with Saryan was more than important: it shaped his standpoint as an art historian which in

¹²³ Azatyan, "National Modernism," 114.

turn re-shaped Saryan's legacy according to Matevosyan's own ideals of art animated by neo-Kantian formalism. Revealing an evolution in Martirosyan's scholarship through his friendship with Saryan I will investigate in this chapter the complex dynamic of the art historian's engagement with European modernism through neo-Kantian aesthetics and his re-interpretation of Saryan's art within the logic of de-Stalinization of Khrushchev's Thaw. The position formed within this complex juncture for Matevosyan then becomes a vantage point to re-imagine the tradition of Armenian art. The discussion of the purely aesthetic and formal dimensions of the artworks that he upheld in turn reveals the political agenda of Matevosyan's art history which is to uproot the artists discussed by him from Soviet art history and situate their work within European modernism while also revealing their ties to Armenian national culture.

After a long recess from 1941 a new issue of the official journal *Sovetakan arvest* (*Soviet Art*) was published in Armenia in 1955. The editorial of the first issue states an urgent need for developing "criticism and self-criticism among our artists"¹²⁴ proclaiming the resumption of its publication as a step towards that task. While this demand was not a break from the Stalinist self-flagellating pathos of self-criticism, the resumption of the journal, however, seems to offer a step beyond. The first section after the editorial introduction is dedicated to Martiros Saryan's 75th birthday. In the section presented are pieces by the first head of the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment of the USSR Anatoly Lunacharsky (1875-1933), Armenian poet Avetiq Isahakyan (1875-1957), Georgian painter Ucha Japaridze (1906-1988) and Russian painter and academic

¹²⁴ "Mets Aneliqner" (Great Things to Do). *Sovetakan Arvest* (*Soviet Art*), no. 1 (1955), 7.

Igor Grabar (1871-1960). In the editorial introduction of the issue there is a warning about Grabar's article: "This first issue of our journal has published academic Igor Grabar's article about Martiros Saryan's work. The article contains controversial theses..."¹²⁵ Grabar himself acknowledges the controversial character of his thoughts:

I know that for favoring Saryan's art I will perhaps be accused of all the deadly sins of formalism, and will be directly classified as an enemy of realism. I am not afraid of that ... All the things that came to replace impressionism, - cubism, expressionism, futurism, surrealism and other "isms" – I cannot accept all of them.¹²⁶

Considering impressionism as "a unique phase of realism" Grabar unequivocally reclaims Saryan as a realist "in all his essence."¹²⁷ The author then points his arrow of criticism towards "the contemporary priests of art history" who in his opinion interpret realism as they please and, in whose hands, even Courbet would have been accused of formalism. Grabar's position doesn't come out of nowhere. Being an established figure before the revolution his work as an art critic and museologist had been formative for the history of Russian art. Receiving his training as an artist in Munich at the beginning of the century and having close ties with European modern movements, Grabar became the executive director of the Tretyakov gallery in 1913 and started a chain of reforms to turn it "into a museum of a European type."¹²⁸ It is through Grabar's reformatory policies that two works by the young Saryan were purchased by the Gallery at the

¹²⁵ Ibid. 5.

¹²⁶ Igor Grabar, "Chshmarit Arvesti Uzhy" (The Power of the True Art). *Sovetakan Arvest* (Soviet Art), no. 1 (1995): 12.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Wayback Machine. "The Tretyakov Gallery After Tretyakov, 1899-1918." Internet Archive, n.d. <https://bit.ly/3bKZLVX>.

beginning of the 1910s.¹²⁹ Already during the late 1910s and the beginning of the 1920s, amidst the heated artistic debates in the Soviet Union, Grabar was among the very few artists in Russia still working “in a traditional style” who sympathized the moderate policies of the first Bolshevik leadership and accepted Lunacharsky’s offer of cooperation.¹³⁰ He would later state that during these years as the head of the Museums and Preservation Section of the Soviet Government he had to balance two extreme standpoints, “the destruction of heritage and obstruction of avant-garde artists,”¹³¹ while being the “main exponent of conservation”¹³² himself. Thus, Grabar’s general approach to art history and museology was formed through his close contact with European modernism and the early heated debates on Soviet art before the institutionalization of the doctrine of Socialist Realism. At the same time his approach towards Saryan’s art is substantiated by his deep knowledge of the artist and his work from its very emergence. It is from this perspective that Grabar detects the faults of the established perception of both realism and formalism which were perceived in sharp opposition to each other as a result of the Stalinist schematization of the two. By challenging this view after Stalin’s death, he daringly questions the accusation of formalism in Saryan’s work, one that was widespread within the ideologically charged Stalinist art history of the previous decades.¹³³

¹²⁹ Ibid. Saryan himself mentions the purchase of his works by the Tretyakov Gallery in his memoirs in Martiros Saryan, *Grarrunner Im Kyanqts* (Notes from My Life). Yerevan: Sovetakan Grogh, 1966, 96.

¹³⁰ In her study Shakhnazaryan mentions Grabar’s commitments amidst the turbulence in the art scene in Russia of the first years after the Revolution. Shakhnazaryan, *The Realism of the Revolution*, 14.

¹³¹ Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution*. Oxford University Press, 1991, 77.

¹³² Timothy J. Colton, *Moscow: Governing the Socialist Metropolis*. Harvard University Press 1998, 111.

¹³³ These accusations were expressed in works of art historians such as Eghishe Martikyan, Minas Sargsyan and others. See S. Stepanyan, “Kerparvesty Sotsialistakan Shinararutyan Payqarum” (Fine

Next to Grabar's article is Lunacharsky's writing of approximately twenty years earlier, in 1933 as an introduction to a volume on Saryan which did not see light at the time. Here the first People's Commissar of Enlightenment of the USSR positions the artist as a realist while indirectly acknowledging the formal specificities of Saryan's work which were later brought up to justify accusations of formalism:

By the way, when I was admiring Saryan's images it always seemed to me that I am standing in front of tasteful but at the same time pleasant flat color compositions infused with unusual and, so to say, "otherworldly" charm. But when I was in Armenia I felt that Saryan is a realist and even more than I supposed.¹³⁴

Lunacharsky sees Saryan's use of pure warm color fields, the stylization of figures and other formal characteristics of his work as deeply affected by the natural landscape of Armenia. That is why for the author to understand the realism of Saryan's work, one needs to be in Armenia. By making this connection between the country's landscape and Saryan's painting, Lunacharsky, however, warns the reader against another opposition, the one between realism and naturalism. According to him, being a realist, the painter is by no means a naturalist, he rather "accomplishes his charming compositions on the basis of the living material of living Armenia."¹³⁵ Thus, in Lunacharsky's view, the connection of Saryan's work with the natural landscape of Armenia is put into a historical perspective of the "ever changing" life of Soviet Armenia manifesting Saryan's potential of becoming a Soviet painter: "Along with the

Arts in the Struggle for Socialist Construction). *Khorhrdayin Arvest* (Soviet Art), no. 21–22 (November 1935): 7–11; Minas Sargsyan, *Martiros Saryan*. Yerevan: Academy of Sciences, RA, 1955; Eghishe Martikyan, "Martiros Saryan." *Sovetakan Arvest* (Soviet Art), no. 2 (1958).

¹³⁴ Anatoly Lunacharsky, "Nkarich Saryany (The Painter Saryan)." *Sovetakan Arvest* (Soviet Art), no. 1 (1955): 8.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

manifestations of the outlines of the new Soviet Armenia are manifested also the outlines of Saryan as a Soviet painter.”¹³⁶

In a dialectical move Lunacharsky connects Saryan’s depiction of the natural landscape to the historical class struggle of his nation with Soviet Armenia as its destination. This complex approach of the Leninist Bolsheviks, as Azatyan unravels in his article “Disintegrating Progress: Bolshevism, National Modernism, and the Emergence of Contemporary Art Practices in Armenia”, was “based on the assumption that any national liberation movement is shaped by class antagonisms” which allowed these statesmen “not to fall into nationalism while defending the ethnic/national aspect of people’s liberation struggles.”¹³⁷ It is within this dialectical view that Azatyan sees the old Leninist Bolsheviks concurring with Saryan’s “strategy of naturalizing history” where “the attachment of the Armenian common people to their natural surroundings is so tightly emphasized ... that the landscape itself becomes *Armenian*.”¹³⁸ While realizing the dangers of essentializing national/ethnic belonging, the Bolsheviks “found Saryan’s art to reveal the all-democratic content of the oppressed people’s bourgeois nationalism.”¹³⁹ Lunacharsky’s view of Saryan’s art should be seen within this dialectics of class and nation. The author’s nuanced and forbearing approach towards the painter conceived as developing a specific style within a broad conception of realism that is yet to be evolved with the historical developments of the country epitomizes the policies of the Soviet authorities of the 1920s in the question of the formation of the new art in the newly established socialist country.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Azatyan, “Disintegrating Progress,” 66.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 69.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 72.



Figure 2 Martiros Saryan, *Hayastan (Armenia)*, 1923, *Oil on canvas*, 138x103 cm. National Gallery of Armenia, Yerevan.

Being an already established artist in the 1920s Saryan was welcomed in Soviet Armenia as a “fellow traveler”¹⁴⁰ and was trusted by the first communist leaders to create the institutional bases of the cultural life of Soviet Armenia.¹⁴¹ Along with another artist Hakob Kojoyan, Saryan was also believed by the Bolshevik leadership and their allies to present the bases on which the realist Armenian art of the new country was to be created. Art historian Irina Shakhnazaryan argues that in contrast to the

¹⁴⁰ “Fellow traveler” is a term coined by Leon Trotsky to describe the non-Bolshevik intellectuals sympathizing with the Revolution and putting their expertise into the construction of socialism in Soviet Union.

¹⁴¹ Saryan remembers: “The head of the the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment was my friend Ashot Hovhannissyan. He instructed me to undertake the organization of institutions such as the museum of archeology, fine arts, history and ethnography as well as the committee for the preservation of antiquities. A college of fine arts and an artists’ union were also needed to be established.” Saryan, *Notes from My Life*, 168-169.

younger artists in the “left” who, enchanted by the processes of Soviet modernization, stood for demolishing every remnant of bourgeois society in their efforts to create art suitable for the new, proletarian society, the old Bolsheviks “had a realistic view of the prematurity of the discussions regarding the formation of Armenian proletarian art.”¹⁴² Thus, a general dichotomy appears in Shakhnazaryan’s study between the approach of cultural succession epitomized in involving the “fellow travelers” from the older generation in the cultural construction of the country and the standpoint of the destruction of the remnants of bourgeois culture expressed by the younger artists in the “left.” This situation can be seen as parallel to what Grabar describes about his years as the head of the Museums and Preservation Section. Drawing a careful parallel between the processes launched from the center in Moscow and in Yerevan Shakhnazaryan then goes on to reveal how the Bolshevik government of Soviet Armenia moderated this dichotomy. Discussing a speech delivered by the People’s Commissar of Enlightenment of Soviet Armenia Ashot Hovhannissyan at the opening of the first exhibition in Soviet Armenia in 1921, Shakhnazaryan claims:

The core of Hovhannissyan's speech is the historical understanding of art, which implied consideration for the historical situation, while viewing art in relation to it. This was the only standpoint from which an art considered the heritage of the old order and understandings could be given the chance to correspond to "new experiences," that is, not to break with the tradition of art and give space to the development of the artistic style of "our Armenian painters."¹⁴³

Within the heated artistic debates during the first turbulent decade of the establishment of Soviet Armenia Shakhnazaryan reveals both the tolerant approach of

¹⁴² Shakhnazaryan, “The New Destination”.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

the first leaders towards every generation of artists and their clear standpoint regarding the question of the style of the new art, i.e. realism. However, as the art historian claims, the 1930s became a turning point in the government's policies related to art: "The Stalinist pretensions of establishing unconditional and universal control of the government over the artistic life were distinguished in every branch of art at the beginning of the decade. This implied the appointment of Socialist Realism – the artistic style determined and imposed at the same state level– as the only true doctrine."¹⁴⁴

As was established by Andrey Zhdanov at the 1934 Soviet Writers Congress,¹⁴⁵ *partiinnost'* (party-mindedness), *klassovost'* (class consciousness), *ideinnost'* (ideological commitment) and *narodnost'* (national/popular spirit) became the main criteria for evaluating an artwork in the Stalinist period up until the beginning of the 1950s. In her efforts to go beyond the Stalinist retrospective homogenization of the 1920s Shakhnazaryan reveals what she calls the "the realism of the revolution" of the first half of the decade, an undefined perception of the artistic style that was yet to take its shape years after the revolution. The discussions on the new realist art of the new socialist country in the early 1920s unveiled by the art historian go beyond the simple division of form and content: "Realism, unlike naturalism, does not mean to express the external verisimilitude, the mere visual outline presented before the eye. True realism means to apprehend the essence of reality, to pulsate with the heartbeat of phenomena, to convey the spirit of life, and not only its form."¹⁴⁶ This definition of realism is expressed by writer Kostan Zaryan in an article titled "Martiros Saryan ev ir arvesty" (Martiros

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Andrei Zhdanov, "Soviet literature: The Richest in Ideas, the Most Advanced Literature." Before the Writers' Congress in 1932 the Party issued a resolution, "On the Reconstruction of Artistic and Literary Organizations" which is seen as the beginning of the Socialist Realist dictum in the USSR.

¹⁴⁶ Kostan Zaryan, "Martiros Saryan Yev Ir Arvesty" (Martiros Saryan and His Art). *Payqar*, no. 10–11 (1923): 8. Cited in Shakhnazaryan, *The Realism of the Revolution*, 50.

Saryan and his art) published in 1923. Shakhnazaryan discusses the article along to another piece by Bolshevik revolutionary Artashes Karinyan. The two articles, although with discrepancies, agree on Saryan being a “true realist” where realism itself is understood in a broad sense of grasping “the spirit of life.” As Shakhnazaryan puts it, “Zaryan takes the conception of realism out of its simple characterization as formally recognizable, and it is from this very standpoint that he calls Saryan a realist.”¹⁴⁷ It is within this broad understanding of realist art that Saryan was seen and praised before the establishment of Socialist Realism. Both Lunacharsky’s and Grabar’s articles published in 1955 reveal in general lines a similar comprehensive understanding of realism while situating Saryan’s work within it. Thus, the efforts of the rehabilitation of Saryan’s legacy during Khrushchev’s Thaw that was constitutive for Matevosyan as a young art historian echo the problematics of art of the 1920s understood, however, through the Stalinist schematization of the categories at hand.

As a result of the schematic ideological criteria brought by the Stalinist policies a sharp contradiction was established between realism and formalism. The work of art started to be seen through the instrumentalised categories of form and content and the dialectics of class and nation through which the early Bolsheviks saw the further development of Soviet art was in turn schematized. “Leninist national communists were simply considered ‘nationalists’,”¹⁴⁸ while Saryan’s work began to be labeled as “national in form, bourgeois in content.”¹⁴⁹ The Stalinist critique of what Azatyan calls Saryan’s “ethnographic formalism”¹⁵⁰ considered the artist’s pre-revolutionary period as

¹⁴⁷ Ibid. 50-51.

¹⁴⁸ Azatyan, “Disintegrating Progress,” 72.

¹⁴⁹ Tretia sessia. Voprosi teorii i kritiki sovetского izobrazitel'nogo iskusstva (The Third Session: Questions of Theory and Critique of the Soviet Fine Arts), Moscow, USSR Academy of Fine Arts, 1949.

¹⁵⁰ Azatyan, “Disintegrating Progress,” 71.

formalist while detecting a struggle between realism and formalism in his work in the Soviet Union up until the beginning of the 1950s. The articles published in the first issue of the official journal *Soviet Art* in 1955 need to be seen as the beginning of the process of rehabilitation of Saryan's art after its Stalinist critique. Although the editorial warns against Grabar's "controversial arguments", the mere fact of its publication indicates a step towards reconsidering the very boundaries of the official policy. In turn, Grabar's move to question the conception of both realism and formalism among "the contemporary priests of art history" after Stalin's death can be heard as an echo from the decade before the rigid principles of Socialist Realism were implemented in the Soviet Union.

1955 is the same year that Matevosyan entered the Institute of Art of the Academy of Sciences of Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic as a PhD student. His first peer-reviewed article, entitled "On the Question of the Evaluation of Martiros Saryan's Artistic Evolution" was published in 1961. In the spirit of the changes manifested from the mid 1950s on, Matevosyan's debut calls for a "serious re-examination"¹⁵¹ in the field of "Saryanology."¹⁵² In the article he maps the literature written on Saryan since the early 1900s in an attempt to confront the critique of Saryan as a formalist. His line of argumentation starts from the "representatives of bourgeois aestheticism" of the beginning of the century. As Matevosyan puts it, although interesting in their discussion of the formal characteristics of Saryan's art the main attempt of these art critics was to "justify the aesthetic ideals of the current 'art for art's sake'." Thus, it is consequential

¹⁵¹ Wilhelm Matevosyan, "Martiros Saryani Stegtsagortsakan Evolyutsiayi Gnhatman Harts'i Shurjy" (On the Question of the Evaluation of Martiros Saryan's Artistic Evolution). *Patmabanasirakan Handes* 3–4 (1961): 148.

¹⁵² Given the popularity of Saryan as a contested figure, one could indeed speak of Saryanology within the Armenian art history.

for the art historian that the “aesthetes” of the bourgeois world “do not give a correct idea about Saryan’s worldview, artistic method, and aesthetic-social principles.”¹⁵³

Presenting an uninterrupted historical succession in the interpretations of Saryan’s art throughout the Soviet decades, Matevosyan claims that this perspective, set by “the aesthete art historians of the pre-revolutionary era”, had come through the 1920s and 1930s, eventually making their way to his current time.

The main sentiment remained the same: the Saryan of the pre-revolutionary era was perceived as a formalist (decorativist). And if by attributing formalism to Saryan Voloshin and other aesthetes wanted to stress the progressiveness of the artist and praise him, then the same attribution by some of our critics had an incriminatory undertone. Coming from the *seeming* position of Marxist aesthetics the latter considered Saryan as a subjectivist and a representative of the bourgeois decadent art of the era of imperialism. (emphasis added)¹⁵⁴

Starting with a rejection of the position of “bourgeois aestheticism” based on the criterion of the social engagement of the artist and the artwork’s “ideological purposefulness,”¹⁵⁵ Matevosyan situates himself within the Soviet art history questioning from within how “our critics” perceive Marxist aesthetics. His overarching argument in the article is that “*starting from its origination up until now Saryan’s art has been and is going through the path of realism,*”¹⁵⁶ and the long-standing perception of Saryan’s evolution “from formalism to realism” is a result of some art historians’ “primitive understanding of realism.”¹⁵⁷ Through a formal analysis of the “relationship of light, color and volume” in Saryan’s works of the 1920s, Matevosyan finds that there

¹⁵³ Matevosyan, “On the Question of the Evaluation,” 133.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 134.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 147.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

is indeed a subtle change in Saryan's art throughout the decade. He states that at first the artist relates the object to the source of light through "the strict opposition of volumes and their shadows within the dimension of flatness" while solving the same problem on the picture plane after the mid 1920s through "vibrant halftones."¹⁵⁸ Revealing a keen eye and a methodical approach towards formal characteristics of the artwork, the art historian, however, considers this a change within realism. And to support this wider perception of realism he brings an excerpt from Saryan's interview about his impressions of the works of Renaissance masters published in 1925: "There is a profound realism at the foundation of these genial works and it is that which makes these works deeply charming and eternal."¹⁵⁹

Developing this comprehensive perception of realism through Saryan's work Matevosyan then refers to the above-discussed texts by Lunacharsky and Grabar. In relation to the connection of Saryan's art with Armenia Matevosyan quotes Lunacharsky's description of the Armenian national landscape leaving out the second part of the argument that connects the national identity epitomized in the landscape to the class struggle of the nation, with the Soviet Republic as its destination. He concludes: "Here is the correct interpretation of the link Saryan's art has with Armenia."¹⁶⁰

As Azatyan argues, the complex dialectic of class and nation that animated the cultural policies of the old Bolsheviks in the 1920s (and we can include Lunacharsky here), had already waned by the 1950s. As a result of Stalinist schematization, class and ethnic/national belonging came to be perceived in opposition to one another as non-

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 144.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 146.

dialectical identities. The art historian sees Stalinism and the “post-Stalinist nationalism of Khrushchev’s Thaw” as interconnected through this premise: “Both were non-dialectical rigid projects that homogenized ‘national unity.’ The first, animated by Russian chauvinism, constructed itself around class and the party, while the second was based on the ethnic/national identity stripped of class antagonisms.”¹⁶¹

It is under this light that Matevosyan’s reading of Lunacharsky’s article becomes clear. The art historian valued the connection that Lunacharsky had drawn between Saryan and the Armenian national landscape that from his reading implied a homogenizing perspective on the nation. And it is not incidental that while concurring with the point of view of the first People’s Commissar of Enlightenment Matevosyan does not reconsider the single homogenized historical line of interpretations of Saryan’s art from the pre-revolutionary period through the 1920s and 1930s up until the 1950s constructed by himself. By this the art historian seems to dismiss the complexity of the historical moment that echoed by his own supporting references - both Lunacharsky and Grabar as well as Saryan’s perception of realism in 1925. Interestingly, while drawing a homogenized historical line of the interpretations of Saryan’s work through the early decades of the Soviet Union Matevosyan does not include in this discussion articles from the 1920s and instead extends his criticism of the art historical texts published after 1932 back to the previous decade. This generalized historicization deployed by the art historian once again affirms the identification of the Bolshevik ideals with their Stalinist usurpation, a view that characterizes discourses of the Thaw in general.

¹⁶¹ Azatyan, “Disintegrating Progress,” 72.

In his speech at the Writer's Congress in May 13,¹⁶² 1957 the First Secretary Nikita Khrushchev clarified the new priorities of the ideological criteria of art in Soviet Socialist Realism. According to this new cultural policy the Zhdanovite dictum of the 1930s which put an emphasis on the party and class interests gave its way to the accentuation of *narodnost* (national/popular spirit) and *sovremennost* (contemporaneity). Three years later, in 1960, the Soviet Union's main official art journal, *Iskusstvo* (Art) published an editorial, titled "The Most Important Thing Is Contemporaneity."¹⁶³ While drawing attention to the innovative character of art the editorial also criticized modernism for depriving art of its "national uniqueness"¹⁶⁴ and thus clarifying the official politics of revisiting artistic criteria during the 1960s. Matevosyan's attempt in the article to rethink realism as a method of representation by expanding its boundaries to include the features of Saryan's art previously considered as remnants of his "modernist deviations" on the one hand and his accentuation of the national character of Saryan's art that he views as "stripped of class antagonisms"¹⁶⁵ on the other hand, positions the young art historian in the vanguard of the liberalization processes initiated at the wake of the Thaw.

Matevosyan's first article on Saryan is not the only example of this specific position the art historian was maintaining at the beginning of the Thaw. The same view is observed in Matevosyan's dissertation on the Armenian artist Sedrak Araqelyan (1884-1942) that he defended in 1960 and which was published in 1963. In an effort to present the entirety of the artist's work the author discusses the influence of the impressionist style of painting on Araqelyan's works within a broad understanding of

¹⁶² Nikita Khrushchev's speech in the meeting with writers in the Central Committee of the CPSU, 1957 <https://refdb.ru/look/2134279.html>

¹⁶³ "Sovremennost - glavnoe!" (The Most Important Thing Is Contemporaneity) *Iskusstvo* 9 (1960).

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁶⁵ Azatyan, "Disintegrating Progress," 72.

realism. Doing this the art historian simultaneously positions his practice within the history of the development of Soviet Socialist Realism while accentuating the “the close spiritual connection”¹⁶⁶ he had with the motherland. The articles written during the first years of Matevosyan’s career about the works of artists from different generations such as Hakob Hovnatanyan (1806-1881), Edgar Shahin (1874-1947), Hovhannes Zardaryan (1918-1992) published in popular magazines¹⁶⁷ one way or another confirm his approach on realism and his perception of the ethnic/national character of art discussed above. However, Matevosyan’s view point was to be radically reshaped after a few years through his reading of idealist philosophy and neo-Kantian formalism as well as his intense relationship with Saryan as both an artist and a thinker.

Many of Matevosyan’s contemporaries claim that his first scholarly article on Saryan was ready years before its publication, and it was after reading the draft of this article that Saryan himself initiated a meeting with the young art historian. This was to be the beginning of a lifechanging friendship for Matevosyan, one that also became critical for his scholarship.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁶ Wilhelm Matevosyan, *Sedrak Araqelyan*. Yerevan: Academy of Sciences, RA, 1963, 20.

¹⁶⁷ Wilhelm Matevosyan, “Hovhannes Tumanyan Kerparvestum” (Hovhannes Tumanyan in Fine Arts). *Sovetakan Hayastan* (Soviet Armenia) 3 (March 1958); “Dasakan Avandneri Chanaparhov” (By Way of Classic Deposits). *Sovetakan Hayastan* (Soviet Armenia) 8 (August 1958).

¹⁶⁸ The meeting is described in Khachatryan, “Wilhelm Matevosyan,” XXL. It was testified with minor changes of details by both Khachikoghlyan and Ghazaryan.



Figure 3 *Martiros Saryan, The Portrait of Wilhelm Matevosyan, 1960, Oil on canvas. Martiros Saryan House-Museum, Yerevan.*

Saryan's importance for Matevosyan can be seen from two main perspectives. On the one hand being one of the cornerstones of Soviet Armenian art Saryan as an artist had his roots in the modern art movements of the beginning of the century in Russia inspired by European modernism, a fact that would become pivotal for both Matevosyan's fascination with European modernism and for his later re-interpretation of Armenian art as well as of Saryan himself. Matevosyan gives his peculiar take on Saryan's education in Russia in his diary in 1980:

In the studio of Serov and Korovin at the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture Saryan studied the grammar of painting—something that he could learn in any institution in Europe as teaching was done the same way everywhere in its general outlines (the good old school

of teaching-oriented academy). It is another matter that through Moscow (Shchukin)¹⁶⁹ he got acquainted and studied impressionists, post-impressionists and the most up-to-date currents (something that, by the way, he could have done in much more favorable conditions and in its immediate cultural-historical and native atmosphere).¹⁷⁰

Dismissing the specificities of Russian art within which Saryan developed as an artist Matevosyan thus considers it as a conduit to European modernism for the artist, a view that would become important for him as an art historian.

At the same time, Saryan was also an active figure in the pre-revolutionary Armenian culture, working in close connection with the Armenian intellectuals residing in Tbilisi at the beginning of the century. Thus, for Matevosyan, the artist also became a living bridge to the pre-Soviet “golden age” of Armenian culture that came to be almost sacred for this generation of anti-Soviet intellectuals. Remembering his conversations with Matevosyan Khachikoghlyan laments: “Saryan was the only one left from *Vernatun*. And when Wilhelm was talking and telling about him I was having goosebumps, it was as if talking to the members of *Vernatun*.”¹⁷¹ *Vernatun* was a literary club formed by Armenian intellectuals in Tbilisi, operating from 1899 to 1908. The abiding members of the club were writers, such as Hovhannes Tumanyan (1869-1923), Ghazaros Aghayan (1840-1911), Avetiq Isahakyan (1875-1957) and others while *Vernatun* also hosted a wide range of intellectuals, painters and musicians among whom was Saryan himself. Regardless of the specific political and aesthetic views of the members and the visitors of the club *Vernatun* acquired an almost mythical position in the viewpoint of the anti-Soviet thinkers, as a gathering place of the selected elite of

¹⁶⁹ Sergei Shchukin (1854-1936) was a Russian businessman and an art collector, mainly of French Impressionist and Post-Impressionist art.

¹⁷⁰ Wilhelm Matevosyan's diary, “3 April, 1980.” Matevosyan's fund in The Museum of Literature and Art.

¹⁷¹ My conversation to Khachikoghlyan, 26.08.2020.

Armenian intellectuals who kept the torch of national culture alive at the same time as the Armenians were deprived of national statehood.

Thus, although Saryan as an artist was formed within the modern art movements of the beginning of the century in Russia his figure came to be seen as the closest to European modernism for Matevosyan in the Soviet Armenia of the 1960s. It was him that also remained deeply connected to the art historian's perception of ethnic/national unity. Reconsidered through these two principles pivotal for the anti-Soviet front of the 1960s retrospectively conceptualized by Azatyan as National Modernism Saryan's legacy once again became a cornerstone for a new ideal of Armenian art. It is not impossible to think that after the hostile environment the artist endured as a result of his Stalinist critique the modernist interpretations of his own work were encouraged by Saryan himself.¹⁷² On the one hand the liberalization policies of the Thaw that had their impact on Soviet academia and the close friendship with the "godfather" of Armenian art whose considerable figure allowed for modernist interpretations on the other hand, transformed Matevosyan's view of Armenian art and first of all the interpretation of Saryan's. Starting from the end of the 1950s Matevosyan's understanding of Armenian art although formed within the boundaries of the new priorities of the Socialist Realism of the Thaw took a shape of an anti-Soviet scholarship.

The date of Matevosyan's encounter with Saryan differs in the testimonies of different persons.¹⁷³ However, in the introduction to the artist's memoirs written in 1966 Matevosyan mentions that he was in conversation with him already in the spring of 1959. The fact that the art historian was working on Saryan earlier than the publication

¹⁷² Besides being one of the major influences for National Modernist painters Saryan's authoritative figure was also behind the opening of The Modern Art Museum in Yerevan which opened immediately after the death of the artist in 1972.

¹⁷³ In Khachatryan's testimony the meeting occurred in 1960, whereas Khachikoghlyan remembers the date to be 1959.

of the article in 1961 is confirmed by another article on the artist with a similar line of argumentation that he published in the popular magazine *Sovetakan Hayastan* (*Soviet Armenia*) in 1958.¹⁷⁴

It is during the years starting from the end of the 1950s up until the mid 1960s that both Matevosyan's method and its consequential political significance developed. The sound manifestation of his aesthetic agenda formed against Soviet ideology is already seen around the mid 1960s. Vigen Ghazaryan states that "Despite the dominant atmosphere, especially in the 1950s he [Matevosyan] had a surprising ability to find and read from the libraries almost inaccessible foreign language literature on philosophy and aesthetics."¹⁷⁵ In Matevosyan's archive one can find his handwritten translation of Maurice Gieure's *La Peinture Moderne* dated to 1962, a typewritten excerpt on the use of color in art from a book by Herbert Read in Russian and other materials on modern art and formal analysis roughly from the same period. Khachikoghlyan mentions that he read "John Rewald's books on Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, Bernard Berenson's *The Italian Painters of the Renaissance* and other works together with Saryan."¹⁷⁶ Matevosyan's sources were also pre-Soviet publications such as Georg Simmel's *Kant and Contemporary Aesthetics*,¹⁷⁷ Johannes Volkelt's *Questions of Contemporary Aesthetics*¹⁷⁸ and other scattered fragments of neo-Kantian aesthetics and philosophy.

¹⁷⁴ Wilhelm Matevosyan, "Mard, Vor Hastatum e Chshmartutyuny" (A Man Who Affirms the Truth). *Sovetakan Hayastan* (Soviet Armenia) 11 (November 1958)

¹⁷⁵ Ghazaryan, "Wilhelm Matevosyan," 5.

¹⁷⁶ My conversation with Khachikoghlyan, 26.08.2020.

¹⁷⁷ Georg Simmel, *Kant i sovremennaya estetika* (Kant and Contemporary Aesthetics). St. Petersburg, 1904.

¹⁷⁸ Johannes Volkelt, *Sovremennyye Voprosy Estetiki* (Contemporary Issues of Aesthetics). St. Petersburg: Obrazovaniye, 1899.

He was reading [Wilhelm] Windelband, [Ernst] Cassirer, [Hermann] Cohen and [Paul] Natorp, anything one could find translated in Armenia. There was no possibility to photocopy back then and he used to take actual photos of the pages then to put them together. I remember he owned one of Panofsky's books in German that way...He also had one of Cassirer's works about philosophers in three volumes, a foreign publication.¹⁷⁹

One of the files in Matevosyan's archive is dedicated to Georg Marzinski's book *Method of Expressionism in Fine Arts* published in 1923 paraphrased "almost word by word"¹⁸⁰ in Armenian by Matevosyan. On the last page of the manuscript is Matevosyan's drawing of Saryan with a motive from artist's works of the 1910s on the background exemplifying Matevosyan's intense engagement with the literature on European modernism mainly through Saryan's work.

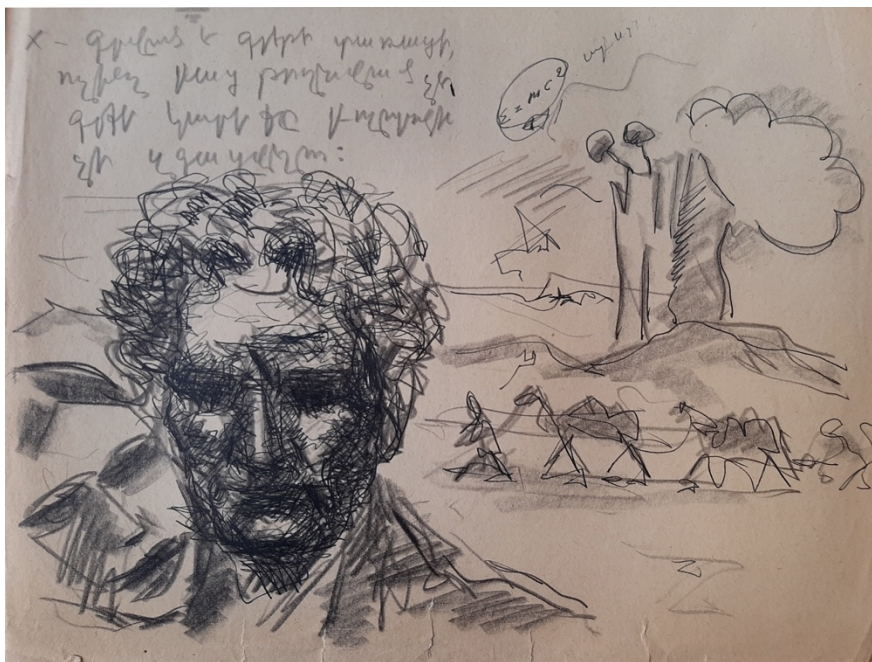


Figure 4 *Wilhelm Matevosyan, Martiros Saryan's portrait, Ink on paper. Museum of Literature and Art after Eghishe Charents, Yerevan.*

¹⁷⁹ My conversation with Khachikoghlyan, 24.09.2020.

¹⁸⁰ Matevosyan's fund in The Museum of Literature and Art. On the last page of the manuscript is Saryan's portrait drawn by Matevosyan himself.

For Matevosyan's art history, however, one of the most influential authors is Heinrich Wölfflin. Khachikoghlyan states that it was Saryan who introduced Matevosyan to Wölfflin:

One of Wölfflin's books, the *Principles*, was Saryan's copy, Saryan had given it to him as a present, later he gave it to me (it's written M. Saryan on the front page). It is a 1930s' publication with a "filthy" Soviet introduction.¹⁸¹ Wilhelm used to say they read the book together with Saryan.¹⁸²

Wölfflin's formal method of analysis later become one of the cornerstones of Matevosyan's art history: he used to refer to Wölfflin's *Principles of Art History: The Problem of The Development of Style in Later Art* as the "art historian's bible ... from which should depart every art historian to be able to see the work itself as an artwork, - autonomous and with all its internal features."¹⁸³ In order to ground Matevosyan's method of art history it might be helpful to consider some features of Wölfflin's work. However, one needs to keep in mind that it is impossible to draw a direct line between the two.

In the Introduction titled "The Double Root of Style" Wölfflin develops his understanding of the first "root" of style by which he considers art as the *expression* of the individual, nation or epoch with those in turn tied in a complex connection with each other. However, as far as Wölfflin is concerned, "a survey which takes the history of art essentially as the history of expression runs the risk of disastrous one-

¹⁸¹ Heinrich Wölfflin, *Osnovnyye Ponyatiya Istorii Iskusstv : Problema Evolyutsii Stilya v Novom Iskusstve* (Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art). Leningrad: Academy of Sciences of the USSR, 1930.

¹⁸² My conversation with Khachikoghlyan, 24.09.2020

¹⁸³ Ibid.

sidedness.”¹⁸⁴ The entirety of the book then appears as a project of re-positioning art history as the history of vision, the second “root of style,” which has its own process of development not expressive of the political-historical context the individual artist is working in. Preoccupied with this project in his chapters on the five pairs of principles that structure the development of “the history of vision,” such as linear-painterly, plane-recession, closed (tectonic) form-open (a-tectonic) form, multiplicity-unity, absolute clarity-relative clarity, throughout the entire book Wölfflin does not explicitly refer to the first root described in the introduction while still considering it in his analysis from time to time. This evokes seeming discrepancies in his project as art historian Lisa Deam claims: “In his influential 1915 study, *Principles of Art History*, for example, Heinrich Wölfflin set out to investigate stylistic change in ‘Renaissance’ and ‘Baroque’ art, but against his own thesis claimed that ‘there is a definite type of Italian or Germanic imagination which asserts itself, always the same in all centuries.’”¹⁸⁵

The connection between the two roots of style described in Wölfflin’s introduction prompted many researches and art historical discussions. Although without consideration of this problem of double roots Wölfflin posits in the introduction of his work Deam’s account, however, unveils the ethno-national constants animating Wölfflin’s formalist method. Matevosyan in turn was not only influenced by Wölfflin’s project of the autonomous development of style. His attribution of national characteristics to the artwork seems also in line with the art historian’s idea of “national imagination.”¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁴ Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art*. Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2015, 226.

¹⁸⁵ Lisa Deam, “Flemish versus Netherlandish: A Discourse of Nationalism,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (1998): 27.

¹⁸⁶ Wölfflin, *The Principles*, 315-17.

In her article “Reinterpreting Wölfflin: Neo-Kantianism and Hermeneutics” art historian Joan Hart argues that Wölfflin’s project of establishing the autonomous discipline of art history as the history of vision as well as his method of formalism are deeply indebted to the neo-Kantian currents in German academy mostly influential before World War I.¹⁸⁷ In turn, Mark A. Cheetham’s book *Kant, Art and Art History* goes even beyond the specific academic relations suggesting that the philosopher had a consistent influence on Western art and academic art history from 1770s on which exceeds the borders of formalist art history. In his reception history Cheetham presents Kant, “the man and his ideas, his name and his authority, and the discipline of philosophy that he frequently came to personify”¹⁸⁸ as a contouring force in the discipline of art history. Cheetham reveals this force in various instances of the discipline, such as “the famous analytic/synthetic distinction used traditionally in discussion of cubism”¹⁸⁹ or “Panofsky’s distinctly Kantian search for a stable Archimedean vantage point outside the flux of empirical reality from which to judge individual works of art.”¹⁹⁰

Matevosyan’s above-mentioned references, mainly discovered throughout the years from the end of the 1950s to the mid 1960s, present a scattered line of neo-Kantian aesthetics from Wölfflin, his professor of aesthetics Johannes Volkelt,¹⁹¹ the founder of the Baden school of neo-Kantianism Wilhelm Windelband, neo-Kantian sociologist Georg Simmel all the way to Ernst Cassirer, his mentor Herman Cohen, and an art historian deeply influenced by him, Erwin Panofsky as well as many others.

¹⁸⁷ Joan Hart, “Reinterpreting Wölfflin: Neo-Kantianism and Hermeneutics.” *Art Journal* 42, no. 4 (Winter 1982): 292–300.

¹⁸⁸ Cheetham, *Kant, Art, and Art History*, 2.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.* 1.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁹¹ Volkelt was Wölfflin’s professor of aesthetics at the University of Basel in 1884. Hart, “Reinterpreting Wölfflin,” 293.

Furthermore, the Euro-American modernists influencing Matevosyan, such as John Rewald or Herbert Read can also be seen within the neo-Kantian tradition in their interpretations of modern art and its history.¹⁹²

However, Matevosyan's most frequent reference concerning the history of modern art is to Italian art critic Lionello Venturi. His influence on Matevosyan opens up another vein of references to Italian idealism constitutive for both Matevosyan and his peers. This tradition includes idealist philosophers such as Giambattista Vico (1668-1744) and Benedetto Croce (1866-1952) who in turn were influential for Venturi as an art historian. This is a line of thought which was made available in Russian in the wake of the Thaw¹⁹³ and became one of the pillars for the anti-Soviet intellectuals of the time the unveiling of which, however, is beyond the boundaries of the present study.

Lionello Venturi, was a proponent of the autonomy of art himself and put a strong emphasis on the individuality of the artist in his discussions of European modernism. His writings were in turn affected by art historians such as Alois Riegl, Max Dvořák and Wölfflin.¹⁹⁴ Two of Venturi's works, *Modern Painters* and *From Manet to Lautrec* were translated into Russian and published respectively in 1956 and 1958 in the Soviet Union.¹⁹⁵ Matevosyan then translated into Armenian most of the books he could find by Venturi both in English and in Italian such as *History of Art*

¹⁹² See Cheetham, *Kant, Art, and Art History*.

¹⁹³ One of the works by Giambattista Vico was published even before the Thaw, in 1940. See Giambattista Vico, *Osnovaniya Novoy Nauki Ob Obshchey Prirode Natsiy* (The Foundation of a New Science of the General Nature of Nations). Leningrad, 1940. Soviet Armenian intellectuals initially got acquainted to the worldview and aesthetics of Benedetto Croce from a book by Georgian philosopher Elena Topuridze published in Russian and frequently referred to especially in Henrik Hovhannissyan's works. See Elena Topuridze, *Estetika Benedetto Kroche* (Aesthetics of Benedetto Croce). Tbilisi: Metsniereba, 1967.

¹⁹⁴ Luigi Salerno, "Obituary," *The Burlington Magazine*, 104, No. 706 (Jan., 1962): 35-36.

¹⁹⁵ Lionello Venturi, *Khudozhniki Novogo Vremeni: Ot Mane Do Lotreka* (Painters of the Modern Time: From Manet to Lautrec). Moscow, 1956; *Ot Mane Do Lotreka* (From Manet to Lautrec). Moscow, 1958.

Criticism,¹⁹⁶ *La mia prospettiva estetica, Painting and Painters: How to look at a picture from Giotto to Chagall*, and *Four Steps Toward Modern Art*.¹⁹⁷ Himself

impressed by Venturi Matevosyan's associate and friend Khachikoghlyan remembers:

Wilhelm used to say that Venturi is a genius, used to praise him a lot. After the [collapse] of the Soviet [Union] I was in Paris once and bought a thin book called *Essential Art History*. It was a small volume which included the greatest art historians of the century, there were German, Jewish and English authors. Venturi's name, however, was not included at all.¹⁹⁸

Khachikoghlyan's anecdote typifies the limitation of references mainly available to Matevosyan through the changed policies of the Thaw and the exaggerated value he granted to the sources he could acquire in search of an alternative to the method of Soviet Socialist Realism and the ideology behind it.

Thus, from the end of the 1950s a complex network of mostly neo-Kantian philosophy and aesthetics was shaping Matevosyan's understanding of art which eventually resulted in a firm position towards art and art history within which his later interpretation of Armenian art and the work of Saryan can be seen. In 1965 on the occasion of Saryan's 85th birthday, Matevosyan wrote a piece, entitled "The Great Master."¹⁹⁹ In contrast to his first scholarly article, the art historian here situates Saryan within European modernism, namely post-impressionism. Shortly presenting a contradiction between Paul Gauguin's "decorative-monumental, synthetic" and Paul Cezanne's "constructive-volumetric, architectonic" principles of art as a given, Matevosyan then goes on to position Saryan within the two: "Independently developing

¹⁹⁶ Matevosyan's fund in The Museum of Literature and Art. Matevosyan's translation is from the English translation from Italian by Charles Marriot. See Charles Marriot, *History of Art Criticism*, New York, 1936.

¹⁹⁷ Khachikoghlyan's personal archive.

¹⁹⁸ My conversation with Khachikoghlyan, 24.09.2020

¹⁹⁹ Wilhelm Matevosyan, "Mets Varpety" (The Great Master). *Patmabanasirakan Handes*, no. 5 (1965): 325–27.

Gauguin's line, Saryan welded it with Cezanne's principle and gave it a magnificent stylistic unity which is one of the great victories of the world art of our century."²⁰⁰

Moreover, Matevosyan considers the guarantee of this unity the national character of Saryan's work, "the brilliant perception of the severe and simple quality of nature in the Nairian country"²⁰¹ and the artistic appropriation of the features of the Armenian national miniature painting, murals and architecture."²⁰²

Matevosyan's vocabulary is drastically changed in the article. He no longer uses political terms such as "bourgeois aestheticism" or "ideological purposefulness" established in Soviet art history. There is not even a mention of the Soviet Socialist Revolution as a milestone in Saryan's work. The art historian's method comes across as resolutely ahistorical concerning itself with a "purely aesthetic" discussion of Saryan, an approach which is animated by the political agenda of National Modernism. Drawing an almost direct connection between post-impressionism and Armenian nature as well as national medieval art in Saryan's work, Matevosyan discusses the entirety of the artist's creation within "the world art" which is first and foremost perceived as European modernism. The art historian then generalizes Saryan's method of painting departing from his argument on realism articulated in the previous article:

To bring the object to an artistic value on the picture plane he [Saryan] breaks it down to its preliminary forms. These [forms] then exclude the details and the objective-material illusion conveyed by the empirical experience. He designates the imaginatively created proto-forms as linear,

²⁰⁰ Matevosyan, "The Great Master," 326.

²⁰¹ "Nairian country" is used in reference to Armenia itself as a signifier of the cultural unity of the Armenian people notwithstanding the political circumstances they are in. The term was put into circulation by Armenian poet Vahan Teryan (1885-1920) within the wider project of "Spiritual Armenia" proposed by him at the beginning of the twentieth century. The anti-Soviet intellectuals of the 1960s revived this project of the "Spiritual Armenia" in accommodation to their search of national unity perceived as exempt from class contradictions.

²⁰² Matevosyan, "The Great Master," 326.

color and spatial autonomous elements, underlines their opposite and complimentary rhythms and finds the boundaries of their qualitative and quantitative relations.²⁰³

Here Matevosyan mainly evaluates the artwork through formal criteria. The art historian views the picture plane as a united system of formal elements while revealing art as an autonomous sphere of creativity that parallels reality. Already in 1966, in his introduction to Saryan's memoirs Matevosyan boldly states: "The picture is the self-expression of the author that is endowed with an autonomous artistic meaning."²⁰⁴ These two principles – viewing the artwork as the self-expression of the artist and cherishing the idea of the autonomy of art through formal analysis – are the pillars which carry Matevosyan's method in all of his writings mainly published after the mid 1960s.

In an entry to the third edition of his study *Hakob Kojoyan*, written already in the independent Republic of Armenia in 1998 Matevosyan states the "general-theoretical principle"²⁰⁵ of his work which appear as "'hidden' and obscure"²⁰⁶ in the first edition of 1971 because of the pressure of the censorship in the Soviet Union:

[it is] a principle the foundation of which are not so called "representation," "reflection" and others alike as starting points but the parallelism of the reality and the very artistic essence of art, the autonomy of art and the thesis of its self-sufficiency as a phenomenon of aesthetic expression. This self-sufficiency has as its very kernel the absolute substance of the potential activity of the self-expression of the artist-subject.²⁰⁷

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Wilhelm Matevosyan, "Saryann Ir Grarrumnerum" (Saryan in His Notes). In *Grarrumner Im Kyanqts* (Notes from My Life), by Martiros Saryan. Yerevan: Sovetakan Grogh, 1966, 11.

²⁰⁵ Wilhelm Matevosyan, "Erku khosq" (Two words). In Hakob Kojoyan. Yerevan: Sargis Khachents, 2003, 15.

²⁰⁶ Ibid. 14.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

It is according to these principles that Matevosyan first presents his own interpretation of the different periods in Saryan's art in a book entitled *Martiros Saryan* published in 1975.²⁰⁸ Here the author divides Saryan's work into three clearly defined stages of development where the first stage encompasses the years of 1904-1909, the second is the 1910s and the third final stage includes the entire Soviet period, from the 1920s until the artist's death in 1972. Establishing in the introduction the methodological angle of his work that views the style of the artist as an expression of his individuality within the currents of the art of his time Matevosyan conveys his perception of Saryan's artistic method in general: "While dedicating himself with his entire essence to the speculative experience of the interconnection between the autonomous value of color and the constructive-geometric function of volume-form he simultaneously remained close to nature."²⁰⁹ It is within this dynamic of the relation of the autonomy of formal elements on the picture plane and the immediate experience of reality that the three stages of Saryan's art are demarcated in the book. Matevosyan views the works of the first period, titled Tales and Dreams by the artist, as imaginary systems of formal elements abstracted from the artist's study of nature. In these works, the positioning of the figures in the composition of the plane, the color relations, source of light and the solutions to other formal problems Matevosyan attributes solely to Saryan's artistic imagination. In contrast to the first stage, the works made by the artist during the second period contain motives from immediate reality while being "abstract-speculative" in their manner of painting.

²⁰⁸ Wilhelm Matevosyan, *Martiros Saryan*. Yerevan: Academy of Sciences, RA, 1975. In his journal Matevosyan specifically states that although the book was published after Saryan's death the artist was well aware of the manuscript. Matevosyan's journal, "28 Feb., 1980." In Matevosyan's fund in The Museum of Literature and Art.

²⁰⁹ Matevosyan, *Martiros Saryan*, 7.

During this period the artist organically synthesized the morphological principles of Armenian miniature painting, murals, architecture, and the Gauguin's, Van-Gogh's [and] Cezanne's legacies and created a new, Saryanesque stylistic unity. By realizing this unity as the manifestation of his artistic individuality on the canvas he viewed the visible world as an ideal compound of proto-forms while excluding the ephemeral impressions of everyday experience and the positive obviousness of the object.²¹⁰

This second stage was followed by “dramatic changes in Saryan’s poetics and technique” in the 1920s, a change that Matevosyan does not attributed to any political or social transformation. He goes through pains not to mention either the establishment of Soviet Armenia or the principles of Socialist Realism while defining the third phase of the artist’s work. In describing what he himself unequivocally declared realism in his first article Matevosyan maneuvers: “The strictly mediated relationship with reality characteristic to the works of the previous stages now became incomparably more direct.”²¹¹ Later in 1979 the author would complain in his personal journal how this change in Saryan’s work articulated in his book was perceived as progress “although it is clearly stated in the book (indeed not in direct words which, alas, would not have been possible) that it was a regrettable narrowing of worldview, philosophical-aesthetic and stylistic problems for the artist.”²¹²

Thus, the idealized generalization of Saryan’s artistic method as elaborated in the introduction of the book is based on the second stage of the artist’s work in the 1910s. It is from the point of view of Matevosyan’s ideal of Saryanesque style, which is in tune with his ideals of the autonomy of art and expression of the individuality of the artist that the change in Saryan’s work of the 1920s is seen as a regress. Matevosyan

²¹⁰ Ibid., 45.

²¹¹ Ibid., 35.

²¹² Matevosyan’s journal, “22, June, 1979.” In Matevosyan’s fund in The Museum of Literature and Art.

cultivates this ahistorical, selectively idealized image of Saryan to re-imagine a tradition of Armenian art of the modern era suitable for his aspirations of European modernism through ethnic/national unity.

It is these two pillars constructed on which Matevosyan's studies on other Armenian artists can be seen as well. In his work on another major figure in Soviet Armenian art Hakob Kojoyan, Matevosyan positions the work of the artist within the European modern currents of art, specifically expressionism while at the same time attributing the expressive, monumental character of his work to Armenian medieval murals and miniature paintings.²¹³ Later in his career Matevosyan revisits his dissertation on Sedrak Araqelyan including the discussion of the artist's work in his study "Impressionismy hay kerparvestum" (Impressionism in the Armenian art).²¹⁴ In tune with his strategy of re-imagining a tradition of Armenian art according to his ideals Matevosyan reveals the unequivocal existence of what he calls "Armenian Impressionism" of the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. Araqelyan in this view as opposed to Matevosyan's dissertation becomes a proud member of this current. In the study the art historian reveals the phenomenon of "Armenian Impressionism" in parallel to other modern movements in the Armenian art of the same period:

During those years when Eghishe Tadevosyan, Sedrak Araqelyan, Vahram Gayfejyan and other Armenian artists were painting their impressionist works alongside with them were working Vardges Surenyants with his symbolic "modern" [method], Martiros Saryan with his structuralism merging fauvism, cubism, constructivism and the principles of the

²¹³ Wilhelm Matevosyan, *Hakob Kojoyan: Arvesty* (Hakob Kojoyan: Art). Yerevan: Academy of Sciences, RA, 1971; *Hakob Kojoyan*. Yerevan: Sargis Khachents, 2003.

²¹⁴ Wilhelm Matevosyan, "Impressionismy Hay Kerparvestum" (Impressionism in the Armenian Art). In *Usumnasirutyunner* (Inquiries), 135-244. Yerevan: Sargis Khachents, 2014.

monumental painting of the past [and] Hakob Kojoyan with his uniquely interpreted expressionism, along with other Armenian innovators.”²¹⁵ Matevosyan re-evaluates the place of almost every major artist in Armenian art according to the above-discussed principles of art and art history formed by the author through and against the principles of the Socialist Realism of the Thaw.²¹⁶ Besides the scarce material on European modernism available in the late Soviet Union one of the main authorities for Matevosyan was Saryan himself. In almost every study the art historian either refers to the opinion of Saryan as an unquestionable tribunal to evaluate works of other artists or compares the works under discussion to Saryan’s works to determine their value. It is not incidental that in a study on Saryan’s aesthetic views Matevosyan distinguishes between Saryan the artist and Saryan the theorist.²¹⁷ Thus, Saryan is not yet another subject of study in Matevosyan’s scholarship. Instead he appears as a figure formative for his views on art and art history.

Matevosyan’s multilayered connection with Saryan is the reason that besides the interpretation of the artist’s work Matevosyan was also determined to purge Saryan’s legacy from what he perceived as Soviet falsifications and to unveil the system of his philosophical thinking and aesthetics. About the numerous articles and essays published about Saryan in popular magazines and journals in the Soviet Union Matevosyan writes: “There are instances when the artist’s reflections are reported with obvious misunderstandings and distortions attributing him judgements, opinions and views that

²¹⁵ Matevosyan, “Impressionism in the Armenian Art,” 144.

²¹⁶ This approach refers not only to the artists of the twentieth century but also to his studies on the thirtieth century Armenian miniature painting. See Wilhelm Matevosyan, “Margare.” In *Usumnasirutyunner* (Inquiries), 245–62. Yerevan: Sargis Khachents, 2014; Wilhelm Matevosyan, “Ikonografiakan Skhemayi Yev Stegtsagortsoghi Artistakan Anhatakanut’yan Haraberut’yan Khndiry Mijnadaryan Hay Arvestum” (On the Question of the Relationship between the Iconological Scheme and Artistic Individuality in Medieval Armenian Art). In *Usumnasirutyunner* (Inquiries), 263–310. Yerevan: Sargis Khachents, 2014.

²¹⁷ Wilhelm Matevosyan, *Martiros Saryani Estetikakan Hayatsqneri* (The Aesthetic Views of Martiros Saryan). Yerevan: Academy of Sciences, RA, 1980, 7.

are absolutely inappropriate for his worldview and thought, his taste and aesthetic criteria.”²¹⁸ In his pursuit for authenticity the art historian published three volumes presenting Saryan’s aesthetic views, *The Aesthetic Views of Martiros Saryan* (1980), *Saryan about Art* (1986), *Conversations with Saryan* (2002). Although differently structured and varying in their format all three have an underlying premise of presenting Saryan’s views on aesthetics as a homogenized and unified system, one that is autonomous from its historical-political context.²¹⁹ According to Matevosyan he wrote *The Aesthetic Views of Martiros Saryan* during the years of 1966-1968²²⁰ clarifying with the artist the ambiguities raising from the printed material which the art historian had already established in the introduction as unreliable.²²¹ Faithful to the general spirit of Kantian philosophy animated with “a constant preoccupation with limits, boundaries”²²² and formal structures Matevosyan presents clear thematic divisions in Saryan’s thought based on his own theoretical vocabulary, such as “Saryan’s pantheism,” “The general cosmological interpretation of the beautiful,” “The estimation of man within the cosmos as the system of universal beauty,” etc. The book presents a structured system of aesthetics that the artist had developed on the basis of which lays a pantheist worldview with his emphasis on humanism,²²³ a universal perception of the beautiful²²⁴ and the “purely aesthetic value of the artwork”.²²⁵

²¹⁸ Martiros Saryan, *Saryany Arvesti Masin* (Saryan about Art). Edited by Wilhelm Matevosyan and Yuri Khachatryan. Yerevan: Sovetakan Grogh, 1986, 8.

²¹⁹ Although *Conversations with Saryan* does not have the same pretention of presenting a system of thought as do the other two publications, the conversations are still not dated and the comments on art and other artists by Saryan does not appear within the historical context they were expressed in.

²²⁰ Matevosyan’s journal, “28 Feb., 1980.” In Matevosyan’s fund in The Museum of Literature and Art.

²²¹ The introductions to both *The Aesthetic Views of Martiros Saryan* and *Saryan about Art* are essentially the same text with minor changes.

²²² Cheetham, *Kant, Art, and Art History*, 11.

²²³ Matevosyan, *The Aesthetic Views of Martiros Saryan*, 24-34.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 16-24.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

Thus, beginning from the mid 1960s Matevosyan's efforts to re-imagine a new tradition of Armenian art bases itself on Saryan as the ideal of his art history while the different levels of influences of Kantian philosophy and neo-Kantian art history are subsumed within his rendering of both Saryan "the artist" and "the theorist." Matevosyan's ahistorical generalizations in search for theoretical, political and aesthetic constants, his preoccupation with theorization and systematization and his ideals of the autonomy of art and the expression of the individuality of the artist are animated by a neo-Kantian horizon which became available to him thanks to the policies of the Thaw and was perceived as salvation from the same political and historical reality.

In a note in his journal written in 1980 Matevosyan returns to his writings published at the beginning of his career. Describing the oppressive atmosphere in Soviet art history during the 1940s and 1950s and the efforts of some "progressive art critics" to bring the artists accused of formalism closer to realism, the art historian claims:

Going against truth, I too made an effort if not to declare Saryan a realist (if my memory does not betray me, indeed I did not declare him so: seems to me that on the road to falsification I did not completely lose my sense of shame), then at least to distance him from formalism (under which every progressive aesthetic principle is conceived) and consider him as someone who is guided by the aesthetics of representing reality ... And although done for a good cause, scholarly, art historical, art critical, theoretical falsification does not have a justification. IT DOES NOT!²²⁶

It needs to be noted, that the journal is the only personal document that Matevosyan did not destroy during his last years, before his passing in 2001.

²²⁶ Matevosyan's journal, "5, November, 1980, Berd." In Matevosyan's fund in The Museum of Literature and Art.

Khachikoghlyan claims that the art historian used to burn or shear everything in his archive he considered “unintelligible” for the upcoming researchers of his work.²²⁷ Indeed, Matevosyan’s archive seems devoid of personal thoughts except for the almost completed studies published posthumously by the Sargis Khachents publishing house. The journal which the art historian kept from 1979 to 1987 and left untouched for future researchers is mainly a conversation with Saryan, “the Master.” However, it can hardly be considered a personal diary of the author as the notes are mainly evaluations of various figures in the field or articulations of Matevosyan’s art historical views on specific currents, published books, etc. Many are judgements that the author considers impermissible in the Soviet atmosphere of the time. Thus, the journal seems intentionally left by Matevosyan for the researchers of his work in order to render the exact evaluation of his own work according to the way he would like to be seen posthumously.²²⁸

In retrospect the art historian sees his development as a scholar in almost religious terms: caught up between truth and falsification and having the “sense of shame” as his compass. From an ahistorically conceived criterion of “truth” Matevosyan attempts to erase and petrify the dynamic evolution of his own work in order not to be associated with Soviet art history, a self-flagellating move that fabricates his legacy through self-distortion. The art historian’s moral confession once again reveals the biggest enemy of his art history, the Soviet ideology homogenized by Stalinist policies that was already a construct of yet another self-destructive fabrication.

²²⁷ My conversation with Khachikoghlyan, 26.08.2020.

²²⁸ The author also gives exact references to many books and articles he discusses, something which is hardly done in a personal diary.

Matevosyan refers to the same logic of schematic division of the truth and false, a logic from which Kantian philosophy seemed to offer a true salvation.

CHAPTER IV

THE ASPIRATION OF “PURE VISION”

The previous chapters have attempted to present the way in which Wilhelm Matevosyan’s understanding of art was transformed through the liberalization policies of the Thaw after Stalin’s death. Khrushchev’s policies that had an impact on both social and academic life, resulted also in the formation of an anti-Soviet front among the intellectuals of the 1960s. The overarching purpose of this front was to salvage the Armenian tradition from Soviet ideology seen as an interruption of the modernization processes of the nation. Matevosyan’s scholarship, indebted to neo-Kantian and other strands of formalist aesthetics and developed in strict contradiction to Soviet Socialist Realism made him one of the prominent figures of this front.

To unravel a wider context within which Matevosyan can be seen, this chapter takes its vantage point from the perception of the art historian and his scholarship by the intellectuals inspired by him. Discussing the articles written on Matevosyan’s work by his peers a monumental figure of the art historian arises whose method seems to be detached from its own historical context. In the eyes of this loose group of anti-Soviet intellectuals of his generation Matevosyan’s oeuvre presents an ideal of art historical scholarship that is armed with universally established formal laws and perceived against the principles of Socialist Realism. However, these takes on the art historian reveal also a subtle indication of a change in his scholarship the crossroad of which is considered his monograph *Sedrak Araqelyan* published in 1963. Matevosyan’s work on artist Sedrak Araqelyan is discussed in the chapter as the early stage of the development of his art historical method. While maintaining the ideological and contextual discussion

of the painter, a feature typical for Socialist Realist art history, the monograph at the same time reveals seeds of his formalist method that was later to crystalize as the aesthetic system formulated mainly after the book on Araqelyan. It is this method that his peers consider as “high art history.”²²⁹ The culmination of this ideal of art historical scholarship is considered Matevosyan’s book on one of the major artists of Armenian art, Hakob Kojoyan, first published in 1971. The discussion of this work in this chapter will reveal the nuances of his aesthetic method.

Informed by his situated usage of Heinrich Wölfflin’s principles of art history and neo-Kantian perceptual psychology widely circulated at the turn of the century German academy, Matevosyan’s scholarship is praised for basing itself on universal, “stable laws”²³⁰ of aesthetics irrespective of the latter’s historical conditions. However, by analyzing Matevosyan’s works on both Araqelyan and Kojoyan I argue in this chapter that the art historian’s method is interconnected with the established Socialist Realist art history in opposition to which it was developed. It is precisely the opposition to Socialist Realism and Soviet ideology in general that provided a ground for Matevosyan’s perception of neo-Kantian formalist aesthetics as an absolute and true alternative to the former. This negative connection of Matevosyan’s method and agenda to Soviet ideology runs counter to the attempts made both by him and his peers to present the art historian as exempt from the latter thus resulting in ahistorical efforts to purge his scholarship from its historical conditions.

²²⁹ Ghazaryan, “Wolhelm Matevosyan,” 15.

²³⁰ Ibid. 7.

After Matevosyan's death in 2001 the Sargis Khachents publishing house and the art historian's friends gathered around it published four volumes of Matevosyan's works, *Zruytsner Saryani het* [Conversations with Saryan] (2002), *Yereq kisadem* [Three profiles] (2002), *Hakob Kojoyan* (2003) and *Usumnasirutyunner* [Inquiries] (2014). The introductions to these publications written by the intellectuals of his generation who shared and were inspired by his views are the only texts on Matevosyan's scholarship thus far. The introduction to *Inquiries* by art historian Vigen Ghazaryan is titled "Wilhelm Matevosyan as a Theorist and Cultivator of Art." While largely presenting a general overview of Matevosyan's work, Ghazaryan also indicates a difference between Matevosyan's first manuscript based on his dissertation on the work of the artist Sedrak Araqelyan (1884-1942), published in 1963 and his later work, *The Aesthetic Views of Martiros Saryan* published in 1980:

From a purely art historical point of view Matevosyan was guided by methods that he himself contributed thanks to his self-education, great intellectual ability and energy. The first of these is the descriptive method, which is more characteristic of his first, *Sedrak Araqelyan* monograph. ... The other method can be considered the aesthetic approach which is more conspicuous in the book *The Aesthetic Views of Martiros Saryan*.²³¹

Ghazaryan does not portray this difference as a transformation in Matevosyan's method, although these two works stand at the opposite chronological spectrum of his work. Instead, detaching Matevosyan from his socio-political context and revealing him as almost an absolute phenomenon in Armenian art history, Ghazaryan considers these as two separate approaches both of which Matevosyan supposedly singlehandedly

²³¹ Ibid., 14.

developed himself. From Ghazaryan's formulation it seems like there is no qualitative difference between the two methods. However, it is about the art historian's later "aesthetic approach" that the author states: "Here and not only here he [Matevosyan] puts to work the verified system of aesthetic and near-aesthetic categories."²³²

Ghazaryan presents this system frequently characterized by epithets such as "pure" and "high" as an a priori tribunal of truth that is above its historical context. Matevosyan is in turn the carrier of this truthful system in Ghazaryan's article, something that makes him exceptional among the late Soviet art historians in the eyes of his disciple and friend.

Literary critic Yuri Khachatryan's take in the introduction to *Yereq kisadem* [Three profiles] titled "Wilhelm Matevosyan: The Candle that was Burning and the Light that is Reaching Us" is not far from Ghazaryan. Going to great lengths to isolate the art historian from the Soviet reality Khachatryan reveals a "serious scholarly approach" in Matevosyan's method in opposition to Soviet art history. Although not from a methodological perspective a change in the art historian's works appearing after the first monograph is mentioned in Khachatryan's article as well. Discussing some of Matevosyan's works he especially highlights the art historian's monograph on Hakob Kojoyan.²³³ Considering it an "exceptional phenomenon in the history of Armenian theoretical and art historical thought"²³⁴ Khachatryan compares Matevosyan's writing style in *Hakob Kojoyan: Art* to that of the monograph *Sedrak Araqelyan*: "After *Sedrak*

²³² Ibid., 15.

²³³ Matevosyan, *Hakob Kojoyan: Art*, 1971.

²³⁴ Khachatryan, "Wilhelm Matevosyan," XXV.

Araqelyan his language was evidently freed and purged from excessive details, epithetic convolutions and the presence of general, simple information.”²³⁵

Thus, from the two articles the figure of the art historian arises as a representative of what Ghazaryan calls “high art history”²³⁶ whose aesthetic system is in isolation from Soviet ideology and is above its historical context. However, despite the insistence on the ahistorical character of the art historian’s methodology and aesthetic system there is a slight indication of a change in Matevosyan’s method in both articles after the monograph *Sedrak Araqelyan*. Whether it is for firmly grounding his “aesthetic approach” or for the shedding of “excessive details, epithetic convolutions” the monograph *Sedrak Araqelyan* appears on the crossroad of the art historical method developed by Matevosyan later in his career. Therefore, to unveil the development of the art historian’s methodology and reveal the value of his work beyond the monument erected by his peers in their texts about Matevosyan a close look at this work is of importance.

Based on the dissertation that he defended in 1960 this book comprises a general evaluation of the artist Sedrak Araqelyan’s work. In the book Matevosyan outlines three stages in Araqelyan’s practice: the 1910s, the early 1920s and the years from the late 1920s up until his death in 1942. Araqelyan studied in the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture under Konstantin Korovin, who also taught Saryan. Korovin was a Russian impressionist painter who was formative for Araqelyan as well as for many of his other students at the beginning of the century. The influence of the impressionist style of painting is visible in Araqelyan’s work throughout his life and especially in the works of the 1910s and 1920s. Matevosyan considers this influence

²³⁵ Ibid., XXVII.

²³⁶ Ghazaryan, “Wilhelm Matevosyan,” 14.

within the comprehensive understanding of realism he had maintained earlier in his career, as discussed in my previous chapter: “At the basis of S. Araqelyan’s artistic thinking lays the realist method of reflection of objective reality with the stamp of impressionist coloring.”²³⁷ It is under this umbrella of realism that the art historian elaborates on Araqelyan’s solutions of formal problems on the picture plane such as his attempts at achieving a plastic unity of line and color or his renouncement of the somber palette of academic painting in favor of bright and light coloring.²³⁸

In the first two chapters of the monograph, Matevosyan discusses an autonomous development of the formal aspects of Araqelyan’s work such as the use of monochrome brushstrokes²³⁹ or the appearance of the local color fields on the plane²⁴⁰ throughout the two decades of the beginning of the century thus revealing the trajectory of the painter through the transformation of the formal characteristics of his work. However, referring to the latest stage of the artist’s work, Matevosyan detects a change in the method and subject matter of Araqelyan’s works: while throughout the last decades the artist was depicting his immediate impressions of nature manifesting his mastery of coloring “from the years of 1928-1930 a new milestone begins in S. Araqelyan’s creative life practice. A break takes place in the thematic of his art.”²⁴¹ The artist starts to rely on thematic compositions with multiple figures drawn not directly from the original, but composed from the sketches in the studio. Matevosyan attributes this change to the establishment of Socialist Realism as the only method of representation, as well as to “the directives given by the Party to the workers of the

²³⁷ Matevosyan, *Sedrak Araqelyan*, 31.

²³⁸ Ibid. See the first and second chapters.

²³⁹ Ibid., 18.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 30.

²⁴¹ Ibid., 83.

ideological front.”²⁴² The art historian starts to describe the narrative of these compositions one by one praising the ideological commitment of the artist manifested in them, an engagement with the descriptive content that he would abandon in his later writings. He states:

In these works, he appears in the positions of the method of Socialist Realism and the ideological principles of Soviet art. He now approaches the social-economic life of the country and the psychology of various social layers armed with the Leninist theses of the party-mindedness of art derived from the foundations of the new, Soviet aesthetics.²⁴³

Considering these compositions inseparable from “the history of our art”²⁴⁴ and absolutely important in the discussion of the entirety of the artist’s work, Matevosyan nevertheless claims that: “[these] thematic works done in the studio have plastic, compositional and painterly imperfections.”²⁴⁵ He then discusses these imperfections against the background of the artist’s professional pedigree and his relationship with his teacher Korovin. Being an impressionist himself, Korovin put great importance on the coloring skills of his students which resulted in insufficiency of developing their drawing skills. Matevosyan eventually concludes that while Araqelyan was brilliant when painting from the original, he “was unable to mentally construct a figure.”²⁴⁶ To elaborate on his point Matevosyan takes the example of the work *Donkey Loaded with Grass*:²⁴⁷

²⁴² Ibid., 92.

²⁴³ Ibid., 91.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 104.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 92.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ As Matevosyan indicates the work is from Araqelyan’s Soviet period, done after 1932. However, I was unable to find the exact date of its creation.

The canvas has a general unity of color, a connection between the different spatial parts. The architectonic structure of the landscape in the image is also convincing. Thanks to that the viewer perceives the dynamic of the presented situation from the first glance. Through the mediation of these successful formal elements [the viewer] to some extent enters the atmosphere created by the image. Nevertheless, the process of perception remains incomplete. Encompassing the aesthetic completeness of the image from the very first moment of the interaction [with it], the viewer naturally focuses her attention on the separate and first and foremost on the central details of the canvas. And it is here, in this exact moment that the harmonious process of the perception of the canvas is disturbed. The canvas leaves an incomplete impression. The reason is that the central figure (the man on the donkey) has an unconvincing structure of drawing. His arms, legs and head do not form a respective relation with the torso and do not display the dynamic and plastic movement of the organs.²⁴⁸

On the one hand, the sketchiness, fragmentation, incompleteness that are characteristics of the impressionist method of painting appear in Matevosyan's discussion as deficiencies in Araqelyan's later period. On the other hand, however, the excerpt also shows the method of formal analysis Matevosyan applies throughout the book which takes its starting point from the process of the perception of the viewer, an early trace of an important methodological aspect that would later become one of the pillars of his art historical method. Throughout the monograph Matevosyan unveils a trajectory of the autonomous formal transformation along with ruptures in the artist's work while attempting to reveal his mode of painting through the social-political changes in the country. Thus, the book presents an internal split within the art historian's method between the criteria of Socialist Realist art history and the neo-Kantian formalist aesthetics Matevosyan was leaning towards during the first half of the 1960s. I believe it is the description of the socio-political aspects and the discussion of the narrative of Araqelyan's compositions customary for Socialist Realist art history

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 93.

that Khachatryan considers as “epithetic convolutions” or “presence of general, simple information” the move away from which is seen as an improvement in Khachatryan’s view. In contrast to this view, an account from the defense of Matevosyan’s dissertation in 1960 shows the resonance the implementation of formalist analysis in the work had at the Institute of Art of the Academy of Sciences of Armenian SSR:

The supervisor of his dissertation was [Ruben] Drambyan. The defense went well, everyone was impressed. Drambyan asked to speak and addressed everyone saying, I ask you not to give a PhD to this person, he does not love art, but rather approaches art as an analyst and as someone who performs an autopsy.²⁴⁹

Drambyan’s voice carried an authority with it, he is a central figure in Soviet Armenian art history. Being a proponent of realism in art himself Drambyan started his career long before the institution of the principles of Socialist Realism.²⁵⁰ His take on art was developed through the heated artistic debates of the 1920s while also witnessing the harsh methods of implementation of Socialist Realism in the 1930s. Thus, Drambyan’s views on Armenian artists can be seen as much more nuanced than the official ideological position would suggest. Many of his keen observations about pivotal artworks in Armenian art established a vantage point from which every art historian

²⁴⁹ My conversation with Khachikoghlyan, 26.08.2020

²⁵⁰ Having started his career at the Russian State Museum in 1923 Ruben Drambyan (1891-1991) moved to Armenia at the end of 1924 upon the request of the People's Commissariat for Education of Soviet Armenia as well as Martiros Saryan and architect Alexander Tamanyan personally. He was to undertake the task of developing the collection for the art section of the State Museum founded in 1921, a section that would then grow into the National Gallery of Armenia. Drambyan worked at the Museum until 1951 becoming the founder not only of the standing collection of artworks in Armenia but also shaping the canon of Soviet Armenian art. He also extensively published art criticism throughout several decades in Soviet Union. Irina Drambyan, “R. G. Drambyan i Yego Rol’ v Khudozhestvennoy Zhizni Armenii XX Veka” (R. G. Drambyan and His Role in the Artistic Life of Armenia in the Twentieth Century), VII-XXVIII. In *Iz Istorii Armyanskogo Iskusstvo* (From History of the Armenian Art), by Ruben Drambyan. Yerevan: National Gallery of Armenia, 2016.

departs until now. Drambyan is the only art historian of Soviet Armenia to whose work Matevosyan refers mainly without criticism even during the later period of his career. In his dissertation *Sedrak Araqelyan* the art historian bases several of his arguments on his supervisor's take on the artist regarding the genre of Araqelyan's work and the change of his subject matter from the late 1920s on. However, for the representative of the older school Soviet art history with a firm position on realism, Matevosyan's analysis seemed too formal: it did not leave space for an appreciation of the work emotionally.

Drambyan's comparison of Matevosyan's method to autopsy, which implied a disapproval of distancing oneself too much from the artwork, appears once again as a flattering remark in the accompanying article to the revised publication of the study *Hakob Kojoyan* (2003) originally published in 1971. The author of the article Poghos Haytayan (1935-2017), an art historian of the same generation as Vigen Ghazaryan, Yuri Khachatryan and Matevosyan himself outlines the merits of the study, thus claiming: "It is an exceptional ability on the part of the art historian and scholar to reopen and rethink the 'anatomy' and 'physiology' of the picture, to retell the artistic 'vision'."²⁵¹ In opposition to Drambyan's prioritization of the emotional engagement with the work, the precision and accuracy required from surgical work in Haytayan's text turns into an ideal of art historical scholarship. From his analysis of *Hakob Kojoyan* Haytayan concludes that Matevosyan is "a scholar who 'diagnoses' the work of art with microscopic accuracy, a rare phenomenon that *raises art history to the level of scholarship among us*."²⁵² Thus, the higher ideal of scholarship for Haytayan is methodologically closer to diagnostics, i.e. the analysis of the work of art according to

²⁵¹ Poghos Haytayan, "Girq, Vor Aprelu e Yerkar (A Book That Will Live Long)." In *Hakob Kojoyan*, by Wilhelm Matevosyan. Yerevan: Sargis Khachents, 2003, 288.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 291.

universally established formal categories. It is precisely the ahistorical universality of these categories that in the eyes of these scholars helps to accurately allocate the place of the artwork in world art history. Describing Matevosyan's works Ghazaryan in turn confirms this view:

An organic part of these writings is the aestheticism which was not only characteristic of Wilhelm Matevosyan's temperament but also, and more importantly, it was a deeply and methodologically conscious aestheticism verified by *the stable laws* of classical and modern aesthetics and art history.²⁵³ (emphasis added)

During our exchange Khachatryan put into context what he and his peers perceived as the ideal of scholarship. Referring to the state of art history established in the Soviet Union which in his perspective endures up until now, Khachatryan characterized it as: "...[a]rt history filled with journalistic things that do not say anything. However, art history is an exact science, it is neither some pleasantry out in the air nor an expression of immediate impressions."²⁵⁴ Away from the established methods of Soviet art history understood as random "pleasantry" and "expressions of the immediate impressions" is neo-Kantian formalism prevailing among the intellectuals of this generation. It is within a strict qualitative hierarchy that the difference between the two is seen from their perspective. In opposition to the ideologically charged Soviet art history characterized as "low journalism"²⁵⁵ this view occupies the highest position in the hierarchy of methodologies, a firm ahistorical vantage point of analyzing the artwork. The absolutized perception of the formalist method of these scholars is best summed up by Ghazaryan:

²⁵³ Ghazaryan, "Wilhelm Matevosyan," 7.

²⁵⁴ My conversation with Khachatryan, 2.09.2020.

²⁵⁵ Matevosyan himself makes this formulation multiple times in his journal.

In the language of high art history aesthetic categories with all their generalization, sometimes even vagueness and historical layers serve as a basis for aesthetic analysis the same way the dot, line, circle, plane, etc. do for Euclid as axioms for geometric proofs.²⁵⁶

For both Haytayan and Khachatryan Matevosyan's study on Kojoyan marks the culmination of this method in his work. Khachatryan retrospectively identifies the origins of Matevosyan's method in his article of 2002: "The book *Hakob Kojoyan: Art* was written according to the principles of the current of 'pure vision' (Wölfflin) in pursuit for neo-Kantianism."²⁵⁷ By the current of "pure vision" Khachatryan obviously refers to Heinrich Wölfflin's endeavor in *The Principles of Art History* to render the universal structure of the history of vision through his five pairs – linear vs. painterly, plane vs. recession, closed (tectonic) vs. open (a-tectonic) form, multiplicity vs. unity, and absolute vs. relative clarity. Although Wölfflin is considered to be the founder of the formalist method and his views are deeply indebted to Kantian a priori categories the idea of "vision" is rather complex in his system of art history.²⁵⁸ It is put in a complex juncture of a specific understanding of neo-Kantianism animated by the

²⁵⁶ Ghazaryan, "Wilhelm Matevosyan," 15.

²⁵⁷ Khachatryan, "Wilhelm Matevosyan," XXVI.

²⁵⁸ For Wölfflin, the pairs of concepts are not only characterizations of what is represented but are largely forms of subjective perception that reveal the specific understanding of the idea of vision in his work. A broadly neo-Kantian conception of the mind underlies this idea, the origins of which can be found in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* according to which objects of experience are not simply "given" but are rather perceived and transformed by the active contribution of our faculties. Committing to and in a way modifying this Kantian approach, Wölfflin takes vision as a faculty itself: "...visual perception is not a mirror that always remains the same; it is a living *faculty of perception* with its own internal history and many phases behind it (emphasis added)." Wölfflin, *Principles*, 304. As Jason Geiger puts it, for Wölfflin "the conditions of the possibility of experience are no longer treated as universal and a priori but as dynamic as well as culturally and historically specific." For further analysis on Wölfflin's neo-Kantian commitments see Jason Geiger, "Intuition and Representation: Wölfflin's Fundamental Concepts of Art History." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 73, no. 2 (Spring 2015): 164–71.

cultural and historical specificity that can be viewed within the currents of German academy of the beginning of the century.²⁵⁹ The perception of Wölfflin's system by Khachatryan as a current of "pure vision" is a historically specific one which opens a curious window to the way Wölfflin and neo-Kantianism were perceived among the anti-Soviet intellectuals of this generation. "Purenness" in Khachatryan's view is considered a much higher attribute in opposition to the set criteria of Socialist Realism of the late Soviet Union devoid of substantial methodological unity and associated with lies and deception. It is the guarantee of the stability and universality of the laws according to which an artwork can be judged, with this judgment in turn perceived as a salvation from an ideologically charged contextual analysis. Although Khachatryan's wording in Armenian does not directly refer to Kant's "pure reason"²⁶⁰ it is clear that Wölfflin's idea of the history of vision is mediated in his view through the Kantian "purenness" perceived as the antidote to what he calls the "Marxist-Leninist fatuous lies" of the Soviet Union. This "purenness" is akin to a moral high ground the attainment of which can exempt one from the connection with the Soviet context. In this perception of Wölfflin it is the latter's Kantianism that is put forth as a weapon against Soviet ideology while the cultural-historical ground that puts in motion his understanding of vision is somewhat overlooked. Thus, to unveil the specificities of Matevosyan's art historical method praised by his peers for the universally verified, "purely" formal structure it represents, one needs to turn to his work on Hakob Kojoyan's art as the culmination point of this method.

²⁵⁹ See Adler, "The German academy." Besides, in Wölfflin's work "the vision" or "the formal schema" or what he metaphorically calls "the mirror" is itself changes throughout time which can be interpreted as putting the idea of Kantian categories into historical perspective.

²⁶⁰ In Armenian the "pure" in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* is translated as "զուտ," whereas Khachatryan uses another word with a similar meaning, "մաքուր."

In her study of the artistic life of the Soviet Armenia of the early 1920s entitled *The Realism of the Revolution The Debates on the Armenian Art of the 1920s* art historian Irina Shakhnazaryan points out that it was mainly two artists, Martiros Saryan and Hakob Kojoyan who became “the pillars of the discussion of the artistic life in Soviet Armenian periodicals.”²⁶¹ Saryan and Kojoyan were considered to be the figures most engaged with the construction of the cultural life of the beginning of the 1920s. Coming from a long line of jewelers of Akhaltska²⁶² and having received his artistic education in Munich at the beginning of the century, Kojoyan, along with Martiros Saryan, was thought to be one of the founders of the “Armenian style” in painting. If Saryan was entrusted to organize the cultural institutions throughout the 1920s Kojoyan was the painter-illustrator of at least five major periodicals thus heralding the aesthetics of the newly developing Soviet public sphere of the early 1920s.²⁶³ The two artists and their works were so constitutive for the establishment of art as institution in the 1920s that despite the Stalinist oppressions throughout the late 1930s up until Stalin’s death, Saryan and Kojoyan maintained their positions as the main pillars of the canon of Armenian art throughout the seven decades of Soviet Armenia and up until the present day.

Thus, it is not surprising that in his efforts to re-imagine a new tradition of Armenian art in the 1960s against the ideological criteria of Socialist Realism and through his ideals of the autonomy of art and the expression of the individuality of the artist, Matevosyan in his scholarship referred to Kojoyan’s practice. If the art historian’s

²⁶¹ Shakhnazaryan, *The Realism of the Revolution*, 45.

²⁶² A city in Georgia traditionally populated by Armenians.

²⁶³ In the 1920s Kojoyan was the painter-illustrator of periodicals such as *Norq, Payqar, Nor Akos, Verelq, Khorhrdayin Hayastan*. See Shakhnazaryan, *The Realism of the Revolution*, 52.

interest in Saryan can be seen already from the end of the 1950s and his interpretation of Saryan's art transformed through the personal relationship with the artist, Kojoyan became central to Matevosyan's scholarship from the mid 1960s when he was already standing firmly on the grounds of formalist art history with the agenda of National Modernism. It is perhaps the personal relationship the art historian developed with Saryan, that brought about the difference by the way he discusses the two artists' works. In his various volumes on Saryan, along with the discussion of the works of the artist, Matevosyan mostly strives to reveal Saryan's aesthetic views faithful to the dialogues unfolding between them throughout the years. In contrast, the art historian's take on Kojoyan derives exceptionally from his engagement with the artworks presenting an opportunity to closely examine his method of formal analysis at work.

In his first scholarly article on Kojoyan, "The Graphic Works of Hakob Kojoyan of 1921-1922"²⁶⁴ published in 1967, Matevosyan positions his views on the artist mainly against another art historian deeply committed to Socialist Realism, Eghishe Martikyan. Under consideration are four works on paper Kojoyan produced after his visit to Iran in 1921. Matevosyan discusses the relationship between ornament and figure in these works arguing that the figures themselves are ornaments. The art historian holds that the ornament for Kojoyan is a perfect form to realize his aesthetic method which is to imaginatively synthesize the sensual experience of the empirical world into color scheme, brush strokes, planes and forms where "the real reality is transformed into the aesthetic reality symbolizing his spirit as a patriot, a human and an

²⁶⁴ Wilhelm Matevosyan, "Hakob Kojoyani 1921-1922 t't'. Grafikakan Yerkey" (The Graphic Works of Hakob Kojoyan of 1921-1922). *Lraber Hasarakakan Gitutyunneri*, no. 6 (1967): 65-77. Prior to this, Matevosyan published two articles on the artist which are mainly introductions to Kojoyan's life and work for a wide range of readership.

artist.”²⁶⁵ For Matevosyan, the importance of the ornament in Kojoyan’s works reveals itself through his defense of the autonomy of art as an “aesthetic reality” parallel to “the real reality” where the artwork is the expression of the spirit of the artist. This appears as a dramatic change in the art historian’s views on art compared to the description-oriented discussion of Araqelyan’s work published less than five years prior. To reveal Kojoyan’s works on paper as entirely ornamental linear compositions was no plane aesthetic analysis but was also a political stance against the Socialist Realist art history of the 1960s. It is from this position that Matevosyan starts discussing Martikyan’s take on the ornament in Kojoyan’s works:

... it is just surprising that the means of coloring that Kojoyan deploys and that is acceptable for him [Martikyan] (meaning they do not have a decorative effect), “exude a painterly quality” to the observed pictures, as the art historian claims. Yet, this is not enough; it is the very color hues that, according to him, condition the emotional quality of the stylized ornament-motives, something that is unacceptable to him. That the colors in their turn give an emotional undertone to them and are not excessive is obvious. However, one needs not be armed with the Wölfflinian theory of the principles of the coloristic and graphical, the linear and the painterly to notice that in the observed works the starting point in Kojoyan’s self-expression is the line.²⁶⁶

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 69.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 72.



Figure 5 Hakob Kojoyan, *Qnats Parskuhin (Sleeping Persian Girl)*, 1921, watercolor, 22x15 cm. National Gallery of Armenia, Yerevan.

For Matevosyan, the Wölfflinian principles appear so absolutized that Martikyan’s observation of the “painterly quality” of Kojoyan’s works on paper is unquestionably seen within the distinction of “linear versus painterly” where he takes the side of the former. Moreover, Matevosyan considers this distinction as merely a given, to the point that the actual knowledge of Wölfflin’s theory appears unnecessary for one to see the artwork through them. For him “even an unprofessional eye would distinguish”²⁶⁷ between these two. Thus, Matevosyan’s critique, although itself caught

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

up in the efforts to purge Kojoyan from Soviet principles of realism, in the ideological front it is directed towards the very basis of the profession of the art historian, *vision*, which in Martikyan's case, is seen as being obscured by ideology. Already in 1971, in his book on Kojoyan Matevosyan even directly attacks Martikyan's "ability to see",²⁶⁸ presupposing an ideal of vision that for him only the formalist method and first of all Wölfflinian art history were capable of revealing.

Hakob Kojoyan: Art was Matevosyan's first extensive study on Kojoyan which also presents a critical engagement with Martikyan's book, *Hakob Kojoyan*, published in 1961. The latter is a discussion of the artist's life and work against the background of the historical developments of the era with the establishment of the Soviet Union as the culmination point of "historical class struggle." In his book Martikyan puts a critical emphasis on the subject matter of Araqelyan's works and the ideological commitment expressed through them. The volume is not broken down according to chapters but rather reads as a book-length uninterrupted historical narrative of the artist's life. Here Kojoyan unequivocally appears as a realist painter ideologically committed to the Party and its ideals. Matevosyan's take, however, is structurally different: the book is constructed around nine highlights from the artist's creative life – his specific works or works of a certain genre made during the same period – each of which presents a separate chapter.²⁶⁹ In the introduction Matevosyan states that as Kojoyan's artistic practice was very diverse and the artist worked with different media and subjects simultaneously it is irrelevant to speak of his artistic evolution. Instead, the nine chapters reveal the "essential sides of the aesthetic principles" and the "artistic

²⁶⁸ Matevosyan, *Hakob Kojoyan: Art*, 208.

²⁶⁹ A modified version of the article "The Graphic Works" is one of the chapters in the book.

individuality”²⁷⁰ of the artist exceptionally through his “masterpieces.”²⁷¹ The book’s appendix presents a chronology of the artist’s life and references to the works that did not pass “the ‘barrier’ of Matevosyan’s value system.”²⁷² The criterion of this “value system” appears from the first chapter in the discussion of the work *The Ruins of Ani* (1919), a stylized landscape of the ruined medieval Armenian city. Proclaiming the style of the work as “synthetic” in reference to Lionello Venturi’s discussion of Paul Gauguin, the art historian elaborates on his perception of this synthetic character in Kojoyan’s work:

In this case he [Kojoyan] excludes the details and intertwines the impressions from the moment of observation as color, spatial and linear combined values. By the force of abstraction, he denies the illusion of the precision of both material and light effects. This is already “synthetism,” an old painterly principle which was restored and developed by several great artists of the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. By studying their work in Europe and returning to his homeland, Kojoyan found in the Armenian art of the past the complete embodiment of this principle.²⁷³



Figure 6 *Hakob Kojoyan, Anii Averaknery (The Ruins of Ani), 1919.*

²⁷⁰ Matevosyan, *Hakob Kojoyan: Art*, 9.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*

²⁷² Haytayan, “A Book,” 289.

²⁷³ Matevosyan, *Hakob Kojoyan: Art*, 15.

Thus, Matevosyan's selection of Kojoyan's work grounds itself in the two pillars of the National Modernist discourse and the formal expectations that constitute modern Armenian painting, the European modernism of the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century as received by the Armenian artists through the art of their own national past. This reception, in this view, inherently possesses the potential for reconnecting the Armenian nation with the modern European currents. "The complete embodiment" of Gauguin's "synthetic" principle are the murals of the St. Savior church from the thirteenth century in Ani which Kojoyan was studying while painting *The Ruins of Ani*. For the art historian, in line with the modernist principle of "synthetism", these murals present "synthetic mental images made by combining extremely generalized forms turned into signs of being,"²⁷⁴ Each of the chapters in Matevosyan's book, one way or another, reaffirms this relationship between European modernism and Armenian art in Kojoyan's work. Thus, the art historian constructs a closed system from the artist's works by exceptionally selecting "masterpieces" according to his understanding of formal aesthetic categories and according to their affinity with the history of European modernism.

In his first chapter on Kojoyan presenting *The Ruins of Ani* according to this vision, Matevosyan then criticizes Martikyan for dismissing the painting as merely an experiment. In Martikyan's book, however, Kojoyan appears as a completely different figure from what Matevosyan attributes to the artist. His other works of the same pre-revolutionary period are praised by the art historian for their "life-affirming realistic conception,"²⁷⁵ the nuanced refinement of the plane, the selection of real characters and

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

²⁷⁵ Eghishe Martikyan, *Hakob Kojoyan*. Yerevan: Haypethrat, 1961, 6.

the “love towards real life.”²⁷⁶ By these epithets Martikyan retrospectively re-frames the artist’s early period in order to prepare a ground for his transformation into a true Soviet Socialist Realist painter. By this the art historian constructs an uninterrupted development of realism as a style in Kojoyan’s work from which the landscape *The Ruins of Ani* with its highly stylized forms “falls out for reasons unknown.”²⁷⁷

It is within this trajectory of the development of realist style in Kojoyan’s work, with Socialist Realism as its final destination, that Martikyan locates another work by the artist, *The Execution of the Communists in Tatev* (1930). Briefly describing Kojoyan’s involvement in the art groups and collectives in Soviet Armenia during the 1920s, specifically his membership to the AKhRR (the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia), Martikyan positions the work within the development of typically Soviet themes among the artists at the time:

The composition created by Kojoyan, *The Execution of the Communists in Tatev* (1930), was one of the first works painted on the historical-revolutionary subject. Despite its partial imperfections this painting, in a sense, prompted at its time works on similar subjects.²⁷⁸

The work’s significance within the Socialist Realist art occasions the art historian’s discussion of it. Firstly, he acknowledges some merit in the depiction of the “class antagonisms” through a personal drama between “the armed group leader from Dashnaktsutyun on a horseback”²⁷⁹ and the communist on his way to execution. For Martikyan, the subject matter is so obvious that even the party affiliation of the central figure is certain. Moreover, he criticizes the painter who, although “in order to oppose

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 6.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 25.

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 26.

the class enemies”²⁸⁰ in his picture, went too far in making a caricature out of the executioner and depriving the character of his individuality. The principle of typicality in the identification of the characters underlying Martikyan’s criticism derives from the method of Socialist Realism which Martikyan retrospectively superimposes on the work painted years before the institution of Socialist Realist principles. Moreover, having these principles as nonnegotiable criteria, the art historian then detects “formalist deviations” in the artist’s work:

If the compositional structure of the picture has logic and is thought out, the same cannot be said about the construction of all the figures and [their] color scheme. The painter did not prove a necessary demand in that matter. The figures in the background are strictly schematic while the coloring is monochromatic and conventional.²⁸¹

Thus, the art historian judges the work according to a certain ideal that a realist painting with a historical-revolutionary subject matter needs to adhere to, something that Kojoyan’s work does only partially.

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

²⁸¹ Ibid., 27.



Figure 7 *Hakob Kojoyan, Komunistneri gndakaharutyuny Tatevum (The Execution of Communists in Tatev), 1930, Oil on canvas, 250x210 cm. National Gallery of Armenia, Yerevan.*

The Execution of the Communists in Tatev is also one of the “masterpieces” chosen by Matevosyan to which the art historian devotes an entire chapter in his book. In Matevosyan’s analysis, however, the painting does not appear as historical-revolutionary in terms of its thematic content, but rather as “historical-moral.”²⁸² Throughout the chapter the art historian refers to the title of the picture as “The Execution” refusing to affiliate Kojoyan with communists at all cost.²⁸³ Through a historical detour of the disasters the Armenian nation lived through during the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century Matevosyan maneuvers

²⁸² Matevosyan, *Hakob Kojoyan: Art*, 180.

²⁸³ Haytayan considers this move as “yet another expression of his [Matevosyan’s] feeling of the time and wisdom”, Haytayan, “A Book,” 296.

around with expressions such as “the tragic topic,”²⁸⁴ “this specific event,”²⁸⁵ etc., in order to avoid mentioning the specific historical moment depicted on the canvas. Around ten years later, in 1980 Matevosyan will write in his journal: “Kojoyan observed and interpreted the *sujet* of The Execution (as a reflection of a specific-historical event) as an act of fratricide and as a psychological- moral-philosophical – socio-historical problem.”²⁸⁶ The horrific subject matter is similarly generalized in the book where Matevosyan claims: “Kojoyan’s work objectively takes the eye of the viewer to the “first murder,” and then through the turmoil of the centuries brings [this act] back to his days directing it towards the future.”²⁸⁷ Thus, for Matevosyan, the theme of “The Execution” is all the evil in the world starting from the biblical fratricide echoed in turn in the centuries-long turmoil of the Armenian nation. For him, Kojoyan’s work appears as a firm account on national unity which disregards class contradictions. Matevosyan later articulates the view on history behind Kojoyan’s painting: “For decades the Turks massacred us and others were setting their own accounts while we were being played by the parties and their struggle.”²⁸⁸

The turbulence caused by the massacres, party struggles, fratricide and other disasters Armenians endured throughout their history Matevosyan reveals through the formal composition of the painting. The art historian points out that the dynamic disposition of the figures on the picture plane create an irregular ellipse which “keeps the eye of the viewer in an ‘eternal’ movement.”²⁸⁹ Following this movement of the eye

²⁸⁴ Kojoyan, 160

²⁸⁵ Matevosyan, *Hakob Kojoyan: Art*, 180.

²⁸⁶ Matevosyan’s journal, “4, July, 1980.” In Matevosyan’s fund in The Museum of Literature and Art.

²⁸⁷ Matevosyan, *Hakob Kojoyan: Art*, 180.

²⁸⁸ Matevosyan’s journal, “4, July, 1980.”

²⁸⁹ Matevosyan, *Hakob Kojoyan: Art*, 159.

Matevosyan then presents a keen observation which unveils the discussed angle of the subject matter through the form itself:

Since the ellipse of The Execution is approximate and irregular it brings forward an extremely tense movement. By “reading” it generally as an ellipse the viewer, while following its course expects regularity by habit but instead stumbles upon distortions. This very opposition of expectation and the real result accompanies the movement becoming a reason for heartburning protractions and sudden accelerations, abrupt transitions and difficult ascents on its way.²⁹⁰

This method of unveiling the formal characteristics of the artwork from the vantage point of the perception of a viewer while positioning her phenomenologically, through the bodily affects, as was observed earlier in his analysis of Araqelyan’s work *Donkey Loaded with Grass*, is key for Matevosyan’s art history. To support this analysis in the book the author obscurely mentions “experimental psychology and aesthetics,”²⁹¹ without giving a specific reference. I hold that this method was developed out of Matevosyan’s reading of the turn of the century neo-Kantian aesthetics.

Mark Jarzombek argues that since the axis of Kantian philosophy is the subject’s a priori capacities of the perception of the object when the latter is fundamentally unknown “in itself”, “late-nineteenth-century neo-Kantians saw in this a justification for perceptual psychology.”²⁹² The marriage of Kantian philosophy with psychology was wide-spread at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of twentieth century German academic circles. One of the many examples of it is Wölfflin’s dissertation *Prolegomena zu einer Psychologie der Architektur* (Munich, 1886). In this work the

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 160.

²⁹¹ Ibid.

²⁹² Mark Jarzombek, “De-Scribing the Language of Looking: Wölfflin and the History of Aesthetic Experientalism.” *Assemblage*, no. 23 (April 1994): 39.

author discusses architectural form through the viewer's empathetic response, an approach that was heavily influenced by his supervisor philosopher Theodor Lipps who is considered to be one of the pioneers of framing the *Einfühlung* (empathy) theory in aesthetics.²⁹³ The fundamental doctrine of empathy theory is that "aesthetic experience is dependent on the experiencing subject's projection of bodily sensations and emotional remembrances."²⁹⁴ One of the most widely read and influential takes on empathy theory in art history can be found in Wilhelm Worringer's canonical work, *Abstraction and Empathy* (*Abstraktion und Einfühlung*, 1907), especially influential among German expressionist artists of the turn of the century. Khachikoghlyan remembers that Matevosyan dreamed of having Worringer's book translated into Armenian: "For him it was an exceptional book, he considered it as an entirely new voice in the aesthetics of the twentieth century. He used to say, even if I am dead, get me out from the ground to write an introduction for it."²⁹⁵

Matevosyan's consistent method of following the perception of the viewer and detecting the sensations evoked by specific formal characteristics of the work can be seen influenced by the echoes of this marriage of Kantian philosophy with psychology. The later development of this line of thought formulated in the *Einfühlung* (empathy) theory in aesthetics that Khachikoghlyan claims as highly important for Matevosyan is yet another testimony of this influence. It is by this method that Matevosyan goes on to debunk Martikyan's criticism of Kojoyan's *The Execution of the Communists in Tatev*. He divides the subsections in this chapter according to the formal aspects of the work – the composition, the coloring, the light, etc. Against Martikyan's comment on the

²⁹³ For further elaboration see Robin Curtis and Richard George Elliott. "An Introduction to *Einfühlung*," *Art in Translation* 6, no. 4 (December 2014): 353–76.

²⁹⁴ Michael Hatt and Charlotte Klonk. "Formalism: Heinrich Wölfflin and Alois Riegl." In *Art History: A Critical Introduction to Its Methods*. Manchester University Press, 2006, 68.

²⁹⁵ My conversation with Khachikoghlyan, 13.10.2020.

coloring of the plane, “monochromatic and conventional” considered as imperfections, Matevosyan starts with a description of the use of light in the work. As the art historian observes, it is impossible to find a single source of light on the picture plane. Instead, “Kojoyan distributed light and shade in a very strange, unnatural manner,”²⁹⁶ using “quite an imaginary light” to render his artistic vision according to “the criterion of the artistic reality of the canvas.”²⁹⁷ Matevosyan then takes the reader through the path of the eye of the viewer, step by step exposing how the use of this “imaginary light” intensifies the drama of “The Execution.” Thus, the shading of the monochromatic gray with the unusual distribution of light through which Kojoyan arranged his composition appears, in Matevosyan’s interpretation as a critical aspect of the very subject matter of *The Execution of the Communists in Tatev*. This in dept formal analysis of the work which Matevosyan parallels to the solutions of similar formal problems in the paintings of European modernists, such as Francisco Goya, Édouard Manet, Pablo Picasso and others places his interpretation of Kojoyan’s work at the opposite spectrum to Martikyan’s interpretation.

Eghishe Martikyan’s take epitomizes the official Socialist Realist stance on Kojoyan which was firmly developed during the Stalinist era and was maintaining its position up until the 1960s. The above discussed dispute over the artist between Matevosyan and Martikyan can be seen as a clash of two art historical methodologies where the limitations of the official stance brings about its own opposition.

Matevosyan’s reference to the Wölfflinian principles of art history that ground his method of formal analysis in neo-Kantian perceptual psychology, is seen to serve his overarching aim: to debunk the critique of Kojoyan’s work of the early period by the

²⁹⁶ Matevosyan, *Hakob Kojoyan: Art*, 168.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 170.

established Socialist Realist art historians. However, in the new publication of the same study in 2003 revised by Matevosyan before his death, the references to Martikyan are absent, a move characteristic of the author's tendency to purge his scholarship from any contextual engagement with the Soviet Union and its official art history. As a result, the study appears as if it is exempt from its even negative methodological relations to Socialist Realism while his own method comes across as "high art history" in Ghazaryan's formulation and "current of the pure vision" in Khachatryan's.

The intention of this group of intellectuals to uproot "the Teacher's" methodology from Soviet ideology portraying him as the carrier of the universal, stable laws of aesthetics irrespective of his historical condition presents their own longing of establishing themselves within a specific tradition of thought. In the schematized contradiction of materialism and idealism established by Stalinist politics which lived through Khrushchev's Thaw, the neo-Kantian and other idealist philosophical and aesthetic systems provided for this generation the ideal of scholarship the epitome of which was found in Matevosyan's work.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Kant's appeal in late Soviet Armenian art history should be seen within the complex juncture in which the reception of the German philosopher as well as the tradition of German idealism in general, was situated in the Soviet Union. The schematized opposition between historical materialism and philosophical idealism set by the Stalinist administration from the mid-1930s prompted the anti-Soviet intellectuals of the 1960s to eagerly accept what they perceived as the alternative to Soviet ideology. This anti-Soviet front of art history is seen in the present study within the relation of the cultural and political changes of Khrushchev's Thaw and the discourse retrospectively conceptualized as national modernism that formed as a result of the official cultural policies and yet came to form an opposition to it. I have argued that Wilhelm Matevosyan's art historical scholarship and the indistinct Kantian appeal that has partially animated this scholarship reveal the relations between the Soviet discourse and its "official opposition" at their most mature form.

Molding his ideals of art and art historical methodology in the wake of the Thaw in sharp opposition to Soviet Socialist Realist art history, Matevosyan comes to exemplify in the eyes of his peers an ideal of scholarship, one that is based on universally established formal aesthetic categories irrespective of its historical conditions. However, as I showed in the thesis Matevosyan's perspective has formed as a result of the tamed de-Stalinization policies and their effect on Soviet academy on the one hand and the art historian's close connection with Martiros Saryan and his art on the other hand. From the mid-1960s on the art historian gradually stood on the firm

ground of defending the autonomy of art and seeing the artwork as the self-expression of the individuality of the artist. It is from this vantage point that armed with the methodological tools of formalist art history Matevosyan attempts to uproot from Soviet art history the canonical figures of Armenian art and situate their work within European modernism while also revealing their ties to Armenian national culture.

The eagerness of Matevosyan and his peers to appear as exempt from everything associated with the Soviet ideology discloses an unbreakable negative connection their worldview has with that same ideology. The retrospective attempts by both Matevosyan and the scholars inspired by him to erase and petrify the dynamic evolution of the art historian's work once again reveal the biggest enemy of his art history, the Soviet ideology as it was homogenized by Stalinist policies. This self-destructive fabrication of one's own trajectory has the Kantian dream of "purity" at its heart while at the same time it duplicates the Stalinist logic of retrospective purges on the premise of schematized polarizations.

The ideological aspects that Matevosyan shares with national modernism as a broad discourse can be seen formative for the institutionalized art history practiced in Armenia until now. The tradition of Armenian art continues to be considered within a broadly defined Europeanism grounded in the specificity of national belonging, a specificity that is especially supported by medieval Armenian ecclesial art. But these contemporary practitioners have neither Matevosyan's methodological awareness nor his scholarly rigor. Perhaps a critical historical examination of a moment in the discipline's constitution may offer a modest possibility of reimagining the contemporary practice of the discipline itself.

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