

Arshile Gorky (1904-48)

Composition, 1936-39

63.14.1



Artist

- Born in Armenia (Khorkum) as Vosdanik Adoian
- Fled to America after WWI, during the Turkish government's persecution of Armenians. While a refugee in 1918, his mother starved to death. Gorky and his sister eventually made it to America in 1920.
- Attended the New School of Design in Boston 1922-24 and adopted "Arshile Gorky" (in honor of the Russian writer Maxim Gorky) as his name. Gorky means bitter.
- Moved to New York in 1924 where he attended the National Academy of Design and the Grand Central School of Art, where he also taught until 1931.
- Influenced by Cezanne in the 1920s, but by the 30s was strongly influenced by the Surrealists. Was close friends with Andre Breton, a founder of the Surrealist movement. Also friends with Willem de Kooning who said Gorky "had an extraordinary gift for hitting the nail on the head; remarkable. So I immediately attached myself to him and we became very good friends."
- Painted murals on public buildings during the depression as part of WPA.

- Gorky felt his art should convey his “living dreams” of childhood memories and his ancient homeland. However, he was known “to reinvent” his history and his memories over time.
- At one point Arshile said, “Loving memories of our garden in Armenia’s Khorkom haunt me frequently....in my art I often draw our garden and recreate its precious greenery and life.” The garden may represent suffering, separation and loss for Arshile, as well as family, community and happiness.
- He committed suicide in 1948, after 3 years of hardship: cancer, divorce, a studio fire that destroyed many of his works, and a broken neck and broken painting arm from a car accident.
- Considered a pivotal figure in mid-century American art.

His work

- His painting is often more concerned with shape and mass than with line: not necessarily with strong contours but having shapes flow one into the other.
- He used free form, organic shapes in his work (biomorphism).
- In his earlier work, he borrows from Picasso, Miro and Matta.
- His style later moved to a watery, biomorphic abstraction that incorporated Surrealist automatism while anticipating the gestural brushwork of Abstract Expressionism.
- His work forms a continuum between Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism. It has both the biomorphism of surrealists with the bold gestural movement that sweeps across the canvas of the Abstract Expressionists.
- “His lyrical abstractions anticipated Abstract Expressionism, which emerged in 1940s New York among a circle of artists who valued spontaneity of expression and individuality, including Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning and Mark Rothko.” (artdaily.org)

“Composition”

- By late 1930s, Gorky’s style had begun to evolve. He begins to combine the flat, 2-dimensional emphasis found in Cubism with the biomorphic forms typical of surrealism. Hence, this painting can be seen as transitional.
- This painting exemplifies this still tentative period in its somewhat belabored composition and heavily impastoed surface.
- The suggestive forms are surrealist while the expressionistic style presages Abstract Expressionism.
- In the 30s he worked with a series of familiar shapes. Perhaps simple forms, abstracted from familiar appearances are the most direct way to articulate feelings. These shapes are partly recognizable, but they are also “peepholes into the unknown.”
- Arshile would rework paintings over several years, which one can see here. There is a building up and layering of paint.
- Emphasis on 2-dimensional, abstracted forms.
- Known for representing his childhood memories. Look closely and might see outline of some legs or a body or see a kite or yellow heart.

- He taught his students that shapes should be kept simple and “clear, more definite, more and more decided.” He liked the simplification of a white background so that shapes stand out clearly.
- With Gorky it is not easy to grasp the relationship between the symbol and the underlying emotion. One cannot say “this means that.”

Surrealism

- Grew out of a literary movement from the 1910s and 20s that experimented with automatic writing (automatism), which sought to release the imagination of the subconscious.
- Visual artists that first worked with surrealism include Max Ernst, Andre Masson, Joan Miro, and Man Ray. Their style was more “visual automatism” while such artists as Magritte, Dali, Delvaux and Tanguy produced works of “illusionistic Surrealism.” The former is often more organic, using biomorphic shapes and twisted lines to explore the realm of the unconscious, while the latter uses illusionistic space, with a mixture of identifiable and unidentifiable objects rendered with great precision, often with deep symbolic meaning.
- European surrealists fled to New York during World War II.

Abstract Expressionism

- Influenced by Europe
- Coming out of dreamscape idea of surrealism and from Freud and Jung, from letting the unconscious come through and from dreams. Jung taught that “beneath one’s private memories lies a storehouse of feelings and symbolic association common to all humans... [American] Abstract Expressionists sought these universal themes within themselves.” (Stokstad)
- Also known as the New York School, it represents a wide variety of work produced between 1940 and roughly 1960.
- NY artists have access to art journals from Europe, but not in color. This has big impact on how they select color - really a lack of color, a reduced palette focusing on the qualities of the paint and “mark making.” (this from our audio commentary)

Research

- artsConnectEd (including audio commentary on Composition and Abstract Expressionism)
- Wikipedia, “Arshile Gorky”. See links in footnotes to the Wikipedia article.
- arshilegorkyfoundation.org
- “Composition” object file
- Stokstad, Art History, Volume 6 ,1131-32



Andre Breton declared Gorky's "The Liver is the Cock's Comb" to be "one of the most important paintings made in America," and said that Gorky was a surrealist, which was Breton's highest compliment. This may be Gorky's greatest work and shows him emerging from the influence of Cezanne and Picasso into his own style.