



GRIGORIAN, MARCOS

GRIGORIAN, Marcos (Mārcos [better known as Marco] Grigoriān, b. Kropotkin, Russia, 5 December 1925; d. Yerevan, 27 August 2007), Iranian-Armenian artist, actor, teacher, gallery owner, and collector who played a pioneering role in the development of Iranian modern art ([FIGURE 1](#)).

LIFE

The youngest of three children, Marco was born to Bāgrāt Grigoriān and Šušānik Māngoiān, both born in Kars, [Armenia](#) (Grigorian, 1989, p. 127). Before Marco was born, his parents defected to Kropotkin, Russia, and moved to Tabriz when he was five. In the same year Marco's mother died of appendicitis, and his father moved the family to Tehran. In 1937, his father remarried, and they moved to New [Julfa](#), in [Isfahan](#). Marco was fifteen when his family moved back to Tehran again in 1940. He attended [Alborz College](#) and later Kamāl-al-Molk Art School in 1948 (see [KAMĀL-AL-MOLK, MOḤAMMAD ĠAFFĀRI](#)). Upon graduation in 1950, Marco went to Rome, and enrolled at *the Academia di Belle Arti*. He studied with cubist sculptor Roberto Melli (1885-1958) and held several exhibitions while there (See exhibition list below.)

Marco returned to Iran in 1954 and opened Gallery Esthetique, one of the first modern galleries in Tehran. A cosmopolitan and a multifaceted artist, Grigorian introduced the Iranian audience to the unconventional arts and innovative European sensibilities. He started collecting and promoting a form of folk art commonly known as coffeehouse painting (*naqqāši-ye qahvaḵāna*:



Šāh-nāma-related paintings and popular religious murals found in coffeehouses). Grigorian's appreciation for this fading practice inspired him to champion and publicize the last generation of masters of the genre, most noted among them Ḥosayn Qullar Āgāsi and Moḥammad Moddaber (Nāmi, 2005, p.16; idem, 2007, p. 16). Marco's collection was later bought and placed in Negārestān Museum at Sa'ādatbād Palace.

In 1955 Marco married Florā Ādāmiān in Tehran and returned to Rome. His only child Sabrinā was born in Rome in 1956 (Kalāntari, pp. 134-37). Marco participated in the Venice Biennale for the first time that year. He then returned to Tehran and was appointed as the Head of the Graphic Department at the Ministry of Culture and Art. While there, he introduced new etching techniques to students (Abramian, p. 80) and assumed a pivotal role in promoting the concept of drawing as distinct from painting and as a "self contained art" (Rueen Pakbaz, *Exhibition Catalogue*, First Tehran International Drawing Exhibition, 1999). In 1958, Marco participated as the Iranian delegate and an International Jury member at the Venice Biennale. In the same year, under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture and Art, Marco organized the First Tehran Biennial, attempting to coin a modern tradition with ethnic flavor. The establishment of the Biennial, in which creative artists were recognized for their genuine and yet individualistic styles (Yarshater, p. 3), inscribed Marco's name in the unfolding of modern Iranian art.

In 1959, after two years of intensive work, Marco completed a succession of enormous murals centering on the topic of the Holocaust. [Karim Emami](#) described the paintings as a sequence of actions: "This is Auschwitz, any Auschwitz, the scene of man's greatest atrocities against man" (Emami, p. 4). The impressive series of twelve 6×10 feet panels was later published in *The Gate of Auschwitz* (New York, 2002) (FIGURE 2). During the same period, Marco started applying dirt to the center of his canvases. This became the starting point of his celebrated "Earthworks Series," one that would focus on using earthen materials to symbolize man's transient nature on earth (Grigorian, 1989, p. 128).

Marco divorced his wife in 1960 and in the same year started acting in several Iranian films, most noted among them *Ārameš qabl az ṭufān* (Calm before storm, 1960), directed by Kōsrow Parvizi (See below). Having features similar to American actor Richard Widmark and a name close to the famous actor Gregory Peck, Marco chose the stage name of Gregory Mark. An energetic and talented performer, he played villains in many movies, soon specializing in



anti-hero roles and conspicuously contrary characters. However, he eventually gave up his acting career to return to art (Lāzāriān, p. 354).

In 1962 Marco moved to New York City and started a new phase in his artistic career. He was soon offered a teaching job at Minnetonka Center for the Arts (Wayzata, Minnesota), where he established the Universal Galleries. While there, he exhibited at Walker Art Center and for the first time showed part of his Holocaust murals.

In 1964 Marco returned to New York City's art scene again and signed a contract with the Jason Gallery. He worked and lived in New York for several years until 1970, when he returned to Tehran and joined the Faculty of Fine Arts at Tehran University. In 1974 Marco formed the Independent Artists Group along with Mas'ud 'Arabšāhi (b. 1935), Sirāk Malkoniān (b. 1931), [Morteżā Momayyez](#), and Ġolām-Ĥosayn Nāmi (b. 1936; see *Blue Works, Exhibition Catalogue*, Ministry of Culture and Arts, 1975). He held several exhibits in the coming years including a major retrospective at the Iran-America Society.

In 1978 at the opening of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tehran, Nelson Rockefeller admired Marco's earthworks and later acquired four of his works (Ġāzāriān, "Introduction," in Marco Grigorian, *The Contemporary Armenian Carpet*, 1999). He met with Marco again in New York, purchased another of his earthworks, and donated it to the Museum of Modern Art in New York (Nelson Rockefeller Collection, p. 214) ([FIGURE 3](#)).

Marco returned to New York in 1980 and established Arshile Gorky Gallery, named after the Armenian abstract expressionist painter who committed suicide in the U.S.A. in 1948. There he exhibited the works of Iranian and Armenian artists for several years. On 10 June 1986 Marco lost his daughter to a massive heart attack (Abramian, p. 77). The tragedy caused a shift in Grigorian's entire perspective and artistic priorities. He immersed himself in his other passion, that of Armenian folk art and rug weaving. He made several trips to Armenia and in 1993 established the Sabrina Near East Museum of Yerevan, where he housed his own works and exquisite collection. During the last twenty years of his life Marco organized several exhibits and weaving workshops in Armenia (Grigorian, "Introduction," 1999). Unfortunately, until Marco's death no permanent premises or status had been given to his collection (Ishkhanyan).



WORK

Grigorian was a trendsetter whose career began in the 1950s and spanned several countries. By establishing the First Tehran Biennial he was especially instrumental in opening up channels of communication for Iranian artists (Nāmi, 2005, p. 16). He was one of the “international Armenians of the 20th century who brought fresh inventions to ancient pursuits” (Lima, 2007) (FIGURE 4).

Marco’s early works, including the Auschwitz murals, presented in an expressive visual language of anxiety and despair, were potent images that forever remind the viewer of the cruelty of war and inevitability of death and decay. Marco, as held by a critic, conceived of two alternative directions from the blackness he perceived: death and earth (Stein, “Introduction to Earth Painting,” *Exhibition Catalogue*, Tehran, 1977). With a movement “almost cinematic,” bodies full of life were on their way to the gas chamber, “so tainted with death” (Kirshenbaum, 1964, p. 1). Depicting the horrors of the Holocaust may have been a way of alluding to, as well as assuaging, the pain of the Armenian Massacre (Milani, p. 1000).

Marco’s early expressionist works incorporated skillful drawing techniques and mixtures of color and ash, depicting deformed limbs and facial features, in order to emphasize the tragic fate of immigrants from Van and victims of the Armenian Genocide. From early on, issues of originality, purity, and attention to ethnic textures became essential elements in Marco’s modernist expressions. He focused his artistic visions on the structured geometry that he had “absorbed from minimalism, but he did not shy away from the other aesthetic pole: pop art” (Daftari, “Introduction to Earthworks,” *Exhibition Catalogue*, New York, 2011). To evoke authenticity he turned to local textures, incorporating ethnic foods such as *nān-e sangak* and *ābgušt* while experimenting with clay as an original material (Fouladvand, 2008, p. 36) (FIGURE 5).

Years ahead of his time, his experimentation with earth, straw, and paint predated later pieces by modern American, European, and Japanese artists (Daftari, “Introduction to Earthworks,” *Exhibition Catalogue*, New York, 2011). Grigorian preferred a style that referred to the desert, indigenous dwellings, and their visual vocabulary of parched earth and mud (Ekhtiar, *Timeline of Art History*, 2000). The simple and familiar geometric figure of a square became Marco’s compositional signature (Stein) (FIGURE 6, FIGURE 7, FIGURE 8).



Breaking the traditions of 3,000 years, he turned to Persian desert dusts and snared them on canvas (Ross, p. 1), and created textures that cried out to be touched. Marco's avant-garde experimentations with new materials and mediums were especially innovative in formal, reductive aesthetics and produced plastic effects. The abjectness of his materials, the significant chance elements in drying up of dried earth (*kāhgel*) works, the unpredictable procedures at cutting and dehydration of bread and other perishable food in his three-dimensional assemblage, and the minimal nature of his palette, all made his art deeply novel and provocative. Introducing prototypical installations for the first time, Grigorian disregarded conventional notions of authorial presence and individual expression. He searched for the sublime in the ordinary and used commonplace objects such as chairs, plastic bags, and sieves as reactions against formalism articulated in the refinement of conventional mediums. He would dig a trench and lay inside or would tie himself to chairs performing as part of his own installation (FIGURE 9, FIGURE 10, FIGURE 11).

Marco's legacy lies in the variety and the extent of experimentations he demonstrated without constraints, a vision that already started in the first generation of modernist artists and one that he was able to actualize (Fouladvand, 2000, p. 7). With the emergence of the new artistic movements and the opening of more exhibition spaces in Tehran, many writers, critics, and artists began a critical examination of both the conceptual works and the visions behind them as related to local art production. At the time, many of Marco's exhibitions generated a backlash and were particularly criticized (Kalāntari, pp. 134-36). They were rejected with such harsh terms as "artistic plagiarism that have complicated the works of genuine researchers," (Foruzān, pp. 35-39), as "superficial," and "the art of sieve and toilet paper (Mojābi, p. 20, FIGURE 13).

Ākarin godargāh (Last passage), directed by Kōsrow Parvizi, 1962 (FIGURE 14).

Ṭalā-ye sefid (White gold), with Fardin and Pourān, directed by Jamšid Šaybani, 1962.

Šahr-e bozorg (Big city), with Garšā, directed by Robert Ekhart, 1966.

Mardi dar Ṭufān (Man in storm), with Sa'id Rād and Marjān, directed by Kōsrow Parvizi, 1972 (FIGURE 15).



Herfa-i (Professional), directed by Qodratollāh Bozorgi, 1976.

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