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GRIGORIAN, Marcos

Iranian-Armenian artist, actor, teacher, gallery owner, and collector who played a pioneering role in the development of Iranian modern art (1925-2007). As a modernist trendsetter Marco's career began in the 1950s and spanned several countries. By establishing the First Tehran Biennial in 1958 Marco was especially instrumental in opening up channels of communication for Iranian artists.

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, MOHAMMAD 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 qahvaḡāna*: *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 Āḡāsi and Moḡammad Moddaber (Nāmi, 2005, p.16; idem, 2007, p. 16). Marco's collection was later bought and placed in Negārestān Museum at Sa'ādātḡād 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 tufān* (Calm before storm, 1960), directed by K̄osrow 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 (Gāzāriān, “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 12](#)), and as "imitations of the kind of art already considered old in the U.S." (Asadi, p. 10). On the other hand, however, he earned the appreciation of many for his modern artistic expressions and his innovative concepts, which defy the imitation of old masters (Pirniā, p.11; Hātām, pp. 7-9, 24).

Marco, as his interviews indicate, was mesmerized by the texture and secrets of the earth, and drawn to manipulate his surroundings through conceptual interventions (Eslāmpur, p.27). He did not wish, however, to be classified as an Eastern artist obliged to follow age-old traditions, and although he chose familiar items such as Persian food or *kāhgel*, he constantly searched for new universal possibilities (Golestān, p. 7).

Marco was instrumental in introducing modern influences through the experiences of his local culture. By performing outside the gallery space, he would negate the gallery as the location and determiner of art, focusing on the idea rather than the work of art. His installations were characterized by deliberate conceptual arrangements and ephemeral performances. Marco's focus on the humbleness of materials and primal materiality, his incorporation of ethnic food and texture, and accidental elements within his planned executions and the treatment of surfaces led to unique new material aesthetics that helped open fresh horizons for future experiments. Marco's later efforts in re-vitalization of ethnic Armenian rug designs and weaving not only situated him within yet another local narrative, but uniquely erased the separating lines between art and craft, a characteristic of many artworks of the early twenty-first century.

Marco Grigorian was the winner of many national and international awards, including: Premio ENIT, Rome, and Le Olimpiadi Culturale della Gioventù (1952); First prize in Painting and First prize in Graphics at Milan National Exhibition of Academies (1953); First prize and Honorable mention in the First Tehran Biennial (1958); and a Silver medal at the New York International Art Exhibition (1970). Marco's work is included in several important public and private collections, among them the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Museum of Contemporary Art, Tehran; Museum of Fine Arts, Tehran; Kermān Museum; Agenzia Nazionale del Turistica (ENIT), Rome; Nelson Rockefeller Collection, New York; Johnson Museum of Art, Ithaca N.Y.; National Gallery and Near East Museum, Yerevan, Armenia; Central Bank of Cyprus, Nicosia; and Empress Farah Pahlavi's Private Collection.

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

1951 -Fiorani Gallery, Rome

1953 -Raymond Duncan Gallery, Paris

1953 -Galleria II Pincio, Rome

1954 -Iran - America Society, Tehran

1960 -Holocaust Exhibition, Misaghieh Film Studios, Tehran

1971 -Iran-America Society, Tehran

1975 -Litho Gallery, Tehran

1977 -Sāmān Gallery, Tehran

1981-85 -Gorky Gallery, New York

1989-90 -Moscow and Leningrad Solo Exhibits

1991 -"Earthworks," organized by Union of Artists, Yerevan Armenia

2000 -"Earthworks" Old Gallery, Tbilisi, Georgia

2001 -"Armenian Carpets by Grigorian," Near East Museum, Yerevan

2004 -"Fifty Years Retrospective," National Museum of Art, Yerevan

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1952 - "International Art exhibition," National Tourist Center (ENIT), Rome

1953 - Palazzo Delle Esposizioni, Rome

1956 - Venice e "Jury Selection," Venice

1956 - Museum of Modern Art, Ca' Pesaro, Venice

1963 - "Invitation 1963," Walker Art Center, MN

1964 - "Earthworks," Jason Gallery Group Exhibits, New York

1966 - "Recent Acquisitions 1966," Museum of Modern Art, New York

1974 - "Blue Works," Independent Artists Group, Exhibition Hall, Tehran

1975 - "Volume and Environment," Iran-America Society, Tehran

1994 - "Armenia past and present," Bochum Museum, Germany

1999 - "Stream of Fire," Royal National Gallery, Nicosia and Amman

2000 - "Continental Shift," Ludwig Forum, Aachen, Germany

2001 - "Iranian Contemporary Art," Barbican Center, London

2001 - Armenian Contemporary Art, National Art Gallery of Armenia

2002 - "Between Word and Image: Modern Iranian Visual Culture"

2001 - Grey Art Gallery, New York University, New York City,

2006 - "Layered Lives: Iranian Armenian Identity," Brunei Gallery, London

SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

Ārameš qabl az tufān (Calm before storm), with Nāšer Malek- Moṭi'e, Farānak Mirqahāri, directed by K̄osrow Parvizi, 1960.

Gorg-e šahrā (Desert wolf), with Vidā Qahremāni, directed by Sa'īd Nivandi, 1961.

Kilid (Key), directed by Mahmud Noḡari, 1962 ([FIGURE 13](#)).

Ākarin godargāh (Last passage), directed by K̄osrow Parvizi, 1962 ([FIGURE 14](#)).

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

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

Mardi dar Tufān (Man in storm), with Sa'īd Rād and Marjān, directed by Kōsrow Parvizi, 1972 ([FIGURE 15](#)).

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

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Mas'ud Foruzān, "Taqlid o copieh bardārihā-ye honari o adabi," *Rastākiz-e Javānān*, 27 Bahman 2536/17 February 1978, pp. 35-39.

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Lili Golestān, "Čāhār divarihā-ye Marco Grigoriān," *Rastākiz*, no. 539, 19 Bahman 2535/8 January 1977, p. 7.

Marcos Grigorian, *Biennal-e Tehran, Kāk-e Abyaz, 1337* (Exhibition Catalogue, *First Tehran Biennial*), introduction by Ehsan Yarshater, Abyaz Palace, April 1958, pp. 1-9.

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Idem, *The Contemporary Armenian Carpet, Designed and Woven by Marcos Grigorian*, Introduction by Mania Gazarian, Yerevan, 1999.

Idem, *The Gates of Auschwitz*, Yerevan, 2002.

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“Namayešgah Marco dar Gallery-e Lito,” *Āyandegān*, 6 Dey 1354 Š./27 December 1975, p. 16.

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