

# Island of Memory: The Art of the Armenian Diaspora at Biennale 2015 - The Armenian Mirror-Spectator

## [The Armenian Mirror-Spectator](#)

The deportations and massacres during the First World War brought a fundamental shift not only in the ethnic composition of the Middle East, as its major Christian populations (Armenians, Greeks and Assyrians) were uprooted, but also in the numerical balance between the two components of the Armenian nation, two-thirds of whom were living under Ottoman rule. The emergence of an independent Armenia following the collapse of the Soviet Union brought yet more complications: Armenia became an independent republic, which had the effect of marginalizing the diaspora. In the Middle East, war and instability threatened the survival of Armenian communities, leading to further exodus. Today, large traditional Armenian communities in Syria are being dispersed once again, as Armenian neighbourhoods in the historic centre of Aleppo have become battlefronts. Recent communities, such as the growing Armenian population in California, face problems of a new type: today's generation is losing its historic knowledge of the Armenian language, and churchgoers are dwindling in number. As a result, increasing numbers of people have become pessimistic about the survival of an Armenian identity abroad.

"The Armenians are exemplary as a people, in the sense that in the last hundred years they were migrants par excellence," explains Adelina Cüberyan von Fürstenberg, the curator of "Armenity/Haiyutioun." "They show how it is possible to live within the culture and laws of the country while preserving their proper culture." The title she gave to the pavilion derives from the French *arménité* (loosely, "the art of being Armenian"), and

the pavilion itself is located neither in the Giardini nor the Arsenale (the two traditional exhibit spaces of the Biennale) but on San Lazzaro degli Armeni, a twenty-minute journey by vaporetto from San Zaccaria.

There could be no better place to represent arménité than the tiny island that bears the name of the patron saint of lepers. In 1717, the Venetian Republic gave San Lazzaro to the Armenian monk Mekhitar to found a monastery. Mekhitar was born in Sebastia (Sivas, in today's Turkey), and established an Armenian Catholic order in Constantinople. But he was persecuted both by the Sultan and by the majority Armenian Apostolic Church, eventually finding refuge in the Peloponnese, then under Venetian rule. When Ottoman forces attacked and occupied the Morea peninsula, Mekhitar and his followers fled with the retreating Venetian forces. From this small island in faraway Venice, armed with the power of a printing press, the Mekhitarist Congregation played a central role in the revival of Armenian culture, printing dictionaries and books, educating teachers, and providing shelter for the persecuted. It was here on San Lazzaro that Lord Byron came in late 1816 to learn classical Armenian. He is considered the island's most famous visitor, and the room where he stayed still bears his name.

Standing today on San Lazzaro, in the midst of the Venetian Lagoon, one is initially struck by the contrast between this small island and mountainous Armenia – between the heart of Renaissance Europe and a lost corner of Asia Minor. Yet, on closer consideration, they bear a deep similarity. Both are fragile: the smallest of the post-Soviet republics, Armenia has been under siege by two of its neighbours since it gained independence in 1991; bordered by hostile states, it is itself like a Venetian island in the mountains of the Caucasus. Both have had a global influence incompatible with their size: Armenia through its diaspora, San Lazzaro through the Mekhitarist Congregation. "We have a pavilion which has existed for 300 years," von Fürstenberg says.

For Biennale 2015, the walls of the San Lazzaro monastery have been

transformed into showrooms, its ancient manuscripts raw material for art. Just like the Mekhitarist Congregation, the 16 artists have gathered remnants of an Armenian past in order to give them new life. References to this traumatic past are omnipresent: Nigol Bezjian in his installation "Witnessed.ed" introduces the tragic poet Daniel Varoujan, symbol of the Armenian intelligentsia, who was arrested on April 24, 1915 and murdered in deportation. Through old newspaper texts and contemporary video installation, the artist gives life to the poet. "Treasures," Silvina Der-Meguerditchian's installation, is inspired by a text about folk medicine written by her grandmother in Turkish in the Armenian alphabet; the introduction of additional texts and various objects makes for a meaningful exploration of identity and longing. In the photographs of Aram Jibilian, subjects wear masks based on characters in the paintings of the Armenian-American Arshile Gorky.

By reviving fragments of the past, the artists of "Armenity" overcome both the pain of annihilation and the borders of modern nation-states. This is well illustrated by the work of Sarkis Zabunian, who exhibits "My memory is my homeland" on San Lazzaro, and, as the sole exhibit of the Turkish pavilion in the Arsenale, his new magnum opus "Respiro." For this, a large hall in the Arsenale has been divided by two huge mirrors marked with large coloured fingerprints painted in watercolour by seven children from Istanbul. At the two extremities of the hall are neon rainbows representing "the first magical breaking point of light," the beginning of existence. Lining the walls are thirty-six stained-glass panes on which one can find Hrant Dink, the Turkish-Armenian journalist assassinated in front of his editorial offices in Istanbul on January 19, 2007, holding a pomegranate and smiling; a reproduction of the Archangel Gabriel as depicted on the walls of Haghia Sophia; Christ on the cross; a woman participating in the Gezi Park protests of 2013; war in Africa; candles in an old medieval church; and the filmmaker Sergei Parajanov sitting on his bed. There is much suffering in these images, yet Sarkis has made from it something beautiful. After one hundred years of separation, Sarkis, a diaspora Armenian who was born in Istanbul and lives

in France, has brought his art back to Turkey.