

LAYERED LIVES: Iranian Armenian Contemporary Arts

ARTS WORKSHOPS

The Arts Workshops were successful in bringing people together and teaching new skills. We have had requests for repeat workshops for each of those offered. Seven arts workshops were held, one more than the 6 outlined in the grant application.

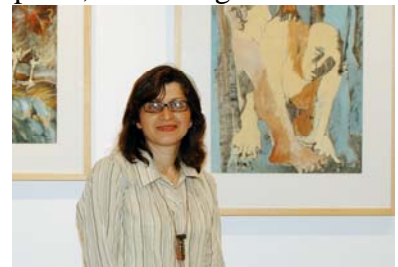


Raffi Avanesian,
photographer

Saturday April 29: Gallery Talks and Family Workshops with the Artists

This morning had been planned as an opportunity for people to meet the artists and speak with them about their lives in Iran and their motivations and experiences as artists. We had also publicised the event as an opportunity to sketch and design one's own thoughts, inspired by the themes of the exhibition. To this end, we provided materials on site for people to use. The artists themselves were interested in this workshop – but we were very disappointed to find that this was, by far, the most poorly attended of all the workshop series. We also found that those who did attend were not at all interested in creating anything themselves. And though we had anticipated this as a family event, only one child came.

In retrospect, and in conversation with other workshop participants, we can guess at possible reasons for this: (a) The workshop was scheduled for the morning of a long day of events so some people may have decided it would be too tiring to come early and stay into the evening. (we had assumed some people would come to this workshop only that day). (b) It was suggested that people are inhibited by the idea of drawing in public at an exhibition. (c) People who wanted to speak with the artists had managed to do so the evening before at the Opening of the exhibition. Those who did attend had the opportunity to speak at length with the artists and all expressed their pleasure at being able to do so.



Hermineh Keshish.

Sunday April 30: Iran Arts Workshop for Families

Nairi Sahakian (artist and curator).



Painted plate

Children, teens and adults listened as Nairi Sahakian gave a brief history of arts and architecture in Iran, highlighting several kinds of traditional crafts particular to the Armenians of Iran. She illustrated her words with many colour photocopies of brightly designed tiles, intricately carved wood, paintings, rugs and other works. As she spoke,

participants could begin sketching ideas for their own work and following her demonstration of techniques,



Nairi Sahakian, curator and workshop leader

eagerly began their projects. Plates and tiles were painted in designs from earlier centuries – or with their own designs inspired by the pictures. Other people worked in clay, applying different textures to the surface and making a variety of vessels. We found that people who had arrived early for the following dinner event joined the group as they were fascinated by what was being made. The participants were able to take their work home with them.

Sunday April 30: Varand, from Iran, Reading and Speaking about His Own Poetry.

People began arriving early for this event, looking forward to meeting someone whose works they were already familiar with and very fond of. Some had already met Varand before their own migration to the UK and were renewing friendships, others meeting for the first time. The excitement was palpable. Some of those attending also brought their own poetry, published and unpublished, to show him and the others. The event demonstrated the ongoing importance of poetry both as an art form and as a means of expression of personal identity. Varand's recitations of his own work were enthusiastically received and his later public performance the same evening was likewise very warmly welcomed. As noted above, particularly moving was the communal recitation of the last verses of one poem as the audience joined Varand.



Poet Varand.

Saturday May 13: Armenian Dance for Adults (morning) and Children (afternoon) Shakeh Tchilingirian Major.

An enthusiastic group of women took part in the morning session. Ranging in age from early twenties to 65, they followed leader Shakeh



Adult dance workshop.

Tchilingirian Major through a variety of traditional dances, carefully chosen to build confidence as difficulty gradually increased. Shakeh chose dances which contrasted in tempo and

theme and the women said they enjoyed learning about Armenian culture through dance.



Shakeh Tchilingirian Major, dancer.

The children's workshop in the afternoon was not as well attended but those who did come were again led through different movements, building up to a more complex dance which could be performed together. Shakeh spoke to the children about the different elements present in the dances, whether the context was one of communal work, of celebration, or the hunt, etc. In doing so, she invited them to also act out what the people in the villages might have been doing in addition to dancing – or in the case of the hunt, the role of the deer, for example. In both workshops, participants included a large percentage of non-



Children's Dance Workshop

Armenians who said they enjoyed learning about Armenian culture through Shakeh's explanations about the histories and contexts of the different dances.

Saturday May 13: Calligraphy and Bird Letters Painting Workshop (all ages) Astghik Vardanyan.



Bird Letter workshop

Bird letters are fantasy birds in the shape of capital letters in the Armenian alphabet. Using medieval Armenian manuscript illustrations as inspiration, Astghik taught the group to create their own colourful pictures and letters. Ages ranging from 10 to 70, the group



Painted Bird Letters.

included a professional artist as well as people who had not tried their hand at miniature paintings. Using watercolours (coloured pencils for the children), each person was able to create traditional "bird letters" to take home. The results of this workshop were very impressive and have created a demand for a repeat both from those participating and those unable to attend this time. The focus on the letters also gives an opportunity to look carefully at the unique Armenian alphabet.



Painted Bird Letters.

Sunday July 2: Storytelling Vergine Gulbenkian.

Women were invited to bring a story to work on together and indeed, each brought a fascinating – and very different – tale. The workshop began with a short story told by Vergine who shared some aspects of the process involved in preparing it. The story she chose was a traditional Armenian tale, which all enjoyed. She then gently encouraged the participants to outline the germ of a narrative they wanted to build up into an entertaining story. With her prodding, and the relaxed atmosphere of the group, each person told tales ranging from family histories to fantasies based on nearly forgotten legends from childhood. The participants again ranged in age from late twenties to 80+ and included Armenian and non-Armenian women. The feedback from this workshop was very positive and similar ones will be scheduled in the future.



Vergine Gulbenkian, storyteller.

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Storytelling workshop

Our thanks to Awards for All and the Benlian Charitable Trust for their generous support of these workshops

