

# FROM DARK TO LIGHT

## THE LIFE AND ART OF ARIEL AGEMIAN

by Gwyneth Holston

*Ascension* by Ariel Agemian

When I was homeschooled during the 1990s, I spent countless hours intently studying the illustrations in my 1950s textbooks. *Faith and Freedom* readers, *Voyages in English*, *Our Holy Faith*... all of my textbooks depicted lucky children my age taught by beautiful nuns. The children wore dapper clothing and dwelt in a sunny world that radiated Catholic culture. I frequently compared the idyllic classmates I should have had to my actual classmates – three brothers whose novelty had worn off long before.

As I got older and ventured out of my living room and into the world, I was informed by a variety of sources that nostalgia for the 1950s was the epitome of foolishness. They said that the era had only projected a wholesome veneer, whereas its society actually seethed with dysfunction. And yet, despite the evidence offered to me, I couldn't quite abandon the hope that there was at least some truth behind the lovely images of my youth.

My secret hope was finally rewarded when I met the daughter of artist Ariel Agemian.

Ariel Agemian was a prolific Catholic painter whose works included over five hundred illustrations for the Confraternity of the Precious Blood. In his daughter's home in Glenwood Springs, Colorado, is a collection of his drawings and paintings. It is an oeuvre that documents a life devoted to

serving God through art. Annig Raley generously shared her father's work with me and told me his life story.<sup>1</sup>

Ariel Agemian was born in Brussa, Turkey, in 1904. At the age of ten, he saw his father killed during the Armenian revolution. The Turkish government attempted to exterminate all ethnic Armenians by forced labor, death marches through the Syrian

Desert, and wholesale slaughter of over one million people. Agemian escaped this fate with the help of a congregation of Mekhitarist monks in the Armenian Eastern Rite Catholic Church. After the Armenian genocide at the hands of the Turks, the monks felt that the best way to restore the culture was to educate the many boys who had been left either orphaned or fatherless. At the age of eleven, Ariel left his mother and brother and went with the monks to be educated.

At first, the monks hoped to train young Ariel in Italy for the field of medicine, but he fainted at the sight of blood. He was then sent to Venice to study with the monks for the priesthood. There he showed a prolific talent for drawing. The monks admired his artistic skill but told him that he must choose between art and God; he had to decide between becoming a painter or a priest. He decided to serve God through art. The monks sent him to study at the Venice Academy of Fine Arts, and at the age of twenty-one he received his Doctorate of philosophy and a Gold Award from the *Associazione Artistica* in 1926. In return for the financial support from the monks,

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he painted two major works for the college based on religious Armenian history. After graduation, he taught painting at Moorat College in Sevres, France, eventually devoting himself to painting full time in his Paris studio.

The resulting murals, portraits, and landscapes he created received critical acclaim. He was even commissioned to paint a portrait of Pope Pius XI.

His major works during the 1930s included murals for Armenian churches throughout Paris as well as several large panels for Moorat College. The panels represent the four principal elements which make up the life of a



Figure 1: Religious Panel in Moorat College, 1933 (oil). Sevres, France.

nation: religion, patriotism, instruction, and literature. A 1938 press release described the religious panel (figure 1) as follows:

The picture of the “Virgin Mary and the Child,” painted in 1933 by Ariel Agemian is placed directly above the altar in the chapel of the Mechitarest School. Here the mystic style is kept. The Virgin Mary with the Babe in her arms is seen in a brilliantly lighted center stepping on silver clouds as though advancing toward the praying Believers. Her illuminant face with a purest light gives the flesh an appearance of transparency. The expression is so pure and holy, affects us with a feeling of admiration and reverence for the Virgin. The child yet small, with outstretched arms yearns to be among His people and to lead them to the Truth. The entire tone of the picture is silver. The frame itself, made of precious 18th century walnut gives an effect of age to an otherwise modern work.<sup>2</sup>

He also painted *Our Lady of Narek* for the Armenian College in Rome, Italy (figure 2). This image became famous and has been reproduced in several other Armenian churches. It is especially beloved because it includes the Armenian saint, Saint Gregory of Narek. Agemian was well known



Figure 2: *Our Lady of Narek*, 1963. Armenian College, Rome, Italy.

in the art circles of Paris and Venice during the 1930s and is well known to many Armenian Catholics to this day. His Armenian identity is communicated by the many political paintings he completed. One such painting depicts the Turkish Massacre he experienced as a child (figure 3). It is a painting of pure chaos. A one-armed horseman tramples countless bodies as the countryside burns. Although it is currently in a private collection, the Louvre has requested the painting because of its historical significance.

It was the Armenian Catholic Community that invited him to New York for a show in 1938. He took seventy-five paintings and a few possessions on a boat to New York for a stay that he thought would be three months. Soon after arriving in New York City, he set up studio, where he met his art student and future wife, Maria Roxas. They wed in 1939 and had a son, Stefan. In



Figure 3: *Turkish Massacre*, c. 1932 (oil). Private Collection.



Figure 4: *Untitled*, date and location unknown.

1942, he planned a trip to return to his Paris studio to look after the works he left behind. However, the ship that he booked passage on, the *S. S. Normandie*, burnt in the harbor. He took it as a sign and never returned to Paris to reunite with his mother and brother or retrieve his paintings. In 1943, their daughter, Annig was born.

It is a mystery as to what happened to the paintings that remained in France and Italy. At least fifty are lost. Some are documented with black-and-white photographs. One such work is an untitled oil painting of a young girl wearing a veil (figure 4). She has been interrupted from reading her prayer book and yet we can see by her eyes that she is still recollected. The girl’s white skin is emphasized by the black veil that shrouds her hair and shoulders. Is she in mourning? Why would a child so young look so grave? The hand that clasps her heart appears to have been carved out of white marble. This illusion is due to the incredible care that Agemian took to render the shadow transition over the curved surfaces of her face and hands. Even the shadows cast by the embroidered veil on her



Figure 5: Illustration from *My Mass*, 1958 (ink).

neck did not go unnoticed. Despite the hours he must have taken to complete this work, his meticulous labor did not diminish the freshness and gracefulness of the finished painting.

The work that Agemian completed in the United States during the 1940s and 1950s became almost entirely devoted to religious subjects. Among his most notable works were the illustrations he created for the books *My Daily Psalms*, *Christ in the Gospel*, *The Imitation of Christ*, *My Meditation on the Gospel* and *My Mass*, published by the Confraternity of the Precious Blood. These pocket-sized books were published to promote knowledge of scripture, the liturgy, and the spiritual life.

As a great believer in working from dark to light, his initial sketches for these illustrations were all done in white chalk on black paper. Once he was content with a design, he would render the finished work with black ink on white paper. A recurring theme for his illustrations is Christ's presence during the Mass. By superimposing the spiritual reality of the Sacrifice of the Mass over its physical reality, we are given an image that is as powerful as it is reassuring.

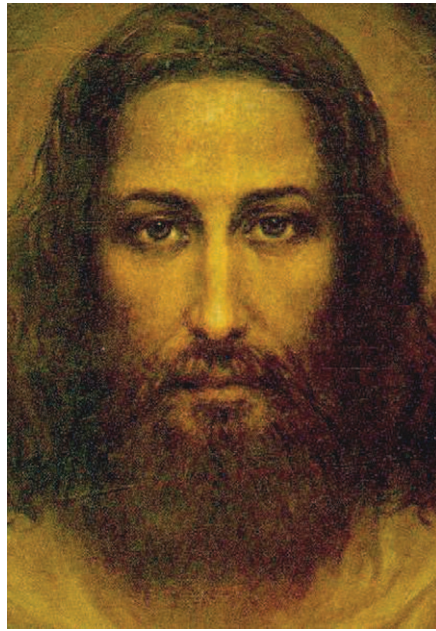


Figure 6: *The Face of Christ*, 1935 (oil). Confraternity of the Precious Blood, Brooklyn, New York.

An example of this compositional technique may be found in an illustration from *My Mass* (figure 5). Over the altar, Christ gazes downward, wearing the same vestments as the priest. Barely discernible in the background is the Church triumphant gathered about the altar with palms in their hands. It reminds me very much of the engravings by Gustav Doré for Dante's *Paradiso*, except that here we are permitted to see both heaven and earth at the same time.

Ariel Agemian's most famous painting of all is the portrait of Christ he made based on the Shroud of Turin. After visiting the shroud many times in the 1920s, he painted the image of Christ in 1935 (figure 6). According to scholars, it is the most accurate positive image of the Shroud ever painted. It now hangs in the headquarters of the Confraternity of Precious Blood in Brooklyn, New York.

Agemian produced many beautiful finished works, but I was most impressed by the thousands of sketches, studies, and visual experiments he left behind. All too often artists settle into a rut because they lack the humility required to take creative risks. If

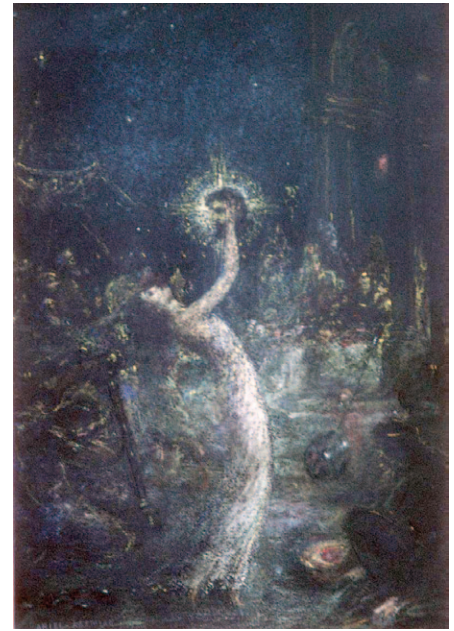


Figure 7: *Salome (John the Baptist's head)*, 1936 (pastel). Private Collection.

humility is the root of all virtue, then it must have something to do with development of other gifts from God, such as artistic skill. Although some results were more successful than others, the great paintings he created could not have come into existence without his habit of responding in the affirmative to every inspiration from God.

One intriguing sketch he created features Salome triumphantly raising the head of Saint John the Baptist like a lantern (figure 7). Agemian beautifully contrasts the strength of Saint John with the licentiousness of Salome. The haloed head is perfectly centered whereas Salome's body coils below it like a serpent. Although the subject matter and composition are almost identical to Gustave Moreau's *The Apparition*, the fact that it is rendered in light pastel on a dark background draws the viewer into an eerie moonlit scene of the supernatural triumphing over the sensual.

Everyone Ariel Agemian met was a potential model, but he used his family members again and again. He often used friends and neighbor children to populate the worlds he created on paper. Annig Raley, his daughter, remembers:

It was amusing and sometimes tiresome for me to dress in those garments the Pharisees and Christ and Blessed Mother wore. It was a practice in patience for me. He wanted to capture the light and see the folds. I am reminded, by those who knew me as a young girl, that my long curly blonde hair was in most of his portraits of Christ. My mother was the model for the many of the Blessed Mothers.

When his daughter, Annig, made her First Communion, he had her model in five-minute intervals in between which she could run out and play until he finished her portrait (figure 8). She told me that she had wanted a photograph “like the other kids” at the time, but was resigned to sitting for her portrait. It is a lovely pastel drawing of a real little girl wearing a delicate veil and dress that had obviously been given to her by parents who valued the momentous occasion of her First Holy Communion. Rather than have his daughter look back at him, Ariel Agemian directed her serious gaze towards her heavenly Father instead.

In 1958, Pope Pius XII awarded Agemian a gold medal for his work, and he was knighted to the Order of Saint Gregory. He died unexpectedly five years later from a heart attack. His wife died three years after that, leaving their twenty-three-year-old daughter with the sole responsibility of cataloging her father’s works,

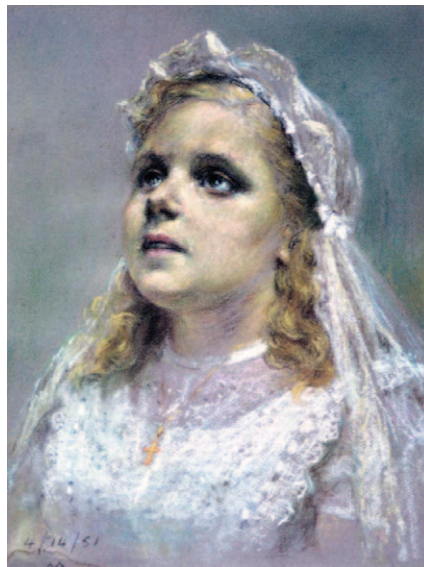


Figure 8: *Annig's First Communion*, 1951 (pastel). Private Collection.

having them restored, and solving the mysteries of the chronology and location of older works. In 1987, she traveled to Paris and discovered a very large mural he had painted for a church in Arnoueville, France. In the mid-1990s, she traveled to Italy and visited a series of murals he had painted for the Mekhitarist monks in exchange for the education they had given him. She has shouldered the monumental task of caring for the artwork in her possession but hopes to find a permanent home for them in museums and churches that will value his legacy.

His work is on display at several churches in the United States. He painted an array of Carmelite Saints for the National Shrine of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Middletown,

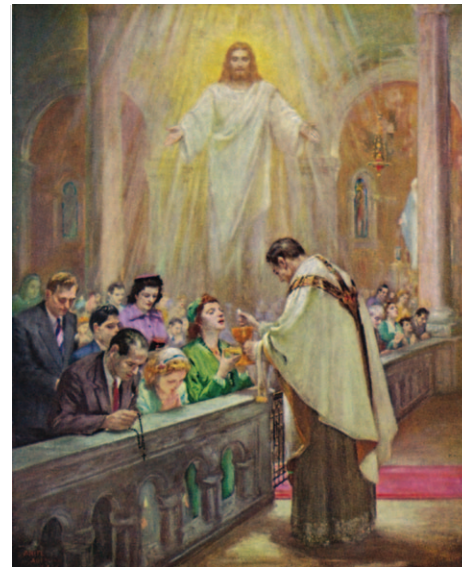


Figure 10: *Oneness in Christ*, 1958 (oil). Saint Bernard of Clairvaux Catholic Church, New Bloomfield, Pennsylvania.

New York (figure 9). The painting *Oneness in Christ* (figure 10) was donated to Saint Bernard of Clairvaux Catholic Church in New Bloomfield, Pennsylvania. There are also paintings at Holy Cross Armenian Catholic Church in Belmont, Massachusetts; Saint Mark’s Armenian Catholic Church in Wynnewood, Pennsylvania; and Anna Maria College in Paxton, Massachusetts. ✠



Ariel Agemian

#### Notes

1. The information in this essay was gathered during an interview on January 26th, 2013, with Annig Raley in her home in Glenwood Springs, Colorado, and her website [www.agemianpaintings.com](http://www.agemianpaintings.com). All images provided courtesy of Annig Raley.
2. “Professor Ariel Agemian Paintings Decorate Moorat College in Milan, Armenian Churches in Paris and College S. Moorat in Sevres” News Release, March 28, 1938, New York, New York.

*Gwyneth Holston is currently studying academic painting and drawing at an atelier. Images of her work are available on her website [www.gwynethholston.com](http://www.gwynethholston.com).*



Figure 9: *All Carmelite Saints*, 1941 (oil). National Shrine of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, Middletown, New York.