



Sumbat, an artist who captured village life in Iran

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After almost nine years of work in collecting letters, articles, exhibition announcements, and obtaining reproductions of paintings, Armen Der Kiureghian is publishing his book on his father, Sumbat Der Kiureghian, the Iranian-Armenian watercolorist, known simply as Sumbat. The new book, *The Life and Art of Sumbat*, has a foreword by Levon Abrahamian, cultural anthropologist, author of many books and articles, and former William Saroyan Professor of Armenian Studies at the University of California at Berkeley. The graphic design was done by Haroutiun Samuelian, who has designed many of Armenia's stamps and recently designed the seldom-seen 100,000-dram note.

Der Kiureghian, who is a professor of civil engineering at UC Berkeley, used his research, his memories, and what he learned from consultations and conversations with his many relatives to write about Sumbat's life in a detailed prose that not only shows his great respect for his father but also a fondness for the cultures and locations that were Sumbat's themes. Raised, as was his father, in the family's ancestral home in New Julfa, the Armenian quarter of Isfahan, Der Kiureghian is familiar with every shade of light that slips by in a day in this region and, himself a watercolorist, describes his father's art with a painter's knowledge of both the art and its inspirations. He writes of his father's style, Sumbat's "colors are gentle like the sycamore trees and warm like the Isfahani sun."

Reading about the life of Sumbat is compelling not just because it is a biography of a well-known artist but because of the care with which he's depicted in the prose; he comes to life through pictures and descriptions and one finds oneself going along with him on his many bicycle journeys into the Armenian and Persian villages of Iran, staying in the homes of newly met friends and painting their world.

Included in Sumbat's biography are the stories and paintings of those who inspired him and those who were inspired by him; these are the famous artist Sarkis Kachadourian, and Sumbat's great friend, fellow painter, and one-time sponsor, Stanley Flockton Foster, with whom Sumbat toured Europe and the Middle East for eight months starting in June 1949. These stories and reproductions of paintings, along with the photographs of Sumbat's subjects, provide a rich context and background for the 130 pages of album to come.

Opening up the first page of the album and seeing a full-page reproduction of a painting of New Julfa is like starting over, now with the artistic life of this artist, which is also a portrayal of the life of these places. The album is arranged by sections, from paintings in New Julfa to Persian and Armenian villages, and all the way to California.

Although painting in watercolors, a relatively new medium in Iran at the time, and particularly after his lengthy tour abroad using "Western strokes" rather than those of traditional Iranian art, Sumbat's work in depicting the life in many villages in Iran, in the words of Abrahamian's foreword, preserved in "watercolors the quickly vanishing traditions of rural life in Iran." One reviewer describes Sumbat's art by saying, "When viewing his watercolors, you feel yourself in reality"; and another review states that his paintings are "Reflections of nature natural as the nature." Watercolors are a medium that require great skill and speed in

implementation; when used well they can provide accurate and detailed depictions and so are often used in scientific illustrations. However, Der Kiureghian adds that with the representations are Sumbat's interpretations of what he is seeing and feeling: "he feels the cool temperature of the water flowing in the stream.... And he sees beauty in the dust rising behind a herd of sheep, when we are merely bothered by it."

The artist's eye and his expertise in choosing a scene are integral to these paintings. Once Sumbat moves to Glendale, California, in 1979 and begins to paint California scenes, his compositional style is so fluent and accomplished that such stale sites as Yosemite's Half Dome seen from Inspiration Point lose their reputation as starting points for all amateur artists and become merely beautiful places. It's as if we are seeing them for the first time when imbued with Sumbat's perfect color sense and depiction of light.

But California is the end of the story; and even in Glendale, Sumbat's favorite subjects were Armenian villages; as the author describes, "In [Sumbat's] mind the colors in no place were as vibrant and delicate as in his Isfahan." Abrahamian describes Sumbat's Iranian subjects as the "mesocosm"; he does not perform character studies, nor broad overviews, he takes a middle view that conveys a place as it is while he is seeing it. One reviewer of his art describes this as "The captured happiness of momentary encounters." There is no specter of death in these paintings. In a scene near Isfahan a village is depicted set against a background of tall mountains. A man stands on a cart loaded with hay while another man works on the ground. The frayed ends of the hay on the cart are beside patches of wind-blown dry grass. Sparse green leaves are seen on the few trees. The peaks of the mountains seem to emanate the white cloud patches that rise out of them. A foreground of layers of earth and dirt road produce rich shadows. The composition is in such harmony with its parts that the two men at work are as alive as the mountains, and share the same attention in the scene. Of his work, Sumbat has said, "Inside I'm a happy person and I see happiness and brightness in my scenes."

When using gouache, Sumbat tested out colors on an old newspaper. One day he noticed shapes in the many stains of color spread across the newspaper. He transformed the color array into an Iranian street scene, embellishing the suggestion of forms he saw in the color blots. He later dubbed this style "Sumbatism." Although Sumbat was not the first artist to mix print and paint, Sumbatisms are quite unique. On canvasses of Armenian and Farsi newspapers arise scenes of Iranian and Armenian life; scenes of dancing, of making music and simply of people walking through their village. Yet in this context even a simple village scene is an exuberant celebration of life. The words of the world seem to come alive, and every accidental blot of paint is the nascent form of a life in the swell of activity.

Sumbat would occasionally paint portraits of family members, or of military officials for a commission; in the book there are two self-portraits. In his depictions of himself there are no hints of ego or pomposity. He stands before his canvasses with paintbrushes and a palette in his hand. His look is sincere and content. He knows who he is. One work that is much like a self-portrait is a still life of the artist's tools. Assembled on the artist's work table in this painting are dishes of water, a cup of brushes and a pencil, a box of jars of paint and a newspaper covered in smears of color which obscure the name of the newspaper (although it is clear that it is "Asbarez"). One doesn't need to see the artist's face to recognize that this is his identity and world. Presented are the means of artistic production, a catalogue of raw materials before the act of creation commences - or perhaps in the middle of an act of creation, because colors have been tested on the newspaper and soon life will erupt spontaneously and overwhelm the thoughts set down in print on the newspaper.

The big jars of unmixed colors in this still life are reminiscent of a later painting of Persian carpet weavers in an Iranian scene. The weavers are absorbed in their work, weaving small pieces of yarn into a bright and ornate carpet. Dangling above their heads are big balls of yarn in basic colors: bright yellow, green, red, blue, black, and white. The weavers have pulled what they need from these source colors, small pieces of colored yarn sit in piles around them, and with great skill and knowledge of their medium they compose their masterpiece. The weavers are like the painter himself. It's from the expert implementation of these raw colors that these great and quiet works of art are produced. But the carpet weavers are only performing their everyday practice. All the characters depicted in Sumbat's painting have a similar ease of being and an

unquestioning contentment with their work, from young women carrying jugs of water home from the well to villagers buying fruit at a market.

The memories of these villages inspired Sumbat all his life. After living in Glendale for 20 years, a copy of *Asbarez* newspaper, with its address written in English, still brought forth from Sumbat's brush the colors, costumes and feelings of village life in Iran. The estimated 10,000 of Sumbat's paintings are currently scattered throughout the world. Since Sumbat's works were declared national treasures, the originals can no longer be exported from Iran for any reason; some of the earlier works were laboriously acquired from collectors in Iran in order to represent this period of his art. Nevertheless, the book assembles an impressive anthology that contains many examples of all his evolving styles.

Sumbat's interest and skill in art has been passed down to his family members. Der Kiureghian, when not engaged as a professor, spends time in Lake Tahoe painting with watercolors in some of the locations his father painted, combining what he's learned from his father with his own style. Sumbat's granddaughter, Naira Der Kiureghian, although not a watercolorist, is also an accomplished artist, and her work in ceramics and other media exhibits the same wit and spontaneity that is seen in her grandfather's work. Der Kiureghian is presently working on a full archive of Sumbat's many works.

The *Life and Art of Sumbat* was printed in Yerevan. It will be available through Sumbat.com, through Amazon.com, and in selected bookstores, including Abril Books in Glendale, and ArtBridge bookstore-café in Yerevan.

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