

The Colors of Jazz: Berge Missakian blends disciplined techniques and visualization with the free-flowing rhythms of jazz to create soulful paintings that celebrate life.

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For those who believe that art is indeed "the window to a man's soul," as Claudia "Lady Bird" Johnson once said, then the art of Egyptian-born Berge Missakian provides a wonderful view of a spirited, energetic soul.

Born in Egypt in 1933 to Armenian parents who met and settled in Alexandria after fleeing their native Ottoman Turkey during the 1915 genocide (see sidebar, "Colors of a Genocide"), Missakian and his wife, Hanne, make their home in Montreal. There, he paints while being inspired by the recordings of jazz greats such as Dave Brubeck, Duke Ellington, Tito Puente (Latin Jazz), Louis Armstrong, Miles Davis, George Shearing, Stan Getz, Count Basie and Stephane Grappelli.

"For me, jazz is an echo--a reflection of life" says Missakian. "I try to capture its colors, rhythms and improvisational spirit. Like the visual arts, jazz provides an exceptional means of communication. Whether it is jazz, jazz-rock fusion, free jazz, jam sessions, improvisation or experimentation, I find my way around the canvas with my brushes."

Whatever the subject, Missakian says his objectives remain the same. "I want to celebrate life in my paintings--with ecstasy over passivity, movement over inertia, and joy over melancholy" Missakian's passion for life was intensified in 1993 when, following heart-bypass surgery, he felt "death's proximity. Thanks to my profound belief in God, my desire to paint has taken on even greater meaning. Art provides me with a bridge, a raison d'etre, and a passion for life for which I am grateful to God." Structure and visualization are critical!

Missakian, who studied art at the American University in Beirut, Lebanon, Cornell University in Ithaca, NY, and Concordia University in Montreal, began painting full-time in 1976 after working as a graphic designer for R.L. Crain, Inc., a Montreal-based supplier of business forms. Newly married at the time to Hanne, a German-born widow with four children, Missakian embarked upon his career as a painter. During this period he enjoyed the structure of strict Cubism, as seen in paintings such as "St. Mary's Ukrainian Orthodox Church, Montreal" (1976) and "Eglise Bonsecours, Montreal" (1975). He says of his Cubist works that they allowed him to "show his perspective of a subject from different angles." And his still lifes from around this time were colorful, yet traditional, in their representation of subjects, as shown by "Still Life with Three Red Apples" (1973).

A decade later, his work moved toward "flowing" landscapes, resplendent with bold brush strokes and unusual lines, as shown in "Landscape with Lake" (1986) and "Couleurs D-Automne" (1986). Those early works are far different from Missakian's carefully orchestrated jazz paintings of today. These modern works blend the bold brushstrokes and colors of Fauvist artists such as Matisse, with the abstract and geometric shapes of Picasso's Cubism, and even the playfulness of Disney (think "Fantasia").

And though his paintings, which typically include musical instruments, flowers, fruit, wine, books, furnishings and even artworks, may appear to feature an arbitrary selection of bold colors, that's hardly the case. Instead, Missakian adheres to a highly structured approach that he follows for all his paintings.

Missakian places a great importance on the visualization of the painting, as well as the process.

"This is the pillar of my compositions" he says. "Without it, I can't proceed"

Like many artists, Missakian must visualize the final painting before he's ready to begin. He also visualizes the entire process until the work is complete in his mind. This mental exercise generally takes five to 10 minutes.

"I visualize myself taking the various acrylic colors from their jars, the way the palette looks, the brush strokes, the movements, and the unrelated designs and colors in the composition. I even visualize signing the work, which I use as a compositional element to help add overall balance to the piece."

Once Missakian begins a painting, he works quickly and rarely stops until the work is complete, which typically takes one or two days. Missakian completes about 110 paintings annually, though he works on only one at a time.

Working on linen or canvas that has been primed with three coats of black acrylic gesso, Missakian begins by using a round brush loaded with cerulean blue to sketch the outlines--

"cartoon style?" (He also worked as a cartoonist during the early 1970s.)

During this sketching phase, Missakian employs "Cezanne's technique of looking at subjects from different angles" and moves to and from the four easel stations he positions equidistant from one another and the still life objects to be painted, which are positioned in the center.

Using 50 to 80 flat and round brushes to help keep colors fresh and clean, Missakian begins by using large brushes to apply the most intense colors, such as the bright yellow seen showing through the window in "Modigliani's First Jazz," or the dramatic reds seen in the background of "Puerto Vallarta--Afternoon Melody." Then he seeks complementary colors that bring movement and vibration to the images. Neutral colors--black, white, brown--are typically used for the main elements such as musical instruments and furniture--"to allow the viewer's eyes to stop and rest before plunging back into the swirl of visual activity."

This visual activity is intensified through Missakian's usage of lines and rounded shapes. "The strong diagonal lines are a reaction to Cubism, which is dominated by straight lines" says the artist. "I've taken that a bit further and made everything round. I think round shapes communicate more innately with the viewer. After all, everything in life is round. Life, after all, travels in a circle. It's perennial."

The careful combination of round shapes and wavy lines gives Missakian's works a great sense of movement. Once he is satisfied that his "intuition" has brought together all the colors and objects in ways that capture the emotion and exude the energy that Missakian strives for from all possible viewing angles, he considers the work complete.

And while Missakian says that he may work back over the colors to avoid a labored look, once a painting is complete, he never goes back to it.

"I want my canvas to maintain the feelings of a specific time and a specific visualization experience" which is why Missakian says that he can only work on one painting at a time, unlike other artists who report working on several simultaneously.

What is the first thing he does upon completing and digitally recording the finished work?

Typically he celebrates with a glass of wine, often poured from a bottle featured in a painting.

Keep it real! When asked what advice he has for emerging artists, the self-represented artist answers without hesitation: "Be real. Work from the heart. Don't copy a style. Work hard. And be truthful to the art."

Then, quoting Vincent Van Gogh in a letter written to his brother Theo on Jan. 3 1883, "I want something serious,--something fresh,--something with soul in it!" (Excerpted from "Vincent van Gogh," published by The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1935).

When it comes to galleries, Missakian offers this advice: "Communicate with your artists. Let them know how their work is being reacted to by the viewing public. It has to be a partnership." Missakian is represented by the following U.S. galleries: Seaside Art Gallery, Nags Head, NC, and Monty Stabler Galleries, Birmingham, AL. In Canada: Galerie Lamoureux Ritzenhoff, Montreal; Hollander York Gallery, Toronto; Rendez-Vous Art Gallery, Vancouver; Adele Campbell Fine Art Gallery, Whistler, B.C.; and Galerie D'Art Perreault, Quebec City. And his art is found throughout the world, with collectors in the United States, Canada, France, England, Ireland, Scotland, Greece, Belgium, Holland, Germany, Austria, Armenia, Poland, Mexico, Argentina, Australia, Japan, Lebanon and Jordan.

He says that artists need to know something about the galleries to which they present their work, and if their work would be a good fit for the gallery. While in-person visits aren't always possible, Missakian says online visits to gallery Web sites generally provide an artist with a feel for a gallery.

'Art Is My Life!' Ask Missakian what he would do if he weren't an artist, and one can hear the sadness in his voice resulting from even having to consider such a scenario.

"Art is very important to me. It's my life. It keeps me alive and it's important for me to leave something behind through my work"

And of all the thousands of paintings he's accomplished, which one is his favorite?

Without hesitation, Missakian answers, "The Future" (see sidebar, "Colors of a Genocide")

"because it shows the continuity of life; that life continues in the face of adversity and horror."

RELATED ARTICLE: Colors of a Genocide.

"In Van Gogh's painting, "The Night Cafe" (1888), the artist wanted to show all the despair in human emotions by using two main colors: red and green.

I chose the same colors in "The Red Lake" (1985), to present the trauma experienced by an entire people--my own. In 1915, 1.5 million Armenians were massacred by the Ottoman Turks. Over one million more Armenians were forced to flee their native land. My parents' account of this persecution has long resonated within me, although I did not personally experience this tragic event.

To commemorate this human tragedy on the 70th anniversary of the 1915 genocide, I created 15 large paintings. Fourteen of these deal with the suffering that humans inflict on other humans. The artwork conveys the message that a genocide begins with a murder of a single individual. The fifteenth painting, "The Future" bears witness to the faith and hope that I place in humanity. This painting shows that the life of a people does not end, despite the atrocities of a genocide. "The Red Lake," "The Last March" and "The Future" are part of a series of 15. They have been exhibited in Canada, Europe and the United States as "The Colors of Genocide," and the entire collection has been acquired by the Armenian Library and the Museum of America in Watertown, MA.

Recalling this dramatic event and commiserating with the victims, including my grandparents, became a mission for me as it was a mission for Picasso to paint his celebrated "Guernica".

--Berge Missakian