

## **ANDRE GVALIVICH (1911-1985)**

### **Table of Contents for the Webpage**

**I. Andre: Life History** (accompanied by a combination of landscape paintings and portraiture to show the breadth of scope, and variations in the evolution of his art. Which ones? To be decided later.)

**II. Andre: The Artist** (accompanied by the portrait of the healer, mother, and a variety of landscape paintings to be selected later.)

**III. Andre: A Self-Portrait** (accompanied by 4 of his own self portraits.)

**IV. Andre: The Wrestling Champion and Coach** (accompanied by the portrait of different athletes.)

**V. Andre: An Assyrian Patriot:** (accompanied by the Raqa paintings, and paintings of famous Assyrians.)

**VI. Andre: A family Man** (accompanied by portraits of his family members.)

**VII. The Eternal Seasons of Andre: A Fan's View** (accompanied by landscape paintings to be selected later.)

### **Andre: Life History:**

Andre Gvalivich was born in 1911 in the village of Gotranis, located in the region of Barwar, in south eastern Turkey. He was the second son of 3 boys, Aram, his older brother, and Victor, the younger. His parents were Barjam and Nazi Morogolof, (later changed to Gvalivich). In 1912 the Gvalivich family abandoned their village due to political upheavals in the region, fleeing to Salamas, a town in northwestern Iran.

In 1914, at the age of three, Andre's family fled again to Tsarist, Russia because of the massacre of Christians in Salamas. They settled in Rostov where Andre started school in 1918 and began exhibiting an interest in working with his hands. As early as elementary school, he would carve designs in sections of tree bark with a knife. The beauty and skill of these early carvings earned a place on display along with the artwork of 5<sup>th</sup> graders in his school.

In 1920, Andre's father passed away and his paternal uncle took charge of Andre and his two brothers. In 1921, after World War I, there was famine in Rostov; and the family was again forced to move to Petrograd, (Leningrad). For two years Andre was not able to attend school. Eventually, he was enrolled again as a student in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade, where his interests, once again gravitated toward the subjects of drawing and painting. He had the company of three other students who eventually became well-known painters: Kantarovitch, Knausovski, and Desperstov. His talent was exceptional and drew praise

from his teachers. Encouraged, Andre continued, and in 5<sup>th</sup> grade participated in an art contest put on by his school, winning first prize for a portrait he drew of Pushkin.

As Andre's talents grew, he began developing a style, intrigued at the time by painter Aivassovski. Under the influence of Aivassovski's work, Andre explored the medium of oil painting producing works of sea scapes.

In his senior year, Andre's interests took a detour in his interests towards medicine, still impressing his teachers with outstanding art skills shown in his drawings of various internal human organs.

Andre recounts that once, after being dismissed from a music class for misbehaving, he ran into the President of his school in the hall, Professor D. A. Alexandrov. When the professor found out that Andre was planning to enter medical school, he discouraged him "We have talked about you in the faculty meetings, and are very eager to see you as an artist, and come to view your art exhibitions." This was partly because of the Pushkin painting that had won first place. When Andre conferred with his uncle about this, he found that his uncle was in agreement with the idea.

In 1929 Andre joined The Leningrad Academy of the Arts where he enrolled in classes on theory and techniques of painting, even expanding his skills in the art of porcelain and china painting. One of his most outstanding creations in this art form was a set of Turkish coffee cups, which was placed on display in the Museum of Leningrad. (It would be interesting to know if it is still there.)

Aside from painting, Andre also had a passion for sports, particularly wrestling. He used to train regularly in a sports club known as "Dinamo" and the result of his rigorous training was that in 1932 he became the champion of wrestling in Russia. This was the same year he graduated from The Leningrad Academy of the Arts.

In his own words:

"After graduating from the school of fine arts I was hired to teach drawing and stage design at the same institute for a year. Then I was hired by the cinematography institute of Leningrad as an interior designer. I was the art director in such films as "The Tempest", "The Hot Days", and "Peter the Great". Drawing and stage decoration is very important in a motion picture. It is as important as film directing and shooting. During that time I painted 600 scenes. I was also designing period fashion costumes, and working as a make-up artist. Adjusting stage lighting was my responsibility as well. All of these were done in the tradition of "realism"."

In 1934 Andre enrolled at the University of Leningrad's athletic program. But after two years he had to interrupt his studies as he was called back by the studio to help with the production of "Peter the Great". It is not clear whether this was done voluntarily or to comply with Soviet Union's socialist work requirements.

In 1938, in a political purge, Andre was expelled from the Soviet Union because he had not renounced his Iranian citizenship. First he lived in Hamadan. Then, in 1940, he moved to Teheran. In Iran his main activity was training Iranian athletes in the sport of European wrestling. But he never abandoned painting. He lived in a two-story building on the Old Road to Shemran. On the first floor was his residence where he lived with his wife Anastasia and his two children. On the second floor was his photography and art studio. He made a living as a photographer. But he is the founder of European Wrestling, and a forerunner of impressionism and realism in Iran.

Andre has drawn more than 300 paintings, and has participated in various national and international exhibitions either in a group or solo. The art exhibitions in which Andre Gvalivich has participated are:

1. 1931: Leningrad Museum, Russia (Group)
2. 1944 Assyrian Association, Teheran (solo)
3. 1948 French-Iranian Association (solo)
4. 1952 Iranian-Russian Educational Interrelations (group)
5. 1953 As Above
6. 1954 Mehregan Gallery, Teheran (group)
7. 1956 Iranian-American Association group)
8. 1963 Burguez Gallery, Teheran (Group)
9. 1973 Saratoga Art Gallery , Saratoga, CA (Andre and Jan Toma)
10. 1976 Assyrian-American Association Hartford, Conn. (solo)
11. 1976 The Sun House, Teheran (solo)
12. 1979 Iranian-Russian Association, Teheran (solo)
13. 1984 Niavaran Institute of Art (group)
14. 1986 Hotel Laleh Gallery, Teheran (solo)
15. 1984 Museum of Modern Art, Teheran (group)

On June 12, 1985, at the age of seventy-four, Andre passed away. He suffered a heart attack one morning when he was doing his daily warm up exercises in preparation for his daily walk. He died upon arrival to the hospital. Those who knew him personally will remember him clearly not only as an artist, but also for his pleasant and most congenial character.

### **Andre the Artist:**

Andre Gvalivich was raised in Russia, but he was always proud of Salamas, his childhood town in the region of Azarbaijan, Iran. The green of its verdure, the red of its crimson and its gay nature are reflected in his paintings. The happiest qualities of the bright summers of Salamas, the coolness and brightness of the spring water, can almost be felt in his compositions. In her article on arts and literature, Seemeen Daneshvar writes: "Andre has succeeded in depicting the natural color compositions of the Iranian landscape." His paintings immortalize sites and buildings that have not and will not

survive the passage of time. His colors are spread on the canvas delicately and smoothly reminiscent of his porcelain-painting heritage. After 58 years of experience in painting, Andre at the age of 73 was still an experimentalist at heart always introducing new color schemes, brush strokes, and discovering ways to bring out contrasts of dark and light, warm and cool. Until his death he had the vivacity of a young man and the crudity of an experimenter.

Andre was also an expert portrait artist. His ability to depict individual characteristics and facial expressions was remarkable. His apprenticeship in porcelain painting is recalled in the delicate contours of the face, the hands, and the graceful curves of the body of his female subjects. This is especially evident in the portrait of the healer, and that of his mother.

Unfortunately, not one painting from the turbulent years of the 1930's survived. There are, however, a few pieces from the 1940's that show an expert hand that knew how to play the brush smoothly and comfortably across the canvas. The colors of that period were delicate and light. They conveyed sadness and melancholy. Perhaps he was reflecting the Russian landscape, or may be these were traits he had borrowed from other Russian painters who were masters of portraiture. With bold and measured strokes, with unwavering movement of the brush, he filled the canvas with color. Of all subject matter that became immortalized in his works, Andre most loved to depict scenes of nature. He depicted nature's various manifestations sometimes with faint colors especially in the 40's and sometimes in vivid, bold colors during later periods. Enthralled with the beauty of nature, he laid out the scenery upon his canvas, almost effortlessly, like an impressionist. His perceptive gaze captured scientific accuracy in the images. He used the canvas as a medium to encapsulate nature, science and history all at the same time.

With the passage of time, Andre's color compositions changed from mellow hues to vibrant outbursts of glowing oranges and deep shades, reflecting changes in the natural environment as he moved from one country to another, from one period to the next.

Towards the end of 1960's and into the 1970's, Andre gave free statement to the play of imagination. Once again he went back to nature as his source of inspiration. At this stage his strokes were more carefree and his colors livelier. The sky was wider, the greens, greener, the orange hues, purer, and the presence of the sun and its hot rays on the greens, tangible. He boldly applied colors to the canvas and let them freely flow and merge together to wherever his imagination took them. The paint was freely splashed on canvas, and therefore the dance of colors, poetic and lively. It is hard to believe that the artist, who in the 1940's worked with such faded colors, had suddenly acquired the boldness of a young man. This boldness sometimes revealed inexperience in an experienced hand. The hallmark of decades of work is the paintings that depict the autumn colors where Andre had let his imagination and feelings soar beyond the dictates of nature.

Most of Andre's paintings were a walk through nature; a moment in time, frozen under a hot summer afternoon sun. With every lingering glance at one of his scenes, movements and nuances of color are discovered. This is especially noteworthy in his depiction of

trees. Some of them are heavily covered with green, either greenest of green or a radiant orange. Others are dry, barren of leaves half hidden in misty weather. Others are heavily laden with snow, and still others appear standing firm under rain showers.

His paintings were an extension of himself, as if they were his beloved children. He would not release them to art dealers for sale, even in times of economic hardship.

In 1945, Andre participated in a national exhibition of Iranian art, which took place in the palace of Alee Reza Darbar. The judging panel awarded Andre's painting, "Assyrian Raqa" (The Assyrian Uprooting), first place for excellence in the class of genre.

One of Andre's more interesting portraits was completed in 1970. It was a remarkable full figured rendering of Takhti, a famous athlete. He had originally drawn the figure three years earlier, but had not yet completed a background that he found satisfying. Eventually Andre decided to place the athlete in front of a mountain that was dwarfed by the imposing athletic figure in the foreground. Finally Andre was satisfied with his creation. This painting is placed in the museum of the 2000 Capacity Stadium in Teheran.

Another of Andre's masterpieces is the portrait of "Priest Ruvoul" which is placed in the hall of St. Mary's Church in Terheran.

### **Andre, A Self-Portrait:**

In an interview with Lorraine Davis, Andre talked about his childhood, his Russian upbringing, his art, and life history as an athlete. He also spoke of his aspirations for his Umta, The Assyrians. This interview was published in the 1982 Artistic Pocket Calendar, with many of Andre's portraits. The interview is translated into English from Assyrian, and appears below:

I was five years old when my parents sent me to the fiancé of my father's friend to learn the Russian alphabet. One day when I had a hard time learning one of the letters, my teacher drew the picture of the sun to help me out. I was so enthralled that I asked her to teach me how to draw the sun. Ever since I was five, I had the freedom to explore the countryside with my two friends: Haydar, the Tartar, and Sasha, the Russian. I was the youngest of the three and people used to call us the "three musketeers". The countryside around our house was rich in varieties of flowers and plants to explore. In the logic of childhood, one day we spent the entire day looking for the "dried raisin" tree. Another of our childhood pastimes was to swim in the river Don. That is when I learned how to swim. I was very fond of nature. I had a great memory and an exploring spirit. It drove me to investigate my surroundings.

I do not see myself as an inventor of a new style of painting. But my technique of color free-flow that I have used in some of my paintings is unique, because I have not seen it in the paintings of other artists. I am a realist and an impressionist. I am especially fascinated with modern realism. I try to use a variety of skills and techniques in my

compositions. Color flow and black pen sketching are examples. What pleases me especially when I paint is to be able to reveal my intentions and goals to the viewer.

The reason why I continue painting is to fulfill my duty to my people. Painting is a very important art form in a society, as well as all humanity. This is because art teaches people how to discern beauty. Every person appreciates beauty in their own way. Some find it in music; some in sculpture, and others in paintings.

There are few painters who can master all three types of painting: landscape, genre, and portraiture. A person can be an excellent painter, but only in one branch. One cannot say which branch is superior. Carot was only a landscape painter. I am strong in portraiture. The portrait I drew of “Rev. Ruvoul” won first place in *VOX*. The reason I chose that branch of painting is because I saw it was not popular in Iran.

As to “genre”, I have drawn two paintings of this type. The one titled “Raqa-d-Atouraye “The Assyrian Uprooting”, which won first place in its kind in Iran. The second, “Tomorrow Is the Meeting” won first place in an international exhibition in Bucharest, where I received a medal for it. Later in my life I developed a special interest in drawing people, especially portraits of famous Assyrians. The reason why I draw landscapes is because I am fascinated with nature. Where I lived, nature was beautiful. I cannot say which is preferable; landscape painting, or portraits. In terms of art forms, they are equal in value. What is important is the level of artistry and excellence in a work. It has to be an artistic output and not a cheap assemblage.

With respect to colors in my paintings, all of them can be found in nature. It is nature itself that is reflected in my work. I can even say that it is my only source of inspiration. Fortunately, Iranian landscape is so beautiful and colorful that it fulfills all my inspirational needs. I love nature the same way that a poet does. In my paintings sadness and happiness are co-mingled, and this is a reflection of my inner feelings. Among all seasons, my favorite is autumn. Therefore most of my landscapes depict this season. This is because of the rich colors and the distinctive character of the fall. A landscape to me is like a portrait. I try to bring out the character of the place much like I do with a face. From my point of view, technique is not as important as the image or the scene itself.

In Iranian art my favorite is miniature work. This is because of its authenticity, refinement and beauty. In the last six years I have discovered that I am using a lot of bluish hues in my landscapes. I realized this was because I had acquired an intimate knowledge and understanding of nature in Iran, and had developed a feel for the natural light and color in the country. The characteristics of the sky and water, the reflection of the sunlight on them, led me to use more of the bluish hues.

I apply various techniques in my color compositions and brush strokes. Which technique is better, one cannot say. What is important is that color schemes and compositions must be skillfully selected and applied. For example nowadays people do not like pure and simple colors. They prefer non-primary colors, or colors worked in patches. This is for two reasons: use of off colors is a new thing. The second reason is that people do not

have true art appreciation skills. DaVinci used pure and primary colors. So if a painter uses patched colors, one cannot conclude that the latter is better. In painting, originality is very important. This is what distinguishes Picasso from Cézanne and Renoir. The originality of an artist is seen in his color schemes and treatment of space. It is important for an artist to maintain his/her stylistic identity, and not imitate others. An artist must have freedom of statement, and be able to communicate his/her message in the painting. If we Assyrians had our own state, then I could draw paintings with political messages to draw people towards a designated goal. When the government asks its artists to engage in various artistic activities to advance the goals of the government, the artists change the subject and the style of their artwork to match the preferences of the government. Of course, in art, subject matter is not of prime importance. A piece of art is not to be judged on the basis of what it depicts. That is why, if a person is focusing on the subject of a painting alone, that person has no understanding of what art is.

It is the responsibility of an artist to promote and strengthen knowledge and understanding among his/her people. A society without art is a barbaric society. Colors, beauty and paintings are the food of eyes. If a person sees nature and is not touched, then that person is very backward in terms of thinking and understanding. It is disrespectful but we need to recognize that our people are behind in the field of art appreciation, to the extent that they cannot even appreciate the importance and value of their own ancestor's artwork. For example, if you ask a modern-day Assyrian which is superior: the ancient Assyrian guardian angel with the wings of an eagle and the head of a human, or a sculpture of Michelangelo, they will choose Michelangelo. This is because they have no understanding of the real value of art. Of course, as long as we Assyrians do not have our own state, we do not have a unique art form. We can only take pride in the excellence of the arts of our ancestors. A nation can only acquire a unique art form when it has a homeland. A people's artistic statement can only become valuable and excellent when that nation achieves independence. At present we are poor in artistic endowments and it is embarrassing to claim that we are Assyrians and related to the exalted artists of old.

### **Andre: The Wrestling Champion and Trainer:**

Andre's dark complexion and dark brown hair stood out among the fair-skinned, blonde Russian children. His first childhood wrestling adventures took him from the streets or amusement parties to the wrestling mat, where he learned wrestling techniques at the famous Este-S Gymnasium, under Bassof, a well known Soviet wrestling champion. His diligence in training was rewarded when he won first place in the medium-weight class in Leningrad in 1928 at the age of seventeen.

Later, he was awarded membership in the Dinamo Wrestling Gymnasium, where all the champions were members. Then, in 1929 Andre began training with Yal Magagir, the famous Finnish trainer, and a wrestling champion himself. Andre used to attribute all his successes as an athlete to Magagir, who became his mentor, believing that there was never a more competent trainer than him.

In 1932, at the same time that he graduated from the Leningrad Academy of Fine Arts, he also realized another dream and became the wrestling champion of Russia in the medium-weight division. His credentials as an official wrestling trainer, which he acquired at the same time, qualified him to be a wrestling coach. In 1934 he was one of four finalists in the Soviet Union's national wrestling competition in the company of Bassof, Lolakof and Guerdi Nigo. Andre defeated two of them, but while wrestling with Guerdi Nigo, a match that took 20 minutes, his right rib broke, and he was taken to the hospital.

In 1935, even though he was not in good health, and not expected to achieve further success in the wrestling arena, he participated again in the Russian national wrestling competition, and won the third place. The same year, in a strenuous wrestling match with the Russian wrestler Doronin, Andre received a major blow on his right hand. He was taken to the hospital where doctors feared amputation was the only option. At the insistence of Andre and friends, the doctors proceeded with 6 consecutive operations to save his hand.

In 1936, the wrestling team of Turkey was invited to the Soviet Union for the renowned Leningrad-Turkey wrestling competition. Andre faced Baktan, the third place Berlin Olympian champion in a match that lasted for 20 minutes ending in a stale mate and becoming the most famous wrestling match in the history of the sport in the Soviet Union. Until 1937, Andre was among the most distinguished wrestlers in the USSR; but because he was an Iranian citizen, he was never sent with the Soviet team to participate in international wrestling matches.

Andre continued his wrestling career in Iran, first in Hamadan, and later in Teheran. He trained many Iranian athletes, including 80% of the wrestlers on the Iranian National Wrestling Team, using the techniques of Classical and European wrestling, which were internationally recognized standards and unknown to in the Iranian wrestling world. His efforts paid off and many of the athletes he trained distinguished themselves on the world scene. Among the star athletes he trained was, Unik Jalalian, Masud Razavi, Fardin, Nasser Javid, Hossein, Mahmood Molla Gassem, Ali Ghafari, and Karim Raeessee.

During the last six years of his life, in order to train with his students, Andre lost 1/4<sup>th</sup> of his body weight to be more nimble on the wrestling mat.

Since his day, the majority of wrestling coaches in Iran have been reaping the benefits of Andre's legacy. European wrestling finally took off in Iran in 1958 when Iranian wrestlers, thanks to Andre's diligence, were able to compete in the International wrestling tournament in Budapest, Hungary.

Andre's career as a wrestling coach lasted 59 years and though very rewarding, it was also a source of frustration. Before Andre, the directors of the Iranian Sports Federation never took classical or European wrestling seriously, only coaching Freestyle. When he returned to Iran, he trained many Iranian athletes in the "Bashgah-e-Neeru va Rasti: (the Strength and Truth) Club. Despite his dedication, expertise, and proven accomplishments,

the Iranian Wrestling Federation gave him little recognition. His own students were promoted to coaching positions while he remained unemployed. Although he served the wrestling team in Iran for more than 20 years, he was never given a permanent position in the Federation. He had to stand by and observe trainers who were not licensed, and did not have experience in human physiognomy, become promoted.

Andre passed away on June 12, 1985 in Teheran and is buried in the Assyrian cemetery in the Feiz Garden on the road to Saveh, Iran. Many distinguished sports champions and members of the Iranian National Sports Federation were present at his funeral in St Mary's Church. To honor his valuable service to the sport of wrestling in Iran, an annual wrestling competition known as the Andre Cup has been established in Iran.

### **Andre: An Assyrian Patriot:**

Soon after Andre settled in Hamadan, Iran he began to teach Assyrian young men the art of drawing in addition to wrestling. One of his art students was Jan Toma, who later developed his own style, and made a name for himself in Argentina and the U.S.A.

From 1943 to 1946 Andre taught drawing and helped with set designs for William Daniel's plays in the Aziz-Zadeh Club, (the club for Assyrians in Teheran). After that club closed down, he volunteered his time in the Assyrian club that opened in Sheikh-Hadi Avenue. He became the club treasurer, while still teaching drawing, wrestling, and photography to interested Assyrians. With all these responsibilities, Andre was even able to coach Sardiq Teimourazi, to win second place on the Iranian National Team with only 2 weeks notice before the match.

In a message to Assyrians, during an interview, Andre commented that:

Assyrians must sincerely unite and avoid divisiveness, irrespective of differences in beliefs and ideas. Arrogance brings no gain but causes substantial damage. Today, if every Assyrian works diligently and excels in his work, he will be an asset to his nation. Since we are dispersed among many nations, it is imperative that each person uses his expertise, whether he is an engineer, doctor, lawyer, or a plain laborer to fulfill his responsibilities better than anyone else, so that he will shine, and stand out among all, and bring honor to the Assyrian name. This is the only way towards the progress of our people. Faithful persistence in excellence makes each member a treasured asset, and a source of pride for the rest.

### **Andre: A family Man:**

During the peak of his success as an athlete, Andre married Maryam, an Assyrian woman and they had a child, Edward. Andre returned to Iran in 1939 but without Maryam and Edward. Their marriage ended in divorce, when his wife refused to accompany him to Iran.

In 1952 Andre married a relative by the name of Anastasia who was also an émigré from the USSR. The gentle and beautiful Anastasia could not give Andre any children. Upon realizing his brother's intense desire to have more children, Victor, Andre's younger brother gave him two of his own children: Maria, 5 and Boris, 3.

**The rest to be filled after interview with Maria.**

## **The Eternal Seasons of Andre**

### **A Fan's View:**

There was a time when our memory lane was not mired by the nearness of the cemetery where Andre and Takhti lie, although the dead who are there were once the most beloved of the living.

Three years earlier when there was an exhibition in the Museum of Modern Arts, I saw the portrait of an old man whose eyes were fixed upon his own image in a mirror. This was Andre. We began to speak of impressionism. Later I went to his studio. I saw there the portrait of *Takhti* and the *Assyrian Uprooting* in his studio. A half finished landscape depicting the beauty of a season was still on the easel: the old and the new side by side in the present. I asked him: "You and wrestling?"

This was Andre, and me, a novice admirer. He was the wizard of the easel. I was in search of the secret of his colors and the dance of his fingers on the canvas that created the special autumn melancholy, the luminous warm tint of Tamuz, and the dullness of sunrise in the winter. I was intrigued by the green of his spring, the color rich depiction of the country flowers and the shadow of the girls in their vests on the country road that leads to a settlement. These are the eternal seasons of Andre.

This was the first and the last time I saw him. I heard he was dead. I thought: death can walk the streets, but what can it do to the nature, to the paintings and to the hues of Andre's eternal seasons?

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