

ARMENIAN ART AT THE SPRING STEP GALLERY

by Justin Wollenhaupt

If I didn't know better, I would have guessed the "kilim" was a Native American textile, with its repeating pattern of complex, angular shapes expressed in earthy tones of brick, blue, black, blood, beige, and sepia. In fact, I sat in one of the squat leather chairs in the atrium of the Springstep facility staring at the wall-mounted rug for several minutes, wondering if this piece had not been included in the "Roots and Riches of Armenia" exhibit by mistake. It didn't *seem* Armenian, but after a bit of reflection I realized that I really have no notion of what an Armenian rug is supposed to look like in the first place, and that I was completely unqualified to be judging the authenticity of anything in this exhibit.

On some level, however, that sort of reflection seems to be the goal of the folks at Springstep. The atrium contains several chairs and ottomans in the midst of its gallery space, divided into pairs and facing each other, inviting visitors to sit and discuss the art and artifacts that surround them. The inclusion was well-reasoned; part of Springstep's mission is to explore and appreciate the heritage of all cultural backgrounds, many of which are entirely unfamiliar to any given visitor, and the seating arrangements allow for the sort of leisurely assessment that is impractical at most traditional galleries.

The limited scope of the exhibit lends itself to this sort of assessment as well. It is composed of eight or fourteen pieces, depending upon whether you consider the hats on the hat rack to be individual pieces or just a single piece. While diverse in type - pieces include the kilim rug, the aforementioned hats, several drawings, an abstract painting, and a full set of clothes - the number of pieces is small enough to allow for a measured consideration of everything in the exhibit.

For me, that consideration consisted of a comparison of the little I know about Armenia with the pieces in the exhibit. The first piece, a print showcasing traditional 19th century dress costumes, seemed at odds with my fuzzy concept of Armenian life. I knew that the region had been under Russian and Soviet hegemony for most of the last century, yet the costumes were suggestive of Turkish and Middle Eastern attire.

The full set of clothes supported that image, as did the collection of hats - as I examined them, I saw similarities with Turkish and Middle Eastern styles, along with hints of the regional [herding culture](#) in items like the Black Persian Lamb hat.

As soon as I began to feel as though I had some grasp of an Armenian style, however, I was confronted by a painting that seemed to willfully negate my efforts to understand the underlying Armenian essence of these pieces. Done in bold, vibrant colors, it was almost entirely abstract except for the vague suggestion of three elongated heads floating in the center of the piece.

Unfamiliar with the region's painting traditions beyond my knowledge of Rabo Karabekian (Kurt Vonnegut's Armenian painter and protagonist in the novel [Bluebeard](#)), I was ready to add Armenia to my mental file of countries that had fully embraced abstraction until I turned to find the next three paintings, all works by Minas Avetisian. Avetisian's works were also born in a panoply of color, but these featured definite pictures of individuals, although they too favored a suggestion of over statement. Each was unique in color and tone, enriching the diversity of the exhibit, but bringing me no closer to a cohesive sense of Armenian style.

I thus arrived at the final piece, the kilim rug, and sat for a while in reflection. I cannot say that I have come to understand what it is that makes something "Armenian," but one need not necessarily understand to appreciate, and often, appreciation later leads to some level of understanding. At least, that is the hope of the folks at Springstep.

The "Roots and Riches of Armenia" exhibition runs until March 15, 2006. The Springstep Gallery is located at 98 George P. Hassett Drive in Medford. The Gallery is open during administrative hours (Monday through Friday, 8:30 a.m. - 6:00 p.m.), and evenings and weekends when other programs are in session. Admission to the gallery is free. For more information, visit www.springstep.org.