

THE IMAGE OF THE "CHAIR" IN THE CREATIVE LIFE OF GEVORG MSHETSI JAVRUSHYAN



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Abstract: In this research we have studied the pictorial features of "chair" as a main character and the semantic content of the image in painter, sculptor and designer Gevorg Mshetsi Javrushyan's three-dimensional, volumetric series of works named "Chairs". These unique collages created over different years predominate in his creative life (they are approximately 60), so they have a great role and importance in the context of studying and enlightening his art. Having a unique ideological and philosophical content, an interesting presentation of external form, they have received various interpretations. Each "Chair" has something to say, some message, which can be understood through the title mainly presented in the form of catchphrase or aphorism. The article refers to the depiction of the chair in the world and Armenian fine art, starting from its initial stage of the growth of importance. Through individual examples, comparative parallels are drawn between the similar works of the artist and those of other artists representing different artistic movements and cultural periods. Thus, this article aims to study this period of Gevorg Mshetsi's work, to present and illuminate it for art lovers and the scientific community, and, importantly, to do so in the context of Armenian and world fine art.

Keywords: Gevorg Mshetsi Javrushyan, chair, collage, three-dimensional work, catchphrase.

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Introduction

Gevorg Mshetsi Javrushyan (1958-2022), artist, sculptor, and designer, not so popular among scientific and art-loving circles and the wider society, has left a significant legacy that stands out for its original and engaging style and profound thematic and ideological substance. However, it should be noted that his legacy has not been studied and appraised at its true worth in Armenian fine art. It should be noted that the family archive contains approximately two dozen literary references to his work, but these are mostly informative or fleeting, more lyrical and emotionally charged publications in the press [1-6], rather than complex artistic analyses. There are no serious scientific studies of his work.

We can fill this gap with a comprehensive monograph, which will embrace his entire creative activity, along with all the stages of its formation, development, and establishment. However, in this article, we will refer to only one still significant and extensive part of his oeuvre.

It should be stated that the artist was limited to neither the choice of genre nor the theme or material during his creative activity, and he worked in various fine art spheres. However, Gevorg Mshetsi's large-scale collage series "Chairs" is particularly noteworthy, which embraces free thematic thinking typical of an artist, the perception of plasticity and dimensions characteristic of a sculptor, and the accurate artistic planning of ideas typical of a designer. The chair itself, by its form, plasticity, and as a base of creativity and a core idea, already occupies a significant place in the oeuvre of Gevorg Javrushyan. The fact that the series includes about 60 chairs is evidence of the above-mentioned. Each work is created, as a rule, directly on the base of a chair and/or on one or other fundamental part, in combination with other surfaces. The creative process is accompanied by an original presentation of a collage while synthesizing various things that are no longer suitable for use on the surface of a unique "born" chair. This is not just a mere combination of various subjects, not at all; even the smallest, insignificant detail in the composition has its sense, it has something to say, and it occupies its

irreplaceable and inviolable place carefully thought out and sought out by the artist. The permanent existence of things in the above-mentioned ideas and the fact of expressing what the artist wants to say in their language may be due to the fact that Javrushyan seemed to be constantly in an inner silent dialogue, in a close psychological relationship with the surrounding world, elements of nature, and also with the objects created by man and the reality created by these objects. Therefore, his inner connection with all this could not but occupy a certain place in his works through the language of the same things. This was the means through which Javrushyan tried to convey his thoughts, emotions, and feelings to the viewer, which he had experienced through his own world perception and which received an original interpretation: his inner turmoil and indignation, admiration and reverence, and sharp humor and sarcasm. This was, in fact, his original way of associating with the viewer on this or that phenomenon in the past, present, and sometimes also in the future. All of this is particularly aptly and eloquently presented in his comprehensive series.

In this article, the features of the artist's unique depiction of chair were analyzed from the artistic viewpoint, and a certain idea was highlighted through them. It was also interesting to consider various depictions of chair in world and Armenian fine art, their iconographic transformations in different cultural periods, as well as to refer to the comparative parallels between Javrushyanesque chairs and similar works of artists representing different art movements.

Materials and Methods

"There is a misconception that things around us are dumb.
Not at all. They can talk like us. All we need is to have
a desire to listen to their speech till the end"¹.
Gevorg Mshetsi Javrushyan

Such is the perception of an object, perhaps of no significance at first glance, in the works of artist, sculptor, and designer Gevorg Mshetsi Javrushyan.

The chair, as such, seems to be just a component of everyday life, a necessary piece of furniture. However, sometimes things surrounding us fascinate not only with their function but also with their shape and form; they are even a source of inspiration to develop an idea for an artwork of artistic value. This factor became particularly significant in fine art in the works of prominent representatives of world fine art of the 20th century, Van Gogh, Henri Matisse, Salvador Dali, Egon Schiele, and Andy Warhol, and this even became one of the signature details of the Bauhaus school. The chair went beyond the narrow limits of applicability and truly acquired an aesthetic value. Initially, it was depicted as a part of an interior, being juxtaposed with various things in it (table, rocking chair, tableware, bed, and other elements of furniture) (Figs. 1-3). In this regard, not so much the chair but the entire interior, mood, and atmosphere were generally highlighted. This, of course, was also contributed to by the selected color, the chiaroscuro interplay conditioned by the author's state of mind, the season of the year, and the instants of the day.

Sometimes a chair served as a support for a still life, playing the role of a table. In this case, its incorporation into the picture had a dual use: it served only as a mere surface carrying the still life on one hand, where it appeared only with reliable descriptions of the material and formal aspects, or with an interesting stylistic interpretation (Figs. 4-6). On the other hand, it also entered into a direct dialogue with this or that symbolic object placed on it, hung on it, or wrapped around it (Figs. 7-9).

In the case of the second version, the chair took on a dominant role, becoming the protagonist of the work and an irreplaceable actor, thus forming the idea and the concept itself. Here, the key idea is that every object created by human beings carries an immaterial stamp of the phenomenon of human memory. Personal life perceptions, emotions, and feelings are at the roots of this pictorial alternative and allegorical thinking.

¹ From the artist's notes kept in the family archive.

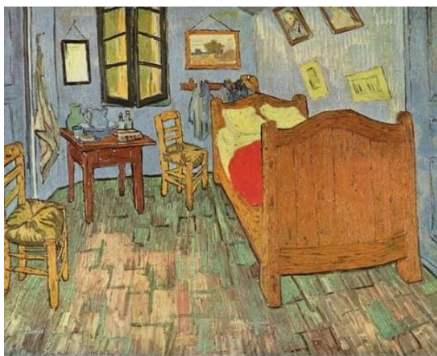


Fig. 1. Van Gogh,
Bedroom in Arles, 1889



Fig. 2. Egon Schiele, *My Room in Neulengbach*, 1911



Fig. 3. Andy Warhol,
Living room, 1948



Fig. 4. Henri Matisse,
Chair, 1919



Fig. 5. Atanas
Matsoureff (untitled)



Fig. 6. Hagop Hagopian,
Still life, 1961

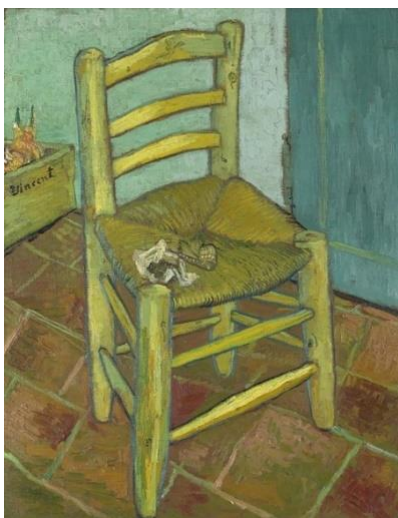


Fig. 7. Van Gogh, *Vincent's chair with his pipe*, 1988



Fig. 8. Hagop Hagopian,
Memory, 1974-1975

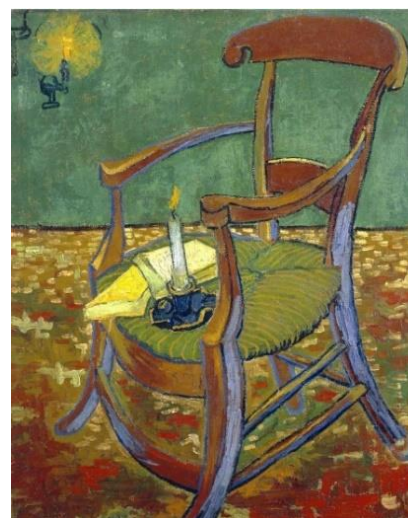


Fig. 9. Van Gogh,
Gauguin's Armchair, 1988

The chair in this case sometimes acts as a symbol of inner emptiness, loneliness, and abandonment of a man, and sometimes as a symbol of expectation and introspection. It is often vivified; it embodies the origins of human existence, the absence of a human being, or, on the contrary, its paradoxical presence. This is especially obvious in the "chairs" painted by Van Gogh (Figs. 7,9). The temperaments of the two artists, Van Gogh and Paul Gauguin, are presented in an allegorical style, which soon were often to be in conflict and led

to arguments². Again, each selected object (chair, mannequin, coat, glove...) in the paintings of Hagop Hagopian, one of the peculiar representatives of Armenian fine art of the 20th century, is an expression of the artist's contemplative feelings, human relationships, love and struggle, life and death, a response to the diverse phenomena in the world, and an expression of his and the environment's state of mind in its own way (Fig.8) [7]. Thus, among a number of artists, the chair itself begins to carry more often the semantic and ideological background of the idea, to be perceived as the main leitmotif of the work, around which the idea would unfold, the content, which itself would prompt and dictate the thematic substance of the work. Therefore, this component of furniture gradually ceases to be of an auxiliary nature in art and is already considered within the thematic compositional genre. In addition, the depiction of this object is so prioritized that artists begin to present it also within the complete series. In this context, the works of Giacomo Mantzu (Fig.10), Ashot Baghdasaryan (Fig.11), Ruben Arutchyan (Fig.12), and Artur Sharafyan (Fig.13), should be highlighted.

In the sculpture work "Tebe Che Cade" (Falling Thebes) (Fig.10) by Italian sculptor Giacomo Manzù, which has only one point of support, where the dynamism of the composition solution and the realistic solution of the figure are harmoniously combined, the instant seems to be literally stopped³. And the interview of Armenian artists R. Arutchyan and A. Baghdasaryan on the exhibition titled "Creation of Chair," which opened in 2018 at the Russian-Armenian (Slavonic) University, unfolds A. Baghdasaryan's fascination with the chair as an object of depiction with its two dimensions: horizontal, on which one can sit, and vertical, the back, which allows the sculptor, using the horizontal surface, to make the vertical dimension serve as a background.

The chair for R. Arutchyan, as he himself notes, is a fundamental concept, a base, which allows the sitting person to even reveal his/her own personality⁴. It should be noted that Arutchyan's works are generally endowed with inner motion. As the art critic Armen Gasparyan wrote, Arutchyan categorically rejects the state of immobility, and in the ordinary material world the artist creates mood and speech beyond the mere demonstration of material objects [8]. In the paintings of contemporary artist Artur Sharafyan, the chair appears again as the main leitmotif of the artistic piece of "work". As the artist himself states, the character becomes a chair and gives the audience more reason to think⁵.

Noteworthy is also the 12-meter monumental sculpture "Broken Chair" (Fig.14) by Daniel Berset, erected in front of the European headquarters of the UN in Geneva, Switzerland. It is an allegorical embodiment of the collective image of those who lost their limbs due to infantry bullets and a substantive objection to their application. In contrast to such a dramatic, sensual depiction of a chair (a similar interpretation is also found in Gevorg



Fig. 10. Giacomo Mantzu, *Tebe Che Cade*, 1983

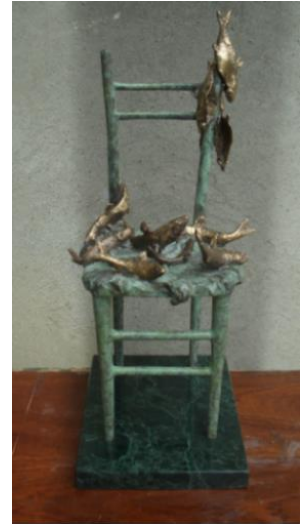


Fig. 11. Ashot Baghdasaryan, *Struggle for existence*, 2012



Fig. 12. Ruben Arutchyan, *From the series "Chair"*, 1997

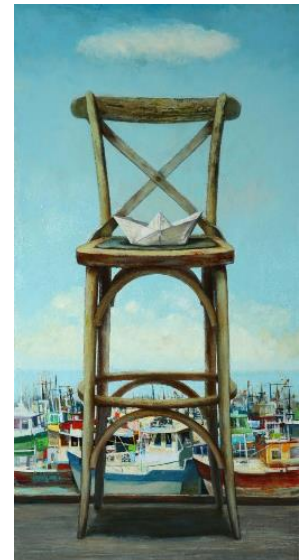


Fig. 13. Artur Sharafyan, *Dream*, 2024

² Masterpieces from the Van Gogh Museum. Museum of Van Gogh, Amsterdam, 2011.

³ <https://izi.travel/ru/9d4f-dzhakomo-mancu-padayuschaya-tebe-1983/ru>

⁴ <https://www.golosarmenii.am/article/72503/eto-stul—ego-tvoryat>

⁵ <https://surl.lu/yyxqfm>

Mshetsi's "Veteran" chair (Fig.15)), its presentation in "The Wassily" chair by Hungarian designer and architect Marcel Breuer, representative of the Bauhaus, is quite different (Fig.16). Here, where the artist was inspired by the bicycle frame, not the content, but the original, stylistic presentation of the chair is highlighted. Salvador Dali's "Chair" (Fig.17) stands out for its amusing, humorous, even funny interpretation of this piece of furniture as an ideological axis of perception, where the artist applied the principle of using an optical binocular, the stereoscope. It is based on human binocular vision. In the case of both the device (binocular) and Dali's work, we are dealing with two parts of the same scene, taken from slightly different observation points, each of which is meant for a specific eye; however, when looking through a stereoscope, the image appears dimensional to the viewer. It turns out that a simple image externally viewed on a flat surface can surprisingly also be viewed in a three-dimensional format.

Next to the above-mentioned artists and sculptors who have adopted various artistic concepts, it is noteworthy to consider Gevorg Mshetsi's collage series "Chairs", which was exhibited for the first time in 2016 at the Artists' Union of Armenia within the framework of his solo exhibition "Timextimextime" (15 collage-chairs of the collection, including around 60 items, are now on permanent display in the Dilijan Geological Museum Gallery). Note that the mentioned artists form the chair itself with painting and sculptural materials, with color, bronze, and wood. In Javrushyan's chairs, the base is the chair itself or any distinctly recognizable part of it. The fact that the Javrushianesque chairs are presented in the form of collages allows us to single out this series of his, to study the peculiarities of its formation, to analyze the content structure, and to view it in the context of both Armenian and world fine art. It should be noted that Javrushyan personally knew Sergey Parajanov and was in touch with the greatest artist of collage, who greatly encouraged him [1].

The material used in the ideas of Gevorg Mshetsi is a wonderful means of self-expression and self-discovery [2]. Therefore, both in this and other dimensional works, to deliver his message to the viewer as accurately and eloquently as possible, Javrushyan juxtaposes various materials, things that have been forgotten and have lost their functional properties, that are simply thrown away; nevertheless, their usage in the composition is thought out and logical. In this way, he makes the idea more alive, direct, and dynamic; makes it more emotional; makes the viewer-creation dialogue easy and effective on one hand; and breathes new life into the used household items and moves them to another aspect of the spiritual value system on the other hand. As Mshetsi himself admits in one of the interviews, there are many abandoned objects next to us; however, each of them has its own biography, many of them seem to dictate, become a guide for their preferred role, and he is only in the role of a mediator to breathe new life into them [3]. Moreover, as Ara Hovhannisyan states, the artist is not fascinated by the external beauty of the objects but penetrates inside them with acuity, highlighting the content and the inner essence [4]. These Javrushyanesque experimental tricks, free creative thinking, profound philosophical and symbolic interpretations resulted in the creation of unique works with a mysterious content and unrevealed sense, which, as a rule, need interpretation.



Fig. 14. Daniel Berset, *Broken Chair*, 1997



Fig. 15. Gevorg Mshetsi, Javrushyan, *The Veteran chair*



Fig. 16. Marcel Breuer, *The Wassily chair, or the Model B3 chair*, 1925-1926



Fig. 17. Salvador Dali, *The chair*, 1975

To become associated with their content, it is necessary to use one's own analytical and even research arsenal and one's own cognitive potential and capacity to find the key that will guide towards the discovery of the artist's message. Basically, the "key" is the title of the work, which sometimes appears in the form of an aphorism or a catchphrase and sometimes in the form of a phrase taken from a proverb or an idiom. For example, those mentioned above (Figs. 18-21) have titles based on literary works of G. Aghayan (Fig.18), H. Tumanian (Figs. 19,20), and A. Khnkoyan (Fig.21), on the catchphrases that have originated in those works. In the first chair, we visually see the unhappy Aghayanesque pulley wheel; in the second one, the spoons and ladles of hunters who have not tasted anything from the bowl in the story of False Hunt described in Tumanian's fairy tale. In the other one, the Tumanianesque ruler-stick "measuring" human height is striving for the small purse with banknotes on the base of the footwear. And in the last one, the key substance of A. Khnkoyan's fable "The Frog and the Crow", we see the "bare" water. Javarushyan's frequent references to proverbs and adages may be due to the fact that, as Ph.D. Professor Valery Mirzoyan states, a proverb or saying plays the role of a moral norm: it instructs, exhorts, warns, forbids, imposes...⁶ And Gevorg Mshetsi did exactly the same thing in his chairs; again, he admonished and reprimanded through conventions and tried to educate in this way. As we read in one of the artist's notes, "Most of my works are "ideograms", are interesting at first glance, and still they are also unclear, unexplained, and undeciphered." On his unique creative path, while working on each piece of the collection, the artist used metal objects turned into production waste, including iron bowls, pipes, taps, spoons, ladles, baskets, pulleys, mechanical counters, chess pieces, badges, banknotes, lower limbs of mannequins, water heaters, horns, mechanisms of various electrical devices, meat grinders, glassware, piano keys, parts of a guitar and trumpet, easels, and signboards—that is, everything that would help the artist to express this or that idea. Moreover, the artist would not consider the work finished until he had found this or that detail, even a small one, that was so necessary for his composition. In this respect, for an artist who has brushed numerous paintings, it was much more difficult to turn a three-dimensional voluminous work, created like a collage, from a sketch into a thought-out three-dimensional image than if it was done merely as a "picture". The issue is that if you can depict what you want to depict with the painting materials at hand—the brush and the color—while working on a painting, then you cannot do the same when working on this kind of work. In this case, first of all, you need to search and find the necessary materials to create the form of the composition, where the most improbable object, which is the most difficult to find, may serve for it. This process often required a long period of time; the sketch of the idea found on paper or the chair based on it could remain unfinished in the small house-studio for years until the specific detail required for the specific part of the work was found. This is also the reason why Mshetsi worked on this series for about 30 years.



Fig. 18. Gevorg Mshetsi Javrushyan, Pulley, pulley, my wheel



Fig. 19. Gevorg Mshetsi Javrushyan, The chair without a seat, or The false hunt



Fig. 20. Gevorg Mshetsi Javrushyan, The purse of money raises human height



Fig. 21. Gevorg Mshetsi Javrushyan, Till the water comes, the frog's eye will get out

⁶ <https://surli.cc/tontkx>

Chairs that raise social issues and have a political connotation reflect the artist's original style, as well as his wide scope of creativity. Making the visible or invisible sides sharper and depicting the phenomena of reality grotesquely, Javrushyan presents the reality to the public, which is mysterious and extremely conventional on one hand and terribly "bare", undisguised, on the other hand. As the artist's notes preserved in the family archive read, "Life is reflected so clearly and so obviously in my works that one can be disgusted with our days, our reality." Similar "Chairs" (Figs. 22-24) are usually of a sharp critical nature and sometimes bear a satirical and sarcastic tone, condemning lies, falsehood, injustice, lawlessness, human greed, stinginess, and servility.

On one hand, according to him, the vocation of an artist is to tell the truth, and the works are created according to the dictates of time⁷, and on the other hand, the artist is a struggling, intolerant, patriotic, and suffering personality who treats many phenomena with humor, sometimes with sarcasm [5]. Another important fact should be considered as well: Gevorg Mshetsi was a great advocate and fan of the literary activity of Ler Kamsar, a famous writer and satirist; he did the illustrations of the author's books, as Kamsar's granddaughter, Vanuhi Tovmasyan, describes, and was truly devoted to Kamsar. If Ler Kamsar exposed the negative, unhealthy realities of Soviet society through his literary works, Javrushyan instead did it mainly through his graphic works, especially sculptural, large-scale compositions. For example, in the case of the "Stair by Stair" chair (Fig.22), it is symbolically shown how, during the years of the Cult of Personality, by walking up the stairs with the appropriate signboards, "overcoming" the subordinate positions indicated by the instructions, one could take the position of the highest leader. Through another chair (Fig.23), he plays on words, taking the stem of the word "campaign" and mocking the pre-election campaign, which seems to remind him of horse races: to make every possible trick, to make ingenious chess moves, to place the maximum bet, so that one's own fictitious "throne" reaches the place first by dragging it. The chair "Press" (Fig.24) is about the right to freedom of speech, which is constantly limited, unfree, and "bound". If these Javrushyanesque chairs referred to Soviet mores and dictatorial regime, then we see the reflection of internal political realities of the independent, sovereign Republic of Armenia in the graphic artworks "The Throne" and "March, 2008" (Fig.25) of Sergey Narazyan. In these works, the protagonist is once again the chair, and to highlight the supremacy of its sense, the artist depicts it quite large in both artworks.

When starting a new work, Gevorg Javrushyan applied new forms of plasticity expression, implemented new techniques in art, and made use of the capacity of the chosen material in a new way. Biographical chairs are also of great interest, which, as a rule, highlight the fact that Gevorg Mshetsi is an artist.



Fig. 22. Gevorg Mshetsi, Stair by Stair or Keep cleanness, close the door



Fig. 23. Gevorg Mshetsi, Election campaign



Fig. 24. Gevorg Mshetsi, The Press

⁷ <https://surl.li/ypttcu>

In the work "My Chair" (Fig.26), we see the crown of thorns of Christ's crucifixion hanging on the easel on one side and the wreath symbolizing "The Lord's Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem" on the other side. This suggests the bond of creation existing between the mission of the artist and Christ: that is, to make, to create eternal life and truth in the world, and to enlighten the human heart and soul consciously at the cost of one's own life. Along with all the differences in art issues, we also see some similarity with the Biblical figure in the "Self-Portrait", attributed to 1994 (Fig.27) of artist-architect Albert Sokhikyan, which again alludes to seeing one's self in the context of an "artist-creator", the artist's conviction to perceive his existence as a mission [9]. In the case of the other chair (Fig.28), Javrushyan's position that the metal legs of the artist's travel case are legs for the artist and the palette is the back and the support is quite clear. He even incorporated into the composition a vegetable grater for the artist to be constantly alert and vigilant. The chair "Objective" (Fig.29) is close to Parajanov's aesthetics in its original depiction and is worth special attention in Mshetsi's "Chairs" series. There are small and big parts of mirrors in the composition. Their use in the concept also makes the viewer who tries to get acquainted with his art and accidentally finds himself in the reflection of the mirror obviously become a participant. This contributes to the completeness of the composition. One of Javrushyan's articles related to these works, including a mirror, reads, "Presence of a human with its entire spiritual and emotional world, along with the evil and the good in it, not only within the collage done by the artist, but also outside it when catching the gaze of each staring individual" [6]. In the same article, parallels are also drawn with the phenomenon in the theater when the actor, being among the audience, eliminates the border between the audience and the stage, enters into a unique dialogue with the audience, and makes them be part of the actions on the stage. The work becomes complete with the accordion attached to the lower part of the chair, through which we see photos of known and unknown people representing different times and realities behind the glass of the small box formed by it—people who may have played a significant role in the artist's life.



Fig. 25. Sergey Narazyan, March 2008, From series "Dreams of Yerevan", 2021



Fig. 26. My chair



Fig. 27. Albert Sokhikyan, Self-Portrait, 1994



Fig. 28. Chagall, Beatrice and Me



Fig. 29. The Chair Objective

One can endlessly speak about Gevorg Mshetsi's unique collage-chair comprehensive series, trying to bring out and analyze the artist's philosophical thoughts and ideological messages and to study the artistic and plastic means of each work that he has used to achieve maximum expressiveness. In this way, we automatically become associated with his rich artistic arsenal, which summarizes Javrushyanesque critical thinking about various realities of spatial and temporal coexistence, his exhortations, or simply his witty humor filled with sarcasm. Therefore, in this research, we have sought to present this original series of Javrushyan, which has not been fully illuminated or properly appreciated in the art-loving community, particularly among scientific circles, with all its manifestations as comprehensively and concisely as possible.

Results and Discussion

Indeed, it can be stated that such an interesting Javrushyanesque series of collage chairs, born during the 30 years of his creative activity, is an original reflection of the artist's thoughts and feelings. However, each exemplar was developed and depicted in detail not only based on his sensory impulses, impressions, feelings, memories, and their traces imprinted in the human consciousness but also those of human beings in general, formed as a result of association with their own inner world and external environment. Therefore, Mshetsi seems in this way to ingeniously try to return the sense and meaning of the surrounding world to the human being, sometimes seasoning them with subtle satirical and sarcastic episodes and sometimes even developing human dramas. It is clear that this period of creativity of this artist-intellectual endowed with an original worldview and imaginative leaps proceeded consistently, restlessly, and swiftly.

Conclusion

Thus, artists have always been interested in the depiction of chairs, and they have repeatedly found their place in their paintings, graphic and sculptural works. We can often see pictures of chairs in the works of both Armenian and foreign artists, even up to the present day. However, while compared with the chairs of artists representing world fine art, Gevorg Javrushyan's chairs are distinguished by their manner of execution and the innovative use of technical skills; they are done according to the logic of collage, when each necessary component is an integral part of the complete picture and is fixed on the priming not at will, but thought out in advance and put in its exact place. They are thought out mostly within the thematic thinking, have a great emotional impulse, and are saturated with allegories, conventional, symbolic, and even surrealistic elements, which gives them an obvious philosophical tone. In addition, the chairs of the series are as similar as they are different in their plasticity forms, performance, and interesting presentation. They seem to be the "evidence" of the reality that breathed new life into the artist's oeuvre. Owing especially to these chairs, Javrushyan's creative path acquired its clearly recognizable "form" in the sphere of fine art.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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