

God Given: Cultural Treasures of Armenia

Teacher's Guide **An Introduction to the Work and Life of Norik Astvatsaturov**



(Image courtesy of Robb Siverson Copyright © 2010)

“*Gates of Knowledge*, brass repoussé artwork by Norik Astvatsaturov. In this ‘Gate Page,’ the artist wanted to honor the original 36 characters of the Armenian alphabet. Generations-old Armenian Bibles and other books are written with the Armenian alphabet, which is not Latin, Greek, or Cyrillic. It is completely unique. Norik opines, ‘Many of the ‘Great Books,’ lost when the Great Library of Egypt in Alexandria burned, still survive in ancient libraries in Armenia. They are written with the Armenian alphabet and need to be translated.’ Bordering the alphabet are two lions, flowers, bulls representing power, and birds like peacocks (top right) representing beauty and a crane (top left) representing the home because cranes return year after year to the same tree to nest. Cranes also represent children. The trees, to the left, are ‘bread trees,’ the trees that fed Moses’ people as they wandered the desert.... The elaborate and intricate ornamentation at the top is Arabic influenced.” (Geist, Troyd A., *God Given: Cultural Treasures of Armenia*. Fargo: Spirit Room Gallery, 2010.)

Developed by Susan Eleuterio with assistance from Linda Ehreth and Troyd Geist
(Copyright © 2010 North Dakota Council on the Arts)

Introduction

This teacher's guide is designed to accompany the documentary *God Given: Cultural Treasures of Armenia*. Produced by the North Dakota Council on the Arts, Prairie Public Broadcasting and the Spirit Room Gallery, this documentary will introduce your students to the art, history, culture and talent of Norik Astvatsaturov, an award winning metal repoussé artist who now lives in North Dakota.

Overview

“The artistry and life experiences of Norik Astvatsaturov reflect in microcosm the history and culture of Armenia. Armenia is an ancient country in Eurasia's mountainous Transcaucasian region within an area often referred to as the ‘Cradle of Civilization.’ Situated between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, it was part of a fabled trade route, the Great Silk Road.... Rich in precious stones and ores like iron, copper, gold and silver, the area lies at the heart of a regional tradition of metallurgy and stone carving going back 4,000 years when Armenian artisans were sent to Greece and Rome.... Because of its position as a crossroads between East and West, Christian and Muslim, Armenia's existence is marked throughout by turbulent occupation and persecution stemming, in part, from cultural and religious intolerance.... Generations of foreign occupation, religious strife, and communism forced the art, symbolism used, and meaning conveyed to be subtle and hidden from the view of those outside the culture but easily understood and held meaningful by those within the culture...

[Norik Astvatsaturov was born in the city of Baku in 1947, which was then under the control of the Soviet Union as an enclave formerly cut from Armenia but at the time within the Soviet republic of Azerbaijan. It is here he recounts,] ‘I learned to carve wood and stone, using traditional designs that my father's father would bring back after traveling to different villages via donkey cart. My father also brought stones for me to carve. Traditional art was always around me. Then when I was about twenty years old, I learned metal repoussé from an old Armenian artisan in Baku named Goga. He taught me all the old techniques: how to work both sides of the metal to create depth, volume and detail using nothing but a hammer and nail punch: how to read different kinds of metal-gold, silver, bronze, copper, how to polish and affect the color with just sand and water. Everything is done by hand’....

In 301 AD, Armenia adopted Christianity as its official religion with the formation of the world's oldest national church, the Armenian Apostolic Church.... Norik states, ‘Whenever we lost independence, it was the Armenian Church that held us together as a people... Christian symbolism is often used in our art, but not necessarily because we are very religious. But because it is our symbol of resistance much like the Catholic Church was for Poland's Solidarity Movement in its struggle against the Soviet Union.’

Carved stone crosses called *khachkars* are found throughout Armenia that commemorate important places and events. These *khachkars* often include wing-like designs at their base that denote ‘holiness’ or ‘flying.’ These ancient works of art date back to stone monoliths used in pre-Christian religious ceremonies. Today metal *khachkars* are made to commemorate churches, geographic features historical events and people and in prayer as a request for good health. In addition to crosses, Norik's art includes ancient motifs and symbols such as suns, dragons, fish, mountains, and

flowers, a result of Armenia's position as a crossroads of geography, culture and religion. In Norik's work, one notices influences from Syria to Persia (Iran), to Byzantium, from the Western world including ancient Greece and Rome to the USSR, from pre-Christian religions to Christianity to Islam." (Interviews with Norik and Troyd Geist, *God Given: Cultural Treasures of Armenia*, Fargo: Spirit Room Gallery, 2010.)

Note to Teachers:

Lesson 1 should be used before viewing the documentary, Lessons 2 and 3 are designed to be used when you show the documentary to your students and Lesson 4 is designed to be used after the documentary has been viewed.

Grade Level Focus:

High School



Norik working on the details of an icon. (Troyd Geist, North Dakota Council on the Arts © 2009)

Connections with North Dakota Arts Grades 9-12 Standards and Benchmarks

Visual Arts*

Standard 1: Visual Art Media, Techniques, and Processes

Students understand and apply media, techniques and processes.

12.1.1 Understand how to create works of visual art that communicate an idea in one or more visual art media.

Standard 2: Structure and Function

Students understand how works of art are structured and how visual art has a variety of functions.

12.2.1 Understand how the visual structures and functions accomplish personal, commercial, societal, or other art intentions.

12.2.2 Understand what makes various visual art organizational structures effective or ineffective in the communication of ideas.

Standard 3: Subject matter, Themes, Symbols and Ideas in Visual Art

Students know a range of subject matter, symbols, and ideas.

12.3.1 Understand how to interpret, integrate, and apply subjects, symbols, themes, and ideas into their work of art.

Standard 4: Visual Art, History and Culture

Students understand the visual arts in relation to history and culture.

12.4.1 Understand works of art among a variety of historical and cultural contexts in terms of characteristics, functions, and purposes of visual art.

12.4.2 Understand relationships among works of art in terms of history, aesthetics, and culture.

Standard 5: Merits of Works of Visual Art

Students understand the characteristics and merit of one's own work of art and the works of art of others.

12.5.1 12.5.2 12.5.3 Understand the possible intentions of those creating works of art. Understand how specific works of art are created and how they relate to historical and cultural contexts. Understand how one's own work of art has purpose and meaning.

Standard 6: Connections

Students make connections between the visual arts and other disciplines.

12.6.1 Understand and compare the similarities between visual art and other art disciplines (performing arts, literature, practical arts) that share common themes, historical periods, and cultural context.

12.6.2 Understand and compare the relationship between the visual arts and other disciplines in the curriculum.

***Please note:** Visual Arts Standards are not grade specific.

English Language Arts

Standard 1: *Students engage in the research process*

Benchmark Expectations

Organizing Research Information

9.1.5 Organize information from a variety of sources: eg. Chronological

9.1.6 Summarize information

9.1.8 Use primary and secondary sources

Standard 2: *Students engage in the reading process*

Benchmark Expectations

Literary Genres

9.2.7 Access prior knowledge to interpret meaning

9.2.8 Read for a variety of purposes

9.2.11 Identify universal themes

9.2.14 Use decoding/encoding, connotation and denotation

Standard 3: *Students engage in the writing process*

Benchmark Expectations

9.3.7 Organize and write compositions for self and family

9.3.8 Use supporting details

Standard 4: *Students engage in the speaking and listening process*

Benchmark Expectations

Conversation, Group Discussion and Oral Presentation

9.4.4 Engage in a group discussion

9.4.5 Use critical listening skills, i.e., reflection

Standard 5: *Students understand media*

Benchmark Expectations

12.5.2 Using Media for a Purpose

Create a media project for a purpose

Standard 6: *Students understand and use principles of language*

Benchmark Expectations

Literary Elements and Techniques

9.6.4 Identify idiomatic language and figurative language, i.e., allusion, analogy, hyperbole, irony, personification, oxymoron, and paradox

9.6.6 Interpret symbolism

Social Studies

Standard 1: *Students apply Social Studies skills and resources.*

Resources 8.1.2 Use various primary and secondary resources (e.g., historical maps, diaries, speeches, pictures, charts, graphs, diagrams, time lines specific to North Dakota) to analyze, and interpret information.

Research Processes 9–12.1.4 *Draw conclusions based on the research processes* (e.g., collect, organize, evaluate, and synthesize information)

Use media (e.g., oral, written, websites, computer simulations, multimedia resources) to access, record, analyze, and communicate information relating to social studies

Standard 5: *Students understand and apply concepts of geography*

Human Geography Achievement Descriptors 9–12.5.1 *Analyze the Earth's human systems* (e.g., population, culture, settlement, economic interdependence)

Interpret the relationships between physical environments and society (e.g., humans modify environment, environment modifies society, and use, distribution, and importance of resources)

Standard 6: *Students understand the importance of culture, individual identity, and group identity.*

9-12.6.2 *Explain the various purposes of social groups, general implications of group membership, and different ways that groups function* (e.g., minority groups, cliques, counterculture, family relations and political groups)

9-12.6.4 *Analyze conflict, cooperation, and interdependence among individuals, groups, and institutions* (e.g., gender roles, social stratification, racial/ethnic bias)

Objectives

- 1) To introduce students to the physical and cultural area known as the “Cradle of Civilization” (Film and Overview)
- 2) To help students make connections between political and cultural events which lead to individuals becoming refugees in North Dakota (Film)
- 3) To introduce symbols, techniques, and beliefs used by Norik Astvatsaturov in his metalwork and art (Film, Overview)
- 4) To help students compare and contrast symbols used in Norik’s work and in their own lives and cultures through drawing, reading, and writing (Lessons 1 and 4)
- 5) To help students make connections between human behavior and the physical, cultural and social environments by studying Norik’s life and their own families (Lessons 3 and 4)

Outcomes

- 1) Students will be able to identify the region known as “The Cradle of Civilization” on a world map; and to create a Google map showing the journey and reasons for each move Norik Astvatsaturov made from Baku to North Dakota (Lessons 1 and 3)
- 2) Students will be able to list three of the cultural influences on Norik Astvatsaturov’s art by drawing or describing three symbols and explaining their meaning and use in Armenian culture (Lesson 2)
- 3) Students will be able to describe three techniques and tools used in metal repoussé (Lesson 2)
- 4) Students will identify symbols and/or types of art used in their own lives which are also used in Norik’s work and make a comparison between the meaning and purpose of the symbols, the materials used, and the function of the art including storytelling (Lesson 1 and 4)
- 5) Students will create a map of Norik’s journey and that of their own families using Google maps (Lessons 3 and 4)

Pre-Documentary Lesson Plan

Lesson 1

Goal: Introduction to geography, history of region, art, culture, symbols of Armenia

Time Needed: 1 classroom period

Directions:

- 1) Have students read *Overview* and section on Armenia on Norik's website
<http://www.artbynorik.com/Armenia.htm>
- 2) Show students Google map link
<http://maps.google.com/maps/ms?f=q&source=s_q&hl=en&geocode=&doflg=ptk&ie=UTF8&hq=&hnear=Ozero+Baku-G%C3%AB1%E2%80%99&msa=0&msid=118445419613170737453.00047fa90d3f57173192d&ll=57.704147,-44.296875&spn=96.030685,316.054688&z=2&iwloc=00047fa926e90cab33ba3>
- 3) Ask students to discuss or respond in writing to these questions:

What similarities do you see between Armenia and North Dakota?

How are important places and events commemorated physically in North Dakota? How are these commemorative pieces similar to the *khachkars*? Have you noticed any similarity in the types of material or designs used in North Dakota commemorative pieces? What cultures impacted Armenia?

What are some cultures which have impacted North Dakota culture?

What symbols have you seen from those cultures?

- 4) Show students this image of Norik's work:



Copper repoussé by Norik Astvatsaturov titled Aghtamar. (Dan Koeck; North Dakota Council on the Arts © circa 1995)

Before reading the story below, ask students to identify the symbols they see in the picture and to write a paragraph interpreting the images as a story.

Then have a student read this story.

“[This copper repoussé is based on an ancient Armenian folk story. Long ago there was a devout woman, Tamar,] who loved a man who lived on the other side of Lake Van along Mount Ararat, in what is now Turkey. The woman would hold a metal bowl with fire in it as a beacon in the night. [The three flames represent the Trinity.] The man, following the three flames, would swim across the lake to visit his love. This continued for some time. One night, as the man was swimming toward his love, a witch caused the wind to blow. The woman’s flames were extinguished, the waves overtook the man, [he sighed, ‘Ah, Tamar’ and drowned, hence *Aghtamar*.] The woman was so distraught that she lost faith in the Church ... symbolized by her turning away from the church in the background. *Aghtamar* also refers to a church in Armenia that takes its name from the woman in this legend.” (Troyd Geist, *Faces of Identity, Hands of Skill*, Bismarck, ND: North Dakota Council on the Arts, 1995.)

5) Ask students to compare their story to the Armenian story. Have them answer these questions in writing.

How close was your story to the folk tale this piece is based on? What stories do you know which incorporate the number “three”? How might this story be a symbol of the conflicts which have taken place in Armenia?



German silver repoussé work by Norik Astvatsaturov in process. It shows the top of a jewelry box. (Troyd Geist, North Dakota Council on the Arts © 2005)

Lessons for use while showing students the documentary (Lessons 2 and 3)

Goals:

To examine ethnic conflict and its impact on citizens

To examine how the symbols have been used over time (look for the cross in the photo of fighters)
look at symbolism of the work Norik has made in the US (Mary as a refugee)

To identify techniques of repoussé

Time Needed: 1-2 classroom periods (including showing the documentary)

Lesson 2 –Symbolism and Technique

Symbols

Norik notes that Christian symbols were used by Armenians as a sign of resistance to groups which conquered Armenia. Groups in America have used symbols as a sign of resistance to those in power or belonging-for instance, the rattlesnake was used by colonial Americans as a sign against the British, slaves used symbols to indicate the Underground Railroad, and a closed fist was used by antiwar groups and the Black Panther movement in the 60s.

Directions

- 1) Before starting the film, give students an index card. During the film, have students keep a list of symbols they see in Norik's art and in other photographs or images in the documentary.
- 2) On the back side of the card, have students list the techniques they see Norik using in creating his art.
- 3) Put students into teams and have each team list the symbols and techniques they saw in the documentary. Next to each symbol they should list the cultural influences they see, and how this symbol might function as a sign of cultural resistance.
- 4) For each technique, they should explain how the technique creates the final piece of art.
- 5) Teams present their findings.

Lesson 3- Refugees

Norik briefly describes in the film his family's experience of becoming refugees, leaving their home and eventually being settled in North Dakota.

- 1) Show students this film "**Ethnic Armenians**"- includes a video of young man in a refugee camp in Azerbaijan
<http://www.unhcr.org/3eb93e184.html>

- 2) Create a Google Map (www.maps.google.com) showing where Norik and his family moved during the film . Divide students into four groups and have each group write a description for their portion of the map of the time and place in Norik's life . Students should research the political and historical events of each era in Armenia, Azerbaijan or North Dakota.

For each era, the team should create a symbol based on Norik's work that would represent the political, cultural and historical events of that time.

Era 1 1947-1967 Born and raised in Baku

Era 2 1967-1989 Baku-official government Repoussé artist and secretly made Armenian art

Era 3 1989-fled to Yerevan, Armenia, then Moscow, became refugee

Era 4 1992-Arrived in North Dakota; became machinist and revived his art form



Norik working on a piece of metal. (Troyd Geist, North Dakota Council on the Arts © 2009)

Post-Documentary Lesson 4

Goals:

To help students connect Norik's journey to North Dakota with the journey their families made to North Dakota

To have students make connections between the use of symbolism in Norik's work and contemporary uses of symbolism in their lives and communities

Time Needed: 1 classroom period (can be done as homework assignment)

Activity 1- Create a Google Map of the route your family took to North Dakota. Go back at least three-four generations-if you don't know specific places, you can use general places such as "Germany." If you don't have that information, pick a group from your community who came to North Dakota from somewhere else and make a map of their journey.

Directions for students:

- 1) Make a list of all the places your family has lived going back to your great-grandparents' generation.
- 2) Go to <http://maps.google.com>
- 3) Then go to "My Maps"
- 3) Follow the directions (you will have to create a Google mail account)
- 4) Mark the map *private*, give it a title, and a description
- 5) Type in the first location you want to use in the box next to "search maps" . Keep adding locations (don't forget to "save") – then you can print out the map or ask your teacher to print it.

Activity 2- Symbolism. Ask students to write answers to these questions:

- 1) List three cultures which influenced Norik's work along with a sketch of a symbol from each culture.
- 2) Which of these symbols could you find in your own home or community? What are they used for in your family, culture or community? (create a sense of belonging, identify beliefs, promote patriotism or school spirit, mark significant events)
- 3) If you had to leave home quickly, what symbols would you take with you? If you had to start over again in a new place, what symbols would make you feel at home?
- 4) Norik says, "Many people don't realize the greatness of this country. It is strong, democratic and free. There is something special about the spirit of America." What symbols do we use to express those concepts of strength, democracy and freedom?

Evaluation

- 1) Students will be able to identify the region known as the “Cradle of Civilization” on a world map; and to create a Google map showing the journey and reasons for each move Norik Astvatsaturov made from Baku to North Dakota
- 2) Students will be able to list three of the cultural influences on Norik Astvatsaturov’s art by drawing or describing three symbols and explaining their meaning and use in Armenian culture
- 3) Students will be able to describe three techniques used in metal repoussé
- 4) Students will identify symbols and or types of art used in their own lives to those used in Norik’s work and make a comparison between the meaning and purpose of the symbols, the materials used, and the function of the art.



Norik working on a copper icon. (Troyd Geist, North Dakota Council on the Arts © 2009)

Resources

Norik Astvatsaturov's Website

<http://www.artbynorik.com/>

Google maps www.maps.google.com

North Dakota Council on the Arts Folk Arts Program

For more information, contact Troyd Geist at (701) 328-7591 or tgeist@nd.gov.

Geist, Troyd, A. *Faces of Identity, Hands of Skill: Folk Arts in North Dakota*. Bismarck, ND: North Dakota Council on the Arts, 1995. Phone #701-328-7590 or www.nd.gov/arts

Geist, Troyd, A. *God Given: Cultural Treasures of Armenia*. Fargo: Spirit Room Gallery, 2010. Spirit Room Phone #701-237-0230 or www.spiritroom.net or email spirit@ideaone.net

Arts in Education Grants for Teachers and Schools

Need help? Call (701) 328-7593 or e-mail lehreth@nd.gov.

All NDCA grants are only available online. To apply for a grant, or for more information, please visit: <http://northdakota.cgweb.org>

Artist in Residence. The Artist in Residence program provides matching funds for schools and other non-profit organizations to bring artists into North Dakota schools and communities to conduct residencies of three days or longer. This program is designed to provide students, teachers, and community members with hands-on experiences and personal interactions with working artists. Residencies give students an understanding of quality art and appreciation for cultural traditions.

[Guidelines are available via this link.](#)

- Maximum grant: 50% of the artist's negotiated fee and expenses
- Deadline dates: April 1 and November 1 (submitted online)

Schools and Artists as Learning Teams (SALT) is a professional development grant program that supports and strengthens partnerships between schools, community arts organizations and artists. Through thoughtful collaboration, teachers and artists create opportunities for success so that all students achieve to high standards. The grant can be renewed for up to three years, dependent on legislative funding, which allows the opportunity to stretch and explore what it means to work collaboratively. [Guidelines, program overview and FAQ's are available via this link.](#)

- SALT Grant Program Time Frame/Deadlines Application deadline: Applications must be submitted by August 1.
- Notification: All applicants will be notified of funding status on or about September 1.
- Grant period: Grants begin in September and ends by June 30.

Teacher Incentive. The Teacher Incentive program is a means of providing financial assistance to teachers who wish to explore new and creative ways of incorporating the arts into the non-arts curriculum of a classroom. Projects may involve the visual arts, poetry/fiction writing, performing arts, architecture, folk arts, or any combination of artistic disciplines. [Guidelines are available via this link.](#)

- Maximum grant: \$300
- Deadline dates: April 1 and November 1 (submitted online)

Beyond the Fire- introduces real teenagers who are refugees
<http://www.itvs.org/beyondthefire/master.html>

UN HCR lesson plans
www.un.org/works/Lesson_Plans/WGO/WGO_LP_RT.pdf

The Right To Asylum
USA UNHSCR
http://www.unrefugees.org/site/c.lfIQKSOWFqG/b.4803941/k.488/The_Right_to_Asylum.htm

Unite Plan- Human Rights and Refugees
http://www.unrefugees.org/site/c.lfIQKSOWFqG/b.4803939/k.2827/Unit_Plan_1518_year_olds.

