

## Challenging the Time

*Paris, Paris... how many hearts aflame, souls burnt with art turn to ash on your sacrificial altar... no one has captured your heart, rather, only the most fortunate once have merited your enchanting smile that promises immortality... Kochar*

Kochar arrived in Paris in 1923, when the era's artistic thought and spirit, in post-war transitional death throes, experienced serious upheavals and developments. The twenty-four-year-old artist, already recognized as a leading and talented artist in Tiflis, was in Paris to connect with those transformations. However, the Armenian artist was destined to bond with the revolutionary thought of leading art figures and to stand atop the roots of avant-garde art.

Developing in the swing of innovative new directions and assuming their direct formative and ideological influence, his art, nevertheless, rose from a different plane of thought that predetermined the unique

process of Kochar's avant-gardism. The young artist was already familiar with the innovative outbursts of artistic movements of the era during his years in Tiflis and Moscow, which was reflected in his work and thoughts of that period. By this time, Kochar had already begun to define his aesthetic and formalist ideas, in which the artist developed his existential outlook on a mutual correlation of the essence of art, the beauty and the sensual, the form and the spirit. Kochar's travel to Constantinople and later to Italy, where the artist became fully acquainted with classical art and the works of Italian renaissance masters and profoundly studied Armenian miniature art at the Mkhitarist Congregation in Venice, was certainly of utmost importance for Kochar's creative development. It is here that the basis of the artist's ideological and aesthetic outlook was completed, on which Kochar's formalist mindset was manifested in the fertile Parisian environment.

Since the first months, he boldly threw himself into the complex and alluring artistic environment of Paris. Alongside prominent artists of the day, he participated in the exhibitions of the Salon Des Indépendants and other innovative movements of the period. He gave one-man exhibitions and published articles and programs. In a short time, the name Kochar appeared in the leading cultural periodicals of the day, and his works elicited intense discussion and debate. Critics of the period regarded his art as "deeply cognitive and heretofore unmatched in terms of execution", "innovative", "avant-garde and the most audacious".

Regarding art as the reflection of the ideal of its time, Kochar shaped his vision of the "ideal" which, on one hand, reflected the mindsets of his era with the expressive forms of that period and, on the other hand he received his ideological and formative ideas from ancient culture and philosophical thought, as well as from medieval Armenian art, especially miniature painting.

In 1926, in a conversation with the Armenian writer and public figure Vazgen Shoushanyan, Kochar noted: "The greatest success of Armenian artists will be to resurrect the old art of our painting. What's important is to resuscitate that lost but very valuable art, to make it contemporary and perfect in the light of modern art. Our old art has elements striving towards contemporary painting and especially miniature painting extremely approaches the art we seek."

It is not by chance that the artist's appearance in Paris is ushered in by three works linked to Christian ideology – *Resurrection* (1st plate), *Transfiguration* and *Vision* (2nd plate). In these works, the artist unveils

religious subjects as the eternal transitional phase between life and death, the spiritual and the material, light and dark. By splitting and unfolding the beings into their archetypes, Kochar “revived the mindsets and fundamental problems of the period”, with a strong formalist sense of colors, forms and metaphoric images, reflecting the spirit of the era in the metaphysical world. Nevertheless, Kochar’s imagery did not flow from dreams and the subconscious. Kochar’s inspiration was the reality he depicted on the level of ideas. By expressing the tendencies and problems of the era in the context of cultural interaction, rather than rejection, Kochar enciphered those ideological layers, which the artist himself embodied – his era, the spirit of time; the national, the spirit of identity; and the ancient Greek art, the spirit of civilization.

Observing the development of art in the “linkage of the evolution of world art”, Kochar expressed “the clash between the earthly and the cosmic” at the center of which was the machine, the embodiment of the spirit of the era that brought a new dimension of time and space. In his numerous works, he revived the antique Greek hero, as the embodiment of absolute beauty, in a “mechanical” space that contained a new ideal of time. The reconstruction of time and space became the guiding vision of Kochar’s art.

In a letter to Kochar in 1931, Leonce Rosenberg, an influential Paris art patron of the first half of the 20th century, a famous collector and publisher, and important supporter of modern art, wrote:

*“Dear Mr. Kochar,*

*The idea of time and space, your primary subject of mental engagement, is also in the focus of certain modern artists, for example, Picasso, Picabia, Léger, Valmier, Herbin. They, however, are content with merely giving importance to space, while You, You strive to depict the space.”*

Remaining loyal to the means of visual arts, Kochar, for whom “form was just a shell beyond which one must see the internal structure, the internal movement”, defined a new correlation of space, time and movement. Movement, the century’s mechanical-borne spirit, became the vision of the artist that promised new horizons of space. Kochar’s liberating gesture broke down the frame. Just as the achievements of technology and science reached the Universe and allowed humans to overcome earth’s gravity, Kochar’s spatial art also cut the boundaries of the frame and established the painting in free space. Kochar overcame time.

Paris was promising immortality...

Providence, however, defined another setting of space and time for Kochar. In 1936 the artist returned to his birthplace with a mission to spread and establish the new tendencies of Parisian art. However, in a totalitarian regime, Kochar’s progressive and innovative ideas were viewed as “anti-Soviet and anti-revolutionary” and the ‘iron curtain’ closed before him permanently. Liberating the national identity became Kochar’s new challenge. “It is necessary to shake off the ashes of time from our inflamed heroes and incite the eternal flame of our national self-consciousness and freedom.” This became the new message of Kochar’s avant-gardism. Kochar, who grew to be the symbol of the avant-garde, the new and freedom in his native land, revived the tradition of struggle and national identity in his monumental sculptures *Davit of Sassoun* and *Vardan Mamikonyan*. The Maestro affirmed that the manifestation of a genius is a challenge to the Time, whose prophetic visions liberate the spirit of the era.

Astghik Marabyan

art historian

**Vision: Christ and Mary Magdalene**

1924

Oil on canvas

130 x 81 cm

On loan from a Private Collection





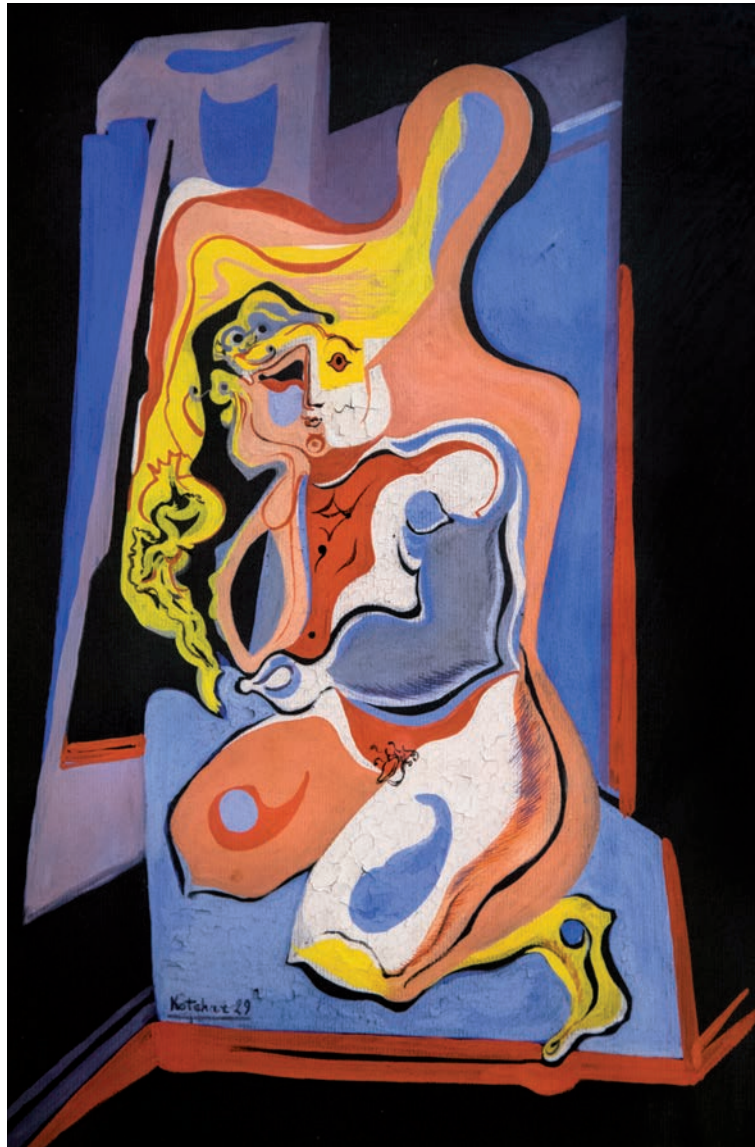
**Harmony**

1930

Oil on canvas

73 x 54 cm,

On loan from the Ervand Kochar



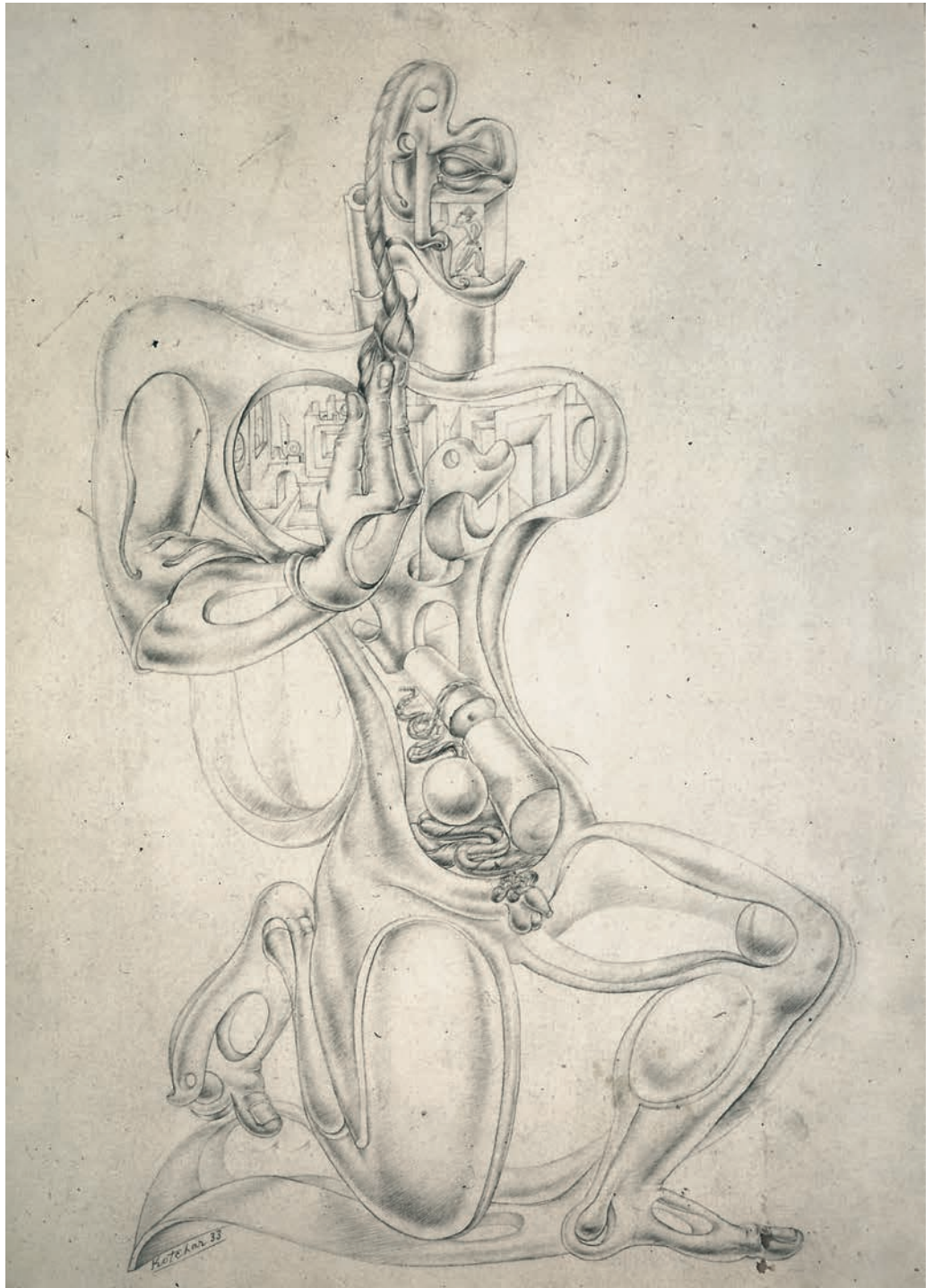
**Composition**

1929

Gouache on cardboard, mixed media

34 x 27.5 cm

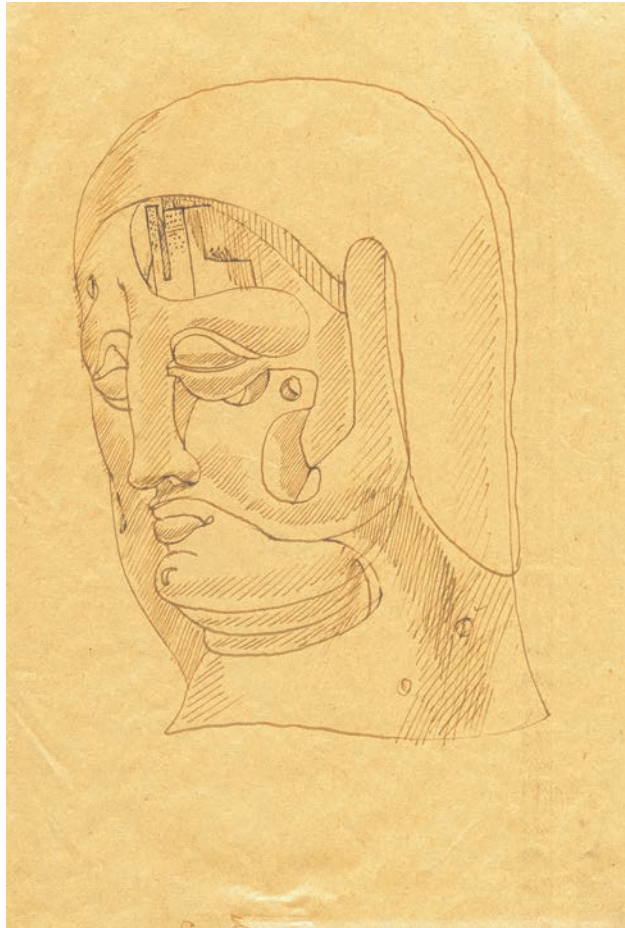
On loan from a Private Collection



**The Kneeler**  
1933

Pencil on paper  
44.7 x 35.2 cm

On loan from a Private Collection



**Head Drawing**

1925

Ink on paper

25.5 x 16.3 cm

On loan from the Ervand Kochar Museum

*Our epoch is a century of great acts of valor and discoveries. For the first time of his existence, man has freed himself from the earth's gravitational pull, which had nailed him down. He penetrated into the Universe. Man was able to split the atom... but has still not been able to make men happy. The secret of happiness remains undiscovered.*

*...But the person who is able to distinguish the pearly melody of the flute in an inhuman din of the big city, that person will be happy for a moment because, for that moment, he will be detached from the big machine, that is the city, and will become human – he will find himself anew.*

*Ervand Kochar, 1967*







**Ecstasy**  
1960  
Oil on canvas  
150 x 120 cm  
On loan from a  
Private Collection



**The Disaster of War**

1962

Oil on canvas

290 x 203 cm

On loan from a Private Collection

