

Trailing the Fine Arts of **AZERBAIJAN**

Sattar Bahlulzadeh's gravestone. Sculptor Omar Eldarov

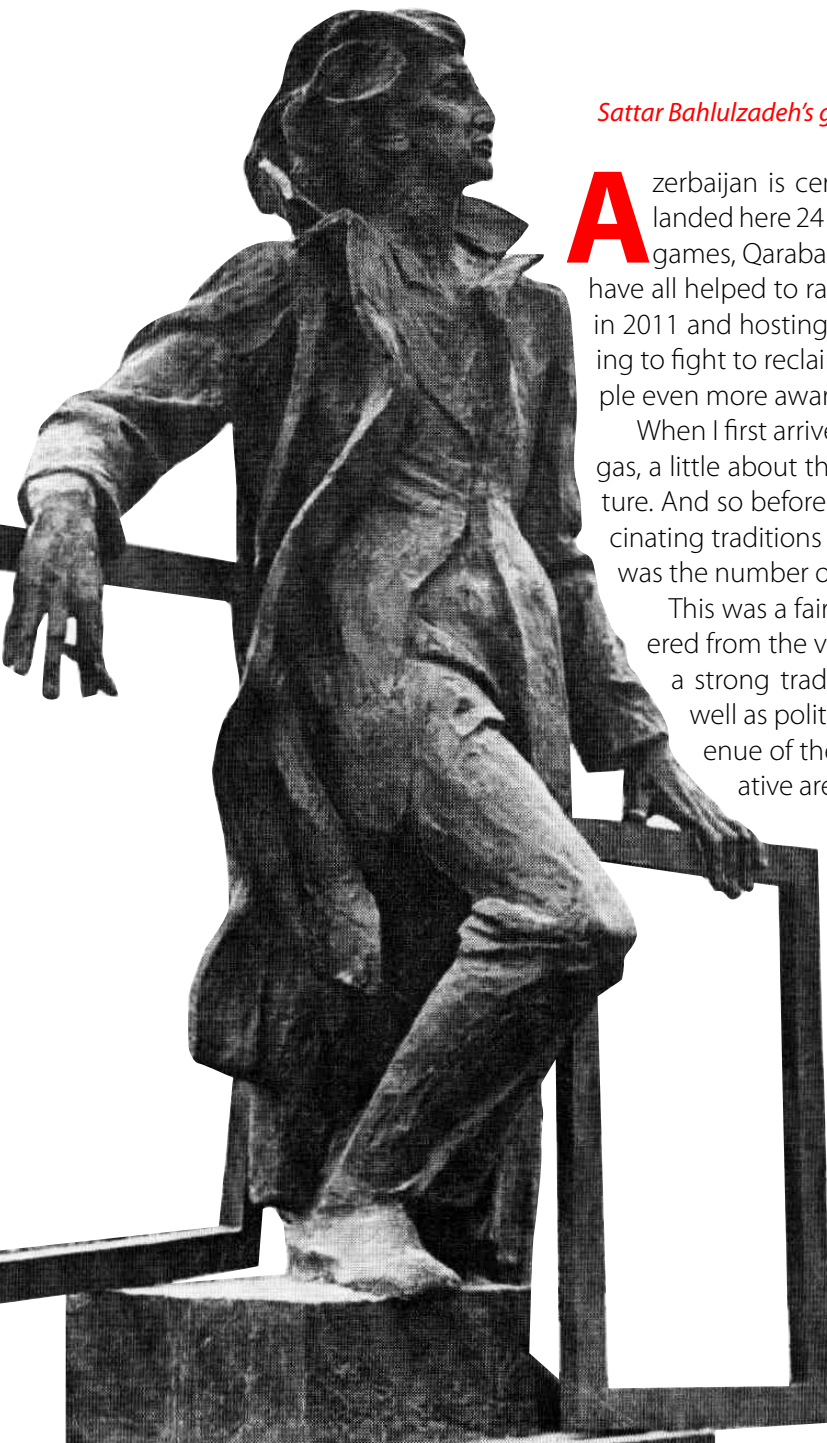
Azerbaijan is certainly better known now to the West than when I landed here 24 years ago, and its exploits in sports: the first European games, Qarabag's footballing exploits across Europe, and Formula 1 have all helped to raise the profile. Winning the Eurovision Song Contest in 2011 and hosting it in the following year also helped. And finally having to fight to reclaim its lands in Karabakh in 2020 and 2023 made people even more aware of the country.

When I first arrived, back in 2000, I knew something about the oil and gas, a little about the history, but almost nothing about Azerbaijani culture. And so before me lay the great pleasure of learning about the fascinating traditions and arts at first hand. Possibly most surprising to me was the number of fine artists - and the range and depth of their work.

This was a fairly ad hoc process of discovery, for example, I'd gathered from the very imaginative statues on the streets that there was a strong tradition of sculpture celebrating creative forebears, as well as political heroes. And a visit to Baku's Fakhri Khiyabani (Avenue of the Honoured) where the great, the good and the creative are buried, appeared to me as more open-air art gallery than cemetery, so impressive is the commemorative statuary.

Then one day I saw a picture of the statue over the grave of the highly individualistic Impressionist painter Sattar Bahlulzadeh (1909-74). Already interested in this artist, his work and his character, it was clear that the sculptor had worked to capture in full the spirit of the man.

Naturally, I wanted to see the statue, but the article gave no location. So I set off back to Fakhri Khiyabani, thinking that somehow I must have missed it. A thorough exploration of the rows drew a blank - Sattar was not to be found. I asked around and drew more blanks. Frustrated, I tried a long shot.



Oil rigs sketch. Artist Sattar Bahlulzadeh*Bakhtiyar Vahabzadeh. Artist Eldaniz Babayev*

I knew that the artist was from the village of Amirjan, between the capital and the main airport, so perhaps he was buried there.

I boarded a compact minibus and headed off in hope. After some fruitless wandering of the empty streets, I went down to Lake Bulbula, thinking that the view along the lakeside might reveal the cemetery. And yes, there in the distance, surely gravestones? Twenty minutes later I'm at the cemetery entrance, where four or five young lads are messing around on their bikes.

"Sattar?"

"Bəli, gəl!" (Yes, come!)

Two minutes later, I'm before what is still my all-time favourite statue. It tells you all about the character, energy and spirit of this eccentric, larger than life figure. Even down to the two frames he's holding - empty? No! Look through them at the lake and landscape beyond (since changed) - Impressionist landscapes were his forte. After gazing at length and camera snapping many shots of sculptor Omar Eldarov's (more on him later) wonderful creation, I finally turned to find my way back; mission accomplished I thought. But as I walk there's music; it gets louder - it's live.

I follow my ears and emerge into a square, to understand why the streets had been empty. It's the Spring holiday, Novruz Bayram and festivities are in full flow. Kosa, one of the characters associated with this favourite

The Shift Is Over. Artist Tahir Salahov

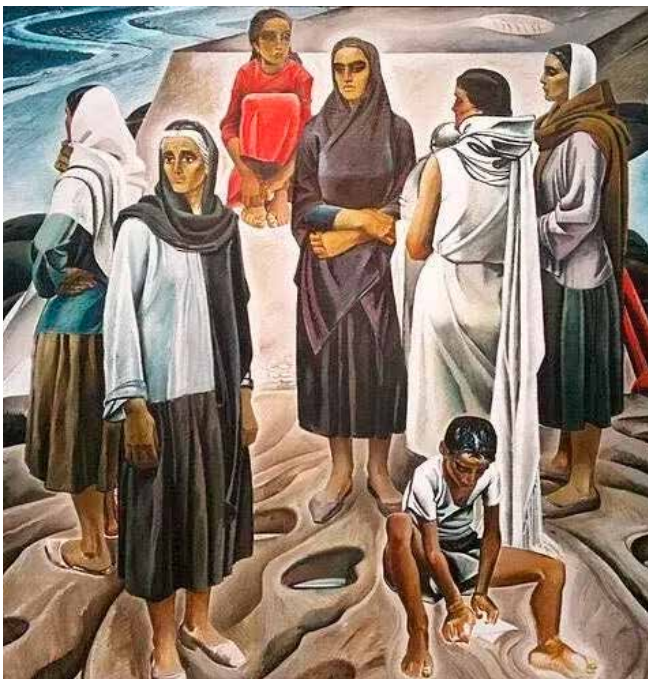


traditional festival, spots the foreigner but, more importantly, notes the camera he's carrying; probably the only one in the square. I am immediately welcomed and invited over to a table of goodies reserved for the agh saqqals (literally, white beards) the village's elders. To pay for my supper I snap as many of the activities and participants as I can. My return some days later to distribute the photographs began a friendship with Kosa,

now back in civvies as Namiq Hashimov, director of the culture centre, and later to my acceptance as Fəxri Qonaq (guest of honour) in Amirjan.

I was to discover that this village was home to more celebrities than Sattar: for example, Abbas Gulu Bakikh-anov, 18th/19th century soldier and pioneering historian, and Murtuza Mukhtarov, philanthropic magnate of the early 20th century oil boom, builder of the village's elegant mosque and also Baku's Səadət Saray (Wedding Palace, literally, Palace of Happiness) where I was later to marry my own Səadət. As well as another artist, Gayyur Yunus, and famed mugham singer Aghakhan Abdullayev. Not to mention Albert Agarunov, Mountain Jewish National Hero tank commander who died defending Shusha against Armenian invasion in the first Karabakh War.

Having tracked down Sattar, the thirst for more took me on a round of Baku's galleries, especially those in and around Icherisheher, the capital's historic, fortress-walled inner city. Back then, a foreigner wandering the galleries was naturally either in the city for the oil or, more rarely, a tourist - in either case expected to be well-moneyed. So gallery staff eyes tended to light up when such a 'catch' walked in and sales pitches would become pushier. No oilman, nor tourist, nor rich, this was not what I wanted. Until I found the Qala Gallery - near then to the Lezghi Mosque - and Eldeniz Babayev. Crucially, Eldeniz is himself a fine artist and was more interested in talking about art than money. And so, over



Women of Absheron. Artist Tahir Salahov

the years, most of the paintings Səadət and I collected are from his galleries - he now has the Bakı Art Gallery, just along the road from the Shirvanshahs' Palace in Icherisheher, the historic inner city.

Through Eldeniz we met, even holidayed with, Yusif Mirza, witnessing his creativity in action on watercolour landscapes in the north-eastern resort of Nabran. Yusif has worked in many different styles, from abstract to realist, from highly imaginative reworkings of images from the Stone-Age Gobustan petroglyphs, to atmospheric lamp-lit interiors. But his poignant recollections of Lachin town, from which his family was expelled 30 years ago by the Armenian invasion now mean the most. The Lachin painting we have has been an inspirational talisman of hope for its people's return. And we hear now that Yusif will be back there soon with an exhibition that will surely be a very fitting cultural celebration of a homeland's restoration.

Adil Rustamov's wistful sketch-like images of the Absheron peninsula were another pointer from Eldeniz, as were El-Turan's invaluable pre-invasion paintings of Shusha's cultural landmarks. He is also the reason we have a few treasured ink drawings from Sattar's sketch-book. Finally, in May last year, we were able to give a little moral support back to Eldeniz - with the catalogue

News of the Victory. Artist Eldaniz Babayev



Lachin village landscape. Artist Yusif Mirza

Memory 2005. Artist Yusif Mirza



of his own superbly characterful portraits of the greats of Azerbaijani and Turkish literature. His exhibition of them in Baku's Museum Centre also commemorated the centenaries of father figures of their respective nations: Heydar Aliyev was born in 1923, the year that Mustafa Kemal Ataturk became first president of the Turkish Republic. The exhibition was mounted again in Istanbul's Ataturk Culture Centre from 27 June to 5 July this year and drew an enthusiastic response from both public and cultural elite.

Meandering through the streets of Icherisheher, you'll surely note a sculpture on a corner wall that captures all the energy and inspiration of Soviet pianist Vaqif Mustafazadeh (1940-79), celebrated at home and abroad for his melding of jazz and traditional mugham music. The sculpture points you to his house museum, which itself is an eye-opening insight into boundaries and illicit explorations in the post-Stalin USSR. As with Sattar, the vivid sculptural evocation of Vaqif is from the hands of Omar Eldarov, whose other works delight the eye in many parts of the city - as well as in Fakhri Kheyabani.

I heard about Tahir Salahov (1928-2021) before I'd seen his work, and I'd checked him out on Google. I have to admit that the facts that for 19 years he'd been "First Secretary of the Artists' Union of the USSR" (1973-1992) and was a "Hero of Socialist Labour", filled my head with far too many negative stereotypes. Luckily, his house museum is also in Icherisheher, and a first sight of his paintings was enough to shatter those stereotypes. In contrast with the iconic rigidity of Soviet state-sponsored Socialist Realism, Salahov's works pulsed with the heart and soul of people depicted at work, rest and play. From men and women leaving their shift on the Oil Rocks drilling platforms, to the women waiting for their return, to an animated Rostropovich in Cubist setting, to his mother resting in their luxuriantly fertile Absheron dacha. Unforgettable, too, was a visit to interview the great man, with our main task being to get him to talk about himself, rather than a young artist that he was keen to promote. The absolute opposite of my initial apprehensions, Tahir Salahov was the kindest and most considerate of men, and how that is reflected in the subjects of his paintings!

Within the space of this article it is impossible to convey the depth, range, colour and spirit of Azerbaijan's artists, past and present: Zakir Huseynov, Amrulla Israfilov, Maral Rahmanzade, Mikayil Abdullayev (see his mosaics in the Nizami Metro), Irina Eldarova, Huseyn



Icherisheher. Artist Ruhulla Hasanzadeh

Migration. Artist Ibrahim Hasanov

Haqverdiyev, the Rustamov family of sculptors who crafted the Khojaly Monument in Khatai, father and son Arif and Orkhan Huseynov, are just a very few of the other artists who are all well worth looking up.

To continue and complete, for now, this brief way through Azerbaijani art, the most recent discovery was another father/son pairing.

I'd met Ruhulla Hasanzade (Ruh) while working for The European Azerbaijan Society (TEAS). I was journalist, he was book illustrator and caricaturist of colleagues on their special occasions, while also producing his own art, which was stunningly individual in colour, theme and content. His solo exhibition in 2018 was the most original we'd seen for a long time and two of the exhibits are in our treasured safekeeping. Then late last year he told me that he and his father were having a joint exhibition in December. It was news to me that his father, Ibrahim Hasanov, was a sculptor and painter. On the one hand, I was a tad annoyed that I hadn't known about him, on the other I was happy to have found an-

other of Azerbaijan's creative gems - especially when I went to their Keshle home/studio to interview them for the catalogue. I regularly claim to see or hear a story every day here - but this was a real standout; my jaw dropped at the sculptures, murals and paintings within the garden walls of an 'ordinary' townhouse. The exhibition, too, was stunning: sculptures realist, surreal and mythic; encapsulating tradition and modernity. Paintings and collage realist and close, dreamlike and distant, semi- and full abstract; the everyday and fantasy; portraits sympathetic and sensual.

That exhibition, *Metamorfik Bağlar* (Metamorphic Ties) 70/30 was truly of its time, given recent history, both home and abroad: change and constancy in life, who we are, where we are, our values and loves; all expressed with an uplifting vibrancy that truly energised those lucky to be there.

The visual arts of Azerbaijan are every bit as enticing as the aural to a cultural newcomer here. Seek them out, you'll enjoy the trail. 🌸