[An exhibit on] Armenian painters provides a convenient vehicle to consider some basic questions about art, especially Armenian art. Although the artists are Armenian by their ethnic origin many of them were born outside of Armenia or spent their entire creative life in countries other than Armenia. Is their art individually or collectively Armenian? If one chooses to answer "yes" then there is a presumed relation between artistic creativity and ethnicity, a notion that is very difficult, if not impossible, to demonstrate.... Perhaps when limiting the idea to those artists who live and work in Armenia we might find a number of common factors. But are there such shared qualities among diasporan artist scattered over three continents with little, if any, contact among themselves or with the homeland? What then is Armenian art? Perhaps then, Armenian painting has characteristics that are distinctive and therefore identifiable. Whatever these characteristic might be, they have not yet been commonly defined or accepted, though terms are sometimes applied such as "a rich palette," "seriousness" bordering on sadness, while other times one hears about the "exuberance" of Armenian art.

Art, particularly painting, has been practiced continuously in historical Armenia from at least the first millennium before Christ. Through archaeology we have discovered the polychrome frescoes of the Urartians and mosaics and frescoes from early Christian centuries, many still in situ. However, the greatest quantity of Armenian painting is preserved within the pages of the 30,000 surviving medieval Armenian manuscripts. Tens of thousands of miniatures provide a nearly decade by decade (at times year by year) record of Armenian art from the ninth to the eighteenth century. The transitional period from manuscript illumination to canvas painting, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, has not been thoroughly studied. Frescoes, painted altar curtains, ceramics, and canvas paintings are preserved in churches and the homes of the wealthy from Constantinople to New Julfa (Isfahan), Egypt to the Crimea, in Central Europe, Aleppo, Jerusalem, and the Caucasus. They represent the links in the unbroken chain of Armenian painters from the early middle ages to the twentieth century... The works of European based Armenian artists of the turn of the twentieth century are to be viewed in these terms. They are more easily understood and explained through occidental currents than native orientation, even though some of them occasionally introduced Armenian or oriental themes... Those who remained in the Caucasus, especially in Tiflis, or in other traditional Armenian communities seemed to retain or cultivate, despite travel and study in Europe, a strong predilection toward an Armenian or oriental flavor... Paradoxically, Armenian artists, while seeking out native historical themes as subjects, no longer looked for artistic inspiration in their nation's past. There focus was on trends in the western art.

Armenian artists, whether creating in the homeland or the diaspora, are in the last analysis, artists. As such, they bring to their creativity, consciously or unconsciously, the legacy of heredity and environment that is each person's lot in the acting out of his or her life... despite apparent differences in the works of these painters, they share, in addition to a common ethnic bond rooted in a perceived awareness of the millennia old tradition of Armenia art, an inner integrity, a disturbing intensity, and a cohesive artistic vision. If in the future, art continues to be classified by ethnic or national labels, the works of these painters will serve to define and give dimension to the term "Armenian art," an art which remains as complex and rich today as it has been in past centuries.

(Submitted by June Pachuta Farris)