CIRCULATION, EXCHANGE AND RACE IN RALPH CLARKSON’S ‘NOUVART DZERON, A DAUGHTER OF ARMENIA’

BY

AMY LYNN WEBER

THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Art History in the Graduate College of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2011

Urbana, Illinois

Adviser:

Assistant Professor Jennifer Greenhill
ABSTRACT

Ralph Clarkson, a prominent Chicago portrait painter, created his best known work, the painting *Nouvart Dzeron*, in 1912. The painting depicts a full-length portrait of a young woman dressed in traditional Armenian dress. Between 1912 and the 1920s, the title of the painting would change from *Nouvart Dzeron* to *A Daughter of Armenia* to eventually a combination of the two titles: *Nouvart Dzeron, A Daughter of Armenia*. This changing title reveals how socio-political conceptions altered how people read the seemingly simple composition of a model posed against a blank background. This painting acts as a site of exploration for the changing conceptions of whiteness and commodification of ethnicity during a fifteen years span in the beginning of the twentieth century. Between 1912 and 1915, Clarkson used this painting to depict a generic idea of the Orient in order to bolster his own status as a fine artist. With the Armenian genocide of 1915, the painting’s subject moved into the realm of symbolism and ceased to be just a commodity of Clarkson’s to further his career. Instead, the more valuable commodity became Dzeron’s specific ethnicity: Armenian. And finally, in the mid-1920s, the two titles were combined as public opinion turned against the Armenian cause and the painting’s memorializing effect lessened.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: Introduction........................................................................................................1
Chapter 2: Ralph Clarkson and the Oriental Commodity..................................................3
Chapter 3: Memorials and the Armenian Commodity.........................................................16
Chapter 4: Armenian-ness and American Politics............................................................27
Chapter 5: Conclusion........................................................................................................29
Chapter 6: Figures................................................................................................................30
References.........................................................................................................................46
Chapter 1: Introduction

At the end of 1912, the organization Friends of American Art\(^1\) presented their new purchase, a painting entitled *Nouvart Dzeron* (figure 1), to the Art Institute of Chicago. It was painted by one of the Friends of American Art Board members and an instructor at the Art Institute: Ralph Elmer Clarkson. The painting depicts a full-length portrait of a young woman dressed in traditional Armenian dress. The article announcing the purchase labels the model Dzeron as a “large blue-robed American lady” and goes on to describe the figure as one with “dramatic beauty, mobility, and grace.”\(^2\) This description provokes questions about movement and commodification that are augmented in relation to the changing title of the painting through the years 1912 and the mid-1920s. This changing title reveals how socio-political conceptions altered how people read the seemingly simple composition of a model posed against a blank background. The original title of 1912 is simple in that it just identifies the sitter. This is important as the title would change in 1915 to *A Daughter of Armenia* and then in the 1920s to a combination of the two previous titles: *Nouvart Dzeron, A Daughter of Armenia*. As the changing title illustrates, this painting acts as a site of exploration for the changing conceptions of whiteness and commodification of ethnicity during a fifteen years span in the beginning of the twentieth century. Between 1912 and 1915, Clarkson used this painting to depict a generic idea of the Orient in order to bolster his own status as a fine artist. With the Armenian genocide of

---

\(^1\) In February 1910, the Friends of American Art was created with Clarkson acting as one of its founding members. It was an organization that was independent of the Art Institute of Chicago yet worked in conjunction with the institution to raise funds and purchase contemporary American art for its collection. As of 1910, the Art Institute owned only twenty works by Americans, a condition that the organization hoped to remedy as soon as possible. The Friends of American Art was quick to point out that outside of Paris, no comparable organization existed. Within a few months of their inception, they had raised an estimated $90,000 from Chicago’s elite. See “Chicago Forms Society of ‘Friends of American Art,’” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 27, 1910; Art Institute of Chicago, “A New Movement: The Friends of American Art,” *Bulletin of the Art Institute of Chicago* 3:4 (April 1910): 53; and “Mrs. Palmer Aid to Chicago Art,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 7, 1910.

1915, the painting’s subject moved into the realm of symbolism and ceased to be just a commodity of Clarkson’s to further his career. Instead, the more valuable commodity became Dzeron’s specific ethnicity: Armenian. And finally, in the mid-1920s, the two titles were combined as public opinion turned against the Armenian cause and ushered it into a silent history.

Clarkson is best known for the painting *Nouvart Dzeron* and not for the society portraits that composed the majority of his career. To a degree the portrait of Dzeron lies within the tradition of grand portraiture that Clarkson was most comfortable. Such portraits act as a fictitious moment where the sitter is posed to present to the world a certain side of their cultural identity. We clearly see this in other portraits that Clarkson painted of Chicago’s elites where women and men are shown from the waist up and are usually looking directly at the viewer. They wear impeccable suits and fashionable gowns. They invite your gaze to judge them and behold their sophistication (see figures 2 and 3). With Dzeron, however, she is full length and in profile wearing a traditional ethnic costume. The viewer is not supposed to judge her place in society as a representative of a state legislature or a university professor’s wife. Instead, her highlighted prominent nose and costume points to her otherness. Her very creation puts her in a separate category from Clarkson’s commissioned portraits; he did not paint Dzeron for someone else and for a direct monetary exchange. It was a show piece and through it, Clarkson’s own cultural identity is revealed more fully than Dzeron’s in 1912.

---

Since Clarkson had arrived in Chicago in 1894, he had been trying to establish Chicago as a renowned artistic city and himself as a nationally recognized artist. He attempted to achieve his goals by establishing artistic organizations and copying the French Academic style. Chicago’s art scene had been slow to develop in comparison to New York and Boston. Although Chicago was one of the largest cities in the United States in the late nineteenth century, it was one of the last large cities to form an art museum. Part of the blame may be placed on the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 that decimated the city. While cities such as New York, Boston and Philadelphia were rallying around the cry for an art museum, Chicago was just trying to reinstitute the basic landscape of the city. Clarkson looked for ways to convince the economically advantaged that it was in their interest to further the Art Institute and the cultural capital of the city. On February 9, 1909, Clarkson gave a speech to the Menoken Club—a social and literary club—about why Chicago needed to develop the arts saying that “the purposes of municipal art…is to make Chicago so attractive that the money [wealthy travelers have] will be spent here.”

Clarkson also noted that if Chicago’s cultural prominence rose, his reputation would expand as well. Clarkson already had a rising career; he served as an international art juror for the St. Louis and the San Francisco Expositions. In 1898, Clarkson and the sculptor Lorado Taft founded the Eagle Nest Art Colony a few hours outside of Chicago. And Clarkson’s Chicago studio was a point of cultural development within the city limits through the founding of the Cliff

---

5 Clarkson gave interviews such as “Why I Prefer to Live in Chicago” to Mary Isabel Brush of the Chicago Daily Tribune (May 8, 1910) that perpetuated the importance of Chicago as an art center.
Dwellers, a club for art and literary enthusiasts in 1907 and the Little Room which gathered together a “companion spirits” of local artists, architecture and authors that gathered every Friday in Clarkson’s studio.

Clarkson was carefully crafting an image based on traditional European and East Coast artistic traditions in order to engage with the idea of what constituted the urban artist. These were traditions that he had learned through studying at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and the Julian Academy in Paris as well as when he opened a portrait studio in New York for two years prior to establishing himself in Chicago. The European and East Coast models were so important as it was a generally accepted notion that “[t]he public, west of New York…cared little for art” due to the lack of an established artistic community. Clarkson looked to where an established arts community was acknowledged to exist: the East.

He cultivated his public image so much so, that at his death, he was remembered for being a painter “who looked like a prosperous artist, with a hair-do and mustache patterned after Jimmy [James McNeill] Whistler’s.” By surrounding himself with the elements that seemed to typify a successful artistic career, Clarkson was able to at least superficially put himself on par with other well known artistic studios such as William Merritt Chase’s Tenth Street Studio. This imitation is evidenced by a comparison between Clarkson’s painting Interior of Mr. Clarkson’s Studio (c.1900) and Chase’s Interior of the Artist’s Studio (1880) (figures 4 and 5). Clarkson shows a seated woman reading in a large antique couch with numerous gilded frame paintings on

---

7 “A Line O’Type or Two,” Chicago Daily Tribune, April 9, 1942.
9 Ralph Clarkson, “Exhibition of Society of Western Artists,” Brush and Pencil 1 (March 1898): 197. Chicago was trying to assert itself as an artistic viable city. Clarkson defended the city by saying that it was “the birthplace of a new appreciation of art in America…Chicago has more natural attractions than almost any place in this country…” See “High Art in Chicago Smoke: Painters Come from Europe to See Lights and Shadows,” Chicago Daily Tribune, February 10, 1909.
10 “A Line O’Type or Two.”
the wall behind her and the Oriental rug on the wall mirrors Chase’s composition of a woman seated in a large arm chair surrounded by framed artwork and knickknacks. A contemporary reviewer wrote that Clarkson’s studio was one of the “richest and most attractive studios in Chicago” and was “filled with genuine old Masters…fine rugs and the usual mélange of draperies and bric-a-brac”; it was a “show-place unique in Chicago.”

Clarkson had the local reputation, the Parisian education and the studio environment to be the artist he wanted to become. He was lacking in compelling material, though. Perhaps this is why Clarkson decided to create the portrait of Nouvert Dzeron. He had to break out of the confines of being a society painter. In the words of a contemporary critic, Clarkson’s work was “direct and frank”. Such portraits of Chicago elites would be less likely to find their way to an established institution within Clarkson’s lifetime. In 1897, the paintings that Clarkson advertised to market a gallery show—and hence would have had the biggest draw—were portraits of the newly elected mayor of Chicago, Carter Harrison, Jr., and the previous Illinois governor, John Peter Altgeld. The critic Frederick W. Morton lamented that “one regrets that [Clarkson] cultivates portraiture so assiduously” instead of more allegorical work as Clarkson’s painting Rest that was shown in a 1900 exhibition.

Clarkson’s works were largely commissioned portraits and could not engage in the growing enthusiasm for art-for-arts sake ideals. In this manner he was often compared to John Singer Sargent who also struggled with the label of just being a society portrait painter. The

---

12 Browne, 100.
13 Dzeron is the only painting in the AIC’s collection by Clarkson even though he was such a large force in the art world of Chicago.
14 “Art,” Chicago Daily Tribune, November 14, 1897.
16 Sarah Burns, Inventing the Modern Artist: Art and Culture in Gilded Age America (New Haven:
society portrait painter at the turn of the twentieth century was challenged by the idea that the art that he created was in the words of Sarah Burns an “unconcealed commodity.” Sargent attempted to go beyond this criticism and show his artistic range by painting *Study of an Egyptian Girl* in 1891 (figure 6). Perhaps this is also why we see Clarkson turning to an Oriental subject matter in 1912. By creating a painting with an Oriental woman as the subject, Clarkson would be showing his ability to partake in not only an established artistic trend but a large popular culture phenomenon that would be able to garner him attention beyond just being a society portrait painter.

While their impetus may have been the same, Clarkson and Sargent’s turn to Oriental subject matter had both formal similarities and differences. Both works are painted on an approximately six-foot-tall canvas (Sargent’s is slightly over six feet and Clarkson’s is six and half feet) and show a solitary young woman set in the foreground against a dark shadowed background. Each woman also has long dark brown braided hair. And both artists worked in the French Academic painting style. Sargent and Clarkson also both posed their models in facial profile. They are meant to be looked upon for the pleasure of the viewer. But that is where the similarities end.

*Study of an Egyptian Girl* shows a nude female figure with her back to the audience. She coyly looks down as she plays with her hair. There is a decidedly sexual overtone to the pose. The brushwork and lines of her body are sinuous and sensual. The tones of her hair, skin and the background coalesce for one cohesive image; the viewer cannot escape the woman’s skin


Burns, 62.
because every pigment color throughout the whole painting mimics the color of the tone of her skin.

Although Sargent and Clarkson employ the same compositional elements and French Academic painting style, Clarkson chose to conceptualize the idea of the Oriental woman differently. Whereas Sargent engages in the French tradition of using the Orient to explore the female nude in the vein of Jean-Léon Gérôme’s *The Slave Market* (1866) (figure 7), Clarkson presents a model that is covered from her neck down to her toes. In contrast to Sargent’s painting of Oriental skin, Clarkson refuses this narrative of the erotically charged Oriental woman. The small exposed parts of her white skin jarringly stand out as they are contrasted to the darkness of the background and her blue robe. The nameless Egyptian slave girl has her eyes lowered and her limbs close to her body, inviting the onlooker. This contrasts sharply to Dzeron who while in profile looks directly away from her body with her arm outstretched. The rough angles of her arms replace the softness of the Egyptian slave girl’s. And most importantly, Dzeron commands the space around her with the arm that is outstretched. She is meant to be seen not as a sexualized and eroticized woman but as a specimen of a certain type.

Because Clarkson did not engage with the eroticized Orientalism of the French Academy, it does not mean that his work was not self-consciously Oriental. The first placement of the portrait within the Art Institute was the Nickerson Gallery. This gallery was reserved for Oriental and ancient works of art.\(^{18}\) His contemporary audience clearly saw this painting as an Oriental painting. American artists also had a history of refusing “[t]he blatantly erotic” in order to depict “a desirable world in which women are proper, beautiful, and reticent.”\(^{19}\)

---


\(^{19}\) Holly Edwards, “A Million and One Nights: Orientalism in America, 1870-1930,” in *Noble Dreams, Wicked*
Edwards explains, “Ultimately, it would appear that American Orientalism was essentially a therapeutic mechanic as well as a creative process whereby people might construct models of behavior and society and then move into the spaces of power that they had constructed.” American artists such as J.L.G. Ferris and Frederick Arthur Bridgman (figure 8) similarly painted images of women—often times lounging—but fully clothed and often more in line with the straight limb angles of Clarkson’s work than the sinuous curves of Sargent’s.

Compositionally, Clarkson and Sargent’s work fall into a very specific category of American Orientalism. Their subjects are placed in a shallow space, each limb is clearly delineated and each is seen in profile. Their figures are pushed up against the foreground and the background is devoid of any other characteristics. Paintings such as these were seen as “deliberate showpieces” that displayed the artist’s knowledge of French artistic practices. They were meant to attract “acclaim in the art market.” In the words of Holly Edwards, “Orientalism of this sort reveals more about the relationship with the international art market and with France than it does about America’s perceptions of the Orient.” Similarly, understanding this work as a showpiece tells us more about Clarkson than about Nouvart or Armenians in America in 1912; this is why Dzeron’s Armenian-ness is to a degree negligible in 1912. Clarkson used the traditional Armenian object and dress in order to denote the larger category of the ‘Orient’ and not necessarily Armenia.

Dzeron’s form acts as a generic Oriental object as much as the unspecific object in which she offers up for the viewer’s gaze. A perceived Oriental artifact was not valued for its unique properties or what it meant to the culture that produced it. Instead, value lay exclusively in its

---


20 Ibid., 17.
21 Ibid., 25-26.
collectability. Her palm faces upward with the object—possibly a necklace—dangling from it. It is made out of beads with a gold piece that ends in a large red tassel. There are no signs or symbols on it. Perhaps this object has religious meaning; perhaps it is purely decorative. This ambiguity points to the unimportance of its actual meaning. It has value only in its visual identity. The Orient was easier to (mis)understand when one could place a part of it in one’s hand literally or figuratively and only see it as a part of a large category of “other.”

The viewer is not only visually able to collect the object but also Dzeron. Dzeron’s fastidiously ignores the object and viewer. The necklace’s straightness and immobility mirrors Dzeron’s physical stability and braids that hang to the same length. These two objects are pinned into the same corner for others to view them. Here in Clarkson’s work we see Dzeron as a specimen—dressed-up and posed for the benefit of the viewer much like a taxidermied animal. She is confined to the corner of a room, with a shadow that intersects and pins down her wrist and leg, seemingly staying her in the pose. There is no surrounding background that serves to place Dzeron in a setting; nothing is there to detract the viewer’s perusal of her. The awkward nature of her pose and profile heightens the connection to the idea of display. It serves as a marker. Viewers are able to appreciate the object(s) on display for being foreign. It does not matter in what capacity foreignness is encapsulated; all that matters is that it and she are not Western.

The generic Orient—and not the specific Armenia—is further conveyed by the costume that Dzeron wears. Her blue coat is long with gold trim. There are decorative detailing patches near her ribcage and near the bottom of the coat. Wide blue and gold-starred pants that mimic

---

the fabric of her dress that hangs down to her white stockings. Her feet have light blue slippers with a red pompom atop each. The coat, shoes, hat and pants state that she is wearing are not typical Midwestern dress, but also are not overly unusual. But any definable Armenian characteristic is not shown. This includes highly ornamented necklaces, a long veil and the traditional two piece apron. Without any real recognizable Armenian artifacts within the painting, her American-ness is more fully able to assert itself. She could shed her coat and with her harem pants, easily step onto the streets of Chicago and be recognized as an American girl.

The years of 1910-1912 saw the height of the Oriental dress trend in Western Europe and the United States. Turbans, tunics, loose-fitting jackets, jupe-culottes or harem trousers were all sought after as well as pearls and long beaded sautoirs. In the *New York Times* December 26, 1910 issue, the headline proclaimed, “Pantaloons Skirt Here.” The reporter wrote that the new fashion trend was “an exact reproduction of the dress worn by Turkish women, minus the veil.” One reporter wrote that large hats have “given way to the Persian turbans, which are narrow, rich in color, and adorned on the right side with an aigrette or a cabochon jewel” and to “close fitting cap[s that resemble] the Juliet cap, made of gold or silver threads and studded with semi-precious and imitation gems.” This is the type that Dzeron wears in the portrait: a close fitting hat with a few decorative elements around the ear with no veil. Thus, her hat is closer to the American trend of Oriental ware than the traditional Armenian head coverings.

By 1912, this Orientalist theme had became firmly established in the fine art and commercial sectors of the American market. This interest in the Orient was primarily driven not

---

by an intellectual or historical interest, but by a “consumer interest” in the exotic. Orientalism was a part of a high art tradition going back to the late eighteenth century, but by the 1910s, it was also firmly a part of popular culture. Numerous movies, plays and books that all featured the “exotic Orient” as their locale were being produced and eagerly bought. The Oriental popularity was tied to the rising tide of consumerism. The perceived visuals of the Orient provided a lush and theatrical setting for the culture of display that allowed escaped for the corset-restricted “stiff American[s].” By using the tropes of Orientalism, salesmen were able to market the supposed characteristics of the Orient which included self-indulgences and luxury.

In 1912, the same year that Clarkson’s painting was unveiled, the play Garden of Allah—based on the popular bestselling book by Robert Hichens—came to Chicago where it was welcomed with “an uncommon quantity of popular interest.” The play included “natives from the Levant and from North Africa [who] were employed unobtrusively but effectively to help in achieving atmosphere and varisemblance [sic] in the crowded scenes.” “Troupes of Arabic men” were borrowed from the production and employed by the department store Marshall Field’s to walk around the store as living mannequins. Esther Romeyn argues that “[t]his intertwining of display and spectatorship…was characteristic of the explosive early phase of commodity culture” and that “by adopting the visual strategies of the museum, the world’s fair, the tableaux vivant, and the theater, the department stores imbued the mass-produced copies

---

28 Ibid., 107.
with an aura of authenticity and prestige.”

The Chicago Department store Boston Store also had the Arabic actors as a publicity stunt in their store to sell copies of the book.

The pose of Dzeron would have strongly reminded viewers of mannequins within department store windows such as Boston’s and Marshall Field’s. The new position of mannequins would have shaped how viewers understood this work and more importantly how Clarkson would have understood Oriental-inspired clothing on a displayed form. This is especially pertinent as Clarkson understood art to be a commodity just as much as an Oriental inspired dress. Mannequins had reached a new maturity in their creation by 1912. Advertised in the November 16, 1912 issue of the *Dry Goods Reporter* were “Life-Like Wax Figures” from the Model Form Company based out of Chicago. The displayed figure shows a sculpted wax head and bust complete with styled hair and a smiling face and arms and legs that were bendable which were important since each figure in a store window “should be given a different position.” As opposed to dry good merchants, clothing windows were not supposed to be crowded. In the October 19, 1912, issue of the *Dry Goods Reporter*, we see three mannequins lined up in the window in front of a sparse background and all assuming different poses advertising the products they wore. Dzeron’s static pose of just an outstretched arm mimics the shallow range of motions that mannequins had. The empty composition also echoes the formal scarcity of department store windows. Consumers understood fashion in relation to these figures. Dzeron was modeling the costume she wore much as the same way mannequins displayed the ever changing clothing in store windows.

---

32 Model Form Company Advertisement, *The Dry Goods Reporter* 42 (November 16, 1912): 34.
Oriental performances were not just reserved for the professional stage or for the store windows; instead undefined ethnic performances were common within popular and public culture. Soon after the announcement of the portrait’s purchase, the *Chicago Tribune* published two photographs (figure 10) on the third page of their November 19, 1912 edition with the title, “Art Students Who Will Take Part in Vaudeville Show.” The two photographs take up four columns and a third of the overall space of the page. In one photograph, a man with a large turban, hoop earrings and a long robe stands among three kneeling women wearing veils atop loose-flowing hair and short-sleeved shirts and brightly patterned skirts. The other photograph is of a woman in a similar costume as the other women, but she is standing and holding a large cistern as she poses next to a column. This annual event featured “many gorgeous costumes, representing both modern and ancient times.” Importantly, though, Dzeron is listed simply as a “singer before a curtain.” Her proposed ethnicity is not included. This is in contrast to individuals that are given an ethnicity that they will be playing such as Ray Mammes who is listed as being an “Egyptian Dancer.”

These costume gatherings and performances were popular on every level of society.\(^3^3\) The *Chicago Tribune* reports costume parties hosted at Clarkson’s home and studio as well at the Art Institute.\(^3^4\) Clarkson himself was a great enthusiast of such entertainment as were his fellow artists at the Eagle Nest Art Colony. Numerous photographs show the men, their wives and their children dressed as Arab sheiks and princesses.\(^3^5\) Public enthusiasm for dressing up for make-believe revelry provoked a 1902 research endeavor that Charles Horton Cooley conducted. He


\(^{3^5}\) Ralph E. Clarkson Papers, c.1900-1941, Ryerson and Burnham Archives, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL.
subsequently deduced from the study, the importance of play in teaching individuals about their private wants and their public selves.\textsuperscript{36} This is similar to the same language that surrounded indulging in Orientalism. Individuals were able to masquerade their identity and subsume a new persona that usually carried more freedom.

Clarkson’s portrait of Dzeron is such a painting of masquerade. Her costume masks her American identity. Dzeron was a student of Clarkson’s at the Art Institute. In a memorial biography to Clarkson, Dzeron is described as American-born Armenian and that her grandfather had sent the clothing that she wears in the picture to her from Armenia.\textsuperscript{37} A Chicago Tribune article from the late 1910s contradicts this statement, though, describing Dzeron as being Armenian or Armenian-born.\textsuperscript{38} Whether or not Dzeron was born in America or Armenia, she is portrayed in a way that is not her everyday attire. She has taken on the role of an Armenian in traditional dress or simply a non-Westerner. She put on such costumes for her performances masking her American identity. One identity temporarily replaces another. Martha Banta explains that there is a duality about this type of masquerade.\textsuperscript{39} On one hand, the emphasis and the only sight line is on the mask—Nouvart’s clothing—and what that materiality signals: the Orient. On the other hand, though, this masking draws even more attention to Nouvart’s covered identity—her American white identity. There is an easy fluctuation between these two identifications.

Because there was this easy fluctuation, Clarkson could not create a typical French sexualized Oriental painting. If Dzeron was understood and recognizable as an “American lady” as reported in 1912, she needed to be defined by modesty and propriety. In 1912, she was

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{36} Banta, 266.  
\textsuperscript{37} Richard Teutsch, Ralph Clarkson: A Tribute (Privately Printed: 1942), 11.  
\textsuperscript{38} “Armenians who are Americans,” Chicago Daily Tribune, June 12, 1918.  
\textsuperscript{39} Banta, 222.}
received as being an American wearing a costume and not perceived as an exotic woman from a harem. This was not a new occurrence within American art. In the late 18th century, John Singleton Copley painted Mrs. Thomas Gage as an “exotic Turkish woman” (figure 9). But no one mistook her for actually belonging to that heritage. Instead, the Turkish turban is “lightly” set upon on her head and an appropriate English chemise peaks out from the top of her dress.\textsuperscript{40} Dzeron similarly has her white undershirt exposed, highlighting the removability of her Oriental jacket and hat.

Chapter 3: Memorials and the Armenian Commodity

A painting’s meaning is continually in flux due to the socio-political culture that surrounds it. Clarkson could not fully anticipate that three short years after he created the portrait, Dzeron’s image would no longer be simply classified as a portrait or be used as an Oriental painting to advance his career. In 1915, *A Daughter of Armenia* replaced *Nouvart Dzeron* as the title.41 Dzeron’s ethnicity became a more valuable commodity than the generic Orient after the 1915 Armenian genocide.

While the placement of Armenians within the Ottoman Empire was a bloody story through the 1890s and early 1900s, it was the Armenian genocide of 1915 that captured headlines on the front pages of American newspapers on a weekly basis from January 1915 through 1918. The genocide sunk into the American consciousness through massive fundraising campaigns and through such catch phrases as “remember the starving Armenians.”

Dzeron’s figure became a memorializing symbol for Armenia that was distinct from her being an American—her primary identification in 1912. The figure of Dzeron as well as her dress and pose act as a sign beyond her own personhood. As a sign, Dzeron is emptied of herself and replaced by a whole ethnic group. Within the title, she works as a sign for Armenia, a sign that only goes one way. The *Daughter of Armenia* places Dzeron in a space of abstraction, commoditization and further de-individualization.

The composition that Clarkson constructed easily lent itself to a memorial symbol. Her crossed feet can be read as the ancient Greco-Roman sign of mourning and her static pose mimics that of a statue. The solitary female form had a long tradition of being used in high art

41 The Bulletin of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1913 lists the painting as “Nouvart Dzeron” and in 1915 lists it as “Daughter of Armenia”
for allegorical memorials. For example, in 1827 Eugene Delacroix used a traditionally dressed lone female figure to personify modern Greece after the city has been besieged by Turkish forces in 1827 in his painting *Greece on the Ruins of Missolonghi* (figure 10).\(^{42}\) At the U.S. capitol between the War of 1812 and the Civil War, Native Americans were also used extensively within the artwork to “serve as memorials of an extinct race and culture.”\(^ {43}\) Furthermore, allegorical embodiments beyond just memorials were also seen at the U.S. capitol where a plaster relief of Carlo Franzoni’s *Justice* shows as a woman in classical garb holding the attributes of justice: a balance and a sword (figure 11). The objects she held, defined who she was. Lady Liberty also seen on coins and virtues throughout the art historical narrative have all been personified by female forms draped in classical regalia. Having this Western tradition facilitated the easy transition from portrait to symbol. The profile also allowed an easy move away from a specific person.

The very use of the profile is a much more generic and distanced portrait conception. Harry Berger writes that the profile flattens and removes any intimacy from between the viewer and the subject.\(^ {44}\) Jennifer Roberts agrees, writing that the profile moves from the realm of strict portraiture to spheres of other genres like numismatic commemorative and honorific imagery.\(^ {45}\) Indeed, the profile has been used on coinage and memorials medals since Alexander the Great. Due to the position of the face, all emotion is lost to the viewer and the person becomes abstracted into tribute and idealization. The 1913 article “The Art of the Medalist” in the

---


\(^{43}\) For a discussion on these figures, see Vivien Green Frye, *Art and Empire: the Politics of Ethnicity in the U.S. Capitol, 1815-1860* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 208. For women serving as allegorical representations of Justice, History, America and others, see pages 177-208.


magazine *Art and Progress* narrates the tradition of medals from the Renaissance through the modern world. Adeline Adams explains that “[o]ne side portrays the person, the other commemorates his deed…” The viewer cannot physically turn Clarkson’s painting over to see if one side has an allegory or narrative while the other side is just a portrait. Instead, the profile acts as a sign to possibly read the rest of the composition as a memorial. American manifestation of such numismatic imagery during this time was seen with coin monies.

During the first years of the twentieth century, American coinage was going through many changes as the design went from showing a full length Columbia to a Columbia just a profile to finally showing past American presidents in profile. In 1909, Lincoln became the first president and recognizable profile on an American coin. This was a change from the federal coinage that had been “long dominated by the ideal form of the abstract concept” such as Lady Liberty. The use of the profile on coins heightened the transitory nature of the placement of the profile within society by attaching the profile to a fetishized currency. This also raised the awareness of the profile and use of it in everyday life.

Along with the profile, the object that she holds would also rise to a new significance in the viewer’s creation of a memorial symbol. No longer is it a generic Oriental object as an object can never wholly be disconnected from its past. To quote Vladimir Nabokov, “When we concentrate on a material object, whatever its situation, the very act of attention may lead to our involuntarily sinking into the history of that object.” The necklace itself has its own social life and history that transcended the figure of Dzeron as it was understood that the object physically

48 Ibid., 1.
50 Quoted in Brown, 7.
came from Armenia even if she did not.\textsuperscript{51} It could act as a replacement of Dzeron who in turn could act as a whole replacement for the Armenian ethnicity. The political events heightened the commoditization of the elements within the portrait.

This use of the object borrows from Marx’s concept of the commodity fetish. Its use-value and exchange value have been displaced from one another not necessarily in the market context—as it is an artwork that has been removed from pure economic circulation—but within the realm of ideas and identification. It is the “doubleness of the commodity” that hides the larger difference separating the thing and the idea: the person.\textsuperscript{52} As Max Weber writes, “It is only through things that one discerns himself.”\textsuperscript{53} The object acts as an appendage to Dzeron and a mimic of her two long braids. By possessing the object, Dzeron is able to more fully posses and understand herself and place in society while at the same time the necklace possesses her because it is the marker of her new identity.\textsuperscript{54} There is hence a movement that is set up between the object and Dzeron’s personhood. There is a circulation that is occurring within the picture as much as the picture’s image circulates with ideas outside of itself.

There were no firmly established visual images of the Armenian genocide; nothing competed with Dzeron as a memorial symbol in Chicago. There was no universal picture where a society could seek to pin a memory or rally around. And significantly, there were no publicized photographic images of the genocide as there would be with the World War II holocaust twenty-five years later. Words such as “holocaust” and “massacres” “could not

\textsuperscript{51} For the concept of commodities’ social lives, see Appadurai, 3.
\textsuperscript{52} Brown, 13.
\textsuperscript{53} Quoted in Ibid., 12.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 5.
register [a] mental image” that would be so much easier to visualize in later decades after the word “genocide” was created.  

The most visible imagery about the genocide came from the Near Eastern Relief and the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief organization posters advertising for monetary aid for the Armenians. These posters were a part of a large campaign to “spread the news to Americans with compelling images and catchy slogans” including the infamous phrase “starving Armenians”. These posters were featured on store windows, on the sides of buildings, on billboards as well as almost all of the streetcar systems and the American Railway Express trains.

The organizations used direct and specific marketing in Chicago. A Chicago Tribune ad for the organization proclaimed, “A Charitable World Saved Chicago When in Ruins, Hungry and Desolate. Will This City Refuse Now to Save Four Million Starving Women and Children?” The bottom of the ad reads: “Repay the City’s Debt to Humanity.” The ad was asking the reader to equate Chicagoans and their specific history with the Armenians.

Oftentimes posters were devoid of any image and simply exclaimed that the two and half million people were starving. A woman is shown hugging her child above the title “Save the Children!” (figure 12) in the Chicago Tribune of December 16, 1920 otherwise most print ads were just text (figure 13). When a figure was included in the posters, it was many times pushed to the edge or took up less than half of the sheet. There was no clear representational figure beyond a female form or a small child that typically showed her against a blank background.

57 Ibid.
confrontationally facing the viewer. The poster *Lest They Perish* (figure 14) mirrors Dzeron’s profile pose. Hence one can deduce that people were able to more easily read Dzeron as a symbol in the absence of seeing a real visual attached to such messages or images that were similar in terms of subject. An easy equation between the typical poster layout and the Clarkson’s composition also occurs. A viewer would easily be able to transcribe the words “Remember the Starving Armenians” in the large negative space of Clarkson’s composition.

Using traditional native dress as a way to focus on memorialization also occurred as a marketing strategy for the Near East Relief. The Chicago Tribune records in the article entitled “You May Expect These Callers” that a group of small Armenian girls dressed in traditional Armenian clothing—and shown in a large photograph (figure 15) above the article—would be actively helping to campaign for the Chicago chapter of the American Relief Committee. Armenian clothing and identity was an easily recognizable fact of public American life. Herbert Hoover, when reflecting back on the late 1910s and early 1920s, said that every school child was as familiar with Armenia as they were Great Britain.

The “Armenia Question” was always in the news and as a result there was an American outpouring of sympathy that went beyond just social clubs. For instance, in a 1920 ceremony, Babe Ruth presented one of his home-run bats to Dzeron in New York so that she would be able to sell the bat and donate the money to the Near East Relief Fund. When she accepted the bat, she wore the same hat and slippers in which Clarkson painted her (figure 16). It was the living personification of the Daughter of Armenia.

---

By 1915 the Armenian ethnicity had a higher commodity value than Dzeron’s white “American” skin within the Armenian community but also within the commercial market economy. The destabilization of racial categories concerned not only white Americans but also immigrant and ethnic communities. If white and American were becoming more inclusionary terms, then how did a group retain its distinct identity in the face of a recent genocide?

These were concerns beginning before 1915. On July 7, 1911, the California Armenian newspaper Asbarez ran an editorial that stated, “The most important question confronting the Armenians of California, and in the United States in general, is that of remaining Armenian.” Within the Armenian Diaspora, anxiety about “symbolic ethnicity” arose; this constituted the ability to shed Armenian traits—such as dress, language and specific socio-cultural behaviors—in exchange for more mainstream characteristics when the situation desired it. This is effectively the situation that Clarkson painted: Dzeron defined not by her surroundings or community or job, but by her easy to remove costume. She can clearly be placed within the melting pot ideology that “gave credit to the immigrants’ heritage” yet also implied the understanding that the “emergent American” would “remain” or “become Anglo-Saxon.”

Within the Chicago Armenian community there was an ownership of the Armenian identity after 1915. Dzeron who previously had not been linked to Armenia in press descriptions and who was usually listed singing just “in costume” (see example above), began to include Armenia as part of her description. She also raised awareness for the plight of Armenia while performing. For instance, on June 8, 1918 the Tribune reported that Dzeron described as “a young Armenian born girl” who would sing “a program in of songs in Armenian native

---

63 Ibid., 6-7.
64 Ibid., 32.
costume” discuss the “conditions of Armenia” for a socialite club.\textsuperscript{65} February 22, 1919, the 
Tribune once again reported that Dzeron would sing “Armenian folk songs” at the Chicago
College club. The year 1919 also saw Dzeron translating the Armenian National Anthem into
English.\textsuperscript{66} After 1915, Dzeron was able to trade in her Armenian identity to receive tangible
results in a way that she could not do with her American-ness.

This economic value of ethnicity was in contrast to the pre-1915 attitude. Clarkson’s
painting before 1915 operated in a world where skin acted as a social currency—as a commodity
to be exchanged and circulated; you needed to be defined as having the right color skin to
exchange for social privileges. And Clarkson clearly emphasizes Dzeron’s fair skin. The
lighting of the painting acts as if there is a spotlight on the only three areas of her exposed skin:
her hands, face, neck and décolletage. The creaminess of her skin contrasts sharply to the dark
blue of her costume and dark somber browns of the background and her hair. Even the looser
brushwork of the background and of her clothing serve to contrast her flawlessness of her skin.
Her white skin was of more important in 1912 than it would be a few years later when her ethnic
identity had more value.

American culture constructed racial identity as principally visual based on a “binaristic
logic” of race. Phillip Brian Harper explains that the “definition of whiteness itself, against
which ‘blackness’…functions principally as the oppositional sign under which all racial Others
are organized and subsumed.”\textsuperscript{67} Hence, “for certain groups, at certain moments, under certain

\textsuperscript{65}“Armenians Who Are Americans,” Chicago Daily Tribune, June 12, 1918.
conditions, Jim Crown whitened, and whitened decisively."\(^{68}\) A person, who was not black, was white. In 1909, four Armenian immigrants were declared to have the right to citizenship as "free white persons" after having first been denied it. The Circuit Court in Massachusetts declared Armenians were in fact legally as they were not black. Hence, the only appropriate label was white. White became a more inclusionary term than it had ever been before as long as those deemed white properly assimilated.

The line of difference between ethnicities was narrowed in the opposition to those that could not be classified as having an European heritage as the 1909 ruling also rested on the word ‘European’ and its ability to be substituted for ‘white’ and for ‘white’ to be able to be substituted for ‘European.’ Armenians were defined as being European in opposition to the Turks and their placement within the Ottoman Empire.\(^{69}\) Racial and cultural understanding of Armenians always depended upon this supposed contrast to the Turks in literature about Armenians. For example, one contemporary writer explained, “While the Turks have shown little enterprise, initiative, inventive genius, or ability in banking or business, the Armenians have been distinguished in all these fields.”\(^{70}\) Race was only understood in relation to difference. Hence, Armenian whiteness was dependent “upon an exaggerated Asian (Turkish) difference” that made Armenian whiteness “contingent upon their Anglo-conformity.”\(^{71}\) As a result, in 1912 Dzeron was identified being an American due to her white skin.

Armenians were also more easily classified as white as they were highly regarded for enduring persecution since the fourth century. In his 1924 treatise, *The Character of Races*,

---


\(^{71}\) Ibid., 219.
Ellsworth Huntington reports that “the inexorable process which Darwin called natural selection has given these people such remarkable unity and such clearly defined traits.”\textsuperscript{72} Since Armenians had gone through so many bouts of genocidal massacres, the Armenians that were left were considered to be part of the highest echelons of society and those who had a “weaker” mind and renounced their faith had been absorbed into Turkish society as a form of social Darwinism.\textsuperscript{73}

Armenians’ physiognomy also made them easier to define as white and also direct sympathy towards. Historian Thomas C. Leonard explains, “Skin color—like foreign policy—simply made it easier to see a moral drama unfold.”\textsuperscript{74} As discussed during this period, white was an inclusionary term although there was a clear hierarchy within “races” denoted as being white. Armenians had the important reputation of being the “Anglo-Saxons of Western Asia”\textsuperscript{75} and the “Swiss of the East.”\textsuperscript{76} This equated them with everything that the racial demarcation of Anglo-Saxon and the European-Swiss contained. They could not be given the classification of being European derived due to their placement within the Orient. But their similarities to the West could be stressed. American missionary Frederick Davis Greene compared Armenian women to the English saying that they were as “lovely; their features are pure and delicate, and their serene expression recalls the beauty of the women of the British Islands or the peasants of Switzerland.”\textsuperscript{77}

The demarcation of being Anglo-Saxon was also significant because the rhetoric surrounding the genocide relief campaign was about saving the Armenians from annihilation. Proponents of the Anglo-Saxon would have also have read a parallel of the perceived plight of

\textsuperscript{72} Ellsworth Huntington, The Character of Races (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925), 137.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 138.
\textsuperscript{74} Leonard, 304.
\textsuperscript{76} M.C. Gabrielian, Armenia, A Martyr Nation: A Historical Sketch of the Armenian People from Traditional Times to the Present Tragic Days (London: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1918), 149.
\textsuperscript{77} Quoted in Ibid.
the “race suicide” of the Anglo-Saxon. Americans worried about the influx of immigrants. In 1921, Meier Schlesinger wrote, “Whatever of history may be made in the future in these parts of the country will not be the result primarily of an ‘Anglo-Saxon’ heritage but will the product of the interaction of these more recent racial elements upon each other” due to the “hordes of foreigners” which had “caused a decline in the birth-rate of the old American stock.” He lamented that immigrants and their children “outnumber the natives white.”78 This parallel idea of the fading Anglo-Saxon and Armenian would eventually turn on the Armenians and make them another potential enemy of the American.

Chapter 4: Armenian-ness and American Politics

In the early 1920s the ethnic commodity of Armenian-ness was undergoing many changes. No longer was it valued as high or even higher than being American. With the end of World War I, there was a heightened degree of optimism over small ethnically defined nations forming to govern themselves. President Woodrow Wilson issued an investigative committee to look into what position to uphold: the formation of a newly formed Armenian nation or to withhold his commitment to the cause. Ultimately, the committee agreed that it was best to forgo any special efforts in regard to an Armenian nation. The magazine *Advocate of Peace through Justice*, it reported that among various reasons, the USA would not commit to helping because there were “a sufficient number of difficult situations which call for action within the well-recognized spheres of American influence.”

Herbert Hoover who was head of the distributing American aid worried that by helping Armenia, America would be committing itself to helping out all surrounding countries as well and thus would be over stretching itself.

After World War I, American politics embraced an isolationist position. This had profound effects on immigration laws. The National Quota Act of 1920 capped immigration from any particular place to three percent of the national group already living in the United States in 1910. Four years later, the New Quota Law reduced the percentage to two percent of the national group in 1890. This allowed for immigration from favored North and West European countries that had a history of emigration to the United States such as Great Britain and Germany. This caused problems for Armenians for two reasons. First, there were few

---

80 Ibid., 213.
Armenians in the United States before 1890. Secondly, Armenia was not a recognized nation—only an ethnicity. Without the status of a recognized nation, there was no prescribed national quota. The value of Armenian-ness was diminishing rapidly.

The public was also beginning to turn against the large fundraising campaign especially in light of developing politics. Armenia as an independent nation began to get more and more support from Bolshevik Russia who would eventually partially subsume the fledging independent Armenia along with Turkey. “Armenians Try To Force U.S. To Continue Aid” cries a May 12, 1920, Chicago Tribune headline. American relief workers at this point were being evacuated “in the face of spreading bolshevism.”  

By defining the painting as only a symbol of Armenia, Clarkson and the Art Institute staff risked the painting falling into obscurity with the fading memory of the genocide or worse into disfavor in the growing wake of resistance to Armenians. The hooked nose and strong jaw line is able to rescue her figure from remaining only a symbol. The non-idealized profile and form of Dzeron lends itself to be a portrait and specifically the American Dzeron portrait of 1912. Nouvart Dzeron, A Daughter of Armenia was created in the place of just A Daughter of Armenia. There was no fracturing in her identity, but a reconciling of the American and Armenian parts. Much like Jake Robin in the Jazz Singer who was able to sing in Vaudeville and in the synagogue; there was a process of voluntary assimilation that still contained recognition of an ethnic identity that could be removed or taken up when needed.

---

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Between 1912 and 1930, Americans’ conceptualization of whiteness and ethnicities underwent changes that were impacted by national and international events. Clarkson’s painting, *Nouvart Dzeron, A Daughter of Armenia* was impacted by these changing ideas. People could not look at her portrait and just see a young woman in non-Western clothing. As they looked, they looked with a vision defined by a set of ideological principles. The media and society around them helped to determine these principles. In a world before Armenians had a heightened public presence, Clarkson was able to use the painting to improve his own reputation and to highlight his artistic merits. After the Armenian genocide of 1915, the painting—and specifically Dzeron’s figure—came to symbolize Armenians as an ethnic group as evidenced by the change in the title to *A Daughter of Armenia*. By the late 1920s, though, the Armenian ethnic group had lost much of its favor in America and a symbol for their plight was not an adequate conception of the painting. Dzeron’s name had to be returned and the idea of being an American and having dual identities needed to be restored to the painting. This period was a highly unstable time for not only the painting’s title, but for politics and racial understanding. Collectively the parts and the whole of *Nouvart Dzeron, A Daughter of Armenia* were and still can be seen as commodities that can be exchanged freely for new definitions within contemporary society and over the passage of time.
Chapter 6: Figures

Fig. 1: Ralph Elmer Clarkson (American, 1861-1942), *Nouvart Dzeron, A Daughter of Armenia*, 1912. Oil on canvas, 80 x 40 in., Art Institute of Chicago.
Fig. 2: Ralph Elmer Clarkson (American, 1861-1942), *Portrait of a Lady*, n.d. Oil on canvas, 42 x 34 in., Private Collection.
Fig. 3: Ralph Elmer Clarkson (American, 1861-1942), *Frank O. Lowden*, n.d. Oil on canvas, 30 x 44 in., Oregon Public Library, Oregon, IL.
Fig. 4: Ralph Elmer Clarkson (American, 1861-1942), *Interior of Studio*, c. 1900. Oil on canvas, unknown dimensions and location. Reproduced in *Brush and Pencil* 1:4 (January 1898), 95.
Fig. 5: William Merritt Chase (American, 1849-1916), *Tenth Street Studio*, 1880. Oil on canvas, 40 3/8 x 52 1/2 in., Saint Louis Art Museum.
Fig. 6: John Singer Sargent (American, 1856-1925), *Study of an Egyptian Slave Girl*, 1891. Oil on canvas, 72 ¾ x 23 ¼ in., Private Collection, on loan to the Art Institute of Chicago.
Fig. 7: Jean-Léon Gérôme (French 1824-1904), *The Slave Market*, 1866. Oil on canvas, 5.20 x 33.07 in., Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts.
Fig. 8: Frederick Arthur Bridgman (American, 1847-1928), The Siesta, 1878. Oil on canvas, 11 1.4 x 17 in., Private Collection.
Fig. 9: John Singleton Copley (American, 1738-1815), *Mrs. Thomas Gage*, 1771. Oil on canvas, 50 x 40 in., Timken Museum of Art.
Fig. 10: Eugène Delacroix (French, 1789-1863), *Greece on the Ruins of Missolonghi*, 1827. Oil on canvas, 81.89 × 57.87 in., Musée des Beaux-Arts, Bordeaux, France.
Fig. 11: Carlo Franzoni (Italian, 1788–1819), *Justice*, 1817. Plaster, 53 ¼ x 127 ¼ in., U.S. Capitol, Old Supreme Court Chamber.
Fig. 12: Near East Relief Committee Advertisement on page 6 of the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 16, 1920.
Fig. 13: American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief Poster, c.1915-1918.
Fig. 14: William Gunning King (British, 1859–1940), *Lest They Perish*, 1917. Poster, 31 x 46cm, published by Conwell Graphic Co’s NY.
Fig. 15: “You May Expect These Callers” on page 15 in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 20, 1919.
Fig. 16: Babe Ruth presenting a baseball bat to Nouvart Dzeron in order for her to auction off for the benefit of the Near East Relief in 1920. Photo from collection of Babe Ruth photographs on the LA84 Foundation’s website. The LA84 Foundation operates the largest sports research library in North America.
References


“A Line O’Type or Two.” Chicago Daily Tribune. April 9, 1942.


“Armenians who are Americans.” Chicago Daily Tribune. June 12, 1918.


“Art Students Prepare for Annual Costume Ball to be Given Tonight.” Chicago Daily Tribune. February 27, 1906.


Clarkson, Ralph. “Exhibition of Society of Western Artists.” *Brush and Pencil* 1 (March 1898): 197.


Ralph E. Clarkson Papers, c.1900-1941. Ryerson and Burnham Archives. Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL.


