Two years before the outbreak of the First World War, a 10-year-old boy and his 32-year-old mother visited a photographic studio in the city of Van, Turkish Armenia. Around them the Armenian Genocide was escalating but their wish was to sit for a formal studio portrait. The photograph was to be sent to the boy’s father, who had left 4 years previously seeking asylum in America. In the surviving 1912 black-and-white image (Fig. 1) the woman wears a long floral dress and neat headscarf. Her son stands stiffly beside her in his formal coat, usually reserved for church. Whatever she wished to communicate to her absent husband, she received no response. Seven years later she died of starvation while fleeing Turkish persecution and was buried in a mass grave. Her death, and the hopelessness of his situation, prompted her teenage son to escape to the USA. There, in about 1920, he was reunited with his father and reclaimed this photograph, later using it for a work of great personal significance: *The Artist and His Mother*.

Despite creating a new life for himself in the USA, Arshile Gorky remained haunted by these traumatic early experiences. Afflicted by depression, financial worries, cancer and paralysis of his painting arm, he died by suicide in 1948. This article describes how Gorky used his early experiences in Armenia in his art, attempting to repair these losses by recreating his world.

**The Artist and His Mother**

*The Artist and His Mother* is a profoundly melancholic image. The couple pose stiffly, perhaps conflicted by hope that the photograph will elicit the father’s financial support and pride in seeking to present themselves in their best clothing. Their expressions betray the helplessness of their situation and the horrors they have seen befall their relatives. One of the two painted versions of this work creates a separation of the
figures (Fig. 2), whereas in the other their arms touch, faithful to the original photograph. The great sadness of this masterpiece lies not only in the horrifying social context it provides to the Armenian Genocide, but also its depiction of a lost and idealised mother. From piecing together Gorky’s history we understand why this painting is a great work of art: in it he had embodied deep experiences of his own. As the psychoanalyst Hanna Segal explains, ‘All artists aim at immortality [...] And of all human activities art comes nearest to achieving immortality’ (Segal 1952). Through this framework we understand that for Gorky the act of painting this image represents his attempts to recreate a once loved and once whole object.

For over 10 years, Gorky extensively reworked the two versions of this image; a process regarded as an important means of resolving the destruction of his old world (Theriault 2009). Over the course of many charcoal, graphite and ink studies, Gorky refined the identity he wished to construct for himself and for his lost mother, repeatedly sandpapering and repainting her face to a porcelain finish (Anfam 1990). Her sorrowful serenity commemorates a woman who died amidst the family’s forced displacement, and serves as an accusation of an absent father who took so little care to keep them in mind. As Gorky’s wife commented years later after his death:

‘He often said that, if a human being managed to emerge from such a period, it could not be as a whole man and that there was no recovery from the blows and wounds of such a struggle to survive’ (Taylor 2009a).

The story told by this image adds vital personal history for a man who was to suffer a series of great hardships over a life that ended at 46.

**Biography**

Arshile Gorky was born Vosdanig Adoian, probably in 1902, although no birth records survive. His family lived in the village of Khorkum, near Van, in an Armenian province near the border of Ottoman Turkey. As minority Armenians, the family lived under the threat of continued religious persecution by the Turks. His father had managed to escape conscription, a certain death sentence, by emigrating to the USA in 1908, where he joined his firstborn son. Gorky’s mother, Sushranig, struggled in his absence, not least due to scant financial support. By 1915 persecution of the Armenians had intensified and the Turks commenced the Siege of Van. Alongside 250 000 others, the family fled on an 8-day march to Russian Armenia, witnessing many of their number die. Weakened over a harsh winter by malnutrition and inadequate housing, Sushranig died in 1919 at the age of 39 and was buried in a mass grave. She joined an estimated 1 500 000 Armenians who died in massacres and forced deportations at the hands of Ottoman soldiers over the years of the Armenian Genocide.

The Armenian diaspora saw escaped communities resettling in Russia, the USA, the Middle East and Europe. In 1920 the 19-year-old Gorky and his sister Vartoosh sought exile in America. They rejoined their sisters, now living in a Massachusetts Armenian community, and their father and half-brother, who farmed in Rhode Island. Gorky’s relationship with his father foundered after 11 years of separation. Resentment festered over his father’s long absence, his failure to provide for the family and to protect their mother from her dreadful fate. It was around this time that Gorky found stashed in his father’s drawer the photograph sent over by his mother in 1912. He borrowed it, never to return it. A final rupture with his father in his early 20s reinforced...
a decision to carve out his own identity, distinct
from that of the immigrant labourers around him.

Gorky immersed himself in the cultural riches
of recent European painting, learning by imitation
and using books, museum visits and brief
enrolments in art school to apprentice himself to
his chosen masters – Cézanne, Picasso and Miró
(Taylor 2009b). So strong was their influence on
his work that many early paintings were dismissed
as pastiche. However, this period was critical for
Gorky in finding his own voice among new and
alien circumstances. The insecurity of his identity
was manifested in the lies he maintained up until
his death. Changing his name in 1924 to Arshile
Gorky involved a pretence at being nephew to the
exiled Soviet poet Maxim Gorky (Spender 2011).
Hiding away his experiences of holocaust survival,
he also invented a new history for himself: an
elite education and Parisian artistic training. Only
posthumously did his wife find out that he
had lived through genocide, at the same time
discovering his real name.

As Gorky’s style evolved from the figurative
to the abstract, nostalgia for his heritage
broke through these European borrowings. He
established his place alongside contemporaries
such as de Kooning, Guston, Pollock and Rothko
– all central characters in the development of
Abstract Expressionism (Anfam 1990). Like
de Kooning and Rothko, immigrant heritage
and outsider status influenced his work. Like
Guston and Rothko, he suffered depression; and,
as with Pollock and Rothko, he would suffer a
violent death.

Gorky’s connections to a group of Surrealists,
including the Chilean-born artist Roberto Matta
and the French writer André Breton, established
him at the hub of New York’s intellectual life. By
1941 he had achieved artistic recognition with
his first solo exhibition. However, the 1930s and
1940s were also troubled by economic insecurity,
stormy relationships and depressive episodes.

Amidst this he found great happiness with his
second wife, the American Agnes Magruder,
whom he called Mougouch; an Armenian term
of endearment. Their marriage marked a point
at which no further work was to be done on the
two versions of The Artist and His Mother. A great
burden of guilt appeared to have been sublimated.

Limited finances confined the family’s living
space to Gorky’s studio and Mougouch found
it hard to keep their two young daughters from
disturbing him. Relying on the kindness of friends
and family, they were able to spend periods in
rural Virginia and Connecticut. There, Gorky’s
creativity was inspired, melding memories of the
Armenian countryside into abstract American
landscapes. Just as his financial prospects
appeared to be lifting, the mid-1940s marked the
start of a series of devastating events. There was
the humiliation of a 1945 gallery opening, where
delayed invitations meant that Mougouch and
Gorky’s dealer, Julien Levy, constituted almost
the only guests. In 1946 a fire destroyed over 20
recent paintings in his Connecticut studio. The
same year, Gorky underwent surgery for rectal
cancer and was left with a colostomy bag. In an
effort to conceal the indignities he starved himself,
handaging his body tightly to control the noises.
Depression, which had affected him before his
marriage, returned in 1947 and he started to
speak of suicide.

By 1948 family life was significantly strained,
with his wife and daughters living under the
cloud of his black moods, chronic pain and heavy
drinking (Spender 2011). On three occasions
Mougouch saw him set off for the woods with a
rope, intent on hanging himself, and was forced
to send their daughters to intercept him (Spender
2011). At this time Gorky was severely injured in
a car crash. His broken neck was set in a brace,
paralysing his painting arm and deepening his
depression. The children were terrified at the
outbursts of violence they witnessed against
their mother, who asked Gorky’s doctor for help
and was advised to seek safety at her mother’s
house (Spender 2011). Alone at their home, and
determined to kill himself to free the family,
Gorky ended his life on 21 July 1948.

Relevance to psychiatry
Contemporary psychiatrists may find this work
interesting because the figures portrayed in The
Artist and His Mother remind us of the enduring
impact of childhood trauma. For Gorky this meant
that despite his attempts at reparation through art,
his early experiences, long-term depressive illness
and the series of tragedies he suffered in adulthood
eventually proved too much for him to sublimate.
More generally, the figures communicate the
individual impact of great trauma to a degree
that could rarely be tolerated when taking a full
personal history. The young boy and his mother
remind us that a trauma history represents not
merely a sequence of events, but a human narrative
in which relationships are ruptured, new fears are
gendered, and great personal disappointments
undermine the human capacity to withstand
psychological assault. In the clinical setting, any
patient who describes their experiences of loss or
abuse battles pride, disgust, sorrow and disdain
in telling their story. However dispassionately
this account is related, or indeed recorded, being reminded of Gorky’s painting allows the more fine-grained interpretation warranted. *The Artist and His Mother* contributes the human detail that is often lacking, and that which Gorky was never able to speak of in adulthood.

**Acknowledgements**

With thanks to Cosima Spender for valuable insights into her grandfather’s life story; and to Melissa Kerr at the Arshile Gorky Foundation for her help in securing permissions.

**References**


