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Seventeen Pieces: Displacement, Misplacement, and Conservation

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Abstract

This article explores the systemic importance of art in the conservation of images, historical reference, and cultural meaning as displaced victims of humanitarian crises make the transition from the land of their birth to a new country with a different history and cultural landscape. In presenting the work of Kevork Mourad, an artist of Armenian descent displaced from Syria, we show the essential, layered interplay of visceral, lived individual experiences and the historic collective memory of real and imagined pasts that survive the destruction of physical artifacts.

Yasmin Merali is Professor of Systems Thinking at the University of Hull and an expert evaluator for the European Union. She serves on the executive board of the UNESCO UniNet on Complex Systems Science. Kevork Mourad is an internationally renowned artist based in New York. His performance art entails live drawing and animation in concert with musicians. Collaborators include Yo-Yo Ma, Kim Kashkashian, the Los Angeles Master Chorale, Brooklyn Rider, The Knights, Perspectives Ensemble, Paola Prestini, and Kinan Azmeh. Manas Ghanem is a visiting research fellow at the Centre for the Resolution of Intractable Conflict. She is the founder of an art platform organizing exhibitions and cultural events to counter negative sentiments and foster a peaceful coexistence.

The invitation to write this article stems from a conversation we had at the annual conference of the Centre for the Resolution of Intractable Conflict at Harris Manchester College, Oxford University in September 2019, when Kevork Mourad presented his work and images of architectural features that existed in Syria before the war. The conversation about preservation and conservation of objects and their meanings for displaced peoples was sparked when a participant, moved by the image of a door fashioned by beautiful Armenian craftsmanship, asked, “Can we not preserve these artifacts, or create replicas?” This article does not engage with questions of curation and restoration of physical objects. Our focus is on the conservation of images, historical reference, and cultural meaning, as displaced victims of humanitarian crises make the transition from the land of their birth to a new country with a different history and cultural landscape.

Images of displaced people, forced out of their home countries often in the unfolding or escalation of humanitarian crises, are becoming commonplace. It is the white noise against which life in the West goes on—the public attention span for humanitarian crises is in step with the fast-paced media coverage of these events. A slower burning and more persistent, growing concern is with the specter of migrants competing for jobs, straining infrastructures, and generally diluting the national character of the host population. In the post-9/11 world, for the vast majority of displaced people, the outlook on arrival is often bleak: there is a pressure to integrate with the “native” population by suppressing all “foreign” traits through a sort of collective cultural amnesia, possibly retaining a few decorative features, resonating with the attitude of the early nineteenth-century school of orientalist artists.

The responsibility of first-generation migrants toward future generations, then, is not one of preserving or replicating the past but conserving authentically what is of value for the perpetuation of their sense of self as they become healthy citizens in a multicultural society. The notion of preserving the past is not viable—when you are displaced, what was “home” is lost to you and you are lost to it. “Home” and “self” are evolving, situated living beings, and the arrow of time precludes returning to the past in any intact way. What does persist is the individual and collective memory, with the construction of the former rooted in the latter.

For the first generation of a displaced people, there is the immediacy of the visceral, experiential recollection of the land they have left, rooted in the collective identity and history of the community from which they originated. Art, music, literature, and food allow the requisite latitude for the conservation of the things that matter, to make the transition from one *place* to a new, evolving *space*, as individuals grow into the new life they have embarked on.

This transition is reflected in Kevork Mourad’s process and in the work that emerges from that process. His work is not about creating a fusion of the East and West. It is about gracefully conserving what can be conserved from the collective past of displaced people, to sustain their evolving identity as they go forward to realize a way of coexisting comfortably with those who arrived before them and those to follow. The conservation is not self-conscious—it is something that is integral to the existence and evolution of survivors. He does not start out with a composition in his head—the process of creation is emergent, always moving forward from one line to the next. As he puts it, “There is no going back.” His sketches find their way into his works, but they are not studies for the work in the conventional way.

Kevork Mourad’s performance art is often in collaboration with musicians and poets. These performances and the animations on his website with their motion and trajectory create a dynamic virtual space, embodying the essential transience and evolution at the core of the migrant experience. The process is one of capturing “stuff” in the moment, and once committed,

this becomes a persistent trace in the memory and the senses of those who engage with it. His three-dimensional pieces accentuate the possibilities that are afforded by looking at these creations from different perspectives.

His process of creating the works that are displayed in art galleries and public places also generates a space where there is an interplay between transience and persistence. The work is not representative of real buildings or objects. The imagery and motifs echo forms and symbolism from a collective memory (reflecting particularly his ancestry and inheritance from Armenia), but they also bring forth a landscape that resonates with a more universally palpable sensation of raw power, beauty, broken beauty, civilization, and life. The ambition is for the image to bring you into the work, to invoke a shared familiarity with the space and place he is creating: “to reactivate certain things in you related to your own memory that you might not remember—a sense of *déjà vu*, feeling that you have been there before, have seen it before . . .”

It is possibly because he is a displaced person in the midst of a migration crisis that at the core of all this is that appeal to celebrating humanity and diversity, allowing the other to enter and make what they will of the space that is there to be inhabited.

Three Voices

The voice of the artist is embodied in the works. Kevork Mourad was born in Syria with an Armenian ancestry. His great grandparents were of the generation that, fleeing from Turkish persecution, arrived in Aleppo with nothing but soon established themselves as the finest of craftsmen and artisans “to create with bare hands *something out of nothing*. . . . I am from a culture that makes things with my hands . . .”

On being an Armenian in Syria, he says:

Syria is an interesting place because it is a place where people from different backgrounds brought with them their traditions.

To grow up as an Armenian in Syria you cannot avoid being displaced, descending from a displaced person: The language you speak is not the language of the land, the traditions you have—even cooking—what you eat there is not the tradition of the land—fifty percent is from my Armenian ancestors. Therefore, to be descendent of a displaced person is part of our daily living. Before the crisis I was creating works about the displacement of my ancestors, the way they arrived to Syria. I was fascinated by the idea that people can come to a new land with their bare hands but there is something about them—you can spot from a distance. . . . You see a group of people walking down a street, but there is a slight symbolism in what they are wearing that they know they could rebuild, recreate—that is why so many craftsmen arrived to Syria and they created carpets, textiles, pottery, and all this. I put that in the works. . . . For us in Syria they say the best body shop person, carpenter, jeweler is Armenian. Because we had to work extra hard to show that we could offer something.

On being a Syrian in the United States:

When I arrived to the US I found the first five years confusing. I thought to become part of the American fabric right away. You don’t want to be spotted as an immigrant. . . . [But then] you realize what is your own story—you need to have your individual story to offer—to survive. I want to add to the story of immigrants in this country—a thousand years from now people will see individual stories that make a difference. In my mind—

my grandmother is making coffee, the neighbor is making this calligraphy, the façade of the old home on the right-hand side, my journey to school—all becomes this work.

For the commentary with the images that appear in the next section, we have two voices speaking about where the pieces take us in the specific and the abstract sense. Manas Ghanem has a special connection with the works because of her Syrian origins and her experience on the frontline working with refugees with the United Nations. She relates intimately to the cultural roots of the imagery and its connection with many individual stories and the condition of the refugees she worked with in the camps in many countries. Yasmin Merali was born in Africa but shares the experience of displacement and of life in a refugee camp. As a systems thinker, she is interested in the systemic conservation of cultural heritage: she is drawn to the works because of what they do to make a space where the transience of time and place is captured intellectually and viscerally.

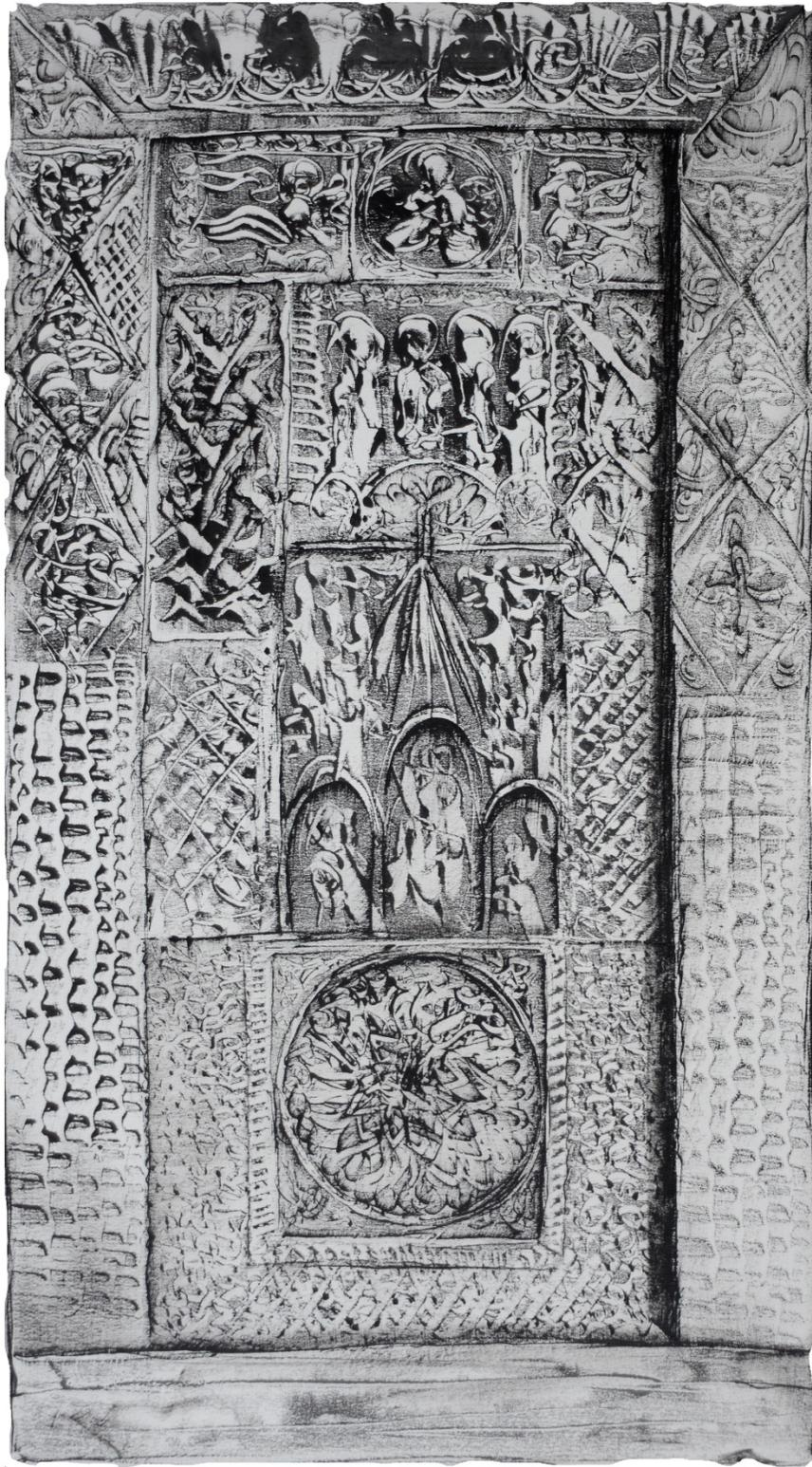
Seventeen Pieces

The images in this article have been chosen to convey a flavor of what goes into the making of the works and what they invoke in those who engage with them. We begin with the simpler images and sketches and build up to the more complex three-dimensional pieces that allow one to engage with the temporal and spatial trajectories of things conserved.

Images: At Home in Aleppo

Doors

The Arabic and Armenian cultures are poetic, attaching great significance to the use of imagination, metaphor, and symbolism. Here, front doors take the character and sensibilities of those who inhabit the houses. They are also the security guards providing protection from the dangers outside, the first to greet you when you enter, and the last to wave goodbye and wait for your return when you leave. They keep secrets about what goes on inside and represent the face of the household before strangers who come knocking. A door is not only a piece of wood or metal that you push or pull in your way in or out; it is in the essence of “home” remembered.



Armenian Door

One of two doors that were exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, this piece was inspired by doors in the streets of Aleppo and the huge gates of palaces, historic churches, and monasteries in Armenia.

Beautifully and skillfully carved, carrying many symbols from the Armenian cultural heritage, it tells stories of people's journeys, religion, and monuments. The intricate carvings stand out as much as the craftsmanship and the identity of the Armenians in Syria and particularly in Aleppo. Standing side by side with other doors in the imaginary city, it tells that it was safe to maintain one's identity and hold onto its significance while smoothly integrating in the social and cultural tissue of the city and enriching the country at large.

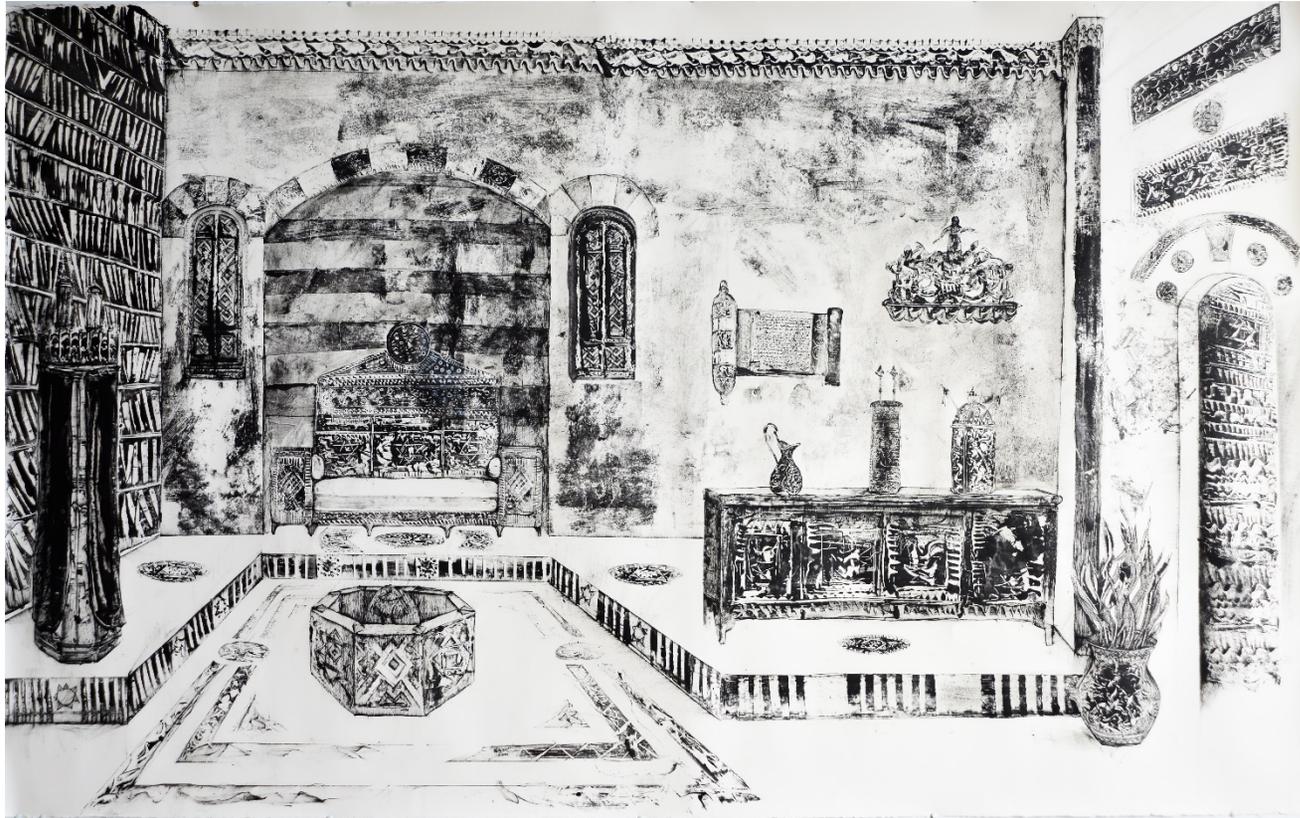


Aleppo Door

Typical door of old Aleppo homes with its Juliet balcony and the vine tree that springs from the doorsteps and climbs up to bloom and display its fruits at the roof. The wooden shutters, the typical shapes, engravings, and textures—the experience of walking in the narrow alleys of old Aleppo.

Interiors

People of old cities like Damascus and Aleppo preferred a simple design for the exterior appearance of their homes. Houses looked similar from the outside, with ashen walls made of brick coated with a mixture of clay, limestone, and hay. The modest façade projects a sense of equality and empathy between the rich and poor, while the interior exhibits the social status and cultural heritage of the householder. The front door of a traditional house typically opens onto a tranquil space of plants and trees with a water fountain in the center and living quarters surrounding it. The walls are tiled and decorated with different designs and artifacts. Most houses consist of two or three floors linked by staircases and internal balconies with beautiful wrought-iron rails. Fruit trees, fragrant roses, and jasmine, exuding a heavenly aroma, are essentials. The two pieces shown here are part of a larger collection that Kevork Mourad created for his short animation movie *4 Acts for Syria*. These homes reflect the identities of the people who lived there. They stood by each other and lived together in harmony for centuries.



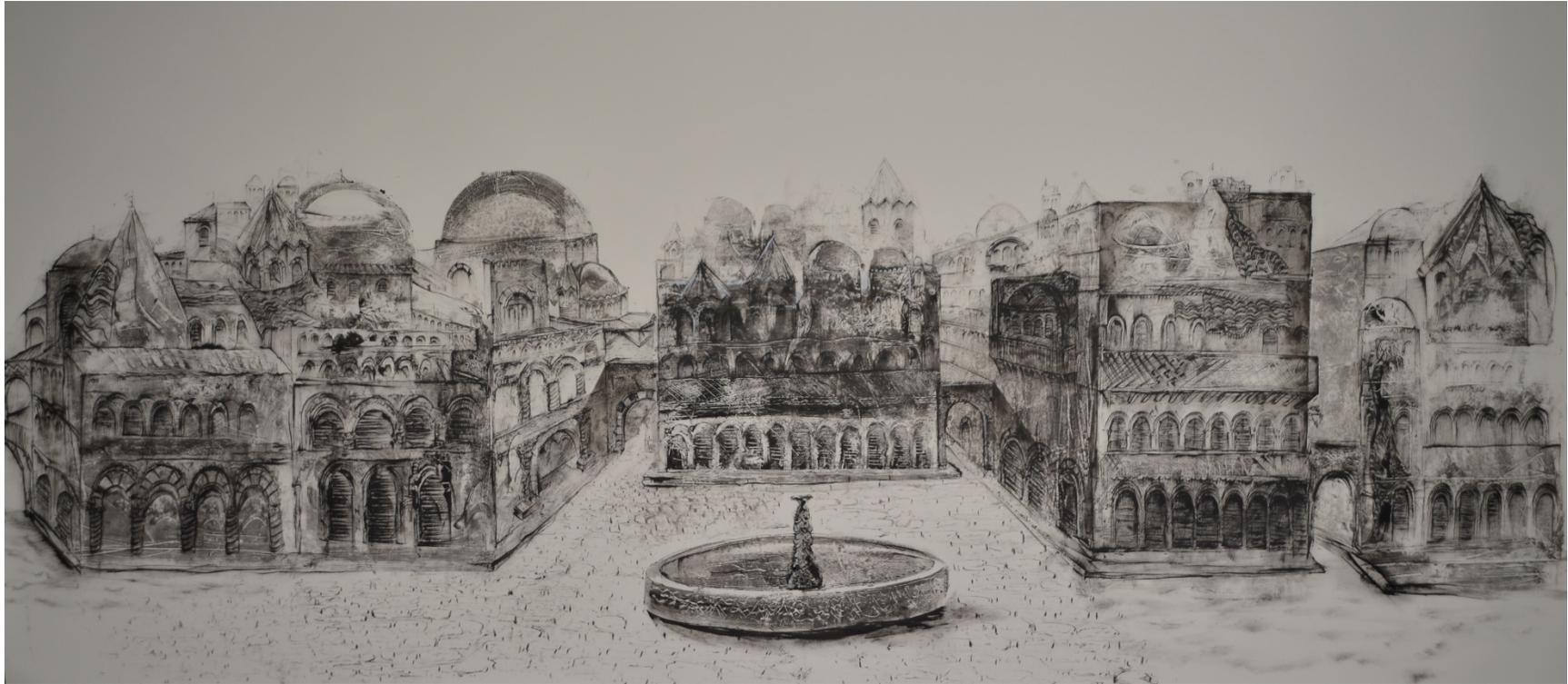
Jewish Room

This is a typical Aleppo home with its beautiful marble flooring and fountain and the signature wooden furniture and bookcase. It houses precious artifacts and decorative pieces from the Jewish heritage: the Star of David, the Torah, and the menorah.



Arabic Room

Beautifully hand-carved traditional furniture, wooden chairs, and coffee tables, the signature crafts of Aleppo and Damascus provide the setting for everyday objects from the Arab and Islamic world: an astrolabe, Islamic tiles, the samovar and argileh, the ornate Damascus box, and hanging on the wall, a painting of a desert settlement.



The City (1)

The historic quarters of old Aleppo have traditional old houses that stand shoulder-to-shoulder. Some are also positioned on top of each other—a bricolage from which emerges a unique and organic architectural design. The doors, walls, and balconies extend facing each other, forming the narrow alleyways that run between the neighborhoods all over the city. Streets stretch and curve parallel to each other and then part at roundabouts to form squares with fountains of flickering water where people gather to drink, rest, and talk. There are arches, gates, minarets, markets, and places of worship. The walls are an earthy color, brick walls covered with a consistent layer of clay, limestone, and mud, reflecting the bright sunlight. The churches and mosques stand not far from each other, announcing time for prayer together, loud enough to rise above the bustling noise of the street markets.



The City (2)

Throughout its history, the gentle touch of the diverse cultures that lived in the city has enhanced its quality and ensured its security. Aleppo was home to the three Abrahamic religions for centuries. It was open to religious and ethnic diversity as it stood at the old Silk Road when trade linked continents. It was a safe refuge for persecuted minorities and a welcoming ground for visitors and migrants from the East and the West who passed through or decided to make it home. Here Kevork Mourad captures the vision of this Aleppo with its imaginary seven doors welcoming travelers from different directions. The spatial orientation of the doors is an extension of the solicitousness of Syrian hospitality: no matter which direction they come from, travelers have an entry point close to home. The decoration of each door bears imagery taken from the cultural repertoire of the visitor, to create an aesthetic that connects.

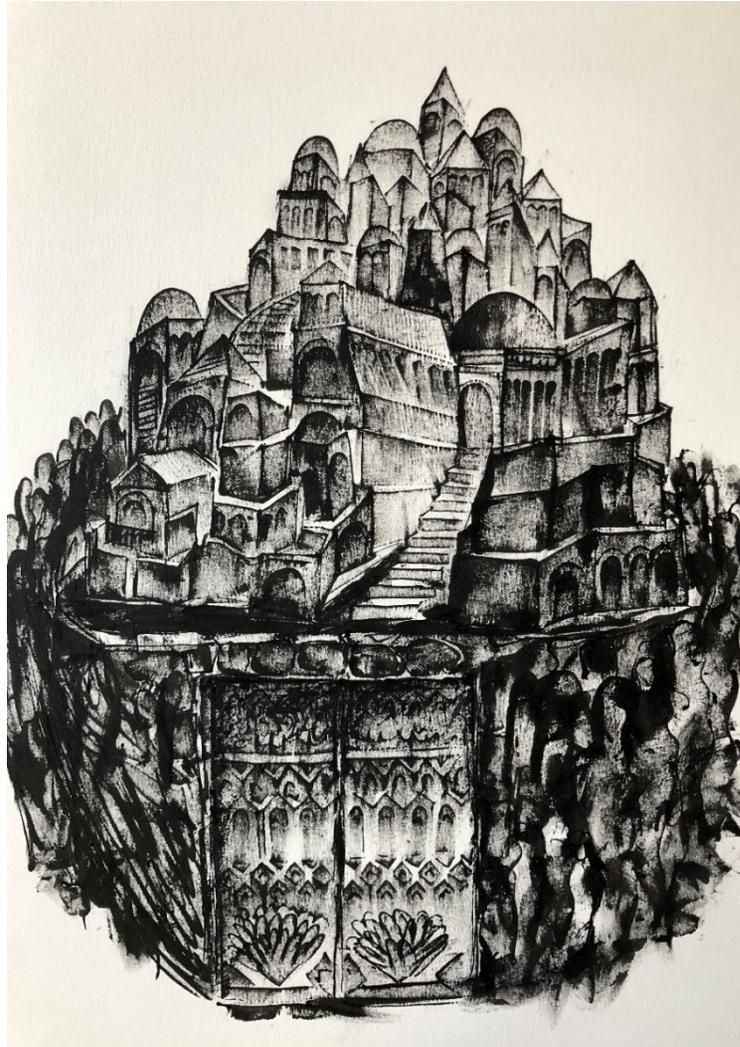
The Sketches

Kevork Mourad's sketchbook is an exploration diary of different places: the lines and flow are spontaneous; the place dictates what he creates. The sketches are not intended to be studies for any particular work or installation, but certain features do find their way into the exhibited works.



This untitled sketch was created in a Parisian café in the summer of 2018. We chose to include it here because of its complexity. The elegance of the form and the intricacy of the patterns run alongside a palpable sense of raw, sinuous power, delicately poised against the edifice.

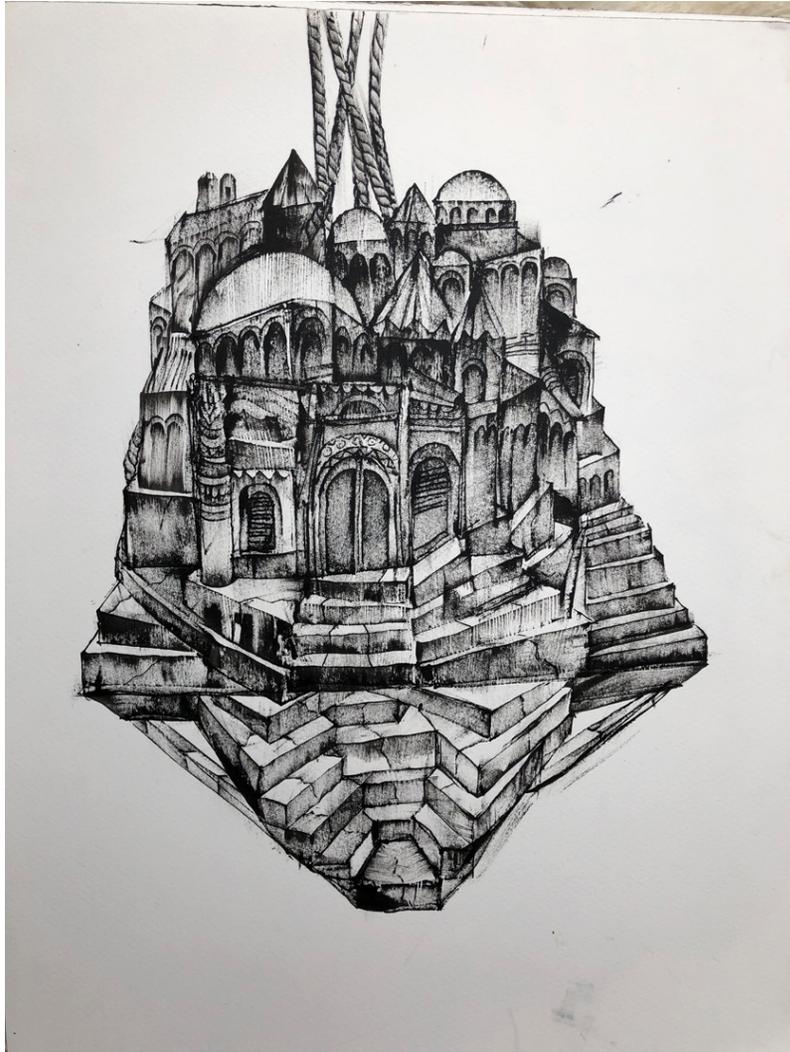
The making of the next three sketches is in the same vein as Calvino's invisible city—seeing the same city from different angles, an allegory for Syria. The fortified aspect, the heavy doors, the rock it stands on, and the bodies that embrace the city walls bring home the fragility of existence and the precariousness of fortified constructions sequestered from the fabric of humanity. The fourth sketch relates to Kevork's concern for the conservation of Armenian culture.



The city sequestered, within closed solid gates and high walls, inspired by fear and isolation. Figures cling to the exterior, to defend with their lives a civilization for future generations. Despite grave danger, many people decided to remain in Aleppo. Many did not have the means to travel and more refused to leave, preferring to die protecting their home.



The city is pristine, standing in all its glory, engulfed by a sea of souls.



Suspended in time, stripped of its protections, the city with all its weight hanging in the air in such unprecedented times. The fragile ropes hold the streets, markets, monuments, and homes with doors and window shutters closed. We can recognize domes, arches, and minarets. All are one in such times of distress.

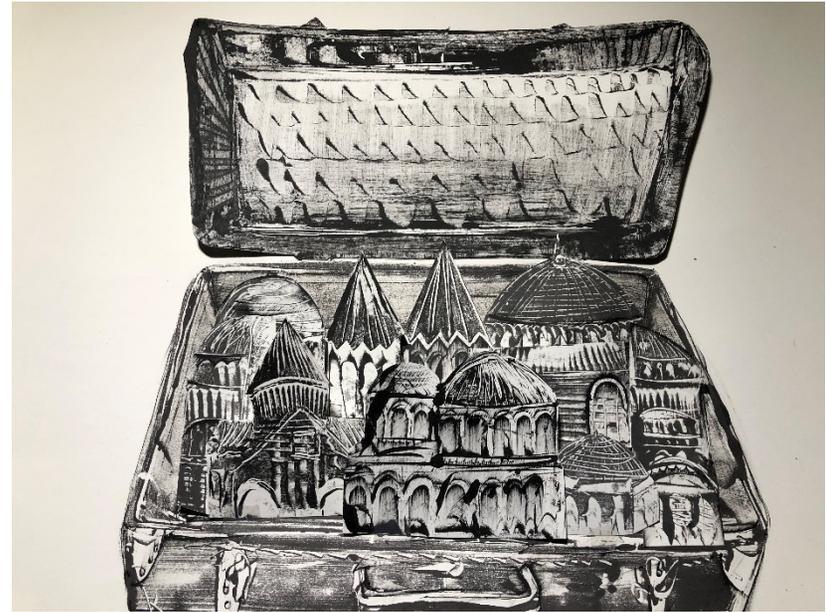


This sketch captures the sense of relying on the past to build something new. Inspired by a small new hotel complex in Armenia and created to look like an old city, it echoes Kevork Mourad's fear for the Armenian culture as something small, fragile, and in danger—a precarious survival, like a tree house in a hurricane.

These final two sketches speak directly to the plight of migrants.



A simple, traditional family fleeing. Figures on foot and on horseback, the man carrying on his back nothing but the grief and memories of the city that was (and in his heart still is) home. The angel wings, the intertwining of man and beast and treasured objects, the weariness of bodies, and the featureless landscape make this a strange and desolate statement. We sense they are in flight, away from possible horrors, but toward what?



This piece was created for the movie *4 Acts for Syria* in 2017. When you have to flee from your home, you carry with you the things you want to conserve—the memories of people and places, of smells and tastes and colors and the way the light plays on the land and the water, changing with the seasons. The suitcase is of only modest proportions but its contents are not: “Every person is like the universe—there is so much behind the door.”

Installations

Kevorg Mourad's installations are displayed in galleries and museums internationally. They also feature in animated movies that he co-produces with musicians, artists, poets, and film makers. In the following installation pieces, we can see the conservation of some of the themes and forms that are captured in the sketches.

Immortal City (2016)

The Voice of the Artist

This piece was created as a tribute to the loyalty and courage of the people of Syria who did not desert their homeland. The work was inspired by a telephone conversation the artist had with a friend in Aleppo, where life goes on in the face of senseless destruction. "When we go to work," his friend told him, "we hide behind flimsy textiles and avoid snipers."

This is probably the most poignant of Kevorg Mourad's two-dimensional pieces.

It laid the foundation of how to take something historic and combine it with tragedy and my own feelings.

There are people like him and people like me. They tie themselves to the city, they want to defend this country simply by being there. People make places—their act of living makes the city survive. I left Aleppo many years ago, before I could foresee this. I am in a relatively safe place. How will I face him when we meet in the future, when that person has gone through so much horror and you just say, "How are you?"? We think we are equal but we cannot forget their journey and their effort.

Commentary

This was the start of a series of artworks connecting people to places, to a particular architecture, a lifetime, a memory, or a feeling.

The image looks monotonous: it offers no loud signposting to tell you where to look—figures blend with the architecture—you need to peel the layers away for a tale that unwinds, and then you become attached to it.

At the center of the piece is the iconic castle of Aleppo on fire, smoke billowing out of its towers. At the bottom, the rich velvet and silk carpets and traditional textile that used to be proudly displayed in markets are torn and scattered on the ground. We see the bodies and parts of bodies mingled with the rubble: those who did not survive and the hands that tried to help them but could not reach.

There is the imagery of ropes, which we can see connecting and linking the people with each other, with the textiles and with the buildings. The drawing moves the viewer from looking at a two-dimensional piece of art to a story of deep connectedness beyond its elements. The ropes transmute from representing physical artifacts to embodying an emotional and humane connection to mysterious powers even when the people are absent from the artwork.



Immortal City

Strata of Memory (2017)

An installation with three layers
Acrylic and ink on fine Egyptian cotton (400-thread count)
6x2.2x1.5 meters

The Voice of the Artist

This installation is about the history of Syria. It demonstrates Kevork Mourad's ability to use physical space and symbolism to capture the transience and persistence of civilizations, allowing one to move freely through time and space.

Commentary

This is a three-dimensional piece, with three layers of paper suspended in space. Each layer captures an era in Syria's history.

The back layer is the foundation of the piece, invoking glorious memories of the origins of Syria and the iconic outlines of Palmira, Busra, and the citadel of Aleppo.

The middle piece takes us to the thriving civilization of the country a thousand to five hundred years ago, with many different faiths living peacefully together. The artist uses architecture and design to create a sense of stability and order. The structures are regular, and churches, mosques, and synagogues stand intact and erect, shoulder to shoulder, supporting each other for hundreds of years of peaceful co-existence.

The front layer rudely restores us to modern-day reality, the toppling and destruction of columns, arches, and buildings by formidable, palpable but invisible forces. Intermingled with this carnage and fragments of the past are figurative elements, hands reaching out, bodies supporting each other. There is no order, and there is nothing to help us make sense of what we see in our time.



Strata of Memory

Time Immemorial (2018)

An installation with three layers
Acrylic and ink on Egyptian cotton (400-thread count)
6x2.2x1.5 meters

The Voice of the Artist

Ani was the ancient capital of Armenia, a place of pilgrimage, of wealth and prosperity. It is known as “the city of a thousand and one churches,” which today are all destroyed, leaving little to bring to mind the splendor of the capital: the spirit of its civilization cannot be recovered intact from its paltry archaeological remains.

Here, Kevork Mourad resurrects the “lost city” of Ani from his imagination, relying on his feelings and emotions to bring us an almost mythological creation inspired by history.

I have the responsibility to preserve it emotionally, preserve it imaginatively. We don’t have facts about it. I am worried the history is getting lost. I want the line to dance, to scream: the line talks in the piece—a gesture of expression, a smooth form—not hesitant. Line after line, a smudge, and the piece reveals itself.

Commentary

Another suspended piece, this time the artist pays tribute to his Armenian heritage.

The structure of the installation reveals Kevork Mourad’s fascination with transience and persistence. As in the *Strata of Memory*, there are three layers that capture the passage of historical time. Every structure is connected to other structures with ropes—signifying the cultural space of the time—binding together neighbors from different civilizations. The ropes that suspend the fabric from the ceiling invoke the vision of sails: “You can take it with you wherever you want—a work that can float and travel with you.”

In the back panel we can see the Tower of Babel alongside ancient artifacts shared by the three cultures of ancient Babylonia, Persia, and Armenia. In the middle panel is the glorious manifestation of the cultural mix thriving, with harmony and depth evoking the splendor of bronze, gold, tea, perfume, and wine and the sweetness of spices—and then comes the front piece with the falling columns, and the ruins speak of a great civilization that is now being deliberately erased from history.

This piece speaks volumes about the repetitive history of the region.



Time Immemorial



Time Immemorial

The deconstructed installation showing the three separate layers that are assembled to produce the three-dimensional piece.

Seeing through Babel (2019)

Commissioned by the Ismaili Centre, London, in partnership with the Aga Khan Museum, Toronto

This work was created in-situ in the exhibition space, using a monotype technique in addition to direct drawing onto the surface of the structure.



Set against the Old Testament story of the Tower of Babel, this piece speaks to the power of art and imagery to communicate across the divides of language and race.

Kevork Mourad has created a space for pluralism where imagery from different cultures and traditions coalesces in a structure of beautiful elegance with many windows to light up its internal space.¹

Multiple Belongings

All the pieces we show here are Kevork Mourad's imagined constructions. None are replicas of actual objects, but all are representations of the collective senses and experiences that for him conserve the essence of his cultural heritage and the histories of Armenia and Syria. The place of his ancestors and the place of his birth are woven into his identity, but he is not defined wholly by these. This article and the images give you a glimpse of the Armenian who makes works with his bare hands, an internationally acclaimed artist who co-creates things of beauty and power with musicians and poets, the man who will always know the smell of the bread from his grandmother's kitchen in Aleppo, the parent . . . , the immigrant who walks the streets of Manhattan with pride.

Right-wing populist sentiment in Western countries is a force for homogenizing the immigrant into a conforming stereotype twice over: on arrival there is an "othering" based on a stereotype defined by perceived characteristics associated with race, ethnicity, color, and so on; the subsequent process of "enabling" the outsider to integrate successfully into society sets about the task of dropping "cultural baggage" to conform to some idealized vision of national identity. Added to this phenomenon is a more recent evocation of Samuel Huntington's "clash of cultures" thesis, pitting Islam against Western civilization. Perhaps what matters even more is that for those who have had to flee to the West, these things are seen as part of the landscape, to be accepted in the same way that one accepts the presence of mountains.

The initial motivation for writing this article was to explore the way in which art can conserve the cultural heritage of displaced peoples even if physical artifacts cannot be preserved. Humanitarian efforts to address the plight of the migrants overlook the importance of conserving intact the cultural treasures they embody. So much is lost in making a "successful" transition from the refugee camp to becoming a citizen. We chose *Seeing through Babel* as the final piece in this article because it is about hope for a future where diversity will be celebrated. As His Highness the Aga Khan, founder of the Global Centre for Pluralism, observed, "We cannot make the world safe for democracy unless we also make the world safe for diversity."²

Notes

¹ For detailed images of the intricate artwork and the internal space, see <https://www.kevorkmourad.com/seeing-through-babel-2019/>.

² Address by His Highness the Aga Khan to the School of International and Public Affairs, Columbia University, May 15, 2006.