



The Mountains of Azerbaijan Through the Eyes of Modern Artists

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Abstract. The artistic interpretation of Azerbaijani mountains in modern fine art was explained in this article. This work attaches a great importance, since the mountain landscape is a part of a cultural and historical code of national identity. The aim of the study is to analyze the transformation of mountain imagery in the works of several 19th- and 20th-century artists. The study utilizes art history, comparative history, and compositional stylistic analysis. Using works by Vasily Vereshchagin, Tahir Salakhov, Bahruz Kengerli, Mikayil Abdullayev, Sattar Bahlulzade, and Baba Aliyev as examples, the author identifies distinctive features of artistic interpretation of mountain landscapes, ranging from ethnographic authenticity to philosophical and symbolic interpretation. It is established that the image of mountains acts not only as a natural motif but also as an expression of historical memory, spiritual resilience, and national self-awareness. A conclusion is drawn about the key role of mountain landscapes in shaping the artistic language of 20th-century Azerbaijani painting.

Keywords: *artistic interpretation, national identity, style, mountain landscape, natural motif, mountain landscape*

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1. Introduction

Since ancient times, mountains have been perceived by humans not only as a natural phenomenon but also as a space for spiritual experience, a symbol of strength, resilience, and memory. Artists and travelers of various eras have turned to mountain landscapes in search of new meanings, forms, and states of mind. While for Renaissance masters, travel beyond their native land was a rare event, beginning in the 18th century, artistic expeditions became an integral part of exploring the world.

2. Mountain landscape as an artistic image in the painting of Azerbaijan in the 19th–20th centuries

During this period, the artist increasingly acted not only as a creator of images but also as an observer, researcher, and ethnographer. One striking example of this approach is the work of Vasily Vasilyevich Vereshchagin, for whom the Caucasus became an important point in his artistic and personal development (Fig. 1).

His impressions of Karabakh, Shushi, and the region's mountainous landscapes reflect not only the visual beauty of the area but also the complex, multilayered lives of people closely connected to nature. One of the most famous biographies of V.V. Vereshchagin is called "Easel on the Globe." This manuscript also mentions that the Caucasian theme was present in the works of Pushkin, Lermontov, Tolstoy, and many Russian artists and composers.



Figure. 1. Religious procession on Moharrem in Shusha. From a trip to the Caucasus. V.V. Vereshchagin. 1865.

“I arrived in Shusha late in the evening: through the darkness, only the dark silhouette of the city wall, built on the top of a high, steep mountain, could be seen... Shusha, the provincial capital of the Shusha district, was formerly the residence of the Karabakh khans. This place is quite well fortified, as it is protected on two sides by a sheer cliff, and on the other sides by a wall with very well-built towers. The climb up the mountain is very difficult; the poor road, roughly paved with large stones, is so steep that five horses could barely pull my cart. Even before reaching the mountain, I saw a bright light appear above the city and heard the roar of some kind of shouting; as I approached, the light grew ever stronger and finally turned into the glow of a large fire, and the roar turned into a chaotic roar of apparently many thousands of voices.”

This is how Vasily Vasilyevich begins his first Caucasian essay.

Upon entering the city, the artist witnessed a dazzling spectacle he had never seen before. By the light of night lights and torches, a teeming crowd filled the city square. Shiite Muslims, lined up in a line about a hundred strong, were jumping with loud shouts. Each held his neighbor with his left hand, and in his right, a thick stick, which he shook in the air as he leaped. Boys dressed in various rags and skins turned inside out galloped and beat drums to the general shouting and dancing. The mullahs, the stewards, pushed the crowd aside and cursed. The neighing of horses mingled with the chatter and noise of the gawking crowd. All this was illuminated by oil flares... Beginning with a colorful, emotional description of the holiday, Vereshchagin went on to explain its essence. Every year, during the first nine days of the month of Maharrem, Shia Azerbaijanis celebrate such festivities in memory of the suffering and martyrdom of imams revered by adherents of the Shia branch of Islam. These days are days of sorrow and mourning (Demin, Lev.).

Vereshchagin's Caucasus essays do not reflect all of his impressions. The geography of his travels in Azerbaijan was vast: from Nakhchivan to remote mountain villages. Vasily Vasilyevich was not limited to the role of a detached observer—he studied with equal attention both the opulent homes of the local nobility and the humble lives of the poor, immersing himself in the atmosphere of Eastern markets and exploring remote trails. The impressions of his second trip to the Caucasus were embodied in a large series of drawings and sketches, including portraits of representatives of the various peoples inhabiting the region, as well as genre scenes and urban and rural landscapes. In them, the artist captured the ethnographic diversity of the region: colorful portraits of local residents, dynamic genre sketches, and panoramas of towns and villages. Vereshchagin's works from this period are distinguished by a higher level of mastery than those produced during his first Caucasian trip in 1863. This applies to the technique, compositional



approach, meticulous drawing, and psychological depth of the images. This information is also detailed in literature devoted to the cultural heritage of the region. In particular, visual and historical parallels with these studies can be found in the materials (Demin, Lev. *With an Easel Around the Globe: The World through the Eyes of V.V. Vereshchagin*. 374 pages; 1991).

In the mid-20th century, a powerful cohort of young painters of various nationalities emerged and emerged, indebted in large part to the Russian school of art, which introduced them to the realistic tradition and to a deep understanding of the spiritual life of man.

Tahir Salahov is recognized as the main founder of the hard realism movement in Azerbaijan. In Azerbaijani fine arts, Soltan Mahammad was the founder of the Tabriz school of miniature painting, Bahruz Kangarli was the founder of the school of realistic painting, Azim Azimzade was a skilled master of caricature and graphics, Togrul Narimanbeyov was a great composition artist, Sattar Bahlulzade was a poet of painting, Mikayil Abdullayev, Ogtay Sadikzade was a master of portraiture, Baba Aliyev was a leading creator of socialist realism, Maral Rahmanzade was a landscape painter, Elmira Shakhtakhtinskaya was a poster artist, Farhad Khalilov was the head of the avant-garde school, Arif Huseynov was a talented graphic artist, Sakit Mammadov was the founder of opalism, and Ulviya Khamzayeva was a talented artist with mythological motifs and many other creators. All of them paved their way in great art and achieved great success. Recognition and fame. The strict realism pioneered by People's Artist Tahir Salahov in painting is completely original, renewing and modernizing Azerbaijani fine art. It is proud-inducing that the name of this outstanding artist stands alongside Van Gogh, Picasso, Claude Monet, Hachishika Hakusai, Salvador Dali, Zurab Tsereteli, Aivazovsky, Repin, Surikov, and other world-renowned artists for his originality and remarkable achievements (Isa Habibbayli, Vice President of ANAS, Member of the Milli Majlis, Academician. Azerbaijan. 2021, May 23).

In Tahir Salahov's creativity, particularly in "Nakhchivan Mountains," "mountains", depict grandness, integrity, and national strength with sharp lines and localized colors. They describe the power of the Caucasus ranges emphasizing their monumental nature, making this work one of the most notable examples of how Salahov transforms landscape into a profound philosophical statement. In this unique work, the canvas captures the distinctive silhouette of the Nakhchivan Mountain Range. The artist avoids from excessive detail in preference to large forms and rhythmic lines, which create the impression of ancient titans. The structure of the composition allows the viewer to perceive the scale and physical power of the mountain range. Red is the dominant color in this work, carrying a special meaning—the color of vital energy, pride, and historical memory. In folk beliefs, the red color is believed to link with the fire, liveliness, happiness, and protection from the evil eye. As is known, Azerbaijan has historically been called the "Land of Fire," and the red color is also inseparably associated with the cult of fire. Ancient Zoroastrians saw fire as a purifying force, the color of divine presence and warmth. Against deep, shadowed tones, red awakens the rugged beauty of the mountains, wrapping the landscape in a quiet majesty that feels almost alive. The painting conveys not only a superficial resemblance to the landscape but also the "spirit of the place." For comparison, I have presented his vision of the Shamakhi Mountains below (Fig. 2). For Salahov, these mountains are the embodiment of the pride of the Azerbaijani people, a symbol that the nation, like these peaks, is capable of enduring any historical conditions.

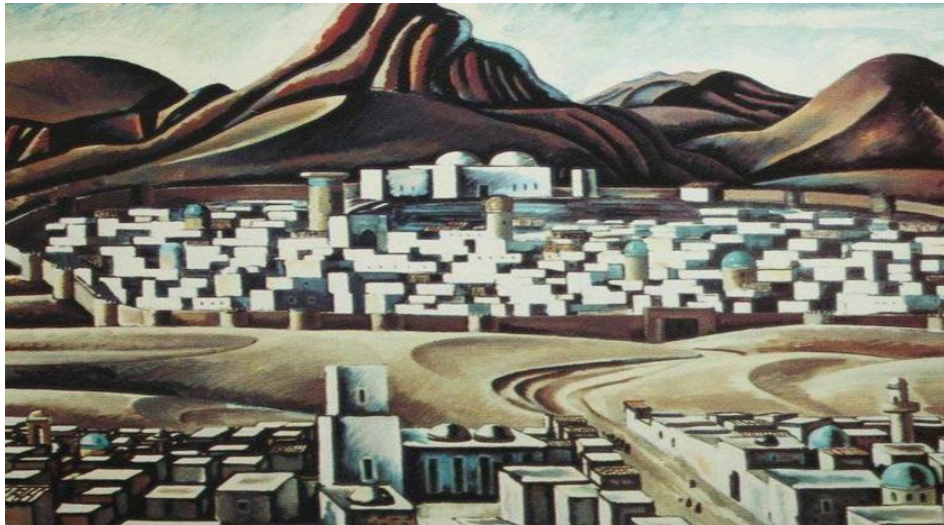


Figure 2. Old Shamakhi. Tahir Salakhov, 1973.

The Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic is an autonomous republic within the Republic of Azerbaijan, home to breathtaking landscapes of astonishing beauty. Nakhchivan boasts numerous historical monuments. The autonomous republic is rich in deposits of gypsum, rock salt, marble, lime, and, especially, rare mineral waters, of which there are approximately 250, such as Sirab, Badamli, Vaykhyr, Nagajyr, Giziljyr, and others. More than 30% of this territory lies at an altitude of 600 meters to 1 kilometer above sea level. The highest point in the region is Mount Gapyjyg (3,906 m). The capital of the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic is the city of Nakhchivan. It is located at an altitude of 1,000 meters above sea level, on the right bank of the Nakhchivanchay River (Fig. 3).



Figure 3. Nakhchivan mountains. Tair Salakhov 1970-71 (Tretyakov Gallery).

The etymology (origin) of the word "Nakhchivan" has been the subject of various interpretations at various times. Observations indicate that in the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, the local cultural tradition associated with the name "Nakhchivan" is dominated by toponyms, as well as myths and legends associated with the Great Flood and the Prophet Nuh (Noah), who survived the catastrophe (Fig. 4).



Figure. 4. Nakhchivan (<https://myseldon.com/ru/news/index/183545083>).

It is believed that Noah's Ark came to rest here, and this land is a settlement for Noah's descendants. According to local legend, Noah's Ark collided several times with the Lesser Caucasus mountain peaks before landing on the mountain, and even one of the mountains, Agridag, was split by this impact into Greater and Lesser Agridag. Other mountains that the Ark collided with were Ilandag, Alagoz, and Gapydzhik. According to local legend, Noah lived and died here after the waters receded. Until recently, there were long-lived elders among the local population who claimed to know the burial place of the Prophet Noah. (Isa Habibbayli. Azerbaijan. 2014, March 26). This story became so popular among the people that the renowned artist Behruz Kengerli painted a picture called "Noah's Tomb" (Fig. 5).

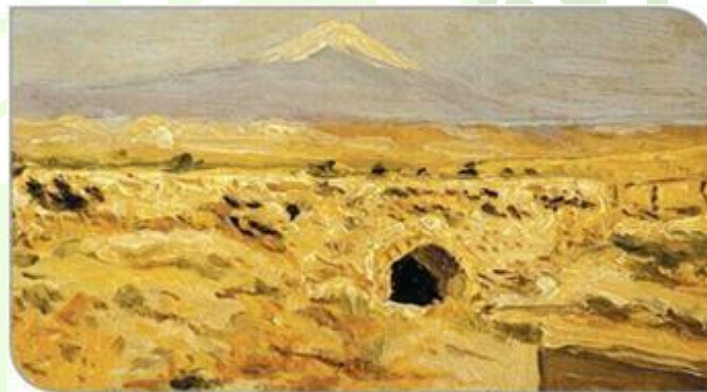


Figure. 5. Mausoleum of the Prophet Noah. B. Kangerli.

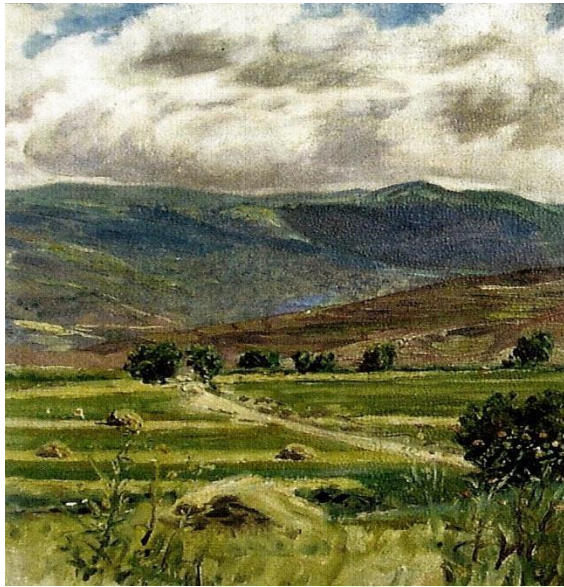
Bahruz Kangerli has gone down in history as a distinguished master who stood at the origins of Azerbaijani professional fine art. A native of Nakhchivan, he was one of the first painters to lay the foundation for the realist movement in his country's culture at the beginning of the 20th century.

While the artist lived only thirty years of, his creativity left a deep impression: Kengerli was a pioneer, engaging in almost every genre of painting and graphic art. Tbilisi School of Fine Arts played a crucial role in his professional development, where he enrolled in 1910 with the active support of literary classic Jalil Mammadguluzade. The master's creative works were mainly about the current trends of the era. Pre-revolutionary satirical publications, especially the legendary magazine "Molla Nasreddin," where Kangerli published his sharp and apt drawings, highly appreciated his talent as caricaturist and graphic artist. Today, his name represents the preservation of heritage and high professionalism in Azerbaijani art.



Bahruz Kangarli's creative legacy primarily focused on landscape painting. The artist had a special talent to subtly capture and convey the authentic atmosphere of his motherland, meticulously depicting the nuances of lighting and the color of nature. Watercolors and oil paintings belonging to his creativity, such as "Waterfall," "Agrydag," "Road to the Village of Yashkhan," and "Mount Ilanli by Moonlight," have been considered as basis for lyrical landscapes in Azerbaijani art.

In his works, the artist attaches a great importance to the harmony of natural and historical



landscapes. Kangarli described the majestic cultural monuments set against Nakhchivan's rugged and beautiful natural landscape (Figs. 6 and 7) through documentary precision and artistic awe. The Momine Khatun Mausoleum, the Tomb of the Prophet Noah, the Askhabi-Kahf shrine, and the Imamzadeh architectural complex are among those prominent artworks. These works don't merely express the antiquity but also artist's deep devotion to his homeland. The "mountain" was portrayed as an inexhaustible poetry between stone and sky in Kangarli's works. During his short life, he created a comprehensive view of his homeland, including snow-capped peaks, mountain sunsets, as well as blooming spring slopes. His landscapes are a declaration of love for his native land, imbued with every detail.

Figure 6. Mountain Landscape – Bahruz Kangarli (Azerbaijan National Museum of Art).

"His painting 'Mountain Landscape' (Fig. 6) reflects the grandeur and power of the Nakhchivan Mountains, the characteristic lines of impressions that give a person breadth of heart, tolerance and struggle," says Ramiz Kasimov, head of the department of the Nakhchivan branch of the National Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan, Doctor of Philology, Associate Professor, in his article. National Leader Heydar Aliyev always placed special emphasis on preserving and promoting the legacy of Bahruz Kangarli. At the personal initiative of the Great Leader, a memorial museum to the artist was established in Nakhchivan, and the exhibition hall of the Artists' Union of the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic was named after the artist. Speaking at the museum's grand opening in the summer of 2002, the distinguished son of our people, Heydar Aliyev, emphasized the exceptional significance of the artist's work with the following words: "The creative legacy of Bahruz Kangarli is one of the most striking achievements of Azerbaijani culture and fine art. We should be sincerely proud that our people gave the world such a unique talent." From an article by Turkan Huseynli.

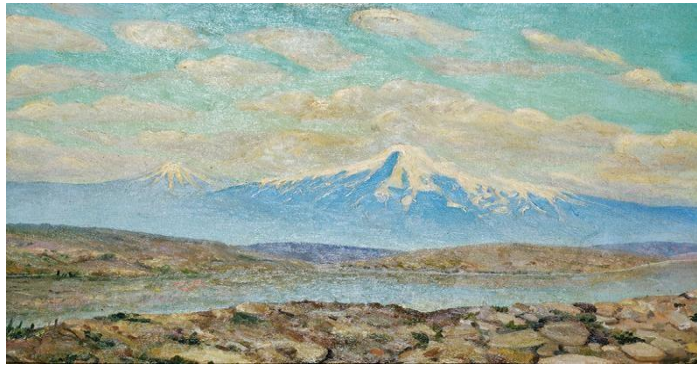


Figure. 7. Snow-capped mountains. B. Kengerli. 1916 (Azerbaijan National Museum of Art).

A special place in the galaxy of masters who praised the greatness of Azerbaijani nature is occupied by Mikail Abdullayev. The main value of his legacy lies not only in the amazing breadth of creative range, but also in the unique gift of the artist-researcher. Abdullayev held a distinct capability to closely observe reality, flawlessly underlying the most colorful and vivid details in it.

His native land and people were inspired by his realistic canvases, instilled with deep truth and creative optimism. Abdullayev's artworks devoting to mountainous regions achieved impossible: to perceive and poeticize the ordinary walls of life, revealing the genuine aesthetic depth in them. What makes Abdullayev's works so heartfelt and accessible to viewers is his ability to dress harsh reality in a bright artistic form (Fig. 8).

Heydar Aliyev (1997): "The beauty of Azerbaijan's nature, the heroic battles of the sons of the Motherland, devotion to the land, one's native land, labor, and art constitute the core themes of your work. Each of your paintings of nature is a romantic example of art, depicting the various corners of our country. In your lovingly created portraits, you entered the spiritual world of the historical figures and ordinary people you depicted, masterfully revealing their characters." (Mikayil Abdullayev, 2022).

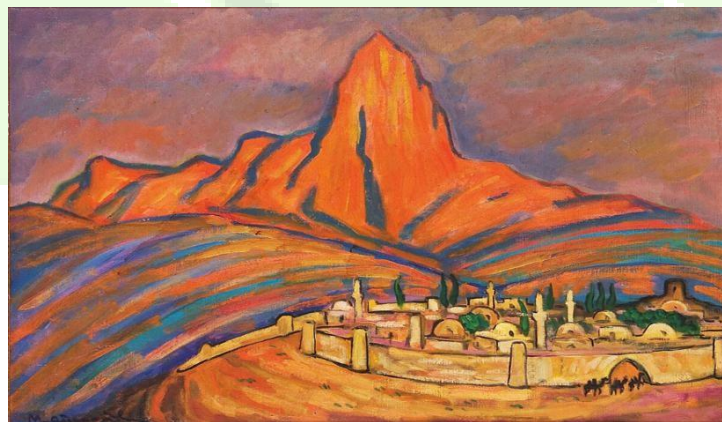


Figure. 8. Mikayil Abdullayev. Nakhchivan. 1990 (Azerbaijan National Art Museum).

Sattar Bahlulzade describes the notion of mountains from different point of view. (Fig. 9). Unlike Mikayil Abdullayev, who depicted the beauty of daily life in his works, Bahlulzade sought to capture the ever-changing side of nature. His lyrical landscapes are not restricted to views of peaks, but emotional outbursts, which raises Azerbaijan's real landscape to the level of high art.



Figure. 9. Sattar Bahlulzadeh. *Nakhchivan Mountains*. 1970 (Azerbaijan National Museum of Art).

His creative method is based on the desire similar to the Impressionist philosophy, which involves working exclusively outdoors, capturing the fleeting changeability of the world and the magic of a particular moment of light. Bahlulzade, a genuinely independent artist decisively rejected academic dogma. He welcomed the beauty of nature with great sincerity, trying to express external form, but the intensity and sincerity of the impression received. His unique artistic style was shaped with sincerity and refusal to follow canons; his paintings don't simply describe landscapes, but mirrors of his vast, sometimes childishly pure soul. The monumental scale of his canvases was driven by an inner necessity to convey the entire breadth of feelings (Fig. 10).

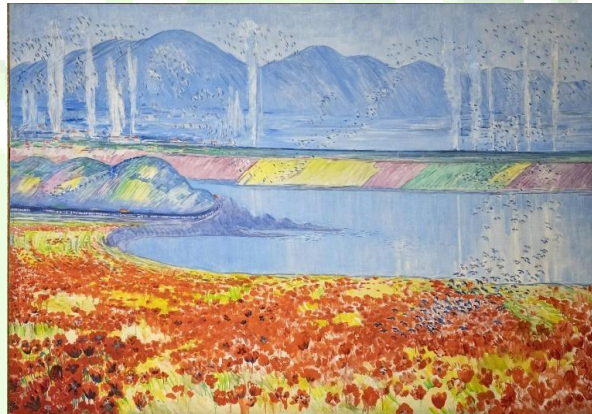


Figure. 10. *The Desire of the Land*. Sattar Bahlulzadeh. 1963 (Azerbaijan National Museum of Art).



Figure. 11. Sattar Bahlulzadeh. *In the Gardens of Amsar*. 1950 (Azerbaijan National Museum of Art).



His excellent mastery of technique was introduced in this landscape (Fig. 11). Melting horizons and lush, young greenery were masterfully conveyed by the great artist. Out here beneath flat skies, Bahlulzadeh still chases brightness - his brush picks up hues invisible to most, hidden inside dull mist. Color spills loose, arranged like fragments of something cherished, turning canvas into quiet celebration.



Figure 12. Upper Dashalty. Sattar Bahlulzade. 1957 (Azerbaijan National Museum of Art).

From my perspective, Sattar achieved perfect harmony in conveying the character of the Karabakh landscape in the painting "Yukhary Dashalty" (Fig. 12). When you look at this masterpiece, you admire the boldness and confidence of his brushwork. You are struck to see how quickly and precisely the artist solves complex coloristic problems. The rock formations here come to life: each brushstroke laid down in a single impulse, depicting the rhythm of the rushing clouds. This described interrelation between earth and sky serves to feel the pulsation of nature itself. (Mir-Bagirzade. F. A. Philosophy of Art. Collection of Articles. - 2006.)

(Fine Arts of the Azerbaijan SSR. 1957. 32 pp.)

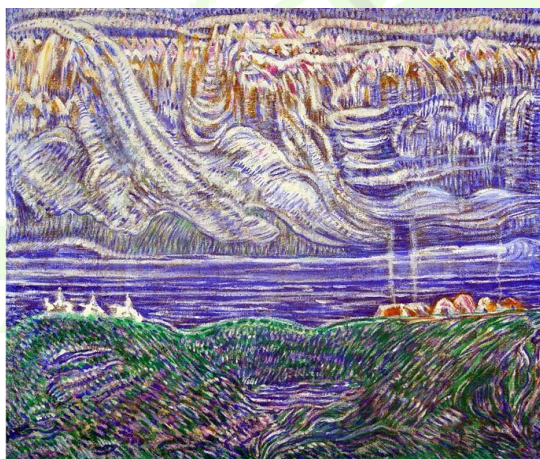


Figure 13. Sattar Bahlulzadeh Shahdag, 1971-1972.

In his later works, Sattar created the apparent style of the creator and his entire path from academicism to his own poetic manner was completely described (Fig. 13). The last art piece, which was dedicated to Shahdag was a clear manifestation of his present artistic development. The name of this peak, which is translated as "King Mountain," from Azerbaijani, perfectly aligns with the artist's personality. In Bahlulzade's interpretation, Shahdag, located in the eastern part of the Greater Caucasus, in northern Azerbaijan, is not just a geographical point, but also a symbol of spiritual heights. The region of majestic mountain ranges, always attracts

travelers and wildlife enthusiasts worldwide. The country's natural landscape is determined primarily by the gorgeous landscapes of the Greater Caucasus—a vast mountain range that passes through the territory of Azerbaijan and reflects the power and scale of natural forces. The mountain ranges add the landscape a unique expressiveness and aesthetic depth. Walkways curve through leafy valleys and lead to extreme altitudes, which offer fearless travelers' access to virtually untouched natural landscapes. Mountaineers eager to try their physical limits and experience are attracted by the challenging terrain and rugged peaks. In winter, the temperature often drops below -20°C , causing powerful waterfalls flowing down the



mountain slopes to freeze completely, which subsequently turn into massive ice buildup used for climbing.



Figure. 14. Baba Aliyev. Shahdag.1960 (personal archive).

Now, I would like to draw attention to the creativity of my great-grandfather, People's Artist of the Azerbaijan SSR, Baba Aliyev (Fig. 14). The artist prefers extended, almost panoramic format allowing the viewer to "read" the space from left to right, like a living landscape gradually unveiling its depth and breath. Brushstrokes are the proof of the artist's mastery that he used to describe a silent rural scene in the foreground: logs shattered across the ground, traces of human activity, and fragments of village life, without any bustle. Everything appears natural and seamlessly integrated into the landscape, which create a sense of human presence in nature, not as its master, but as an integral part of it. The middle ground is filled with houses and trees, painted with loose, generalized brushstrokes. The autumnal hues of the foliage—warm ochre, tawny, and muted green—create a soft contrast with the cool whiteness of the mountains. The trees seem to dissolve into the air, conveying a sense of the transparency and freshness of the mountain climate. The painting's main focus is the majestic snow-capped peaks of Shahdag in the background. They are painted in a light, almost ethereal quality, with subtle transitions of cool tones. The mountains do not overwhelm with their massiveness; on the contrary, they tower, as in the following work from 1962 (Fig. 15). Their presence lends scale and inner calm to the composition.



Figure. 15. Baba Aliyev. Shahdag.1962 (personal archive).



The artist's color scheme in these works is based on a subtle balance of warm and cool tones. The warm earth, houses, and trees below are contrasted with the cool whiteness of the peaks, creating a sense of harmony and depth. The brushwork is free, lively, and at times almost sketch-like, lending the work a sense of direct impression from nature.

Baba Aliyev shows not only the landscape of Shahdag, but also the character of this place: tranquility, simplicity, naturalness and grandeur.

Azerbaijan is a mountainous country, with approximately 60% of its territory covered by mountains. The republic boasts mountain ranges such as the Greater Caucasus, the Lesser Caucasus, and the Talysh Mountains. The mountains are a repository of global biodiversity, home to and sheltering a multitude of animals and plants.

The main place in the Greater Caucasus Mountains is occupied by the Main Caucasus Range, where the highest peak of Azerbaijan is located - Bazarduzu (4466 m), as well as some other peaks- Victory Peak (4301 m, Zəfər zirvəsi, named in honor of the victory in the Second Garabagh - Patriotic War), Tufan (4191 m), Bazar-Yurt (4126 m), Yarydag (4116 m), Chingiz Mustafayev (4063 m), Ilkam Aliyev (4048 m), Ragdan (4020 m), Heydar Aliyev (3755 m), Babadag (3629 m), Tinovroso (3374 m), Akhvay (3481 m), Gara-Burga (3471 m), Dubrar (2205 m). Parallel to the Great Caucasus Range stretch the Lateral Ridge (Shahdag Mountain - 4243 m), the Govdag Ridge, the Niyaldag and Lyantyabiz Ridges. The highest of the difficult passes of the Main Caucasus Range is the Shergi Salavat Pass (2915 m).

Within Azerbaijan, the largest geomorphological units of the Lesser Caucasus are: the Shahdag Range (Mount Gojadag 3,318 m, Mount Garagach 3,062 m), which forms the watershed between the basins of Lake Goycha and Lake Kura; the Murovdag Range (Mount Gyamysh 3,724 m, Mount Ginaldag 3,367 m, Mount Goshgar 3,361 m, Mount Kyapaz 3,066 m, and the Omar Pass 3,260 m), these mountains are bordered by the Ganja-Gazakh sloping plain in the north; the Garabag Range (Mount Boyuk Kirs 2,725 m); along the left bank of the Araz River stretch the Lower Araz sloping plains - Geyanskaya, Inja, and Harami. More than 90% of gas reserves are located at depths greater than 3000 m (Garadag, Shah Deniz, Umud and other fields).

Current climate change is having a significant impact on mountain ecosystems. Rising temperatures, shrinking glaciers, and changing precipitation patterns are shifting natural zones and increasing competition between species. Rare and local forms of flora and fauna, whose existence directly depends on environmental stability, are particularly vulnerable. From that standpoint, it is particularly important to ensure sustainable management of mountain areas, based on respect for nature and the traditional knowledge of local communities. It is proved in the experience of many countries that the involvement of local people in environmental conservation processes allow to preserve both the ecological and cultural heritage of mountain regions (National Atlas of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Baku, 2014).

Conclusion

The mountains are not merely considered as a geographical feature but also a living chronicle of Azerbaijan, connecting nature, history, and art. Azerbaijan's majestic mountains have inspired prominent artists, influenced the character of the people, and remain a source of aesthetic and spiritual experience. Their depictions reflect the power of time, the resilience of traditions, and a beauty that defies simplistic description (Figures. 16–19).



Figure. 16. Shusha. Desert fortress. Isa Ibrahimov (1986).

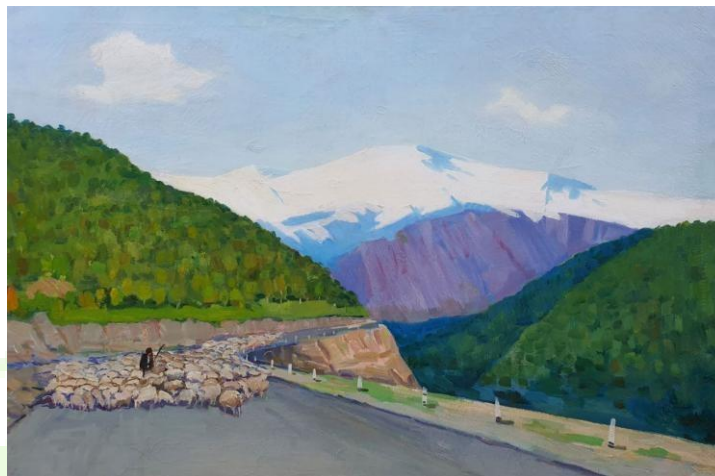


Figure. 17. Boyukaga Mirzazade.

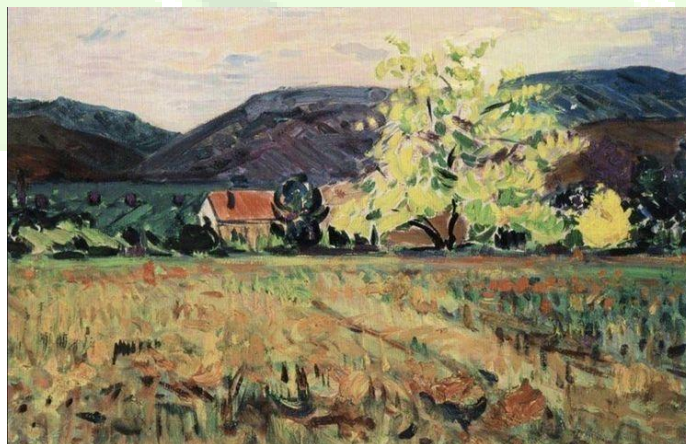


Figure. 18. Baba Aliyev. Chukhuryurd.1962.



Figure. 19. Baba Aliyev. Mountains.

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