

Artwork turned into the narrator of an epic.

Case Study: David of Sassoun

Epics, also known as oral narratives or oral folklore, are very common in the cultural development of peoples worldwide. The reflection of cultural and social identities is the main reason for creating these stories, which are nowadays transmitted in various ways and are considered to be an important part of the cultural tradition of a many communities.

The everlasting battle of good against evil is what makes these stories resilient through time and, in some cases, relevant even today. The existence of a main hero, who possesses a combination of divine qualities and the characteristics of everyday people, is a trait which seems to be common in most epics and oral narratives. This hero is presented as a champion of the common man and reflects the identity of the community, whilst the story itself is filled with cultural and historical features.

There are many reasons why people still feel connected to these stories centuries after they were first created. An undeniably important role in the preservation of these stories is the role of the narrator. In many cultures, the person who told these stories was considered to be a very significant member of the community. He was responsible for passing on of these stories from one generation to the other, and it was important that he managed to do so without any significant alterations.

The Epic of Gilgamesh, the Iliad and the Odyssey by Homer, the Tales from Nordic mythology, Beowulf and even Dante's Divine Comedy, were initially passed on orally. One of the most difficult tasks a narrator had to face was remembering every little detail of the story and be as accurate to the previous "version" as possible. That is the reason why most of these epics follow certain patterns (rhythm, names, locations), so as to make them more memorable, both for the narrator and the audience. The language barrier was another difficult aspect to be tackled as, depending on the time period, the language between generations might alter, thus creating misinterpretations in the meaning.

However, all of this stopped being a problem once these epics could be recorded in written form. What was once communication through auditory means turned into something visual. Not only is the basic approach different, but the human factor in the act of the communication has been minimized. The roles are now totally different. The narrator, who until now was the safeguard of a historical tradition based solely upon his memory, gives his place to the writer - researcher. No longer can personal beliefs, historical changes or individual taste alter the story. Furthermore, the story itself changes from an evolving, living organism to become a complete cultural fact, which automatically means that variations of the same story cease to exist once it is published.

So the real question is, have oral narratives and epics lost their charm and cultural value because of the scholarly analysis bestowed on them through years? Have they become common knowledge because of the libraries and the Internet?

The ease of gaining information and the immense amount of it available has made certain aspects of knowledge hidden gems. One needs to be familiar with an epic in order to research it, read it and maybe even learn it. In the past, through the procedure of narration, all the young people in the community were involved as this was the main way of preserving, sharing and transmitting historical knowledge and cultural characteristics. Nowadays, there needs to be stimuli for someone to delve deeper into learning more about their culture, let alone the hero of an epic. Yes, access to information is easier than ever before. However real knowledge has given way to fast, factual and on-the-spot research which, unfortunately, is as easily forgotten as it is obtained.

How can this change and in what way can this need to learn about such stories be cultivated by new generations?

New means of communication seems to be the answer to all these questions. The narrators are no longer people, nor are they books or websites. It needs to be something exciting, eye-catching and utterly unexpected.

Nowadays, art is one of the invariants of modern societies and it seems to be an outlet for not only aesthetic values but also cultural, social and political ones - as it has always been. History has proven that there are very few things that are more radical than art. So, can art take the role of passing on these epics to the next generations and do what oral narrators did in the past?

The case study of David of Sassoun, an Armenian epic, is proof that art, in all its forms, can become the new narrator of epics and make people familiar with them.

David of Sassoun, or Sasuntsi Davit, is an epic that has played an immense role in the development of Armenian national identity through the centuries and remains the most important Armenian epic. The main story is divided into four branches, all of which are correlated through the genealogy of the main characters. It is the story of the Armenian nation, concealed within the story of a family throughout the centuries.

The initial name of the epic, Dtserer, is very important as it gives a clear view of the Armenian ethos. The word means 'crazy' and 'bold', 'not afraid of anything', describing the characteristics of all the heroes of the epic in one word. Armenian people see themselves in that way. They are opinionated and passionate about all aspects of their lives and feel that those characters depict, in the best way, all those things that describe the Armenian nation. This is one of the reasons why the epic has never ceased to be relevant. Moreover, the heroes' link to nature and its magic powers, along with their supernatural strength and the myths told within the story, are hidden narratives of the traditional Armenian pagan beliefs, lost centuries ago (Khatchadourian 2016).

What is very interesting in this particular epic is that one could argue that a big part of its importance to modern Armenian society, which is still very much connected to it, has been the artwork displayed all over the capital city of Yerevan, inspired by the characters of the epic.

Even though not many people read the epic itself, there is a deep awareness and connection to it, especially with the character of David, the main hero of the third branch. The artists that have created those artworks somehow managed to capture the essence of the epic in such a way, that it was as if they were telling the story through their art.

It all started in 1922 when Hakob Kojoyan did the illustrations for the book. He created a set of ten engravings from parts of the story he considered to be of importance. These illustrations are colourful engravings of the characters and their powers, and are exhibited in the National Gallery of Armenia.

In 1939, for the celebration of the one thousand years of the epic, the Soviet Union decided to print a special edition book with illustrations from various Soviet artists of the time. The ones that really stood out (as the rest followed the Socialist Realism art movement) were the engravings of Yervand Kochar, who drew parts of the epic as if they were reliefs on stone. After twenty years the same artist was asked to create a statue, which would go on to become the symbol of the capital of Armenia, Yerevan - the Statue of David of Sassoun.

Created in 1959 and situated in the centre of one of the main city squares, upon what looks like a rock, this immense statue creates feelings of awe to anyone coming out of the railway station behind it. The statue is so big, powerful and full of movement and strength. David is on his horse ready to fight the foreign invaders, with his lightning sword on his hand and underneath the legs of his horse, Qurkik Jalali, lays the cup which has fallen, showing the patience of Armenian people who have had enough.

In 1956, another great Armenian artist inspired by the epic painted his work "Young David". David is accompanied by a small goat and a tiger, meaning that even wild animals bow to his kind heart. This painting, showing the time when David was a shepherd, has particular symbolic value as the artist, touched by the epic's optimism, wishes that the young people in Armenia would love their land as David did. More specifically, when asked about this painting, Eduard Isabekyan said:

"When I was back home from Bjni, I painted a young girl on a rocky background. Mkrtych Kamalyan advised me to paint David of Sassoun instead of the girl. "Young David" was painted in 3 weeks. With his bright mind, brave soul, honest and prideful shape, he became my favorite character of young man. I would like our youth to throw themselves to Marut Mountain, love their soil and water like him and have his bright eyes."(Isabekyan 1956)

In the 80's, Artashes Hovsepyan, who passed away in July 2017, decorated the Sasuntsi Davit Subway Station with reliefs of the characters of Great Mher, Little David with Qurkik Jalali, Little Mher and David as a shepherd, covering all four branches of the epic. After a few years, he was asked to design one of the special exhibition halls of the newly built Cascade museum (the Cafesjian Center for the Arts). The room where he started working on the enormous relief, an enlargement of the original engraving of Hakob Kojoyan, was called the Sasuntsi Davit Gallery and was unfortunately left unfinished due to the big earthquake of 1988 and the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Even though this relief is not complete, due to its size and the fact that the whole room is devoted to it, it captures the audience with its power.

There is another sculpture of Sasuntsi Davit, created by Varaz Samuelian in 1971, which is a more modern approach to Yervand Kochar's statue, placed in Fresno, California. This statue has a special value as it is outside Armenia. It stands a reminder of the Armenian ethos, to all those who are part of the truly immense diaspora of Armenians worldwide.

All artworks mentioned above, are of unique artistic value, and are created by artists who have played a great role in the cultural evolution of the country in the 20th century. This, along with the power of the story itself, have created a tremendous connection between the Armenian past, present and possibly the future, by making a 1000 year old epic not only relevant, but also loved and appreciated by the nation who created it.

The epic of Sasuntsi Davit was brought back to life through art. In this past century, Armenian artists managed to keep a story of faith and freedom alive and made everyone who saw their artwork connect to the story's cultural value. Since the artwork is placed in very central parts of the city (squares, metro station), there is an everyday contact of the people with the epic, so it becomes a part of their everyday life.

In the globalized cultural reality of today, we can't help but accept the fact that heroes will always be popular and people will always love them. Comic books and the superheroes that we all know are in fact the heroes of the narratives of the past. Times have changed and the means of narration as well. Comics, movies, cartoons, or even video games are the new means of achieving the linkage of past and present. The art of filmmaking, illustration, animation, in combination with the more traditional visual arts, are sure to create a new way of perception, accepted by the new generation.

Sasuntsi Davit could easily be treated like a pop culture figure, much like Beowulf or Thor, or Achilles and Ulysses. These characters are also derived from thousands of years old epics and were made popular again through comics and cinema. These new forms of art are in fact the new narrators and they are the ones responsible for making oral epics and the cultural heritage traits within them become relevant and popular again, thus making these stories immortal.

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