

**ARTISTIC CREATIVITY OF MARTIROS SARYAN AS THE INDICATOR OF  
NATIONAL SELF-IDENTIFICATION OF THE PERSONALITY IN A  
MULTICULTURAL SPACE: FEATURES OF METHODOLOGY OF A  
RETROSPECTIVE RESEARCH**

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**ABSTRACT**

In this article, the life and works of the famous Armenian artist, founder of the modern Armenian school of painting Martiros Saryan (1880-1972) are analyzed in the context of the influence of Russian and Armenian culture during the Russian period of his activity. In this retrospective analysis of the life and works of the artist, it is proposed to use the new indicator, which is Russian or the Middle East countries place names being included in the titles of works by the artist. On the basis of the analysis of Russian archival sources and the analytical research of content, it is established that, in Russia, the interest of the artist during the first period of his life and study was mainly on subjects reflecting the life of the Armenian diaspora in the south of Russia. Landscapes were mainly represented against the background in which the artist spent his childhood.

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During the time which he spent in Moscow, interest in Russian culture was connected with the recognition of the contribution of teachers of the School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture in the development of the Russian art school and world culture. Saryan has shown the aspiration to seize this particular technic of painting, at the same time he had the original vision of the world.

**Keywords:** methodology, personality, geographical indicators, Martiros Saryan, culture, regional archive

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The inclusion of modern Russia in the system of global communications makes it relevant to research ethno-territorial changes and migration processes in the former Soviet Union, cultures of the former Soviet republics people, and economic and mental relations between them. The history of the development of the new or new-found statehood is followed by attention to the ethno-national problems connected with an awareness of national and religious identity, aspirations to reconsideration of the initial coordinates of the existence which have found reflection in the artifacts of history and culture. These aspects have practical interest connected with the formation of the ethnic and cultural state policy of the post-Soviet countries and theoretical importance, allowing for the formation of a diaspora strategy and the understanding of the mental basis of repatriates and immigrants, their cultural priorities, values, and preferences. The post-Soviet countries, despite temporary moments of misunderstanding, are connected by the general historical past, cultural heritage, and aspirations of the people to neighborliness.

At a theoretical level, it is always interesting to understand reasons of the attitude to the historical homeland of the famous, world-wide recognized compatriots who have made a significant contribution to the world culture. Addressing a thought of the German philosopher O.F. Bollnow who has formulated "the principle of the Organon" (Bollnow, 1981) it is possible to ask a post factum question as to what was the national culture of the person who created masterpieces (or artifacts). Moreover, on the basis of the analysis of the products of creativity, it is possible to try to define what factors have influenced the formation of his personality. In this area, it is advisable to address the analysis of the art heritage of the Armenian painter Martiros Saryan whose creativity is certainly recognized as nation specific. The fact that he is a native of the Russian Empire is characteristic of the stages in the life of Saryan. In the first half of his life, he lived in the territory of the Area of Army of Don - the multicultural Russian South. His pictures are exhibited in the leading art collections and the

museums of Russia. That testifies to the appreciation of his works. Saryan's works were also subject of the art criticism analysis (Compareti, 2010; Nerssisyan, 2003) and basis for creation of educational Case Study (Fedotova et al., 2017).

Nowadays the intensive research designed to establish and analyze scientific and cultural ties between countries which are geographically related. At the same time, studies of historical (Azatyan, 2012; Oganessian, 2014), ethnopsychological (Avanesyan, Asriyan, & Stepanyan, 2016; Darieva, 2011), pedagogical (Fedotova, 2014; Fedotova & Latun, 2015; Ogannessian & Fedotova, 2009), culturological (Asaturov, 2016), sociological, psychological (Guilford, 1950), geopolitical (Rothman, 2015) and economic (Gugushvili, 2015) intercourse with Europe, Asia, and North African countries are conducted. There are examples of the ethnopsychological analysis of the personality and activity of representatives of ethnic minorities from among the persons forming part of the European and Asian diasporas, and irredentists. However, in our opinion, they often have a descriptive character, realizing to a different degree the sequence of the requirements of the phenomenological and/or hermeneutical approach. Recognizing the value of the results received by descriptive and interpretive methods, we will note that, in their use, the moments connected with contextual self-identification of the personality living in a multicultural and multi-confessional environment are not considered in due measure. Therefore, it is proposed that these moments have to be considered when determining the research approaches, which focus attention on the elements allowing for the treatment of the moments of unconscious self-identification ethnicity in the context of the interaction and the mutual crossing of the semantic fields of national cultures.

The study is aimed at finding answers to the question: *what elements of a methodical approach can be applied to define extramental internal intentions as unconscious intentions which a person feels?*

The **research objective** is to reveal the features of the ethnic self-identification which has defined artistic creativity and the life journey of Saryan using the proposed methodical approach based on geographical indicators.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research was carried out in two steps according to its tasks and the following hypotheses.

### **Hypotheses**

In this study, we use the following hypothetical representations defining the research plan, conceptual framework, and methodology.

- 1) Formation and developing of the identity of the artist ethnicity in a multicultural diaspora space can be investigated by studying:
  - his/her art heritage within the period of time designated above including residence in Russia;
  - text of autobiographical narrative containing the author's vision and assessment of events, including his/her emotional perception and estimated judgments;
  - archival documentary sources confirming or disproving the facts of the life of the artist.
- 2) The fact of the artist addressing the image of a certain object demonstrates that this object has made a certain impression on him and has caused him to desire to depict it.
- 3) Description, in an autobiographical narrative, of objects, processes, states, situations, and circumstances indicates that the author was very much impressed by these moments, he/she retained them in the memory. The fact that the text of the memoirs was written many years after the described events provides evidence for the importance of these events.
- 4) Inclusion place names by the author in the titles of his works is a conscious act confirming the aspiration to fix localization of the act of artistic creativity in memory and to show a qualitative originality of the area reflected in the work of art.

### **MATERIALS**

The following materials were the empirical basis of this research:

- 1) The text of an autobiographical narrative by Saryan "From my life" (Saryan, 1990), with the list of titles of the artist's works in chronological order;
- 2) The catalogs of Saryan's works of art which are contained in the works of R.G. Drampyan (Drampyan, 1964), A. Michailova (Michailova, 1958), L. Vagashian (Vagashian, 1984). That fact has allowed us to consider Saryan's existing works on the basis of the drawing up of a comprehensive list (combined and excluding duplicates) as much as it was possible.
- 3) The archival materials presented in the collection of the State Archive of the Rostov Region.

### **Methodology and logic of the research**

The concept of the research assumes understanding of the historical and ethnic-cultural predictors which have defined Saryan personality development in the multicultural space of the South of Russia during the pre-revolutionary and post-revolutionary period. The

chronological borders of the research include, firstly, the period of the beginning of Saryan's creative career as defined by the start of his training in the Moscow School of painting, sculpture, and architecture. Secondly, they include the period of his professional creativity in Russia after finishing school which happened when he moved from Russia to Armenia to take up permanent residence there (1896 – 1921).

For the research tasks, the following methods were used: content analysis, cluster analysis, comparative analysis (Fedotova & Chigisheva, 2015), interpretation, generalization.

### **Content analysis technique**

When carrying out a content analytical research, the following approaches to group materials (empirical basis) of the research have been applied:

1) At the first investigation stage, the concept "The Russian South is the small Homeland" is chosen as a semantic category of the research. It is determined by the criterion of the existence of regional place names, including names of cities, settlements, mountains, and rivers. Within this position, a framework of the geographical area excluding the territories of Transcaucasia is considered (East Armenia and Georgia, which were a part of the Russian Empire in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century). The position "out of classification criterion" is allocated. This position includes place names of the Russian objects which are not located in the south of the Russian Empire.

2) At the second investigation stage, the semantic category is defined. By the concept of "States of the Middle East" is meant place names relating to designations of the geographical objects (settlements, mountains, gorges, parts of the world, names of countries, etc.) located in the territory of Transcaucasia in Turkey and in other southeast regions of Asia and also in North Africa. Within this investigation phase the positions designated "out of classification criterion" are allocated. These include the North Caucasus and on the Black Sea coast of the Russian Empire – Pyatigorsk and Gelendzhik.

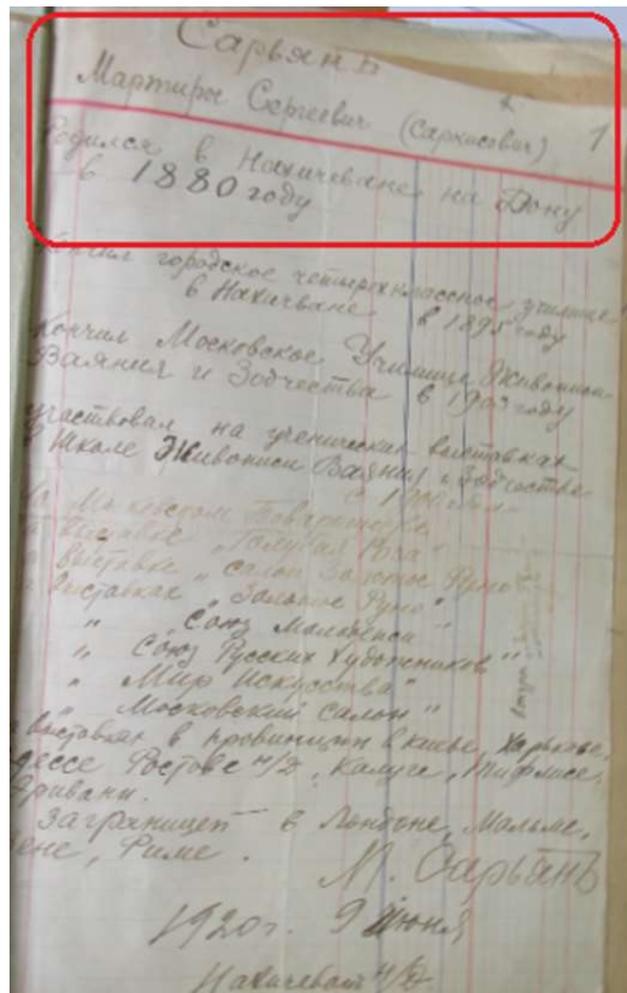
Saryan's works included in the above-mentioned official catalogs. When carrying out calculations, drawings, sketches, and also finished pictorial works irrespective of a genre were considered. Works containing regional place names are selected and are analyzed. This catalog is placed at the end of Saryan's book "From my life". The tallies "it is destroyed by the author" and "the location is not known" were taken into consideration.

After allocation the obtained data, we fed information into the computer application to produce graphs and tables. By means of Excel program, simple graphs were constructed. The contents of graphs were interpreted in substantial and semantic contexts.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### The first stage of the research

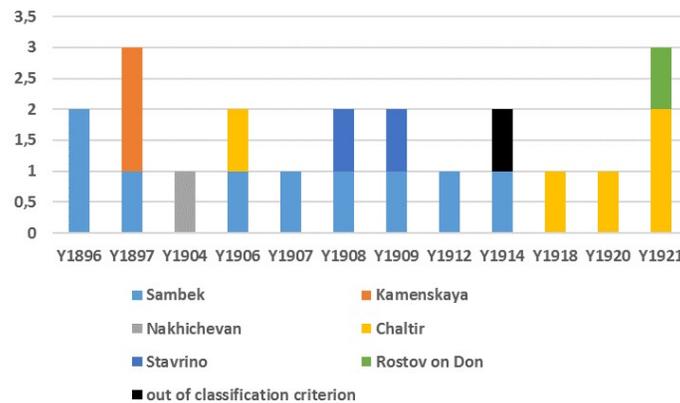
The first period of Saryan's creative career is inseparably linked to life of the Armenian diaspora. It moved from the Crimea with the permission of the Russian queen Catherine II in 1779, according to the Decree of November 14, 1779 (Ogannesyan & Fedotova, 2011). In the territory of the area of Army of Don, in the mouth of the Don river near fortress of Dimitry Rostov, that is on the southern outpost of the Russian Empire, immigrants founded five villages and one city which named Holes Nakhichevan (New Nakhichevan, Nakhichevan-on-Don) on the border of Russian and the Ottoman Empires. In this city, in 1880, future artist Martiros Saryan (up to 1886, the family carried the Russian version of surname – the Sariyevs) was born. The value of the birthplace for the artist and its influence on his further creativity is confirmed by an archival document – his autobiography (Figure 1).



**Fig.1.** Autobiography of Saryan containing information on his birthplace and places where he lived in the first stages of his life

[State Archive of the Rostov region. Fund 2577. Inventory 1. Unit of Storage 9. Page 1]

According to our hypothesis, the frequency of references of names of settlements where Saryan lived in the period of life before finally moving to Armenia, in the titles of his works of art reflects the depth and qualitative originality of their impact on the inner world of the artist. Reflection of the images of the childhood, adolescence, and youth spent among the Armenian diaspora in the southern Russian border is shown in Figure 2.



**Fig.2.** Range of the distribution of Saryan's works, the titles of which contain regional geographic designations

As shown in Figure 2, the artist most often takes his inspiration from the Armenian village of Sambek. This is due to significance of childhood memories. The future artist, together with other children, was taken by his parents to a small farm near the village of Sambek in which he lived during the first eight years of his life. The analysis of the content of the Saryan's works shows the dynamics of the development of subject and thematic lines in the image of Sambek. At the beginning of his career he draws typical structures of the architecture of the Armenian diaspora settlements in the South of Russia ("A lodge in Sambek", "A small granary in Sambek", 1896). Then the works reflecting landscapes follow ("Willows at the Sambek River", 1897; "On the Sambek", 1908; "In Sambek's grove", 1909; "Pond in Sambek", 1907; "Sambek's Flowers", 1914, etc.). In the sequence of emergence of these images (as the genre of the fine arts where primitive nature is the main subject of the image) can show a tendency to transition to a landscape. Saryan said that nature was his most important teacher.

Since he was eight, Saryan and his brother lived and studied in the four-year city school in the Holes Nakhichevan. Basing on the frequency of mention and reflections in Saryan's art, the city of Holes Nakhichevan did not make a favorable impression upon him. According to the artist's memories, Holes Nakhichevan is the city where the national color, due to its settling by representatives of the Russian and Ukrainian ethnos, is gradually lost: "In New Nakhichevan the Russian and Ukrainian population began to grow. Some, having long lived in the neighborhood with the Armenian families, became related to hem" (Saryan, 1990, p. 28).

Saryan described national customs. He paid his attention to national specifics of different ethnos. It is not surprising that the young Armenian girl living in Holes Nakhichevan becomes an object of his professional attention ("The Armenian from Nakhichevan", 1904). In his image, the modesty, spiritual beauty, and internal nobility are embodied

It is also necessary to note that the Russian city of Rostov-on-Don was based near Holes Nakhichevan. Rostov-on-Don is 30 years older than Holes Nakhichevan. . It was the largest military outpost in the South of Russia and in 1928 it finally absorbed Nakhichevan, which is now a historical part of the urban Proletarian district.

Rostov-on-Don was characterized by Saryan as "the insignificant city" (Saryan, 1990, p. 28). This city did not find a significant reflection in Saryan's art. An exception would be the sketch of a cancelled theatrical performance at the Rostov Theater. "Turandot" was executed by the artist on the eve of his final departure to Armenia in 1921. It is clearly seen from the graph (Figure 2).

At the same time, it is necessary to emphasize that Saryan, after returning to Rostov-on-Don from Tbilisi, was an employee of the Regional Armenian Museum founded in Rostov-on-Don. According to data of State Archive of the Rostov Region ("List of Staff of the Regional Armenian Museum" of September 2, 1920), the artist occupied the post of manager and curator. It also demonstrates Saryan's aspiration to preserve the original culture of the representatives of the Armenian diaspora. It shows his attention, his willing to develop and maintain the traditions and the mentality of the people.

The difficult interethnic, ethnic-cultural, and interfaith relations characteristic of the South of Russia in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, did not fail to affect the personal experience and professional development of Saryan.

After he finished city school in 1885, his first progress in drawing was spotted. This induced his family to send young Martiros to Moscow. Training in Moscow proceeded according to a classical form of the educational process organization. In summer, students had to paint in the

open-air. Saryan, in the autobiographical narrative "From my life", with light humor, told about how in 1897 he and his friend Amayak Artsatpanyan went to paint to the Cossack village of Kamenskaya, located on the coast of the Seversky Donets. The young artists faced irreconcilable hostility from the local Cossack population. This happened because of misunderstanding of the drawing activity and mistrust to people with an eastern appearance. The young artists faced, for the first time, a manifestation of aggression, a lack of correct behavior, and suspiciousness from Cossacks armed with sabers (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). The unexpected life-threatening situation on the picturesque river bank came to a safe conclusion thanks to the intervention of the police and the existence of official documents. Saryan recalled: "This unpleasant tragicomic incident brought our study visit to a difficult conclusion" (Saryan, 1990, p. 32). Therefore the figures "Kamensk Village" and "Barges on the Donets River" (1897) made during a week in the open air had special importance for the development of the artist's identity. This event forced him to show courage and to continue his work on etudes in the adverse conditions brought about by the local Cossack population. Saryan's participation in the performance of the summer task imposed by the school opened to him a new, hitherto unknown to him hostility to art and its creators who are not Slavic in appearance, from aggressive, uneducated people.

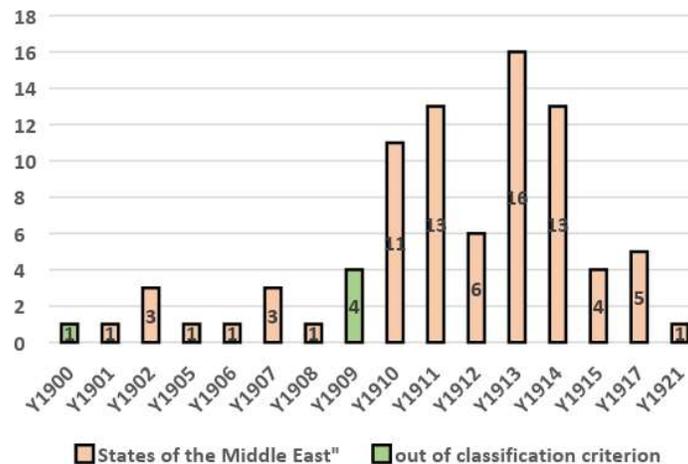
At the same time, it would be wrong to claim that the stay in the Russian villages was followed only by negative emotions. In Russia, trips to the Stavrino settlement made only positive impressions, having inspired the artist to create the original works "Break in Stavrino" (1908) and "Evening in Stavrino" (1909), both inspired by the nature of the Russian South. The position "out of classification criterion" includes the work name containing the place name of the only Russian city located in Central Russia and mentioned in the name of Saryan's work, - Tambov. A sketch of the face of an inhabitant was executed by him (Voskresenskaya, 2010).

As seen from the graph (Figure 2), before leaving to Armenia, Saryan began to pay more attention in his art to the nature and elements of culture and social life in the Armenian Chaltir village. For the first time, the artist addresses this subject in 1906 in the work "Winter in Chaltir". Chaltir is interesting to the artist as a peculiar specter of elements of national rural culture ("The Camel. Chaltir", 1921; "The Armenian bakery in the village of Chaltir", 1921) and its embodiment ("Workers from the Village of Chaltir", 1918).

However, the only work of art concerning Rostov-on-Don, the city in which Saryan lived before going to Yerevan is a sketch of a curtain for a cancelled theatrical performance.

In general, the subject of Saryan's works of art demonstrates his deep internal participation in the life of the Armenian people whose destiny was to live their lives in a foreign land and landscape as representatives of an ethnic group.

*The second investigation stage* is devoted to the analysis of the empirical data of the graphic and written documents characterizing Saryan's activity in the context of his objectification within the classification criterion "East". the results of the content analytical research of this subject are presented in Figure 3.



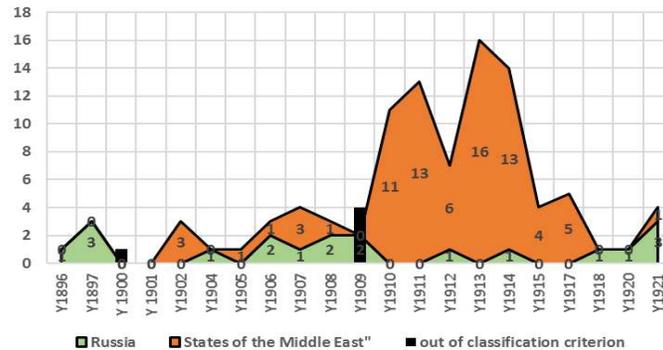
**Fig.3.** The distributions of works of art which names fit the "Middle East States" criterion

As it is clearly seen from the graph (Fig. 3), the number of the artworks devoted to the East significantly differs from the number of works which titles contain names of geographical objects located in Russia. It corresponds well to Saryan's statement: "I was especially attracted by the East" which gave him "courage in new judgment" (Saryan, 1990, p. 94).

The artist paid great attention to Constantinople (Istanbul), having absorbed bright images of its inhabitants (both people and animals), and also the unique, sun-filled city landscapes, the natural southern gifts of flowers and fruit.

In fact, by the time he traveled to Armenia, Persia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Egypt, Saryan deeply reflected on art and its role in the life of the people. This tendency shows his sincere absorption in the nature and the culture of the East. "Since childhood, as they say, with my mother's milk, I absorbed the East, the South, all the features of Armenian art, always and in every possible way I sought to render it on canvas and on paper" (Saryan, 1990, p. 125). Saryan, for the first time, reflects this attitude toward art, allocating it to feature in the context of the cultural history of eastern and southern people.

The ratio of works with geographical markers in their names, which subjects fit semantic categories "The Russian South is the Small Homeland" and "States of the Middle East", is shown in Figure 4.



**Fig.4.**The ratio of Saryan's works of art fitting geographical connotations "The Russian South is the small Homeland" and "States of the Middle East" criteria "

Figure 4 leads us to an unambiguous conclusion that the comparison of the intensity of the appeal to Saryan of subjects marked by place names demonstrates an obvious preference for oriental images. It covers the training period in Moscow and the years after the training finished.

Apart from the preferences reflected in the quantitative measurement, it is possible to define a semantic vector of the professional intentions of the artist. The analysis of the autobiographical narrative devoted to the life period before moving to Armenia allows for the allocation of several thematic lines – nature, people, and art.

The character of reasoning of the artist on the questions connected with national art attracts our attention. So, the description of the period of the training in Moscow in the context of the influence of Russian art culture on him, Saryan analyzes in detail the art potential of the Russian artists teaching painting, their creative manner, and their personal qualities.

As it appears from Saryan's memories, the Russian art school had excellent picturesque traditions and differed in variety of subjects. Recognizing the high level of the mastery of the teachers Serov, Korovin, Levitan, Vasnetsov, but not always agreeing with their technique of training and evaluation opinions concerning the level of students mastery, sometimes teachers were very critical, Saryan accurately expresses the task of the student. It consisted of failure due to "imitating this or that even if of a very considerable artist. I aimed to seize graphic and picturesque technique, to learn to write and draw" (Saryan, 1990, p. 39).

Besides, studying in the art school located at the center of Russian culture in Moscow, Saryan had no desire to reflect its original architectural appearance on paper or canvas. According to his version, those teachers who were the masters of national historical and folklore painting such as, for example, Vasnetsov, "did not inspire students, just as his far-fetched historical Moscow and epic landscapes did not inspire them" (Saryan, 1990, p. 60).

Expressing a desire and aiming at comprehending the historical and psychological entity of the worker as a person, Saryan elects for sketches of the patterns lost nowadays. As an example, "Farmer" depicting the fellow countryman, native in New Nakhichevan, and democrat revolutionary Michael Nalbandyan who, as a philosopher and writer, was never directly involved in farm work.

While the artist analyzed his impressions of the East countries and of the eastern architectural, historical monuments and picturesque works of art, he showed another focus and semantic intentions. Saryan treats their qualitative originality in the context of historical and cultural development of the people of the Middle East. He admires everything he sees, and defines the artifacts of Middle Eastern art as role models. His statements do not contain any negative assessments or doubts. He considers them as valued cultural heritage of the East countries. He recognizes the right of the artist to reflect his impressions in any form and in a creative manner.

In the context of the assessment of Eastern cultural heritage, for the first time, he reflects on the art activity, including addressing, on the statements of the Russian critics who reproached him with primitivism, sketchiness and the use of unconventional (in fact, imperfect) technology of drawing. In the dialogue with other representatives of culture and art he formulates his own credo.

## **CONCLUSION**

The empirical data characterizes the internal intentions of Saryan concerning the culture and nature of the Russian South and similar positions in the Middle East countries. As appears from quantitative representation of the data, the aspiration to knowledge and reflection of the eastern outlook prevailed in Saryan attitude to the culture and nature of Russian South and Middle East.

Consideration of a complex of the works of art, which formally relate to the Russian geographical area, has shown that the lesser number of works reflecting the Russian national plots and motives is presented in them. The names of the Armenian and Caucasian settlements prevail. The proportion of the pictures, drawings and sketches devoted to the

Middle East prevails. The analysis of the contents of the text of Saryan's autobiographical narrative allows for the assumption that the birthplace, positive impressions of childhood and youth, communication with many people and acquaintance to the great Russian art do not define deep aspiration to change ethnic self-consciousness. It explains the deep aspiration of Saryan to move to Armenia, to live and work in that Soviet Republic for the benefit of the Armenian people. It was carried out on his initiative after a request of the revolutionary figure Alexander Myasnikyan.

The conducted research has shown that the analysis of the geographical connotations which are taken out by authors in the titles of the works allows for a more objective picture of ethno identification.

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