

Tiflis of 1910-1920ies, Culture and Art

Due to the location of Tiflis, the same Tbilisi, the capital city of Georgia on the crossroad of the South and North, West and East it was compared to the two-headed Janus, whose one head was turned to the East and the other to the West. A British journalist Charles Bihoff gave the following description of then Tbilisi: “one can find here very strange people such as poets and artists ... philosophers, theosophists, dancers, singers, actors.

In the beginning of XX century the tremendous cataclysms happened in Russia – the revolution and civil war ruined the foundation to the cultural life of the creative society there. Russian intelligentsia overwhelmed by “broken dreams” immersed themselves into “the mist of uncertainty” and driven with hopes for future moved from cold Russia to independent Georgia that was how Georgia became shelter for them.

In 1922 Titsian Tabidze wrote in “Barricade” newspaper: “Russia three years ago – was something phantasmagoric. Some astral dust was snowing as frozen icicles in Russia then. Devastation brought by the civil war, freezing cold of the Arctic Ocean, hunger reaching the extents of mystery and blood-thirsty Cheka. Thrown away emigrants uttered unspeakable things under the inhuman terror ...

Cultural people would kiss the Tbilisi ground right before us and begin crying when seeing the light of electric lamps...

Vasili Kamenski sitting in a pleasantly warm café was crying harder and could not stop telling with Khlysts veracity about Moscow nightmares and cold, when humans were valued lower than animals.”

For the people came out of that hell Georgia became haven, and Tbilisi for them was like ”oasis in desert and attracted them, who tried escape the storm of the war and revolution”.

Grigol Robakidze wrote about Tbilisi of that time:

“Tbilisi is a strange city, but in 1919-1920 it became the strangest than ever. Russians thrown out or escaped from Russia were sheltering here. From the stage it was heard Kachalov’s voice... Khodotov was in Tbilisi too and his voice sounded from the stage too. The drunk composer Cherepnin visited café and worried about Russia. The artist Sergey Sudeikin was painting the restaurant, which by Georgian poets was called “Kimerioni”– Sudeikin really filled up the restaurant with Chimeras. The artist Savelii Sorin was painting the profiles of elegant noble women on the canvases with beautiful, very beautiful lines... Who was not over there in Tbilisi for that time? Futurists stepped toward Dadaism here too. They created organization “41 Degrees”. In

Tbilisi was Ilia Zdanevich too, he was great, when was reading his “Smert Garro”... Vasili Kamenski visited Tbilisi as well. There were others there too.

Tiflis became the city of poets. In café “International” it was declared as the city of poets.

Moreover – they were claiming that genuine poetry can only be found in Tiflis... The world was going downhill and Tiflis was the only town which was meeting this “downfall” with poetic songs. Such was fantasy of Tbilisi...”

That was Paolo Iashvili, the leader of the young Georgian poets, who one day ... in café *International*... climbed the table and loudly declared that Tbilisi, and not Paris was the center of the world culture”.

Cultural life of Tbilisi in 1910-1920ies was a significant phenomenon in the history of new Georgian art. Art in Tbilisi of that time was ready to open the way to the new artistic trends and transplant the achievements of Modern European Art onto its own cultural soil.

By the end of 1910s artistic and literary life was in full swing in this city. Many artistic circles such as “Caucasian Association of Fine Arts”, “Small Circle” union, “Georgian Artistic Society”, “Union of Armenian Artists”, Tbilisi avant-garde followers group and many others originated there. Futurist movement in Georgia was led by the brothers Zdanevich who adopted the avant-garde ideas in the beginning of 1910s. The same years saw the appearance the first futurist works by D. Kakabadze: “Funeral in Imereti”, “Cubist Self-Portrait” and the work of Siga Valishevski “Shifted Houses” (1912), which testifies to the fact that in Georgia talented young artists were in the process of searching of novelty and attempting to creatively comprehend Modern Western Art.

Revolution in 1917 and the subsequent civil war ruined bohemian life in Russia and intelligentsia and aristocrats overwhelmed by “broken dreams” and with hopes for future moved from cold Russia to independent Georgia.

In 1917-1921 Tbilisi really acquired similarity with “a little Paris”. Here was created absolutely unique artistic space that by its cultural-and-aesthetic context indeed was close to Paris, which in its turn was the cultural center of Europe of that period. Tbilisi assumed this mission in its region and it became an important modernist center in Caucasus and Russia.

In Tbilisi there was created the fruitful soil for creative freedom, were a number of groups, circles, salons, newspapers, printing houses sprang up: thus, for example an art association “Abjari”, “ARS” magazine, a group “Alfa-Lira”, “Phoenix” journal, the journal “Orion”, “ART” Magazine, literary almanac “Acme” and etc. Creative cooperation of various national artistic forces, integration of different national signs into united artistic system became a characteristic feature of Georgian intercultural, international art and this phenomenon is known under the name of Tbilisi Avant-garde.

In 1918 the Futurist poets and artists Ilia Zdanevich, Kara-Darvish (Akop Ganjian), A. Kruchenykh, N. Cherniavski, L. Gudiashvili and Kirill Zdanevich founded the organization “Futurists’ Syndicate” in Tbilisi, which was very short-lived and soon was broken up into various groups. One part of the Futurists founded the union “Futvseuchbishche”. Ilia Zdanevich, Kruchenykh and Terentiev founded a new group “41⁰”. The name of this union was made in honor of the geographical longitude on which Tbilisi as well as other big cities such as New York, Naples, Madrid... are located and to stress that 41⁰C is the highest temperature which human organism can tolerate.

As early as in 1916 one group of Russian avant-garde poets and artists established Futurist-poetic school under the same name in Petersburg, the participant of which was Ilia Zdanevich. Zdanevich was one of the main founders of the above union 41⁰ in Tbilisi and at the same time he is considered to be a founder of “Georgian Dadaism”. The radical typographic experiments conducted by 41⁰ justify the speculations on Dadaistic trends in Georgia in 1919-1921. Ilia Zdanevich played the crucial role in the development of Dadaism first in Tbilisi, then in Paris.

He is better known by his pseudonym Iliazd. Iliazd, whose father was a Pole and mother – Georgian was born in Tbilisi in 1894. In 1911 he moved to Russia where he became carried out by Russian avant-garde movements. Though in that period his art was feeding on Russian avant-garde ideas, his artistic and stylistic thinking bloomed in the Georgian cultural environment and his best works were created there, when he returned to his mother land (in 1918-1921). Georgian artistic traditions and art were very important for him. Suffice it to say, that he, together with Mikhail Le Dantiu (French born Russian avant-garde artist), was the first to discover the creative works of the Georgian self-taught artist Niko Pirosmiani, and spared no efforts to collect and save his works. He was actively involved in all the events of Georgian art and culture of those times.

As has already been mentioned, he was one of the most active members of the organization “41⁰”. The organization was planning to publish books, found a theater, University, to issue a Futurist newspaper “41⁰”. The organization managed to publish only one issue of this newspaper where the Futurism manifesto and the theoretical substantiation of a new direction in poetry named “Zaumni” were published. The publishing activity of “41⁰” was a very interesting phenomenon in the cultural life of Tbilisi. The organization published many interesting books. Those were second editions (1917-1918) of the books issued in 1912-1913 in Petersburg and Moscow, namely: “Uchites, Khudogi”, “Ojirenie Roz”, “Malokholia v Kapote” by Kruchenykh , “O Sploshnim Neprilichii” by Terentiev, “Janko –Krul Albanski” by I. Zdanevich, “Milliork”, “Lakirovannoe Triko” by Kruchenykh, (published in 1919), “Record Nejnosti” by Tedrentiev, “Ostrof Paskhi”, “Zga Jakobi” by I. Zdanevich and others... In 1919 was published the collection of works dedicated to the actress Sofia Melnikova. That book became a certain anthology of futurist poetry and art.

The intensive creative activities of the Futurists in Tbilisi left their impact on Georgian art of that time. There were individual artists and poets who rather actively were trying themselves in this avant-garde movement. Ir. Gamrekeli, M.Gotsiridze, Z.Valishevski, B. Gordeziani and others were carried out with Futurist art. Some of them remained true to this passion and quest for Futurism for rather a long time – up to the mid 1930ies.

Of interest is also the fact that Georgian writers, poets and artists like their Russian colleagues were issuing Futurist/Dadaist almanac H_2SO_4 (1924). Among the publishers of the almanac were Beno Gordeziani, Akaki Beliashvili, Simon Chikovani, Irakli Gamrekeli, Nikoloz Shengelaia and others.

Diverse exhibition activities were occurring in Tbilisi in the beginning of the 20th century. The exhibition of “Mali Krug” (“Small Circle”) was held in 1919, in 1918 was arranged “The Exhibition of Moscow Futurists” and the local innovative artists V. Gudashvili and A. Bashbeuk-Melikov. The catalogue of the exhibition of Kirill Zdanevich contained the introductory article written by A. Kruchenykh and Eli Eganbury (I. Zdanevich), where the authors called K. Zdanevich’s art works “Orchestral painting” and compared K.Zdanevich with Mikheil Larionov, who was working in various styles. They believed that Zdanevich advanced farther and managed to unite various styles on one canvas. Overlooking the works created by him before 1919 one can conclude that K. Zdanevich attempted to find “the forms of new beauty” and in the process of his quest he was really “orchestral”.

In 1919 the Society of Georgian Artists organized an exhibition where David Kakabadze, Shalva Kikodze and Lado Gudiashvili were nominated as the best artists and were sent to Paris where they could familiarize themselves with the European art and advance their artistic skills. This was a very important event both for the future of those artists (except for Sh. Kikodze who could not return to Georgia because of his sudden death from tuberculosis in 1921) and the development of Georgian modern art.

We would like to discuss several works of those outstanding Georgian artists mostly created in 1910-1920s. In the “Self-Portrait” by Kikodze the influence of academic classic painting is still markedly visible; however, indisputable talent and artistic intuition add more internal energy and graphic vividness to the portrait. In his works of that period the interest towards color characteristic and free painting manner is evident to which adds the skilful broad brushstroke manner of painting and the impulse which would subsequently manifest itself in his works and bring him closer to German expressionism, but in some cases his art works are very close to Symbolism as well.

Sh. Kikodze’s drawings should also be mentioned here. In the humoristic journals of that period he is represented as a talented, skilful master whom never betrayed the sense of humor. There one can see a skillful use of a line that is a major element of his compositions. At the same time the line is

never exaggerated or stylized and the artist uses it so energetically and intensively that his drawings are pierced with internal energy and expression.

Lado Gudiashvili exposed some of his paintings at the above mentioned exhibition in 1919. Among those were: “In the Suburbs” (1919), “Pirimze” (1917), Rustaveli’s Portrait (1917), “Feast” (1918)...

In these works Lado Gudiashvili showed himself as a mature artist with his own vision of the world and manner of painting. Elongated stylized forms, underlined depiction of national signs, well outlined typical details, lyrical-and-poetic mood are common for L. Gudiashvili’s works of that period.

Avant-garde nature of L. Gudiashvili’s art is emphasized and well pronounced in those works. It is manifested in his fluid, stylized linearity, slight exaggeration and fluidity of the forms, common musical-and-plastic character of the images. Here, apart from Western avant-garde, one can see the nuances of the Oriental art. Namely, his passion for Persian miniatures (often manifested in particular interest towards a line, narrative nature of the depicted story) is well expressed. The influence of Georgian art of wall painting is also significant. In the paintings of Lado Gudiashvili the importance of the plane is stressed, whereas forms allocated on the surface are always decoratively perceived and compositionally well balanced.

It is noteworthy that avant-garde trends are characteristic of this period of L. Gudiashvili’s creative life; however, his works never lose national features.

In the above mentioned exhibition David Kakabadze represented two of his works: “Imereti – My Mother” (The Mother’s Portrait) and “Imeruli Peizaji” (Imeretian Landscape).

In his Imeretian Landscape (1918) the avant-garde preferences of the artist are evident. Here the Kakabadze reveals his passion for Cézannism and Cubism. Compositional solution of the painting is very interesting. The artist audaciously brings to the foreground a giant triangle which almost completely covers the picture plane. Outside of this triangle (depicting a mountain) is located Imeretian landscape consisting of small geometrical forms while the mountain is crowned with a castle represented as unified geometric forms of cylinders. Irrespective of these cubist forms, the artist still reserves his connection with reality (e.g. colorist solution of the composition); he is not yet fully established as the follower of objectless art notwithstanding of obvious striving towards it as manifested in the landscapes painted in that period of time.

Here we would like to mention Kakabadze’s sketch “Old Tbilisi” painted in 1918 for the café “Chimerioni” murals, where the artist made a significant progress in his avant-garde quest. In this painting he creates an extremely attractive composition impregnated with lyrical and general theatric disposition through using generalized, slightly stylized forms as well as broken stylized

linearity, decorative processing of background, harmonious interaction of surface and space, lines and forms.

When speaking about artistic life of Tbilisi in 1910-1920ies one most significant phenomenon comes forth. This phenomenon played tremendous role in the establishment and further development of Georgian art and culture. These were artistic-literary cafés, which were opened in Tbilisi following the appearance of the artistic cabarets in Paris, Petersburg, Moscow

In the first decade of the 20th century cultural life of Georgia was led by “Blue Horners”. Though their creation tended more towards symbolism they still had close relationships with the representatives of other artistic movements. By their temperament, striving for revival and active actions the Blue Horners were very alike the Futurists. They would often arrange meetings with artists, poets, actors in cafes and clubs where Tbilisi bohemian life reached its culmination. The majority of artistic cafes were predominantly painted with wall-paintings. Here actors, singers, dancers were giving performances, writers and poets were reading their works, lecturers gave their presentations, here were held discussions, concerts, ballet performances, theatrical and literary evenings, charity campaigns, benefit performances... Artistic cafes in Tbilisi united the audience and performers; here often actions were developing directly at the tables and the audience could actively participate in the performances. One can say that arts synthesis occurred in those artistic cafes: music, theater, dancing, poetry and prose merged with each other and every single word about the art novelties was first voiced in these cafes.

At the edge of XIX-XX centuries in European countries broadly spread new style of architecture Art Nouveau and it was established as Modern Style in Tbilisi too. The popularity of Art Nouveau in Georgia was determined by its "international and democratic" character. In Georgia were built banks, colleges, shops, movie theatres, hospitals, workshops, canteens, factories, library, conservatory, typography and many other Art Nouveau buildings. But “The most significant are Art Nouveau style movie theatres. The arrival and then spreading of Art Nouveau and cinema took place simultaneously and the coincidental success of these two innovations is very important in Georgia. A good example of this is cinema “Apollo”, an Art Nouveau movie theatre built in 1909. Today it is in grave technical condition and is not functioning anymore. The movie theatre “Palace” is not operational today either. It was built in Tbilisi in 1914 and only the entrance hall and small fragments of the facade are preserved up to the present. In Georgia only cinema "Apollo" has been preserved in its original form".

From the beginning of their existence in the movie theaters the foreign production of the new media were shown, but later, from 1920s the Georgian films were presented there.

Georgian Avant-Garde films of 1920s and the beginning of 1930s is the significant phenomenon of Georgian modernism. So called Georgian Avant-garde Films create the quite specific and important phenomenon of Georgian Modernist art and culture. Georgian avant-garde films - K. Mikaberidze's *My Grandmother* (1929), M.Kalatozishvili's *Jim Shvante* (1930), *Nail in the Boot* (1932), M.Chiaureli's *Saba* (1929), *Khabarda* (1931)... are significant examples of avant-garde cinema art and they play important role in the development of Georgian Modernism and essentially contributed to the World avant-garde films as well.

After occupation of Georgia by Russian troops and its "soveization" a significant part of creative forces participating in Tbilisi active cultural life has been scattered, emigrated from Georgia or completely vanished; another part continued their activities under political pressure. For example Ilia Zdanevich after his emigration from Georgia continued his activities in Paris where he lived until his last days. He left his special trace there in development of Dadaist poetry. The books he published there remain significant samples of typographic invention.

Russian artists and poets working in the beginning of XX century in Tbilisi fled from Boshevism terror and continued their creative quest in avant-garde movement abroad. For them the period of existing in Tbilisi modernist environment became a certain transitional stage from Russian to international, multi-cultural art; in other words thanks to Tbilisi experience it was easier for them after their emigration to the West integrate into European contemporary culture and co-exist there.

In Georgian reality the above described cultural situation existed till the end of 1920s, though its destruction started much earlier in 1920s, after lost of independence, Russian Soviet army annexed Georgia in 1921. Georgia was forced to join the USSR, and Mensheviks government fled abroad. That was the beginning of purposeful destruction of Georgian national culture, moreover even the destruction of Georgian ethno type, together with all other tools by means of aggressive, antinational cultural policy.

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