

Tbilisi Artistic Cafes (1917-1921). Qimerioni

The history of artistic cabaret began back in the 80s of XIX century when Rudolf Sallis opened the cabaret *Le Chat Noir* at Montmartre in 1881. It was the period of so called “Cabaret Epidemic” outbreak and by the 20-30s of XX century it spread over almost all big cities of Europe.

Artistic café, club, or cabaret - a meeting place for a creative or intellectual society, a kind of cultural context, became a particular way of life generally called café culture.

The initial title of *Black Cat* was *Artistic Cabaret*, the term that was used as a general description (especially in Russian literature) of the phenomenon.

Establishment of such institutions was dictated by a specific cultural-aesthetic - modernists context and political, social and psychological inclinations of the society, creating an area for them to join up and spend time together. It defined the chronology of their creation, their functional character and social-aesthetic destination. As a rule, artistic cabarets were established within the period of the social and political crises, during some big changes the epoch had brought about.

Therefore, artistic cabarets in different countries and cities had different images, unique environment and their own “theme”. In France it was the late XIX century, the period when anti-bourgeois attitudes and protests intensified. 15-20 years later Berlin and Munich cabarets were founded with the songs full of Fronde aspiration and satiric sketches on imperial claims of Wilhelm II. During World War I, in 1916 a Dadaistic cabaret *Voltaire* was open in respectable Zurich. According to Hugo Ball its goals was to “remind the world that beyond the war and nationalism there are independent men living with some other ideals. » In Russia it was a period that entered in history with two definitions “Silver Age” and “Damned Decade.” It was the period between two revolutions (1905-1917) with an exceptional concentration of creative energy, on the one hand, but with the experience of the time as the end of history, on the other: “Objects are dying,” Shklovsky wrote, “We fail to perceive the universe... and we are easily losing our life because cannot feel it any more.”

It was the period when the historical process of art differentiation resulted in its complete self-regulation and secularism, when art became a subjective, self- sufficient form of cognition and expression. However, one could clearly observe the tendency of arts syntheses, which was becoming one of the central aesthetic ideas of the epoch. Artistic cabaret-clubs are one of the reflectors of the given tendency.

Artistic cabaret was a synthesized structure, and not only for the simple reason, that, within its space, the different fields of art and various representatives of art used to merge. Similar environments used to get structured on the basis of certain outlook values. For example, cabarets in St. Petersburg were based on N. Evreinov's theory of theater of life or Theatricalized Life. The last project of *De Stijl*, café De L'Aubette, was based on the idea of unification of art and reality/life, the creation of its universal plastic model. We believe this was the very reason why the walls of these spaces got painted (*Piotersque* in Moscow; *Stray Dog* and *Shelter of Comedians* in St. Petersburg; *Café De L'Aubette* in Strasbourg; *La Coupole* in Paris). Artistic cabaret or cafe was one more immersive space, one more "Gesamkunstwerk". Ritualized space, synthesized structure naturally incorporated in and logically "required" painting not only as a mere decoration but also as art, as one of the synthesizing factors.

This, specific context is created in Tbilisi by 1910s, and that is when the so called "Cabaret Epidemics" spreads here as well: *Fraternal Consolation*, *Peacock's Tail*, *Fantastic Tavern*, *Argonaut's Boat*, *Qimerioni*. Their establishment coincides with the active immigration of artistic society from Russia, and they all seem to be founded by modernists of different nationalities residing in Tbilisi at that period. It is noteworthy to consider that as the tradition of artistic café-clubs comes from Russia, However, we must as well take into consideration the fact that the Georgians, Grigol Robakidze and Paolo Iashvili for example, became familiar with "café culture" in Europe before. The fact that in the 10s of XX century in Tbilisi there was a large number of such active cafes with diverse functioning indicated that they were natural and logical part of its milieu. They were developing according to the spiritual, ideological, aesthetic/ethic values of the very environment, the society within which it sprung to existence.

The artists of different nationalities painted the walls of three of Tbilisi artistic cafes. *Fantastic Tavern* was decorated by Lado Gudiashvili, Alexander Petrakovski, Niko Nikoladze, Yuri Degen, Illia Zdanevich, Ser Gey in 1917.) The walls of *Argonaut's Boat* were painted by Kiril Zdanevich, Lado Gudiashvili, Bajbeuk-Melikov in 1918 and *Qimerioni* - by Serge Sudeikin, Lado Gudiashvili, David Kakabadze in 1919. No wall paintings of St. Petersburg, Moscow or Strasbourg exist any more. In this connection it is very important that the wall paintings of two Tbilisi artistic cafes, *Argonaut's Boat* and *Qimerioni* still remain. *Qimerioni* is remarkable because the wall paintings so much completely preserved here can only be found in Paris *La Coupole* nowadays.

This time we will turn our attention to *Qimerioni* and its murals. The first modernist group of Georgian poets, “Tsisperkantslebi” (“Blue Horns”), took the initiative to found it as a café-club for “Georgian writers.” The café was arranged in the basement of the building of Artistic Society. Now it is the crush-room of Shota Rustaveli State Theater.

The following factors describe the nature of *Qimerioni* and generally Tbilisi artistic cafes:

Political situation of the country, a short period of independence which very much ascertained the sound, positive psychological disposition that differed from those of western and Russian;

Tbilisi itself with its historically created universal and natural junction of Western and Eastern cultures, with its openness in this regard.

At the beginning of XX century Tbilisi was already a modern city where different cultural, social and historical layers were still kept joined and mingled.

In 1917-21 Tbilisi was the capital of the country that had recently gained independence. It was a new important center of Avant-garde in Russia and the Caucasus, the place where so-called Tiflis Avant-garde was being created. The phenomenon carried a multinational and multilingual nature where generationally and ideologically different artistic trends could coexist in open and tolerant space. There was endurable, less confronted, unaggressive attitude towards different nations’ art, various groups and trends, between these groups and society and different social layers as well. For all these peculiarities Grigol Robakidze called Tbilisi of 1917-21 “Fantastic city”.¹

Modern art of the period is not demonstratively oppositionist, negatively denying everything, nihilistic. More to the contrary - the aesthetics of Georgian artists, certainly share general modernist principles, referred as Greenbergian formalism, but during the pursuit, national artistic tradition becomes the initial point. However it was not a radical “revolution” in aesthetics either. Since the late XVIII century along with the appearance and development of secular tendencies in Georgian art, aesthetics and outlook of the Middle Ages had been very strong. The tendency still persisted in the professional painting of the late XIX century. More significant is the fact that this special attitude towards the tradition is connected not only with the artistic-formal quests, but it is, at the same time a completely acknowledged socially stand and national position: the definition of art – that art should be both “national and universal” is the determinant in terms of the desired aesthetic quality of form as well as recognized duty to the country:

According to Geronti Kikodze art was perceived as “national energy”. “Any art of any country is created within the national framework, and only then it acquires value and justification”- wrote artist Shalva Kikodze and as Tizian Tabidze also wrote: “As Europe steps in through the open doors, we shall all be clad in the amour of our national awareness, buttoned up in our national culture, so it shell be the core, around which other, new ideas shall be spun.” It is also essential that this attitude was common for the whole active society.

Tbilisi artistic cafes had no definite social or political motivation (like ones in Paris or Munich), they had neither any specific aesthetic idea (like the cabarets in St. Petersburg, cabaret *Voltaire* or *café De L’Aubette*), nor etiquette of accepted behavior and attribution but they had one common ground and ethics – “Fantastic Tbilisi”.

Therefore, unlike others the structural and functional peculiarities of Tbilisi artistic cafes, and namely of *Qimerioni*, had quite different ground: it was not any existing theory or reality perceived by a group of artists or a group of society but it was reality in general, common attitude. Described features are expressed in *Qimerioni* in different ways: in the peculiarities of its functioning as a social structure and in its environment nature as well.

Qimerioni, and in general Tbilisi artistic cafes as a communication space of society had a kind of “predecessors”, some “roots” in the form of literature salons existing in large numbers in Tbilisi of that time. But the most important among them was a traditional city tavern (*ducani*) and *Lagidze Café*, the first “European” café in Georgia open in Kutaisi and Tbilisi in 1904 and 1906.

According to E. Kuznetsov a traditional *ducani*’s “function was much more expanded than its actual one – it was a sort of a club.”² *Ducani* in Kutaisi and Tbilisi was a place where “Blue Horns”, and creative people in general used to gather.

Café in general is a typical, European Modern form of urban public sociability but *Lagidze* café in Kutaisi and Tbilisi mainly visited by intellectual, literate people, as Paul Manning stated, became the loci of lighting and enlightenment, a representative of intelligentsia “High Culture”³.

Qimerioni was founded by and for such society – it was a modern form to establish modernist art. “Tsisperkantselibi” call it a *café* and the meetings arranged there by them didn’t differ much in nature from the traditional Georgian feasts (*supra*) they used to have in *ducani*.

Both types and orientations of public communication were well combined in it: old and new, modern and traditional, lighting-enlightenment and party-feast, soft drinks

(“Lagidze Drinks”) and wine. As a social structure it was neither only a café (even *Lagidze* café) nor only a *ducani* (even *ducani* turned into Parisian literature café, as Grigol Robakidze wrote⁴). *Qimerioni* was Tbilisi artistic café and as a public structure it was developing in a certain hybrid form of “café-ducani”.

The same tendency is apparent in the environment existing within the *Qimerioni*. Namely, Georgian traditional feast (*supra*) used to be held in the café (Poet Giorgi Leonidze’s wedding party, for example) while Evreionov’s experimental performances were staged here as well (*Etuale School*, for example).

It is significant that for the contemporaries *Qimerioni* was the space carrying great importance. In 1920 the writer David Kasradze wrote that *Qimerioni* was “temple of art”, it was “a finest monument of our art,” which was developing “when the architects of new politics in recently liberated Georgia started building a state”⁵. In fact, *Qimerioni* was a sort of a “restaurant” but at the same time it became a system joining society according to certain functions and purposes, a ritual space decorated with wall paintings – “a temple.” It is natural that such environment described well the activity rules, ethic norms and ideology of “Tsisperkantslebi”, of their friends and fellows. In this regard it belongs to “our” time and is “ours.” It means it is Georgian because this attitude was valuable not only for “Tsisperkantslebi” or only for the creative people but also for the society as a whole. Probably, that is why *Qimerioni* was associated with “building of a new state”, i.e., with civic duty and responsibility towards one’s own country. David Kasradze’s another judgment is also important – *Qimerioni* is “our”, Georgian “monument of art.” I think these words don’t express a mere fact that Georgian works of art of that time decorated *Qimerioni* walls. Furthermore, one of the artists, S. Sudeikin was a representative of Russian art. “Monument”, “Georgian art monument” must mean that some essential signs of art of that period were being revealed in the café painting; it represented not only limited, formal quests (of aesthetics) but moral-ethic, or ideological guides of Georgian modern art as well.

Is it really expressed in *Chimerioni* murals? In other words does *Qimerioni* painting along with architecture-space create a synthesized structure? Or was *Qimerioni* a contemporary monument, a cultural sign of its time? And if that is so, then how did it happen? The question becomes more legitimate if we take into consideration that S. Sudeikin made the most part of the painting and was the leader of the process.

Qimerioni paintings is rather complicated, polysemic structure. Three artists, two Georgian and one Russian painted it in the early XX century. Therefore, we can say that in *Qimerioni* painting we deal with:

1. Three different visions, three distinct attitudes, three artistic individualities;
2. The existence and relationship of two different cultures in one space;
3. The peculiarities and difficulties of establishing a wall painting system as a whole, since two remarkable and opposite tendencies of modernist culture are simultaneously found in it. They are individualism, subjectivism and striving for syntheses. Therefore, *Qimerioni* painting is an ambivalent structure. Today we will discuss one part of this ambivalent structure - *Qimerioni* wall painting as one artistic system. Namely, we will talk about one side of this integrity, entire ideology of the murals, the concept of its entire content.

Schematically the wall paintings of the café look in the following way:

Entrance. On the right wall of the south stairs leading down to the hall there is Lado Gudiashvili's *Stepko's Tavern*. On the left wall just opposite *Stepko's Tavern* there must have been Sudeikin's *Georgian Poets* (This composition is lost and no photos exist).

The opening to the left side of the stairs leads to *Qimerioni* main hall. On the sides of the pillars and in the left wall niche there are Sudeikin's compositions (50 in total). *Broken Mirror* and a composition with a flower basket must have been opposite the entrance where a small stage (bandstand) was constructed. The right wall at the entrance must have been decorated with the scene of dancing women accompanied by duduki (a wind musical instrument) tunes. On the opposite, southern wall the niches were divided with stained-glass partitions. All three compositions and stained glasses belonged to Sudeikin. These works doesn't exist any more. In the semicircle shaped arch of the southern wall, opposite the stage there was David Kakabadze's *Artist and Muse*.

Lado Gudiashvili, Serge Sudeikin and Davit Kakabadze carried out the given task according to their own principles. Their works clearly reveal their distinct artistic visions and styles; the choice of the theme is absolutely different as well. And their thematic and genre interests determined it all.

For Gudiashvili (*Stepko's tavern*) it is Tbilisi, its traditional way of life. In that particular period he creates his famous paintings, on the theme of Karachokheli (representatives of the city artisans) and Kintos (tradesmen). In *Qimerioni* he represents the image of a typical Tbilisi ducani and its keeper.

In his multi-faced painting Sudeikin depicts the usual for him world of theater, masquerade and masks; After having designed St. Petersburg's artistic cabarets, *Stray*

Dog and Shelter of Comedians, in Tbilisi he made another attempt to transform space, to realize N. Evreinov's theory of *Theatricalized Life*.

For Kakabadze ("Artist and a Muse") it is a matter of a pressing problem of that particular period - juxtaposition of a portrait and a landscape in one work, and figure/background interaction. *Qimerioni* composition, where the artist uses the same scheme (the figure as the foreground and the landscape as the background) and the image of the artist depicts the self-portrait, represents metaphor: artist and his motherland as the inspiration.

Therefore, it is evident that each of these three artists singled out only one side of the function, environment-space character and content of the artistic café. They chose the subjects valuable and significant for each of them in regard to *Qimerioni*. How are these three themes, three different contents combined in one idea, in an entire concept?

This integrity may have been created with purposeful, preliminary intention or, perhaps, even intuitively. The entire narration was being created by the congruence of painting with architecture in rhythm, proportion, scale and size and the form composing principles. All three artists (Georgians and Russian) reveal one and the same attitude towards these principles. There is no discord in relation between the painting and architecture; Thus, despite the individual style of the artists, all paintings are perceived formally as a unique adornment, part of the architecture.

The entire narration represented the logic created by the scheme of separate compositions and their space relationships, assisting the visitors of the cafe to find the right direction, to move rhythmically within its walls and to perceive these compositions in a certain order.

Composition scheme of "Stepkos Tavern", prompts movement leading downstairs, towards the main hall, where the visitor finds herself/himself surrounded by the work of Sudeikin, spread on "Qimerioni" columns and walls. Some of the compositions are neutral in terms of dictating movement direction, while others clearly "prompt" to cross the hall, walk in-between the columns, walk around them or just stop. However, these maneuvers, to a certain extent, are regulated by wall compositions and thematic homogeneity and emotional relaxation of mid section of the hall, depicting only still-lives, force one to go around the it, or cross it straight, and finally turn to the wall where David Kakabadze's "Artist and a Muse" is located. The composition with its balance, directness, horizontal display and strict symmetry, with the figures of a comparatively bigger size, not only makes us freeze in static position but also somehow "informs" us about the end of this procession.

The congruence of paintings with architecture, such formalistic unity of the compositions set a background for the conceptual evolvement of murals, but since these paintings are compatible with a given system, their thematic diversity and dissimilarity, gets integrated into consistent, focused “narrative”, creating comprehensive conceptual pattern of Qimerioni painting. Compositions bordering the entrance serve as a kind of introduction, Qimerioni “visit card” if you will. “Stepko’s Tavern”, on one side, is a reminder of Tbilisi tavern, lifestyle, indicating that the “event” takes place in Tbilisi. On the other side, the painting with the poets and artists dressed up in fancy masquerade costumes – introduces Qimerioni aspirators/“main heroes” to visitors, and prepare for the atmosphere of Qimerioni. The visitors entered the main hall, with a certain emotional disposition, and there, as unfolding plot, with an immense force and diversity, the universe of theatre, masks, and a masquerade would unveil – sometimes poetic, sometimes grotesque; sometimes theatrical, and sometimes as mysterious as a fairy tale. The universe that drags you into a head spinning night life. But, then suddenly this emotion becomes more peaceful, and quiet. It happens when finally David Kakabadze’s “Artist and Muse” appears as a metaphor of the purpose of an artist, the one, whose country is his inspiration, and no matter how exciting and attractive is this masquerade, the reality for an artist is still something that made Titsian Tabidze say: “Was I was born a slave to carry a yoke with Georgia as its name.”

All these themes obtained one whole meaning only within this unified system. They lost their own meaning and went on their existence as the content of Tbilisi artistic café, as the visual metaphor of its function. Therefore, the paintings idea was brought about by ideological and ethical tendencies of Georgian artists, Tsisperkantslebi” and the creative society of that time. Not Sudeikin’s but Lado Gudiashvili and David Kakabadze’s works determine the total concept, since, despite the fact that the great part of the paintings belongs to Sudeikin and his works mainly create the mood of the main hall, Gudiashvili and Kakabadze’s compositions make the principle content of the paintings. *Stepko’s Tavern* begins and *Artist and Muse* finishes “visual narration” while Sudeikin’s theatricalized life blends in this context rather successfully. Thus, *Qimerioni* reveals one of the main guides of that time ideology – national signs as well as the ideals of an artist and his function, which Titsian Tabidze called “Mojamagireoba” (to be a hired man).

In this “technology” of establishing *Qimerioni* compositions as café painting system significant characters of our modernist art and culture of the 1910s were revealed. It shows the self-identity, self-experience of Georgian artists within the “modernist

milieu”. They are not characterized either by avant-garde “us” – authoritarian and aggressive unity against reality and aesthetics, or insularity-autism in aesthetic world – a sort of modernist ”self”. These artists are, of course, artistic individuals but their unity is determined by the values that go beyond aesthetics. These are national position and civic duties. It shows the nature of the cooperation and interrelationship of the artists belonging to different nations living in Tbilisi (in this regard the best example can be the album dedicated to Sophia Melnikova as well as Tbilisi architecture itself).

Such integrity also reveals the peculiarities of Tbilisi modernity, which, I will repeat, Grigol Robakidze called “Fantastic city”.

As we have stated above, this conception of wall painting was being created methodically but because the method unified three independent themes and three artists’ individual visions, the establishment of one common system was possible only by considering the definite order of these artworks. Integrity can be gained only in straightforward way. The method permits only this kind of comprehension of the system. In addition, it should be disposable. Therefore, if one fails to follow this intention then *Qimerioni* wall paintings can be considered as only Lado Gudiashvili, Sergey Sudeikin and David Kakabadze’s artworks created on the walls of the café. They are not an architectural decoration but they only give a certain definition to the space content (in three ways).

And exactly that very feature of *Qimerioni* murals, its “non-universality” is the sign of its contemporariness and sociability with subjective, individualistic modernist art. Taking all these into consideration we can state that in fact, *Qimerioni* with its wall painting is Georgian monument of 1910 – 1920s. It really is a cultural sign of its historical time and environment.

¹ Gr. Robakidze, Phalestra, (in Georgian) Tbilisi, 1988, p.237-238

² E. Kuznetsov, Pirozmanashvili i khudozhesyvennaia kultura XX veka (Pirozmanashvili and Artistic Culture of XX c., in Russian), International Symposium of Georgian Art, Tbilisi, 1977, p. 4

³ P. Manning, Georgian Drinking Culture. Introduction to Fluid Modernities. Waters. <http://www.dangerserviceagency.org/drinking.html>, 2009

⁴ G. Robakidze, Gruzinskii modernism (Georgian Modernism, in Russian), p. 47

⁵ D. Kasradze, Qimerioni, newspaper Sakartvelo (in Georgian), N3, 1920