

The Avant-Garde in Georgia

1900–1936



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Kirile Zdanevich
Female Figure, 1910s
Oil on canvas, 123 × 91 cm
Shalva Amiranashvili State Museum of Fine Arts,
Georgian National Museum, Tbilisi

Preface I

2023 has been an especially significant year for Georgian art. For 20th-century Georgian fine art, this year will go down in history like the first Niko Piroshvili (Piroshvili) exhibition in 1969 at the Louvre Museum of Decorative Arts.

The exhibition “The Avant-Garde in Georgia (1900–1936)”, co-presented by Georgia and europa at Bozar, Centre for Fine Arts, in Brussels, is the first exhibition of Georgian Modern and Avant-Garde art in Europe.

If our country was once known as the centre of ancient and medieval Christian culture, it now presents itself in Brussels as an important centre of Modern art.

Georgia’s unique geographical location, artistic traditions as well as social, political and economic readiness at the turn of the 20th century contributed to the distinctiveness of this multinational and multistructural cultural phenomenon called Georgian Modern and Avant-Garde art.

Numerous works, rare documents and photographs from various museums and private collections from Georgia and Europe have been brought together for the first time in one exhibition space in Bozar to tell the story of Georgian painting, graphics, theatre and cinema – that is, the history of Georgian Modern Art of the 20th century.

The exhibition also demonstrates Georgia’s constant efforts to regain its place in the European historical and cultural realm, of which Georgian Modern art had been a part before being forcibly braked by the Soviet occupation in 1921.

This exhibition conveys the youthful spirit and inquisitiveness of the main characters of Georgian Modernism and, while observing the veritable kaleidoscope of events shaking the Georgian political- cultural space at the turn of the 20th century, you will be able to feel this “cultural oasis” in the midst of revolutions and wars.

Thea Tsulukiani

Minister of Culture, Sport and Youth of Georgia

Preface II

For its 29th festival, europalia is turning its attention to the Caucasus and in particular to Georgia, a country with a unique cultural and artistic identity shaped both by its own traditions and by Western and Eastern influences, little known in Western Europe despite a long history of ties with our continent.

One of the two main festival exhibitions is dedicated to Avant-Garde movements in Georgia between 1900 and 1936. This largely forgotten chapter in the history of Avant-Garde art of the early 20th century deserves to be explored in greater depth to highlight the specific challenges facing artists at the time. The winds of freedom and creativity that blew through Georgia at that time, and particularly Tbilisi, were of vital importance in the country's recent history. During that period, Georgia declared its first, albeit short-lived, independence. Within three years, the country had been invaded and annexed by the Soviet army. It was not until 1991 that independence was declared on a permanent basis. The influence of these Avant-Garde movements was not confined to Georgia's borders. Numerous exchanges took place with other centres of Avant-Garde creation, notably Munich, St. Petersburg, Moscow and Paris. Tbilisi was also a cosmopolitan destination for many foreign artists, who found it a haven of peace in a turbulent world context.

This exhibition and the accompanying catalogue were conceived by a team of passionate art historians and curators – Nana Kipiani, Irine Jorjadze and Tea Tabatadze – in collaboration with the europalia team.

By shining a spotlight on Georgia, the europalia team aims to introduce the country's rich and abundant art scene to Western European audiences. Tens of events across all artistic disciplines showcase a polyphony of voices with an emphasis on new creations, residencies and exchanges between artists.

None of this would have been possible without the close and intense collaboration between many people in Georgia and the europalia team. We would like to thank them all for their commitment to this beautiful project that promotes dialogue between people and cultures.

Baron Philippe Vlerick

Chairman of the Board of Directors at europalia

Introduction

In terms of historical and artistic merit, Georgian Modernism and Avant-Garde undoubtedly have their place in the history of 20th-century art. Nonetheless, it was brief, ended abruptly, and was very much isolated from the period that followed. The main problem, however, is not that its value has yet to be recognised, but rather that so little is known about it, due to the unfortunate and ill-fated history of Georgia in the 20th century.

During the Soviet period, following Georgia's forced Sovietisation and relegation to the peripheral zone of the Soviet Union, Georgian Modernism and Avant-Garde emerged as a part of history that was forbidden and deliberately erased from memory.

Georgian Modernism arose in the 1900s when Georgia was a part of the Russian Empire. From 1918 to 1921, it went through a brief period of independence, which marked the most liberal era of the Tiflis Avant-Garde in the 20th-century history of Georgian art. Despite certain scholars referring to Georgia as Avant-Garde “periphery” at the time, it managed to establish itself as one of the Avant-Garde centres in Southern and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Russia. However, the flourishing era came to an end in the 1930s. Soviet cultural policy officially designated Modernism as formalism, a facet of bourgeois culture, and consequently banned it. This policy effectively obliterated Modernism, replacing it with Socialist Realism. Some parts and fragments of it may have survived the darkest, repressive, state-terror Soviet years of the 1930s, but this came with high risks of physical or psychological harm, costing the creativity and lives of many artists.

This entire history of the Georgian Avant-Garde is being introduced to Europe for the first time by the exhibition “The Avant-Garde in Georgia (1900–1936)” and its accompanying catalogue. It will present its origins, the Modernist artists and their works, the international milieu of the Tiflis Avant-Garde with its artistic cafés and unique Avant-Garde books, archival documentary materials, artefacts that reflect the Avant-Garde's unique attitude towards heritage, and the experimental work of the 1920s and 1930s in scenography and cinema.

Nana Kipiani, Irine Jorjadze and Tea Tabatadze

Curators

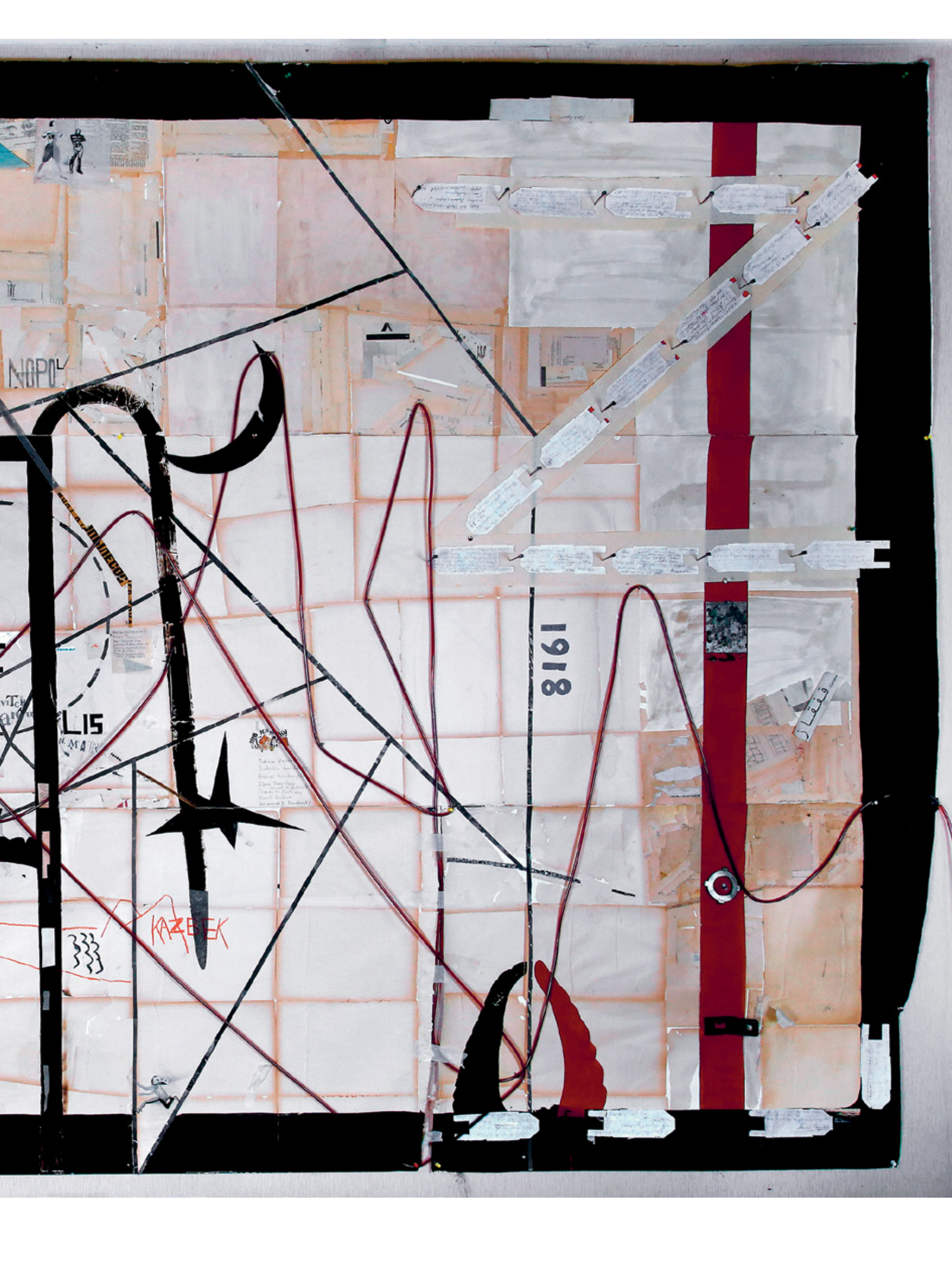
Next spread:

Levan Chogoshvili

Donkey Way – The Map of Georgian Modernism, 2018

Mixed media, 400 × 200 cm

Levan Chogoshvili Collection



1918

KAZBEK

L15

1918

NOPI

Текст на белом листе с эмблемой

Nana Kipiani

How We Became Modernists

In 1919, David Kakabadze¹ wrote an essay titled *Our Path*.² In this conceptual, programmatic text – something uncommon in Modernism or Avant-Garde – the artist discusses what Georgian art should be and the path that it should travel. Writing about Georgian art of the past, including painting, architecture, literature, and folk art, and about its authenticity, Kakabadze argues that contemporary Georgian art too needs to seek out its own method and way forward; he also expresses the view that art is the science and the knowledge essential for finding this method.

While, from the point of view of defining the function of Georgian art, the text addresses many subjects, its key message remains concerned with Georgian art's authenticity and with a path which, for Kakabadze, is defined by the necessity of knowledge of the past. This is during a period in which, in Western art and Avant-Garde, the past, at least in formal terms, was being rejected, and in which, whether one speaks of Italian Futurism or even German Expressionism, Dada, the later French Surrealism, or many other "isms", and despite the multitude of these "isms" and their being dispersed throughout various countries, these were still considered a unified, universal and Eurocentric, or rather universal and Western, whole – an undifferentiated process.

This text of Kakabadze's and other texts by Georgian Modernists or Avant-Gardists of such orientation have a real foundation which fits directly into political discourse, and which naturally also feeds into religious and cultural contexts.

In what follows we will tell you about the political and cultural contexts, which were quite dramatic and distinctive in terms of how and under what circumstances Georgia entered the Modern Age and how cultural, artistic, and political Modernism then took shape. In what respect were they dramatic, and what is the meaning of *Our Path*?

At the end of the 19th century, in roughly the 1880s to 1890s, anybody in Georgia wishing to gain insight into the immediate future of art and literature would have come to realise that, in just a short time, at the beginning of the 20th century, the age of Modernist culture would appear before their eyes, for which all of the necessary conditions were already in place. The final two decades of the 19th century also saw the birth of the generation which would soon establish this Georgian artistic and literary Modernism and create the Tbilisi Avant-Garde, while the same period would see the coming into being of Modernist politics.

What was happening in Georgia in the years 1880–1890? Modernism had in fact already opened the door; the stage was set, making the future evident to anybody who wished to see it. By this time, Gigo Gabashvili, Oskar Schmerling,³ David Guramishvili,⁴ and others were already present in the realm of painting, for example, in addition of course to Niko Pirozmanashvili (Pirosmani),⁵ who was so beloved of the Tbilisi Avant-Garde. It was thus just a few years after the 1880s–1890s that with the 1900s, the age of a young and youthful culture, that of so-called "Modernism", arrived, for which life was important. In 1910 there was already a premonition of Avant-Gardism, and as early as 1912 the Tbilisi Avant-Garde was born.

In beginning our account in the 1880s–1890s, we are to a certain extent modifying the chronology of Georgian Modernism which Modernist writer Grigol Robakidze first established as early as in 1918 in his essay *Georgian Modernism* as having begun in 1915,⁶ and which Georgian art history thereafter came to count from this year. It is unclear why we should have put our trust in this date.

Here I will digress slightly with an explanation. It so happened that from the 1930s, and more specifically from 1932 onward, Modernism and Avant-Gardism were banned in Soviet Georgia. Entire decades were erased from memory. Academia was forbidden not only from studying Modernism, but even from mentioning it. Furthermore, the years 1918–1921 – those three short years during which Georgia succeeded in delivering itself from Russia and achieving independence, only to lose it again through force of arms – were torn from the memory of generations. Our history was made to fit directly into Russia's 20th-century history, and through a series of manipulations, we were interpolated into the chronology of the Bolshevik coup that was called a revolution and that took place in Russia in 1917, and into the founding of Bolshevik Russia that took place in the same year. Until the end of the 1980s, it was taught directly to pupils in Georgian schools learning Modern Georgian History that in 1917, we were already part of Bolshevik-Soviet Russia and accomplices in its "revolution". Who, moreover, could have spoken about Modernism or the Avant-Garde when these were categorically unacceptable under an official policy of Socialist Realism? It was only from approximately the mid-1990s that interest in Modernism and the Avant-Garde began to grow. Information on these subjects was initially accessible only via certain channels, but gradually, museum warehouses began to be explored, and imagine the astonishing historical and cultural absurdity of the fact that only in 2003–2004 – some 80 years later – Georgian society had for the first time the opportunity to see a certain part of the Georgian Modernism of 1910–1920, and to discover some of the names associated with it, when a first exhibition was held at the Tbilisi Historical Museum – Carvasla and a book was published.⁷ It was during this time that, in an artistic and literary journal titled ARS (Tbilisi, 1918, No.1) that had been preserved in a closed archive for decades, a text in Russian by the categorically banned Symbolist and expressionist writer Grigol Robakidze titled *Georgian Modernism* was discovered, in which he dates the beginning of the movement to 1915 in the city of Kutaisi, commencing with those poets and writers who had at that time created the group the *Blue Horns*, and whom we describe as Symbolists to the present day. Though we have long put our trust in this date, sufficient information has in the meantime come to light for a revision of the chronology of Modernism to be appropriate.

I return now to *Our Path* and to the 1890s. What was happening in Georgia at this time? In order to understand this, we must go back in time further, to the beginning of the 19th century.

In 1801, the somewhat lengthy process of the Russian Empire's annexation of Georgia began. The colonised and

abolished kingdom state in the South Caucasus was declared a province of Russia, although in fact it was not until half a century later, in 1868, that it surrendered to the empire in full. The country's annexation meanwhile took place in stages, against a background of enduring anti-Russian opposition, uprisings, and conspiracies.

Of these, the most significant was the Conspiracy of 1832 of Georgian Romanticism, or rather of the Georgian Romantics, which, in addition to its objective of liberation, had a very evident cultural significance.

Previously, in the years 1830–1831, the November Uprising had taken place in Poland. This and the Georgian Conspiracy of 1832 are often compared in terms of the attitudes that lay behind them and their objectives. Poland and Georgia were in similar political situations; between 1795 and 1918, Poland lost its statehood and was partitioned and distributed between Russia, Prussia (later the German Empire), and Austria (later Austria-Hungary). Both nations had therefore found themselves under Russian dominion;⁸ the difference was that prior to the uprising of 1830, there had existed a state of personal union between Poland and Russia, whereas in 1801 the Georgian Kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti had simply been abolished and made into a "Georgian Governorate" that formed part of the Russian Empire. As the process of annexation continued, this entity was transformed into the Georgian-Imeretian Governorate, and was then transformed again so that, by 1918, the Caucasus was divided between the Tbilisi, Kutaisi, Shemakha, and Derbent Governorates. There was no trace of autonomy for Georgia at this time whatsoever.

Though in 1801 it had found itself deprived of its kingdom and statehood, Georgia nevertheless began entering the Modern Age. As much is indicated by the Conspiracy of 1832 which, with the objective of making the idea of liberation a reality, brought together its own learned cultural, intellectual, and professional militarily trained forces of the period and, using contemporary Western experience, gave articulation to the problems of statehood and of a crisis of national and cultural identity.

Against the background of the grave political situation that had existed since the first years of the 1800s, the Conspiracy of 1832 of the Georgian Romantics posed that problem of state, cultural, and national identity that permeated the entire century, and that came to a head in the first two decades of the 20th. In this watershed year, in an annexed country, against a background of the establishment of Russian rule, imposed Russification, the beginnings of the nation's assimilation, and the forced resettlement and strict censorship of undesirable intellectuals and of princes and aristocrats, Georgia began a new history.

This conspiracy naturally later became the stimulus for quite a complex debate relating to the problem of cultural, political, and social identity which was followed by changes in many fields, among which art of course figured.⁹ Initially, for a certain period, the silence of disappointment reigned; the conspiracy had been defeated. While defeat temporarily brought a halt to political activism, however, in its stead this became a time for research in the humanities and in history on one hand and, on the other, of Romanticism as a movement, which was manifested astonishingly in poetry and which left us with Romantic-historical prose.

What was happening in the visual arts? An entire gallery of very attractive portraits was being painted which we call "Georgian Noble Portraiture" or, more succinctly, "the Tbilisi School" (Fig. 1).

It so happened that in Georgia – this country that boasts the highest standard of church mural paintings and centuries-old manuscript miniatures, easel painting (oil painting techniques) appeared only from the 18th century

onward, and, in the first half of the 19th century – became part of the Romantic Movement. To those who know little or nothing about Georgian art and culture, I would say that even as early as "from the end of the 17th century, a certain reorientation of Georgian fine [...] art is entirely clear, as is [...] the manifestation of certain influences from Western art ("Western" here in the more specific sense of the word, referring to Italian, German, and Dutch art)."¹⁰

Georgian culture and art were thus not part of that great narrative that began in Western Europe in the 14th century or earlier still, and which was founded upon the great concept of mimesis and subsequently of illusionism. This concept only began to spread in Georgia in the 17th century, and only became truly and evidently established in the 19th century – initially, for a brief period, with Classicist features, then with those of Romanticism, then with those of Realism, and so on. Naturally, however, this process also met here with local cultural and artistic thought with its pre-existing tributaries.

The Tbilisi School's great cycle of noble portraits represents the first body of work to finally establish easel painting in Georgia, and portrait became virtually the only genre of the time. If we take into consideration that this occurred during Romanticism, such a specific interest in portraiture is understandable.

Stylistically, this portraiture resembles that of a number of regions and countries, which must be the result of a certain similarity culturally, politically, and in terms of artistic processes. Similarity can be noted with the larger part of Eastern Europe – its "Orthodox" region, where typological cultural change took place later than it did in the West: in Greece, from the 16th century onward; then in Ukraine, Russia, Serbia, to a certain extent in Romania, and, at the transition between the 18th and 19th centuries and in the first half of the 19th century, in Bulgaria as well.¹¹ There is also a similarity with the "Sarmatian" portraits of the Catholic Polish *szlachta* and with Czech portraiture, and with Hispano-Habsburg aristocratic portraiture, the portraiture of Latin and North America in the Colonial Period and in the 19th century, and even with earlier Scottish aristocratic portraiture, which appears to have played a certain role in the development of Polish/Sarmatian portraiture, many Scottish Catholics having fled to co-religionist Poland during the Reformation. In most, although not all, of these countries, portraiture was a leading genre in easel painting in the initial stage of typological change, while in Georgia it was virtually the only genre.

All of these countries are united by their existence at the periphery of Western European culture, in this way almost forming a circle around "mainstream" Western illusionist culture, which influenced them while they met this influence with their own local artistic thought. When the time came, this experience moved towards the centre.

Orientation towards the West thus began in Georgia from the 17th century onward, whereby influences entered Georgia directly from the West as well; "purely European samples" (not Russian, but from Europe directly)¹² were quite plentiful in number. This process is clear in 17th-century "donor portraiture in ecclesiastical art, which is probably unsurprising if we take into account that Catholic missionaries were residing in Zugdidi and Gori; they had brought over books and would paint."¹³ In addition, the artists who had come here taught oil painting in schools; this was the case in Gori, for example. Those arriving at this time included Cristoforo de Castelli in 1628; Arcangelo Lamberti in 1638-1649; Joseph Goetting, a military expert and painter who painted the portrait of Georgia's last king, Giorgi XII, and who worked at the court of Erekle II; and others.

I always associate the 19th-century Romantic portraiture of the Tbilisi School, which continued until the

1860s–1870s, with the dramatic and politically anti-Russian poetry of Queen Mariam and Princesses Ketevan and Tekla, which was written at the beginning of the same century during a most difficult period. These women, themselves participants in uprisings or conspiracies against Russia, bring an intense individualism to their poetry which is expressed in personal disillusionment and in a melancholic and romantic view of the past arising from Georgia's political fate, and represent artistic figures upon whom, soon after, "Georgian Romanticism founded its national discourse".¹⁴ Georgian women, always so active in politics, had previously long embroidered scenes of Christ's descent from the cross which, despite their religious subject matter, did not specifically have the function of icons, and which thereby represented a shift from the church towards the religious and in fact changed their artistic form, in which the beginning of typological changes in art can already be seen.

But still, why do I mention this Tbilisian portraiture of the Romantic Period, which at a glance appears almost simplistic to an eye trained on and oriented towards Western illusionism? Firstly, as I have already said, this is essentially the only genre in painting which portrays the humanitarian culture of the time and the process of transition from late feudalism into a new history. Secondly, it is apparent from it that culture was the preserve of the aristocracy, for whom portraits were important as a representation of a person's social status. But not only this; also evident are Romantic individualism, intimacy, concentration on the face of the subject, a lugubriousness, a certain taciturnity, a withdrawnness, and an indifference, which permeates all of the portraits created over the course of half a century. In connection with this, there is also the rejection of an entourage, and a predominantly dull, almost dark, homogenous background that works upon the subject's face to make them appear "as if immersed in the twilight of mystery, silence, hoax" (Milan Kundera).¹⁵

In addition to their noted similarity with the portraits of "peripheral" countries, these portraits have on the one hand a staticness, a certain proportional deformation and anti-illusionism, a preponderance of local colour, and a certain timelessness which, from a Western perspective, may also appear in some way archaic, recalling the traditions of Georgian ecclesiastical donor portraiture; while on the other hand, with their sometimes detailed, neat depiction of ornaments upon clothing and the creeping into this of a certain decorativeness, we are reminded of Iranian portraiture of the Qajar Dynasty Period and of Qajar Europeanised portraiture. The Tbilisi School, however, selects most carefully from the still-life, ornamental nature of Qajar art which characterises the latter's own, ostentatious portraits, avoiding excessive ornamentalism.

The Romantic portraits of the Tbilisi School demonstrate a closeness not only to the portraiture of the Qajar Period, but also to that of earlier Safavid Iran. Its similarity with this, albeit in few examples, is even clearly iconographic. In this period the Safavids, who were establishing diplomatic contacts with Europe, were influenced by European art as they began their own Modern history. Direct iconographic similarity is apparent between a portrait of Nino Eristavi executed in 1829 (Fig. 2) and, for example, a portrait of a noblewoman holding a rose painted in circa the first decade of the 1700s; many other examples exist. The portrait of Nino Eristavi virtually reproduces the Iranian woman's pose, including the rose held in her hand, which is the flower of paradise in Islamic culture and symbolises heavenly beauty.¹⁶ While iconographically analogous, however, how different Nino Eristavi's portrait is in terms of dramatic composition, how expressive and vibrant her figure compared with that of the Safavid subject, and for its part, how conventional its

connection with the Western art of this time; how expressive her sadness-tinged expression, how well-defined her features in contrast with the mask-like Safavid face, and yet how static and withdrawn her face appears, with a gaze directed beyond us, more so than in the portraiture of the Western Romantic Period. How carefully the ornamental, lacy surface of her clothing is depicted with its precious stones, how accented her figure with its essential linearity and the almost local (red and white) colouring of her clothes, and how distant what appears behind her, depicted with a very low horizon and almost abstracted natural surroundings, a dark, troubled sky, and in the lower background, dimly reddish and pinkish-lit mountaintops that indicate the setting sun to us, and how greatly this resembles the poetry of Queen Mariam: "The cloud with shadow hid/ The arena of the luminaries in darkness.../ The sun set towards Asia/ Shade will now spread over it/ Our mountains were quickly ploughed down/... The arena of swords has grown dark/ The roses no longer unfurl/ The luminaries all trembled/ The clouds have begun to cast shade now." It is almost a German Romantic poem that we behold, although far more abstract. The figure of Nino Eristavi, standing in a contrast of scale with the background landscape but connected with it in essence, displays an interesting feature: the reflection in nature of the internal condition of an individual with a calm exterior who appears slightly melancholic and simultaneously withdrawn within themselves (even as a silhouette). On one hand, therefore, we have Romanticism with its melancholy, preoccupation with the past, metaphorical language, and individualism, and on the other hand, similarity with Persian art from the point of view of form, iconography, and symbolism.

The Modernist Osip Mandelstam, poet of Russia's Silver Age, writes of these portraits in 1922: "Before you stands a long procession of severe portraits [...] in their technique and profound static serenity reminiscent of German painting. At the same time, a two-dimensional perception of form and a linear composition (rhythm of lines) exude the methods of Persian miniature [...] these works of nameless painters are a true triumph of Georgian art over the East."¹⁷

I now return to the poetry of the princesses, which "is written in Oriental form... in a Turko-Persian voice. Artistic forms and subject matter are used to create a uniform basic vocabulary. Orientalism and Persophilic tendencies continue in Georgian Romantic poetry", just as this stratum is apparent in Georgian Romantic portraiture. This is the case with the Romantic poets and writers of the first half of the century – Aleksandre Chavchavadze, Grigol Orbeliani, and others – whose succession ends with the poet Nikoloz Baratashvili. Though his work marks the conclusion of Persophilia, voices of Persian and more broadly Islamic culture rise to the surface again later in Modernism.

And so we come to David Kakabadze's text *Our Path*: "We must embark upon that path, [...] that method that was created by magnificent Persian art, the artistic form of India and of China and Japan, the sculpture of Easter Island, of ancient Egypt, Greece, New Byzantium, the Renaissance" he continues, conceptually differentiating Romantic and Classical art and attributing superiority to the latter. Most important, however, is clear convergence in the individual. Prior to this, in the manifesto *Made Pictures*¹⁸ he writes: "We agree with all achievements in art [...] We will not permit the world's division into districts – the Eastern and the Western. We stand at the centre of the life of world art."

In 1917, Ilia Zdanevich¹⁹ (under one of his pseudonyms, Eli Eganbyuri), together with Aleksei Kruchenykh, the Zaum poet of Ukrainian origin (who was born in the Kherson Region), wrote in the catalogue of an exhibition held in Tbilisi by Ilia's brother, the artist Kirile Zdanevich: "It is possible to bring together various modes of painting onto one



Fig. 1
Tbilisi Portrait School
The family of the Prince Nikoloz Mukhran-Batoni, 1862
Oil on canvas, 94.5 × 130 cm
Shalva Amiranashvili State Museum of Fine Arts, Georgian National Museum, Tbilisi







Niko Pirosmanashvili (Pirosmani)

Clockwise from opposite:

Signboard: Cold Beer, n.d.
Oil on tinsplate, 124 × 69 cm

A Lion and the Sun, n.d.
Oil on cardboard, 80.5 × 99.6 cm

Little Boy Riding a Donkey, n.d.
Oil on cardboard, 99.4 × 80.5 cm

All on this spread:
Shalva Amiranashvili State Museum of Fine Arts,
Georgian National Museum, Tbilisi



Niko Piroshvili (Piroshvili)
Four Townsfolk Carousing, n.d.
Oil on oilcloth, 108 × 202 cm
Shalva Amiranashvili State Museum of Fine Arts,
Georgian National Museum, Tbilisi





Gigo Gabashvili

Five Winged Creatures, 1900s–1910s

Watercolour on paper, 20 × 33 cm

All on this and next spread: Shalva Amiranashvili State Museum of Fine Arts, Georgian National Museum, Tbilisi



Gigo Gabashvili
Angel in the Sky, 1900s–1910s
Watercolour on paper, 20 × 28.4 cm

Next spread:
Gigo Gabashvili
Fantasy, 1910s
Oil on canvas, 58.2 × 71.4 cm





harmony or disharmony – elements which have such attributes as love and enmity, phobias and phobias, and beauty and ugliness, and are thus the elements in their duality. The scheme is quite a simple one.

In addition to this, and probably most importantly, Gabashvili brings several themes to relevance in Georgian visual Modernism – among them eroticism, which became a leitmotiv of Modernism as early as the 1910s. Eroticism in Gabashvili's case is all-encompassing, on earth and in the heavens, everywhere and always, in time and in timelessness; Gabashvili's earthly scenes are orgiastic, brutally erotic in a "pagan" manner, while in the ether, scenes with winged beings lack this orgiastic quality. These beings reside in light blue, darkish blue, or whitish-lightish blue abstract, removed, and eternal ether, in that part of the vertical of the world where motion, sexual division, and the meeting and parting of the upper and the lower begin, but where the unity of the world in idea still exists. For this reason, androgynes cohabit here with angels, fallen angels, and humans; "the ether" is that fateful area of space where the characters are ready to descend to dramatic earth (or conversely, to ascend into the heavens).

The traditional and, subsequently, the modern occultism and esoterica of the transition between the 19th and 20th centuries see the elements as a hierarchy. Fire and air are spiritual and perfect, while water and earth are reduced to matter. As for ether, Blavatsky writes in *The Secret Doctrine* that this is not a void created by the absence of forms, but rather the foundation of form. Astral light – also known as "lower ether" – is inhabited by various conscious, semiconscious, and unconscious entities.

The fire "series" is the only series whose element is presented not in elemental form, but as an object of worship. We are transported into the world of the fire ritual, into mystery. In one painting we even recognise the location of the ritual; it is the square before the main cave-hall of Uplistsikhe (The Lord's Fortress),¹⁷ a pagan, Late Bronze Age city carved into rock in Eastern Georgia, upon which a pagan priest is leading a crowd in prayer (Fig. 1–6). It was apparently also here that an entire clan of seers and warriors settled in isolation in the 18th century.¹⁸ Gabashvili is drawing upon the history of Uplistsikhe – legendary, not yet established, magical. In this place, in "the city", there were apparently initially rocky burial grounds, where there was also a shrine to fire.¹⁹ A grand space that served as a meeting point between death and eternal fire, representing the sun and life.

Gabashvili is thus also establishing mythology, which for Georgian visual art at the transition between the 19th and 20th centuries, unlike literature, was something essentially new. A return to the most distant past, to paganism, to Zoroastrianism, to the ancient, mystical East, to the sun, and to the myth of Prometheus.

Together with mysteries relating to fire, we encounter mysteries of the cult of the phallus in his cycle, which are portrayed in two ways: in the form of ritual, and orgiastically.

Ancient large-scale cult sculptures of the phallus, which are also known as breast stones,²⁰ in addition to small-scale sculptures, are scattered at many locations throughout Georgia, and it must be from this tradition that this form in Gabashvili's work derives. This cult is transmitted in Christianity, especially in the mountains, in Khevsureti, where Gabashvili spent a long period studying the region's traditions, not to mention many surviving festivals²¹ and ritual dances – phallic celebrations which supposedly resemble the mystery of Dionysus and Venus²² and the mysteries of the intersex Cretan Aphrodite-Ishtar-Inanna.

The theme of the androgyne likewise enters into Gabashvili's work (Fig. 7). The Modernism of the 1910s itself thoroughly recalls the ancient androgyne, transforming

it into its own text. The popularity of androgynism, which was revived in European culture by Jakob Böhme and by Swedenborg, was revived following Romanticism at the end of the century/millennium by theosophy, esotericism, and anthroposophy, creating its modern version – the concept of the androgyne underwent much change, and Gabashvili too does not employ the archaic ritual concept of cosmological asexual perfection, but the hermaphroditic model of a dynamic unity between binary opposites that was established by Romanticism.²³

Gabashvili's symbolism is thematically distinctive, seeking out the origins of mysticism in the mysterious world of the local Caucasus and the ancient East, just as the Neo-Symbolism of the 1910s did for instance in ancient Eastern Chaldea with a "sickness-induced hallucination", inhabited by seers, sorcerers, magi, and astrologers.

* * *

Let us now turn briefly to the political situation.

Significant among the many changes that took place in the first decade of the 1900s is one of the hallmarks of modernisation: the growing activeness of political parties and of the social classes. Parties were ideologically dispersed predominantly over the problem of nation and state, of defining priorities among the concepts of political autonomy, cultural autonomy, and the preferentiality of social struggle. Each saw themselves as a moderniser of the nation with the ability to form public opinion. This of course did not require a struggle that would manifest itself in literature, but a professional party methodology.

The new face of Georgia was party-political and methodical, corporate self-confidence, with an ambition to pursue "Realpolitik". While this would appear to be a departure from the Romantic paradigm, it would become apparent in the 1910s that no paradigm change would take place, despite the coarseness, let us say, of political life.

The year 1901 marked a century since Georgia's annexation by Russia. As Jorjadze writes, "One hundred years had passed since Georgia lost political freedom and became a province of Russia,"²⁴ "since a General Fadeev appeared and said that a true Georgian should simultaneously be a true Russian". 1901 saw the publication of the politician and lawyer Zurab Avalishvili's book *Georgia's Annexation to Russia*.²⁵

The Conspiracy of 1832 was recalled as well, and critical analysis was written of socio-political and cultural life in the 19th century and of the contemporary situation. There was confrontation between the generations, which appeared in the press of the time – essays radical in form were printed in many newspapers and periodicals carrying parties' ideological lines. Texts were written on historical and on economic materialism. Marxism, which liberal moderate leftists discussed as an ideological doctrine and not as a theory, had already been present in Georgia for some time.

The conflicting generations have for some time been conventionally divided into three groups: the First Group; the *Tergdaleulebi* (Those who have drunk the waters of the River Tergi, that is, received an education in Russia and Europe), a liberal social and literary movement previously discussed which initiated a national liberation movement under the leadership of Ilia Chavchavadze, a liberal and democratic wing of which, the Second Group, or the New Youth, was founded in 1869 under the leadership of Niko Nikoladze; and the Third Group, created in 1895 as the first Marxist political organisation in Georgia, the Social Democratic Party, following the entry onto the humanitarian and cultural scene of a new generation and new social stratum of educated new intellectuals from the "lower classes".

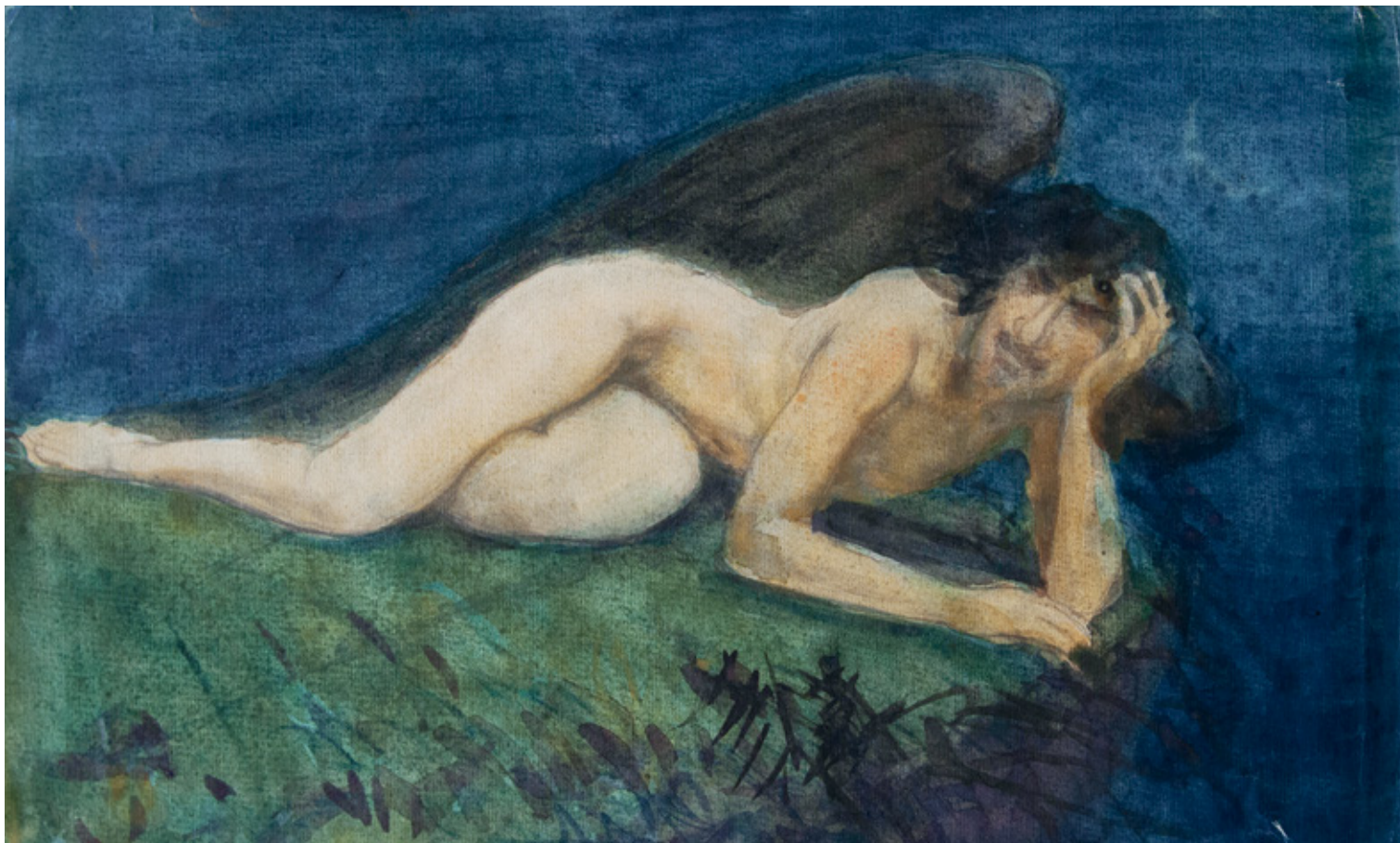


Fig. 7
Gigo Gabashvili
Winged Androgyne, 1910s
Watercolour on paper, 20 × 33 cm
Shalva Amiranashvili State Museum of Fine Arts, Georgian National Museum, Tbilisi



Fig. 8
Illustration by **Alexander von Salzmänn**,
published in *Jugend: Münchner illustrierte
Wochenschrift für Kunst und Leben*, no.52, p.1054, 1904
Heidelberg University Library

Opposite: Fig. 9
Illustration by **Alexander von Salzmänn**,
published in *Jugend: Münchner illustrierte
Wochenschrift für Kunst und Leben*, no.14, p.322a, 1908
Heidelberg University Library



Münchener Künstler-Versammlung

A. v. Salzmann

„Sehr Wirt, wir brauchen noch viel mehr Tische!“ — „Aber die Tische sind ja noch lange nicht besetzt!“ —
„Ja, aber an jedem Tisch sitzt eine Künstler-Gruppe!“



Fig. 10
Alexander von Salzmann
Minerva, 1918
Gouache on paper, 40 × 30 cm
Shalva Amiranashvili State Museum of Fine Arts, Georgian National Museum, Tbilisi



Fig. 11
Alexander von Salzmann
Woman with a Shawl, 1910
Tempera on paper, 53.5 × 38 cm
Shalva Amiranashvili State Museum of Fine Arts, Georgian National Museum, Tbilisi

From the early 19th century, in the years 1817–1819, Germans who had come primarily from Swabia settled in Georgia, creating two colonies on Tbilisi's left bank. Today, in places which have since been mercilessly destroyed and obliterated from history, the remains of traditional German houses and gardens can still be seen. In one district of "Old Tbilisi", "Rike", they built workshops. Friedrich Salzmänn, Alexander's grandfather and an agronomist for the Caucasian Society and honorary citizen of Tbilisi, built a house here and then, in 1836, a hotel where Georgian Germans would often gather.³⁷

Alexander's father Albert's work as an architect was closely linked with Tbilisi; his efforts are largely to thank for the city's transformation into a modern urban, architectural space, with key buildings built to his designs.³⁸

Much was said of Alexander von Salzmänn's unusual appearance: "His face with its weather-beaten skin, sunken cheeks, and gaps and stumps of teeth, was not easily forgotten. He told [...] that he had lost his teeth through a fall from a cliff in the Caucasus Mountains... Fortunately he fell into a tree and saved his life. In spite of his artistic sophistication, there was something wild and savage in him, a breath of his native Caucasus perhaps."³⁹

In 1896, at the age of 22, von Salzmänn went to Moscow to continue his studies, then two years later was in Munich, studying with Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee at Franz von Stuck's studio at the city's Academy of Fine Arts.

Alexander von Salzmänn remained in Germany until 1914, during which time he occasionally visited Tbilisi before finally returning to Georgia in 1917. In 1921, however, Georgia was annexed, and like a great many others, he left the country, doing so shortly before the annexation amid a deteriorating situation. He first left for Constantinople with Giorgi Gurdjieff and Thomas de Hartmann, before two years later travelling to Germany and then settling in Paris.

Von Salzmänn was an important figure in the establishment of Avant-Garde set design and in the creation of a concept of a synthesis of the theatrical arts in which he attributes an important role to lighting; he transforms light into an important sphere of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, instilling a new principle of "dispersed, diffused light" which he first employed at the beginning of the 1910s for a theatricalised festival at the Institute of Music and Rhythm founded by the Swiss composer Émile Jaques-Dalcroze in Hellerau, Germany (Fig. 12). He created a philosophy of light which transcended the boundaries of scenography, seeking out connections between light, colour, and sound; for von Salzmänn, lighting had to be flexible and mobile and possess tonal characteristics.

A production of Gluck's *Orpheus and Eurydice* at Hellerau in 1913 proved phenomenal in all respects, not least due to von Salzmänn's novel art of stage lighting (Fig. 13–14).

The admirer and promoter of Jaques-Dalcroze's eurythmics Sergey Volkonsky writes in his memoirs that "One more force besides man and music had its part in the play – light [...] Those who have not seen it cannot imagine what light's participation brings, its building and waning as the music builds and wanes – a simultaneity, an accord of the dynamism of light with sound."⁴⁰

Carla Di Donato writes about interesting triads in von Salzmänn's career; the "maître des lumières", as Edward Gordon Craig called him, who was eulogised by all of the reformers and visionaries of theatre of the first half of the 20th century, and especially by Antonin Artaud, was at the centre of every key moment and collaboration in this chapter of theatre's history, and often also at the centre of creative and directorial triads: with Kandinsky and de Hartmann in Munich; Jaques-Dalcroze and Appia in Hellerau; Hébertot and Lugué-Poe in Paris; and Gurdjieff and Jeanne de Salzmänn in Georgia/Europe/the USA.⁴¹

Donato remarks that Appia and Jaques-Dalcroze call him an inventor of genius, both for arrangements for large auditoriums that enable the stage to change places and, most importantly, for his system for lighting with diffused light for whose creation and construction we have the production of Gluck's opera at Hellerau to thank. The play was attended by Max Reinhardt, Erich Maria Rilke, Vaslav Nijinsky, Georges Pitoëff, Sergei Diaghilev, and many others.⁴²

For his lighting system von Salzmänn employed a pentagrammic arrangement which, in addition to musical sounds, was able to reproduce a full range of colours, from complete black to dazzling white, in precise accompaniment with crescendo and decrescendo: for each colour on the spectrum, the system could create the finest variations of tonality and intensity on rising and falling scales. Inspired by Gurdjieff and by Rudolf Steiner, von Salzmänn imbued light – the light of Amor, the god of love – with an inner, spiritual significance. Through Artaud, the influence of his work extends to the present day, for example in the work of Peter Brook.⁴³

Von Salzmänn made use of the novel system of lighting designed by him in 1916–1917 in Moscow in Aleksandr Tairov's production of the Symbolist and bacchanal drama *Famira Kifared* (based on the play by Innokenty Annensky), which became Tairov's theatrical manifesto. The role of Famira was performed by the actor Nikoloz Tsereteli, who was said at the time to have noble, striking features, and to be astoundingly fluid in his movements and exceptionally musical. Von Salzmänn collaborated with Aleksandra Ekster, who created the production's Cubo-Futurist set design and costumes.

When von Salzmänn, a Symbolist and member of the Jugendstil group, well versed in esotericism and mysticism and close to Kandinsky and de Hartmann, began working at Hellerau, this was a natural step – Hellerau was a place where there was a desire to return to theatre the symbolism of ancient ritual and the fluid unity of the play. Such terms as "light director" and "light composition" were invented, and von Salzmänn became a composer of light, and his short article on theatrical lighting a form of manifesto.⁴⁴

Von Salzmänn, or *Katsomarili*, as Kruchenykh translated his name into Georgian,⁴⁵ soon returned to his homeland, and by 1920 was living in Tbilisi with his wife, the dancer Jeanne Allemand. He began working as artistic director of the Tbilisi Opera, on the set design for Pyotr Tchaikovsky's *The Queen of Spades*, Jacques Offenbach's *The Tales of Hoffmann*, Anton Rubinstein's *The Demon*, and Zakaria Paliashvili's *Abesalom and Eteri*; in collaboration with Sandro Akhmeteli he staged Dimitri Arakishvili's opera *The Legend of Shota Rustaveli*; and in the Culture and Labour Union, the plays of Sophocles' *Antigone* in Kutaisi together with the actor and director Vasil Kushitashvili. He also worked at the Georgian Drama Theatre and participated in an exhibition of the Society for the Encouragement of the Fine Arts in the Caucasus, in exhibitions by the artistic group *Small Circle* in 1918 and 1919, and exhibited originals of drawings printed in *Jugend* as well as pictures on mythological themes.

He writes about the importance of lighting on the stage in the Kutaisi periodical *Theatre and Music*, in his essay *Remarks on the Stage*. "Only the dreamer Swiss Adolphe Appia in the book *Staging Wagnerian Drama* discusses the importance of lighting; nothing was done in this sphere until 1912, however [...] Only one system can be considered an advancement: reflected light, but this system too requires darkness in the auditorium. I emphasise a dark auditorium especially because it is here that the matter lies, and this it the starting point for future theatre as well."⁴⁶



Eintragungen

17 MAI 1912

Rat zu Dresden.

Schulfeste
 der
Bildungsanstalt Jaques-Dalcroze
Hellerau bei Dresden
 in der Zeit
 vom 28. Juni - 11. Juli

W. b. S. Sachs, 1912

Gesamtprot.
fr.
W. b. S.

Vorgetragen in der Gesamtsitzung

am 21. 5. 12.

Stadthauptkanzlei.

22. 5. 12.

L. M. M.

fr.



Clockwise from top left:

Aleksei Kruchenykh

Tsotsa, 1921

Ioseb Grishashvili Library Museum, Tbilisi

Theatre and Music, no.1, 1919

National Parliamentary Library of Georgia, Tbilisi

The Obesity of Roses,
published by 41°, 1918

Ioseb Grishashvili Library Museum, Tbilisi

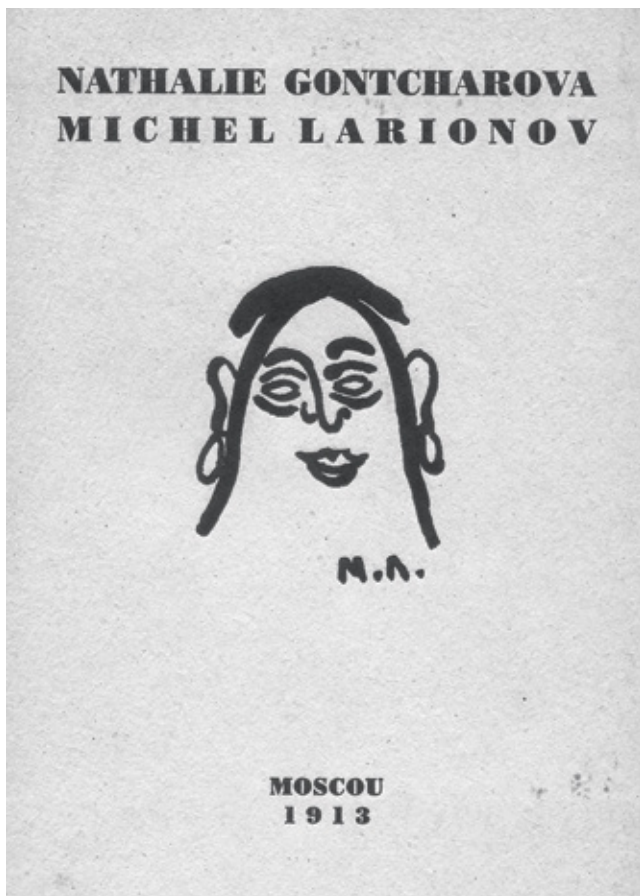
The Phoenix, no.2-3, 1919

National Parliamentary Library of Georgia, Tbilisi

Opposite:

41° newspaper, published by 41°, 1919

National Parliamentary Library of Georgia, Tbilisi



Clockwise from top left:

Cover for *Natalia Goncharova/Mikhail Larionov* by Eli Eganebury (Iliia Zdanevich), catalogue raisonné, Moscow, 1913
Private collection

Photograph of Iliia Zdanevich (right), Natalia Goncharova and Mikhail Larionov with painted faces, published with their manifesto *Why We Paint Ourselves* in the journal *Argus*, Moscow, 8 November 1913
Fonds Iliazd (Iliia Zdanevich)

Mikhail Larionov
Self-portrait, 1912
Watercolour on lithographic postcard, 14.2 × 9.2 cm
Shalva Amiranashvili State Museum of Fine Arts,
Georgian National Museum, Tbilisi

Opposite:
Mikhail Larionov
Portrait of Natalia Goncharova, 1912
Watercolour on lithographic postcard, 14.2 × 9.2 cm
Shalva Amiranashvili State Museum of Fine Arts,
Georgian National Museum, Tbilisi



Корнели
Наталия
Томасов
ой



David Kakabadze
Imereti, 1917
Oil on canvas, 24 × 30 cm
Shalva Amiranashvili State Museum of Fine Arts,
Georgian National Museum, Tbilisi

Opposite:
David Kakabadze
Self-Portrait by the Mirror, 1913
Oil on canvas, 99 × 71 cm
Shalva Amiranashvili State Museum of Fine Arts,
Georgian National Museum, Tbilisi







David Kakabadze

Imereti - My Mother, 1918

Oil on canvas, 137 × 153 cm

Shalva Amiranashvili State Museum of Fine Arts,
Georgian National Museum, Tbilisi

Publication**Authors**

Nana Kipiani, Irine Jorjadze and
Tea Tabatadze

Editors

Nana Kipiani, Irine Jorjadze and
Tea Tabatadze

Translation

Georgian to English:
Geoffrey Gosby (principal texts)
Mariam Dvali (additional texts)
French to English:
Liz Morrison

Copy-editing

Ian Winick Translation & Copywriting

Coordination

Julie Verheye (Exhibition Coordinator,
europalia), Aleksandra Gabunia (Head of the
Exhibition Department, Dimitri Shevardnadze
Georgian National Gallery) and Elizabeth
Vandeweghe & Stephanie Van den bosch
(Hannibal Books)

Graphic design

Sara De Bondt
assisted by Leroy Meyer

Printing

die Keure, Bruges, Belgium

Binding

Abbringh, Groningen, The Netherlands

Publisher

Gautier Platteau

HANNIBAL

europalia

ISBN 978 94 6466 663 2
D/2023/11922/46
NUR 646

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www.hannibalbooks.be

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Front cover

Kirile Zdanevich
Detail from costume design for Grigol
Robakidze's play "Maelstrom", 1924
Pencil and gouache on paper, 44 × 64 cm
Art Palace of Georgia, Museum of Cultural
History, Tbilisi

Back cover

Irakli Gamrekeli
Detail from set design for Grigol Robakidze's
play "Londa", 1926
Pencil and watercolour on paper, 25 × 36 cm
Rustaveli National Theatre Museum, Tbilisi