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Modernism and Identity

The paradigm of modernism places it in a cosmopolitan area. The desire to become integrated into a unified artistic space generates not only common, similar artistic trends in modernist art, but also severely limits the borders between the specific national derivatives within it. Coupled with the fact that “national” became a dangerous and unpopular topic after World War I, the modernism that developed in Central Europe developed as an anti-national phenomenon.

Georgia enjoyed a short period of independence from 1918 to 1921. Not only Georgian modernism, but also the distinctive model of the Tbilisi avant-garde flourished during this time. It was based on a creative collaboration between different nationalities, their multinational and intercultural art. The specificity of the Tbilisi avant-garde was characterized by integrating different national characteristics into a unified artistic system. Despite the artists’ differing individual and national backgrounds, a unified artistic language was formed and this unique language determined the emerging art’s diversity and vivid imagery.

The art and culture that developed in the bosom of independent Georgia generally carried a trace of Georgian national characteristics. The question arises: How organic and relevant is distinctiveness by national features in the context of modernism, which, as already mentioned, promotes cosmopolitanism. The priority of nationality should be considered as a hindering factor in terms of modernist values. However, the specifics of Georgian modernism and the Tbilisi avant-garde differed from the European ones. Namely, as Italian futurism stated and Tommaso Marinetti, its founding father, wrote in his Manifesto of Futurism: “We want to destroy museums and libraries, fight against morality, feminism, and all opportunist and utilitarian cowardice ... We use this devastating and violent manifesto in Italy to establish futurism, we want to free Italy from the gangrene of professors, archaeologists, tourist guides and antiquities.” Meanwhile Ilia Zdanevich, one of the main founders and banner-carriers of the Georgian avant-garde, who was an

admirer of Italian futurism and the art of Marinetti and was heavily influenced by his poetry, expresses sharply different trends in his own art, as well as in his activity.¹

As early as 1917, Zdanevich participated in the third archaeological expedition in Tao-Klarjeti, which was commissioned by the Historical Ethnographic Society and organized by Ekvtime Takaishvili. Zdanevich was the expedition's photographer and architect. It is noteworthy that from among Georgia's modernist artists, the expedition included Lado Gudiashvili, Dimitri Shevardnadze and the sculptor Mikheil Chiaureli (later movie director). The group studied local churches. Based on the expedition materials, an exhibition of medieval Georgian architecture was held in 1920 at the Temple of Glory in Tbilisi. Zdanevich's photographs, drawings and blueprints became the basis for Takaishvili's research, and their major contribution was presented in the 1952 book, *An Archaeological Expedition in South Georgia in 1917*. It is interesting that Zdanevich's name is not mentioned in the book, as, in 1920 Zdanevich had left Georgia for France, and thereafter lived and worked in Paris.

The poet-futurist Zdanevich's attitude toward Georgia's historical past and culture is important for us. The material preserved in his archive confirms that not only did he perform Takaishvili's assignment in Tao-Klarjeti and made drawings, sketches and blueprints and photographed material, but he also studied the natural features, geography (mountain systems, glaciers, gorges, rivers), history, ethnography, anthropology, population, migration, etc. of South Georgia. In these endeavors, Zdanevich drew tables and calculations and created mathematical formulas. The avant-garde poet revealed a scientific approach to architecture. Numerous architectural drawings with his own formulas are found in his archive. Apparently, Zdanevich was searching for the "golden ratio," a structural basis for the architecture of Georgian cathedrals.²

¹ The Italian futurists purposefully reject the art and culture of the past; they consider futurism to be the starting point, and everything earlier than it as insignificant. This could be only a statement of purpose, but futurists make this claim in everything and everywhere. It is inconceivable that Marinetti would participate in a conference with an analysis of antique Roman art. Deep in his heart, Marinetti might have been proud of this heritage, but what he preached was its destruction.

² This topic requires further research.

It should be noted that in Paris, even after his departure from Georgia, Zdanevich continued to work on Georgian architecture. The correspondence between Takaishvili and Zdanevich confirms this fact. Takaishvili wrote to Iliazd³ on July 13, 1933 that he had received Zdanevich's letter with the plan of Ishkani cathedral. From this letter we learn that Takaishvili was waiting for the general plan of Oshki cathedral, with details of the upper tier and the sketch of the eastern façade. Takaishvili points out that after receiving this material, he and his colleagues will have all needed information from their expedition and would start publishing the book.

During his years in France, Iliazd – in addition to collaborating with Takaishvili and providing him with materials that he had researched – participated in International symposiums addressing Byzantine topics and also organized conferences and exhibitions and printed articles on Georgian medieval architecture.

In addition to history and architecture, Zdanevich studied literature and art. All this proves that for Iliazd the past was the basis for the present, on which he founded his knowledge and therefore his art, which significantly differed from the Italian futurists' ideology, that war would cleanse everything and disinfect Italian art from its historic past and memory. The future had to be built upon futurist bases only.

Zdanevich, who was one of the founders and main locomotives of Tbilisi's multicultural life, always expressed great interest in Georgian national culture and art.⁴ As mentioned above, Georgian modernism and the avant-garde that sprang from it were generally characterized by a search for this art's national foundations and, moreover, creation of art stamped with the signs of nationality.

The culture of the short-lived Democratic Republic of Georgia (1918-1921) was saturated with the national spirit. Similar approaches are seen in the writings of Georgian writers and thinkers of that time. Grigol Robakidze, for example, wrote in his essay "The Spirit and Work of the Nation" (1913):

³ The pseudonym that Ilia Zdanevich adopted when he emigrated to France.

⁴ Despite the fact that Zdanevich's native tongue was Russian and that he also wrote his avant-garde poetry in Russian.

“The spirit of the nation is ahead (ideally) of each of its members; it is one but many; it is multi-unified ... take the language. Who is its author? No one and everyone ... The author is the spirit of the nation ... and through his creativity, the artist enters into the soul of the entire nation.”⁵

Geronti Kikodze claims that “... the individuality of the national soul is clearly seen in art. In this respect, nationality is truly unique ... A person is born and dies, one generation follows the other, while nationality retains graduality and sameness within this variation...”⁶

Valerian Gunia noted: “... self-awareness, the interest of the individual “me,” has been manifested in the essence of the Georgian essayist, where it is almost always inseparable from knowledge of national character. Literary or other issues are part of the problem of national self-awareness in the Georgian character. Each individual is part of one whole – the nation.”⁷

“... The tradition of the unity of national and personal interests in Georgian writings was so powerful that individual self-awareness takes on the character of socio-national self-awareness in the Georgian essay of the 20th century...”⁸

Presenting Georgian art and highlighting nationality is apparent in the works of such modernist artist as Lado Gudiashvili, Shalva Kikodze, Elene Akhvlediani and Davit Kakabadze, who seemed to be the most prominent in moving from local meaning into cosmopolitan art. However, even in his avant-garde art, Kakabadze is also engaged in the quest for the Georgian character and for national signs. It is interesting how Gudiashvili evaluates his colleague’s art: “An experienced eye will immediately notice [in Kakabadze’s abstract paintings] that his pictures’ colors or compositions do not resemble the usual abstract artworks. I have a clear sense of Georgian color, Georgian land and Georgian sky in them”⁹ – thus the artist wrote in his *Book of Memories*.

⁵ G. Robakidze, “The Spirit and Work of the Nation,” People’s Newspaper, 12 April 1913.

⁶ G. Kikodze, *Letters, Essays, Literary Studies* (1985), p. 36.

⁷ Playwright, critic, actor.

⁸ M. Khelaia, “V. Gunia: Characteristics of the Georgian Essay Style in 1920s,” in *The Georgian Literary Essay, 1920s*, 1986, pp. 352-353.

⁹ L. Gudiashvili, “The Mystery of Beauty,” in *The Book of Memories*, Tbilisi 1988, p. 43.

The analysis of modernist artists is crucial for us insofar as they emigrated in the late 1910s and in the 1920s. They appeared in Paris – a hub of modern Western art – where they shared this art and the concepts of Western artistic principles. They came to some conclusions that we will discuss below.

Davit Kakabadze was looking for “Georgian painting” language. In his letters from France in 1924-25, he wrote: “... national art should be seen in the activity of creative work ... our goal is to create finished work with a modern method ... with an enlightened spirit, Georgian characteristics and Georgian temperament, the sense of modern life and its depiction [will happen] under the ceiling of humanity.”¹⁰

Shalva Kikodze’s idea is also interesting in this regard. In a letter from Paris written in the 1920s, we read: “All art is created in the national framework of its nation. Only then is art valuable and justified. Only forms sprung in national frames carry international significance ... It is obvious that, for example, Georgian art should take shape, it should develop in the national framework. Only then will it be interesting.” (Paris, 8 August 1920).¹¹

In the second letter he sent to his family, he wrote: “... One of us (L. Gudiashvili) participated in the so-called “Salon” exhibition and I believe even sold one artwork. Kakabadze and I did not participate on the principle that the “Salon” will accumulate thousands of pictures for the exhibition and carry no artistic character. We recommended to Gudiashvili that he not participate either, but he did not believe us and made a big mistake. If he can’t see this mistake now, he will see it soon. The exhibition of our pictures here must be accompanied by two essential justifications. First of all, it should be artistic... Secondly, it should stand out through the fact that it is Georgian. And the latter ... every viewer should have in his head when coming to see our pictures. The viewer should know that he looks at Georgian artworks, that what he sees is Georgia, the Georgia that for so long he did not know and did not want to recognize; that it is worthy to know Georgia and Georgian artworks.” (Paris, 3 November 1920).¹²

¹⁰ D. Kakabadze, *Our Way, Art and Space*. Tbilisi, 1983, p. 141.

¹¹ K. Bagratishvili, I. Abesadze, and S. Kikodze, *The Cultural Heritage*, Tbilisi, 2005.

¹² K. Bagratishvili, I. Abesadze and S. Kikodze, *The Cultural Heritage*, Nekeri, Tbilisi, 2005.

Georgian modernists, moreover, even avant-garde ones, nevertheless propagate art and culture developed in “national frames.” Similar parallels can be found in the history of other countries. Steven Mansbach, an American art scholar and researcher of 20th century art, claimed that the Society of Polish Artists created Sztuka (“Art”) at the end of the 19th century “with two competing motivations: retaining national traditions during foreign occupation and cultural control, and, at the same time, establishing international progressive directions in art. It questioned the substantial value and purpose of traditional themes and forms. These, which are often opposing tendencies, became the driving force of modernity in the whole Baltic region.”¹³

Evidently, retaining nationality, revealing it, and moreover, developing it and changing it into a modern context was a characteristic of modernist cultures existing in the peripheries of the great empires. Understandably, the Georgian Democratic Republic, as a newly liberated state freed from Russia’s imperial claws, followed the same trend.

The international and cosmopolitan Parisian culture demonstrates how the boundaries between different cultures were erased in modernism, where there was almost no sharp divide between The Netherlands’ Vincent Van Gogh, France’s Paul Gauguin, Spain’s Juan Miró and Romania’s Constantin Brâncuși, Switzerland’s Alberto Giacometti and Belarus’ Jewish Marc Chagall... Georgian artists tried to integrate into the West via art within “the national framework,” they tried to fit into the kaleidoscope of French modern art and to “give international meaning to [their] nationalistic art.”¹⁴

Nationality in art does not infer simple imitation or nationalistic exoticism. In some cases, for example, in that of Lado Gudishvili, we know the artist added ethnic types to his works. In some of the works he completed in Paris in the 1920s, e.g., “Tsotskhali Fish” (1920), “Khashi” (1922), “Toast on Sunrise” (1920), “Feast in an Open Carriage” (1920), “Kristine” (1919), “The Kinto’s Feast” (1920) and others, we see such characters as a Kinto, a typical Tbilisi tavern, a young man in a *chokha*, a barrel-organ grinder in urban

¹³ S.A. Mansbach, *Modern Art in Eastern Europe, From the Baltic to the Balkans, c. 1890-1939* (1997), p. 87.

¹⁴ K. Bagratishvili, I. Abesadze and S. Kikodze, *The Cultural Heritage*, Tbilisi, 2005.

clothing and so on. These exotic types, of course, bring to mind certain national associations, although this is not what gives Gudiashvili's art a national character.

The Georgian national traditions lay deeper in the works of the Georgian modernists. Gudiashvili, Kikodze, Akhvlediani and even artists like Kakabadze, who created non-objective art and his avant-garde experiments have brought their work closer to Western European art, always maintained a connection with Georgian national traditions, reflected in the composition, colors, lines, surfaces and in some cases, links between Eastern and Western elements and signs of art. The integration of Georgian modern artists sprung "within the national framework" with Western art that took place after a deep understanding of European modernist artistic processes and the internalizing of modern artistic language. For example, Kikodze's works of his Parisian period clearly demonstrate his interest in symbolism and German expressionism; Akhvlediani's creations reveal a close connection with Maurice Utrillo's artistic style, where the French artist creates a peculiar mixture of post-impressionism and cubism; and Kakabadze offers his interpretations of abstractionism and cubism.

A picture from Kikodze's Parisian period "In Memory of a Deceased Young Friend" is saturated with symbolic thinking. The artist's fantasy and imagination transport us to a mystical world. The artist presents his self-portrait with Mephistopheles (depicted as a demon's face) and a skeleton (symbolizing death) playing a game of cards. Can it be a prophecy of an early death or a caricature, a grotesque reflection of reality, so typical of Kikodze's art? The question has no clear answer and the artist leaves as with a wide range of possible interpretations.

The extremely subjective characteristic of symbolism and the artist's deeply covered fantasy give rise to a sense of ambiguity, and at the same time, this condition and symbolism speak of the emotions of the artist himself. His melancholy mood and preliminary feeling of approaching tragedy and the unexpected departure from this world are completely revealed. Thus, the symbolists called themselves "Les Nabis," or "the Prophets." Consequently, Kikodze's creation is close to meanings beyond reality and to the eloquence of prehistory characteristic of symbolism.

However, in his paintings of his Parisian period Kikodze did not limit himself to symbolism; he was also very much interested in various movements of modern art, including German expressionism. In his painting “In the Artists’ Café” Kikodze presents a corner of a modern city where artists gathered. The premises present a modern urban look. One sees all the customers. In the foreground, presumably, the artist and the prostitutes are present together. The artist does not provide an individual depiction of any of them. Their grotesque faces look like masks rather than portraits, their figures are depicted in rough forms. The men in the deeper background represent a single, anonymous mass. Even the face of a man, painted by the artist, is represented like a mask. I.e. the artist shows us a impersonal society, where ruttish amusement wins over spiritual life and high morality. This is “Paris wandering, light, sick, nervous...”¹⁵ as the artist himself wrote. Here the author depicted the lightness of the café life and its melancholy mood. In addition to the characteristic faces, the cold colors also contribute to this feeling, where green, brown and gray dominate.

The picture’s space is maximally compressed, as if its front plain “drops” the composition and brings a dissonance and inner tension into the viewers’ perception.

Kikodze’s feeling for Paris reflects the estrangement of a modern, urban city. Rigidly worked forms, faces like masks, dissonant colors, upside-down perspectives, strong, wide strokes – these are the signs that connect Kikodze’s work with expressionism. However, it should be noted that Kikodze’s expressionism is restrained via his visual imaging: the color spectrum, composition and creation of forms demonstrate connection with Georgian traditional art. Nothing overwhelms here; the artist always sticks to the limits between the restrained tension and the mannered expressiveness, and he never crosses that border.

Elene Akhvlediani’s Parisian views (e.g., “A District in Paris” (1927); “A Corner of Paris” (1926); “Paris” (1926) are associated with Maurice Utrillo’s landscapes: widespread surfaces, generalized architectural forms, almost cubic geometry, lyrical city views, slow rhythms and a lively, clear, post-impressionist colorfulness. On top of this lie Akhvlediani’s

¹⁵ K. Bagratishvili, I. Abesadze, and S. Kikodze, *The Cultural Heritage*, Tbilisi, 2005, p. 35.

art's specificity, which attracted Maurice Raynal, a famous French critic. He estimated the young Georgian artist's artwork with the words: "Elene Akhvlediani is a very nationalistic artist, and this is her main worth." In his *Book of Memories* Lado Gudiashvili notes that Raynal was fascinated with the young artist's national traits.¹⁶

David Kakabadze's Parisian period should be noted separately. This analytical artist studied modern European artistic trends with scientific accuracy and then analyzed them and created his own avant-garde art through absorption. However, we should also note the specificity of his art. He always maintained a connection with the Georgian art tradition, and this connection is evident in his abstract and cubic compositions too. For example, in one of the works of Kakabadze's Parisian period – "Cubist Composition" (1920), the artist breaks reality down into geometric parts and offers a new artistic world, where geometric shapes, which are each other's backdrops, create a surface-decorative painting. The colorful surfaces behind each other develop the depth of the composition. They create familiar things in the combinations of these generalized, geometric and decimated shapes – a still life of a tablecloth spread on the table with vases on it. However, this is not what distinguishes Kakabadze's cubist composition. The restrained brown-Bordeaux palette of his work makes it stand out, which is very close to the Georgian traditional art. The tablecloth's decoration is also important, as such decoration is almost always present in Georgian fabrics and carpets. The vase, which is depicted as a cut oval of milky white flatness, is marked by violet spots that resemble floral ornamentation. In a whole it creates an abstract form, which looks as an oriental arabesque. The merging of oriental and western artistic elements, the restrained color, the importance of surface, and the decorative fragments carrying national markings show the continuous links of Kakabadze's art with the traditions of Georgian national art.

If Frederick Jamieson's notion that "modernist aesthetics in some sense are organically linked with the unique self and private identity and with the unique personality and individuality, which presumably give a unique vision of the universe and a unique,

¹⁶ L. Gudiashvili, "The Mystery of Beauty," in *The Book of Memories*, Tbilisi 1988, p. 43.

unmistakable style”¹⁷ is true, then the art of Georgian modernists is associated with their personal individuality, holding within it inherited nationality. In addition, in the case of Georgian modernists, this subconscious factor is added to the intellectual analyses of national art and the desire and practical attempts to integrate into Western art.

It should be noted that most Georgian artists living in France had been sent there by the Georgian authorities, and accordingly, these modernist artists were fully aware of the great responsibility that their homeland had imposed upon them. They often wrote about their obligations in personal letters and in various documents. For example, in a letter to his father, Kikodze wrote: “... I am careful with every day and hour, and due to the state’s patronage, I see my great commitment very clearly.” Georgian scholars addressed Evgeni Gegechkori, the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, with the same depth of feeling: “There are three artists in Paris [Kikodze, Gudiashvili, and Kakabadze] who have been sent by the state to work in Paris. It’s a great assignment that all of us are conscious of and all our work is directed to justify our artistic goal.”¹⁸

They were motivated to receive education and experience in Paris (some artists were sent to other European countries, such as Akhvlediani, who, before arriving in Paris, went to Italy (1922-27), while Chiaureli visited Germany, in particular Berlin (1922-24) to improve his craft as a sculptor) and then return home and share their knowledge and experience of modern art. The great majority of Georgian modernist artists had returned to Georgia by the end of the 1920s, even though they already knew about the dangers that lay in their now Soviet-occupied and ruled country. This demonstrates these artists’ sense of responsibility, their love of their country and their desire to serve it.

There are memoirs and letters in which the artists discuss their return. For example, Gudiashvili, who had a French wife and all the preconditions to remain in Paris, nonetheless returned to Georgia. Gudiashvili wrote in his memoirs: “the desire to return

¹⁷ F. Jamieson, *Postmodernism and Consumer Society*, https://www.scribd.com/document/282572323/პოსტმოდერნიზმი-და-სამომხარებლო-საზოგადოება#fulscreen&from_embed; 18:26 11.12.2018.

¹⁸ K. Bagratishvili, I. Abesadze, and S. Kikodze, *The Cultural Heritage*, Tbilisi, 2005.

to the homeland was strong and dominant. Living away from the homeland is a great tragedy.”¹⁹

This statement underscores the fact that while in Europe’s modern and dynamic world the modernist vision was sharply individual and personal, and the artists’ personal ego was the main determinant of their artistic universe, the Georgian modernists demonstrated own artistic and individual personalities via identifying with the homeland. They shared their creative work with contemporary Western art but linked it to Georgian art in trying to achieve with this synthesis “international importance for national art.”

¹⁹ L. Gudiashvili, “The Mystery of Beauty,” in *The Book of Memories*, Tbilisi, 1988, p. 47.