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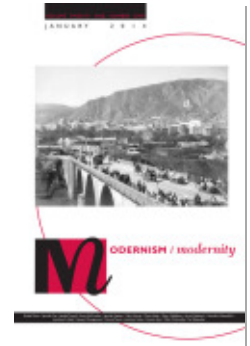
A City of Poets: The Cultural Life of Tbilisi 1910–1930

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## A City of Poets: The Cultural Life of Tbilisi 1910–1930

Mzia Chikhradze

Tbilisi, your poets have gathered,  
And the tavern now thunders like the sea  
—Aleksandr Poroshin



▲  
Fig. 1. Tbilisi seen from Metekhi Castle, Dmitrii Ermakov, 1900. Tbilisi City Museum.

Due to its singular location at the crossroads of North and South, East and West, Tbilisi—or Tiflis, as it was then widely called—has often been compared to the two-headed Roman god Janus, whose one head was turned eastward and the other westward. The geographical position of the city, along with

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290 cultural and historical conditions specific to late imperial Russia, created a fertile environment for the rise of modernism during the 1910s and the 1920s. “One found the strangest people there,” noted British journalist Carl Bechhofer Roberts: “poets and painters... philosophers, theosophists, dancers, singers, actors and actresses...”<sup>1</sup> The Russian revolution of 1917 and the ensuing civil war shattered the material foundations of cultural life throughout much of the crumbling tsarist empire, compelling many Russian artists and intellectuals to flee to Tbilisi, which served as the capital of independent Georgia between 1918 and 1921.

In 1922 the Georgian modernist poet T’itsian T’abidze wrote of the recent past:

Three years ago Russia was something phantasmagorical. All over Russia it was snowing frozen icicles of astral dust. The devastation of the civil war, the freezing Arctic cold, the bloodthirsty Cheka [the Bolshevik secret police], and a famine that acquired the proportions of a mystery play. Subject to inhuman terror, exiled émigrés spoke of unspeakable things. People of culture would kiss the ground of Tbilisi right before our eyes and begin to cry on seeing the light of electric lamps...<sup>2</sup>

This vision of Tbilisi as “an oasis in the desert [for] those seeking to escape the storm of war and revolution”<sup>3</sup> was further elaborated by the doyen of Georgian modernism Grigol Robakidze:

Tbilisi is a strange city, but in 1919–1920 it became stranger still. Russians who had been expelled or who had fled Russia took shelter here. The voice of [Russian actor Vasilii] Kachalov could be heard on stage... [The actor Nikolai] Khodotov was also in Tbilisi and his voice resounded from the stage as well. The drunken composer [Alexander] Cherepnin would visit cafés and brood over Russia... The artist Sergei Sudeikin decorated the walls of a restaurant which Georgian poets dubbed the Kimerioni—and Sudeikin truly filled the restaurant with chimeras. The artist Savelii Sorin painted beautifully contoured profiles of elegant women from the Georgian nobility on canvas... Who was not in Tbilisi at this time? It was here too that the [Russian] futurists shifted to dada. They created the organization ‘41°.’ Il’ia Zdanevich was also in Tbilisi, truly magnificent as he recited his *Death of Garro* in the cafes. [The Russian Futurist poet] Vasilii Kamenskii visited Tbilisi as well. There were others, too.

Tbilisi became a city of poets. In the Café Internationale Tbilisi was pronounced the city of poets. Moreover, people began claiming that real poetry could only be found in Tbilisi... The world was going downhill and Tbilisi was the only city to greet its ‘downfall’ with poetic songs. Such was the Tbilisi fantasy.

One day ... at the Café Internationale a leader of the young Georgian poets, P’aolo Iashvili, climbed onto a table and loudly declared that Tbilisi, and not Paris, was the center of the world culture.<sup>4</sup>

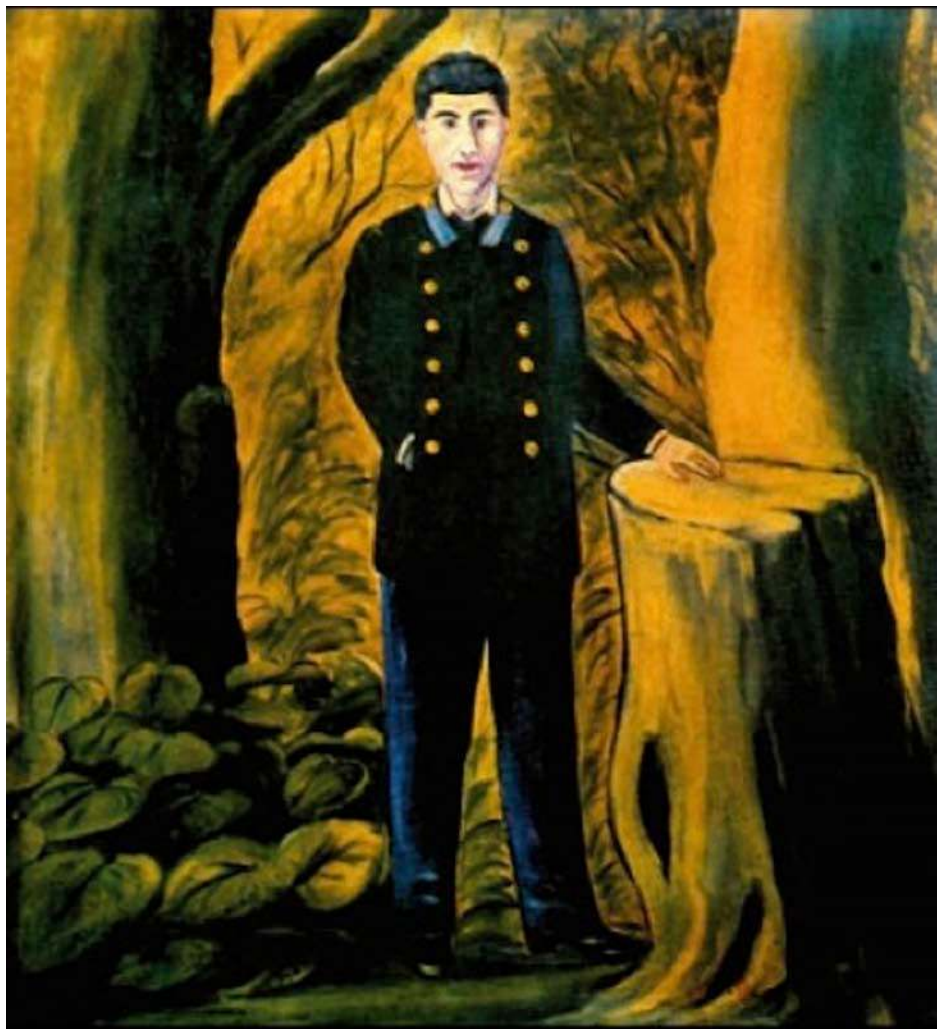
The cultural and artistic life of Tbilisi during the 1910s and 1920s was arguably the single most significant phenomenon in the history of modern Georgian art. The achievements of European modernism were rapidly assimilated and adapted by the inhabitants of a city that had itself been transformed over the previous century by the rapid growth of manufacturing and trade. From the second half of 1910s, the rapid

renewal of urban life and a desire for radical change provoked by unprecedented social, political and psychological conditions established an environment saturated with elements of modernity. The old forms of expression were no longer perceived as useful; a new life needed a new artistic language, and Georgian art readily adopted the modernist idiom already established in Europe.

Given the close relationship of the Tbilisi avant-garde to modernism, a brief conceptual consideration of modernism itself becomes essential for understanding the development of cultural life in Tbilisi during the 1910s and 20s. If modernism can be dated as broadly belonging to the period from the 1880s to the 1930s, analytically it can be defined as an aesthetic and cultural response to late modernity and modernization, involving a rejection of academicism, a desire for innovation, and a new engagement with urban life, mechanization and technological processes.<sup>5</sup> Modernism in Georgia had a specific character. Georgian modernism did not acquire as aggressive and extreme a form as in other countries. This trait was determined by many objective factors. As Tea Tabatadze writes, Georgian modernism arose “on the periphery of the European and Russian cultural systems, which implies one more factor determining its particularity: when powerfully expressed local artistic and urban traditions have European modernist culture superimposed on them.”<sup>6</sup> Coming into being two decades after its European counterpart,<sup>7</sup> Georgian modernism also betrays a close connection to the Georgian medieval tradition: however hidden, this connection to the premodern almost always defined the character and artistic form of twentieth-century Georgian art.<sup>8</sup>

Georgian painting evolved with great rapidity from the academic tradition—founded only in the second half of the nineteenth century—to modernism at the beginning of the twentieth.<sup>9</sup> One singular artist, Nik’o Piroshvili (1862–1918), popularly known as Piroshvili, contributed substantially to the establishment and development of modern Georgian art, his work serving as a bridge between the old and the new. A self-taught artist whose career began at the dawn of the new century, Piroshvili proved to be Georgia’s pre-eminent modern artist in terms of his worldview and aesthetic sensibility. The traditions of Georgian art—particularly those of folk art and the medieval wall-fresco—are clearly reflected in the architectonics of his composition, in the artist’s attitude to the surface of the canvas (the flatness of the surface being the main component of his artistic expression), and in his treatment of form (which invariably emerges in Piroshvili through a “whitening out” of the dark pictorial surface).<sup>10</sup> Developing entirely outside the norms of academic painting and serving as one of the essential foundations for the Georgian modernism that emerged in his wake, Piroshvili’s artistic method corresponded strikingly to the artistic and aesthetic demands of the era. The simplicity of his composition, the generality of his forms, the clarity of his lines and strokes, and his sharp expressiveness conformed to the aesthetic priorities of modernist art, without seeking consciously to embrace them.<sup>11</sup>

Only the Tbilisi school of portraiture came close to Piroshvili’s impact in terms of serving as a local foundation for Georgian modernism. The Tbilisi portrait was characterized by the same simplicity of form and clear compositional structure that were also typical of Piroshvili, although Piroshvili’s break with nineteenth-century academic art



▲  
Fig. 2. *Niko Pirosmiani*, *Portrait of Ilia Zdanevich*, 1913. Private collection.

was more radical, if also more intuitive and unconscious: hence his exceptional expressiveness. In 1927 the Georgian modernist Beno Gordeziani observed of Pirosmiani that his “paintings are characterized by a simplicity as well as by a monumental sense of composition, a surprising rhythm of construction, and a sharp painterly outline.” Gordeziani continues: “Pirosmiani’s paintings proceed from nature to art rather than from art to nature. One of the characteristic features of Pirosmianashvili’s greatness, this attitude towards the object was also the basic intuition of Cubist and, more generally, of the modern conception of painting. In this case we might speak of an affinity based on congeniality.”<sup>12</sup> Pirosmiani’s proximity to Georgian modernist painting is evident in one other significant respect: his connection to urban culture. Although organically linked to rural Georgia, the artist focused principally on the city and on scenes of urban life.<sup>13</sup>

The legacies of Tbilisi portraiture and Pirosmiani, as well as the relative immaturity and weakness of academic art institutions, all contributed to the growth of Georgian

modernism. But Tbilisi itself, Georgia's historic capital, with its specific characteristics, culture and everyday life was arguably Georgian's modernism's most important defining context. Tbilisi's multiethnic character itself helped to define Georgian modernism. While multiculturalism was arguably a characteristic of modernism in general, in Tbilisi it gained a more specific role as the motivating force of art. Possessing a long history, Tbilisi's multiculturalism fostered an artistic environment conducive to fruitful cooperation between representatives of different nationalities, whose varied national peculiarities came together to foster a unique artistic system that came to be known as the Tbilisi avant-garde. In the words of Samson Lezhava, in nineteenth-century Tbilisi: "... A scarcely believable version of the unity of nations was created... One could hear the sensitive yet meditative tones of a reed-pipe [even as]... European opera of a very high quality was also popular there... of an evening, in the [city's] narrow curved streets feasting would be accompanied by a barrel organ, yet suddenly one would hear nearby a piano playing classical music... and at last, when Georgian noblemen presided over their more refined banquets, one naturally heard the divine sound of [the Georgian folk-song] *Mravalzhamieri*... It was within this fantastic mosaic of cultures, created by Georgian hospitality, that cultures not only coexisted but also grew intertwined such that it was impossible to separate them: they melted into one unity... Building the city was a joint process that involved... many nationalities: Russian, German, Polish, Italian, French, Swedish, Persian, Azeri, Armenian, Jewish, Lezghin and who knows who else—together with Georgians."<sup>14</sup>

Given its recent history as colonial administrative capital and trading center, only Tbilisi could have become the cultural center of Russian Transcaucasia. During the years 1917–1921, the brief period during which Georgia enjoyed independence from Russia, Tbilisi came to be seen as a "little Paris." Here many creative forces coalesced for a time to create an artistic space whose cultural and aesthetic sensibility were both specific to Transcaucasia yet openly invoking the bohemian experimentation characteristic of Europe's cultural centers. For a time Tbilisi became an important locus of artistic modernism whose significance transcended the city's role as a regional center.

By the end of the 1910s Tbilisi's artistic and literary life was in full swing. A large number of artistic circles and literary unions, such as the Caucasian Fine Arts Association, The Little Circle, the Georgian Artistic Society, the Union of Armenian Artists, the Futurist Syndicate, the Poets' Guild, Alpha-Lyre, and 41° rose to prominence. Newspapers, journals and printing houses opened up, such as *ARS*, *Kuranty* (*The Carillon*), *Phoenix*, *Orion*, the literary almanac *Acme*, and many others. The themes and topics of these publications were diverse. They published the poetry of Byron and Baudelaire alongside the verse of Ak'ak'i Ts'ereteli, the poet of Georgia's nineteenth-century national revival, scholarly treatises by Giorgi Chubinashvili and Ekvtime Taqaishvili on art and cultural history; translations of recent critical essays on literature and new movements in art; theoretical works by Russian, Georgian and foreign artists and scholars and critical articles about art and literature produced by local as well as expatriate writers and artists.

The futurist movement in Georgia was led by the locally based Russophone brothers Il'ia and Kirill Zdanovich, who embraced the mission of the international avant-

294 garde at the beginning of the 1910s. The same years saw the appearance of the first works of Georgian painting conceived in a recognizably modernist idiom such as Davit K'ak'abadze's *Funeral in Imereti* and *Cubist Self-Portrait* and Zygmunt Waliszewski's futurist-inspired *Shifted Houses* (1912), earliest testaments to a conscious search on the part of talented resident artists for innovation through the assimilation of western trends.

In 1918, the Futurist poets and artists Il'ia Zdanevich, Kara-Darvish (Akop Ganjian), Aleksei Kruchenykh, Nikolai Cherniavskii, Lado Gudiashvili and Kirill Zdanevich founded the Futurist Syndicate, a very short-lived group that soon broke up into various factions, including the *Futurvseuchbishche*, a Russian neologism that can be loosely translated as "Futuromniversity." Il'ia Zdanevich, Aleksei Kruchenykh and Igor Terent'ev founded the group *41°*, whose name honored the geographical longitude on which Tbilisi—as well as other major cities such as New York, Naples and Madrid—are located. It also referenced the fact that 41°C is supposedly the highest temperature the human organism can tolerate. As early as 1916, a group of Russian avant-garde poets and artists including Il'ia Zdanevich established a Futurist poetic school under the same name in Petrograd.

Il'ia Zdanevich was to play an exceptionally important role in the development of the Georgian avant-garde. Better known by his pseudonym Il'iazd,<sup>15</sup> he was born in Tbilisi in 1894 to a Georgian mother and Polish father. Heavily marked by the Russian and European currents he encountered on moving to Russia in 1911, many of his best works were created in Tbilisi, where he lived between 1918 and 1920. The radical typographical and poetic experiments conducted by Zdanevich in the art house publications of *41°* provide the basis for a discussion of Dada as a Tbilisi phenomenon, although the term Dada was itself unknown in Georgia until 1920.<sup>16</sup> Emigrating to Paris in 1921, Zdanevich served as a crucial conduit between Russian-language poetic experimentation in the Caucasus and the concerns of the interwar European avant-garde. Together with his brother Kirill and the Russian avant-garde artist Mikhail Le Dantiu, Zdanevich was also the first to discover the creative works of Nik'o Pirosmiani and spared no efforts to salvage and collect his works.

Among the most striking achievements of the *41°* group were its publishing activities. Under the leadership and participation of Kruchenykh, Terent'ev, Il'ia Zdanevich and Waliszewski, the collective published many slim but highly original books under the aegis of various publishing houses. Some were second editions, issued between 1917 and 1919, of books already published in St. Petersburg and Moscow in 1912–1913, such as *Uchites', khudogi* (Learn, Arters), *Ozhirenje roz* (Obesity of Roses), and *Malakholiia v kapote* (Malacholia in a Nightgown) by Khruchenykh; *O sploshnom neprilichii* (On Sheer Obscenity) by Terent'ev; and *Janko—Krul' Albanskai* (Janko, King of Albaynia) by I. Zdanevich (The translations of these titles are only approximate; the titles, like the texts themselves, are in highly experimental and deliberately misspelt Russian). In 1919 the group published other works such as *Milliork* and *Lakirovannoe triko* [Patent Leather Tights] by Kruchenykh, *Rekord Nezhnosti* [Record of Tenderness] by Terent'ev, *Ostraf Paskhi* [Easter Eyeland], and *Zga Iakoby* [As if Zga] by I. Zdanevich.



▲  
Fig. 3. *Cubist Self-Portrait*, Davit K'ak'abadze, 1914. From the artist's private collection.



▲  
Fig. 4. Covers of futurist book publications, Tbilisi, 1917–1919. Library-Museum of Ioseb Grishashvili.

296 Issued in very small editions of approximately 50 to 60 copies, these futurist books were essentially lithographed brochures, with the texts often handwritten by the authors themselves.<sup>17</sup> Although adhering to the art book practices of Russian futurism, the futurist books published in Tbilisi boasted their own peculiarities. One is particularly struck by their versatility of approach: in other words, the artistic solution to be found was specific to each poetic sample. From this viewpoint, we can distinguish between brochures of several types. Firstly, there are those which contain only text, i.e. letters and words, which undergo various highly original kinds of manipulation. In such texts the letters often resemble drawings, a similarity enhanced by their handwritten quality. Writing appears as a living organism, the plastic image of a word, rendering the entire text alive and mobile. Secondly, there are brochures in which text and drawing appear nearly indistinguishable, creating a single integrated form. In such cases we are dealing with a unified graphic concept in which words, letters and drawings represent the visual and plastic expression of a poetic work. In yet another third type of brochure the text and drawings are more or less separated; in other words, the images illustrating the text predominantly appear on separate pages, although they remain a continuation of the text and a graphic decoration of the book.<sup>18</sup> It is also worth noting that the Russian futurist books printed in Tbilisi contain Georgian themes and references, in the form of Georgian words and names, and in *Zhelezobetonnye poëmy* (Ferro-Concrete Poems) by Vasiliï Kamenskii, Aleksei Kruchenykh and Kirill Zdanevich we even find an artistic representation of the map of Tbilisi.<sup>19</sup>

The culminating point of futurist publishing activity in Tbilisi was a literary almanach dedicated to the actress Sofiia Mel'nikova. Published in September 1919 and entitled *Sofiï Georgievne Mel'nikovoi* [A Miscellany Dedicated to Sofiia Georgievna Mel'nikova], this book became an established anthology of modernist poetry and art, and even includes a scholarly work by Dmitriï Gordeev on an early modern Georgian translation from the Persian. Illustrations were printed on separate sheets and then bound together into the collection. At the end of the book we find a list of lectures delivered at the Fantastic Tavern from 1917 to 1919. The collection unites the works of the poets of various nationalities in such a way that the entire collection reads as one artistic creation.<sup>20</sup> Characteristic of such a synthesis is the fact that the peculiarities of various textual and artistic solutions serve only to make the book more versatile, its structure and architectonics more mobile and flexible, and the book itself a visual art object.<sup>21</sup>

The literary and artistic aspects of the *Miscellany* are of great interest. From the viewpoint of poetic language, the samples of Russian and Armenian poetry bear the clear markers of futurist poetics, while the Georgian poetic works tend more toward symbolism. The contextual aspect of the Georgian works is also stronger, and their imagery established mainly through referential logic: futurist or Dadaist absurdity is absent. In the Georgian texts the words are not visually "chopped" and the letters are of the same size, printed in one font. In this way the authors of this collection wished to stress the striving of the Georgian poets toward symbolic association and the picturesque. Notwithstanding their distinct approach, however, the Georgian poetic works





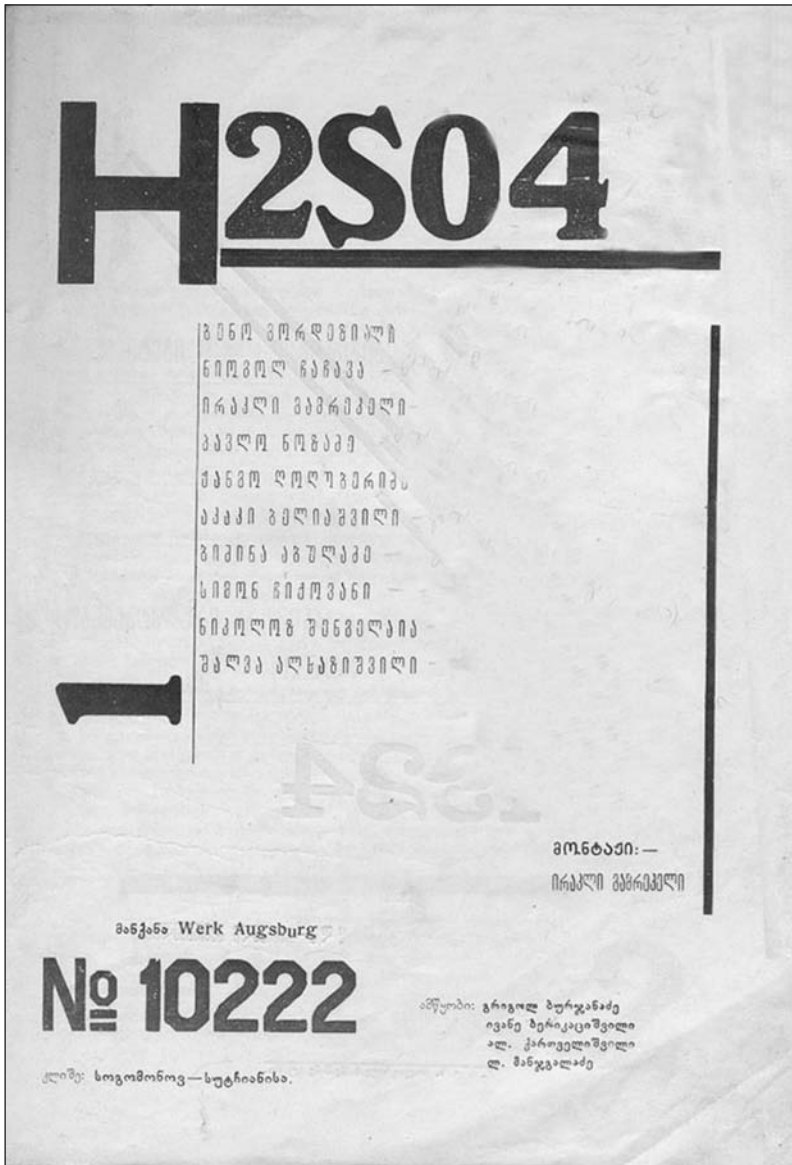
are perfectly integrated into the general body of the collection and even contribute to its variety. It might be said that *Sofia Mel'nikova's Miscellany* is a unique phenomenon in the history of the futurist book, in that poetic works of absolutely different artistic styles and varied artistic forms alternate and combine into one integral unity.

The fervent creative activities of the Tbilisi futurists left a deep mark on the Georgian art of the period, further radicalizing the development of Georgian modernism as well. The impact of the avant-garde, and of modernism in general, remained palpable in Georgia through the middle of the 1930s. The artistic processes initiated at the beginning of the century continued under their own momentum, until the end of the 1920s. In 1924, a new generation of Georgian writers, poets and artists issued the Futurist-Dadaist<sup>22</sup> anthology  $H_2SO_4$  in the Georgian language. Among the editors were Beno Gordeziani, Ak'ak'i Beliashvili, Simon Chikovani, Irak'li Gamrek'eli, Nik'oloz Shengelaia, Shalva Alkhashvili and others. The volume was yet another attempt to break with the canonical forms of literature, poetry and art, highlighting radical experimentation and an avant-garde sense of play. The poetics of  $H_2SO_4$  suggested an evolution from futurism to Dada, foregrounding childish primitivism and disorderly artistic images bordering on the absurd.

Early twentieth-century Tbilisi also became a hub of exhibition activity. In 1918, an exhibition of the Moscow Futurists as well as of innovative local artists such as Lado Gudiashvili and Aleksandr Bazhbeuk-Melikov was arranged. The catalogue of Kirill Zdanevich's exhibition of 1917 contains an introductory article by Aleksei Kruchenykh and "Eli Eganbury" (a pseudonym of Il'ia Zdanevich), in which Kirill Zdanevich's art is termed "orchestral painting" and likened to the art of contemporary Russian neoprimitivist Mikhail Larionov. Kirill, it is suggested, had gone still further, managing to unite various styles on one canvas. Surveying the works created by him, the authors conclude that Kirill Zdanevich has attempted to find "the forms of a new beauty" of an "orchestral" process which, by "unifying [different] means... liberates art from the power of temporary problems and destroys the occasional character of every style, endowing the artwork with an unusual completeness."<sup>23</sup>

In 1919 the Society of Georgian Artists organized an exhibition at which the modernist painters Davit K'ak'abadze, Shalva Kikodze and Lado Gudiashvili were nominated the best artists: as such they won scholarships to Paris where they were to familiarize themselves with European art and develop their artistic skills. This was a very important event both for the artists themselves (tragically, Kikodze would not return to Georgia because of his sudden death from tuberculosis in 1921) and for the development of modern Georgian art.

In speaking about the artistic life of Tbilisi in the 1910s and 20s, a particularly significant phenomenon must be noted that played a tremendous role in the development of early twentieth-century Georgian art and culture. This was the establishment of literary cafés, which opened in Tbilisi in the wake of the artistic cabarets that flourished in Paris, St. Petersburg and Moscow. In the first decade of the twentieth century the literary life of Georgia was dominated by a group of writers known as the *Tsisperqants'elebi* (The Blue Horn Poets). Though their work tended more towards literary symbolism



▲  
 Fig. 9. Cover of the Georgian Futurist Anthology  $H_2SO_4$ , 1924. Library-Museum of Ioseb Grishashvili.

they nevertheless maintained close relationships with representatives of other artistic movements. In their zeal for radical cultural innovation, the *Tsisperqants'elebi* partly resembled the Futurists. It was in the encounters between artists, poets, and actors in the cafes and clubs of Tbilisi that the bohemian life of the city reached its culmination. The greater part of the artistic cafes of the period were decorated with wall-paintings. Here actors, singers, and dancers performed, writers and poets read their works, and lecturers presented their thoughts. Public discussions, concerts, ballet performances,

theatrical and literary evenings, charity drives, and benefit performances were all held in the cafés of Tbilisi. Artistic cafes united audience and performer: the spectacle often reached the customers' tables and the audience could actively participate in the performance. All forms of art came together in Tbilisi's artistic cafes: music, theater, dancing, poetry and prose merged with each other, just as news of the latest novelties in art were first discussed there.

The first literary café in Tbilisi to open was the *Pant'ast'ik'uri samik'it'no* (The Fantastic Tavern), founded in 1917 at the initiative of the Russian poet Iurii Degen and other writers and artists. It was a little room in the center of Tbilisi, which could typically house ten to fifteen people. This was the venue for the Futurist "Omniuniversity" (*Vseuchbishche*), founded by Aleksei Kruchenykh, Il'ia Zdanevich and Igor' Terent'ev together with the Armenian Futurist poet Kara-Darvish. Here they lectured on the avant-garde poetic theory of *zaum'*, or "beyond sense." The composer and poet Aleksandr Korona, the already mentioned actress of the Tbilisi Miniature Theater Sofia Mel'nikova, and the poet Iurii Degen, also performed and presented here. Armenian intellectuals and writers such as Georgii Kharazov and Vasilii Katanian spoke alongside Russian futurists as well as Georgian symbolists such as Grigol Robakidze, T'itsian T'abidze, and P'aolo Iashvili. In his memoirs, Igor Terent'iev recalled that within a three-year period two hundred lectures on literary matters had been delivered there and that about one hundred poets had visited the café. The walls and ceiling of the café were painted with fantastic scenes. These paintings evoked associations with the noted Petersburg artistic café the Stray Dog. Several artists, sculptors and poets participated in decorating the walls. Lado Gudiashvili painted the left wall, ceiling and upper part of the façade wall; caricaturist Sir Gey painted the left wall of the entrance; sculptor Iak'ob Nik'oladze drew outlines on the left side of the arch, which were subsequently colored in by Lado Gudiashvili; poet Il'ia Zdanevich painted the right side of the arch, while poet Iurii Degen painted the niche located opposite the entrance. The wall paintings of the Fantastic Tavern have not survived into the present.

In 1918, another popular bohemian studio *Argonavtebis Navi* (The Boat of the Argonauts) opened in Tbilisi and became a major meeting place for the Russian-language Poets' Guild, who were inspired by the acmeist school of poetry founded by Nikolai Gumilev and Anna Akhmatova. The walls and the ceiling of this café were also decorated, and fragments of these murals are still preserved on one wall of the building. Another café, *Parshevangis k'udi* (The Peacock's Tail), also functioned as the gathering place for acmeists, symbolists and futurists. And there were many other cafes such as *Dzmuri nugesshi* (Brotherly Consolation), *Kape-darbazi* (The Café-Hall), *Ch'ika Chai* (A Cup of Tea), *Int'ernatsionali* (The Internationale), *Imedi* (Hope), *Kartuli k'lubi* (The Georgian Club), all of which became an integral part of Tbilisi's bohemian life.

As noted, the *Tsisperqants'elebi* or Blue Horn Poets were at the forefront of bohemian life in Tbilisi. Even though it existed for only two years, their café, the Kimerioni, became the most significant locale in the artistic life of that period. As T'itsian T'abidze wrote, "No café in the world could absorb as much inspiration and creativity as the Kimerioni."<sup>24</sup> Of particular significance is the artistic leadership provided by the well-

302 known Russian modernist artist Sergei Sudeikin, who himself created the basis for many of the cafe's murals, having already decorated several cafes in Russia. His partners and collaborators in this project were the Georgian modernist painters Lado Gudiashvili and Davit K'ak'abadze. The merging of the modern Russian and Georgian painting styles on the walls of the *Kimerioni* was so organic that the diversity of techniques did not prevent the murals from merging into a single ensemble, giving rise to a mood at once theatrical and mysterious.

In Tbilisi, artistic cafes often served as the site of public appearances by poets and artists speaking on diverse topics and espousing a range of artistic ideologies. Representatives of radically different groups and movements would speak in succession, touching on matters of contemporary concern. From the Russian-language journal *ARS* we learn that in 1918 the following lectures were given within a short period of time: Sergei Gorodetskii, "On Russian Symbolism;" Grigol Robakidze, "About Andrei Belyi;" Mikhail Khristoganov, "Cézanne or the Fourth Dimension in Painting;" Grigol Robakidze, P'aolo Iashvili, and Ali Arsenishvili—"On The Blue Horn Poets." In the lecture rooms of the Futurist Omniversity Il'ia Zdanevich spoke on the "Poetry of Zaum' and Poetry in General," as well as on "Internationalism and National Art," while Aleksei Kruchenykh gave talks entitled "On the New Language," and "The Word As Such." At these forums, the speakers also read extracts from futurist works.

The cultural life of Tbilisi in the 1920s also witnessed significant developments in theatre and set design. With free experimentation in literature and painting progressively restricted after the Sovietization of Georgia in 1921, theater and theatrical design became a major alternative site of avant-garde exploration. The reorganization of Georgian theatre and its transformation on radical modernist lines was largely the effort of the director K'ot'e Marjanishvili, who gave considerable creative freedom to the artists working in theatre design. The modernist artists Irak'li Gamrek'eli, P'et're Otskheli, Kirill Zdanevich, Davit K'ak'abadze and Elene Akhvlediani strove to apply the specific visual methods and techniques of cubism, cubo-futurism, and constructivism, to stagecraft.<sup>25</sup>

The Georgian avant-garde cinema of the late 1920s and early 1930s was likewise an important part of Georgian modernism. While Georgian cinema of the first half of the 1920s was largely conventional, the second half of the 1920s saw an influx of painters such as Valerian Sidamon-Eristavi, Davit K'ak'abadze, Lado Gudiashvili, Irak'li Gamrek'eli and Dimit'ri Shevardnadze for whom experimentation in the medium of film would become essential. K'ot'e Mikaberidze's *Chemi bebia* (My Grandmother, 1929), Mikheil K'alatozishvili's *Jim shvante* (Salt For Svaneti, 1930) and *Lursmani chekmashi* (A Nail in the Boot, 1932), Mikheil Ch'iaureli's *Saba* (1929) and *Khabarda* (1931) are major works in their own right, even as they contributed to the development of Soviet and international avant-garde cinema.

The development of Georgian modernism and its dialogue with European culture were interrupted but not ended by the intervention of Soviet Army in Georgia in 1921. Tbilisi slowly ceased to be the city of the bohemian artist. In the late 1920s Georgian modernism was declared to be formalist and bourgeois. In the decade to come, many

artists would be executed, some sent to labor camps, while others would capitulate to the pressures and promises of the Soviet system. Georgian modernism would be replaced by socialist realism.

After 1921, much of the creative force propelling Tbilisi's cultural life came to be scattered. Some artists emigrated from Georgia while others struggled on under escalating political pressure. Il'ia Zdanevich emigrated from Georgia to France and continued his activities in Paris, where he lived until his death, contributing to the development of the Dada movement. T'itsian T'abidze was executed in 1937. That same year, under increasing political and psychological pressure, P'aolo Iashvili committed suicide. Grigol Robakidze fled to Germany in 1930, along with a segment of the Georgian intelligentsia that, much like their Russian counterparts, remained nostalgic for the atmosphere "created by the new architects of the modern era."<sup>26</sup>

Davit K'ak'abadze was declared to be an "anti-Soviet painter" and prohibited both from exhibiting his work and teaching at the Academy of Fine Arts. Living in penury, he died from a heart attack in the 1950s. Kirill Zdanevich was exiled to Siberia for thirteen years, after which he continued his avant-garde work underground. The avant-garde artist P'et're Otskheli was shot in 1937. That same year Sandro Akhmet'eli, a talented young theater director, was also executed.

The significance of Georgian modernism consists in having extended the boundaries of modernist art to the southeastern edges of Europe, and in having contributed to the creative development of the Russian avant-garde. For Russian artists, Tbilisi's cosmopolitanism nurtured a space which served as a transitional stage that led from a Russocentric to a more multiethnic and finally internationalist artistic vision. A neglected but significant chapter in the history of world modernism, shattered but not destroyed by Georgia's forced Sovietization, Georgian modernism continued to exercise a subterranean influence, to re-emerge decades later in the artistic efflorescence that marks Georgia today.

## Notes

1. Cited in B. Kerdimun, "Kirill Zdanevich and Cubo-Futurism: Tbilisi, 1918–1920," *Kirill Zdanevich*, Rachel Adler Gallery (New York, 1987).

2. T'itsian T'abidze, "Kimerioni," *Barik'adi* (The Barricade) (22 January 1922).

3. T'abidze, "Kimerioni."

4. Grigol Robakidze, *Palest'ra. Gvelis p'erangi* (Palestra. The Snakeskin Shirt) (Tbilisi: Merani, 1988), 237–238.

5. In *Modernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 17, 21, Peter Childs argues that modernism was an artistic response to a rapidly changing world marked by industrialization, mechanization, urbanization, and secularization.

6. Tea T'abat'adze, *Art'ist'uli k'ape "Kimerioni" da misi mokhat'uloba. T'pilis, 1919* (The Artistic Café Kimerioni and its Wall Paintings. Tbilisi, 1919), Ph.D. thesis (Tbilisi, 2009), 1.

7. In Georgia the first modernist works of art were created in the 1910s. It is worth noting that academicism in Georgian art, founded on a blend of Italian and French academicism and the realism of the Russian Wanderers, enjoyed only a brief history.

8. Tea Tabatadze argues that "at the beginning of the twentieth century the temporal proximity to medieval culture and its still living traditions greatly defined the ideology and peculiarities of the

304 artistic language of Georgian modernism, but the rapid tempo with which modernist culture established itself greatly determined its kind of 'belated and simultaneous' character." See T'abaṭ'adze, *Art'ist'uli k'ape "kimerioni" da misi mokhat'uloba. T'pili, 1919*, 1, and Harsha Ram, "Modernism on the Periphery: Literary Life in Postrevolutionary Tbilisi" in *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 5.2 (Spring 2004): 377.

9. In the words of Irina Arsenishvili, *The Main Artistic and Stylistic Tendencies of Georgian Easel Painting*, dissertation abstract (Tbilisi, 2001), Georgian modernism "is marked by artistic diversity, as each artist of that period has his or her clearly shaped individual character" (38).

10. In the words of Giorgi Khosht'aria, *Svoebrazie postroeniia kartin Pirosmashvili* (The Peculiarity of the Construction of Pirosmashvili's Paintings) (Tbilisi, 1987), "Pirosmashvili... uses both the general and the specific artistic methods of the new easel painting as well as the monumental Georgian painting of the Middle Ages. Free opposition of the real and the conventional, the expressed and expressiveness, is particularly typical of the new painting of the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries" (16).

11. According to Dimit'ri Tumanishvili, "Pirosmani combined an epic national vision colored by Christian faith and a certain naiveté with a conventional monumentalism derived from medieval tradition and a modern striving for a diversity of material." See Dimit'ri Tumanishvili, "Georgia Between Two Epochs," *Georgian Modernism 1910–1930* (Tbilisi, 2006), 220.

12. Beno Gordeziani, "Khedvis ost'at'i" ("The Master of Vision"), *Mnatobi* 3 (Tbilisi 1927), 233.

13. Giorgi Khosht'aria states, "the fact that he [Pirosmani]... acquired the qualities of a city-dweller, sensing the unique flavor of the customs, clothing, festivities etc. of city folk, speaks eloquently about his exceptional sense of the world." Giorgi Khosht'aria, *Svoebrazie postroeniia kartin Pirosmashvili* (The Specificity of the Construction of the Paintings of Pirosmashvili) (Tbilisi, 1987), 17.

14. Samson Lezhava, "Niko Pirosmashvilis mkhat'vrobis mnishvnelobitvis" (On the Meaning of the Painting of Niko Pirosmashvili), *Spekt'ri* [in Georgian] (Tbilisi, 2005), 4.

15. Il'ia Zdanevich's pseudonym after his flight to Paris in 1921.

16. Il'ia Zdanevich's play (or so-called *dra*) *Asel na prokat* (Donkey for Hire) from the *Miscellany* to Sofiia Melnikova is the best example of *zaum'* poetry, where the author goes to extreme lengths to achieve a coincidence of poetic sound and its artistic representation. The artist creates a special form of graphic image, where words designed for simultaneous reading are combined together (like a musical partitur for instruments and the voice intended to sound in unison). Here words and their constitutive parts are written one above the other; we even encounter capital letters within words. The principles of fragmentation and simultaneous recitation create a peculiar verbal-musical and artistic expressiveness that is close to Dadaist absurdity.

17. In these books the narrative import of the illustrations was relegated to the background with the major role being played by their plastic and graphic expression. *Zaum'* was built on the play of words, while the words themselves had been divorced from conventional meaning, with improvisation seen as the main tool. The futurist book was itself an experiment in emphatic primitivism, including elements of handwritten text, which futurists believed could express nuances and idiosyncracies of style that were lost in print. To overcome the "boring straightforwardness" of monotonous lines of printed words, members of the *41°* group used diverse fonts, different-sized letters as well as handwritten texts and drawings. They sometimes used wall-paper instead of writing paper, while the bookcovers were made of cardboard.

18. The phenomenon of the futurist book in Tbilisi would ultimately prove important for the further development of the Russian futurist book, which became more differentiated due to the involvement of local artistic forces. The Futurist book acquired a more multicultural and international character that well suited the cosmopolitan nature of futurist ideology.

19. Vasilii Kamenskii, Aleksander Kruchenykh and Kirill Zdanevich, *Zhelezobetonnye poemy* (Ferro-Concrete Poems) (Tbilisi, 1918).

20. This miscellany is distinguished by a convergence of poets of several nationalities: the Russians Aleksei Kruchenykh, Igor Terent'ev, Tat'iana Vechorka, Nina Vasil'eva and Il'ia Zdanevich (the latter a local Russophone artist); the Georgians T'itsian T'abidze, P'aolo Iashvili and Grigol Robakidze; the

Armenian Kara Darvish and Vasilii Katanian. The visual artists participating were similarly multiethnic: the Georgian Lado Gudiashvili and Kirill Zdanevich, the Poles Ziga Walisewski, and Kolau Cherniavskii; the Armenian Aleksandr Bazhbeuk-Melikov; the Russians Natalia Goncharova and Igor Terent'ev.

21. The Tbilisi futurist book is an important achievement in book design. Its constitutive components - text (whereby each word, word segment or letter had graphic-representational meaning) and image (which was considered an integral part of the work) together create the futurist book's representational system.

22. This conflation of literary registers was characteristic for Tbilisi avant-garde art.

23. A. Kruchenykh, E. Eganbury [Il'ia Zdanevich], *Vystavka kartin Kirilla Zdanevicha* [The Exhibition of the Pictures of Kirill Zdanevich] (Tbilisi, 1917).

24. T'itsian T'abidze, "Kimerioni," *Barik'adi* (22 January 1922).

25. See Ketevan Shavgulidze, "The Avant-Garde of Georgian Theatre," [www.harrimaninstitute.org/MEDIA/01768.pdf](http://www.harrimaninstitute.org/MEDIA/01768.pdf) (accessed 9 August 2010).

26. Davit K'asradze, "Kimerioni," in *Sakartvelo* (Georgia), (1920), no. 3.