

SYMBOLIST TRENDS IN THE GEORGIAN MODERNIST ART OF THE 1920S GEORGIAN MODERNISM

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Illustrations: pp.236-238

The Georgian modernist art developed very rapidly and continued its evolution alongside the trends of the European art of the time. Unfortunately, the unique phenomenon proved to be short-lived for it was rooted out by Soviet totalitarian rule even from our cultural memory and has to be rediscovered and studied. Georgian modernism stands out for its reverence of traditions, interest in ancient national culture and search for purely Georgian values. Artists aimed at the creation of the tradition-based “modern and national”¹ art. Perhaps, it is because of this that there were no trends or artistic groupings in Georgian modernist art. Each artist stood out for individuality, and although they employed methods characteristic to cubism, expressionism, symbolism, modernism, and others, those were just a part and not the key trait of their individuality. In the Georgian art of the time, we come across symbolist approaches and curious metaphors. However, not a single Georgian artist of the time was a symbolist by definition. In this paper we deal with the characteristics of symbolism in the works of Valerian Sidamon-Eristavi, Shalva Kikodze, and Lado Gudishvili which, understandably, are revealed very differently in their works. What they have in common is the intensity of symbolic images and metaphors characteristic of expressionism. It should not be a mere coincidence that, in their works, symbols and expressionist artistic forms rub shoulders. For instance, the paintings by Valerian Sidamon-Eristavi are generally associated with the Russian realistic art of the 19th century. However, beginning from the late 1910s, we notice indications of neo-romanticism² and abandonment of realistic representation. In the 1920s, he creates several expressionist and sym-

bolic works. Here we wish to touch upon *The Red Sowers* (Illustration.1) painted in 1920 and depicting an allegoric, intuitive anticipation of Soviet rule in Georgia. In the forefront we see a Bolshevik in military uniform walking in a newly tilled field against the background of trees in bloom and clear skies. He has a pipe in his hand and with his head turned, is looking intensely somewhere beyond the picture. Behind him, diagonally, there are scattered figures sowing Bolshevism. What is Valerian Sidamon-Eristavi’s symbolic language like? He must have known well his contemporary Russian and European artists the leitmotiv of whose works was also the revolution and similar historical events. Actually, war and revolutions are the two key topics recurrent in the paintings of the time. Here *Bolshevik* (1920) (Illustration.2) by Boris Kustodiev, an important work permeated with brutal hyper-symbolism, comes to mind. Much like a poster, it depicts the chaos of the revolution: a grotesque figure of a ruthless giant, with a face of a fanatic, symbolizing collective unconscious and the Red Terror, sowing destruction all around. The painting has its predecessors, the antimonarchic caricatures (1905) also by B. Kustodiev, as well as masterpieces depicting war like *The Colossus* by Francisco Goya, a horrific representation of war and collective unconscious. Here we should mention expressionists, for instance Ludwig Meidner who, in his painting *The Fight on the Barricades*, depicted revolution as the Apocalypse. Typically to L. Meidner, the picture painted against the backdrop of an apocalyptic landscape is an expressionist replica of *The Freedom on the Barricades* by Delacroix. A number of political posters of the 1910s-1920s were also made in the expressionist-allegoric style.

1 D. Kakabadze “The Time and Space”, 1983, p. 136

2 I. Arsenishvili “The Georgian Easel Painting”, 2017. p.176

Thus, in creating *Bolshevik*, Mr. Valerian Sidamon-Eristavi relied on certain archetypes, all the more so that some kind of caricatural characteristics and grotesqueness emerge clearly in his paintings of the time. Both with Kustodiev and Sidamon-Eristavi, the image of the Bolshevik is horrific and grotesque. However, Sidamon-Eristavi's allegory is much more complex, subtle and, perhaps, more ambiguous than that of Kustodiev, whose metaphor is demonstrative and striking.

1920, when Mr. Sidamon-Eristavi created his painting, was especially hard for Georgia for its is then that the destiny of our country, namely what was going to happen in February 1921, became evident. In 1920, attempts to occupy Georgia were temporarily stopped by the 7 May Treaty with Soviet Russia under which Moscow recognized Georgia's independence and assumed obligation of non-interference with its internal affairs. However, the treaty contained several provisions securing the Bolsheviks' victory. Also, in 1920, the League of Nations did not admit Georgia as its member, which was fatal. Soviet rule in Georgia was to be established by means of a socialist coup staged by Georgian Bolsheviks. Russia's actions were to be justified by "brotherly assistance" to Georgian workers, which indeed took place by means of Moscow-inspired uprisings.

Russian colonial policies in this country masked as peace-making continue to this day. Probably, *Bolshevik* by Mr. Sidamon-Eristavi is a representation, an allegory of these ambiguous colonial policies with double standards. The newly-fledged Bolshevik seems to have just stepped on a recently tilled land; his posture and facial expressions are both cautious and horrific; he is alert, looking askance beyond the picture as if anticipating a threat or keeping an eye on his prey; he seems to have perfidiously crept into the frame but his steps and the way he holds his pipe express confidence. A phantom, he is both fearful and scared. He looks both as a culprit and an aggressor, grotesquely horrifying and odious. Unlike *Bolshevik* by B. Kustodiev, he does not fully reveal himself, carries something covert and treacherous, which is extremely expressive, creates intense sensation and a kind of tragic anticipation. A clear spring day and trees in bloom only intensify

the impression. However, the day is also imbued with the anticipation of a tragedy as, in the spring of 1920, the painter should have been overwhelmed with the imminence of Georgia's fate. The red shirts of the sowers of Bolshevism are scattered all across the painting in light colors. There are no faces; they have been deliberately blotted out. Even the Bolshevik's face is a kind of a blot, a mask, while his followers, the sowers, have no faces at all; they are totally impersonal, puppets, robot-like creatures. The loss of individuality and personality is a metaphor of aggression in the works by famous artists depicting war: *The Execution* by F. Goya, where Napoleonic soldiers have lost faces and turned into death machines; or *Guernica* by P. Picasso. In the painting by Mr. Sidamon-Eristavi, nature that has once again come to life in spring is occupied by faceless creatures. The Bolshevik's grey figure contrasts with the beautiful scenery and it is that contrast that helps the artist make the metaphor more intense.

The theme of sowers brings to mind Vincent van Gogh's *The Sower*. In the history of art, a sower is generally a powerful symbol. In terms of their posture and movement, Sidamon-Eristavi's *sowers* are much like those of Vincent van Gogh. Van Gogh's *The Sower* is a Biblical metaphor, a personification of life, the Creator, while the seeds are men. God is sowing life, mankind. Conversely, with Sidamon-Eristavi, the sowers wearing red shirts are sowing death, which is why they are faceless. Consequently, it is an antithesis of van Gogh's *sower*. The artist, who seems to have known European art quite well, employs it in order to create his expressive images. Experience helps him create the painting, an archetypal image synthesizing history, reality and allegory. The painter puts forward the synthetic vision of the event. Like Vincent van Gogh's archetypal images, *Bolshevik* by Sidamon-Eristavi is a Jungian archetype originating not only from traditional symbols but an actual developments and historical event, which makes it a universal synthetic image.

As I. Arsenishvili says,³ by the end of 1910s, the concreteness of Sidamon-Eristavi's works had been replaced by generalization and time dilation, while three-dimensional shapes had given way to a decorative approach. Although the Bolshevik is a historical figure, in his picture, time is totally generalized

3 I. Arsenishvili "The Georgian Easel Painting", 2017. p.176

and provisional. For all his inclination toward the realistic painting, in the 1920s, apparently influenced by the situation in the country, Sidamon-Eristavi ends up as a symbolist and expressionist artist. In the same decade, he created several other pictures made in the expressionist and allegorical style, which are both characteristic and, at the same time, stand out among all his creations. Those are *The Attack of Red Equestrians* (Illustration 3), *Children in the Garden* (Illustration 4), and *The Hawk Flew over* (1920-1925), as well as expressionist style portraits, especially the self-portrait, which stands apart. In the painting carrying political connotations, which was created at about the same time as *The Red Sowers* (1910-1920), he is standing. (Illustration 5) The work is extremely emotional and grotesque, so much so that there may be some similarities with the Bolshevik in *The Red Sowers*. In the self-portrait, the artist portrayed a kind of antihero: he may even remind us of the Führer. However, the portrait is deeply tragic. Undoubtedly, in the 1920s, Valerian Sidamon-Eristavi was quite on edge, as evidenced by his expressive shapes. We may say that later on, he did not create symbolic images of such intensity any more. It is only occasionally and not because of his belonging to an artistic school or a trend that his symbolic vision derives from his inner self.

Although Shalva Kikodze cannot not be categorized as modernist, his works stand out clearly for their metaphors and expressiveness. Unlike Mr. Sidamon-Eristavi, those two properties are characteristic to all of Kikodze's paintings. What makes Shalva Kikodze different is his bitter irony, grotesque and strongly philosophical vision. We can draw parallels between *The Red Sowers* by Valerian Sidamon-Eristavi and Shalva Kikodze's similarly allegoric and philosophical painting *In Memory of the Young Deceased Friend* (1920) (Illustration 6). Unlike Sidamon-Eristavi, his mystical and melancholic mood prevalent at the turn of the 20th century both in Europe⁴ and Georgia was caused not by the political situation but strongly personal reasons, as evidenced by the painting. We see the artist sitting between what appears to be Mephistopheles and Death playing cards on the deck. The theme of the painting is evident from its title, *In Memory of the*

Young Deceased Friend. By replacing his friend with himself, the artist predicted his own untimely death.

A largely naturalistic representation of the artist and fantastic creatures are sitting around the table, which is a curious synthesis of actuality and allegory, dream and reality. The painting presents a certain dual juxtaposition⁵ of realistic form, order, balance, permanence and totally illogical and phantasmagoric. The quest for the meaning of life and the eternity and, particularly so, the death theme expressed by way of the self-portrait is characteristic of quite a few European expressionist and symbolist artists. The composition of a self-portrait and death was common to the artists of the turn of the 20th century: A. Böcklin, L. Corinth, J. Ensor, E. Munch, to mention a few. Of course, Sh. Kikodze's Mephistopheles has predecessors: the grotesque images in paintings by F. Goya, O. Redon, J. Ensor, M. Vrubel, F. Stuck, and others. Here we can also mention the paintings by P. Otskheli, as well as E. Delacroix's Faust lithographs. By employing Christian or archetypal symbols like a sheep, an apple, a fruit or the sea, Shalva Kikodze created a specific system of symbols and allegories. From his biography we know that he first faced the threat of death during his voyage to France, when he lost his favorite riding crop bearing an image of Mephistopheles. He never went back to Georgia. In the composition, his personal experiences, the pain of separation from his country, the chaos in the world, as well as the presentiment of his early death, are generalized and raised up to eternal philosophical categories. Notably, here emerges one of the symbolists' principles: contraposition of death and art. In the 1920s, when Sh. Kikodze painted the picture in Paris, the great Georgian poet Galaktion Tabidze published his collection, *The Artistic Flowers*. The title of the collection in French can be translated as *The Skull with the Artistic Flowers*, i.e. death and eternal artistic flowers. It should be the search for those eternal flowers and the defeat of death that Sh. Kikodze sought to express in his presumably final self-portrait.

Another Georgian modernist to whom symbolism as a philosophical concept was quite acceptable was Lado Gudiashvili. In his paintings, reality transforms into a fairy tale, is mythologized, and assumes

4 I. Arsenishvili "The Georgian Easel Painting", 2017. p.130

5 T.Kiladze, Three Artists ,. G.Chubinashvili NAtional Research Centre for Georgian Art History and Heritage Preservation online Magazine, Seria B, <http://www.georgianart.ge>, 2015

an exotic, romantic image. His themes embrace national legends, fairy tales and townsfolk's daily life. Not only did the artist rely on medieval Georgian art and oriental traditions, but he was also closely associated with Georgian literary symbolism. Art historians say that his paintings made in the modernistic style are marked with individuality and national belonging⁶. L. Gudiashvili worked and was friends with the symbolist poets of the Blue Horn group, whose images recurrently appear in his paintings. For instance, in his 1919 self-portrait (*Illustration 7*), he is surrounded by wild goats. The artist is presented as a phantasmagoric creature merged with chaotic nature. He seems to be posed between real and imaginary worlds. By a combination of provisional decorative artistic methods, rhythmic lines and color blots, the artist creates a symbolic metamorphosis of himself into a kind of pantheistic vision. We see a similar artistic vision in P. Gauguin's symbolic *Self-Portrait with Halo and Snake* painted in 1889.

His *Pegasus* (1918) (*Illustration 8*), an outstanding modernistic work, was inspired by Georgian ro-

mantic and symbolist poetry. Mythological Pegasus and the rider are racing against the background of clouds and the fantastic sky, while at the bottom of the picture, we see mountains, a Georgian fortress and a tower. The painting is clearly a visualization of *The Pegasus*, a poetic masterpiece by Nikoloz Baratashvili, and *The Blue Horses* by Galaktion Tabidze suffused with the patriotic spirit and strive for freedom—which makes perfect sense because it was created in 1918, when Georgia declared independence and the Georgians started creating a new state. The picture is a representation of truth, the chaotic, attractive and actually unattainable force of poetry and, also, a symbol of national liberty.

Even the few instances above show how much the symbolistic search of Georgian artists was suffused with the national spirit and, even though building on the experience of their European contemporary counterparts, they remained unmistakably individual.

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6 I. Arsenishvili "The Georgian Easel Painting", 2017. p.180