

# GIORGI SESIASHVILI'S EUROPEAN ART EXPERIENCE AND HIS YEARS AT THE TBILISI ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS

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The desire to study the works by Giorgi Sesiashvili appeared after discovering his small nude sculpture figures. After discovering a vast collection preserved by the sculptor's family, I found it especially exciting and important to learn about Giorgi Sesiashvili's first artistic attempts during several months spent in Geneva.

After graduating from a Tbilisi secondary school in 1912, Giorgi Sesiashvili traveled to Switzerland, namely to Geneva, to study French, where he also delved into arts. He enrolled in an unspecified art school. The graphic sketches preserved by Giorgi Sesiashvili's family are linked to the Geneva period. Scientific literature on the sculptor's oeuvre is very scarce and sketchy. A general overview of his sculpture works is given in the publications of Shalva Kvashvadze and Vakhtang Beridze<sup>1</sup>.

Art expert Otar Kaishauri has dedicated an entire thesis to the works of Giorgi Sesiashvili. The discovered materials convinced me of the importance to fundamentally study Giorgi Sesiashvili's art. In this context, his Swiss period, when he matured as a painter and sculptor, is of special interest. Though it is unknown who his pedagogue was, it is clear that despite specific technical deficiency, which is common among novice artists, his accurate compositions reveal an overwhelming desire to hone professional skills, as evidenced by his plastic line perception and sense of light and shade proportion.

Notably, these pieces of graphic art will not only be an auxiliary, draft work for the future sculptor but

will also serve the function of independent, completed graphical works. Consequently, these graphic works hold an important place in the art of Giorgi Sesiashvili. This part of his creative work is completely ignored by scanty scientific literature dedicated to him. Authors, including fine art expert and Georgian sculpture history researcher Lela Shanidze, focus only on Giorgi Sesiashvili's small sculptures and nude muscled human bodies.

Giorgi Sesiashvili's graphic works created abroad can be thematically categorized in two groups. The first is represented by graphic sketches of Georgian rural routine life, inspired by the artist's nostalgia; the other group consists of works reflecting love scenes full of eroticism. The works of both groups are characterized by a quick drawing manner.

A clear dominant function of a line is vividly emphasized in these so-called Genevan quick sketches. The tense line rhythm is achieved through intercrossing horizontal and vertical lines; large, energetic strokes are created through various weight press on pencil and ink. The graphic sketches of the first group prove that the novice artist mastered the dynamic plastic movement of a line in picture plane; nevertheless, the artist does not try to finish his pictures academically but makes an attempt to render a certain mood by incomplete quick sketches. Herein, the fragmented introduction of the environment, when the picture plane is left blanc, helps the author focus only on flexible individual human figures in the center of the composition.

The pictures of the first group show Georgian aristocrats' routine life, mostly feasting and entertainment.

<sup>1</sup> Kvashvadze, Giorgi Sesiashvili, 1962, p. 51-53; Beridze, Giorgi Sesiashvili – 100, 1995, p. 143-145.

There are works titled conventionally as Georgian Aristocrats Resting (pic. 1) and Come and Drink to Our Health (pic. 2). Another picture (pic.3), an image that came to his memory, presents a figure of a Georgian soldier standing on a hill, possibly an armed border guard observing the surroundings. The figure of the soldier is presented in three quarters turn. The body and half-face justify Georgian ethnicity. The environment around the figure is delineated with a few brisk lines, the shadow is a downsized figure of the soldier with a gun. The minimal number of strokes perfectly conveys an illusion of perspective and accurate proportions. No doubt that the beginner artist had already possessed the knowledge of realistic painting principles by that time. The Georgian narrative emphasizes Georgian national features in the pictures testifying to his nostalgia. Apparently, it was easier for the beginner artist to create scenes of Georgian routine life inspired nostalgia. From this point of view, an interesting example of rendering a typical face's psychological portrait is a picture of a Georgian peasant An Old Man with a Jug (pic. 4).

Throughout his creative career, Giorgi Sesiashvili was enamored with bodily flexibility and dynamic reflection. Oddly enough, opposite-sex relations and eroticism are also demonstrated in his graphical works. Temptation (pic. 5) was created in his Genevan period. A figure of a nude woman lying in the meadow, leaning her head on her hand, looking at the figure of a nude man with a flower in his hand. In my view, the picture presents erotic relationships between a man and a woman. On the other hand, it is fair to assume that the temptation Eden had had its impact on the artist's subconscious. If we admit that the picture reflects Eva's temptation, from a certain point of view, then it is interesting that the tempter is not a snake but a horned man with a goatee<sup>2</sup>. The environment (the scene is in a meadow and not in an interior) creates religious associations. Only trees trunks are visible, while the branches are outside the scene (the method was already introduced by the

impressionists in the early 20th century). The only tree in full length with leaves is placed next to the man, possibly an indication that the flower in the man's hand is the tempting fruit for the woman. An erotic interpretation of the picture might also be interesting. The man, who is active in relationships, is handing the flower leaning towards the woman and is touching the ground with his left hand. The man's body, exposed from his back, is created with anatomic accuracy; proportions and muscle systems are precise and distinct. These details bear witness to the artist's good knowledge of the principles of art. The woman is passive since she does not hurry to take the flower from the man and seems to be observing the situation.

Looking at the picture from this angle, we may assert that it reflects the author's affinity, which is proved by a letter "N" on the woman's right breast and suggests that the woman was possibly the author's love flame. In an imaginative analysis of the picture, we need to recollect the tendencies of the European art of 1900-1910: Art Nouveau with its peculiar grotesque style and original images of lustful horned bodies as one of the distinguishing characteristic components of the European art style. The external feature of the man indicates the above. It is interesting whether Giorgi Sesiashvili—an artist who had nothing in common with the art in Tbilisi, and was infatuated with modern art in Geneva—had any knowledge of art trends, or was influenced by somebody's art while working on this picture. Unfortunately, there is no answer to this question unless the Georgian artist's European experience is studied. The picture reiterates that Georgian artists who left for Europe to study art in the 1910s faced modern challenges<sup>3</sup>.

The presented theme of the Genevan period is later developed in the era of Soviet ideology but in a hidden and modified form. Unsurprisingly, sculptor and painter Giorgi Sesiashvili did not exhibit his erotic genre works<sup>4</sup>.

The post-Genevan period of Giorgi Sesiashvili's

2 The painter creates an image of a man with a goatee, while a horned lustful creature in Greek mythology is Satire, who accompanies Dionysus.

3 The examples of justification of European knowledge in Georgia of the pre-Sovietization period are minimal, but they are of particular importance for the Georgian art history. The representatives are Shalva Kikodze, Lado Gudiashvili, Iakob Nikoladze, Gogi Gabashvili, Davit Kakabadze, Elene Akhvlediani.

4 Nelly Gabashvili, the daughter of Davit Gabashvili, provided the information on erotic pictures by Giorgi Sesiashvili.

training in art is tied to Paris where, according to art researcher Shalva Kvashvadze, he cast his first minor form. Unfortunately, due to compulsory military service, he could not stay in Paris much longer. After World War I, he would not be able to leave the country for Europe independently because of the existing political situation, which is why meeting with Iakob Nikoladze was so important to him. In Georgia of that period, there was a minimal number of young people interested in sculpture, while working with a professional sculpture was of particular importance for Giorgi Sesiashvili. The third stage of the professional development of the hard-working and enthusiastic artist is closely linked to Tbilisi. Iakob Nikoladze invited him to his workshop and told him: "You are free to do whatever you want in this workshop."<sup>5</sup> Giorgi Sesiashvili's works, kept in private collections, were created in 1917–1918, his apprenticeship period at Iakob Nikoladze's workshop. One of the exciting works is the portrait of a man created using geometrical figures (pic.6). It is an evident attempt to master the cubism manner of painting. A stereotypical man's face is repeatedly sketched in the picture plane, probably with the purpose of elaboration, the square-shaped eyes are mainly focused, the straight line in the angles delineates closed eyes. The man's face is divided into two parts: one is better outlined around the eyes and nose. By the outline differentiation of the most expressive parts of the face, the author creates an effect of a mask. A similar tendency is repeated in his next picture, *A Man on Horseback*. An amazingly dynamic body, muscles, preciseness, and flexibility of movement from one side, and the flexible form of the horse create a tense dynamic.

The composition of the next picture (pic. 7) is undoubtedly a sculptural part of an architectural project.

It is interesting as a draft sketch for a relief sculpture. The picture is presented in two main parts. A nude man is building in three quadrants of the lower part of the picture, while a woman and a man are crouching in the arch-form upper part. The bodies are angular in form, and

the faces remind the typical features of African sculptures. It is possible that the painter saw African masks favored by the Paris artistic community. Art critic Shalva Kvashvadze mentions that Giorgi Sesiashvili frequented cubist sculptors' exhibitions during his stay in Paris<sup>6</sup>.

The apprenticeship period at the Iakob Nikoladze workshop was very productive for Giorgi Sesiashvili and explains why he was already a skilled master when he entered the Tbilisi Academy of Fine Arts. After enrolling, his art style changes; he is trying to master the style of Realism. Figures become more solid and hefty, despite the fact that he does not use chiaroscuro in most of his works. Diversity of themes is not his trait; he is mostly drawing nude bodies, albeit lacking eroticism, in various situations. After graduation, his works are more and more reflecting the principles of Socialist Realism compulsory on the Soviet cultural stage, though the sculptor continues drawing and sculpting nude bodies in erotic scenes on the sly. These works were preserved in his workshop until it was robbed.

While studying Giorgi Sesiashvili's early art, it became clear to me that it was unavoidable for the artists of the communist period not to create social art pieces. It is the reason why the name of this exciting artist is forever linked to Socialist Realism. I hope that the presented work will contribute to the rehabilitation and appreciation of the artistic value of Giorgi Sesiashvili's works. The picture titled *Historical Hollow* (pic. 8, versions of the picture are kept by the family of the artist), created in 1981, proves that the author does not fully share the approaches of Socialist Realism in politics and art. The work, built on amazingly coherent rhythmic and tectonic alternations, demonstrates the author's negative attitude toward the Soviet dictatorship with its final destination in the "historical dust hole."

5 Kvashvadze, Giorgi Sesiashvili, 1962, p. 53.

6 Art Critic Shalva Kvashvadze provides this information and mentions that the Georgian painter was filled with a sense of protest against the leftists when studying cubist sculpture works. If we take into account the period when the article was published, it is not excluded because the socialist requirements dictated it. I believe that the mentioned picture by Giorgi Sesiashvili proves the opposite.

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