

Art for Architecture
Georgia
Soviet Modernist Mosaics
from 1960 to 1990

Nini Palavandishvili and Lena Prents

Introduction

Nini Palavandishvili

In Georgia, Soviet-period mosaics, colourful works of art, have become such an integral part of our daily visual culture that we no longer notice them. We even neglect them to the extent that we paint over or glue adverts on top of them.

My admiration for this art form started with one particular structure on the shore of the Black Sea: the former Café Fantasia, commonly called the 'Octopus'. Once a fully functioning café, this sculpture is entirely covered with mosaic pieces and stands against a background of rippling blue sea and azure sky, where its colourful smalti tiles capture one's gaze. When I first became aware of this place, it was already abandoned and in poor condition. In the more than ten years that have passed since then, I have dedicated an exhibition to the Octopus – *Time Future in the Time Past* (Batumi, 2011) – conducted extensive research on the topic of Soviet-period mosaics in Georgia, collected a vast amount of material from personal archives, documented the majority of the mosaics that still exist in Georgia (around 250), organised three different exhibitions at home and abroad, published a book – *Lost Heroes of Tbilisi: Soviet Period Mosaics* (2014)¹ – and engaged in actions to preserve these very special artworks.

This publication is the first to cover the monumental-decorative mosaics that were created in public spaces throughout Georgia from the late 1960s up until the 1980s. Currently, many of these works are under threat of obliteration. Some have already been destroyed.

Unfortunately, at the moment there is no real interest in conserving them – no broad political intentions, no deliberation from the professional community, and no great public concern for them. This book aspires to bring the topic to wider audience, to put the mosaics in their historical and cultural context, to show their beauty and importance, and to help lead to their preservation and maintenance.

The Problem

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, this field of architectural art was completely neglected. Georgia's economy was in poor shape, because of the country's political instability. The 1990s were marked by civil war and regional conflicts that resulted in difficult conditions for much of the population. Parts of hotels, resorts, and health and educational complexes were, and sometimes still are, inhabited by internally displaced persons (IDP); the majority of industry and enterprise was privatised. Survival was the main concern of the population at the time. Accordingly, nobody cared much about art in general, or mosaics in particular. The production of monumental art was discontinued for a long while, and existing works were either dismantled, robbed for materials, or turned derelict.

The active ideological fight against everything 'Soviet' only started after 2004, with the change of political rule led by Mikheil Saakashvili,² a supporter of Western politics who openly declared Russia to be the country's main

enemy. In 2011, the Freedom Charter (თავისუფლების ქარტია) was passed by the Georgian parliament, banning totalitarian communist symbols. However, this did not affect the country's mosaics, as they almost never directly depicted symbols such as the hammer and sickle, or Stalin, Lenin, or any other communist leader – just a few stars and СССР ('USSR' in Russian) written in small letters here and there. The intensive urban changes, the boom in the free market economy, and the selling off of public spaces to private owners which took place over almost 30 years, all contributed to the increase in damage to these artworks and left them under threat. Moreover, the new owners of the mosaics simply do not care about them. Very few of these entrepreneurs appreciate art; they see it as a burden. In general, the unsystematic transformation of the environment and amateur interventions that have shaped the look of cities and villages, as well as façade 'beautifications', have led to the destruction of mosaics.

While mural paintings were mainly used for decorating interiors, mosaics were the best fit for exteriors and façades because of their resilience. Mosaic panels were placed not only in central areas of the cities, but also in the country's regions, small villages, and settlements. For the most part, they were used on the façades of public buildings and/or industrial enterprises, though they were also frequently seen inside canteens and conference or concert halls. In urban environments they often stand as independent decorative fountain pools and wall structures. The former Café Fantasia in Batumi Boulevard and the 'bus pavilions' in Abkhazia are unique examples of functional architectural forms fully covered in mosaic tiles. Small towns still have mosaic-decorated bus stops, while resort areas present complex, three-dimensional compositions, such as those in Bichvinta (Pitsunda) or Kobuleti. The authors of these works were frequently the leading artists of the time. Today, mosaics from the Soviet era constitute an integral part of public space. The monumental-decorative art of this period, especially that made from the

1960s to the 1980s, is typically connected to ideological propaganda: the friendship of nations, the victory of the proletariat in the struggle for socialism, the expansion of industrial society and urbanisation, are common themes. Often reflected in public buildings, these subjects form part of the architecture.

The development of mosaic art in Georgia is strongly linked to the artist Zurab Tsereteli. Born in 1934 in Tbilisi, Tsereteli laid the foundation for the re-use of monumental-decorative mosaics in Georgia – in particular through his works in the seaside resort of Bichvinta (1967), which is likely the most complex mosaic-decorated territory in what was, back then, part of the Soviet Union. These works probably also started the widespread belief that most mosaics in Georgia are by Tsereteli – a myth that found its way through the vernacular to diverse digital media posts³ and reportage, as well as essays about art from the Soviet period.⁴

The main reason for this inaccuracy is that despite the popularity and spread of mosaic art in Soviet Georgia, no systematic studies had been conducted on the subject until a colleague and I started research in 2002. It is almost impossible to find information about the mosaics in the standard institutions. The only sources in this field lead to publications about Tsereteli and his oeuvre. Unlike other areas of Soviet art, mosaic art is not researched; artworks are not collected, classified, and archived. Therefore, information regarding authorship and dates of creation usually does not exist. Data collection has been extremely difficult: neither the Georgian Union of Artists nor archives nor libraries hold the necessary information. Sometimes, identifying authors or simply obtaining general information about the mosaics has only been possible through other, still living artists and their personal records. In most cases I have had no choice but to trust the memories of these people. This problem is particular to Georgia as a country, as in talks with my colleagues who research similar topics in other former republics, such an issue is never highlighted.

The System

Meeting the artists greatly helped me with creating a general picture of how the system worked back then – namely, what precisely happened in the process from the ordering/commissioning of mosaics to their completion.

The majority of the projects were commissioned by the state and carried out through the Union of Artists and its arts fund, though some individuals, *upolnomochniki* ('authorized persons' in Russian) – who from a contemporary standpoint would be seen as managers – mediated between businesses and the Union of Artists, and also brought in projects from all over the Soviet Union. Contracts were then awarded by a body within the Union of Artists and its fund. A special committee ran the competitions, so they could regulate the quality of the work and place the project with a specific artist, based on the standard required and the level of sophistication of the task to be completed.

Artists working on the mosaics were graduates of the Fine Art Academy of Georgia, and came predominantly from the fields of applied arts, graphics, and, rarely, from painting. The Monumental-decorative Art Faculty at the Tbilisi State Academy of Arts was founded by Zurab Tsereteli in 1983, when he was no longer personally active in creating mosaics but still held the necessary influence.

This seemingly fair structure was in reality rather hard to navigate. Artists had to line up to obtain their desired assignments, since mosaics were considered the easiest way to earn money with art. The value of the work was determined according to its compositional and artistic complexity, as well as by its vivid combination of colours. My research has also revealed that in many cases there was no plan or system for placing the mosaics in public areas. Occasionally, they were placed on existing structures that offered enough blank space for putting up monumental pieces of art (for example, the Railway Workers' Association House of Culture, Khashuri). An easier and less costly way, though, was a direct order from the business to the artist. That way, both

parties were spared the bureaucratic process that prevailed within the Union of Artists. In such cases, the design was constructed using the ceramic tiles produced in the Navtlughi Ceramics Factory in Tbilisi. Sometimes the commissioned artists would redirect the work to their students, which for the students was a way to earn money during the summer and a chance to complete the mandatory training. This system made the creation of mosaics into a 'production line' and at times led to low-quality implementation. Surprisingly enough, the majority of the artists and authors did not regard their mosaic designs as serious works of art, and so overlooked their artistic value and historical significance. This goes some way to explaining the lack of information on the subject.

However, this criticism may not apply to all of the mosaics that exist in Georgia. Many of these pieces still overwhelm with their artistic and technical accomplishments. Among them, are the mosaics on the grounds of the Expo Georgia Convention Centre (Guram Kalandadze, Leonardo Shengelia), the decorative frieze on the Laguna Vere Swimming Pool Complex (Koka Ignatov), the diorama on the way to Kazbegi (George Chakhava, Zurab Kapanadze, Zurab Lezhava, Nodar Malazonia), and the mosaic wall panel at the Abastumani Resort (Zaurmag Ghambashidze), which is unfortunately quite damaged today.

A History of Mosaics in Georgia

The art of making mosaics is about 4,000 years old, and began with the use of kiln-dried clay pieces as surface decorations. From 1971 to 1977 archaeological excavations in the vicinity of the village of Dzalisi unearthed mosaic flooring from the second century at the Temple of Dionysus. Between 1952 and 1954, the archaeological expedition of the Ivane Javakhishvili Institute of History, Archaeology and Ethnography revealed a three-nave basilica from the fourth century in Bichvinta. Its floor was covered with mosaic patterns from the fifth century. The mosaics on the apses of the altar and on the stoa/gate, as well as some fragments in different locations of the

building, were relatively well preserved (currently in the Museum of Fine Arts of Georgia). The samples of mosaic patterns were preserved in the altar apses of the Mtsire Jvari Church in Mtskheta. The mosaic in the Tsromi Church dates back to the first half of the seventh century. Most of the mosaics there have disappeared, but three relatively large pieces are preserved in Georgia's Museum of Fine Arts. The mosaics of the Gelati Monastery, a masterpiece of Georgian monumental art, date back to the twelfth century.⁵ After the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the art of mosaic was largely overlooked in not only Georgia but also the whole of Europe, and was only revived in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In Georgia this was influenced by the weak economic state of the country, as it constantly engaged in conflicts with its Mongol, Osman, Ottoman, Persian enemies. Mosaic became very popular again in socialist states, including Czechoslovakia, Poland, East Germany, and especially the Republics of the Soviet Union. During the Soviet era, mosaic art underwent its renaissance. From the 1960s onwards, public and residential buildings in Soviet cities were frequently decorated by state-commissioned mosaic panels that reinforced the political messages of the time.

The production of art in conjunction with government propaganda in the Soviet Union between the 1960s and 1980s was certainly influenced by Mexican muralism. Developing after the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920), the movement corresponded to the country's transformation from a mostly rural and illiterate society to an industrialised one. In the Soviet Union of the 1960s this stage had already passed. However, the belated popularisation of monumental art in the Soviet Republics was very much conditioned by the Committee and the Council of Ministers of the USSR's resolution on the 'elimination of redundancy in design and construction'. Issued in 1955 under Nikita Khrushchev, this resolution criticised the 'excessive use of decorative elements that gave buildings an archaic look', and essentially prohibited any decoration that impeded cost-effectiveness. Only after

Khrushchev's death, during the Brezhnev era (1964–1982), was monumental art again promoted. It then spread widely.⁶ There are different techniques for making mosaics. In Soviet times, smalti mosaics were considered the most valuable and of the highest quality. Smalti is an alloy of opaque, tinted glass that is fragmented into small pieces and then used for creating a mosaic. During the Soviet period, smalti was imported to Georgia, mainly from Ukraine and the Baltic countries, and then processed locally. Artworks were initially assembled in the workshop and mounted at their destination afterwards. Besides smalti, mosaics are made from pieces of ceramic or pebbles with the method identical to the former one. In a few cases, mosaic compositions are mixed with chamotte and/or a copper medium. A group of artists (Zurab Kapanadze, Zurab Lezhava, Nodar Malazonia) working with the architect George Chakhava developed a special method. They applied the traditional Georgian technique of cloisonné enamel to monumental works, and rather than smalti they used special tinted and burnt glass produced in Moscow at a glass factory named after Lenin (see 096).

Iconography

The impact of Mexican muralism on monumental art in the USSR is not surprising. Two members of Los Tres Grandes, the main representatives of Mexican muralism, developed tight bonds with the Soviet Union. Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros both travelled to the Soviet Union in the 1920s. In 1927 Rivera went to the Soviet Union as part of the official Mexican delegation to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution. In 1928, Siqueiros visited the Soviet Union to attend the Congress of Red Trade Unions. Later, in 1955, Rivera and Siqueiros again travelled to Moscow. Siqueiros spoke to the members of the USSR Academy of Arts.⁷ In his speech he criticised Soviet artists for 'a certain drift towards formalism and "a mechanical realism, another form of cosmopolitanism" in Soviet Art',⁸ yet he remained favoured by Soviet colleagues to the extent that he was awarded the

Lenin Peace Prize (1966) and received the title of Honorary Member of the Soviet Academy of Arts (1967).⁹ Apparently, Siqueiros went to USSR again at the beginning of the 1970s, as he was captured in a photo with Zurab Tsereteli in front of the latter's mosaic in Adler (a district in the Sochi municipality). Siqueiros' appreciation of his Soviet colleague's work is also mentioned in several publications: 'Tsereteli's work was comparable to the cream of the oeuvre of Mexico's monumental artists including the great Diego Rivera.'¹⁰

A great influence on Georgian artists was also a 1965 book entitled *Monumental Painting in Mexico* and written by Larissa Zhadova,¹¹ who travelled to Mexico and met the artists there.

Georgian mosaic art's relation to its Mexican counterpart is clear. Certainly, there is a difference in iconography, but formal and stylistic correspondences between mosaics in the two countries are evident. The mosaic in the yard of Nursery No. 1 on Paliashvili Street resembles the work of Carlos Mérida, who himself was influenced by Joan Miro. David Alfaro Siqueiros' Palace of Culture in Mexico City is echoed in those by Aliko Gorgadze and Tezo Asatiani at the entrance to Expo Georgia. Siqueiros' bas-relief mosaics resonate in the Samgori Railway Depot in Tbilisi by Malkhaz Gorgadze, or even with the works by Koka Ignatov at Laguna Vere. A composition by Zurab Tsereteli on the Trade Union Palace of Culture identically repeats the famous exterior mosaic of the Central Library of the National Autonomous University of Mexico by Juan O'Gorman. Based on the information I have so far, the mosaics at Expo Georgia¹² were the very first to be created, appearing even before Tsereteli started his career. Later, artists working on mosaics in Georgia would develop their own style, taking inspiration in part from national motifs and church iconography. For instance, a female cosmonaut in former the Gantiadi Factory mosaic bears features of Queen Tamar in the fresco at Vardzia Monastery.

The iconography of mosaics in Georgia provides an example of how the set characters and themes, which included

a variety of socialist achievements and technological advances, and appealed to the national heritage, were treated locally, away from the centre of regulations. The specific theme of a mosaic was predominantly determined by the function of the building it was attached to: for example, mosaics on businesses were elaborated in praise of technological and scientific progress and labour. Even though female figures have a dominant role in mosaic motifs, I have only found two mosaics that feature women as cosmonauts. During the 1960s, the Soviet Union exulted in the achievements of cosmonauts, as, in 1961, Yuri Gagarin, and later, in 1963, Valentina Tereshkova (the first woman), went into space. There is no evidence that the two female cosmonaut motifs in Georgia (in the former Gantiadi Furniture Factory and on the decorative wall at a junction in Melani) are connected with those achievements time-wise. Also, the function of those edifices does not show any relation to cosmonautics. Except these two buildings in Tbilisi there is, to my knowledge, only one stained glass mosaic that features a female cosmonaut and that is in the planetarium of the cultural and educational centre named after Valentina Tereshkova in Yaroslavl, Russia.

The iconography of cultural, educational, and some independent structures is saturated with national symbols and/or depicts domestic heroes and fables: a decorative panel on Gulia Square, Tbilisi, with a hunting scene by Kukuri Tsereteli originated from the medieval epic poem *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* by Shota Rustaveli; a mosaic by Nugzar Medzmariashvili in the reading room of the National Scientific Library, Tbilisi, is derived from the myth of Prometheus – Amirani, Prometheus' partial equivalent in Georgian mythology, is often used as a symbol of Georgian nation, its ordeals and its struggle for survival.

Unsurprisingly, the most frequently encountered national symbol in mosaic art, regardless of its location, is a bunch of grapes on the vine. Considered as a symbol for the Virgin Mary, this was traditionally depicted in Georgian church architecture and iconography.

Under Soviet iconography, however, it was translated into a national agricultural symbol. It is important to mention the topics of religion and the Church here. Though these institutions were forbidden during the Soviet regime, from the beginning of the 1980s, as the system started to weaken and signs of nationalism strengthened in various republics, religious images also entered into mosaic iconography (for example, in the decoration on the former cinema at Bolnisi and Lilo Distillery by Vazha Mishveladze; the Tbilisi Factory of Instruments for Locksmith Installation and the decorative structure at the entrance to the Tianeti region, both by unknown artists). The small pavilions created as bus stops on the territory of the breakaway region of Abkhazia deserve a special mention here. Designed by the architect George Chakhava in collaboration with the aforementioned artist group of Kapanadze, Lezhava, and Malazonia, these structures count as the expression of free artistic creativity and imagination – objects incomparable to any created before or after in the territory of the Soviet Union. The pavilions respond formally to Antoni Gaudí's mosaics in Park Güell, Barcelona, but, unlike Gaudí's creation, they are fully functional sculptures. Even though abstractionism was not recognised by Soviet art until later, such works facilitated the conveyance of abstract thinking through art. Still today, the quality of these artworks indicates the mastery of their authors.

The Present

During my research, I have encountered objects that were restored by their new 'owners'. Among these are mosaics at various locations: Expo Georgia (as previously mentioned), the interior of the swimming pool at the Neptune Sports Complex, inside the grocery store at 7 Tsintsadze Street (formerly Saburtalo Street), on the façade of the Saburtalo Fire Station, and in the interior of the Tbilisi Fire Service Museum (the protection of which required a lot of energy and risk-taking from the head of the service in the 1990s). Alarmingly, most of the mosaics remain in a state of uncertainty.

At the moment, the fate of one of the best examples of such mosaics – the Laguna Vere Swimming Pool Complex by Koka Ignatov – is unclear. This privatised edifice has been closed to the public for over four years now, under the pretext of performing renovations.

However, rumours of its demolition are still in the air. Unfortunately, time, private interests, and nihilism allowed important artworks to go to ruin, ones such as those that were at the Aragvi Restaurant, the Lagidze Waters Shop, the Hydro-Meteorological Institute, the entrance to Rustaveli Underground Station. In contrast, though, after many years of struggle, protests, and petitions against its demolition, the former Café Fantasia in Batumi is currently being renovated and will open again in 2019. Similarly, the efforts of small group of people who have been arguing for the preservation of the memorial dedicated to the Treaty of Georgievsk, near Gudauri, proved successful and the memorial has been renovated for the first time since it was erected. (Both of these instances are works by the architect George Chakhava and the artists George Chakhava, Zurab Kapanadze, Zurab Lezhava, Nodar Malazonia). These two very recent examples show the importance of civil engagement, of raising awareness, and of the state bearing responsibility for the maintenance of heritage from Soviet times.

The most effective way forward is to understand this history – to view and assess it as objectively as possible, rather than to ignore it. No matter how 'bad' the Soviet system was, it remains a part of Georgia's history and the demolition of the forms and images associated with it cannot erase the past. By preserving architecture, forms, and artworks from the Soviet period, I aim to comprehend and appreciate their artistic value. I very much hope that the two cases cited above will become precedents and find appreciation.



Source: Irakli Tsitsishvili: Tbilisi, Leningrad 1985

Aragvi Restaurant, artist: Zurab Tsereteli, 1972 (demolished 1978)

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to those artists who employed mosaic techniques during their artistic careers for the pleasure we enjoy through their work. I would like to thank them for sharing their memories and archive material. Also, my appreciation goes to everybody who enthusiastically helped me in collecting the material, discovering the mosaic artworks, documenting them, identifying the authors, contributing with images, reading the texts, and making this publication possible.

- 1 Nini Palavandishvili (ed.): *Lost Heroes of Tbilisi. Soviet Period Mosaics*, Tbilisi 2014.
- 2 President of Georgia from 2004 to 2013.
- 3 <https://www.instagram.com/funkyspion>
- 4 Oliver Wainwright: 'Soviet Superpower: Why Russia Has the World's Most Beautiful Bus Stops', *The Guardian*, September 2015.
- 5 ხელოვნების ენციკლოპედია ლექსიკონი [Georgian-Soviet Encyclopedia], Vol. VII, Tbilisi 1984, p. 65.
- 6 See chapter on the urban history of Tbilisi, editor's note, pp. 13–15.
- 7 David Alfaro Siqueiros: *Open Letter to the Painters, Sculptors and Engravers of the Soviet Union*, <http://theoria.art-zoo.com/>.
- 8 Tobias Rupprecht: *Soviet Internationalism after Stalin: The USSR and Latin America in the Cultural Cold War*, Florence 2012, p. 167.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Oleg Shvidkovsky: *Zurab Tsereteli*, Moscow 1985, p. 15.
- 11 Larissa Zhadova: *Monumental Painting in Mexico*, Moscow 1965.
- 12 Former VDNKH – Exhibition of the Successes of the Georgian National Economy. The pavilions were built between 1961 and 1971.

The *Deutsche Nationalbibliothek* lists this publication in the *Deutschen Nationalbibliografie*; detailed bibliographic data are available at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

ISBN 978-3-86922-691-0



© 2019 by DOM publishers, Berlin
www.dom-publishers.com

This work is subject to copyright. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transferred, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publishers. Sources and owners of rights are stated to the best of our knowledge; please signal any we might have omitted.

Translation
Amy Visram

Design
Nini Palavandishvili

Cover Design
Paul Meuser

Map Design
Katrín Soschinski

QR Codes
Christoph Gößmann

Printing
L&C Printing Group, Krakow
www.lcprinting.eu