

თბილისის დაკარგული გმირები.  
საბჭოთა პერიოდის მოზაიკები

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LOST HEROES OF TBILISI.  
SOVIET PERIOD MOSAICS

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## INTRODUCTION

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This publication/postcard collection covers the works of monumental-decorative mosaics,<sup>1</sup> which were created in public spaces of Tbilisi during the '70s and the '80s of the Soviet period. While one can often encounter them in various areas of the city, systematic studies about them have not been conducted so far. Many of them are facing the threat of destruction and obliteration. Hence, the purpose of this publication is to register/document them and to analyze their artistic value for saving them. This publication mainly displays monumental panels, as well as fountains, pools and decorative elements such as flower pots, all created with smalti, ceramic tiles or with chamotte.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, this direction of art was completely neglected, mainly due to the economic condition of the country that followed it. Prolonged recession caused the gradual damage of the existing mosaics. Unfortunately, even today there is still neither political will, nor any deliberation from the professional community or public interest in conserving them.

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1 -- "A piece of monumental art where the image, an ornament is made of natural stone, glass, ceramic, wood or other colorful materials," [translated] Encyclopedic Dictionary of Art, <http://www.nplg.gov.ge/gwdict/index.php?a=term&d=7&t=377> [Accessed on: 18.10.2014].

The intensive changes within public space, that have been taking place during the past 20 years, gave rise to our interest in the monumental-decorative mosaics. On the one hand, it is connected to the attempt of completely erasing the legacy of the Soviet past from cultural or visual memory. On the other hand, it also concerns the current global neo-liberal policies (in this case, mainly the privatization of abolished or partially functioning enterprises following the collapse of the Soviet Union), changing public spaces as such where public participation is disappearing. In general, unsystematic transformation of our urban environment, amateur interventions in forming the image of the city and façade “beautifications” have led to the destruction of mosaics in the public spaces of Tbilisi.

The problem, however, does not apply solely to Tbilisi. The trends described in this publication are symptomatic for the entire country. Though, due to financial and time constraints, the visual material presented in this publication concerns only the description and documentation of mosaics in Tbilisi.

The format of this travel guide was also conditioned by our goal. We would like to introduce the mosaics to the general public, remind locals about them and show the legacy of our recent past to tourists interested in Georgia. We hope that by emphasizing their value, we will be able to increase general public’s interest in preserving the mosaics. It is rather important to document them, put together and analyze the material, as understanding the history is the only way of its objective perception and assessment. The destruction of related images will lead to its improper interpretation. Besides, we believe that no matter how “bad” the Soviet system was, it is part of our history and demolition of associated forms and images cannot erase it. Its proper comprehension would be more effective and appropriate, rather than ignoring it. It should also be mentioned that by preserving architecture, forms and artworks associated with the Soviet period, we are not aiming for the propaganda of Soviet ideology, but rather to comprehend, understand and appreciate their artistic value.

The art of mosaic is about 4000 years old; it started by using the kiln-dried clay pieces on surface decorations. The roadways, ceilings and floor coverings paved with coloured stones existed already in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC, however no specific patterns were followed. The exact geometric ornaments and mosaic images of people, plants and animals appeared later, in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, in Greece, where mosaic transformed into the field of art. In Rome the mosaic technique was mainly used for paving floors, while in the Byzantine Empire it decorated buildings, mostly temple ceilings and walls. The mosaic works are classified into two types: 1) works assembled from little cubes of glass or stone (the so-called Roman mosaic technique, originated in classical antiquity), and 2) works which are constructed with thin plates of colorful marble and jasper (a mineral), that are cut out and according to specific patterns create the image (the so-called Florentine mosaic).<sup>2</sup>

The art of mosaic also existed in Georgia. In 1971-1977 archaeological excavations in the vicinity of the village Dzalisi revealed mosaic flooring from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD at the temple of Dionysus. In 1952-1954, the archaeological expedition of the Ivane Javakhishvili Institute of History, Archaeology and Ethnography discovered the three-nave basilica in Bichvinta from the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD. Its floor was covered with mosaic patterns from the 5<sup>th</sup> century. The mosaics on the apses of the altar and on the stoa/gate, also some fragments in different locations of the building were relatively well preserved (currently kept in the Museum of Fine Arts of Georgia). The samples of mosaic art pattern were also preserved in the altar apses of the Mtsire Jvari church in Mtskheta. The mosaic of Tsromi church dates back to the first half of the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Most of the mosaics have disappeared, however 3 relatively larger pieces are preserved in the Museum of Fine Arts of Georgia. The background of the mosaic consists of golden pebbles of different size and shape, limestone in black and various shades and local light blue and green stones. Mosaics of Gelati, masterpiece of Georgian monumental

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2 -- Ibid.

art, date back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup>

Starting from the 12<sup>th</sup> and the 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, the art of mosaic was largely overlooked not only in Georgia, but also in Europe, the Middle East and the Arab countries. It was revived only in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Westminster Cathedral, London, 1895-1903; Sacre-Coeur, Paris, 1884-1914; and in Art Nouveau, especially in the art of Antoni Gaudí). This field became very popular in the socialist states, including Poland, Germany, and especially Soviet Union countries. During the Soviet era, mosaic art has undergone its “renaissance.” Along with monumental paintings and bas-reliefs, often it is used in adornment of façades and interiors. However, rather than being solely artistic, they were usually created for conveying the Soviet ideology and political will. Though, the forms were changed and bas-relief mosaic compositions became more frequent.

In general, there are different techniques of making mosaic. In Soviet times, the smalti mosaics were considered the most valuable and of highest quality. Smalti is an alloy of opaque, tinted glass that is fragmented into small pieces and thus used for creating a mosaic. The fragments are adjusted on a tablet according to the pre-defined design. During the Soviet period, smalti was imported to Georgia from the Ukraine and the Baltic countries and then processed locally. The artwork was initially assembled in the workshop and mounted to the display destination afterwards. The full-size coloured sketch of the artwork was subsequently divided into square sections. These squares were fit on a dry, transparent paper upside down, afterwards glued and transferred to the wall.

Apart from smalti, mosaics are made from pieces of ceramic or pebbles with the method identical to the former one. Chamotte, which is very similar to clay, was also quite

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3 -- I. Abashidze (Ed.), *სელაგენების ენციკლოპედური ლექსიკონი*, [Georgian Soviet Encyclopedia], Vol. VII, Main Scientific Editorial Staff of Georgian Soviet Encyclopedia, Tbilisi 1984, p. 65.

spread; it uses kilned and tinted tiles that are taken for making compositions. Some rare techniques utilise different sized pieces of wood that are covered with plaster and coloured with tempera paint.

Currently the Soviet era mosaics constitute an integral part of urban public spaces. The monumental-decorative art of the Soviet period, and especially through the '60s to the '80s, is mostly linked to the ideology propaganda, expansion of industrial society and urbanization. These are often reflected in public buildings and are indivisible parts of architecture. The '70s and the '80s in the Soviet Union are marked with extensive use of mosaics. Development of this direction in Georgia is strongly linked to Zurab Tsereteli who laid the foundation for the re-use of monumental-decorative mosaic in Georgia, mainly through his works in the resort Bichvinta (1959-1967). If mural paintings are more used for decorating the interiors, mosaics were best fit for the façades due to their resilience. Mosaic panels were placed not only in the central areas of the cities, but also in the regions, small villages and settlements. For the most part, they were used on the façades of public buildings and/or industrial enterprises, though, were quite frequent in the interiors of canteens and conference or concert halls. In urban environments they often stand as independent decorative fountain pools and wall structures; the small towns often have mosaic-decorated bus stops, while resort areas present complex, three-dimensional compositions (Bichvinta, Kobuleti). The octopus-shaped architectural structure preserved in Batumi Boulevard, which at the time functioned as a café, is a unique example of the mosaic-decoration. The authors of these works often were the best artists of the time, which largely conditioned mosaics' high artistic value.

Shortly after we started our project, we discovered that this area, unlike the other fields of Soviet art, is not researched, artworks are not collected, classified and archived; hence, often the data on their authors and the dates of creation do not exist. Supposedly, this field of art was not appropriately acclaimed. Collection of the relevant data became extremely difficult. Neither the Union of Artists, nor archives and libraries

contained necessary information that we were looking for. Identification of some authors and obtaining general information about the mosaics in Georgia was possible only through other still living artists, in most cases we had to trust the memory of these people. These meetings helped us to create a general picture as to how and in what ways the system worked back then – what was precisely done from ordering mosaics to their completion.

All projects were commissioned by the State and were done through the Union of Artists and its Art Fund; though, some people, presently perceived as managers, mediated between the enterprises and the Union of Artists, and attracted projects from all over the Soviet Union. The assignment was subsequently implemented by the art manufacturing entity under the Union of Artists and the Fund. A special committee was announcing a competition for the outline; thus regulating the quality of the work or ordering the accomplishment to a specific artist based on the quality and the level of sophistication of the work.

This seemingly fair structure was rather hard to get through. The artists had to line up to get the desired assignment since mosaic was considered the easiest way to “get money.” The value of the work was determined according to its compositional and artistic complexity, as well as with its colourfulness. The remuneration was quite high, however quite a large sum had to be returned to the owner of the project. Our research has also revealed that there was no plan or system of placing the mosaics in public areas. Moscow was eager to spend on propaganda and lavishly supplied resources on the creation of mosaics irrespective where the initiative came from – the mediator, the enterprise or the artist himself/herself. Such a system conditioned making mosaics in a “production line” principle thus undermining artistic value and implementation quality of some. An easier and less costly way, though, was a direct order from the enterprise to the artist. Thus they were spared of the bureaucratic process prevailing in the Union of Artists. In such cases, the design was accomplished using the ceramic tiles produced in Navtlughi Ceramics Factory in Tbilisi. Then, it was

impossible to control the quality, which led to a lot of low-quality works. Surprisingly enough, majority of the artists and authors often did not regard their mosaic designs as serious works, neglecting their artistic value and historical significance. Such an attitude towards their own creations, confirms the existence of the “production line” system.

However, this criticism may not apply to all existing mosaics in Georgia. Many of them are still overwhelming the spectators with their artistic and technical accomplishments. Among them we can mention the mosaic panel, though unfortunately quite damaged, at the resort Abastumani (Author: Saurmag Ghambashidze), the Diorama on the way to Kazbegi (authors: George Chakhava, Zurab Kapanadze, Zurab Lezhava, Nodar Malazonia), as well as the mosaics on the territory of Expo Georgia (authors: Guram Kalandadze, Leonardo Shengelia), decorative frieze on the swimming pool complex Laguna Vere (author: Koka Ignatov).

Specific theme of the mosaic was determined by the function of the building it was attached to; mosaics on enterprises were elaborated in praise of technological and scientific progress and labour, iconography of independent structures is saturated with national symbolism or depicts heroes and fables from national literature. Some of them are purely decorative and, even though Abstractionism was not recognized by the Soviet art until its end, such images facilitated conveying abstract thinking through art.

The survived artworks have become parts of the public space and works still attract spectators' attention. During our research we even encountered the objects that were restored by their new “owners.” Among them are the abovementioned mosaics at Expo Georgia; interior mosaics in the swimming pool Neptune; interior mosaics in the grocery store at #7 Tsintsadze (former Saburtalo) Str.; mosaics on Rescue Service 112 Saburtalo branch façade and in Tbilisi Fire Service Museum interior, protection of which in the '90s required a lot of energy and risk-taking from the head of the service; Zurab Tsereteli's mosaic located on the building of the Trade Union, which, according to the staff, could not be dismantled due to being a private property. Though, the condition



of most of them is still uncertain and remains alarming. Currently, the fate of one of the best examples of mosaics at the swimming pool complex Laguna Vere, created by Koka Ignatov is unclear. This privatised building has been closed for the public for over a year under the pretext of renovation; however, the rumours about its demolition are still in the air. Unfortunately, time, private interests and nihilism wasted such important artworks as those that were at the restaurant Aragvi, Lagidze Waters shop, Hydro-Meteorological Institute, Rustaveli subway entrance. We still decided to include them in our publication and thus secure their place in the history.

We hope that our publication will receive due appraisal and increase public apprehension that will facilitate expansion of our research and thus contribute to the documentation of threatened mosaics and monumental-decorative artworks. Perhaps, the little we do might become pivotal for their further protection.

We would like to express our gratitude to everybody who enthusiastically helped us in collecting the material, discovering the mosaic artworks, identifying the authors. Special thanks to Nino Siradze and Alex Kedelashvili, who are enthusiastically collecting information on Soviet mosaics and supported our research, also to Nika Tsiklauri and Zura Dumbadze for documenting mosaics throughout Georgia and sharing them with us.

And finally, we would like to express our gratitude to those artists who employed mosaic in their artistic career and for the pleasure we enjoy through their works.