



**Armenian self-taught painters from Tbilisi and an unknown canvas by
K. Grigoryants¹³⁵**

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Abstract

Armenian painting in Georgia has a long history. Already from the 17th century, there were Armenian artists' families in Tbilisi. The oldest famous family of Hovnathanians lived in Tbilisi from the 17th century. At the beginning of the 20-th century, a group of Armenian women artists was already active in Tbilisi. Professionals who received education in Russia and Europe, as well as self-taught great masters V. Khojabekov, K. Grigoryants, and V. Elibekyan, who brought the life of old Tbilisi to the canvas with exceptional clarity, made an immeasurable contribution to the formation of the Tbilisi Armenian Art School.

K. Grigoryants's work depicting the life of old Tbilisi can be found in artistic, theatrical and literary circles. He was a primitivist

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self-taught artist, a contemporary of Firosmeni and similar to Firosmeni, he created portraits and still lifes with characteristic Georgian painting and made signs. According to S. Kldiashvili, K. Grigoryants was the author of 12 books. The texts are almost completely lost. In 2011, K. Grigoryants's „Rare Stories of Old Tbilisi“ was published. The book is decorated with the author's drawings and includes all 40 drawings known at the time. K. Grigoryants's previously unknown „Queen Tamar and Shota Rustaveli“ was not among them. The National Parliament Library of Georgia purchased the painting from a private person in 2022. V. Khojabegov's painting is as original as the existence of old Tbilisi. He mainly painted genre scenes. The forgotten tradition preserved in Khojabegov's painting „Groom's dance on the grave of his parents" is very interesting. The everyday life of the townspeople is depicted in a theatrical environment. The old Tbilisi captured in the pictures of Grigoryants, Khojabegov, and Elibekyan revives the self-contained face of Tbilisi of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, urban traditions, clothes of Tbilisi residents, and urban entertainments. The naive works of self-taught Armenian artists from Tbilisi are considered to be prominent records of Tbilisi's life.

Keywords: K. Grigoryants; „Queen Tamar and Shota Rustaveli“; „Rare Stories of Old Tbilisi“; V. Elibekyan; V. Khojabegov.

Introduction

The geographical location of Georgia at the crossroads of Asia and Europe, centuries-long forced or conscious relations with Christian Byzantium and Muslim countries, and the accompanying historical processes of these relations led to the multi-ethnicity of the population of Georgia. Tbilisi has always been distinguished by a high culture of inter-ethnic relations; this is evidenced by both Georgian and foreign written sources, existing culture, and other historical-ethnological documents. The long-term coexistence of different ethnic groups has

created a kind of mosaic of traditions and cultures, Tbilisian multiculturalism - an unique phenomenon of conflict-free coexistence, mixed and at the same time, autonomous development of different cultures.

The XIX century in Georgia began with transformative events. In 1801 The failure of Georgian statehood was immediately reflected in the fate of the capital city - Tbilisi became a governorate, the residence of the ruler and viceroy of the Caucasus was located here, Armenians living in Ottoman or Iran aspired here, not to Yerevan, a theological school, Armenian newspapers, Armenian theater were founded here... If the language of Tbilisi Armenians was Georgian in the XVIII and early XIX centuries, they spoke Georgian in their families, drew up documents in Georgian, and signed in Georgian, and by the end of the XIX century, they had mastered Russian and Armenian languages.

Russian Empire, based on its political strategy, deliberately changed the ethnic image of the already historically ethnically diverse Georgia - it encouraged the settlement of different peoples here. The streets of Tbilisi were always crowded. The people of Tbilisi worked in the streets, they traded, rested, strolled, socialized... The ethnic composition of Tbilisi is well characterized by I. Evlakhov: "People move, make noise, whisper. Costumes, faces and decorations are intermingled. Georgians, Persians, Ossetians, Laks; Chokhas, Circassians, turbans, burkas gleam quickly in front of you, and you can't even catch a glimpse of the passers-by. Here are the women from the outskirts of the city with butter, ghee, ham and milk. Here are the Georgian Jews, the wearers of garments, women's needlework, small things." (Евлახовъ, 1846: 2-3).

Such „multicolorism“ of the population of Tbilisi was in the interests of Tsarism. Russia created an acceptable balance for the empire between the ethnic groups of Tbilisi. The aggressive character of the demographic policy of Tsarism was also manifested in the fact that, if before ethnic groups formed a harmless cultural-linguistic group, Tsarist Russia tried to turn the linguistic-cultural phenomenon into a

political actor through ethnic stratification and politicization of ethnicity. However, Tbilisi was able to change the direction of the nationalism stirred up by Tsarist Russia and organized it vertically – against the central government. Avant-garde writers and artists fleeing the Bolshevik terror from Russia took refuge in Tbilisi; Giotto¹³⁶ and D. Kakabadze's biographies similarly reflected the consequences of Soviet terror.

The members¹³⁷ of the board of the "Union of Armenian Artists" established in 1916 in Tbilisi, as well as the members¹³⁸ of the board of the "Hayartun" established in 1921, were representatives of the progressive-minded creative intelligentsia who did not obey the nationalist propaganda of the empire. However, since the beginning of the XIX century, when it was recognized as the administrative center of Transcaucasia, Tbilisi became a creative hub. The Armenian intelligentsia gathered here aimed to use every opportunity to advance the national idea.

Methodology

The research process used the method of data collation and comparative analysis.

Outcome

The research identified self-taught Armenian artists. A previously unknown painting by K. Grigoryants was also identified, which was not included in the list of his works.

Discussion

Before the entry of the empire, Armenian painting in Georgia had a long history. Already from the 17th century, there were Armenian artists' families in Tbilisi. The oldest famous family of Hov-

¹³⁶ Giotto - G. Grigoryan (1897, Tb.-1976, Yerevan). Fearing repressions, Giotto burned 300-400 canvases in one night. The artist often refers to his childhood memories, depicts the hustle and bustle of Old Tbilisi: "Still life "Old Tbilisi", "Mom and Me", "Kinto from my street".

¹³⁷ G. Sherbabchyan, A. Akofyan, Vl. Surenyants, E. Tatevosyan, V. Khojabegov and Al. Shirvanzade.

¹³⁸ H. Tumanyan, R. Melikyan, L. Kalantari and G. Sherbabchyan.

natanians lived in Tbilisi since the XVII century¹³⁹. 7 artists from the Hovnatanian family are known: Nagash, Akof, Arutiun, Hovnatan, Mikirtum, Akof and Agafon (Дзуцова, 2014: 110-144). The elder of the family - Hovnatan Nagashi was the painter of the palace court of Vakhtang VI, the king of Georgia, and the most famous - one of the prominent representatives of the Tbilisi portrait school, painter Hakob Hovnatanian¹⁴⁰. Later, the families of Bazhbeuk-Melikyans, Bayakhchevs, Dilbaryans, Manoyans, Elibekyans, Mirzoyans and others joined to the families of Armenian artists...

The love of Tbilisi runs through the creativity of Armenian artists settled in Tbilisi. The emotional background of their creativity was created by Tbilisi's landscape, architecture, and the somewhat theatrical presence of prominent citizens. And the activity of the patriotic intelligentsia gave its own direction to the creativity of Armenian artists.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Armenian artists considered themselves as an integral part of Tbilisi culture and as an organic part of Georgian Culture, participated in the exhibitions of the „Caucasian Fine Art Promotion Society“ established in 1887.

In 1922, right after the establishment of the Tbilisi Art Academy, famous Armenian artists were teaching and studied there: H. Shamshinyan, H. Hakobyan, V. Surenyants, V. Gaifejian, I. Karalyan; E. Isabekyan, D. Nalbadyan, R. Loris-Melikov, R. Israelyan, R. Simonyan, R. Safarov, H. Gharibjanyan, S. Kirakozov, T. Nalbandyan, Gr. Mirzoev, A. Kojoyan, S. Kashkhyan and others. Together with Georgian artists, they represented a unified school of Tbilisi painting.

During the independence of Georgia, special attention was paid to Armenian artists. Ervand Kochar's first exhibition was held in 1919; In 1919 a joint exposition of Al. Bajbeuk-Melikov and Lado Gudiyash-

¹³⁹ Nagashi's children and disciples mainly worked on the illustration of the book.

¹⁴⁰ H. Hovnatanyan (1806, Tb. - 1886, Iran) Works: N. Tumanyan, E. Gurgenbekyan (Picture Gallery of Armenia, Yerevan), Portraits of G. Karajiani (Museum of Art of the Peoples of Azerbaijan, Moscow), Melikishvili, Mizandari (Museum of Art of the Peoples, Tbilisi).

vili was held in the editorial office of "Arsi" magazine. (Zaalishvili, 2011: 6-11)

At the beginning of the 20-th century, a group of Armenian female artists - Anastasya Dandurov, Nina Tamamsheva, El. Digurova-Kikodze, Hermine Khachoyan, Madeleine Amirkhanova, Nadezhda Aleksanyan-Shakhazizi and an avant-garde artist - the talented graphic artist Ema Lalaeva-Ediberidze (Lali) - was already active in Tbilisi¹⁴¹.

The picture of the Armenian art of Tbilisi would not be complete without mentioning famous photo artists – Al. Saakov (author of photo series depicting Tbilisi and its citizens), Yuri Mechitov (creator of photo compositions dedicated to Tbilisi and S. Farajanov), Al. Arutunov, S. Darchinyan ("Tbilisi, Armenian Etudes"), and I. Terterov.

The works of Georgian Armenian artists are so diverse that they have almost nothing in common except their origin and field of activity. They are united by one topic and one great passion - huge love for Tbilisi. Professionals who received education in Russia and Europe G. Bashinjalyan, G. Sharbabchyan, E. Tadevosyan, A. Shams-hiyan, H. Hakobyan, V. Surenyants, V. Gayfechyan, I. Karalyan and recognized masters of the 20-th century - Martiros Saryan, Ervand Kochar, Giorgi Akulov, Arshil Gork..., as well as self-taught great masters V. Khojabekov, K. Grigoryants, V. Elibekyan, As the "creative historians" of Tbilisi, they brought the life of old Tbilisi to the canvas with exceptional clarity, made an immeasurable contribution to the formation of the Tbilisi Armenian Art School.

It will be fair if we start our conversation about them with Karapet Grigoryants, because, in his case, his creations depicting the life of old Tbilisi can be found in artistic, theatrical, and literary circles. He was a primitivist self-taught painter contemporary of Pirosmeni, although he received more commissions than Pirosmeni in his

¹⁴¹ Emma Lalayants-Ediberidze (1904, Tb.-1991, Tb.) in 1924-1928 she studied at the Faculty of Graphics of the Tbilisi Academy of Arts, in Professor I. Charlemagne's class. In 1938, her husband, Giorgi Ediberidze, was shot, so Emma was expelled from the Union of Artists, and despite the efforts of such famous artists as T. Abakelia, S. Kobuladze, M. Gotsiridze, A. Kutateladze, U. Japaridze... she never had an exhibition.

time. Like Pirosmeni, he painted portraits of historical figures. Like Pirosmeni, he created portraits and still lifes with characteristic Georgian painting, made signs, painted dukhans and taverns. He had painted the meeting place of The Blue Horns members on Pushkini Street, the famous tavern "Simpatia", Mirianashvili's wine cellar, brothers' Matiashvili restaurant on Rike, Mikhaka Warsimashvili's wine cellar. His life and work were part of Tbilisi's artistic and theatrical life.

In the 1899 edition of the "Caucasian Calendar" the name and address of the artist are indicated: Tbilisi, Abbas-Abad Square, the house of Prince Arghutinsky-Dolgorukov. In 1890, he opened his own workshop on Jvaris Mama Street, where he attracted a lot of people. He worked mainly with oil on plywood. Autograph "Karapet Grigoriants. Old Tbilisi" can be found in almost all of the artist's paintings. In the paintings, there are typical types for Tbilisi of that time: kintos, tradesmen... The largest number of paintings by K. Grigoriants are kept in the National Museum of Georgia: A total of 40 works of Karapet Grigoriants have survived: only one of them is kept in Yerevan, six - in the State Museum of Folk and Applied Arts of Georgia, and thirty-three - in the National Museum of Georgia, which, according to the inventory book, were brought by the artist himself in 1935.

I. Grishashvili mentions Karapet Grigoriants in "The Literary Bohemia of Old Tbilisi" (Grishashvili, 1927: 144) not as an artist, but as a writer - the author of a collection of poems published in 1910 (Grigoriants, 1910) and the translator¹⁴² of "Vepkhistaosani" in Armenian.

It should be noted that K. Grigoriants considered Georgian to be his native language and considered it inappropriate to teach in Russian, he is worried about the corruption and impoverishment of the Georgian language: "Such persecution by the Russians caused the Georgian language to such a point that the old Georgian was completely lost and a corrupt language was introduced. Today's Georgian language is

¹⁴² K. Grigoriants wanted to put "Vepkhistaosani" on the stage of the Armenian theater, so he completely translated it into a play, but the theater management, due to the difficulty, postponed its production for the future.

borrowed from Arabic, Persian, Armenian and European languages... Georgians also once had their own pure language. In ancient times, there were also Armenian poets in Georgia, who talked in pure unmixed Georgian language (Grigoryants,2011: 83).

According to Sergo Kldiashvili, K. Grigoryants was the author of 12 books. The texts are almost completely lost. „Rare Stories of Old Tbilisi“, which was submitted to the Museum of Literature by the writer Sergo Kldiashvili in 1944 as a manuscript, has survived. The main merit of the book is that the author has not obtained the ethnographic material from someone else, but he grew up in Tbilisi, is an eyewitness and participant of Tbilisi's existence. Georgian readers are not largely pampered by such books. He describes in detail how houses were arranged, how oil lamps and electronics came into use, how the people of Tbilisi wore clothes, what was the situation in the factories, how much was the salary, where and how they got together, how criminals were punished, what was sold in the markets, he tells us about the introduction of the railway, corruption, "about the riot due to the taxes during Bazhbeuk-Melikyan's stay as the head of the city", about the lightning strike, about the visit of the Emir of Bukhari to Tbilisi, the impressive burial of Grigor Artsrun, the deeds and execution of the thug Tato Tsulukidze, on flooding of the river Mtkvari, on the poisoning wine with snake venom, and what we rarely see - he describes the activities of people of various professions, including prostitutes, in Tbilisi. It should be said that the description is not limited and general, but every topic has a separate chapter.

In 2011, Giorgi Leonidze Museum of Georgian Literature published K. Grigoryants' "Rare Stories of Old Tbilisi", accompanied by the author's biography. It should be noted that the handwriting of the text of the work and the biography are the same, but the handwriting does not belong to the author. The basis for saying this is given by the biography written in the third person's point of view. There is an assumption that it was written or copied by Sergo Kldiashvili. The book is decorated with the author's drawings and includes all the

drawings known at the time. The previously unknown "Queen Tamar and Shota Rustaveli" by K. Grigoryants was not among them, which was purchased by the National Library of the Parliament of Georgia in 2022 from a private person. I will attach this painting to the article and, I think, I will make a small contribution to the artist's biography. Since he painted so much, one can still find his paintings scattered around the city. His literary heritage may also be preserved somewhere. Like most of his paintings and texts, the tomb of Karapet Grigoryants is also considered lost. Lado Gudiashvili complained that, Like Pirosmiani, they lost the tomb of another independent artist of Old Tbilisi (Zurabyan, Waves of happiness, 1981). He died in 1943, in extreme poverty.

I. Grishashvili added to the „Literary Bohemia of Old Tbilisi" published in 1927, illustrations depicting the exotic existence of Tbilisi made by another chronicler artist of Old Tbilisi, Vano Khojabekov. Historian and ethnographer T. Beridze writes (ბერძენი, 1969:5-6). that Vano, born in 1875, started painting since childhood. Vano Khojabekov was born on January 14, 1875 in Tbilisi, in Tskarosubani. Mother – Melania was a housewife. Father Giorgi was a shoemaker. Vano could not receive an education due to lack of money. He spent his childhood in the fruit and vegetable shop of his elder brother living in Tbilisi. Then he opened a small shop on Fedoseev Street, and „when he was free, he painted his clients, citizens of Tbilisi. “Khojabekov's painting is as original as the existence of old Tbilisi. Mostly, he painted genre scenes: „Keenoba, „Bayramy, “and „Shahsei-Vahsei“... Vano's „Groom's Dance on the Grave of his Parents “ is a very interesting work... There was such a tradition, „Karachokheli“ Groom went to his father's grave and asked for blessings by dancing accompanied by „zurna“. This tradition is preserved only in Vano Khojabekov's painting.

Vano attracted the attention of the artist Fogel, who in 1910 took him to Sklifasovsky's private art school. As the artist Joto Grigorian recalls, "While at school, Vano found it very difficult to draw

from subjects, but if he was asked to draw something orally, he did it with great enthusiasm and quickly, with a few words, he used to draw some scene from the old Tbilisi. Vano could not stand the academic regime in the school and after two months he gave up his studies" (Beridze, 1969:7-8). However, this did not detract him from his work, Vano was already an established artist of his own style and form at that time.

Another self-taught artist, Vagharshak Elibekyan, put all the charm and color of old Tbilisi into his canvases. V. Elibekyan was born in 1924, in Tbilisi, in the family of the locksmith H. Elibekyants. As a child, he graduated from the art circle of „Hayartun“, where his first teacher was Gigo Sharbabchian, a painter educated in Paris. Because Elibekyan continued his work in the theater¹⁴³, his canvases seemed to be a stage, the life of Tbilisi seemed to be staged. The atmosphere of the old city is conveyed in movements, poses, facial expressions. The everyday life of the townspeople is depicted in a theatrical environment, with the participation of Kintos, dukhan workers, zurna players and wedding people. As an art critic H. Igityan writes, "We have before us a grandiose colorful play with numerous characters, various situations, which invites the audience to become a participant in an exciting performance, the playwright, director and artist of which is Vagharshak Elibekian. Charming houses with balconies, cozy yards, shops with funny signs. They find new life and beauty, new meaning in Vagharshak Elibekyan's work" (Игитян, 1979:21). What Vagharshak Elibekian depicts, is more of a dream of Tbilisi, as it was in his childhood memories - when the streets were wider, the houses were taller, the colors were brighter. This is a city that has become an amazing legend. Elibekyan gives this legend a face of reality.

Elibekyan started painting at the age of 64 due to idleness, although he made a great contribution to the creation of the visual encyclopedia of Old Tbilisi. All his works are memories of his native Tbilisi. In his paintings, we can see „Mshak's“ editorial office and

¹⁴³ V. Elibekyan led the theater for years and decorated more than twenty plays.

Araksian Theater of Avlabari, the bird market and rows of artisans, street barbers and matson sellers, Harutyun Elibekyants's locksmith workshop...

Conclusion

The old Tbilisi captured in the pictures of Grigoryants, Khojabegov and Elibekyan revives the unique face of Tbilisi of the late 19-th and early 20-th century, urban traditions, clothes of Tbilisians and urban entertainment: Keenoba, Amkroba, Ashugoba, boxing, Arifana, Rigispuri, Kavakhana, street performances, Salkhino gardens... The naive works of self-taught Armenian artists from Tbilisi are inspired by the love of Tbilisi, its prominence, therefore they are a kind of chronicles of Tbilisian life.

For Armenian artists, the topic of Tbilisi is so multifaceted and extensive that it is impossible to fully discuss even one part of it in one article. The purpose of the article is to show that the work of Tbilisi Armenian artists of the 19th-20th century has not yet been fully explored, and the search and collection of works and references continues. I tried to make a small contribution to this search. I think "Queen Tamar and Shota Rustaveli" by K. Grigoryants will occupy a worthy place in the list of the artist's works.

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Vagharshak Elibekyan. Qeenoba (Carnival)



Vano Khojabekov. Groom's Dance on the Grave of his Parents



Karapet Grigoryants, Tamar and Shota