

Georgian Modernist and Avant-Garde Poster in 1910-1930

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(Presented by Academy Member Valeri Asatiani)

This paper discusses the development of Georgian modernist and avant-garde posters from the late 1910s to the mid-1930s. Political, social, and aesthetic preconditions that directly influenced the creation of Georgian posters with specific visual characteristics during this period are indicated. The rapid political, social, and cultural changes in Georgia during this period were reflected in the posters. The development of Georgian posters evolved significantly through shifting historical contexts: from Tsarist Russia to independent Georgia, followed by Soviet occupation and the repressions of the 1930s. These changes influenced their characteristics, including size, material, composition, font, and color scheme. Due to the specific visual forms created through the certain oppositions located on the plane of the poster and various means of perceiving space, diachronic and structuralist methods of analysis were used when studying the iconography of posters. It should be noted that the social context of the development of Georgian modernist and avant-garde posters was largely dictated by the demand for solid, strictly defined concepts. © 2025 Bull. Georg. Natl. Acad. Sci.

poster, modernism, avant-garde

The history, genesis, and development of the Georgian poster remain underexplored in scholarly literature. In the Georgian reality, as well as other geographical areas, the terms “modernism”, “modern” and “modernist”, have multiple meanings and can denote both a change of the cultural paradigm in society and a specific art trend [1]. However, in the case of the latter, it should be considered that the Georgian context was different from that of Western European context. Therefore, in many cases, modernism, during its contemporary period, was used both for purely modernist and avant-garde works of art.

The early 20th century played a crucial role in shaping Georgian public and national identity. Until 1918, Georgia was part of Tsarist Russia. In 1918, as a result of the February and October revolutions, the First World War and the weakened Russian Empire gave Georgia the opportunity to declare its independence and create the first democratic republic. However, Georgia’s independence was short-lived. In 1921, the Russian Bolshevik Red Army occupied Georgia, leading to de facto loss of its autonomy that year and its formal incorporation into the Soviet Union in 1922. Soon after

this, it became a part of the Soviet Union (along with Armenia and Azerbaijan, under the status of the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic [2].

The situation in Europe between 1916 and 1917 was difficult as the First World War was still in an active phase. Two revolutions took place in Russia at this time: the first in February 1917, and then, a more radical one, which largely determined the geopolitical situation of the following years – in October 1917. The challenging geopolitical circumstances made many modernist and avant-garde artists migrate to Georgia [3].

In Georgia, they encountered a generation of artists familiar with contemporary modern art, including Kirile and Ilia Zdanevich, Lado Gudiashvili, David Kakabadze, Elene Akhvlediani, Dimitri Shevardnadze, Shalva Kikodze, Valerian Sidamon-Eristavi, etc.

From the second half of the 1910s, there was created a rather eclectic cultural picture in Georgia, especially in its cultural centres Tbilisi and Kutaisi, considering the diversity of artistic directions and aesthetics, and the ethnic abundance of artists as well as the different political ideology of the general public, cultural or political figures.

Studies on the visual and thematic aspects of posters date back to the early 20th century [4]. Therefore, it is important to define the technical and content characteristics of posters. Among the technical characteristics, firstly, it should be mentioned the material on which the poster is printed, as well as the printing method. Herewith, it's essential to observe the types of the poster font in general or the specific examples based on these general types, as well as determine the colour of the poster and the characterization of the visual elements when studying posters. Another relatively complex technical feature is the composition of posters, which is essentially formed as a result of the arrangement of visual elements on a plane.

Analyzing the content of the posters provides insight into the type of event, its participants, and

their ethnic, gender, and social backgrounds. Most of the posters provide significant information about the social and material conditions of various cultural institutions. Appropriate ticket price is often a good indicator of it. However, until the end of the 1910s, some posters highlighted that “the hall will be heated” and “new decorations will be adopted” during the events. Actually, those mentioned above indicate the problems that arose during the performances and the requirements of the society event organizers had to satisfy.

Since the late 1910s, modernist and avant-garde paradigms have gradually integrated into Georgian society, particularly in the artistic sphere. However, this “invasion” occurred much more slowly in such mediums as theatre and music (the genres most often represented in posters), than in fine arts and literature.

The years 1918-1921, i.e. the period of existence of the first Democratic Republic of Georgia, despite its short duration, proved to be very important in many humanitarian, technical and social fields. The Georgian Social-Democratic Party won the elections and gained an absolute majority.

It was the period when the first Georgian feature film “Christine” was shot, and the first Georgian opera of the same name was created in 1918 [5]. The reforms were actively carried out in the education system, public lectures were held, the first state university was opened. In parallel with it, “public universities” more accessible to the population continued to exist [6].

The visual characterization of a typical Georgian poster of this period is quite difficult. Compared to earlier periods, the aesthetics of posters during Georgia's three-year independence was notably eclectic. While some adhered to classical horizontal layouts, others incorporated transitional and unconventional elements. Such eclecticism is not an inexplicable phenomenon for the society of a country that is completely young and has almost forgotten the experience of independence. Similar to the political

leadership, the cultural sphere sought to establish a direction for national development.

The Georgian poster also followed this evolutionary path. An example of this is the poster created for the staging of Schiller's "Don Carlos" at the city theater in 1920 [7]. This poster is notable for several features. Although, like the earlier posters, the typeface is almost entirely serif and the classic use of colour is evident here, there are several nuances to highlight in this sample. First, part of the text is placed diagonally creating a slight tension with the horizontal text and adding dynamism and expressiveness to the composition. Second, the size of the poster itself is relatively large, and the third, which is directly related to the second one, is that the information displayed on the poster does not cause a sharp overload of the plane.

In February 1921, the Russian Bolshevik Red Army invaded Georgia and soon managed to occupy the country. Despite *de facto* annexation in 1921, Georgia's *de jure* status was still sovereign, although, since 1922, it has been part of the Soviet Union as the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic (in addition to Georgia, this republic included Armenia, and Azerbaijan).

Such developments created special socio-political conditions. One part of the Georgian intellectuals and political elite chose the path of emigration and most of them went to France, while the other part decided to stay.

In the early 1920s, the first years of the existence of the Soviet Union, the government paid relatively little attention to the formal side of the arts. Although posters were used for propaganda, artists still had relative freedom in expressive forms. At the same time, it is important to note that many artists genuinely and sincerely embraced socialist ideals [8] viewing them as a replacement for the bourgeois cultural framework. In their perception, in many cases, social and cultural revolutions took place simultaneously, and classical art was replaced by both modernism and the avant-

garde, and the monarchist and bourgeois institutions were replaced by the Soviet Socialist Union.

Director Kote Mardzhanishvili became the main actor of the Georgian theater scene of the 1920s. Returning to Georgia, he first headed the Rustaveli theater, then formed his own troupe in Western Georgia, and later moved to Tbilisi once again. He gathered around himself a talented generation of artists, actors, and composers, who defined the aesthetics and form of the Georgian theater and cinema in the 1920s and 1930s.

Another notable example is a poster for 1928 Tbilisi Satire Theater tours to be held in the regions of Georgia. There are photos of theater directors, actors, artists and composers in its center, set diagonally. Petre Otskheli stands out among them (on the poster he is given the pseudonym "Carveli"). He was just 20 years old when making a poster. Soon he started working as a main artist in the theater founded by Kote Marjanishvili.

Each detail of the poster is carefully designed, considering its spatial arrangement. The tour repertoire is on the right side. The list of plays starts with the play with the longest name and ends with the one with the shortest name so that this visual-informational component does not cross diagonally.

The diagonal itself, through the red line on the sides and the layout of the photos, symbolizes the train tracks. This fact meaningfully indicates the way to go during the tour. At the same time, we should not forget that the train is a very important image for the modernist and avant-garde paradigm – as a symbol of mechanisms, human rationality, and speed.

Another notable example is a poster for the Workers' Theatre's 1932 season-opening play, „12th“. The critical reception of the performance is particularly relevant, as it aligns with the Soviet Union's increasing efforts to suppress 'formalist elements' in the arts during the 1930s. Theatre expert and critic Bessarion Zhgenti describes the shortcomings of the performance in the 250th issue of the "Komunisti" newspaper of 1931 [9]:

Zhgenti strongly criticizes the „noise and movement” characteristic of modernism and avant-garde, which was later classified as „formalist elements”. However, even a casual observation of the poster is enough to realize that the artist wants to create a dynamic rhythm of speed and movement.

As it was mentioned earlier, since the mid-1930s, the artistic situation in Georgia and in general, in the Soviet Union has been changing. By the mid-1930s, Stalin had consolidated power, leading to significant shifts in artistic policies. The 1934 assassination of Sergei Kirov, a key Communist Party figure, triggered a wave of repression and the systematic elimination of the left-wing opposition in the Soviet Union [10]. In 1932, common artistic associations were created and the existence of independent artistic organizations was prohibited, which led to the dominance of socialist realism in almost all fields [11]. In this way, the operational space of modernist avant-garde art was gradually limited, and artists, writers, composers, and directors either had to radically change their creativity or suffer repression (physically or creatively).

Examining Georgian modernist and avantgarde posters from the mid-1910s to the early 1930s pro-

vides valuable insights into the evolution of Georgian art, culture, and society. The poster's aesthetics, compositional solution, and variability of visual-informational elements are also evident – as modernism and avant-garde move from marginal positions to the dominant (from the mid-1910s to the mid-1920s) and then lose their acquired status again, as it is affected by political regimes, social issues and the relationship of power. The artistic eclecticism of Georgia's first democratic republic (1918-1921) was followed by a period of relative creative freedom in the Soviet Union during the 1920s. However, by the 1930s, artistic expression became fully subordinated to Soviet ideological objectives. During this period, Georgian poster artists first felt the need to strive for freedom, movement, and dynamism, although their aspiration is artificially changed by returning to staticity and immobility.

The paper is published as part of the project “History of the Georgian Poster (1854-2010)” (FR-21-15203) funded by Shota Rustaveli National Science Foundation of Georgia within the framework of 2021 basic research.

ხელოვნების ისტორია

ქართული მოდერნისტული და ავანგარდისტული აფიშა 1910-1930 წწ.

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(წარმოდგენილია აკადემიის წევრის ვ. ასათიანის მიერ)

წინამდებარე სტატიაში განხილულია ქართული მოდერნისტული და ავანგარდისტული აფიშის განვითარების გზა 1910-იანი წლების ბოლოდან 1930-იანი წლების შუამდე. ნაშრომში მითითებულია ის პოლიტიკური, სოციალური და ესთეტიკური წინაპირობები, რომლებიც უშუალოდ ზემოქმედებდნენ აფიშის ისეთი ვიზუალური ხატის შექმნაში, რომელიც სახეზე გვაქვს. საქართველოს პოლიტიკურ, სოციალურ და კულტურულ ისტორიაში ამ მოკლე პერიოდში სწრაფად ცვალებადი გარემოებების ასახვა მატერიალურად აფიშაზეც დაფიქსირდა. მეფის რუსეთიდან დამოუკიდებელ საქართველომდე, საბჭოთა რუსეთის ოკუპაციიდან 30-იანი წლების რეპრესიებამდე ქართული აფიშის განვითარების დინამიკა და მისი მახასიათებლები (ზომა, მასალა, კომპოზიცია, შრიფტი, ფერთა გამა და ა.შ.) სწორედ ამ გარემოებების კვალდაკვალ იცვლებოდა. აფიშების განხილვისას ვისარგებლეთ დიაქრონული მეთოდით. ასევე, უშუალოდ აფიშების იკონოგრაფიის შესწავლისას გამოვიყენეთ სტრუქტურალისტური მეთოდები, რადგან სწორედ აფიშის სიბრტყეზე განლაგებული გარკვეული ობიექტები და სივრცის აღქმის სხვადასხვა საშუალების შედეგად იქმნება კონკრეტული ვიზუალური სახეები. ასევე, ქართული მოდერნისტული და ავანგარდისტული აფიშა ვითარდებოდა პერიოდში, რომლის სოციალური კონტექსტი ნაკარნახევი იყო მეტწილად მყარი, მკაცრად განსაზღვრული, არაფლუიდური ცნებების არსებობის მოთხოვნით.

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Received July, 2024