

The Artistic Portrayal of Georgia in Gevorg Bashinjaghian's Oeuvre

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(Presented by Academy Member Zaza Skhirtladze)

Abstract. This study focuses on the Gevorg Bashinjaghian's paintings created over various years, depicting historically significant landmarks such as Mount Kazbek, the Dariali Gorge, the Kura (Mtkvari) River, and the Alazani Valley. These works have been subjected to detailed artistic analysis, highlighting the artistic techniques employed by Bashinjaghian, examining the evolution of his colour palette and conceptual thinking, and addressing critical compositional, chiaroscuro and iconographic aspects. Particular emphasis is placed on Bashinjaghian's engagement with episodes from Shota Rustaveli's poem *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*, which significantly influenced his artistic narrative. The works created by the artist in the 1890s reflect the influence of the renowned Russian painter A. Kuindzhi, particularly in their expressive use of chiaroscuro. Bashinjaghian's paintings, characterised by the affinity for academic colouring, underwent notable transformations of color palette. The striking tranquillity that permeates the artist's works is particularly evident in his nocturnal landscapes. Bashinjaghian is an unparalleled master in capturing the nuances of subtle and enigmatic darkness. © 2025 *Bull. Georg. Natl. Acad. Sci.*

Keywords: landscape, exhibition, painting, Kazbek, Dariali Gorge

Introduction

The founder of Armenian national landscape painting, Gevorg Bashinjaghian (1857–1925), made a significant contribution to the artistic life of his era through his prolific social and creative activities (Pilon 1900, Sargsyan, 1979, Gayfejyan, Sargsyan, 1957, Avèdissian, 1959, Sargsyan, 1957, Aghasyan, Asatryan, 2015, Drambyan, 2018). Born in the Georgian provincial town of Signaghi, he received his professional education at the Painting School of the Caucasian Society for the Promotion

of Fine Arts in Tiflis, followed by the Petersburg Academy of Fine Arts under the tutelage of the renowned landscape painter M. Clodt. Clodt's creative principles and pedagogical methods exerted a profound influence on Bashinjaghian's artistic development (Sargsyan, 1979).

In 1882, while still a student, Bashinjaghian spent his summer vacation in his native Signaghi, driven by an insatiable desire to create. During this time, he contemplated the life and history of the Armenian and Georgian peoples, producing works that depicted scenes from both contemporary and

historical Georgian life, such as *The State of the Modern Shepherd* and *From the Life of Arsen*. These works were exhibited for charitable purposes in the hall of a certain Safaryan's house in Signaghi (Minor News, 1882).

After graduating from the Petersburg Academy of Fine Arts, the artist returned to Signaghi. The sketches and completed works created during this period – including the landscapes *Alazani Valley* and *Night on the Kura River* – were displayed at Bashinjaghian's first solo exhibition, held on 1 October 1883 in the upper hall of Tsovyan's and Sarajishvili's (in Armenian source – Sarajev) flats on the former Dvortsovaya Street in Tbilisi: "For Tbilisi at that time, Bashinjaghian's personal exhibition represented a phenomenon of exceptional cultural significance" (Gayfejian, Sargsyan, 1957).

Bashinjaghian demonstrated remarkable consistency by participating in nearly all the exhibitions organised by the "Caucasian Society for the Encouragement of Fine Arts," established in Tbilisi in 1877. These exhibitions, held in 1888, 1890, 1892, 1899, 1902, and 1904, prominently featured the artist's works, including paintings inspired by Georgian themes.

On 21 January 1890, the "Exhibition of Caucasian Artists" opened at the "Temple of Glory" in Tbilisi. Among the participants was the highly gifted Georgian artist Gigo Gabashvili, an outstanding representative of Georgian realist painting, who also presented his works. Of the portraits exhibited, contemporary critics particularly highlighted Gabashvili's *Negro* (1889) and *The Paragon of an Armenian*. According to a columnist for the newspaper *Mshak*, the success of *Negro* lay in its creation not from memory but from model, portraying the servant of the Georgian publicist and poet Ilia Chavchavadze (Dudachava, 1958). Gabashvili's works *Bazaar in the Village* and *Girl Carrying a Jug* were also displayed at this exhibition, receiving widespread critical acclaim and numerous laudatory comments (G. A. Artsruni, 1890).

After a solo exhibition in Baku in 1885, Bashinjaghian returned to Georgia, visiting Tbilisi and Signaghi. The artist's creative exploration took him to the Chiauri Forest, situated between Kakheti and Dagestan. Although the painting *Chiauri Forest in Winter* has not survived, contemporary press accounts attest to its status as one of the artist's finest works.

Another notable work from this period is *Liakhvi River and Tskhinvali on a Moonlit Night*, which was sold after being exhibited at a solo exhibition held on 19 October 1886 near the *Caucasus* hotel in Tbilisi. In 1888, Bashinjaghian's second exhibition opened in Baku, showcasing several new works, including landscapes of Georgia such as *Winter in Georgia* and *Iori River on a Moonlit Night*.

In 1889, Bashinjaghian drew inspiration from Shota Rustaveli's epic poem *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*, creating large-scale canvases based on its episodes (Avèdissian, 1959). Subsequently, on 21 January 1890, at the *Exhibition of Caucasian Artists* held in the *Temple of Glory* in Tbilisi, Bashinjaghian presented several Georgian-themed works, including *The Alazani Valley*, *The Pine Forest in Manglisi*, *The Brick Factory in Tiflis*, and *Moonlit Night on the Kura*. Among these, the thematic canvas *Nestan-Darejan Brought to the Shore of an Unknown Lake*, inspired by *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*, stood out prominently.

Although the landscape, dominated by the depiction of the lake and the garden-enclosed castle, occupies most of the canvas, the viewer's attention is drawn to the historical event and the figures portrayed. Iosif Grishashvili, a full member of the Georgian Academy of Sciences, remarked: "The outstanding Armenian painter G. Bashinjaghian depicted an episode from Shota's *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*, when Fatma Khanum opens the window and gazes out to the sea... Bashinjaghian, an Armenian from Signaghi, possesses such profound knowledge of ancient Georgian literature

that many Georgians ought to emulate him” (Gayfejyan, Sargsyan, 1957).

In 1948, during a joint meeting of the Armenian and Georgian Academies of Sciences in Yerevan, Grishashvili once again praised Bashinjaghian’s art in his speech, underscoring the significance of his works inspired by Rustaveli’s poem. Interestingly, an article in the magazine *Mourch* describes Bashinjaghian’s painting based on Rustaveli’s poem in a manner that diverges thematically and iconographically from Grishashvili’s account. This suggests that the artist may have created multiple works inspired by Rustaveli’s timeless epic.

Bashinjaghian depicted the picturesque landscapes of Georgia with profound love and dedication, reflecting his deep respect and admiration for the Georgian people. The painter himself wrote: “The Georgian people have never had and do not have enmity with the Armenians. There are villages and cities where these two compatriots live in harmony, side by side, with houses often built next to each other without a dividing wall” (Gayfejyan, Sargsyan, 1957). These lines encapsulate the artist’s sentiments towards the Georgian people, sentiments that find artistic expression in his numerous paintings.

Upon returning to Tiflis from France in 1901, Bashinjaghian participated in the significant economic and industrial exhibition, where works by notable artists such as Zankovsky, Fetvachyan, Nshanyan, Surenyants, Gabashvili, Monpelidze, and Toidze were displayed in the artistic section (Sargsyan, 1957). For Bashinjaghian, the breathtaking nature of Georgia was an inexhaustible source of inspiration. Its soulful vistas are immortalised in the artist’s numerous paintings, which captivate with their harmonious colours and the precise, careful study of the observed scenes.

Materials and Method

The foundation of this study lies in Soviet Armenian art literature, with particular emphasis on the first monograph dedicated to G. Bashinjaghian

by M. Sargsyan (1957), the collaborative work of V. Gayfejyan and A. Sargsyan (1957), and the section on Bashinjaghian in the extensive French-language volume by Onnik Avetisyan (1959). In the post-Soviet period, the oeuvre of this eminent Armenian painter has been explored in the major research of A. Aghasyan (2009), the co-authored volume by A. Aghasyan and A. Asatryan (2015), the collected studies of R. Drambyan (2018), among other sources.

The examination of key factual material is complemented by an analytical approach. In line with established research principles, the study explores Bashinjaghian’s treatment of formal pictorial challenges, including colour and chiaroscuro modelling, as well as compositional structure. The methodology employed combines empirical-descriptive, comparative, and critical-analytical approaches.

Discussion

One of Bashinjaghian’s recurring and cherished motifs was Kazbek. In 1882, while still a student, he first embarked on depicting Kazbek, one of the highest peaks of the Caucasus Highlands. This early composition served as the foundation for the creation of more complete and perfected works in subsequent years. Notably, the depictions of Kazbek painted in 1892 and 1895 stand out, with the latter especially remarkable for its portrayal of the mountain’s monumental grandeur (“Kazbek,” 1895, oil on canvas, 65 × 83 cm / Inventory No. 157, Accession No. 10, Catalogue code “J”).

The epic impression of the landscape is heightened by the artist’s chosen viewpoint and the expansive panorama of the formidable mountains, immersed in ethereal spatiality (Martikyan, 1975). The precise arrangement of compositional planes harmoniously integrates the snow-capped peak of the mountain with the subdued, foggy masses below. The positioning of the mountain, combined with the nuanced pictorial rendering – featuring a light-filled atmosphere, subtle chiaroscuro, and

tranquil compositional elements – enables the artist to convey the majestic presence of Kazbek.

In 1896, a year after completing the 1895 depiction, Bashinjaghian returned to the subject of Kazbek, creating a work with a distinctly different artistic message and impression. The cold tonal palette of the earlier painting gave way to a composition imbued with warmer, more inviting hues. A grassy foreground rendered in greenish-yellow interacts harmoniously with the delicately outlined sky and the softly merging forms of the mountain. In this piece, the expressionism of epic grandeur and monumental forms that dominated the earlier work are absent. While the 1895 canvas evokes the mountain's sublime majesty through hazy, ethereal forms, the 1896 version conveys a sense of serene calm, achieved through subtle perspective diminishment, accentuated by the depiction of a flock of birds.

In the artist's early works, the sharp emphasis on the outline of the depicted object or fragment of nature, the dryness of the drawing, and the colour palette harmonised with the "museum colour." During the 1890s, influenced by I. Ayvazovsky and his pupil A. Kuindzhi's art, Bashinjaghian enriched his palette. In a number of his works, the dynamic interplay of light and shadow and the creation of striking effects imbue these landscapes with a poetic quality and a sense of romantic mystery (Aghasyan, Asatryan, 2015).

When drawing comparisons between the works under discussion, it is noteworthy that, while in the landscape created in 1895 the mountain dominates as the primary compositional focus, in the 1903 example, the dominance of the foggy atmosphere and the choice of colour schemes diminish the mountain's significance. It no longer occupies a central role but rather complements the grandeur of the broader landscape.

The series of landscapes depicting Kazbek underscores the importance the artist placed on the study and portrayal of the Georgian landscape. Bashinjaghian's representations of this majestic

Georgian mountain vary in their pictorial approach and the impressions they evoke.

The works depicting the Alazani Valley hold a distinctive and significant place in the artist's Georgian period. It would not be an overstatement to assert that Bashinjaghian's landscape painting *Alazani Valley* ranks among his most frequently exhibited works. In 1911, at the 19th exhibition of the Petersburg Union of Artists, it was prominently displayed alongside other landscapes by the artist. His paintings received positive reviews and high praise from the Russian press of the time (Gayfejyan, Sargsyan, 1957).

The pieces created in 1902, including *Alazani Valley* and *Alazani Valley from the Sghnakh Fortress Wall*, exhibit a distinct tonal quality that differentiates them from the paintings depicting Kazbek. A captivating panorama of nature illuminated by sunlight unfolds before the viewer. The skillful rendering of the barely perceptible perspective reductions of the valley is harmoniously integrated with the iconographic and chromatic interplay of the sky and natural scenes, a characteristic already evident in the artist's earlier works. This painterly approach is a hallmark of many of Bashinjaghian's works.

In the foreground of the composition, a subtle application of chiaroscuro modelling can be observed. Among these works, *Alazani Valley from the Side of the Sghnakh Fortress Wall* is particularly noteworthy for its striking colour combinations ("The Alazani Valley from the Walls of Sighnaghi Fortress," 1902, oil on canvas, 32 × 40.5 cm / Inventory No. 1357, Accession No. 987, Catalogue code "J"). The planar sequence of the composition is defined by its chromatic articulation. The artist has successfully captured the beauty of the Alazani Valley and the landscapes of Sighnaghi as seen from an elevated viewpoint through the use of coloristic expression. The spatial impression is conveyed not through linear perspective but through purely pictorial techniques (Sargsyan, 1957).

Indeed, while in his early works the planes of the scene were constructed with graphic expressions, in this 1902 landscape, the artist adopts purely colour modelling, delicately rendering the horizon line as it appears in perspective. The colour combinations are subdued, presented with a calm and tranquil description, skillfully conveying the light-air environment, where the development of chiaroscuro is notably absent.

Throughout his creative life, Bashinjaghian frequently depicted the Kura River and the Dariali Gorge. Examining the landscapes of the Kura created across different periods of his career, it becomes evident that the artist was particularly drawn to the river's nocturnal scenes. In Bashinjaghian's nightscapes, the influence of A. Kuindzhi's art is especially discernible (Drambyan, 2018).

The earliest of these is the landscape painting *The River at Night* (1896), which, through its colour description, the landscape outlined in the darkness of the night, and the use of somber dark tones, is reminiscent of the work *Night in Ortachala* (1899). The painting *The River at Night* (1903) was also inspired by the same style, where the river is depicted more clearly and from a different perspective compared to the earlier work; here, the river itself seems to occupy the central focus of the composition. However, it is notable that the same artistic approach is employed in both the 1896 and 1903 examples. In both works, the image of the moon is absent from the sky, and despite the presence of a cloudy sky, the water's surface is rendered with reflections of light. This suggests an approach chosen by Bashinjaghian, where the dark, gloomy colour scheme of the works is counterbalanced by the "brightness" created through the emphasis on light.

The painting *The Kura at Night* (1916) ("The Kura at Night," 1916, oil on canvas, 134 × 226 cm/Inventory No. 1354, Accession No. 984, Catalogue code "J") presents different colour combinations and evokes a distinct impression. It features subtle tonal transitions of blue, fragmentary chiaroscuro

treatments, perspective reductions of the panorama, and a relatively active illumination of the water's surface, where a serene dialogue between the sky and the river seems to unfold. The striking emphasis on the light fragment within the canvas and the overall treatment of this element are reminiscent of A. Kuindzhi's landscape *Night on the Dnieper* (1880), particularly the overwhelming presence of the sparkling light emanating from Kuindzhi's work (Paranyuk, 2019).

The scene evokes more of an evening atmosphere than a night one. Bashinjaghian's depictions of the Kura are consistently peaceful, harmonious, and calm; the artist generally avoids portraying the turbulent, stormy aspects of the water element. This quality is precisely what gives Bashinjaghian's landscapes their appeal. The work *Moonlit Night on the Banks of the Kura* (1919), from the later period of the artist's career, stands out for its focus on the depiction of the moon, the clear forms of the landscape, and the harmony of the luminous scene. In the distance, images of houses, with light radiating from within, become visible. Though seemingly a minor detail, this subtle emphasis imbues the scene with a unique liveliness and warmth iconographically, while the central focus of the composition, the main "hero" of the work, remains the Kura itself.

The canvas captivates with the masterful light accentuation of the water surface and the harmonious transitions of tone, light, and shadow. The landscape painter possessed a keen observational ability, allowing him to retain and later reproduce the phenomena or scenes he encountered and studied. His landscapes were the result of a detailed exploration of the chosen scene, a creative approach that remained consistent throughout his career.

In the works depicting the Kura, the artist's love and affection for the Georgian landscape are evident. In the overall perceptions of the river scene, the soul of the artist – intimately familiar

with every fragment of Georgian nature – comes through powerfully.

If Bashinjaghian first ventured into depicting the Kura in 1896, the first work depicting the Darial Gorge dates back to 1899. Similar to his landscapes of the Kura, the majority of works featuring the Darial Gorge are night scenes. In terms of pictorial interpretation and colour usage, certain similarities can also be observed in the depiction of these two Georgian locations. The work *Darial Gorge on a Moonlit Night* (1899) is rendered with dark tones, where the artist successfully conveys the rocky mass of the gorge, subtly highlighting human figures walking along the winding path. The artist placed great emphasis on the selection of the scene; he was not drawn to random fragments of nature but consistently sought complete landscapes that could inspire striking imagery (Martikyan, 1975).

According to compositional solutions, a different viewpoint is presented in another example of the Darial Gorge created in 1904. In this work, the artist also seeks to enliven the image with a suggestion of human presence, employing a different colour scheme compared to the previous piece. A yellow veil of colour seems to spread across the entire canvas, harking back to the colour palette typical of the artist's early works, which was in line with the "museum colour" approach. The 1909 version follows the same compositional solution as the 1899 depiction of the canyon. With slight colour differences, warmer, yellowish tones appear in certain areas of the sky and the moon. The work leaves the same impression and appears nearly identical to the earlier version. In terms of presenting the overflowing course of the Terek River, with an abundance of light and subtle transitions of light and shade, the 1910 work *Darial Gorge* ("The Darial Gorge," 1910, oil on canvas, 123 × 89 cm / Inventory No. 4943, Accession No. 12580, Catalogue code "J") stands out with its mysterious impression. The enormous rock fragments and the turbulent, active course of the river, which is rarely depicted in Bashinjaghian's work,

complement each other and form the central focus of the composition. In terms of execution, compositional, and colour solutions, this depiction of the Darial Gorge can perhaps be considered one of Bashinjaghian's most successful works. It is also distinguished by its emphasis on the illuminated landscape, where the artist placed great importance on conveying a luminous, harmonious environment.

Conclusion

Bashinjaghian's art followed a path of broad generalisations, grounded in the meticulous study of reality, resulting in monumental representations of nature.

The artist's creative journey was deeply intertwined with Georgia, and it is perhaps no coincidence that his first exhibition took place in Tbilisi. Although the landscape painter travelled extensively in pursuit of mastering the fine arts, acquiring new knowledge, and gaining experience, these artistic explorations and his path toward perfection ultimately found their true expression in the Caucasus. Bashinjaghian's Georgian landscapes continually convey how deeply they resonate with the artist's soul. They are depicted through the eyes of one intimately familiar with the land, and in these brushstrokes, the painter, who knew every facet of Georgia's stunning nature, comes alive.

The magnificent nature of Georgia, with the monumental grandeur of Kazbek, the awe-inspiring Darial Gorge, and the Kura River, is portrayed in landscapes that captivate with the harmony of their palette, clear compositional structure, solid iconographic forms, and the competent rendering of the light-air environment. By examining these works, created over various periods of the artist's career, from 1895 to 1919, we can trace the evolution and development of Bashinjaghian's style. His palette, initially faithful to the academic colour scheme, undergoes notable changes, especially from the 1900s onwards. These changes are evident in the development of his colour

perceptions, as well as his use of solar, warm light and chiaroscuro transitions.

In addition to the soulful peace that permeates Bashinjaghian's works, his night landscapes – including those of the Kura and Darial gorges

discussed here – deserve particular praise. These pieces captivate with their velvety darkness and enchanting allure, showcasing the artist's ability to evoke a profound atmospheric presence.

ხელოვნების ისტორია

საქართველოს მხატვრულად გამოსახვა გეგორგ ბაშინჯაღიანის შემოქმედებაში

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გეგორგ ბაშინჯაღიანი გამოჩნდა სამხატვრო ასპარეზზე მე-19 საუკუნის ბოლოს, როგორც რეალისტური ლანდშაფტური ფერწერის ბრწყინვალე ოსტატი. თავისი შემოქმედებითი და საზოგადოებრივი საქმიანობით იგი განუწყვეტლივ უწყობდა ხელს როგორც სომხური, ასევე ქართული მხატვრული ცხოვრების განვითარებას და ამ ორ მეზობელ ერს შორის კულტურული კავშირების გაღრმავებას. საქართველოს პოეტური ბუნება ბაშინჯაღიანისთვის გამორჩეულად ღრმა შთაბეჭდილების წყარო იყო. ქართული ლანდშაფტები ცხადად იკვეთება მის მრავალ ტილოზე, რომლებიც დამთვალეობას იხიდავს ფერთა ჰარმონიის უნიკალური შეხამებით. კვლევა ფოკუსირებულია მხატვრის სხვადასხვა წელს შექმნილ ნამუშევრებზე, რომლებიც ასახავს ისტორიულად მნიშვნელოვან ადგილებს, როგორცაა მცინვარწვერი, დარიალის ხეობა, მტკვარი და ალაზნის ველი. ეს ნამუშევრები დეტალური მხატვრული ანალიზის საგანია, სადაც ხაზგასმულია ბაშინჯაღიანის მხატვრული ტექნიკა, მისი ფერთა გამის და კონცეფციის განვითარება, ასევე განხილულია კომპოზიციური, შუქ-ჩრდილის და იკონოგრაფიული ასპექტები. განსაკუთრებული ყურადღება დაეთმო ბაშინჯაღიანის დაინტერესებას შოთა რუსთაველის პოემის „ვეფხისტყაოსნის“ ეპიზოდებით, რომლებმაც მნიშვნელოვანი გავლენა იქონია მის მხატვრულ თხრობაზე. მხატვრის 1890-იანი წლების ნამუშევრებში შეინიშნება ცნობილი რუსი მხატვრის, არხიპ ქუინდშის გავლენა, განსაკუთრებით, შუქ-ჩრდილის გამოხატვის თვალსაჩინო ხერხებში. ბაშინჯაღიანის ფერწერა, რომელიც აკადემიური ფერადოვნებით გამოირჩევა, დროთა განმავლობაში განიცდის ფერთა გამის შესამჩნევ ცვლილებას. მხატვრის ნამუშევრებს გამორჩეული სიწყნარე და სიმშვიდე გასდევს, რაც

განსაკუთრებით თვალშისაცემია ღამის ლანდშაფტებში. ბაშინჯაღიანი იყო შეუდარებელი ოსტატი იდუმალი და დახვეწილი სიბნელის ტონალობის გადმოცემაში.

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Received February, 2025