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Nestan Tatarashvili

Freelance Scholar. Georgia

EUROPEAN CULTURAL HERITAGE – ART NOUVEAU ARCHITECTURE IN GEORGIA

The fall of the Byzantine Empire in 1453 caused the ancient Christian country of Georgia to lose its close contacts with Europe for several centuries. Having grown weak because of continuous defensive wars, in 1801 Georgia allied herself with Russia. Due to strong and developed historical status in the Caucasus, as well as its central geographical location, Georgia became the political-administrative center of Transcaucasia, the southern part of the Russian Empire. For centuries Georgia had been known as strategic area and the crossroads of the main trade routes joining Europe with Asia. If this significant location had been the reason for frequent invasions and destruction, at the same time, this location contributed to Georgia's economic development and cultural progress. The Black Sea, which was the shortest route to Europe and to the Mediterranean countries, played a major part in the process.

The 19th century was a turning point in Georgia's economic and cultural life. Some essential events took place in architecture: the Tbilisi apartment house became established, which "like other apartment houses in the rest of Georgia of that time can be regarded as a certain developmental stage of Georgian architecture" (Beridze V, I, 1960, 127). In the middle of the 19th century buildings of mixed European styles with eclectic façades were widespread and in the last decade of the century several houses in the so-called "Georgian style" were built. The façades of the latter were adorned with ornamental elements characteristic of Georgian architecture of the Middle Ages. In these cases, more important and essential was that fact itself rather than the building; on the one hand, "it was a statement made to show the national existence, national impulse and what is more significant such statement was made in the capital city, where the Georgians didn't feel like

hosts any more for a long time" (Beridze V, II, 1963, 45). On the other hand, it showed that local professionals and skilled workmen were ready to begin a true creative process, which was very soon proved through the establishment of Art Nouveau architecture.

Some prerequisites for establishment of Art Nouveau in Europe were created by the English "Arts and Crafts Movement," which occurred in the middle of 19th century. The poet and architect William Morris headed the movement (Cumming E, Kaplan W., 1995, 12). He was against total industrialization and intended to make craftsmanship one of the art fields.

Because of late arrival of capitalism and the weak economy of Georgia, the art of skilled workers and craftsmen continued to be needed for a longer period of time than in Europe. These workers, according to their qualifications, used to join to different guilds (*amqari*) of craftspeople. Because of the intensity of the building process and the growth in demand for skilled workers, the guilds for building craftsmen survived for an especially for a long time, up to the first decade of the 20th century (Beridze V, II, 1963, 41). William Morris, alarmed at rapid modern industrialization in the middle of 19th century, could only just would have dreamed of the situation which existed in Georgia at that time.

The new style established in Europe by the late 19th century went under various names in various nations: Art Nouveau, Jugendstil, Sezession, Liberty, etc. In Georgia the style was called "Modern." Information about Art Nouveau arrived in Georgia from Russia and Europe via the shortest route, the Black Sea. Art Nouveau expanded rapidly through different kind of publications: professional, popular and fashion magazines, and photos and through people who came to work or to study in the country.

In Georgia Art Nouveau buildings were constructed not only in the capital but also in many towns, among them Sokhumi, Batumi, Poti, Kutaisi, Gagra, Akhali Atoni, Kobuleti, and Dusheti. The first three were ports; the fourth, an industrial town; and the last three were resorts. But Dusheti, the small administrative center of a mountainous region in Eastern Georgia, with its Art Nouveau-style buildings, proved that

this style really was very popular in our country. One illustration of this popularity is the Art Nouveau décor used to adorn wooden balconies of the houses in Racha, one of the mountainous regions of Western Georgia, which is famous for its folk architecture (Lejava S., Kiladze M., Giorgobiani K., 2007. 33, 47, 62). Here and there, in Kutaisi, among monotonous façades with strict and symmetric right-angled door and window-frames, we quite unexpectedly find a house at 25 Newport Street which, reflecting the wishes of an owner enamored of Art Nouveau, is adorned with an Art Nouveau window.

In Tbilisi various international and regional exhibitions were often held. In the exhibition of 1901, Art Nouveau building showed up for the first time. It was exemplified in the Nobel brothers' Community Pavilion, which was adorned with Jacob Nikoladze's sculptures. Unfortunately, the building does not exist anymore. The style was so popular in the Georgian capital that it was used not only in the construction of new buildings but also in reconstructions. The former Artstruni caravanserai can be considered one of the best Art Nouveau-style reconstructions and a unique phenomenon in general. The original building was constructed in the 17th century but was destroyed and rebuilt many times. Finally, in 1912 it was adorned with an Art Nouveau façade. Noteworthy too is the architect Simon Kldiashvili's design for the reconstruction of the Kartvelishvilis' house on Vartsikhe Street and for the bank building in Pushkin Street. The latter is a former building of Tbilisi Municipal Credit Society built in late the 1870s, which was reconstructed in Art Nouveau-style in 1903.

A European eclectic building having Art Nouveau details is a common enough phenomenon in itself, but when 19th-century Tbilisi traditional apartment houses in the oldest district reflect Art Nouveau constructive or decorative elements, it shows another important and distinctive feature of our Art Nouveau. Such houses are at 3 Ingorokva St., 7 Mari Brosse St., 1 Tabukashvili St., 2/7 Lado Gudiashvili Sq., 19 Ovanes Tumanian St., and 6 Abo Tbileli St. We meet some interesting samples of Art Nouveau reconstructions in Batumi – the houses at 30 Melikishvili St. and at 38

Zubalashvili St. In Kutaisi, there is 9 St Nino St., and the house at the corner of Tamar Mepe Street and Agmashenebeli Square.

From the point of view of Art Nouveau functional diversity, Georgia is rather distinguished. In addition to apartment blocks, Art Nouveau designs were used in many types of buildings: banks, colleges, shops, movie theaters, hospitals, workshops, canteens and factories. It should be mentioned too that Tbilisi also had in Art Nouveau style a tobacco factory, printing facility, and thermal power plant (which is being destroyed by the owner). Poti, small city in Western Georgia, has a library and carriage house in Art Nouveau style. There are also wonderful memorial monuments in this style preserved in historical cemeteries.

The most significant Art Nouveau style buildings are movie theaters. The arrival and then the spread of Art Nouveau and cinema took place simultaneously, and the coincidental success of these two innovations is very important in Georgia. A good



Tbilisi, Giorgi Leonidze str. 7/2. The Atelier of Gloves. Unknown architect, 1902



Batumi, 9 April str. 12, House, Unknown architect, Early 20th century

example of this is the Apollo Cinema in Tbilisi, an Art Nouveau movie theater built in 1909. Today it is in grave technical condition and is no longer functioning. The Palace Cinema is not operational today either. It was built in Tbilisi in 1914, and only the entrance hall and small fragments of the facade have survived to the present. In the middle of the 20th century the Art Nouveau-style movie theaters Mon Plaisir in Kutaisi and Apollo in Batumi were destroyed. Today in Georgia only the Apollo Cinema in Tbilisi has been preserved in its original form.

The establishment of Art Nouveau features in the construction high-class apartment houses, while taking into consideration local traditions, made the buildings more suitable and convenient. Modern conditions and facilities required more comfortable individual houses, and these needs were met very successfully. Because most of Georgia's Art Nouveau buildings incorporated very sound functional planning that met international norms, most of these buildings have preserved their initial functions up to the present.

Art Nouveau introduced and applied modern

building materials, methods, and technologies and initiated completely new, complex engineering and constructional solutions in architecture, which is clearly expressed in Art Nouveau-style buildings of Georgia's banks. A good example of this is the glass ceiling supported by a metal framework in the banking hall of the former State Bank at 7 Gudiashvili Street. In Kutaisi, the buildings housing banks at 9 St. Nino Street (now a puppet theater) and at 35 Paliashvili Street, with their wide-span halls, are also worthy of notice.

In terms of their exteriors, Art Nouveau buildings substituted varied forms of asymmetry and "broken" space for the established composition of 19th-century buildings with their symmetry and equal distribution of right-angled openings. The façades of Art Nouveau buildings were decorated with bay windows and attics of different height and image, openings of various forms, closed and open tympanums, towers and domes, high pediments and massive parapets. The forms and frames of façade openings were different – right-angled, rhythmical, curved and wavy.

In Georgia the décor of Art Nouveau architectural façades, as well as interiors, are rather varied; they offer sculptures, archivolt and conventionalized bas-reliefs, mascarons, sculpture or plaster plant or geometric ornaments and bas-reliefs, vases and acroterions, garlands, friezes and anthemia, majolica and mosaics, and wall painting.

The sculptures of Art Nouveau architecture are notable for their high professionalism and produce the effect of real sculpture. In this regard, the bank at 3 Leonidze Street is very interesting. The emphasis is placed on the decorated central entrance with symmetrically placed figures of Mercury and Pluto above it. Other wonderful samples of realistic sculptures can be seen in the hall of the Palace movie. Noteworthy also are Art Nouveau reliefs which were not only executed by skilled professionals but are also thematically rich. The big figure-reliefs on the façade of the former K. Zubalashvili "People's House" and Apollo movie theater deserve attention.

Outside Tbilisi, one can find brilliant reliefs on the façades as well as in the interiors of No. 12, 9th of

April St. in Batumi and at 568 Agmashenebeli Street in Kobuleti.

One of the main characteristics of Art Nouveau architecture in Georgia is mascarón decoration (sculptured human or mythical faces) – a general form of sculptural-ornamental décor that has a very long history. Art Nouveau developed quite a new form of it: the images of women are presented more vividly and descriptively; monsters and magic creatures become more horrific and grotesque. In Art Nouveau buildings we often meet mascarons on façades as well as in interiors. It is very important to note that in some cases they are sculptured and not molded. Noteworthy are the symmetrical molded mascarons of two women on the entrance of the house at 3a Kargareli Street. There are also good samples of mascarons and sculptures in the interiors at 3 Pushkin St., 8 Griboedov St., and 21 Rustaveli Avenue. Outside Tbilisi, there are interesting mascarons in Batumi at 12 9th of April Street and at 1 Gamsakhurdia Street; in Poti at 5 Agmashenebeli St.; and in Kutaisi at 1 Newport Street.

As in European Art Nouveau buildings, those in Georgia with sculptured or plastered décor present both plant and geometric forms. Like other Art Nouveau craftsmen Georgian ones like to use conventionalized or realistic forms of the following plants: the sunflower, rose, clover, lily, iris, oak, plane, chestnut and also the violet and bigger leaved vine and water-plants and narrow-leaved curved rods, and branches with buds, etc. These appeared on façades as well as in interiors and are presented in different forms: molded and sculptured, in mosaic or majolica, on wood or metal, in wall-papers and wall paintings.

Even in the period of eclectic façades in the entrances before the doors and behind them on mosaic floors we often meet the Latin inscription SALVE, which is rather characteristic of Art Nouveau buildings. After reconstruction of the Simon Kldiashvili house at Vartsikhe St. in Art Nouveau style, on the floor of the entrance the Georgian translation of the word appeared – SALAMI. In Tbilisi we have also a Russian translation of SALVE in the Didube District at 5 Kereselidze St. and Armenian ones in Zemo Kala at 3/7 Akhospireli St. and at 3 Akopian St..



Kobuleti, David Agmashenebeli str. 568, House Unknown architect, Early 20th century

Along with spread of eclecticism in Tbilisi since the 1870s "the tradition of city life's 'domestication,' 'humanization,' turned out to be so strong that it gave the form to "another" type of yard – the image or the actual structure of the yard, which behind the urban front of a house, behind the 'European' façade, creates old, traditional environment. The desire to create an architecturally decorated environment, which the inhabitants of Tbilisi had even in 17th and 18th centuries, was realized in the lay-out of the yard. The yard was enclosed with balconies as it used to be in the past. The traditional was the refinement of individual elements" (Marjanishvili G., 1992. 164-165). When discussing Georgian Art Nouveau it is very important to mention the balconies in the yards behind the houses, which were decorated and harmonized with the house



Kutaisi, Tamar Mepe str. 57, House, Unknown architect, Early 20th century



Poti, David Agmashenebeli str. 568, House
Unknown architect, Early 20th century

itself by means this style. These wooden balconies are the best examples of the coexistence of European and traditional styles and are another interesting feature of Georgian Art Nouveau. By means of these balconies the professional specialists and artisans added Georgian national and traditional feature to Art Nouveau that had, in general, an international character.

Unfortunately, we cannot discuss in detail the Art Nouveau architecture found in Abkhazeti, but according to archival and bibliographic sources the region has many wonderful Art Nouveau buildings. In this regard the history of Gagra is very interesting. In 1901, Prince Alexander Oldenburg, the son-in-law of Czar Nicholas II of Russia began building the Chaika Palace and the Gagripski Hotel in Gagra. Both buildings were constructed in Art Nouveau style. In 1903 the Prince celebrated the completion of the buildings (Gokieli V, 1954; Danelia Z., 1876. Jojua V., 1977).

As regards the architect, it is known that even during his first expedition the Prince was accompa-

nied by one Lutsedarski, who is regarded as the designer of the buildings.

The example of Art Nouveau in Gagra can be considered as an "import" of Art Nouveau architectural buildings: the owner, architect, builders and part of the material were from abroad, imported so speedily that it is very difficult to imagine any active use of local resources. In fact, as far as we know the greater part of the Gagripski Hotel was made of wood, ordered in Norway, shipped to Gagra, and constructed without using nails. However, we also have some examples of so-called Art Nouveau "export." It is apparent that some architects from Tbilisi made their contribution to the spreading of Art Nouveau in the Caucasus. As is well known some important buildings in Baku, with Art Nouveau ones among them, were designed by Georgian architects (Patulaev S., 1963).

In Georgia people from different parts of the country and of different social origin were the customers of Art Nouveau, but who were the executors of it? We know that in Tbilisi before the 1917 Revolution the workshops of A. Novak, A. Andreoletti, Reish and Wills worked on façade and interior decors. The Budnika building company was among them. The comparatively small company of Villa, Debras and Ritz were busy with with sculptural decoration of cemeteries. At that time F. Auch's carpentry and Bepile's ironworks shop were in existence (Morreti K., 1971, 10-13). Large number of Art Nouveau buildings in Tbilisi and other cities of Georgia show that lots of artists, smiths, masons, carpenters, stone dressers, skilled artists in majolica, terrazzo, stained-glass window and mosaic were working. Unfortunately, except for the above-mentioned companies, the sculptor Iakob Nikoladze and the wonderful master Ilia Mamatsashvili, who worked on David Sarajishvili's house, the names of other local artisans are completely unknown.

As regards the professional specialists – architects, engineers and technicians, due to V. Beridze and other researchers their names are known. However, it is very important to admit that according to the information we have, only three foreign architects have been identified: K. Zaar, architect of David Sarajishvili's house, was from Germany; and N. Oboloski

and S. Krichinski were from St. Petersburg. Among the specialist working in Georgia many of them belonged to other nations, but almost all of them were born in Georgia or had lived here for a long time.

The rich heritage of Art Nouveau architecture preserved up to the present day in Georgia is evidence of its successful development here along with its progress in leading European countries. This natural process was stopped by the Communist invasion of Georgia in 1921; the nation as well as its architecture came under the supervision of a totalitarian system.

Research into Art Nouveau architecture is being carried on and we hope to reveal more and more examples in different parts of Georgia. In conclusion, we can say that fundamentally international Art Nouveau acquired traditional, local features in Georgia and revealed varied and completely different examples of the style. First of all, these were traditional, wooden balconies on yard façades of the buildings, decorated in Art Nouveau style. Typical for Georgia is also the large number of buildings, which according to V. Beridze "are of different style," though Art Nouveau seems scarcely, by accident "lightly touches" them (Beridze V., II, 1963, 83). Noteworthy are the existence of Art Nouveau details on the 19th-century buildings in Tbilisi oldest districts. An additional important feature of our Art Nouveau buildings is their functional diversity and the large number of reconstructions executed in this style.

Recently Art Nouveau architecture in Georgia attracted the attention of the following well-known international organizations: New York "World Monuments Watch" (New York); "Reseau Art Nouveau Network" (Brussels) and "Art Nouveau European Route" (Barcelona). Today these organizations display materials representing Georgian Art Nouveau on the Internet and in different international editions.

The European cultural heritage – Georgian Art Nouveau architecture – has been properly valued in Europe and given an appropriate place. Now it is Georgia's turn because Art Nouveau has been neither completely researched nor properly valued and protected; it is not protected from either from total destruction or from frequent wrong and non-scientific restora-

tions. The Georgian Art Nouveau heritage deserves its place not only in scientific research into Georgian culture, art and architecture but also in textbooks and other educational literature as well as in tourist guidebooks and routes.

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