

Art Nouveau - European Style

in Georgia's Architecture

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 and 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.

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."¹ In the middle of the 19th century buildings of mixed European styles with eclectic façades were spread 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 during long time."² 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.³ 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.⁴ William Morris, alarmed at rapid industrialization in the middle of 19th century, could only 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 Gagra, Sokhumi, Batumi, Poti, Kutaisi, Kobuleti, and Dusheti. The first four were ports; the fifth, an industrial town; and the last were resorts. But Dusheti, the small administrative center of a mountainous region in Eastern Georgia, with its Art Nouveau-style apartment house, 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 region of Western Georgia, which is famous for its folk architecture.⁵

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.



Tbilisi. Nobel brothers' Community Pavilion. Architect unknown.
Author of the sculptures Jacob Nikoladze. 1901

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 apartment house



Tbilisi. Apartment house. Author of reconstruction
Architect Simon Kldiashvili. 1902



Tbilisi. Former building of Tbilisi Municipal Credit Society built in late the 1870s, which was reconstructed in Art Nouveau-style in 1903. Architect unknown

and for the bank building. 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.

From the point of view of Art Nouveau functional diversity, Georgia is rather distinguished in it. Old photos and drawings from the Historical Archive and the Georgian Art Museum are clear evidence of it. There are: cinema 1909, bank, conservatory 1904, apartment houses, theatre 1907; All these buildings are still exist. On the following drawings are projects, which did not implement: apartment houses cinemas, tobacco shop, free canteen, and college.

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. Tbilisi has shopping complex 1903, apartment houses, entrances, banks, maternity hospital 1912, tobacco factory and gloves studio, thermal power plant 1911 - which is being destroyed by the owner, wonderful memorial

monuments preserved in historical cemeteries. Poti has library 1908 and carriage house. It should be mentioned that small village Karsani near Tbilisi has a magnetic observatory 1912.



Tbilisi. Gloves studio.
Architect unknown.
Beginning of the 20c.



Tbilisi. The cemetery Vere
Architect unknown.



Poti. Carriage parking. Architect
unknown. Beginning of the 20c. Tbilisi.

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 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 Illusion in Batumi were destroyed.



Tbilisi. Cinema Apollo. Architect unknown. 1909

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.

In Georgia the décor of Art Nouveau architectural façades, as well as interiors, are rather varied. The sculptures of Art Nouveau architecture are notable for their high professionalism and produce the effect of real sculpture. There are also different bas-reliefs.

One of the main characteristics of Art Nouveau architecture in Georgia is mascarón decoration - 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. It is very important to note that in some cases they are sculptured and not molded.



Poti. Apartment house.
Beginning of the 20c.
Architect unknown



Batumi. Apartment house.
Beginning of the 20c.
Architect unknown



Batumi. Apartment house.
Beginning of the 20c.
Architect unknown

As in European Art Nouveau buildings, those in Georgia with sculptured or plastered décor present both plant and geometric forms. All the details even the smallest ones on Art Nouveau Buildings existing in Georgia are executed with high professionalism and are noted for their style unity. Noteworthy are terrazzo, gates, doors, metal rails, hand rails and staircases, balconies, stained-glass windows, wall paintings, fireplaces, ceiling, chandeliers, wallpapers, cast-iron stoves and bathroom accessories, locks and handles.

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 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 professional specialists and artisans added Georgian national and traditional feature to Art Nouveau that had, in general, an international character.⁶

Unfortunately, now 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.⁷



Tbilisi. Apartment house
Architect Pavle Zurabian. 1905
Beginning of the 20c.



Tbilisi. Apartment house
Architect unknown.
Beginning of the 20c.



Tbilisi. Apartment house
Architect unknown. 1903

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. 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 the capital of Azerbaijan, Baku, with Art Nouveau ones among them were designed by Georgian architects⁸.



Tbilisi. The masks of Art Nouveau buildings

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 many workshops were built.⁹ Unfortunately, except for the sculptor Iakob Nikoladze and the wonderful master Ilia Mamatsashvili¹⁰, 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 the mane of the professionals are known. (They are Simon Kldiashvili, Giorgi Guramishvili, Grigol kurdiani, Aleksandre Ozerov, Mikhael Neprontsev, Aleksandre Rogoiski, Gazar Sarksian, Mikhael Ohanjanov, Aleksandre Shimkevich and Pavle Zurabian). Except these specialists also three foreign architects have been identified: N. Obolonski and S. Krichinski, but they only sent the projects and did not participated in building process. It should be mentioned, that among the specialist working here many of them belonged to other nations too, 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.



Tbilisi. Art Nouveau metal works

Art Nouveau, so popular in Georgia, was regarded as bourgeois culture and unimportant art by the Soviet regime. Art Nouveau architectural heritage has been neither completely researched nor perfectly estimated and protected. A lot of Art Nouveau works are disappeared and many of them are being destroyed. There are the buildings or their details that are damaged and the samples which do not exist anymore.

In conclusion we can say that Art Nouveau spread not only in architecture in Georgia. In this regard our poetry and literature, paintings, light industry, applied, decorative and fine arts need in-depth study. 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.

Thank you,

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www.itic.org.ge/artnouveau

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