



Art Nouveau: “New Art” for Old Tbilisi

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Art Nouveau is often known in Tbilisi by its Russian name, *stil moderne*: “modern style.” This connection to modernism (now associated with minimal ornament and clean angles) seems confusing today. It is difficult to see now, long after Art Nouveau’s assimilation into “Old Tbilisi charm,” how the style was considered radical in its own time. The twining iron ornament, colorful decorative tiles, and whimsical floral designs today seem only quaint. These organic forms, however, directly confronted the architectural establishment of the era, which up to this period favoured the endless recycling and recombination of existing historical motifs. The names *Art Nouveau* (new art) and *stil moderne* (modern style) are a legacy of this dramatic departure from old traditions.

But Art Nouveau was not without complications. This new style proposed two contradictory goals: first, to escape the ugly, automated world made by industrialisation into a romanticised past that valued craftsmanship and folk art. Second, to

save the world through beautiful design mainly created by a cosmopolitan professional class and mass-produced. The aims and contradictions of Art Nouveau (and its related movement, Arts and Crafts) sound surprisingly familiar to contemporary society: use of natural rather than “processed” materials, inspiration from nature, and preoccupation with the “authentic” pre-technological past just out of reach. Of course, all facilitated by the latest technology. Art Nouveau’s complicated relationship to modernity made it a target for the next generation of modernists, who embraced industrial production and automation. For the architectural avant-garde of the 1920s and ‘30s, *stil moderne* was not really modern at all, but a fanciful and irrelevant detour from the true path of architecture’s break with the past. In their survey of modern architecture, historians Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co famously dismissed Art Nouveau as the “false start” of modernism.

Although the style was born in Europe,





a growing culture of art journals, collectives, and expositions quickly transmitted Art Nouveau across the Russian Empire, where it also became prevalent in Saint Petersburg, Riga, and Kiev. The style arrived in Tiflis at an opportune moment; “The Paris of the Caucasus” had become very wealthy and aspirationally European. More importantly, Art Nouveau’s romantic approach to folk traditions corresponded with Georgia’s growing nationalism and emphasis on recovering traditional crafts. Tbilisian Art Nouveau was thus forged at the intersection of national and imperial culture: introduced as a European fashion but often used to signify revival of Georgian traditions. Soon prominent Georgians were choosing this style for their private homes in villages and cities across the country. That two of the specifically Tbilisian Revival Style’s most elaborate examples (the **Writers Union House 14 D** and **Alexander Jagetiani Mansion 70 D**) use Art Nouveau suggests its ability to accommodate Georgian forms more than previous historical revival styles.

Degrees of Art Nouveau decoration appear with different frequency in each of Tbilisi’s neighbourhoods: buildings entirely designed as Art Nouveau, older buildings which received an Art Nouveau facade reconstruction, and buildings of other

styles with only a few decorative accents. The highest concentration of buildings designed entirely as Art Nouveau (with round windows and curving structural elements) appear in Chugureti, which was only just becoming fashionable at this time. Most of the city’s central neighbourhoods were already built up, so Art Nouveau projects in Sololaki or Mtatsminda were more often facade reconstructions or small modifications (gates, staircases, door handles, murals) to “update” an older house stylistically. In the 1910s, the city council even initiated building competitions for “best facade” and “best new building,” recognizing the competitive nature of Tiflis mansion building.

Despite Art Nouveau’s emphasis on artisanal production, it achieved rapid popularity across Europe thanks to mass production: a builder in Tiflis could order hardware, wallpaper, or plaster models via catalogue¹; one may therefore notice identical metal work. Although its architecture celebrates a romantic past, Art Nouveau in many ways represented the beginnings of “modern style” in Tbilisi.

¹ French architect Hector Guimard, famous for his Paris Metro entrances, produced extensive Art Nouveau catalogues

