



TBILISI

Preserving a Historic City



The Nobel Brothers Pavilion, from the 1901 Caucasus exhibition – since demolished

In 1901, seven years after the world's first Art Nouveau building opened in Brussels – Victor Horta's Hotel Tassel – the same style

of architecture made its appearance in Tbilisi. The Nobel Brothers Pavilion was unveiled at the Caucasus exhibition and decorated



The National Bank of Georgia, 3 Leonidze Street, constructed in 1910, architect Mikheil Ohanjanov

with sculptures by the Georgian artist Jakob Nikoladze. Although today the pavilion no longer exists, many other magnificent Art Nouveau structures still do and can be seen on streets, not only in Tbilisi but across Georgia.

Georgia's engineers and architects began to make an impact on local design towards the end of the 19th century. Residential houses in Art Nouveau style were designed by Simon Kldiashvili (1865-1920) at 4 Rome Street, Tbilisi in 1902, and Grigol Kurdiani (1873-1957) at 28 Ninoshvili Street in 1904. These buildings stand to this day. Soon prominent Georgians were

choosing this style for their private homes – including the writer Prince Ilia Chavchavadze, the philanthropist David Sarajishvili in Tbilisi; Niko Nikoladze in the village of Didi Jikhaishi; Abkhaz Prince Giorgi Sharvashidze in Sukhumi; and philanthropist Akaki Khoshtaria in Sujuna village.

Many local houses were also developed by having Art Nouveau frontages added while maintaining the traditional rear courtyards and their Caucasian balconies. In many cases the vernacular wooden banisters were replaced with decorative metal and elaborate swirling designs.



3a Kargareli Street – an exquisite Art Nouveau flourish with fine sculpted head and trailing leaves

As a result Art Nouveau in Georgia acquired some features rarely found elsewhere. Numerous houses were constructed in different styles, later to have Art Nouveau details and shapes added. The reconstruction of the Artsruni Caravanserai is one such example. Originally built in the 17th century near Sioni Cathedral, then destroyed and rebuilt many times, in 1912 it received an elegant Art Nouveau façade.

In the early 20th century era of industrial capitalism, Tbilisi's enthusiasm for Art Nouveau motifs helped revitalise the architecture of the

city. Because not everyone could afford to adhere to state building conventions, many homeowners arranged small-scale changes directly with builders. These unknown craftsmen renovated numerous houses including a variety of eclectic elements. Art Nouveau gates appeared in courtyards and the style spread into window lattices, staircases, balcony banisters, plastered and moulded motifs, hallway murals, door handles and mailboxes. Furthermore, with its strong tradition of metalwork and high quality craftsmanship, Georgia soon began to emulate William Morris's



Gate, 7 Akhospireli Street – stylised curves and leafwork

ambition of raising the status of architecture to the level of art.

As well as being international in nature, Art Nouveau took on a democratic quality

in Georgia. It enabled all people, irrespective of social or public status, to have their own say and become creatively involved in this powerful European movement, within their own buildings. The functional variety of Georgia's Art Nouveau structures is impressive. In addition to residential houses and banks there was also an Art Nouveau hospital, maternity home, Conservatory of Music, library, carriage depot, pawnshop, greenhouse, schools and educational institutions, shops, manufacturing plants, theatres and cinemas. An Art Nouveau tobacco-processing plant was built along with the country's first thermoelectric power plant, and magnetic observatory. They all still exist. Some cemeteries also contain excellent Art Nouveau monuments.

With its arrival coinciding with the age of cinema, Art Nouveau influenced the design of several movie houses. This occurred not only in Tbilisi but also in provincial cities, such as Kutaisi and Batumi. One of the best examples, built in 1909 and still standing, is the Apollo Cinema on Aghmashenebeli Avenue, Tbilisi.

So what were the distinguishing features of Art Nouveau that so inspired Georgia's craftsmen, architects and architecture patrons? First has to be the style of exuberance and creative enthusiasm of Eclecticism, when compared with the repetition and formality of pre-existing trends. In addition, Art Nouveau helped Georgia join Europe's 'modern' path and aspirations. Georgia's ambition was to become a free country with its own unique art and culture which Georgians had been denied for generations. Although Georgia remained a conquered country, this had no impact on its creative freedom. Art Nouveau helped Georgia enter



into a dialogue with European countries on an equal footing, while maintaining its own architectural vernacular. As the prominent Georgian writer Geronti Kikodze put it:

A spiritually free nation can create beautiful and great things even under political slavery.

The new approach was instinctively taken

up by the Georgian people as greatly preferable to the old styles imposed on them. It was identified directly with freedom of choice and helped the nation break free from the dominant influence of Russia.

Art Nouveau although produced in large quantities much of the ironwork is individually crafted – Tbilisi was an important metalwork centre on the Silk Road – doorways, like hallways, suffer from the problems of communal ownership



6 St Abo Tbileli street – intricate ironwork on a jewellery-like pattern



27/6 Agmashenebeli Avenue – tendrils sprouting through interlocking circles



27/6 Agmashenebeli Avenue detail – lifelike petals and pods



33 Asatiani street – whiplash curves inspired by Belgian Art Nouveau

Art Nouveau The Writers' House, (1903/05), 13 Machabeli Street – architect Karl Zaar from Berlin, in collaboration with Tbilisi architects Aleksander Ozerov and Korneli Titishev, interior Ilia Mamatsashvili, commissioned by Davit Sarajishvili – this beautiful room has been restored – the upstairs now converted into a literary themed guesthouse



David Sarajishvili (1848 – 1911) – a famous philanthropist, producer of Georgian brandy and a doctor of chemistry and philosophy – he commissioned the house to celebrate the 25th anniversary of his wedding to Ekaterine Porakishvili – the house immediately became an important centre of Tbilisi cultural life, frequently hosting art and literary evenings – in 1921 the Revolutionary Committee declared the house the Palace of Arts – in 1923 the building was given to the Writers' Union of Georgia – since 2008 it has been known as the Writers' House



Art Nouveau Tobacco factory, early 20th century, 125 Tsinamdzgvrishvili street – this neat industrial building is notable for its classical cornice, oval bull's-eye windows and arched entrance with Art Nouveau silver oak carving





Door detail



Rome Street, house of Giorgi Kartvelishvili, (1902), architect Simon Kldiashvili – ornament is concentrated towards the top of the façade with both shallow relief and incised detail – note the original glazing bars in the window, top left – the surging balconies have rich frenzied ironwork

