

A long stroll through the Georgian capital of Tbilisi lays bare the tumultuous history of this tiny country, nestled between Turkey and Russia on the eastern shore of the Black Sea, in the sooty, crumbling buildings that hug its winding streets and rise high on the hills over the Mtkvari River. Among them are an ancient Persian fortress, seized by a Georgian king who founded the capital in the fifth century A.D., the Byzantine Sioni (Zion) Cathedral, destroyed by Muslim invaders and rebuilt by Christian faithful over the centuries, magnificent medieval monuments from the country's "Golden Period," low-slung Turkish baths constructed by Ottoman rulers, neo-baroque and Moorish nineteenth-century shops and theaters lining fashionable Rustaveli Avenue, the Stalinesque Parliament, built at the end of World War II by forced German labor, and the endless lines of Soviet apartment blocks that march up and down the hills around the city. The biggest monument to Georgia's post-Soviet progress is the towering Iveria Hotel, a once-showy tourist spot given over to destitute refugees from the Abkhaz Civil War.

All of Georgia's monuments from its 1,600-year formal history share the cold reality of the country's current state, broken by corruption, civil strife, and extreme poverty. Most are in some state of disrepair and require protection. Yet no category of historical monument is as endangered as that which, ironically, embodies modern Georgia's most shining moment of optimism and creativity—its last full embrace of a European stylistic movement before the Soviet Union shut its doors to the West.

Art Nouveau arrived in Tbilisi in 1901 in the form of a pavilion commissioned by the oil rich Nobel brothers for the Jubilee Exhibition of Agricultural and Industrial Products, and it immediately captured the imagination of the country eager for something fresh and innovative. Georgia had already been a colony of the Russian Empire for a century at the time, and Russian Classicism was being established as the standard for state architecture, while any remaining feudal elements in residential construction were being displaced by an eclectic amalgamation of various European styles. Perhaps

Bourgeois Dreams

GEORGIA'S FORGOTTEN ART NOUVEAU LEGACY

by KRISTIN ROMÉY

in reaction to invasive Russian cultural influences and the stylistic chaos spreading across their cities, Georgians looked back several centuries to their Golden Age, which many considered the shining moment of their country's artistic and cultural achievement, and revived medieval ornamentation in their buildings.

But Art Nouveau, an international style with no set forms or methods that encouraged improvisation, held an immediate appeal in a country with a highly developed craft industry and an almost non-existent construction sector. The approach to Art Nouveau buildings required that the visionary be more of a sculptor than an architect and Georgia, a creative nation of poets, painters, and playwrights, certainly had more sculptors than architects.

Indeed, it seems that the movement arrived on the eastern shores of the Black Sea at a time when the country was bristling with creative electricity. The Nobel brothers' pavilion was designed by famed artist and sculptor Jacob Nikoladze, who later went on to design the flag of the briefly independent (1918–1921) Georgian nation. Niko Pirosmani, Georgia's most revered painter, was at the time just beginning to create his primitive masterpieces on black oilcloth. And Art Nouveau appeared during the final years of author Ilya Chachavadze, considered by many to be the "founding father" of modern Georgia. Chachavadze was the first to create a European vision of the country's future based on liberal nationalism. A statue of Chachavadze, who was assassinated in 1907, stands today on the capital's main thoroughfare, where a handful of fanciful buildings from the period still remain.

"The first buildings in the architectural center of Art Nouveau, based in Brussels, were constructed in 1893–1895, whereas it caught on in Georgia only six years later," says Nestan Tatarashvili, director of the Tbilisi-based Georgian Art Nouveau Preservation Pressure Group (GANPPG). "Taking into consideration Georgia's far-flung location and state of affairs at the time—its status as a colony of the Russian Empire, its weak economy, and fledgling capitalism—Georgians were indeed very enthusiastic about this style."

The organic richness of the Art Nouveau style particularly resonated with Georgian hearts and minds.

A FANCIFUL BIT OF IRONWORK
GRACES A CASHIER'S BOOTH IN
A BANK ON PUSHKIN STREET.





THE EXTRAORDINARY ART NOUVEAU FAÇADE OF THE 1901 NOBEL BROTHERS' PAVILION IN TBILISI IGNITED A FASCINATION WITH THE STYLE IN GEORGIA. SADLY, THE BUILDING NO LONGER STANDS

The classic curls and whiplash lines of the style sometimes mimic letters of their alphabet, but even more so bring to mind the endless stretches of grapevines that blanket the country. The stylized vegetation and nature scenes depicted in murals, stained glass, and mosaics that decorate the interior and exterior of the buildings held a great appeal with an urban population that still insisted on grand banquets held in the countryside.

Several Art Nouveau residential buildings were constructed in the capital in the year following the Exhibition, while another residential building and a bank were remodeled in the style. The Nobel brothers' pavilion, Nikoladze's only known Art Nouveau creation, no longer exists.

The most original feature of the Georgian Art Nouveau dwelling is the backyard balcony. As the style spread across Georgia, the wooden balconies that graced the façades of traditional homes were moved to the rear courtyards, and decorated in a similar manner. "These backyard balconies clearly illustrate both local influences on the predominantly international style of Art Nouveau, and the harmonious coexistence of the European and the traditional," observes Tatarashvili.

The popularity of Art Nouveau was not exclusive to the upper classes in the capital. The coastal cities of Batumi, Poti, and Sukhumi all house Art Nouveau buildings, as do smaller towns in the interior like Kutaisi and Akhali Atoni. Magnificent theaters and mansions, as well as small shops, cinemas, and studios in lesser neighborhoods—even graveyards—share the grace, innovation, and whimsy of Art Nouveau.

The charm of Georgian Art Nouveau construction is also unique in the former Soviet Union; Baku in neighboring Azerbaijan also enjoys a number of buildings in the style, but few are of native construction—



WONDERFUL ART NOUVEAU DETAILS
CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE INCLUDE THE DOOR
OF A HOUSE ON KRILOV STREET IN TBILISI,
A BALCONY SUPPORT FOR A DWELLING IN
POTI, A COLUMN ON A RESIDENCE IN TBILISI,
ORNATE GRILLWORK ENTRANCE TO A TBILISI
HOUSE, A TBILISI ROOF DETAIL, AND A
RESIDENTIAL BUILDING IN BATUMI.





A DOORWAY AS IT APPEARED PRIOR TO RESTORATION IN 1997 AND FOLLOWING TREATMENT IN 2000



Art Nouveau an important phenomenon, that its exploration was inevitable from the viewpoint of thoroughly studying our culture and history.”

Upon joining the Department for Monuments Protection after graduation from architecture school, however, Tatarashvili quickly discovered that her fellow Georgians had little interest in or knowledge of Art Nouveau. It wasn't until after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the resulting, disastrous civil war in Georgia, that she saw the opportunity to save what little was left from that happier moment in the country's history.

By then, 80 years of neglect and conflict had taken their toll on this architectural legacy. Once lavish residences were carved up into communal apartment buildings. Decorative interior murals were blanketed in whitewash. Air and water pollution had ravaged once-delicate façades, and stained glass windows had been sold off at the market to feed hungry families. It is estimated that more than half of the country's Art Nouveau buildings have lost their original interiors, and today present only a characteristic façade.

In 1996, Tatarashvili and three other young architects and artists formed GANPPG and began to photograph and document the most significant and damaged buildings in the capital. A grant from the Soros Foundation in the following year allowed the group to expand their documentation to two additional cities. Since then, GANPPG has received funds to perform archival research outside of Georgia, and with the assistance of the British Embassy and Open Society Institute mounted the photo exhibition *Art Nouveau in Tbilisi*, which subsequently traveled to Germany. Tatarashvili estimates that 18 significant Art Nouveau buildings in Tbilisi alone are in desperate need of restoration assistance; 15 of which were damaged in the 6.0 earthquake that rocked the city in April 2002.

Despite the small grants for research, as well as Georgian Art Nouveau's listing on WMF's 2002 list of the *100 Most Endangered Sites*, it has been a significant struggle for GANPPG to raise the funds necessary to document and publicize the plight of monuments that only a few decades ago were considered a decadent or unsavory phenomenon.

The various black markets and shadow economies that allowed Georgia a level of flexibility and prosperity under the stagnating Soviet bureaucracy have, ironically, in the post-Soviet era developed into institutionalized corruption so egregious and pervasive that it has essentially crippled the nation. In the past several years, foreign investors have fled the country while Georgians pass the winter without heat or electricity. Telephones in the Parliament were even repeatedly cut off for nonpayment. Compounding this is the fact that rampant corruption rendered what few heritage protection laws there were on the books essentially unenforceable, and any significant Art Nouveau building could be purchased and altered or razed with enough money.

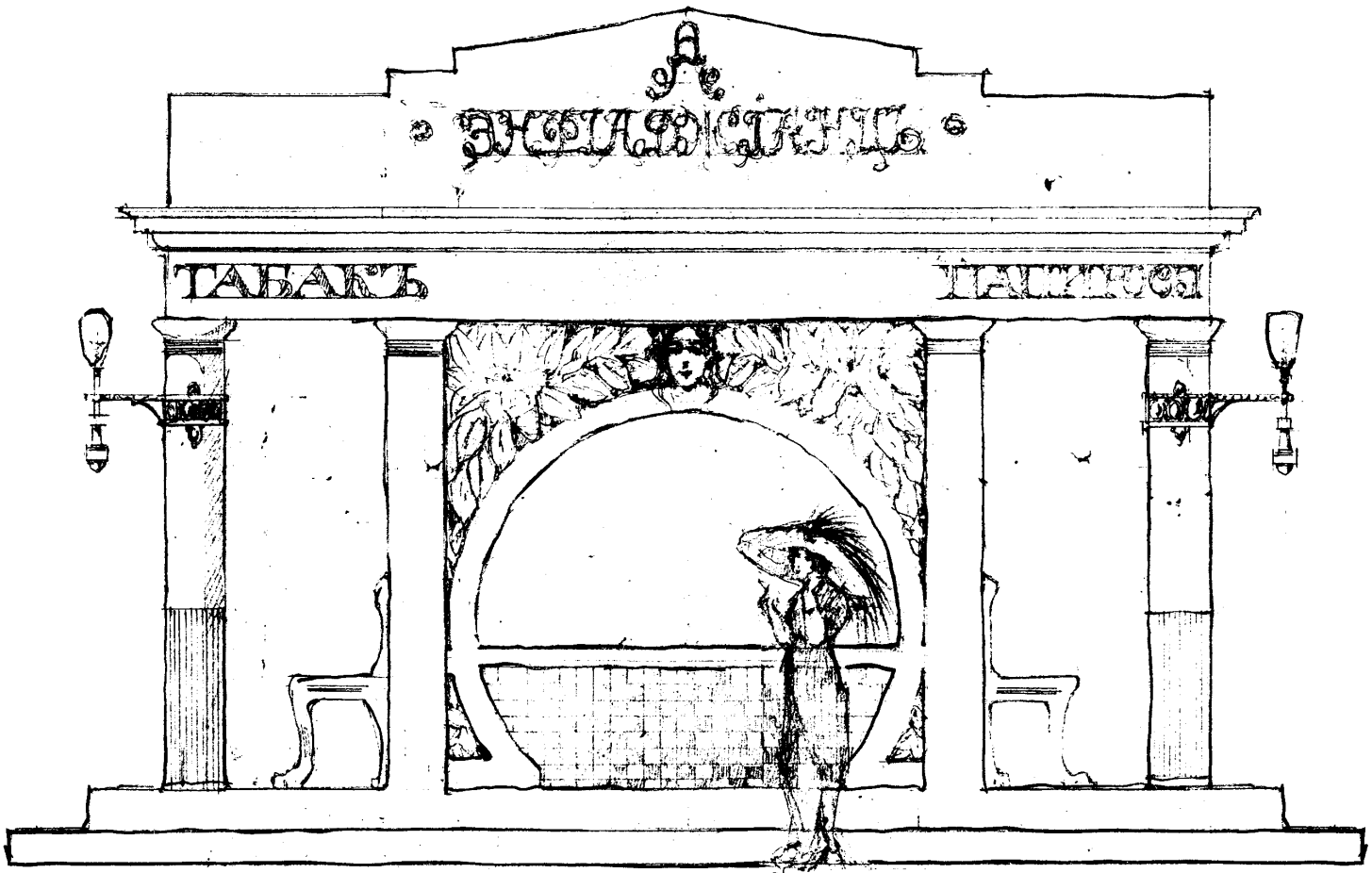
Meanwhile, the country is rich with ancient and medieval monuments, “and the majority of the cultural heritage community believes Art Nouveau is too modern and insignificant in comparison with other Georgian monuments to be given serious attention,” says Mary Kay Judy, a New York-based cultural heritage specialist and advocate of GANPPG's efforts.

Nonetheless, Tatarashvili has been persistent in educating the public of the importance of the country's Art Nouveau legacy, and appeals to Georgians' stubborn sense of independence by emphasizing its unique

and several are actually of Georgian design. The Art Nouveau legacy of the Caucasus also lacks the grand scale found in the similar stylistic monuments of Ukraine, Russia, and Latvia.

Although the Art Nouveau fervor in Western Europe faded around 1907, it continued in Georgia up until the First World War, the point when the heady exchange of ideas and energy with the West began to fade until it was firmly shut off with Georgia's incorporation into the USSR in 1921. Under Soviet rule, architecture was above all functional, and Art Nouveau was viewed as a symbol of bourgeois or capitalist culture. As such, discussion of the Art Nouveau movement was banned in Soviet cultural and architectural dialogue until the 1970s, and then circulated only within Russian academic circles. When it was mentioned, it was dismissed as a flimsy, casual phenomenon rather than a distinct artistic and architectural movement.

When Tatarashvili began studying architecture in the early 1980s, she recalls, only one man in the country seemed to have any knowledge of the country's Art Nouveau legacy—her professor Simon Kintsurashvili. “I don't know why, but [even at that late date] there was no general awareness of the existence of Art Nouveau in Georgia, even though the topic was no longer taboo. But Kintsurashvili was an excellent teacher and a dedicated person. He was quite right when he considered Georgian



fusion of native and European elements born during a period of Russian subjugation. “These buildings demonstrate Georgia’s eternal desire to stand side by side with Europe and to develop as a European country,” says Tatarashvili. “I usually try to emphasize this fact in my articles or TV programs, and I’m sure people will understand it.”

But for supporters of Georgia’s forgotten “bourgeois” architecture—and cultural heritage protection in general—recent events in this tiny country have brought renewed hope. In the winter of 2003, the government led by former Soviet foreign minister Eduard Schevernadze was ousted from power by a younger generation of Georgian leaders determined to rid the country of corruption and forge stronger ties with the West, including joining NATO and the European Union.

These leaders were listening when Tatarashvili recently made an impassioned proposal in a national newspaper for what needed to be done in the field of heritage protection, from scrapping the old government office altogether and bringing in new people to establish a new legal framework regulating the use of privatized Art Nouveau buildings. Today, she is the head advisor of architecture and building under the newly created Ministry of Economic Development.

“There are still a significant number of Art Nouveau buildings in Georgia,” says Tatarashvili, “So in order to be successful, any large-scale restoration program has to have the support of the government. My job is to make sure that the government is aware of this little-known art form and takes active steps to protect it.” She hopes that in this period of renewed optimism and calls for increased ties with Europe, Georgians will come to accept and protect their Art Nouveau heritage, recognizing it as a critical moment in their history—of the last time Europe’s door was fully opened to them, and what their creative energies crafted from that opportunity before war and revolution shut the door on Georgia for most of the twentieth century. ■

THE ORIGINAL FAÇADE OF A TBILISI TOBACCO SHOP APPEARS IN A RENDERING IN GEORGIA’S HISTORICAL ARCHIVE.

AN ENTRANCE BEFORE AND AFTER AN INSENSITIVE OVERHAUL, WHICH RESULTED IN THE LOSS OF SIGNIFICANT DETAIL.

