

The Influence of German Expressionism and Neo-expressionism on Georgian Avant-garde Art in the 1980s and 1990s

Tamari Mchedlishvili

tam.notmuseum@gmail.com

PhD student in art history, Tbilisi State University, Georgia

I am a PhD student at Tbilisi State University, specializing in art history. Currently, I am completing my PhD thesis on the topic “The Influence of German Expressionism and Neoexpressionism on Georgian Avant-garde Art in the 1980s and 1990s.”. Georgian nonconformist artists of the 1980s and 1990s became interested in German Expressionism and Neo-expressionism even before the dissolution of the Soviet Union, at a time when Social Realism was the dominant artistic movement and European art was strictly prohibited. My research examines how these influences shaped their artistic language and creative approaches. Specifically, I explore how these influences manifested in artistic practices, thematic choices, and stylistic approaches. A key aspect of my research involves investigating how young artists managed to access information about European art despite closed borders and restrictions. What did they find appealing in European art, and what had the greatest influence on them

The events, which occurred in the social and political life of the Soviet Union in the late 80's and early 90's of the XX century, caused the weakening of the Soviet system. When Mikhail Gorbachov and his supporters began the policy reform in the year 1985, the political activity in the society began to grow, mass, among them national, movements and organizations began to form. As the result of the economic and political crisis, the Soviet Union officially collapsed on 26 December of 1991. The protest against Soviet dictatorship started secretly but intensively in 1970's in art circles. For this period, counterculture as a term is already being used by secret circles of Georgian artists. In parallel with the artworks of Social Realism few compositions on innovative themes with prominent technique and individual artistic vision are created. Young artists realized, that for this period, the art of painting is much more by its mission and idea than just technically well-drawn composition. At first, the works are demonstrated in closed spaces, later works slowly start to come out to light. From the 1970's to the 1990's the Georgian art was represented by three main art groups. The group members together began painting on linens of their new ideas. The figurative and abstract compositions of enormous size created by them were characterized by the influence of German expressionism and neo-expressionism. XXth century's different art movement directions like “Die Brücke”, neo expressionism or abstract expressionism more or less can be sensed in each of their art works. The art group “Die Brücke” established in 1905 elaborated special

style of painting, which became an inspiration for many artists in the beginning of 1980ies in Europe.

In turn, a number of Georgian nonconformist artists showed their works in exhibitions in various German cities, including Berlin, Cologne, Leipzig, in the 1980s and 1990s. The works of nonconformist Soviet artists of the 1980s and 1990s are today in different museums and private collections. The exhibition and distribution of these works began secretly in the 1960s. While there are few major museums with rich art collections in the world, which keep valuable art pieces and archival material of this period, many nonconformist art works are kept in private collections and are rarely shown. In Georgia, work on this so-called second Soviet avant-garde of the 1980s and 1990s was not completed because of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the local political tensions in its aftermath.

As an art history student living in Georgia, I have very limited access to source material and professional literature on the historic avant-garde movements, including German Expressionism, as well as on the activities of nonconformist Georgian artists living abroad. Access to this information will help to advance our understanding of Georgian art of the 1980s and 1990s.

Conducting research for my PhD thesis, I was able to contact many of the artists, see their works, record interviews, and thus supplement my work material. I was lucky to even find art works of which artists themselves had lost sight and deemed lost. However, this was only a start, in order to provide a comprehensive overview, I need to expand my horizon and material base. My future plan includes expanding the research to Europe, specifically Germany, in the final stage. That is why it is important for me to participate in international conferences and forums.

My research topic is important for broadening the perspective on a European cultural identity. There is great interest in the topic, I have already presented my findings at various international conferences and also been invited as a keynote speaker to a number of events, Symposiums among them: International Symposium “Expressionism Revisited”, organized by The Brucke Museum, Berlin, Jun 1-3, 2023. 2nd Barcelona -International Conference on Social Science and Humanities (ICSSH), organized by Eurasia Research at University Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona, July 29-30, 2019 and 21st International Conference on Research in Life-Science and Healthcare (ICRLSH) organized by Eurasia Research at Czech Technical University in Prague, Prague, Czech Republic; October 18-19, 2019.

Furthermore, in 2018 I founded the contemporary art studio “not Museum,” which functions as a research and educational center, offering public lectures for students and discussions about the Soviet era art and contemporary Georgian art.

