Niko Pirosmanashvili's Picture Language
and Photography*

Speaking of the originality and singularity of Georgian culture would not be correct from the professional point of view. However, if we eliminate the sublime tone and pathos inherent in this kind of discussion and consider the historical circumstances that have influenced the formation of national thinking in general, and creative thinking in particular in Georgia, we find an opportunity to discuss them more objectively. The country's native inheitance situated as it is on the edge of Europe and Asia, and between two regions dominated by different religious beliefs, culture and political systems, has given many things to modern Georgia. Our country bordered directly the Ancient Near East states, the Hellenic world, and the Christian Byzantine and Muslim East and has a complex history of interactions with them.[1] In the late middle ages, at the time of dissolution of the Georgian state into smaller political units - the country first entered the Russian Empire with the status of 'province,' later gaining the title of the 'viceroy of Caucasus'. Under Russian rule Georgia gained her first real chance to continue its dialogue with the West after a long break. And so her European impulses were transformed through russification.

In the 1840s Grigol Maisuradze - the freed serf formely belonging to Prince Alexander Cavchavadze (Georgian poet, public benefactor and military figure; 1786-1846) came to study at the Imperial Academy of Art in St. Petersburg. He was the first professional Georgian painter to gain a European education. Photography had recently been invented in Europe (1839) and one of its inventors, Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre had presente the invention to the French Academy of Sciences, providing the foundations for modern analog photography. Within five to ten years it had spread across the entire Russian Empire, and so it arrived in Georgia around the same time as

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[1] Хускивадзе Ю., Хоштария Г., Этапы становления новой грузинской живописи, II международный симпозиум по грузинскому искусству, Тбилиси, 1977, p. 1; Кузнецов Э., Искусство Нико Пиросманашвили как явление «третьей культуры», Примитив и его место в художественной культуре нового и новейшего времени (сборник), Москва, 1983, p. 105

European Academic painting. The first photographer to appear in Georgia travelled to the Caucasus as member of expedition studing of mineral waters – Mr. Levitskiy in 1842. He was followed by the master of photography, Simon Morits, who settled in Tiflis in 1856 where he founded his own atelier.[2]

From the very beginning photography interested the artistic community worldwide. It entered every level of 'high' and 'low' culture and introduced new artistic tasks for representatives of professional schools and self-taught masters alike. This new technology made the work of documentary artists easier, and their trips become more frequent. The activities of one such artist - the Caucasian photographer Dimitri Ermakov, whose work was one of Pirosmanashvili's key sources, will be discussed below.

It is true that Tbilisi around 1900 was not only the cultural centre of the Caucasian region. It was also an important centre of activity with cultural links to Paris, Berlin, Moscow, Peterburg, Vienna, Istanbul and Tehran.

One could see here a fakir from India, a Muslim dervish, Russian and European officials and businessmen, and Georgians in European dress coats of national costume. In the street one could hear morning songs of oriental melody sung by city workers or fragments of the most popular Italian operas of the time sung by coachmen in top hats.[3]

Photography, as a great fashion of those times entered the social, cultural and artistic lives of Caucasus, and in particular its bourgeois centre Tbilisi without delay (atelier formal portraits, 'Living pictures' etc.)

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[2] Inasaridze Sh., Pilauri-Loria I., Past of Georgia in Photo and Film Documents (in Georgian), Tbilisi, 2006, pp. 6-9

[3] Grishashvili I., Literal Bohem of Old Tbilisi (in Georgian), Batumi, 1986, pp. 17-18

In this period, around 1900, the very special is the personality of Niko Pirosmanashvili (Pirosmani). This self-taught painter whose art combines oriental artistic conventions and western easel art, the monumentality of medieval Christian murals with European easel painting is a kind of cultural crossroad. It is an invaluable aspect of Pirosmanashvili as 'the founder's of modern Georgian painting.'[4] His artistic form is the subject of a number of scholy studies. Various monographs and articles are dedicated to the subject.[5]
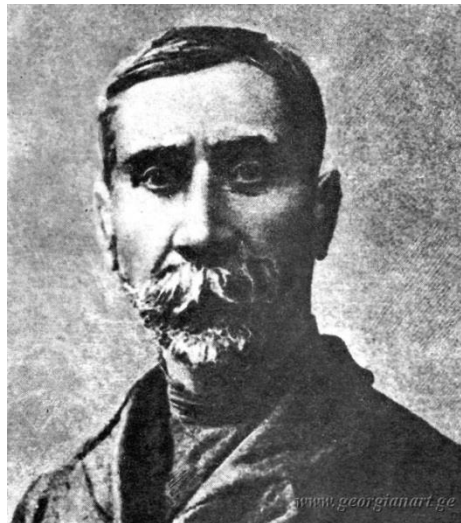
Researchers, artists and other commentators underline the clarity and simplicity of Pirosmanashvili's imagery. They also discuss his truthfulness, and it is here that a notion, that might be referred to as 'Georgian Monumentality' or the Georgian sense of monumentality is evident in Pirosmani's work. 'Georgian Monumentality' unites the features of clarity and simplicity mentioned above but its meaning is specifically national. The reasons for the special projection of 'Georgian Monumentality' in Pirosmanashvili's pictures, which is found in his emphasis on the representation of nature, in the compression of space and conflation of time (which have frequently been noted by

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[4] Periphrasis after David Kakabadze's (Art and Space (in Georgian)), Tbilisi, 1983) and Beno Gordeziani's (Niko Pirosmanashvili (in Georgian)), Tiflis, 1930) valuations

[5] Кузнецов Э., Искусство Нико Пиросманашвили как явление «третьей культуры», Примитив и его место в художественной культуре нового и новейшего времени (сборник), Москва (1983) etc; Хоштария Г., Творчество Пиросманашвили и его место в новой грузинской живописи, Диссертация на соискание ученой степени кандидата исскуствоведения, Тбилиси, 1985

researchers)[6] is evident in the comparison of Pirosmani's pictures with photographs that were very well known to the artist and which he frequently used.


We should mention by way of comparison that photographs were also being used as primary sources for paintings by contemporary European painters including Delacroix, Courbet, Degas, Cezanne, Van Gogh, Matisse, and Picasso…[7] Around 1900 the illustrated postcards were a popular means of quickly-transmitted written communication and filled a real gap in the cross-fertilisation between cultures. They offered different forms of creative inspiration to artists of working in various styles. European masters mostly were looking for new, dynamic modes of expression; unexpected compositional dynamics, effective angles and anything else that would show the transience of industrial life – sunrises, trees blowing in the breeze, the shadows of clouds over moving over the fields below.

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[6] Хоштария Г., Вопросы генезиса творчества Нико Пиросманашвили, Литературная Грузия, 1980, IX; Lezhava S., About the Value of Niko Pirosmanashvili's Paintings ((in Georgian)), *Spectrum*, 2005; A. Shanshiashvili, Medieval Artistic Principles in the Art of Niko Pirosmanashvili, The Proceedings of the 2nd international Symposium of Georgian Culture 'The Caucasus - Georgia on the Crossroads', Tbilisi, 2011

[7] Scharf A., Art and Photography, 1968 (1991; 'Photography', Encyclopedia of World Art, Vol. XI, NY, Toronto, London, 1966, pp. 118-120; 'Painting and Photography', Oxford Companion to Photograph, 2005, pp. 463-466
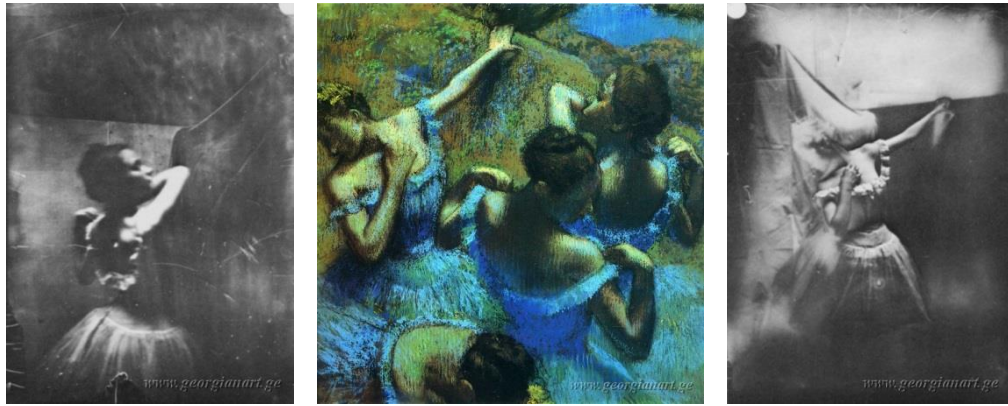
Pirosmanashvili's approach to photography was absolutely different. He looks for the eternal, the silent. As Vakhtang Beridze wrote: 'We must mention not only what Pirosmani painted, but also those things he never wished to paint, though these themes were very well known for him and he saw them in his everyday life'.[8] Here Beridze is referring to the carnival festivals of 'Keenoba' and 'Berikaoba' which did not interest Pirosmani. The artist felt intuitively that 'the compressed space makes broad time'[9] and used photos where such perpetual space–time continuum was materialized. 'A figure standing or sitting facing the viewer: in a general sense – the spiritual relationship, 'the appearance' of the character to the spectator…'[10] – this is introductory part (the other parts are definitely about the iconography of saints) of the charachteristics of Orthodox Christian Art by Viktor V. Bichkov can be connected to the intuitive understanding of murals, stone reliefs and photography by Pirosmani and their use and interpretation in his own work. The history of the early use of photography in Georgia and its subsequent development remain under-investigated, making our discussion of Pirosmani's use of photography problematic. It is not possible to apply knowledge of the history of European or Russian to the Caucasus as its history there is very specific. Moreover, since the majority of interest has focused on the dynamic nature of photography, the static photographs of the nineteenth century have received little scholarly attention. Studio photography is connected with the roots of culture in the Caucasus, Georgia and Tbilisi specifically. Its schemes are farther reminiscent of orthodox-medieval, catholic-renaissance and pagan art (I raised this question at the 2nd Conference of Semiotics in Kutaisi, 15-16th October, 2011, within the presentation: 'Temporal-spatial Dimensions in Nineteenth-Century Georgian Studio Photography [suggested changes to title for future use]). I am referring to

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[8] Beridze V., Niko Pirosmanashvili, 2007, p. 64

[9] Mamaladze-Antelava L., The Question of Transformation of Space/Time in twentieth-century Georgian Painting (in Georgian), *Georgian Antiquities*, 2009, XIII, p. 244

[10] В. Бычков, Об эстетической значимости восточно-христианского искусства, IV международный симпозиум по грузинскому искусству, Тбилиси, 1983, p. 6

photography that existed before the creative practice of Pirosmanashvili began (the biographers date his earliest works from 1895)[11] and that which took place during the period of his artistic activity. These include saloon (portrait) photographs, ethnographic photographs and staged narrative photographs or photographic 'scenes' which, for Pirosmani, mostly refer to scenes of traditional Georgian banquets.

As I have mentioned above, no special studies of Pirosmanashvili's use of photography have ever been carried out. However, it should be noted that some importants articles or sections within monographs illuminating various sides of this issue do exist.[12] They contain the important data for understanding Pirosmanashvili's attitude to photography in relation to his themes, content, attributes. First, we should define which photographs Pirosmanashvili used in his painting. One of them is the series of photographs of royal saints, from Grigori Sabinin's album 'Caucase Pullore Due'[13]. The photographs were taken by the first Georgian photographer Alexandre Roinashvili. With reference to these photographs Pirosmanashvili created various portraits of Queen Tamar (the queen of the Georgian Kingdom, c. 1200) and Shota Rustaveli (the Georgian writer and author of 'The Knight in the Pantera's Skin,' c. 1200). Pirosmani's portrait of King Heraclius II (who ruled Georgia in the eighteenth century) was also certainly painted with reference to a photograph by Alexandre Roinashvili. The achromatic tonalities of the colours of beloved 'Little Kakhi''s face (the nickname of the king Heraclius) attest to this. It is known that the photographer, who was one of the most active members of 'The Society for the Spreading of Literacy Among Georgians,' in 1895, on the 100 year anniversary of the tragic Krtsanisi War, made one thousand copies of the King's portrait and had

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[11] Zdanevich K. Niko Pirosmanishvili (in Georgian), Tbilisi, 1963, pp.103-114

[12] Bagratishvili K., Following Pirosmani's Prototypes (in Georgian), *Soviet Art*, 1987, III; Kamenskiy A., The Origins of the Style of Pirosmani (in Georgian), *Soviet Art*, 1981, XII; Giorgadze L., City Costume in the Paintings of Niko Pirosmanashvili (in Georgian), Georgian State Museum of Art, Tbilisi, 1997, III Дзуцова И., Живописные фоны, *Декоративное искусство СССР,* 1979, VI

[13] Grigori Sabinine 'Caucase Pullore Due', Paris, sans-date

disseminated them in Georgia free of charge.[14] We can therefore assume that Pirosmanashvili might have seen one of these photographs in any flat in Tiflis. Scholars have noted correctly the artistic weakness of the portraits Pirosmani painted from photographs compared to those painted from life, and whose sitters were well known to the artist and numbered among his acquaintances and friends. 'His historic personalities lack "character", internal life'.[15]

Many of Pirosmani's biographers have reproduced extracts from the memoirs of Pirosmani's acquaintances in their volumes. One of them discusses Pirosmani's method for enlarging his images.[16]

It is clear that by 'enlargement,' the author is referring to the creation of bigger painted canvas from the smaller photograph (generally the size of a standard postcard) [which offerts additional confirmation that the artist worked directly from photographs]. Examples of this working method

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[14] Alexandre Roinashvili – The First Georgian Photographer (Albume), 2004, Introduction by L. Mamatsashvili, p. 4

[15] Beridze V., Niko Pirosmanashvili, 2007, p. 63

[16] Leonidze G., The Life of Pirosmani, Memoirs on Pirosmani (collection, in Georgian), Tbilisi, 1986, p. 81

include Giorgi Meskhiev's (Meskhishvili) portrait, previously known as 'The Rich Peasant' or 'An Angry Peasant.' The reason behind this mistake [in naming the work] is the replacement by Pirosmanashvili of the interior backdrop of the wrouse photograph with an outdoor setting – a vineyard – in his painting. The peasant's supposed 'anger' has been pressumed primarily due to the symbol of the whip, which he holds in his hand. Similarly the portrait of the railway worker Misha Metekheli – painted in accordance with the photography studio aesthetics of the time – with a kind of halo, and and decorated with foliage and roses. The portrait of Pirosmanashvili's friend Alexandre Garanov may also be painted from a photograph, although no original photograph has yet been found. Despite this, it certainly has the aesthetics and compositional structure of a static photograph.

It is known how the portrait of Ilia Zdanevich (poet and artist, one of those who 'discovered' Pirosmani) was painted. We read in Ilia's diary, which is included in the book[17] by Kiril Zdanevich,that he was posing for Pirosmanashvili and then the artist asked him to bring a photograph suggesting that he would 'work better' from a photograph. The fact that Pirosmanashvili asked for photograph, suggests that he would already have had experience of using photography.
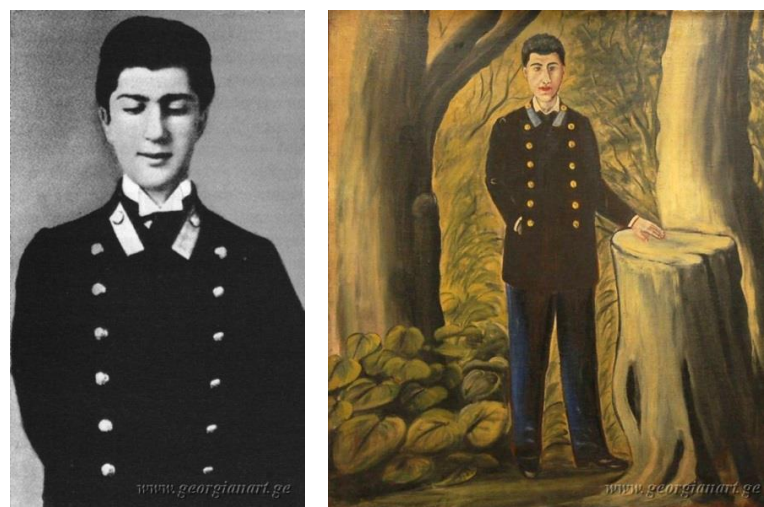
[17] Зданевич К., Нико Пиросманашвили, Москва, 1964, p. 69

The links between the famous picture 'Gvimradzes' Feast' and the characters in it are very important. The surviving photos of these people give us grounds to conclude that this scene was not made after a sketch but is a kind of 'montage' (in general, this montage 'construction' is felt in nearly all pictures which are painted from photographs. It is an indicator of talent when the master chooses things that are organic for his artistic structure).

Even the 'minor' elements such as the neutal bachground of flat and artistically transformed studio sets are used for 'needs'. They are the organic parts of the primitive world, not constrained by human logic, where the subjects are biblical and mythological and show objects such as chairs, and flowers as subjects and concepts, not only as material things. The representation of each figure is so close to the original source photograph, and the features so accurate that they can easily be recognised.

Niko Pirosmanashvili also has the 'montage' (we still use this conditional concept – G.P.) even in cases where the photograph used was not of the person depicted in the mainting, such as in 'Childless millionaire and poor women with children'. The face of the millionaire in the picture is very like a known photograph of a businessman from Tbilisi, a Mr. Pitoev (though it was considered that this character was the Georgian brandy magnate David Sarajishvili. However, the millionaire's appearance clearly doesn't correspond with that of David Sarajishvili). The image of the woman is taken from the family portrait of the Tsagarelis family, which are typical signs of studio portraits of the time. The aim of the viewer is not to discover the genuine identity of the person represented on the

canvas,, Instead we see only the universal character types of the protagonists. This is a point that has been frequently noted by researchers of Pirosmanashvili's art. This is the exact interpretation found in Giorgi (Gogi) Khoshtaria's dissertation[18], in which this artistic phenomenon is referred to as the 'portrait-type'.
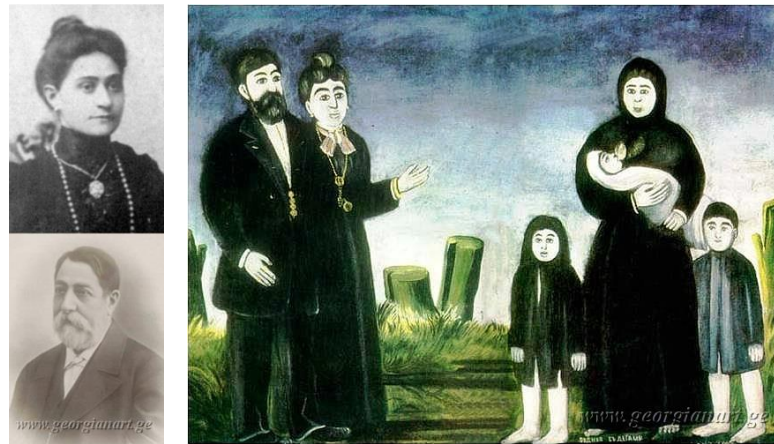
Pirosmanashvili's particular interest in theatre should also be mentioned. It is known that he loved the theatre and was a regular visitor to theatrical performances.[19] The artist has created pictures depicting climacting moments of scenes of murder. These works by Pirosmanashvili also refer to the widely distributed photos, taken by Roinashvili where the artist makes minimal changes to the composition of the photograph in his painting. Howeverm certain features are exaggerated, such as the figure of the woman asking mercy as though she is pleading for the help of the audience.

[18] Хоштария Г., Творчество Пиросманашвили и его место в новой грузинской живописи, Диссертация на соискание учено й степени кандидата исскуствоведения, Тбилиси, 1985

[19] Kuznetsov E., The Theatre of Niko Pirosmanashvili, *Soviet Art* (in Georgian), 1989, I, pp. 85-90; Chkheidze A., Photography in the Art of Pirosmani (in Georgian), *Art*, 1990, VIII, pp. 98-109

It has been frequently argued that an important part of Pirosmanashvili's art is the use of portrait-types of ordinary people based on photographs as primary sources. It is interesting to note that the first Georgian photographer was making portraits of his compatriots, where as the Russian photographer Dimitri Ermakov was photographing ethnographic types of foreigners. Although both represent real people we can recognize an important difference between them. Roinashvili shows personalities while Ermakovs emphasizes physical appearance. Many of these photographs have become the sources for Pirosmanashvili's artistic and compositional work.

The famous 'diptych' – 'A man with barrel' and 'A man with Tiki' (A vessel for liquids) is a good example of it when the artist did not include the background detail found in the source photograph in his pictures, which would have made the artwork more or less concrete.

He aspires to the laconic language of art, a limited palette and flattenning of perspective; he pushes the figures to foreground and selects contrasting, neutral backgrounds that outline the silhouettes of the figures and fill the surface of pictures. The use of the poses shown in photographs is

very important: in the inclination, a small step forward when a man is carrying a heavy object - we see a real worker in this image, his 'character profile'.

I think one semantic analysis of the picture 'Georgian lady with a tambourine' ellucidates the complicated phenomenon of time and space within the painting. This artwork is free from superfluous photographic detail and the mood is created with theatrical devices whereby the background turns to sky and the floor to the ground. The representativeness and architectonics are underlined (with the 'monumental processing' of photographical compositions) – by the sofa and pillows which raise the figure of the lady like a sculptural 'pedestal'.

The form of the rounded body of the figure is plainly organized on the surface of the picture plane – the figure and the background are shown like parallel grounds as in the Georgian reliefs of the eighth to tenth centuries. The non-photographical elements – the vigorous brush strokes, its laconic colour gradation (the silhouette of the dress, for example) gives the structural integrity to the picture. Very important is the gestural language – the arrangement of the hands, mimicry, and the standing pose, the full frontal representation and the 'eternal expectations' of the character what stimulates religious feelings in the viewer.
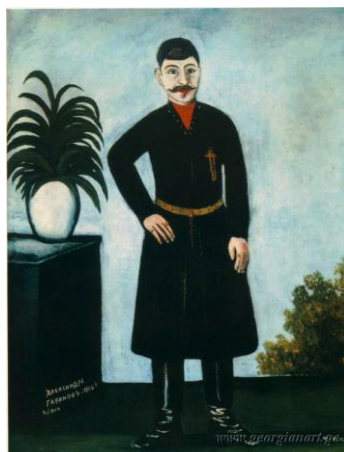
In conclusion we might say that three categories (or levels) of Pirosmani's non-naturalistic approach toward photography can be noted: the first can be termed 'direct imitation' (Alexandre Garanov's portrait); the second – 'the reconstruction of the composition' ('the seller of firewood) and the third – the 'photographic quality' ('the fisherman in red shirt'). We have now primarily discussed the portrait-types that have the low horizon line (one fifth or one seventh of the height of the picture) and it makes the scene appear borderless and protagonists appear giant – as if seen from below. Conversely the panoramas are as if seen from the sky.

Except the artistic and structural analysis there are marked some other art historical and methodological approaches that specify the complexity of the phenomenon of the artist: 1st – Iconological – the thematic and structural analysis of the representative pictures on the edge of nineteenth-century photography and medieval murals; 2nd – attributional – the semantics of the material subject, typology, 3rd – spectral – the nature of light and lighting and their transcendental understanding. These subjects were touched above briefly and we consider they need further researches.