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Soviet Fine Art and Georgian Art Criticism: Purposes and Function

The Object

Art criticism and its form and content underwent various transformations during the dominance of the Soviet cultural system. Soviet totalitarianism created an environment which demanded expression of opinion while paradoxically restricting the right to self-expression. Literary criticism was allowed only if ideologically sound, and this became a fundamental precondition for the development of this field at the All-Union level, including in Soviet Georgia.

The Hierarchical political system determined the functional purpose, sphere of activity and goals of Soviet art criticism. Hence institutional confines created the conformist nature of work produced in this field, and the occasional triggering of reactionary responses.

The need to reinforce socialist ideas determined the ideological framework of the educational function of art criticism. These ideas were considered to be under constant threat from bourgeois-decadent aesthetics, and the doctrine of “art for art’s sake”. This dichotomy would remain unchanged until the collapse of the Soviet regime.

Georgian art criticism in the Soviet era was cautious not to cross the line of political correctness when fulfilling the function given it by the state agenda. It held the following positions in common with the central authority: promoting the moral-cognitive aspects rather than aesthetic value of art, identifying and evaluating the “beneficial” and the

“subversive”, and quantifying the accessibility, limitations and relevance to the “reality of the life” of a given work. Such an approach was designed to help the state convey the “truths” of socialist societies through art.

Georgian art criticism had thus to adapt the unified theoretical base of Soviet art – which included Lenin’s theory of representation, the method of socialist realism, and the conception that art should be socialist in content and national in form – to its own legacy of fine arts, and embrace party influence on art in order to ideologically and artistically educate the audience. The effectiveness of Georgian art, which was restrained by the Soviet framework and tamed through *violent harmonisation* (Evgeny Dobrenko), became dependent on the “correct” understanding and application of the above-mentioned theoretical matrix.

The demonisation of the subjective factor expelled interpretation from art criticism, replacing it with a descriptive and explanatory approach. The tendency to stigmatise was particularly evident when the aspiration to discover the “new” was suppressed by preconceived notions and predetermined dispositions – creative work had to be adapted to the conditions of Marxism, and doing the reverse, proceeding from immanent laws of art to specific theories and categories, was rarely considered.

Art criticism assumed full responsibility for mastering the ideological “packaging” of intellectual and creative activity and ensuring this was assimilated to such an extent that self-censorship was often enough to suppress internal resistance. This became an integral part of the defence mechanism of art criticism. The abundance of evaluative clichés observed at this period was not accidental – this was a time-tested system approved by the party, which directly “secured” the functioning of art criticism; however, it also deprived it of a significant level of autonomy, as confirmed by the long struggle of Georgian critics to maintain and expand their field of activity.

It is worth noting that art criticism, as a reflection of and reception of socialist art, observed evolutionary regularities whilst formulating the fundamental issues of its own function and purpose. Comprehending these very relationships is the key objective of this essay.

The Focus

The development of scholarly interest in Georgian art criticism from the Soviet era was determined by the multifaceted and contradictory nature of the field in different periods of time and space. The chronological framework of the 1930s to 1970s adopted for this research comprises the entire era of socialist culture in the Soviet Republic of Georgia, and largely coincides with a specific concurrent period in the development of criticism. The 1930s saw the institutional establishment of socialist art criticism in Georgia, and were followed by so-called Late Stalinism (1945-1953) and the Post-Stalin era (1954-1964); the final stage of Soviet criticism emerged in the 1970s, when the consequences of the last decrees of the party addressed to the field gradually began to appear in critical publications. These continued to frame criticism during the final decade of the regime, the 1980s.

Understanding Georgian art criticism from this time is somewhat hindered by the fact that the immense body of critical publications produced has never been systematically reviewed or appropriately studied. Nonetheless, the present study attempts to identify the general trends of Georgian art criticism over time based on principal sources.

This research focuses on two main sources of materials: 1) it discusses Georgian periodicals, following the chronological framework of the research; 2) it systematically studies the records of the Artists' Union of the SSR of Georgia, as preserved in the National Archives of Georgia.

Stenographs of board meetings, thematic plenums, and congresses held under the aegis of the Artists' Union and the archival documents of the critics' section of the Union are important sources of information. The materials above-mentioned, with their extensive inclusion of

oral histories, present all the pressing issues found in Soviet art – lively, often relentless polemics are perceived as unconscious attempts to overcome the indifference of the press. The fact that the self-reflection of art criticism began at internal meetings of the Artists' Union is also not coincidental.

The Institution

In discussing the Georgian art criticism of Soviet times, one cannot bypass “The Section of Criticism and Art Criticism” of the Artists' Union of the SSR of Georgia, which was the only creative union both directly responsible for the development of the field and involved in cultural policy at an official level.

This section emerged within the structure of the parent organisation in 1935, with the sole purpose of providing reports for events (exhibitions, plenums) organised by the Artists' Union. However its members immediately expressed interest in getting involved in the evaluation of works. Examining the work of the critics' section helps us determine what were the most crucial issues concerning the functional purpose of art criticism, and the “Section of Criticism and Art Criticism” has left an authentic mark on the elaboration and implementation of these.

In this regard, the annual work plans developed by the section are noteworthy. These brief annotations about the duties and objectives of art critics, as presented in archival documents until the 1950s and onward, differ significantly from each other. Common at all stages seems to be the appeal to closely relate professional obligations to improving ideological-political awareness, and promoting the intensive study of the problems of Marxist-Leninist aesthetics (the intensity of practical implementation of which radically decreased from the 1960s onward).

The main aspects of these work plans were developed within the framework of the mission to secure the aesthetic-ideological education of the general public; this implied the

preparation of reports, the presentation and interpretation of government and party resolutions, processing information about important cultural events elsewhere in the state and reviewing critical letters from the central press, which were crucial in terms of conjuncture, and providing feedback about them in special sessions.

Furthermore, it implied providing professional consultations, participating in exhibition discussions, and, of course, active cooperation with the press. The obligatory practice of giving public lectures greatly contributed to the visibility of the section. A series of lectures was apparently arranged under the supervision of the Georgian branch of the Marx-Engels-Lenin Union Institute, up to and through the 1950s, concerning the global importance of Soviet art and the reactionary nature of bourgeois art. These had to be presented to the public with the correct ideological accents¹. However, these lectures became less frequent towards the end of the Soviet period, and then mainly focused on Georgian fine arts and architecture.

At the end of the 1940s, substantial attention was paid to raising the qualifications of critics and bringing them closer to “socialist reality”. This new initiative involved organising professional trips to Moscow and Leningrad and making special excursions to the leading collective farms and large enterprises of the republic. In order to establish a precedent in this regard, a working visit by one of the members of the section - the art historian Shalva Kvashadze – to the collective farms, sanatoriums and rest houses of the Guria region was planned. The purpose of this trip was to visit sites depicting the building of communism – the art critic had to “inspect” how accurately artists and sculptors were portraying the intended subject during their working visits². However, it soon became obvious that these obligations could exist only on paper. The requirement to participate in exhibitions and sit

¹ National Archives of Georgia (NAG), *the deposit of the Artists' Union*, f. 10, ser. 1, file #182, 16; (the work plan of 1948).

² NAG, *the deposit of the Artists' Union*, f. 10, ser. 1, file #486, 25-26; December 6, 1951 session.

on committees and councils, which were among the most influential bodies, implied challenging the monopoly established over them by the creative part of society.

As the archival materials testify, the section gradually left the evaluation committees staffed by the members of the Artists' Union, and the unilateral decisions of the Presidium of the Union often disregarded the organisational interests of the section, except when it was necessary to submit critical reports. The practice of providing professional consultations to the artistic community and making working visits to artists' studios also fell by the wayside; the latter were undertaken on request, but were not effective. The main reason for the "failure" of the consultations was the artists' distrust of the competence of the critics; however, the influence of the "food chain" and the issues of biased management of the generous state funding of the artistic realm raise deeper doubts.

Fundamental changes in the activities of the critics' section can be observed from the end of the 1940s, and the state, which underwent certain changes from the end of the Stalin era, contributed to the formation of new objectives in the realm of art criticism. The institutional structure and functional purpose remained the same.

From the mid-1950s, the critics' section faced a new challenge – it needed to evaluate the creative work of the new generation of artists, who, under the name of the "50s generation", had begun searching for new content and forms of artistic expression within the framework of socialist realism. The changes which then developed immanently in Georgian art presented critics with a dilemma – they had to either protect the old standards, values and hierarchies or accept new ones. The unusual intensification of artistic life at this time, marked by several events in the republic and the Union, fuelled such a discussion; furthermore, the second congress of Georgian art in Moscow (1957) resulted in the significant promotion of art criticism; works published during the preparation for this event (about twenty monographs and fifty individual articles) were regarded as a significant achievement, considering the previously existing stagnation in the publishing industry.

The need to reevaluate past activities then evolved: an irreversible process of “discovery” of historical periods previously taboo, as well as of artistic trends and individual artists, began. This saw, for example, publications about the works of Lado Gudiashvili and David Kakabadze, prominent modernist artists persecuted by the Soviet regime.

The articles published without the agreement of the critics’ section were considered a “revival of formalism”; at the same time, analysing and discussing the artistic directions of the new generation became a principal issue, since indifference and non-interference were considered harbingers of the uncontrollable developments. This raised the question of the necessity of constructive criticism which would reject the ideological tendencies of previous critical methods and also the Soviet colonial context of these.

One can consider the plenum ordered by the board of the Artists’ Union of the USSR of March 1959 an attempt to systematically “revise” the Stalinist era; this plenum was designed to summarise the activities of Georgian critics and art critics during last two years, and their effects, but in fact delimited boundaries between the “old” and “new” approaches. The outcomes of the 20th (1956) and 21st (1958) congresses of the Communist Party, with their rejection of the cult of Stalin and transition to building a different type of communism, were the historical preconditions for the plenum – Soviet society was in the state of paradigm shift, and the purpose of art criticism was changing as well.

At the plenum of 1959, whilst proclaiming adherence to the course set by the party (demanding the partisanship of art, declaring socialist realism the only artistic method, discouraging individualist-anarchic “pure art”, etc.), Georgian critics also declared support for the new generation of Georgian artists. The speakers, who included Beno Gordeziani, Otar Piralishvili and Shalva Kvaskhadze, recognised that examining the question of national identity was an urgent necessity. This would involve the study of pre-Soviet Georgian art criticism, such as the works of Archil Jorjadze, Kita Abashidze, Vakhtang Kotetishvili, David Kakabadze, David Kasradze, Geronti Kikodze, etc. The “exaggerated idea of formalism and its

limits” established in the criticism of previous decades, when any individual-creative quest was considered an ideological peril, was negatively evaluated.

The self-reflection of the field identified two categories of critics: those who gave preference to formal analysis³ and those who prioritised conceptual-ideological aspects⁴. While discussing the latter approach, which, in turn, was a reflection of the fundamental problem of form-meaning opposition in Soviet art – the question of synthesizing the aforementioned methodological approaches came up for the first time, and is associated with art-critic Otar Piralishvili.

It should be noted that, despite the reactionary-orthodox views of some of its members⁵, the critics' section always reacted sharply to radical conjunctive works in the sphere of art criticism. In this regard, the following publications in the Russian language were exemplary: "Fine Art of the Georgian SSR" (1957) by Igor Urushadze and "About the Trend Foreign to Soviet Art in the Work of Some Artists" (1962) by Mikheil Topuria. These books ignored the legacy of Georgian modernist art and expressed a strongly negative attitude towards the "50s generation". The critic Nino Gudiashvili called Topuria's work "harmful", and taking into account the suspicious peer-review process, considered the publication of the work a crime⁶.

The institutional crisis of the critics' section, and its confrontation with the presidium of the Artists' Union in the following decades, indicates a cancer in the field of art criticism. The scepticism and struggles for power of the artistic community drove critics out of the

³ This particular idea drew inspiration from the then-popular essay about Davit Kakabadze by the art historian Gaiane Alibegashvili.

⁴ In this case, the generalization was based on the example of the work of the art critic and gallerist Mikheil Topuria.

⁵ The critics' section, with its older staff, had trouble identifying with the ongoing changes - their doubts about the advantages of “moving away from realism”, the decreasing interest in *Thematic* exhibitions and *Thematic* pictures, the so-called *Free exhibitions*, etc. - seem to have been genuine.

⁶ NAG, *the deposit of the Artists' Union*, f. 10, ser. 1, file #733, 9; April 13, 1962 session.

exhibition juries and evaluation committees. One of the consequences of this mutual mistrust was that requests made by the critics to establish specialized periodicals were satisfied only in exceptional cases⁷ and without the desired financial and moral support.

The “frivolous attitude” of the artistic community towards criticism, which became a permanent barrier over the years and a precondition for an overcritical attitude towards the field, was often the main topic on the agenda of the critics' section. From the 1960s, it became part of public discourse, when critics moved from defensive texts to offensive opposition, and required artists to take responsibility for their biased and groundless remarks; they pointed out the need to be conscientious about familiarising themselves with publications, and of recognising the importance of art critics' other activities, such as participation in exhibition discussions, academic forums and conferences⁸.

Despite ongoing renewal and replenishment of the section, following these events it could not restore its previous importance - The peculiar oppression of critics and their field of activity continued until the 1980s, when, in order to prepare competent materials, the obligations of the section were reduced to "supervising and assisting" corresponding departments in television, radio and the printed press.

The Power

Soviet ideological campaigns revealed certain features of art criticism: the need for critics to serve the state's propagandistic-educational goals, its institutional dependence on political

⁷ Apart from the *Sabchota Khelovneba* (Georgian: “*Soviet Art*”) magazine, which was the central arts publication of the republic and the main body of the Ministry of Culture of Georgian SSR, articles about fine art were published regularly in the illustrated almanac *Freska* (Georgian: “*Fresco*” - founded on the basis of the journal *Nakaduli* (Georgian: “*Stream*”) in 1967) and the annual newspaper *Mkhatvari* (Georgian: “*Painter*” - published by the Artists' Union of the Georgian SSR since 1971).

⁸ The speech of the critic Leila Tabukashvili in the 1960s (NAG, *the deposit of the Artists' Union*, f. 10, ser. 1, file # 1309, 25-30); the plenum presentation of the art historian Kiti Machabeli in 1981 (NAG, *the deposit of the Artists' Union*, f. 10, ser. 1, file # 1298).

conjuncture and the state's instrumentalisation of resources. In exchange for participating in these campaigns, criticism was granted a temporary, destructive power; this ultimately led to irreparable losses of human and cultural resources in the whole Union (as seen in the notorious numbers of professional bans, arrests, exiles and executions)⁹.

In the 1930s and 1940s the objective of these ideological campaigns, which began during dramatic periods of power redistribution, was to establish the paradigm of socialist realism and to secure the isolationism of culture. The idea was to create artistic structures oriented towards producing propagandistic works which served totalitarian ends.

Individual and party initiatives were equally involved in the process of establishing ideological control. Major official decrees were always preceded by "exposures" of a personal nature, which gradually, or in some cases almost instantly, were moulded to the political dispositions of the regime.

Soviet totalitarianism legitimised every political decision through ideological campaigns. Discreditation campaigns begun in Soviet Russia were repeated in Soviet Georgia. Two crucial ideological reorganisations of Georgian fine art exactly reflect the general Union-wide experience.

The first of these, referred to as the struggle against "bourgeois formalism", appeared in discussions from the end of the 1920s and reached its culmination in 1936.

The repressive power of this campaign was significantly weakened by World War II. However, right after the end of the war, the ideological "scourging" of Soviet culture, which was then absorbed with exposing and subverting "featureless cosmopolitanism and kneeling before the West", became methodologically refined and much more fundamental, becoming a distinguishing feature of the late Stalinist era.

⁹ ნინო ზაალიშვილი, საქართველოს რეპრესირებული მხატვრების *ნუსხა//ტერორის ტოპოგრაფია: საბჭოთა თბილისი*, თბილისი 2011, 140-156.

The discussions held during the 1936 campaign in Georgia, with their impudent and threatening ultimatums, pronounced anathema on the "formalist harmfulness" of the work of the older artists educated in France, but also openly campaigned against younger artists influenced by "bourgeois-decadent art"¹⁰.

Artists deemed to be "formalists" were accused of not making use of their erudition and professional qualifications to portray the socialist era, adopting modernist methodology, and, most importantly, applying the wrong methods of educating the unprepared, unsettled youth.

The ideological attack on Georgian fine art in 1936, and the establishment of its new theoretical basis, were undertaken entirely by critics. In this regard, the solid justifications of socialist realist doctrine and convincing demagoguery of the critic Aleksander (Shura) Duduchava – the figurehead of the campaign, a high-level official in the field of culture and one of the most influential supporters of the new order – are noteworthy. Duduchava was the author of the signal publication of the Georgian "anti-formalist" campaign¹¹ published just after the programmatic articles of the *Pravda* newspaper appeared¹².

A cascade of extensive, well-informed speeches by Duduchava also established a longstanding tradition of "formalistic" discussion of specific authors and their works.

¹⁰ The campaign had no quarrel with easel drawing and scenography; sculpture – as an effective form in realising the principles of socialist art – was also "excluded"; there was no ideological condemnation of the sculptor Iakob Nikoladze, who studied in the workshop of Auguste Rodin and shared European cultural experience – he was considered the founder of sculptural *Leniniana*.

¹¹ Aleksander Duduchava, Against Formalism and Simplification, *Sabchota Khelovneba*, 1936 (3), 1.

¹² In 1937, a special collection of essays, which exposed formalism and naturalism, was jointly published by the Association of the State Book and Magazine Publishers (ОГИЗ) and the publishing house specialising in fine art (ИЗОГИЗ). This collection included articles published in the central union press in 1936, which began with well-known articles published in *Pravda* newspaper, <http://tehne.com/library/protiv-formalizma-i-naturalizma-v-iskusstve-sbornik-statey-moskva-1937>

Aleksander Duduchava - whose statement "a fight against someone is a fight for his own sake" became a motto of the 1936 campaign - was arrested and executed on November 12, 1937. At one of the meetings held at this time, the artistic community, shocked by this "making an example" punishment, immediately discredited the critic destroyed by the "Great Terror", and through this act of self-preservation unintentionally presented the odious face of art criticism acting on behalf of the regime.

The neologism *Duduchavshchina* (Duduchavism) - introduced by the artist Vasil Krotkov at the 1937 report plenum of the Georgian Artists' Union - was an attempt to personify repressive criticism, which was held to consist of arbitrary management in the name of Marxism and the party, an arrogant attitude towards "non-partisan" artists, manipulation through fetishised "socialist" standards, suppression through contractual timeframes, etc¹³.

Thus, the artistic community gave its verdict on criticism compliant with the state authorities; it was also well aware of the political basis of the violence of "formalist inquisition", and some¹⁴ did not support the schematic repetition of Russian parallels and the neglect of recent historical preconditions for creating local art.

For many the real face of the campaign became obvious: it was a means of searching for a proverbial scapegoat in artistic culture in the name of formalism through aggressive, slanderous criticism; the latter, like during the post-war campaigns, served mercantile, careerist aspirations.

Unlike its unanimous embrace of the campaign of 1936, the reaction of the Georgian artistic community to the ideological campaign of the 1940s was much more diverse. Georgian periodicals hardly responded to the polemical articles published in the central press. Instead, important discussions were held at the internal meetings of arts organisations. The first stage

¹³ NAG, *the deposit of the Artists' Union*, f. 1, ser. 1, file #100, 119.

¹⁴ For instance, the artist Apolon Kutateladze, NAG, *the deposit of the Artists' Union*, f. 1, ser. 1, file #82, 12-14.

of these meetings (spring of 1948) was distinguished by noticeably tolerant attitudes towards the formalist legacy of fine art – the consequent reassessment of the outcomes of the anti-formalist campaign of the 1930s was the first of its kind.

This time, the leaders of the Artists' Union of Georgia accepted the existence of formalist artists, and granted them the right to participate in exhibitions; their previous reluctance to engage with the modern world was explained by the “intimidation policy”, and the failure of the “formalists” to utilise their highly professional knowledge. The irresponsibility of the Georgian artistic community was blamed for the wasting of these artistic-intellectual resources¹⁵.

However, these liberal attitudes did not remain unnoticed by the party leaders; at the final discussions of the year (autumn of 1948), those same leaders of the Artists' Union demagogically demanded the final “transition” to socialist realism, threatening to ban creative activity if this were not done – the existence of formalist remnants was declared inadmissible against the background of the growing “people’s masses”. The main accusation retained from the 1936 campaign – that the new generation were being raised using ideologically unsound methods - resulted in the humiliating neglect and exclusion from the artistic community of the great Georgian modernist artist David Kakabadze¹⁶.

In the post-war period, when Union cultural policy took the form of the so-called *Zhdanovshchina* phenomenon¹⁷, art criticism was “assigned” the new task of discrediting different target audiences. In April 1948, during the final stage of the second wave of

¹⁵ NAG, *the deposit of the Artists' Union*, f. 10, ser. 1, file #361, 103-104.

¹⁶ Following the events of 1948, David Kakabadze was deprived of the title of professor and dismissed from the Tbilisi Academy of Art; he was denied all opportunities for professional activity, and this acute stressful condition soon affected the artist's health and led to his sudden death of heart failure in 1952.

¹⁷ This campaign, which began in 1946, after a famous report about the magazines *Zvezda* and *Leningrad* by the top party official Andrei Zhdanov; this was closely followed by the party decrees of 1946-1948, including the final one, *The Resolution of February 10, 1948, on the Opera “Great Friendship by Vano Muradeli*.

ideological resolutions, a meeting held at the Artists' Union of Georgia became the first attempt of the critics' section to make a serious statement – after the campaign of the 1930s, the theoreticians of the field made their first public presentation on behalf of the Artists' Union.

When assessing the Georgian artistic community's attitude towards the ideological format of the meeting, we discover the revealing fact that, despite an agreement concerning this, some speakers avoided dealing with the themes of the plenum, which resulted in an “awkward” and unusual prolongation of the preparatory period. The distancing from activities which could have resulted in a renewed attack upon formalist tendencies in Georgian art indicated a hidden protest against the Moscow campaign.

Questions of unprofessionalism were raised regarding the work of the main speaker, Igor Urushadze; the aggression expressed towards him by the artistic community revealed a tendentiously sceptical attitude towards official art criticism, the greatest expression of which, in those years, was the existence of the critics' section and the work of Igor Urushadze himself¹⁸.

The orthodox right wing of art criticism lives in the Georgian Soviet cultural memory through a famous confrontation with the Institute of Art History. This ideological conflict was fed by the post-war propaganda of “Soviet Patriotism”, which, under the pretext of exposing bourgeois influences, launched a large-scale attack on academic circles, universities, museums and critics which resulted in an extensive ban on professional activities, changing and rewriting - academic programmes and strategies, suppressing publishing bodies and even closing museum collections or entire museums (as in the closing of the State Museum of Modern Western Art in Moscow in 1948, which was based around the famous collection of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist art assembled by Sergei Schukin).

¹⁸ NAG, *the deposit of the Artists' Union*, f. 10, ser. 1, file # 362, 102.

The culmination of these attacks was *Pravda* newspaper editorial of January 28, 1949 entitled “About the Anti-Party Group of Theatre Critics”, which became the initial text of the struggle against cosmopolitanism. This was explicitly called for and developed in the article “For Soviet Patriotism in Art” by Aleksandr Gerasimov – the president of the USSR Academy of Arts¹⁹; in it the author directly campaigned against art critics considered sworn enemies of “realism”.

In Georgia, unlike in Russia, the target of the campaign against fine arts theoreticians was not art critics but the academic circles studying issues that, although related to art, did not deal with modern Soviet culture. Active art critics were not involved in revisionist activities, and worked without subjective biases and ideological deviance (amongst them, Shalva Alkhazishvili – once an active supporter of Georgian modernism, who was published in the 1940s and allowed to review Stalin’s jubilee exhibitions).

On the other hand, the campaign did not affect Georgian museum collections – since its founding, only Metekhi Fine Arts Museum had continued to function, and even then, with closed collections, which, except on the rare occasions retrospective exhibitions were held, were not accessible even to professionals in the field (during the Stalinist period, a whole generations of Georgian artists were raised without access to native museum collections)²⁰.

The Institute of Art History of the Georgian SSR Academy of Sciences, led by the academician Giorgi Chubinashvili, provoked ideological criticism. The academic scope of this institute was the research of medieval art, but “questions” were raised regarding the research methodology applied by the institute; the latter was based on the achievements of the

¹⁹ Документ №109, "За советский патриотизм в искусстве". Статья в *Правде* президента академии художеств СССР А.М. Герасимова, 10.02.1949, <https://www.alexanderyakovlev.org/fond/issues-doc/69538>

²⁰ The issue of the Museum of Fine Arts was resolved only in 1952, when it was officially opened and professor Shalva Amiranashvili took charge of the museum.

German school of art history, and consequently directly related to the propaganda against “Kneeling before the West”.

The general tenor of the accusations against the Institute, in addition to an arrogant passiveness in the field of criticism, was that it recognised “descriptive works based on false traditions” and formalistic research methods. These very features became an ideological cliché used to describe the academic work of the so-called *Chubinashvilis*. This determined campaign against the Institute of Art History, which lasted until the mid-1950s, put its further existence under threat²¹.

However, in this complex situation, the dignified, highly-academic opposition of the researchers of the institute and their unusually strong morale, combined with the significant support of academic circles, proved enough to preserve this extremely important institution²².

The Press

The main body of Soviet art criticism in Georgia consisted of journalistic criticism. Despite the indifference of the press, and unresolved problems with publishing critical materials, the aspirations of the field were fulfilled to varying degrees by recognition in periodical publications; the objectives of art criticism were immediately manifest in the choosing and evaluating of the subject matter of these.

²¹ Although there are no statistics of the numbers of Georgian art theoreticians affected by the post-war ideological campaigns, according to the available information, unlike during the 1936 campaign in Georgia there was no radical repression of critics and art historians, unlike in Russia and some other Union republics (e. g. in Baltic countries).

²² As a consensus, it was decided that a special department for the study of modern and contemporary art would be added to the Institute of Art History, in accordance with which, the research plans would be rearranged – the “modern” department appears in the structure of the Institute of Art History since the end of 1952.

The evolutionary cycle of Soviet criticism began with setting totalitarian aesthetics – the technical perfection of the picture, the ability to imitate reality professionally, the restoration of a genre system and selective canonisation of classical traditions²³.

Later, it expanded to establishing a national form, and ultimately to allowing pluralism and legitimating aesthetically self-sufficient works. During the first stage, to keep up with the rewriting of history in accordance with Marxism, and thus remain on the pages of the Soviet press, art criticism occasionally turned to the falsification of art history (such as associating the foundation of modern Georgian culture only with the period of Sovietization).

The post-Stalinist liberalisation thinned out these notes of falsification and allowed the possibility of the half-truth; when events suppressed on political and ideological grounds in previous decades were recalled with careful interpretation, the underlying reasons for them, and the question – “why?”, were still avoided.

Despite extending its framework of action, art criticism still failed to call certain things by their right names (the issue of repression of artists was not raised, the Stalinist period was mentioned in general terms, the willfulness of “biased artists”, not the party leadership, was declared responsible for political-ideological restrictions).

Beginning in the 1960s, art criticism in Georgia experienced an emancipation – while expanding the core concept of realism, critics acted in the name of creative freedom and subjectivity; propaganda was gradually transformed into popularisation, socialist determinism into the analysis of aesthetically self-sufficient artifacts, the search for international unity into the manifestation of national identities, *Peredvizhnik* norms into abstractionist-modernist standards and the literary discourse of art into a philosophical-historical one.

²³ X. Гюнтер, Жизненные фазы соцреалистического канона, Институциональный комплекс соцреализма, сборник *Соцреалистический канон*, ред. X. Гюнтер, Е. Добренко, СПб 2000, 280-282; И. Голомшток, *Тоталитарное искусство*, Москва 1994, 170.

The only thing which remained unchanged in the orthodox wing of Georgian art criticism was deep scepticism towards change and the polarisation of values.

Creative discussions of the 1930s had produced an outline of the ideal type of critic – the “artist-critic” (Aleksander Duduchava), who would synthesize the Marx-Engels-Lenin-Stalin theory and artistic practice in his thought. The observations of prominent figures of modernist culture, writers, and artists (amongst them Vakhushti Kotetishvili, Ali Arsenishvili, Simon Chikovani, Shalva Alkhazishvili, Benjamin Gordeziani, etc.) reflected this very idea, which was the foundation of art criticism in the mentioned period.

The periodical criticism of those years is of special interest. The sterile ethos of socialist realism was not yet established as the norm, and subjective interpretation and improvisation were still allowed. The publications of this period are distinguished by critical pathos, lively discussions, smart formulations and an effortless manner of narration. The vast majority of articles are exhibition reviews, which present the issues discussed with journalistic sharpness and erudition, showing an ability to pose questions about the modern cultural context, including Western European art (referencing the “bourgeois” context, and, particularly, using the word “European”, would be banned in the following decade and until the 1980s)²⁴.

The main question art criticism and its periodical materials posed in the early 1930s-1940s was how to depict the new Soviet man. There was an insistence on showing his social nature, and rejecting any kind of indifference to this on the part of the creative community. Critics were consistent in adopting the rhetoric of the new times; however, this did not prevent them noticing the flaws in the practical realisation of Socialist art.

Common trends included the “illustrativeness” of the new art and the problem of the increased amount but decreased quality of artifacts, which was caused by speculation on

²⁴ The article by Dimitri Janelidze “Another Exhibition of Soviet Art” (*Mnatobi* (Georgian: “*Luminary*”), 1935 (7-8), 329) starts with the outrageous statement: “Picasso made a picture out of dried dung”, which would have been seen as an impossible ideological diversion in the more orthodox “future”.

ideological themes and relevant topics. Theoreticians openly stated that hasty, professionally unmotivated works were being instigated by the state commissions and the planned economy, an issue which would later only be discussed during internal meetings of the Artists' Union.

The purpose of the often ideologically exaggerated articles of the late Stalinist press, where criticising a “thematically justified” work of art could be seen as politically incorrect, changed from the 1950s onwards.

This came about, first of all, due to the emergence of a new generation of artists. Art criticism, which at that time, instead of conveying personal impressions, was required to disclose the objective meaning of an artwork and explore its psychological and philosophical-aesthetic depths²⁵, had to address new ways of artistic expression.

The critic's eye, which had become “unaccustomed to the authentic form” (Leila Tabukashvili) began to examine the growing interest in the technique, form, and colour of a picture and the relative complexity of its message.

The majority of critical publications of this period were reports, which significantly lacked a conceptual aspect (reasoning is often provided without a conclusion); formal analysis is often limited to composition/colour, and the research material does not contain historical-social perspectives.

At this transitional stage of Georgian Soviet art criticism, the art historians/researchers and postgraduate students of the Institute of Art History become involved as a result of ideological pressure. Their appearance generates historical publications with a scholarly apparatus confined by the press format (with a rare practice of referencing), a strict

²⁵ A plenum on the issues of Georgian Soviet art history and art criticism, March 18-19, 1959, NAG, *the deposit of the Artists' Union*, f. 10, ser. 1, file #740, 30.

adherence to chronology, dominating formal analysis, and observations devoid of subjective-emotional reasoning.

Notably, such articles did not follow the prevailing ideological maxims, or unlike mainstream criticism, applied them only nominally. They were journalistic, but discussed theoretical-aesthetic issues related to Marxism whilst seldom making an impression with their journalistic acuity²⁶. Georgian art criticism then developed amidst the ongoing reconciliation of and confrontation between these two wings.

The 1970s can be considered a turning point in Soviet art criticism. A special Union resolution addressed to the field (the resolution of January 21, 1972, “About Literary-Art Criticism”) revealed the difficulties inherent in the existing conditions and pointed to the need for renewal. This resolution, in line with others from other sources, appealed for a thorough scholarly study of theoretical and methodological questions; it was designed to significantly encourage the work of critics and relevant academic-research institutes.

The need for a painful reevaluation of socialist art was also a determining factor in this attempt at reform. The struggle to maintain the primacy of this was ongoing²⁷, because the active and advanced segment of the creative community had already openly expressed scepticism about the doctrine of socialist realism and rejected the necessity of discussing the purpose of fine art from a propagandistic social-political perspective. Hence the demand to confront revisionist aesthetic concepts brought by “Western influences” was added to the purpose of art criticism.

²⁶ The critic Otar Egadze pursued his impressive journalistic career from 1953 to 1973 as an editor of the main artistic organ in the republic – *Sabchota Khelovneba*. His journalistic characteristic was what you would expect: unusually large texts were organically integrated into the teachings of Marxism-Leninism, given a complex vocabulary and self-satisfied, demagogic narration.

²⁷ Givi Baramidze: “if, instead of instructing, we cover up and unjustifiably protect the young artists entangled in “isms” today, not only socialist realism but even “naïve realism” will be desired tomorrow”- Givi Baramidze, About Socialist Realism in Georgian Fine Art, *Sabchota Khelovneba*, 1973 (10), 38.

The party leadership considered nihilistic attitudes toward socialist realism methodological errors, and pointed to their “politically immature” nature. Cultural politics also radically opposed the practice of criticising “defective sides of life” from a non-Marxist perspective, considering it an ideological diversion²⁸.

At the beginning of the 1970s it was clear that art criticism did not lack competent professionals, but there were insurmountable difficulties in realising professional potential. Modern Georgian artistic culture remained the subject of monographic research, rarely discussed in incisive journalistic criticism. Despite this, within a rather homogenous mass of critical articles there appeared novel publications, such as rare essays published in the form of a debate²⁹, the first observations about the legacy of Georgian modernism (a contribution of employees of the Georgian Museum of Art), and cultural history materials³⁰, which required a well-informed reader.

The authors of some of the best critical articles in those years were the brothers Irakli and Giorgi (Gogi) Ochiauri – two sculptors whose essays, in addition to a deep professional knowledge of the subject, are notable for their tact and sharp observation. The polemical power of these articles – concise, well-grounded, and accurately accentuated discussions on problematic questions and statements exclusively relevant to the field – is worthy of

²⁸ Eduard Shevardnadze: the party is the mind, dignity, and conscience of our age! *Sabchota Khelovneba*, 1974 (6), 13.

²⁹ The research interests, in depth articles and lectures of the artist and art historian Otar Piralishvili, a distinguished member of the critics’ section, is noteworthy; from the 1950s, he presented the problems of modern Soviet artistic production from a different perspective (such as the specifics of creating expositions for jubilee exhibitions, peculiarities of the perception of a work of art, and in general, the complexity of the questions of artistic reception, etc.). He was also the author of the first discussion articles in the 1970s, such as his response to the observations of recognised Soviet art historian and cultural historian Moiseï Kagan, - Otar Piralishvili, What Does “Strict Realism” Mean, *Sabchota Khelovneba*, 1974, #7, 65.

³⁰ The articles of Dimitri Tumanishvili - a researcher at the Institute of Art History - demonstrate remarkable erudition and a highly professional culture and are notable for their broad chronological and contextual range.

attention. The criticism of the Ochiauris is also distinguished by the ability to generalise contexts and present artistic phenomena as a whole³¹.

The new tendencies observed in art criticism and its periodical publications in the 1970s were still visible without significant change in the following decade. However, the main body of critical writing automatically followed the old tracks, providing standard, less meaningful materials to readers, such as isolated discussion of particular events and authors instead of exploring general topics, discussing artistic works in historical-chronological terms and aestheticising them instead of expanding cultural perspectives.

In the 1980s, the final years of the Soviet project, the party-supported legacy of socialist realism lost even more credibility. This time, the official struggle was directed against the uncontrollable fascination with “fashionable trends” in Western European art, which sought to overcome provincialism and epigonism. This attempt to expose the crisis of bourgeois culture remained relevant, but most of the artistic community considered the desire to identify with modern trends a logical process inherent to Georgian culture rather than part of the baleful influence of cosmopolitanism.

The same period marked the appearance of a new historical stage in Georgian art criticism – efforts to conceptualise modern Georgian fine arts intensified significantly. Solid observations on modern and contemporary Georgian art by art historians, literary scholars and museum workers appeared in the mainstream of art criticism without linear retrospectives, and about the research subject only. It was rare for the Union or contemporaneous European context to be taken into account³². The presentation of the work

³¹ The Ochiauri brothers were amongst the first to raise their voices against the profanation of artistic production and consumerist hysteria seen in the fields of modern Georgian metalwork and monumental art; they also did not fail to notice the challenges of easel sculpture, and the pressing issues of the conservation of modern Georgian art.

³² In this regard, separate articles by Nana Kipiani, Tsisana Kukhianidze, Ida Kheladze, Eter Shavgulidze, and others are exceptions.

of unknown artists of the Tbilisi modernism of the 1910s-1920s (such as Felix Varlamishvili and Klara Kvees) and the interest in the previously unexplored topics of modern Georgian art and national culture was noteworthy³³.

In the same period, amid the multiple positive reviews, there suddenly appeared articles which challenged the non-conflicting reflections of the field, articles which had the ambition of objective criticism. Here we are talking about the critical essays of literary critic, later art critic, and philosopher David Andriadze (Andriasov)³⁴.

The unusually large texts published in the “Soviet Art” magazine in the form of a discussion aimed at solving fundamental problems and appealed for a radical revision of the traditional approaches of art criticism, the replacement of the contributions of critics and historians with those of culturologists and philosophers, the relentless exposure of the flawed aspects of modern Georgian art and a reasonable evaluation of Soviet totalitarianism.

However, it should be noted that academic art (discernable with its high professional and technical qualities), and how it overwhelmingly confronted the modernist aspirations of the artistic community, and the cynicism towards the creative searches of the new generation observed in Andriadze’s moralistic narratives, contrary to the statements of the author, paradoxically equate his observations with the methods of official criticism. It is not coincidental that several controversial statements and articles by David Andriadze³⁵ received a critical response from departmental bodies, the editors of the *Sabchota Khelovneba* (Georgian: “Soviet Art”) magazine³⁶, and art historians³⁷. This again reveals the tendentious

³³ Irina Arsenishvili, The First Easel Paintings in Georgian Art (Georgian Portrait Painting of the Second Half of the 18th Century and the Beginning of the 19th Century), *Sabchota Khelovneba*, 1988 (10), 65.

³⁴ The critic’s articles were published under the authorship of *David Andriasov* from the first volume of *Sabchota Khelovneba* in 1980, and *David Andriadze* - from the third volume of *Sabchota Khelovneba* in 1984.

³⁵ See the collection of the author’s articles “At the Turn of the Millennium” (Contemporary Georgian Painting in the Context of Art History and Theory), *Sabchota Khelovneba*, 1987 (7, 9, 10), 1988 (5, 6).

³⁶ Editorial, Current Tasks of Our Magazine, *Sabchota Khelovneba*, 1985 (10), 8.

aspect of the individualistic self-reflection of Georgian art criticism – intellectual snobbery, mannered narcissistic dialogue with the reader, and an eclecticism of theses.

The Conclusion

Despite centralisation and unified plans, Georgian art criticism of the Soviet period developed into a unique socio-cultural phenomenon. Interestingly enough, the criticism involved in building an ideological institution on the periphery of the regime served a purpose by setting tasks of local and national importance, not directly serving Soviet colonial schemes; however, those schemes inevitably had an impact, and imposed functional limitations and self-censorship.

Georgian art criticism has always been steadfast in following the “do not offend” policy³⁷, which hypocrite-enthusiasts actively called for the rejection of for several decades; pointing to central state examples, they categorically demanded offensive, relentless criticism, but this took place only exceptionally, and as a result of ideological pressure. In this respect, neither art criticism nor the vast majority of the artistic community could be “converted”.

Reflections on Georgian fine art in Soviet times are characteristically tolerant and conciliatory. Despite the party’s calls to enhance criticism and self-criticism, Georgian art criticism paradoxically avoided discussing problematic issues, and individual artists were discussed in terms of a positive ideal. The general picture did not include critical turns or creative crises, only artistic achievements. This, on the one hand, was close to the general

³⁷ In her tactful, well-grounded argument, art historian Nana Kipiani discussed the flawed attempts to synthesize different research methods, eclectic selection of research material, unsystematic observations and raising of research problems without in-depth analysis characteristic of Andriadze’s articles; along with original observations, she also identified plagiarism. Nana Kipiani, In Response to the Essays “At the Turn of the Millennium”, *Sabchota Khelovneba*, 1988 (10), 73.

³⁸ A concept introduced by the artist Alpez Kopaliani at the exhibition discussion in 1934, after David Kakabadze’s extensive report “13 Years of Sovietization”. NAG, *the deposit of the Artists’ Union*, f. 10, ser. 1, file #39, 65.

Soviet narrative, but it also laid bare the discontent in the field with certain factors: the complimentary-flattering character of evaluation, ignoring problematic issues and retrospectivism.

One can state that our observation of art criticism – through the periodicals of several decades and reports of administrative meetings of the Artists' Union of Georgia – has revealed its non-homogeneous, multi-functional nature, a striving for authority, and official intervention in the self-identification process of fine art.

Bound by systemic influences and ideological programmes, critics' attempts at impartial evaluation of major arts events are notable. However Georgian art criticism should be considered an authentic phenomenon of regional culture, which under the Soviet institutional conditions was virtually unable to present the general context of modern Georgian fine art, in relation to both contemporaneous Georgian culture and the artistic trends of the Union³⁹.

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³⁹ Difficulties in accessing contemporary global culture were increased by the ideological unfeasibility of its discussion.