

Artistic Decoration of Art Café *Khimerioni* and its Cultural Context

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In the early 20th century, artistic café clubs and café cabarets, as places where artistic leaders gathered and venues for creativity events, were spread across Europe and Russia. Similar places were also found in Tbilisi (Fantastic Tavern, Argonauts' Boat, Peacock's Tale, etc.). Although Khimerioni seemed similar at the first sight, it still differed from the others due to its function, status and the character of its decoration.

Initially Khimerioni was considered as the first house of Georgian Writers in 1919. Unlike the intimate art cafes, the large space of Khimerioni consisted of several parts: a central hall with a small stage for artistic performances and small rooms for the literary evenings and anniversaries. The Georgian symbolist poets' union Blue Horns was in charge of creating the appropriate atmosphere and artistic design for Khimerioni. They invited Sergei Sudeikin a distinguished representative of the Russian Art Nouveau. Other artists: David Kakabadze, Lado Gudishvili, Sigizmund Valishevsky, Kirill Zdanevich, Mose Toidze and Irakli Toidze also worked on the mural decorations in Khimerioni. Understanding the whole concept of the artistic décor of Khimerioni became possible after collating preserved paintings and different sources (memories, memos and artistic sketches). The content of the compositions shows the introduction of several themes that can conventionally be called Creator and Muse, Life and Culture of Old and New Georgia and Imaginary Reality of Art.

Khimerioni was the first among the artistic cafés of Tbilisi that, apart from general European tendencies, reflected the traits of national art, which was a component part of the cultural ideology of independent Georgia in 1919-1920.

The beginning of the 20th century (and particularly the 1910s) is one of the most significant stages in the development of Georgian culture. It is time when Georgian culture naturally and effortlessly became a part of European culture with its creative activity and numerous artistic events. At the same time, owing to centuries' long contact with the countries of the Near East, Georgian culture had been moderately embellished with oriental ornamentations and formed its own individual image, distinguished from others. This achievement, expressed in its irreversible aspiration for European artistic values, was the result of a difficult and painful creative journey which lasted for at least the three previous centuries. Although its fruit, as if symbolically, in an instant and in abundance, became visible just in the period of the independence of Georgia, between 1918-1921 in almost all the fields of culture and art. In this respect one of the greatest achievements was the famous exposition made possible by the financial aid and support of the government of independent Georgia in the former *Temple of Glory* in May of 1919. Eight paintings by the late Niko Pirosmiani were exhibited there and at the same time, painting from artists considerable importance from all generations (Beridze, 1975, pp. 27-28; Beridze, 1991, p.8). We can possibly see how highly members of Georgian society valued this event and what their expectations were, in the comment of Titsian Tabidze, a famous poet and one of the leaders of the cultural initiatives of those days: "It is said, only once in a hundred years may the sky open for a dream, and Georgia was on time for this opened sky in 1919 when the first exhibition of Georgian painters was held in the former *Palace of Glory*. In the palace, which in the past used to be only the Palace of Glory of our slavery, where our torn banners, Shamil's broken sword and Haji-Murat's undone helmets hung surrounded by Russian Tsarist cannons and cast-iron words of Emperor Aleksander the First's enticing manifest; just in this palace the Georgian Artists' Exhibition was held which laid foundation for the National Gallery. Tbilisi residents are not fond of recalling the fact that the heroes of that exhibition were Lado Gudiashvili and Davit Kakabadze, who afterwards were sent to Paris as laureates ... Many of you will remember Sergei Sudeikin's article on the Georgian exhibition of that time; he particularly emphasised Niko Pirosmiani's and Lado Gudiashvili's paintings" (Tabidze, 1966, pp.169-170).

This is the period when just a few meters walk from the Gallery, in the basement of the theatre of the Artists' Society, i.e., what is now the Rustaveli

Theatre building, in the area of the former *Anona* restaurant was the painted art café *Khimerioni*. It was painted by the “heroes” of the May 1919 exhibition – Davit Kakabadze, Lado Gudiashvili, other members of the exhibition and active creators of Tbilisi artistic life, Kiril Zdanevich, Sigizmund Valishevski, Mose and Irakli Toidzes. Along with them, Sergei Sudeikin held a special place in the creation (Beridze, V., 1975, c. 28; Beridze, 1991, p.8; Agiashvili, №6203, p.1), a famous Russian artist, representative of the second generation of *Mir Iskusstva* and the scenic designer of the world famous Parisian *Russian Seasons*.

At a glance, it may seem that *Khimerioni* is similar to the cafe-clubs widely spread in big cities of Europe and Russia, as well as in Tbilisi. Many of them were widely known and popular. For instance, *Fantastic Tavern* which was painted by Lado Gudiashvili, Iakob Nikoladze, Ilia Zdanevich, Zigmund Valishevski, Sergei Skripitsin – the caricaturist known by the nickname of *Sir Gey*, and Iuri Degen with *Phantasms* (Robakidze, 1989, pp. 337-340). It was designed from the very beginning as a continuation of the symbolic artistic-literary aesthetics of St. Petersburg art-clubs, *The Stray Dog* and *The Comedians' Halt*; however, at the same time, it was open for any trends of Tbilisi's creative-cultural life (Nikolskaia, 2002, p. 16; Magarotto, 2006, p. 57; J. E. Bowlt, 1995, pp. XX, 20-21). As the leader of the Futurists' Syndicate, the poet Aleksei Kruchenykh mentioned, “Poets not only of all artistic orientations, but of all languages, including Esperanto and the *zaumni* language developed by the Futurists' Syndicate participated in the soirees of the *Fantastic Tavern* (Nikolskaia, 2002, pp. 16-17). It was at its opening on November 12, 1917 that in Paolo Iashvili's impromptu first sounded the words “Our fantastic Tbilisi” (Lomjaria, 2002, pp.129-131) which later resounded in Grigol Robakidze's novel *Falestra*, as a “Fantastic City” and eventually established its place in the texts of art historians and specialists of culture as an epithet, describing the creative life of Tbilisi of those days. And it implied the free and open co-existence of different artistic tastes, creative disputes with one another, even those such as the one that occurred in the café-restaurant *Imedi* in 1918 where Ilia Zdanevich's report “On *Zaumni* Poetry and Poetry in General” was followed by a hot dispute between the symbolist *Blue Horns* and the Futurist *Zaumniks*. Here there was the avant-garde artists', Lado Gudiashvili's and Kiril Zdanevich's exhibition, which also caused quite a stir (Nikolskaia, 2002, pp. 13-15). Only a few fragments of information have survived on the life and artistic decoration of

these and other art-clubs of that time, yet, we can still say that they all represented part of a Europeanized super-culture existing within the space of the Russian Empire (Tabatadze, 2011, pp.30-39, 59-62).

Khimerioni opened on December 28th, 1919. While its artistic decoration showed definite European accents, there emerged accents of another character as well. These were based on a national ideology prompted by the time and functionally related to it. *Khimerioni* was primarily the first residence of the Georgian Writers' Union founded in 1917. The Writers' Union obtained it from the independent Georgian government on the basis of their appeal of the 16th June, 1919. It was considered to be a place of gathering for not only Georgian writers, but as a creative hearth for the representatives of all fields of art and as a temple of new Georgian culture (Agiashvili, №6203, pp.1-3; Kverenchkhiladze, 2008, pp.18-21). In contrast to the intimate small spaces of the art-clubs and café-cabarets of those days, *Khimerioni* was a considerably large space divided into several sections that were distributed in the basement of the *Society of Artists*.

The central hall with pillars designated for theatrical spectacles, performances, concerts, artistic soirées or other big events, had a small stage to the north and was connected by two staircases going downstairs. Smaller rooms located on the right side of the south central staircase were designated for literary soirees, writers' sessions and jubilees. It was the place where the writers' board and its editorial and jubilee committees worked, where *Poetry Conferences* and *Aesthetic Soirees* were held (Agiashvili, №6201, p.3).

The name *Khimerioni* and the creation of an atmosphere corresponding to it, as well as the organization of its artistic decoration was directed by the most active flank of the *Writers' Union*, the symbolic Union of the *Blue Horns*. They were the ones who invited Sergei Sudeikin, whose artistic world-theatrical-imaginary, loaded with allegories, was close and familiar to the *Blue Horns*. One more "maître", the acknowledged artist, Mose Toidze was engaged in the project, who created here compositions in an impressionistic mood, a characteristic for his art of that period, and which differed from Sudeikin's art. All the other artists as well, apart from the still very young Irakli Toidze, 17 years of age, were artists with their own original signature style, artists who were not only aware of the latest trends of art of the beginning of the

20th century but were active participants of its life, full of creative drive. And still, despite different artistic tastes and individual manners, all of them took into consideration the “symbolic” artistic aesthetics suggested by the *Blue Horns* and Sudeikin, which defined the thematic choice of the murals to a certain extent.

It seems likely that they developed several themes selected in advance. Based on the content of the compositions, conditionally they might be called *The Artist and the Muse*, *Mode of Life and Culture of the Old and Modern Georgia* and *The Imaginary Reality of Art*. The latter one was the main theme of Sudeikin’s creative works, and here, as well as elsewhere, it is most obvious and impressive everywhere (Kogan, 1974, pp. 72-98, 115-124; Kisilev, 1982, pp. 49-55). Here there are fragments of the chimeras, nymph-satyrs, the decorative still lifes and compositions related to the theatre in general or to the *Commedia dell’ arte* that have survived on the pillars and the walls of the hall. According to black-and-white photographs and the witnesses’ descriptions, among them were the portraits of Georgian poets, artists, Sudeikin and his fancy-dressed wife over the walls of the entrance, as well as portraits invoking Petersburg’s artistic Bohemian past – *In the Broken Mirror*, represented in the big hall. The British journalist and writer Carl E. Bechhofer Roberts visiting Tbilisi at that time even remarked that Sudeikin had portrayed his Georgian poet friends in *Khimerioni* more than once (Bechhofer, 1971, pp. 63-65) and allegedly, his self-portrait as well, which can be confirmed from the comments and a sketch made by an outstanding Georgian poet, already acknowledged those days as “the King of Poets” Galaktion Tabidze in his pocket notebook. Galaktion Tabidze describes an imaginary portrait of the artist in a shape of a winged demon wearing a black suit and white shirt, different from the self-portrait inserted in the composition on the staircase cell. It was painted on the “entrance arch of the hall” (Tabidze, №20, p.28).

In our opinion, another theme appears in the imaginary portraits as well; this theme was employed not only by Sudeikin, but according to the remaining fragments, Davit Kakabadze and Irakli Toidze. It is the theme of *The Artist and the Muse*. Sudeikin’s composition in the western niche of the big hall represents the theatre world and the woman-mask sitting in the left corner must represent the theatre Muse or its allegory (*ill. 1*). Whereas the creator, along with the two women, in our opinion, must be Sudeikin himself with his

wife, the actress, Vera De Bosset and his former wife, also an actress, Olga Glebova. As it is known, Sudeikin periodically created imaginary compositions with “characters” from his own life; for instance, in *Cabaret* (1916-1919) or *My Life*, real or allegorical figures represent Sudeikin’s friends and wives (Bowl, 1995, p. XV; Kogan, 1974, p. 169).

Davit Kakabadze’s famous panel over the southern wall of the big hall has partially survived. To our mind it must be dedicated to the literature and poetry. According to an old photograph, here too, on one side is a young artist-creator, presumably embodied by symbolist poet Paolo Iashvili, member of *Blue Horns* (ill. 2). He was handing a clean sheet of paper to the Muse of Literature and Poetry or the allegory represented in the shape of a dark-complexioned Georgian woman. Irakli Toidze’s version of this theme represents a composition that has survived today as a fragment over the restored murals of the restaurant *Anona* in one of the bigger side rooms. It is a young woman riding a horse (ill. 3). In Mose Toidze’s memorial house, there is a water-color sketch by Irakli Toidze and although it is a later replica and not a preparatory sketch, it exactly restores the named composition of *Khimerioni* (ill. 4). The young woman riding a horse is the Muse of the artist, and the artist holding a palette in his hand is looking at her with inspiration. The artist who created this is Mose Toidze, and this fact is confirmed by the documents kept in his Memorial House.

Other parts of *Khimerioni*’s decor, as it seems, can be united most clearly around the third theme, *Authentic life and culture of the old and new Georgia*. We must primarily note here Gudiashvili’s paintings distributed in front of Sudeikin’s panels within the staircase cell of the main entrance. Similar to the Sudeikin’s painting, it could have been a cycle integrated by the content. Today, out of the three compositions, parts of which can be vaguely observed in an old photograph, only *Stepko’s Tavern* has managed to survive. Gudiashvili mentions one of them – *Fox Guard*, although he does not say a word about the composition itself. In *The Salon Album of Vera Sudeikin-Stravinsky*, compiled and edited by the well-known specialist of Russian Avant-garde art, John E. Bowl, comprising memorial notes and sketches of the writers, poets, theatre figures, artists of the beginning of the 20th century and which was also mentioned by Titsian Tabidze in his memoirs (Tabidze, 1966, p. 267), we find Lado Gudiashvili’s preparatory sketch for the mural believed to be a sketch for *Khimerioni*, or with more likelihood, a sketch for

The Fantastic Tavern (Bowl, 1995, pp. 95-96, 165). If we observe an image of leaning tree leaves on the sketch and compare it with an analogous to tree in the corner of the old photograph (*ill. 5*), we realize that it is a preliminary sketch for *Fox Guard*. The young peasant depicted on it is holding a rope tied to an animal that looks like a fox and is leading him forward. He is followed by his beautiful beloved. The peasant, in our opinion, is the same inn-keeper Stepko. It may be a fable about a peasant being deluded coming to the city and turned into a small trader, were the central focus of this unparalleled colourful image of old Georgia and with it, old Tbilisi which Lado Gudiashvili knew particularly well.

Representation of the cultural achievements of the new, independent Georgia were undertaken by the father and son Toidze. From the fragments that have survived in the smaller rooms of the side flank, Mose Toidze's two compositions are dedicated to the most significant musical events, to the premiers of the first Georgian operas held on 5th and 21st February of 1919. They were Dimitri Arakishvili's *The Legend of Shota Rustaveli* and Zakaria Paliashvili's *Abesalom and Eteri*. Respectively, one of them opens with the scene of *Eteri's death*. From the surviving details of the other one we can discern the haloed face of Queen Tamar, the main character of Arakishvili's opera. Our suggestion is further confirmed by the fact that according to one of the episodes from Mose Toidze's daughter's memoirs the painter even participated in the process of creating the Arakishvili's opera. In her memoirs Aleksandra Toidze reveals that Mose became friends with Georgian composers such as Zakharia Paliashvili and Dimitri Arakishvili. "One moonlit night father saw off Dimitri Arakishvili who was visiting us. Tbilisi was gorgeous. The two artists were excited with its beauty. Father took Dimitri to his *tari* (oriental musical instrument N. Ch.) player. Having enjoyed oriental tunes, they went out into the street. The sad tune of *tari* reminded them of Shota Rustaveli. The moonlit night and the *tari* player inspired father to paint the picture *Shota in the Georgian monastery of Cross in Jerusalem*, while Dimitri Arakishvili composed the opera *The Legend of Shota Rustaveli* (Toidze, 1972, pp. 15-16). The main focus of Irakli Toidze's mural painting, we think, must be depicting literary novelties; this is made clear in the composition with a couple of wild goats. As we know, the literary journal *Dreaming Wild Goats* ("Meotsnebe Niamorebi"), with which the most of important Georgian writers and primarily, *Blue Horns* cooperated, was allegedly created in *Khimerioni*. It is noteworthy that out of 11 issues of the

journal published before 1924, the first three were released in 1919 (Abuladze, 1977 pp. 96-97). Irakli Toidze's other compositions might have been illustrations of Shio Aragvispireli's novel *Broken Heart*, which Titsian Tabidze called the most significant literary phenomenon of that time (Tabidze, 1966, pp. 59-63). We believe that this text, close to the symbolists with its fairy-tale allegorical plot, telling the love-story of an artist-creator and his love adventure, could well have matched the aesthetic space of *Khimerioni*, especially that which is represented in the offices of the Writers' Union.

We think a kind of a "dialogue" crowning the reality and culture of the new and old Georgia must have become Sudeikin's and Kakabadze's artistic "rivalry", and it is hard to say whether it actually took place or not. On the one hand, Sudeikin's composition distributed over the rectangular plane over the staircase cell of the main southern entrance was regarded as *Khimerioni's* signature with its portrayal of generalized types of the Georgian aristocracy of the 19th century (ill. 5); on the other hand, we know Kakabadze's sketch for *Khimerioni's* mural painting, where we can see contemporary Georgians wearing European clothes sitting and leaning over the banister. The gentlemen are identified as Lado Gudiashvili, Georgian writer Vasil Barnovi and Davit Kakabadze himself (Gudiashvili, 1987, p. 38), while we have no information about the identity of the beautiful ladies sitting on the tripod chairs; they might be the generalized images of contemporary Georgian women. The similar construction and representative character of both compositions suggest that we should read them in one and the same context. In Kakabadze's sketch there are Georgians leaning over the banister, but they represent the spiritual aristocracy, artists of various ages familiar with European culture. And while Sudeikin depicted vanished ghosts, Kakabadze portrayed living artists, future Georgians. It makes us presume that this panel ought to have been spread over an analogous place to Sudeikin's composition in order to balance it, on the similar rectangular plane over the northern entrance of the staircase. This is indicated by the rectangular form of the sketch, and further evidenced by the fact that there is no other similar plane in the hall.

Examples of the search for national content and artistic forms can be found mostly in Kakabadze's works that were made for *Khimerioni*. He, by his clear-cut structure and tectonics conveys the pursuit not only of artistic

“regulation” of concrete compositions, but a painting of the cross-vaulted ceiling, which is attributed to Davit Kakabadze (Gudiashvili, 1987, p. 38), played a significant role in creating this mood. It is possible to discuss his murals only on the basis of old photographs and fragments of the ornamental motives preserved over the two arches close to the southern and northern entrances. The restorers, with an inner tact and fine craftsmanship reconstructed the paintings of the ceiling according to these photos. Kakabadze’s choice of geometric and stylized floral and faunal decorative motives clearly gestures toward their origin - medieval Georgian frescoes. Together with Lado Gudiashvili, he had been taking sketches of mural paintings for years and also he studied Georgian ornamentation intentionally. The Monumental Painting Collections of the Georgian National Museum keeps copies of the medieval Georgian wall-paintings performed by Lado Gudiashvili and Davit Kakabadze in 1910s. In the same period Davit Kakabadze became interested in the forms of Georgian carved ornamentation and published articles about this (Kakabadze, 2003, p. 6). The decorative ornament here too, like in the best Georgian frescoes, adorns arches and cross-shaped vaults; it follows architectural forms and accentuates them so that they maintain the tectonics of the architectural structure of the interior and the perception of the space unity. The decorative painting of the ceiling also conditioned to a certain extent the sublime festive character of the main hall which distinguished it from St. Petersburg and Tbilisi artistic café-bars by their more intimate, individualistic artistic mood. Apart from ornamental motives, Kakabadze considered inserting still lifes on the *Khimerioni*’s walls and arches like decorative supplements. In contrast to Sudeikin’s still lifes, they are distinguished by “Georgian” content. About five watercolor sketches of these decorative still lifes made on paper still survive (11X13 cm, 15X10 cm, 13X11 cm, 11X10 cm, 11X8 cm) and their compositions depict objects typical for the Georgian way of life: earthenware jugs, “orshimos” (long handled wine ladles made from gourd) or plants (rose, pomegranate, grape cluster) were taken up to symbols.

Thus, we think *Khimerioni* is the first place among Tbilisi art café-clubs which along with the general European motifs, depicted national artistic trends as well. This was at the same time expressive of the ideology of the independent Georgian national culture and represented the aspirations of the young generation of artists.

Such a synthesis had undoubtedly certain claims to the status of *The New Temple of Art* and despite the fact that neither it, nor the state of the independent Georgia lasted very long, *Khimerioni* still managed to leave a significant impact on the development of Georgian culture.

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Figure 1
*Khimerioni. S. Sudeikin. "The Artist and the Muse".
Muse of Theatre (detail)*



Figure 2

Khimerioni. D. Kakabadze. "The Artist and the Muse". Black-and-white photograph of 20s. Georgia State Museum of Theatre, Music, Film and Choreography



Figure 3

Khimerioni. I. Toidze. "The Artist and the Muse". Muse of Painting. Preserved part of the composition



Figure 4

I. Toidze. *The Dawn*, a sketch according to the *Khimerioni* panel “*The Artist and the Muse*”. After 20s, 63X34 cm, paper, gouache. Mose Toidze’s House Museum

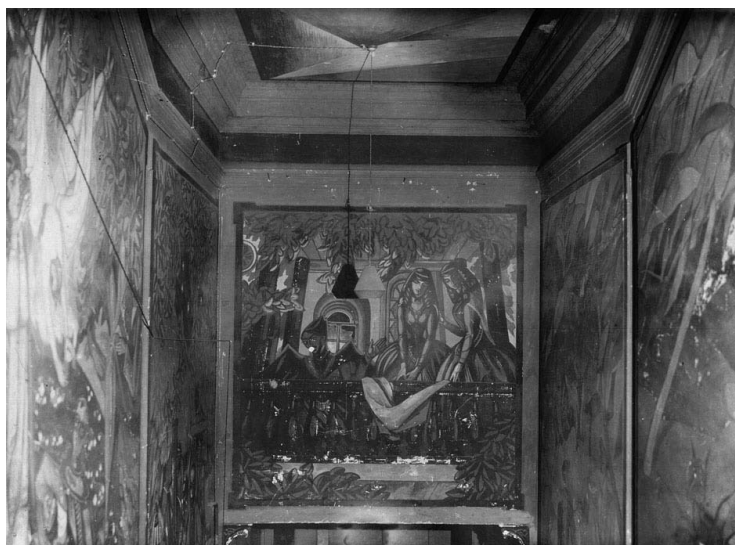


Figure 5

Staircase cell of the main entrance of the *Khimerioni*. On the left S. Sudeikin’s “*Georgian Poets and Artists*”, in the centre S. Sudeikin’s “*On the Balcony*”, on the right L. Gudiashvili’s compositions, with a fragment of “*Fox Guard*” on the edge. Black-and-white photograph of 20s. Rustaveli Theatre Museum