

The Aspects of Identity in 19th and Early 20th Century Church Wall Paintings in Georgia

Wall paintings within Georgian churches dated from 1801 to 1918 are among the most significant chroniclers of this period. Those who see the Murals of the 19th and early 20th century churches in Georgia usually emphasize their close link to contemporary Russian ecclesiastical art and even refer to it as “Russian”. Even though its appearance unquestionably reveals a European influence, its association with Russia is unsurprising, since from the early 19th century until 1918, when the Democratic Republic of Georgia proclaimed independence, the country was a Russian province. After conquering Eastern Georgia in 1801, Russian authorities abolished the autocephaly of the Georgian Church and replaced its Catholicos with the Russian exarch. Further, the Georgian language was banned at schools and within the Church.

In this period, a number of church wall paintings were created throughout Georgia which reflected the ideas and aspirations of Georgian nationalism. These wall paintings are very different from the medieval kind both in program and iconography, displaying a growing interest in national saints and the events of Christian Georgian history. That said, some of these murals fully intended to promote the Russian imperial identity and served to consolidate the power of the Empire over the conquered country.

In this paper, I will focus on the most significant examples.

First, Sioni Cathedral in Tbilisi, which is particularly important to Georgians for its association with a number of crucial historical events and persons (Fig. 1). Its wall paintings of the early 1850s, permeated as they were with the imperial spirit, were created by Russian painter Count Grigoriy Gagarin. Here is what Russian Count Sologub said with regard to this fact¹:

“In the heart of the Caucasus, in Tbilisi, a magnificent cathedral is to be restored... Not only could we call it a local historical milestone, but a landmark of the Russian arts. The cathedral is to be restored in the austere Byzantine style. Byzantine architecture, which has long been deeply rooted in the Caucasus, is very important to us, the Russians, as the original symbol of the Russian Church. Therefore, Sioni Cathedral, as a token of the two nations’ sacred union, restored after many centuries, is to belong not only to Georgia but to Russia as well.”

At the time, as is the case today, Russia had overwhelming imperial aspirations. The concept of restoration of the Byzantine Empire to bring together all the Orthodox countries had always been very dear to the Russian Emperors.² What’s more, the Russian Empire wanted to position itself as the patron, even the saviour, of Georgia, not the conqueror, as made evident by an event which took place in 1801. As said above, in 1801, Georgia’s statehood was abolished. In just a year though, as an apparent show of the “good will”, Russian Tsar Alexander I returned to Georgia the cross of St. Nino the Enlightener, preserved in Georgia from the 4th to the 18th cc. when, due to a sequence of unfortunate developments, it ended up in Russia. However, it proved to be a perfidious manoeuvre. The Georgian nobility rejoiced at seeing the sacred object, which was placed in Sioni Cathedral. Unfortunately, the joy was short-lived: during the church service marking the landmark event, Russian General Knoring besieged the church and forced the Georgian nobility to take an oath of loyalty.³ Yet, as the citation below shows, Alexander I portrayed the return of the cross in quite a different way:

*“As an expression of fondness for our brothers in faith, the Georgians will receive this gift as another symbol of our patronage . . . We order you to proclaim its return to the land of the Georgians . . . Let the miraculous force of the cross heal numerous wounds. God the merciful will consummate our intention and direct our efforts to save the Georgian nation in order to glorify the Saviour”.*⁴

The Russian Empire’s desire to restore the Byzantine Empire is directly indicated in the contract concluded with artist M. Troshinski, executor of the frescoes of Sioni that the dome was to be painted in the ‘Byzantine style’, according to G. Gagarin’s sketches and instructions. In Sioni, the substitution of the old iconostasis with a new single-tier chancel screen “according to the earliest Christian churches of the first century” is also associated with the neo-Byzantine strivings of the Russian Empire. G. Gagarin writes:

*“The Tsar-Emperor expressed a wish to tell me himself that he approved of this chancel screen, as, if the whole church is in conformity with the Byzantine taste, then the chancel screen, indeed, must be in correlation with the whole Church”.*⁵

In fact, the chancel screen of Sioni Cathedral created by Gagarin⁶, which had been devised as Byzantine by the donors ended up extremely eclectic (Fig. 2).

Although Sioni is decorated in the imperial spirit and the inscriptions are made in Russian, numerous Georgian saints are depicted there. The image of Saint Nino, placed above the niche where her cross rests, is logically inscribed in this context (Fig. 3). Given the fact that the Russian Emperor monitored the process of decorating Sioni Cathedral, we may presume that the depiction of the Georgian Saints had been envisaged as the representation of the Russian Empire’s mission to save said nation. However, it is not credible that the Russians had selected specifically the holy martyrs Archil, Luarsab and Ketevan from different time periods – the two holy kings and the queen who sacrificed themselves to their homeland and faith. Such a choice in saints seems to have been made by topical consideration of the era – the inclusion of specific national saints, martyrs for both their faith and homeland, appears to have been intended by Georgian activists striving to preserve their national identity.

Here is an excerpt from a journal published at the time:

*“On the pillars of the cathedral we see the columns of the Georgian Church: saints... fighters against fire-worshippers, and propagators of Christianity in Georgia”.*⁷

All the above determined the national character of the wall painting of Sioni Cathedral, revealed not only by the depiction of the Georgian saints, but also by the unconventional iconography present in the painting. The apse decoration, where an image of the Virgin is depicted, is, at first glance, very common (Fig. 4). The enthroned Mother of God is represented with the Child on her lap, flanked with Archangels, while the latter have David the Prophet and Patriarch Jacob on their sides. The row of prophets continues to the bema; however, the two stand separated from the others and are inscribed in the Apse composition as an entourage of the Virgin. Thus, the image in the Sioni Altar provides a completely novel version of the Virgin in Glory with St. David the Prophet and Patriarch Jacob. From the very start, David the Prophet had been considered the predecessor of the Georgian royal family of Bagrationi and, as kingship had been abolished in Georgia by that time, it cannot be accidental that the holy King David was depicted in supplication in front of the Mother of God in the composition of the Virgin in Glory.

In my opinion, the abovementioned reveal actions taken by Georgian patriots in response to the self-affirmation of Tsarism.

The Russian imperial spirit is clearly visible in the murals of the Holy Trinity Church in Tbilisi (Fig. 5), where, alongside the images of Georgian saints, the images of Russian saints can also be seen, among them Alexander Nevsky, Great Prince Vladimir (who is referred to as Saint Apostolic Prince Vladimir), Sergius of Radonezh, and others. Still, special attention is drawn to the depictions of Saints Cyril and Methodius. These two saints of Thessaloniki do not have any connections with Georgia; however, the service rendered by them to Russia is invaluable – they created the Slavic alphabet and disseminated Christianity in Russia. The saints are depicted in a rather prominent place in the south and north arms between the biblical scenes. Clearly, the presence of Saints Cyril and Methodius and their location is a purposeful step made towards propaganda of the advantage of the Church of Russia over that of Georgia. The presence of Russian saints in the Trinity Church is a distinct indication of the Russian Church's dominance over the Church of Georgia. However, this propaganda opposes the Georgian national idea. The first indications of this come from the inscriptions made not in Russian (as in the painting in Sioni Church), but in Georgian, in the *nuskhuri* script. Despite the fact that Russian saints are depicted in this painting, they are still unable to dominate - they are in minority, as, on entering Trinity Church, one is welcomed by an army of Georgian saints. Instead of biblical scenes, the majority of the painting is lavished on representations of Georgian saints, with the main focus brought onto them, indicating the donors' aim: to introduce the national attitude in the painting. Moreover, something strange attracts the attention of the viewer: the large images of Queen Tamar and Shota Rustaveli (Fig. 6), the great poet, on the eastern pilasters supporting the dome. Tamar was the Queen in the 12th-13th cc., a time of prosperity and peace in Georgia. Shota Rustaveli was her contemporary poet, the author of the epic poem 'The Knight in the Panther's Skin'. Certainly, these two historical persons, who have become a symbol of a once-powerful and united Georgia, echo this common national mood; however, it is very strange to see the poet, who is neither consecrated a saint nor is connected to this church, depicted in such a prominent way. Presumably, assigning a special place to Shota Rustaveli in the painting of Trinity Church was a response to a specific phenomenon. In the 19th c., Shota Rustaveli became the symbol of national identity and his creation "the national treasure". Trinity Church was painted in the 1890s, several years after a new edition of his work was prepared for publishing. The idea to elaborate a new edition of 'The Knight in the Panther's Skin' was voiced in the newspaper *Droeba* in 1880, whose initiators were writers and public figures of the time:

"We had intended to accord the printed version of 'The Knight in the Panther's Skin' with its manuscript.... However, we do not dare to take on the huge responsibility of dealing with such an important work alone. We would like anyone who regards Rustaveli as an invaluable national treasure to take part in this matter".⁸

The authors of the article offered members of the "Society for the Spreading of Literacy among Georgians" the chance to get involved in the process of elaborating the new edition, and appealed to Georgian society to lend the editors their manuscripts of 'The Knight in the Panther's Skin' in order to compare with other printed versions available at the time and create new full version. This idea was responded to the very next day:

*“In yesterday’s issue, you will have read the note signed by three persons according to which a special editorial staff has been set up in order to make corrections to the mistakes of our immortal poem ‘The Knight in the Panther’s Skin’. Rustaveli is our glorious writer who we, Georgians, can readily boast about. From times immemorial, our ancestors have had two precious, holy books consoling us in good times and bad; these were the Bible and ‘The Knight in the Panther’s Skin’. One reflected our creed and faith; the other – our ethnicity and Georgianness. Our predecessors were brought up on these two books; they made them courageous when faced by ordeal inside and outside the country... every Georgian must keep such a book very close at hand, always before them, and treat it like a relic... we are delighted to welcome the founding of an editorial staff for ‘The Knight in the Panther’s Skin’ and we are convinced that each Georgian capable of assisting in any way will help and facilitate such a heavy burden. It is a public matter and it is everyone’s duty to assist those who have undertaken such an important task”.*⁹

The editorial staff completed work on the text in 1882. Artist-engraver Grigol Tatishvili commissioned Hungarian artist Mihály Zichi to illustrate the book, while he undertook to embellish the borders and initials himself. Georgian contemporary publicist and critic Iona Meunargia wrote:

*“Ordinary decoration would not be valid for providing a worthy illumination of ‘The Knight in the Panther’s Skin’. It was necessary to search for completely new material for the decoration. Such material was available only in the monuments of Georgian architecture. Tatishvili made drawings of wonderful Georgian ornaments from the vast walls, domes and vaults of monuments created with Georgian artistry”.*¹⁰

The fact the preparation of a new edition of ‘The Knight in the Panther’s Skin’ was made to retain national identity is indicated by every fact cited above, as well as by each person named and their comments made with regard to publishing said new edition. The emergence of Shota Rustaveli’s portrait in Holy Trinity Church seems to echo this important public event. At the time Georgian statehood was abolished, when the Church of Georgia was deprived of autocephaly, when Georgian nationality faced the risk of disappearance, a great Georgian poet was represented kneeling at the altar of Holy Trinity Church, an author whose poem was compared, by public figures of the time, to the Bible in terms of its significance. The image of Shota Rustaveli in Holy Trinity Church accords special attention in one further way, and it serves a national purpose not only in conceptual terms, but also in appearance: the image of Shota Rustaveli is a copy of the only portrait of the poet that has reached us – the image painted in the Monastery of the Cross in Jerusalem, which once belonged to Georgia. The artist made the face a little more illusory-volumetric and yet the posture, clothing and character exactly repeat the original image represented in Jerusalem. However, he choose to depict Queen Tamar in the European style, while there exist five portraits of King Tamar executed in the medieval epoch. In the 19th century, it was common practice to invent and ‘touch up’ different iconographic versions of saints and historical persons. Although the attributes, setting and clothing characteristic to the iconography of certain saints provided in earlier versions are always taken into account, still much comes as a result of an artist’s imagination. This is how the images of saints were altered in Trinity Church, while Rustaveli is represented according to the original image of the Jerusalem Church. It must be recognized that by this time several portraits of the poet had already been

created. This copy of Shota Rustaveli's fresco from Jerusalem, which had been made bigger by dozens of centimeters, by its appearance enlivens the powerful and united Georgia which enjoyed great respect and influence not only inside the country, but beyond as well. Georgia already had its own monastery in the Holy Land when Russia counted its second century of conversion to Christianity and adopted literacy. The images of Saints Cyril and Methodius represented on the walls of Trinity Church remind us of this fact.

Here, we should also mention the painting of the apse of Trinity Church, a copy of the painting of the apse of Sioni Cathedral with minor alterations. The apse again shows St. King David praying before the Mother of God. In my opinion, the repetition of the novel iconography of the Virgin in Glory in Sioni cannot be accidental in Trinity Church. It is in this representation that Queen Tamar directs her scroll to on which the prayer to the Virgin is written: "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death". The only scene inserted among the figures of Georgian saints is included in the same context: the scene shows the Virgin handing the cross to St. Nino enlightener and sending her to Georgia. This brief period of St. Nino's life emphasizes the fact of Georgia's being chosen by the Virgin and the tradition of the Church of Georgia as counterweight to the lost statehood and deprived autocephaly. The newspaper 'Droeba' wrote:¹¹

"When a nation finds itself in the state we are in now, when it becomes oblivious of its identity, indifferent to the native, its ancestry, and fails to remember the old literature, restoration of the ruins takes on a special significance for the people; for it increases the national self-esteem, ennobles the people, gives them new ideals and builds up their energy".

It is in order to remember, awaken everything native, melt indifference, encourage and strengthen the national energy of Georgians facing the problem of existence that this allegoric painting was created in Holy Trinity Church.

The wall painting of the St David Church in Tbilisi belongs to about the same time, namely 1889 (Fig. 7). As per tradition, Christ the Pantocrator is represented on the dome: in the apse one sees popular images of the Trinity: The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit symbolized by a pigeon; while the altar paintings show the Apostles and the bema – the Mother of God and the Prophets. Ordinarily, the New Testament scenes would take centre stage, but the absence of those makes the St. David Church different: there, on all the walls and pilasters, we see frescoes of the Georgian saints. As opposed to the frescoes of Holy Trinity Church, in the St David Church there are no "strangers", only outstanding Georgians or people closely associated with the country.

The images of each saint are based on the illustrations of a very popular book of the time 'The Georgian Paradise', published in 1882 by Mikhail (Gobron) Sabinin.

Sabinin published 'Georgian Paradise' in Petersburg in 1882. However, by 1871-73, he had already published a similar kind of book – a full description of the lives of the saints of the Church of Georgia in the Russian language, in three volumes.

Born in Tbilisi in 1845, Sabinin's father was a clergyman who was Russian by nationality.¹² He had come to Georgia from Tver, married a Georgian woman and settled here. At first, Mikhail went to the Tbilisi Classical Gymnasium, and then continued studying in the Religious Academy of Petersburg, where he received qualification as a Candidate of Theology. His diploma work was 'History of the Georgian Church prior to the 6th Century'. In the last year

of study, Sabinin took monastic vows and was named Gobron. In the early years of being a student, Sabinin developed an interest in Georgia's history. It was then that he visited Georgia's churches and monasteries, became acquainted with the manuscripts preserved there, looked at old icons and relics, and wrote down the oral traditions as told by the locals. In the introduction of the book, he writes:

*"My noble reader, it is the decline of the Georgian Church that has prompted me to write this book that I entitled 'Georgian Paradise'. There is no other book, printed or handwritten, as comprehensive as this. All the information available to me is in it. I beg you, my noble reader and listener, to show diligence and add to it all you may know, so that our sacred language does not become desecrated... for there are many among our kinsmen and foreigners who want to see the destruction of our beautiful language which is so dear to God".*¹³

As Sabinin reports, he searched for these *vitae* in Georgian manuscripts of various periods and collected them; however, he could not find the *vitae* of some saints whom he considered the most important, so he made his own additions to the collection. It is remarkable what the author regarded most important to add:

*"...there were no stories of some of the abovementioned saints, who were extremely necessary for my programme: that of the Dormition of the Virgin, as our Church is allotted to the most Pure Virgin Mary; the story of the Apostle St. Andrew, as he was the first to preach the Word; the story of St. George, as he was closely related to St. Nino".*¹⁴

At the end, the author, filled with patriotism, addresses the reader again:¹⁵

"I did my best to commemorate all in this book. I beg you, the honest reader or listener, if you are aware of anything more than this, make attempts and be diligent to add to it, so that our holy language is not corrupted, which is mentioned by holy fathers and is equipped with spiritual mind and love, in order not to lose the vitae of the saints of Georgia. There are so many of us as well as strangers who would like to destroy the beautiful language beloved by God".

The foreword of 'Georgian Paradise' is an open manifesto inspired with national spirit. It is in this very context that the program of the painting in St David's Church, which was created under inspiration from Sabinin's 'Georgian Paradise', is perceived, and performed according to the illustrations of the same book ((Fig. 8, 9). Fifteen of the twenty-five illustrations of the collection were selected by the donors. Only holy fathers and kings, spiritual and secular leaders of Georgia, were depicted on the walls.

It is within the national context that one can consider the decoration of the Triumphal arch, where the image of Theotokos is depicted with the cincture in her hands (Fig. 10). The Cincture of Theotokos is what draws our attention most. Legend has it that a part of the Virgin's cincture has been preserved in Georgia since the 11th c. According to one version of the legend, Helen, the niece of a Byzantine Emperor, brought the cincture and the icon of Blachernitisa (Theotocos of Blachernae) to Georgia¹⁶ when she was married to King Bagrat IV. 15th c. foreign sources say also that pilgrims traveling in the Holy Land at the time called the Georgians "the Christians of the Cincture of Theotocos".¹⁷ In the 19th c., both the Georgian and foreign scholars highlighted the fact. In the wall painting of St David's Church, the Mother of God, with the cincture in her hands, seems to be pleading for mercy for the land of Georgia, of which she is regarded the patroness. It is the image of the Virgin that the 19th c. humble and humiliated Georgians used as the symbol of their faith and hope.

It is this idea, too, with which the icon of the ‘Glory of the Church of Georgia’ created by Mikhail Sabinin is filled (Fig. 11). One sample of this icon is still kept in the Church of St David and, having been turned into a national symbol from the very beginning, it still remains topical. The icon was printed as a chromolithograph first in Leipzig in 1889, and then in Berlin in 1895, and thus was spread not only throughout Georgia, but beyond.¹⁸ The icon depicts one of the most important and miraculous moments of St. Nino’s life – the ascension of the life-giving pillar. This scene became very popular in the 18th century and is depicted in manuscripts, seals, flags, and church murals. In almost all cases, not only does the composition of ascension of the life-giving pillar tell of an event from St. Nino’s life, but it is also represented as an image, implying the national notion.

However, Sabinin’s icon provides a more symbolized and altered version of this story. The icon ‘Glory of the Church of Georgia’ shows not only the participants of this event, but also the Georgian saints of other epochs. The central part of the icon depicts the pillar raised by an angel; St. Nino, standing at the pillar, is surrounded by dozens of Georgian saints. The names of those standing in the front are inscribed in their halos in the modern-day Georgian alphabet and in Russian, while at the back are nameless saints, whose images, presumably, consider all the Georgian saints. The upper part of the icon is dedicated to divine beings. Christ is depicted in the center with his hands raised, looking down at the Georgian saints and the life-giving pillar and blessing them. The holy apostles Andrew and Mathias are kneeling on his left, while St. George and the Virgin are on his right. The Mother of God, standing before Christ, is again holding her cincture and is imploring God to bless the nation allotted to her.

Nearly all the Georgian church wall paintings of the time are charged with such national spirit. The spirit of national revival, which grew in strength in the early 20th c., is perceivable in several frescoes of the time.

In this respect, the painting of the Dormition Church of Shiomghvime occupies a special place¹⁹ (Fig. 12). It was executed with great effort from Bishop Alexander Okropiridze and the Father Superior (later the Catholicos-Patriarch of Georgia) Leonide Okropiridze, who had the Shiomghvime Laura restored and the churches of John the Baptist and the Virgin painted. That the painting of Shiomghvime Church was an affair of national importance is evidenced by not only the depictions, but also by the press of the time. More saints are depicted in this painting than in any of the churches discussed above.

The painting of the Church of St. Alexander Nevsky in Abastumani, which was executed at the beginning of the 20th century, can be regarded as a very interesting phenomenon, with murals created by renowned Russian artist Mikhail Nesterov on the direct order of Prince Georgi Alexandrovich (brother of Emperor Nikolai II) (Fig. 13). On the Prince’s wish, the Church of Abastumani was built as an imitation of Zarzma Church. The Prince wanted it painted in the “Georgian Style”. Nesterov was fascinated by this idea himself, having visited a number of medieval mural paintings, studied Georgian antiquities and ornamental motifs, and showing interest in new tendencies and visiting the churches of Tbilisi Sioni and St. Alexander Nevsky. Nesterov painted Abastumani Church in 1902-1904, after Prince Georgi’s death. Themes suitable for the Russian Imperial Court were chosen for the church. Protectors of the Church – St. Alexander Nevsky and St. George – are depicted here in several places, which can be considered a sign of respect to the memory of Emperor Alexander III and Georgi Alexandrovich. Here are

Russian saints too – St. Sergius of Radonezh and St. Seraphim of Sarov, although St. Nino can also be found here. The church, painted by a renowned Russian artist who was brought to Georgia specially on the order of the Russian Prince, indeed served as reinforcement of the identity of the Russian Empire. “Georgian” features were only revealed in the ornamental décor, while the depictions themselves are marked with religious-mystical symbolism characteristic to Nesterov’s creative work, which is very far from medieval Georgian painting.²⁰

This article presents at least a general view of the processes taking place in Georgian ecclesiastical painting from the mid-19th to the early 20th century.

¹ Platon Ioseliani, *agcera tfilisis sidzveleta*, Tbilisi, 2009, p. 92-93.

² David Khoshtaria, “imperiuli identoba da rusuli stili tbilisis saeklesio arkiiteqturashi”, in *arkiteqtura da identoba, saeklesio mshenebloba tbilisshi (1801-1918)*, (Editor: David Khoshtaria), Tbilisi, 2015, p. 31-50.

³ Ketevan Asatiani, “vazis djvris istoriidan”, in *sakartvelos sidzveleni*, n 4-5, 2003, p. 35-36.

⁴ Platon Ioseliani, *agcera tfilisis sidzveleta...*, p. 108-109.

⁵ Platon Ioseliani, *agcera tfilisis sidzveleta...*, p. 110

⁶ Presently, the chancel screen does not exist.

⁷ Sionis tadzari tbilisshi, in *Mogzauri*, n 3, 1901, p. 203-304.

⁸ Vepkhistkaosnis redakcia, in *Droeba*, n 241, 1880.

⁹ Vepkhistkaosnis redakcia, in *Droeba*, n 242, 1880.

¹⁰ Sargis Tsaishvili, “iona meunargias tserilebi”, in *zugdidis sakhelmtsifo istoriul-etnografiuli shromebi*, n 1, 1947, p. 26-37.

¹¹ Vepkhistkaosnis redakkia, in *Droeba*, n 242, 1880.

¹²For Mikhail Sabinin see: Vaja Kiknadze, *erovnuli da sakatsobrio problematika metskhramete saukunis kartveli sasuliero mogvatseebis shemokmedebashi*, Tbilisi, 2009, p. 272-325.

¹³ Sakartvelos samotkhe, edited by Mikhail Sabinin, St Petersburg, 1882, p. a.

¹⁴ Loc. Cit.

¹⁵ Loc. Cit.

¹⁶ The icon is now preserved in Georgian National Museum.

¹⁷ Eldar Bubulashvili, “sakartvelos eklesiis sitsmindeebi“, in *saeklesio biblioteka*, Vol. VII, Tbilisi, 2007, p. 153-169.

¹⁸ Vaja Kiknadze, *erovnuli da sakatsobrio problematika...*, p. 298.

¹⁹ The church was painted by Nikolai Andreev, about whom information is very sparse. About the topic, see: Ana Mgaloblishvili, “abastumnis aleksandre nevelis eklesiis mokhatuloba” in *akhaltsikhis da tao-klardjetis eparkia*, Edited by V. Asatiani, Tbilisi, 2013, p 440-449.

²⁰ Mikhail Nesterov saw the main source of inspiration for his creative work in the spiritual heritage of old Russia. In 1905, he became a member of the reactionary organization “Unity of Russian People” (Союз русского народа). Yet he did not share the views of imperial politics. In 1912, he refused to paint the newly built Orthodox Church in Warsaw, as he considered the building of the church “emphasized the tendency of Russification” (S. Durilin, *nesterov v jizni i tvorchestve*, Moscow, 1976, p. 134).

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