



## **Black Sea Cultural Animation Program**

Pilot model for mobilizing the common cultural characteristics for creative destination management in the Black Sea Basin **(BS CAP)**

Project 1.3.1.67283.26 - MIS ETC 306

Period of implementation 23.08.2011-22.02.2013

## **Georgia: Black Sea Cultural Heritage**

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Common borders. Common Solutions.

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## I. Customs and traditions

### 1. Polyphony and Dance

Polyphony - the unifying feature of folk songs from all regions of country and peculiar for both religious chorals and secular music is one of the most remarkable expressions of Georgian culture. It is one of the rarest phenomena with the history of at least 5000 years.

The different artefacts discovered during the archaeological excavations serve as an evidence for the ancient roots of Georgian music and dance tradition. Amongst these are the artefacts of metalwork, including a silver bowl from Trialeti (3rd millennium BC), which depicts *Perkhuli* - the round-dance, dedicated to the ancient Goddess of fertility. The traces of such rituals have reached us through a number of *perkhuli* songs, regarded as one of the most archaic forms of Georgian music. Another example is bronze belt from Samtavro (8th-7th centuries BC), depicting dance of hunters, performed during the new Moon and bronze sculptures known as Kazbegi Treasure (7th-6th centuries BC). The drawings of ancient instruments *bobghani*, *knari* and *changi*, dating to 11th-10th centuries BC, were discovered in Kazbegi. Another evidence is the 7<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries BC clay figure playing the *changi* (Georgian harp) found in Uplistsikhe (Kartli). The earliest, 15<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries BC musical instrument - *salamuri*, the tongueless flute carved from swan's bone, was found together with other items in ancient burials of Samtavro in Mtskheta.

According to literary sources in Georgia the polyphonic chants were performed in the 8th-9th centuries, if not earlier. Alongside many other indirect sources, which mention the advanced level of musical culture in Georgia, the record of 11<sup>th</sup> century Georgian Philosopher Ioane (John) Petritsi can be regarded of remarkable significance. Here, the unity of three voices is compared to the Holy Trinity and their Georgian names - *mzakhr*, *zhir* and *bam* are mentioned for the first time.

Folk music of Georgia consists of fifteen regional styles or "musical dialects". These fifteen regions are traditionally grouped into two, eastern and western Georgian groups. Both east and west Georgian polyphony is based on wide use of sharp dissonant harmonies (seconds, fourths, sevenths, ninths). In comparison with the homophonic songs of eastern Georgia, western ones are characterized by the contrasting opposition of voices which create colourful consonances.

In general there are three kinds of polyphony in Georgian songs: 1) Complex polyphony, which is characterized by unified rhythmic movement of voices, giving rise to complex chord progressions. This type of polyphony is found in the high-mountains of Svaneti 2) Polyphonic dialogue between two upper voices over moving bass drone, typical of eastern Georgia 3) Contrast polyphony with three uniquely developed and independent voices, found in western Georgian songs. Four-voiced polyphony is also found in some songs from Guria and Ajara. In this respect, the Gurian musical dialect, distinct for its surprisingly high voice - *krimanchuli*, is most interesting and is regarded as the crown of folk polyphony.

Amongst Georgian Folk songs the foremost examples are *Chakrulo* and *Mravalzhamieri*. Both belong to the family of long Kakhetian table songs, which are meant to lift the spirits and create a festive mood. Besides table songs, Georgian folk music is rich with numerous farming and work songs, such as *Gutnuri*, *Orovela*, *Urmuli*, *Kalouri*, as well as martial and funeral songs.

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Georgian traditional dance is another important part of Georgian intangible heritage. Drawing upon the tradition of different ritual dances, they were transformed into war-dances or heroic dances, while others became dances of lyrical-courting character or of free improvisation. Georgian folklore dances vary from region to region. Developed over the centuries, the traditions and styles of performance have been handed down from generation to generation.

The vigorous, leaping male dances, with clashing swords, flying sparks and daggers quivering in the floor combine elegantly with the graceful, gliding female dances. The dance *Kartuli*, performed by a couple, incorporates the softness and gracefulness of a woman with the dignity and love of a man. The dance follows the rule that man must not touch the woman. The utmost skill, which is necessary to perform *Kartuli*, has earned the dance a reputation of one of the most difficult dances. The same softness of movement is typical to the Osetian *simdi* and *khonga* dances. In contrast, the *mtiuluri* and *khevsuruli* dances from the mountains are characterized by the vigour and strictness of the movements. *Khorumi* -the war dance and *adjaruli*, which are distinct for their rhythm and colourful costumes, originated from south-western region Adjara. *Kintauri* the dance of merchants and *karachogeli* that of artisans belong to old Tbilisian dances performed in 18<sup>th</sup> -19<sup>th</sup> century multinational capital. Altogether, colourful costumes, wild drumming, and pipe and accordion music combine to create the overall unforgettable effect of Georgian national dances.

Text: Anna Shaniashvili, Art Historian

Image: © Georgian Arts and Culture Center

1. Georgian Dance “Samaia”
2. Georgian Dance “Kartuli”



## 2. Georgian Table Traditions

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Table culture known as *supra* has a deeper implication than an ordinary meal in Georgia. Manifesting profound age-old relationships, it brings together many different aspects of Georgian culture from the ancient wine-related customs and local cuisine to polyphonic music, spontaneous poetry reading, dance and finally, the traditions of hospitality, which is a particular local feature.

Georgian national cuisine is remarkable for its use of assorted kinds of meat, fish, vegetables, cheeses, pickles and pungent seasonings. Various historical regions of Georgia are known for their particular dishes. In western Georgia the corn flour flat cakes - *mchadi* are especially widespread, while in the eastern Georgia there are white bent breads baked in huge clay jugs. Georgian cuisine makes extensive use of walnuts. Both western and eastern Georgians are famous for their special sauce from walnuts, garlic and spices. Amongst the most famous Georgian dishes are [Khinkali](#) - dumplings (the pastry rounds filled with forcemeat), which originated from the eastern mountainous Georgia and *khachapuri* - baked pastry with cheese, which varies from region to region, namely in [Imereti](#), [Adjara](#) and [Samegrelo](#). The latter is especially distinguished for its spicy, hot food. Georgian desserts amongst others include *gozinaki* - walnuts coated in honey specially prepared for Christmas and New Year celebrations and *churchkhela*, in which walnut pieces are threaded on a string, dipped in thickened, sweetened grape juice and subsequently dried out.

Yet the most important part of Georgian table is connected with the age-old tradition of winemaking, the roots of which can be traced back to the early sixth millennium BC. As it's widely known, [Georgia](#) is often referred to as "The cradle of wine making". In fact, many scholars argue that the generic word "wine" stems from the Georgian word "gvino". There are 525 indigenous grape varieties in Georgia. In several parts of Georgia today, but especially in the Kakheti region of eastern Georgia wine is still made in the traditional way. It is fermented and stored in large ceramic vessels *qvevri*, lined with beeswax and buried under the ground for temperature control in wine cellars, called *marani*. The living culture of wine production extends into virtually every Georgian family. Due to its ancient traditions, wine assumes the crucial role on Georgian table. Alongside the different wine styles varied from region to region, from light body whites to heavy bodied reds and sweet wines, Georgian table is extremely rich in tableware designated for serving and drinking wine, these are: *chapi*, *khelada*, *karkara*, *azarfesha*, *doki*, *sura*, *chinchila*, *deda-khelada*, *marani*, *dzhami*, *tasi*, *piala* and *kantsi* (horn vessel).

However, what makes Georgian feast exceptional are the traditional relationships manifested through the set structure of toasting, where the essential leading role is assumed by the *Tamada* (Toastmaster). The toasts offered by the *tamada* in a set sequence are interpreted individually by each table member before drinking it. Georgian toasts amongst others include those wishing happiness, joy, health and peaceful long lives to

guests, friends and family members, wishing unity and peace to the country and eternal life to those who passed away. Ladies, treated with the special respect by the male representatives, are usually toasted with special gratitude. Despite generally established order of toasts, there's always a room for individual creativity and spontaneous interpretation, which makes Georgian table especially interactive, vibrant and fascinating.

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Georgian table culture is also tightly linked with different important elements of Georgian folklore. Amongst them are the polyphonic songs (two, three or four voiced songs), which are considered as one of the most remarkable expressions of Georgian intangible culture. The foremost examples of table songs are *Chakrulo* and *Mravalzhamieri*, which belong to the family of long Kakhetian table songs and are meant to lift the spirits and create a festive mood. In comparison with the homophonic songs of eastern Georgia, western ones are characterized by the contrasting opposition of voices which create colorful consonances. In this respect, the Gurian musical dialect, distinct for its surprisingly high voice - *krimanchuli* is most interesting and is regarded as the crown of folk polyphony.

Georgian feasts are usually accompanied with dances. The Georgian folk dances the vigorous, leaping male dances, with clashing swords, flying sparks and daggers quivering in the floor combine elegantly with the graceful, gliding female dances. The dance *Kartuli*, performed by a couple, incorporates the softness and gracefulness of a woman with the dignity and love.

Sometimes the toasts go along with the spontaneous verse readings, which especially in the mountainous regions have the form of competition between two or more persons, making the celebration especially joyful and lively.

Ancient traditions connected with the table culture are also reflected on the imagery of the traditional Georgian blue table-cloth widespread in the 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries and used for special occasions. With its white dye "negative" ornamental and figurative image-symbols it echoes with the age-old beliefs rooted and preserved for centuries in folk memory.

Despite the difference in local cuisine, wine types, songs or other table-related customs, which distinguish various Georgian provinces from each other, a trait common to all is the unprecedented and long established tradition of hospitality. The indisputability of the notion that "the guest comes from god" is evident to everyone who has ever visited the country. Implying many different aspects of Georgian culture *supra* is one of the most vivid expressions of Georgian character, which offers a diverse blend of age-old, though still living relationships, customs and traditions.

Text: Anna Shaniashvili, Art Historian

### 3. Wine making traditions



Georgia is often referred to as "The cradle of wine making". The fertile valleys of the South Caucasus, which Georgia straddles, are believed by many archaeologists to be the source of the world's first cultivated grapevines and Neolithic wine production. The archaeological excavations in Kartli, at Shulaveri, have yielded the oldest domesticated grape pipes dating from the early sixth millennium BC. The invention of pottery during the Neolithic period was crucial for processing, serving and storing wine. The earliest wine jars, complete with lees residue, and decorated with grape clusters and jubilant figures were discovered at sixth millennium BC sites of Shulaveri and Khramis Didi Gora.

Archaeological findings at Trialeti and other sites of early second millennium BC further prove Georgia's advancement of viniculture. Amongst these findings, the most important are the marvellously ornate gold and silver Trialeti goblets, the latter of which supposedly depicts a vinous ceremony scene. Unusual variety of winemaking equipment and wine vessels of ancient times attest to the high skill of Georgian craftsmen. The most impressive among these is *qvevri*, giant clay vessels in which wine was fermented and stored. Georgian museums have on display numerous clay vessels of all designations. Some, such as *qvevri*, *dergi*, *tiki*, *satskha*, were used to ferment grape juice and to store wine; others, such as *chapi*, *khelada*, *karkara*, *azarfesha*, *doki*, *sura*, *chinchila*, *deda-khelada*, *marani*, *dzhami*, *tasi*, *piala*, *kantsi* (horn vessel), were used for serving and drinking. Many unearthed silver, gold and bronze artifacts of the third and second millennia BC bare chased imprints of vines, grape clusters and leaves.

In addition to rich archaeological material, other evidence exists of Georgia's crucial role in domesticating grapes. The Greek annals by Apollonius of Rhodes, Strabo, Procopius of Caesaria and Xenophon indicate the crucial role that Georgians played in the development of wine. In fact, many scholars argue that the generic word "wine" stems from the Georgian word "gvino". Furthermore, the Georgian pagan gods—Aguna and Nunua—could be considered as earlier analogous to the Greek gods, Dionysus and Bacchus.

Wine production continued unabated after the country's conversion to Christianity and throughout medieval times. The "cult of wine," on one hand, was associated with the story of how St. Nino made the first cross in Georgia from vine branches tied together with strands of her hair, and, on the other hand, its religious importance was partly assured by the centrality of wine in the Eucharist. Incorporation of the long-lasting tradition of viniculture in Christian art is shown most clearly by the rich ornamental decoration of Georgian church facades, in which grape clusters and vines are often interwoven with

stone carved foliage ornamentation. The same motives are often applied in mural painting, repousse work and manuscript illumination. As Christian symbols, grape and wine penetrated Georgian religious poetry and chorals. Among these the famous choral works, “Shen khar venakhi” “Thou art the Vine” is of a greatest importance.

Nowadays, the best-known wine-making regions of Georgia include Kakheti, Kartli, Imereti, Racha-Lechkhumi and Kvemo Svaneti, and Abkhazeti. Centuries of trial has resulted in different wine styles from region to region, from light body whites to heavy bodied reds and sweet wines. There are 525 indigenous grape varieties in Georgia. In several parts of Georgia today, but especially in the Kakheti region of eastern Georgia where rich vineyards dominate the picturesque landscape, wine is still made in the traditional way. It is fermented and stored in large ceramic vessels, *qvevri*, lined with beeswax and buried under the ground for temperature control in wine cellars, *marani*. The Vintage, *Rtveli*, in Georgia becomes a real autumn celebration for everyone. The living culture of wine production extends into virtually every Georgian family. For instance, the “cult of wine” has developed into a strong tradition of a table culture, *supra*, where the essential leading role is assumed by the *Tamada* (Toastmaster).

This long-lasting tradition of wine production, one of Georgia’s most important cultural assets, has the ability to attract tourists and thus has become an important economic resource of the country. Due to the many millennia of wine-making, in Georgian history, the traditions of its viticulture are entwined and inseparable with the country’s national identity.

On September 15-18, 2011 Georgia hosted the First International Symposium of Qvevri Wines. The main objective of the symposium was to share with international wine community the ancient traditions and methods of winemaking using qvevris (there is a growing interest for this traditional way of wine making all over the world); the unique nature of the qvevri as a wine vessel; how qvevri are made and the danger of losing the art; the history of winemaking in Georgia; the variety of grapes, micro regions, and wines in Georgia; Georgia’s tourism infrastructure; Georgian wine-related culture; Georgian cuisine and its feasting culture; Georgian architecture; Georgian folklore; and future plans to develop wine tourism in Georgia.

Among the invited guests were well-known foreign and Georgian scientists, winemakers, tour operators, journalists, specialists in the fields of wine tourism and marketing, ethnologists and other enthusiasts.

Symposium participants shared their own experiences and views about qvevri wines and traditional methods of wine making. This was a great forum for people from different countries to come together and share their devotion for the wine culture in Georgia- in a country with an unbroken wine culture of 8000 years.

Text: Anna Shaniashvili, Art Historian

Poster: ©Georgian Arts and Culture Centre



## II. Culture sights and landscapes

### 4. Mtskheta

Mtskheta - the ancient capital of Georgia with its picturesque view on its landscape, churches and fortresses offers a unique glimpse of nearly the whole history of the country. Built in the central part of Georgia (Iberia, Kartli), at the confluence of the rivers Mtkvari and Aragvi, Mtskheta was exposed to the influences coming from east and west alike. The Great Silk Road crossing the country passed through the city.

Spread in two directions on both banks of the river Mtkvari, the city was the center of ancient Georgian culture and pagan religion: The highest deity - Armazi was erected on the top of the Mount Kartli in the ancient capital. The remnants of the advanced civilization of various quarters of the city and rich archeological findings indicate the existence of a highly developed agriculture, viniculture, as well as the great skill in architecture, pottery, glassmaking, and refined work in gold.

The spread of Christianity throughout the area since the late first century and its announcement as an official religion in early 4<sup>th</sup> c. was an important turn in the history of Mtskheta, which became the playground for these major events: The beginning of the history of Christianity in Georgia is linked with the event of the burial of Christ's robe in the royal garden in Mtskheta. Thus Mtskheta became the home to the most important sacred relic kept in Georgia and hence the cradle of Christianity in the country. Furthermore, according to the historical sources in the early 4<sup>th</sup> c. St. Nino of Cappadocia came with the mission to Mtskheta and converted royal family into Christianity.

In early 6<sup>th</sup> c. the capital was moved to the newly founded city Tbilisi. Thenceforward, Mtskheta lost its secular and political importance, though maintained the role of the most significant religious center of the country till nowadays. Inscribed in UNESCO World Heritage list, the major attractions of the town: Jvari monastery (586-604), Svetitskhoveli cathedral (11<sup>th</sup> c) and the Samtavro Church (11<sup>th</sup> c) are amongst the most outstanding examples of medieval religious architecture of Georgia and Eastern Christian medieval world in general.

***Svetitskhoveli*** cathedral is the one of the most significant landmarks and sacred sites in Georgia. The Church represents a symbol of Christianity in Georgia, as it's built on the place, where, according to the tradition, the robe of Christ, brought by Jews to Mtskheta was buried in the 30s of the 1<sup>st</sup> c AD.

According to the written sources, after the crucifixion, Christ's robe fell to the Jews from Mtskheta. Rabbi Elioz which brought it to Mtskheta was met by his sister Sidonia, who gripped the robe and was so moved that fell dead on the spot. Thus, she was buried with Christ's robe in her hands. Later, around 330, after the adoption of

Christianity, the newly converted King Mirian, following St. Nino's instructions decided to build the first church on the place of the cedar of Lebanon, which grew upon Sidonia's grave. According to the tradition the cedar was cut down, but the builders were unable to move it. Only after Nino's prayer did angel lift it up in the air. It settled down in its place, exuding a life-giving balm and miraculous radiance. Thereafter, the church was named Svetitskhoveli, which in Georgian means "life-giving pillar". Svetitskhoveli became the first cathedral of Georgian archbishops and after the 5<sup>th</sup> c of the Catholicoses.

In 5<sup>th</sup> c. King Vakhtang Gorgasali built the three-aisled basilica on this place, which was replaced by the glorious cathedral of Svetitskhoveli in the first half of 11<sup>th</sup> c. The magnificent cathedral Svetitskhoveli is of an "inscribed cross" type, with elongated ground plan and with the dome rested upon four free standing columns. The church exemplifies the highest peak of development in medieval Georgian architecture, inspired by the political and economical flourish of the country united under the rule of Bargrationi dynasty. Alongside the unprecedented complexity and enormous dimensions of the cathedral, the basic feature of this period - the profound artistic solutions in design and decor of both, the interior and exterior of building, enhanced by the spectacular contrast of shade, light and color is reflected in the structure of the inner space and the rich carvings on the facades of the church.

Alongside its cultural and religious importance, Svetitskhoveli has been an important burial place of the country. The representatives of Georgian royal family: King Vakhtang Gorgasali, Erekle II, last king of Georgia George XII and many other queens, nobles and important religious figures are buried here.

The magnificent cathedral of Svetitskhoveli symbolizes the glorious past of Georgia and retains its importance as a great masterpiece and the most venerated sacred site of the country till nowadays.

**Jvari Monastery** - Built on the rocky mountaintop overlooking the ancient capital Mtskheta, Jvari Church (The Church of the holy cross) represents one of the most important masterpieces of Georgian medieval architecture.

According to written sources, the church was built on the place, where the large wooden cross was erected by St. Nino as a symbol of newly adopted State religion. The cross was considered to work miracles and drew a lot of pilgrims. Its octagonal stone basement is still seen in the interior of the church. Later in 544-586, ruler of *Kartli* - Guaram has built the small church next to the wooden cross. The remains of the latter are preserved on the northern side of the big church up today. In 586-605 next to the Minor church the big church of Jvari, the most outstanding example of this epoch was erected. Its construction was initiated by ruler of *Kartli* Stepanoz I. The stone carved images of the donator and his family members are still preserved on the facades of the church. This is the first Georgian church to be abundantly decorated with the sculpture. The architectural type of the building *tetraconch* (the four-apse domed building) with four additional chambers in the corners, culminates the artistic explorations of previous periods (evolved in the architectural designs of the 5<sup>th</sup>, beginning of 6<sup>th</sup> c. churches) and gives start up to

new series of 7<sup>th</sup> c. monuments of i.e *Jvari Type*. Balanced harmony of proportions and perfect adjustment of moderate decorations with tectonic architectural forms characterizes the structural design of the Jvari Church and hence becomes the feature of the monuments of i.e. *Classical Period* (6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> c). Erected on the cliff overlooking Mtskheta Jvari is unique with its exceptional location and harmonious interaction with the surrounding landscape.

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***The Great Mtskheta Archaeological Museum-Reserve*** displays several exceptional archaeological exhibits of different historical periods the agricultural tools (4th millennium BC), toys, examples of the ancient Greek epigraphy and precious metalwork marked with highest level of craftsmanship. Museum-Reserve also includes ancient burial ground used from the 2nd Millennium BC till the 8th-9th centuries AD, the settlement remains of 8th-7th centuries BC, Armaztsikhe-Bagineti- an acropolis of the city of Mtskheta and the royal residence of the rulers of Iberia (3rd century BC - 8th century AD), Armaziskhevi being the royal residence of the rulers of Kartli and their burial ground and a mausoleum built in the 1st century AD at foothill of a rocky mountain.

Although Mtskheta was the capital of Georgia only from 3<sup>rd</sup> c. BC to 5<sup>th</sup> c. AD, it retains its importance as a cultural and religious center of the country till nowadays.

Text: Anna Shaniashvili, Art Historian

Images:

1. View on Jvari Monastery (544-605 AD) and Mtsketa. photo by Gia Javelidze
2. Svetitskhoveli cathedral (11<sup>th</sup> c.). photo by Ia Tabagari & Gogita Bukhaidze



## 5. Old Tbilisi

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As the capital of Georgia, Tbilisi (Tiflis) is a significant [economic](#), [social](#), and [cultural](#) centre in the country. Located strategically at the crossroads between [Europe](#) and [Asia](#) and lying along the historic [Silk Road](#) routes, the city has been exposed to a transmission of influences from east and west alike throughout the course of its history.

Archaeological studies of the region have revealed that the territory of Tbilisi was settled by humans as early as the fourth millennium B.C. The earliest actual accounts of settlement of the location come from the second half of the fourth century A.D, when a fortress was built during King Varaz-Bakur's reign. However, according to legend, the origins of the city date to the reign of King Vakhtang Gorgasali, who ruled from 447 to 522. Tradition says that the King went hunting in the heavily wooded region with a [falcon](#), and during the hunt, the falcon injured a [pheasant](#) causing both birds to fall into a hot spring. Afterwards, the king decreed his capital to be built on that very spot. Accordingly, the city's name derives from the Georgian word for "warm" (tbili).

Tbilisi's favourable and strategic location did not necessarily bode well for its existence as capital. Located strategically in the heart of the [Caucasus](#), Tbilisi became an object of rivalry between the region's various powers, including Persia, the [Byzantine Empire](#), [Arabia](#), and the [Seljuk Turks](#).

In the twentieth century, Tbilisi was the capital of the Transcaucasian Federation (1918), the first independent Georgian Republic (1918 - 1921), the Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia (1921 - 1991), and finally the second independent Republic of Georgia since 1991.

Tbilisi is a [multicultural](#) city, historically known for [religious tolerance](#). "Georgians are kind, friendly, staid and restrained at the same time. Here you have the possibility to live with, discuss and protect your faith and traditions. There's no other place in the world where one would find so many foreigners of different origins as in Tbilisi. In the city, you come across Armenians, Greeks, Jews, Turks, Persians, Indians, Azeri, Russians and Europeans."- wrote a French traveller Jean Chardin (1643 -1713). This feature of the city is especially evident in the city's Old Town, where a [Mosque](#), [Synagogue](#), and [Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Churches](#) can all be found within less than 500 meters from each other. Hence, Tbilisi acquired the attributes of an international city while retaining its own specific *Tbilisian* culture and urban folklore, as can be seen on the historical photos of small traders - Kintos - and artisans - Karachogels, etc. - as well as on the canvases of Niko Pirosmanashvili (1862-1918), who is considered to be one of the greatest Georgian painter.

The city rises in terraces from both banks of the River Mtkvari. In the old section are medieval buildings and courtyards, narrow streets, overhanging balconies, and the famous hot sulphur springs. Narikala Fortress, (Persian word, means citadel (or inner fortress) - the main citadel of medieval Tbilisi, longitudinally follows the eastern part of Sololaki range. Despite many destructions and alterations during the centuries, Narikala continues to dominate the Old town owing to its exceptional location. The origins of its building are lost in the mist of time. Most probably the fortress was established in the 4<sup>th</sup>

century. From early time citadel was successfully possessed by Persians, Byzantines, Khazars, Arabs and Mongols. Each invader left its own mark on the main fort of the capital.

19th century, after the annexation of Georgia by the Russian Empire in 1801, is a new stage in the development of Georgian Architecture. The city has been extensively modernized. The areas of Tbilisi which were built up mainly in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Rustaveli Avenue, Vera district, etc.) have a contrasting [neoclassical](#), Renaissance and Baroque elements. The beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the construction of splendid buildings designed in Art-Nouveau style. The city's attractions include: the Sioni Cathedral (6<sup>th</sup> c. rebuilt 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> c.), the Anchiskhati Basilica, the oldest surviving church in Tbilisi (6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> c.), the Metekhi castle and church (1278-89) together with the sculpture of King Vakhtang Gorgasali, the recently built Sameba Cathedral, a funicular railway running to height of Mtatsminda overlooking the city, as well as museums and exhibitions, sulfur baths and local bazaars.

*Tbilisoba* (Day of Tbilisi) the largest annual celebration in the city, commemorating the foundation of Tbilisi is held towards the end of October each year and attracts many tourists.

The picturesque landscape of Tbilisi, dotted with ancient churches, fortresses and modern buildings, offers a unique glimpse into nearly the entire history of the country.

Text: Anna Shaniashvili, Art Historian

Image by Gia Javelidze

1. Old Tbilisi. Georgia

## 6. Alazani Valley



The vast valley of the river Alazani, the main tributary of the river Mtkvari that flows for 351 km, is amongst the most spectacular places in Kakheti, the easternmost part of Georgia, famous for its fertile valleys and rich vineyards, ancient traditions of winemaking, hospitality and the abundance of historic monuments.

The artefacts found during the archaeological excavations proof the existence of the human life on the Alazani Valley beginning from the early Bronze Age. Among many other important archaeological sites are *Alaverdi* and *Ilto* settlements and burials. The tools, jewellery and miniature sculptures unearthed on this territory show an unusually high level of workmanship. Among many others, the 23<sup>rd</sup> - 22<sup>nd</sup> century BC golden lion statuette from the kurgans of the Alazani Valley, is particularly refined and unique.

Alazani valley maintained its importance after the adoption of Christianity. In this respect the significant sacred site, such as Bodbe Monastery with the grave of St. Nino, the converter of Georgia into Christianity in the early 4th century, is worth of special mentioning. Amongst the earliest centers is the *Nekresi Monastery*. Overlooking the ruins of Zoroastrian temple from the hill and consisting of buildings of different periods from 4th to 16th century, the monastery contains the 4<sup>th</sup> century church, which is the oldest Christian building yet discovered in Georgia. In the 6th century one of the famous Syrian Fathers - Abibos Nekreseli lived here.

Alaverdi monastery, founded by Joseph Alaverdeli and Khirsa monastery, founded by Stephan Khirseli were amongst other religious centers established by Syrian Fathers around the Alazani valley.

The 8th-9th centuries were marked by the creative exploration of new structural and artistic ideas and distinguished with the abundance and diversity of architectural types, varied from region to region throughout Georgia. The experimental nature of the time is reflected in the peculiar structure of two important churches of this area: *The Church of All Saints in Gurjaani*, the only church in Georgia having two domes, combining longitudinal planning of basilica with the domed type and the *Church Of All Saints in Vachnadziani*, which is the domed hall type structure with mixed features of triple-church basilica and triconch.

The political and cultural advancement of the united country in the 11<sup>th</sup> century has affected Alazani Valley as well. The magnificent *Cathedral of Alaverdi*, together with other two cathedrals of Svetitskhoveli in Mtskheta and Bagrati in Kutaisi, can serve as a vivid evidence for that. Alaverdi Cathedral being a cross-cupola triconch of over 55 meters height is the second tallest religious building in Georgia, after recently built Sameba Cathedral in Tbilisi. Its western and northern walls preserve paintings from 15-16<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Alongside the cathedral, Alaverdi monastery comprises the Episcopal palace, refectory, bell-tower, bath, fortress and wine-cellar (*marani*), recently restored to welcome the visitors.

The annual celebration *Alaverdoba*, dedicated to Ioseb Alaverdeli usually celebrated on the last Sunday of September attracts people from the whole country.

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Another landmark, connected with the political, economic advancement and cultural achievements of united Georgian State is the Ikalto Academy and Monastery of 12<sup>th</sup> century, founded by *Arsen Ikaltoeli* as a second significant educational centre of country after the Gelati Monastery in Western Georgia.

The disintegration of united Georgian Kingdom in the 15th century, led to the creation of Khakhetian Kingdom. *Gremi*, the newly built capital of Kakhethian kingdom became the royal residence. Due to the strategically suitable location, it served as the fortification from the tribes, invading Georgian land from the north and at the same time acted as a corridor of Gilan-Shemakha-Astrakhan branch of “Silk Road” coming from Iran to the north. The city, contained churches houses, royal palaces, public baths, hotels for the merchant, market, towers, mostly survived in ruins due to the devastating invasion of Shah Abas I in 1614-1616. Composed of the royal castle afterwards transformed into the belfry, serving as a museum nowadays and the church, which contains 16th century frescos with the royal portraits, **the Gremi complex of Archangels** is the only survived structure from the city overlooking from the hill and offering visitors the impressive view on the Alazani valley.

Amongst other spectacular spots from where the vast valley unfolds in front of the viewers are *Town Telavi*, one of oldest towns transformed into the capital of eastern Georgia during the reign of King Erekle II and *Signagi*, the enchanting little town of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, which recently underwent through a fundamental reconstruction program and has become an important tourist destination.

Alazani valley, which cultivates 300 hectare of vineyard, on 400-1000 meters from a sea level is the heartland of winemaking traditions, offering visitors unforgettable hospitality and the diversity of cultural experiences.

Text: Anna Shaniashvili, Art Historian

Images: ©Georgian Arts and Culture Center

1. The Gremi complex of Archangels (16<sup>th</sup> c.)
2. Alaverdy Cathedral (11<sup>th</sup> c.)
3. Town Signagi



Common borders. Common Solutions.

## 7. Gareji Monastery Complex

The David Gareji desert is one of the most important landmarks in Georgia. It is located in Eastern Georgia, 25 kilometers (2 Hour drive) from Tbilisi (Capital of Georgia), on Iori plateau, near the border of Georgia and Azerbaijan. The desert with a total area of 40,000 sq. km. encompasses the territories of Sagarejo, Signagi, and Dedoplistskaro administrative districts. This site is characterized by a unique combination of historic architecture, prehistoric archaeological sites, rich paleontological fields and important bio-geographical features widely spread within the arid and semiarid landscape of the Iori Plateau. The dozens of cave monasteries decorated with unique frescos are among the best examples of harmonious interaction of manmade structures with the dramatic landscape. They bear the traditional principles of sustainable living and are considered masterpieces of Georgian Medieval Art. Moreover David Gareji landscape acts as a sanctuary to many plants and wildlife species linking the Eastern and Western parts of Iori Plateau.

More than three decades have passed since the first archaeological excavations were conducted in the Gareji area. These studies have revealed the remains of various groups including the urban type of ancient eastern settlements of the Late Bronze and Iron Ages. After a gap in the Classical period significant archaeological material has come to light on the medieval sites, notably in the monasteries of the desert. The foundation of the monastic centre in 6th c. in the Gareji desert is connected with the name of one of the 13<sup>th</sup> Syrian fathers, St. David, named Garejeli. Monastic life in Gareji monasteries remained - in reduced form - until early in the 20<sup>th</sup> c. From the 1992, following the desertion of monasteries monastic life ceased in the desert. During the Soviet period the David Gareji Monastery Complex has declined due to devastating use, such as military training activities. The revitalization of monastic life in Gareji monasteries became feasible in 1990s.

This Gareji desert area includes the complex of medieval monasteries with a total area of 25 km. consists of 19 monasteries, with approximately 5 000 cells for monks. Amongst these are: *the Lavra Monastery*, the first monastery founded by the saint father. Davit Garejeli's disciples Dodo and Luciane expanded the original Lavra and founded two other monasteries known as *Dodo's Rka* and *the monastery of St. John the Baptist*. The important examples of early Christian murals are *The Tetri-Udabno Monastery* fresco fragments considered as unique and one of the earliest - 7th-8th century Georgian mural paintings and the *Sabereebi Monastery* murals from 9th-10th centuries. The monastery saw further development under the guidance of the 9th-century Georgian saint Ilarion. *The Udabno* ("Desert") Monastery preserves the mural paintings with the scenes from the Life of Davit Garejeli. The convent was particularly patronized by the Georgian royal and noble families. *The Bertubani Monastery* built in 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries can serve as a vivid evidence for that. The main church of an enormous cave monastery hewn out of cliff is painted with exquisite murals, which bear the royal portraits of Queen Tamar, the first and most



prominent female sovereign of Georgia and her successor Lasha. The murals at Bertubani, demonstrate the features of a new style associated with the period of the reign of Queen Tamar, which is notable for its elegant, refined imagery, growing dynamism, extraordinary draftsmanship, delicate color and flowing line.

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In medieval times Gareji desert with its rock-cut monasteries and magnificent murals served as the most important monastic and pilgrimage centre of Georgia. According to the tradition triple pilgrimage to Gareji Desert is equal to one visit to Jerusalem. This legend, in turn, must be connected with the story of St David Garejeli's pilgrimage to the Jerusalem, which tells that the humble monk could not dare to enter the sacred city, instead he prayed at the gate, took three stones as relics and went back to his homeland. Meanwhile, the patriarch of Jerusalem had a vision at night: the angel told him that St. David took all the blessing from Jerusalem. The men sent after St. David took two stones back to the city, thus St. Father brought only one stone to Gareji desert. The analysis of the quantity of inscriptions left in different languages shows that after Georgians, Greeks, Armenians, and Russians (from 19<sup>th</sup> c.) as well as some Orientals were most active among the Christian pilgrims visiting Gareji.

Due to the historical value of the David Gareji monastic complex as well as the uniqueness of biodiversity of this site, it is one of the most attractive tourist destinations, still being a significant center of cultural and monastic life in Georgia.

Text: Anna Shaniashvili, Art Historian

Images:

1. Bertubani (12<sup>th</sup> -13<sup>th</sup> c.), David Gareji, Georgia.

©Laboratory of Fixation of the Historical Monuments of Georgia, G.Chubinashvili national Center of Georgian Art History and Monuments Protection

2. Lavra (6<sup>th</sup> c.), David Gareji. Georgia. Photo by Teo Bregvadze



## 8. Gergeti Trinity Church and Mount Kazbegi

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Gergeti Trinity Church is among the most impressive cultural heritage landmarks of Georgia. It is situated on Mount Kazbegi, one of the highest and most beautiful peaks of Caucasus, at an elevation of 2400 meters, in the district of Kazbegi. The name of the mountain - "Mkinvartsveri", means "glacier", or literally "ice peak" in Georgian.

Mount Kazbegi is the third highest mountain in Georgia (after Mount Shkhara and Janga) and the seventh highest peak in Caucasus Mountains. Mount Kazbegi is associated with the famous legend (tradition) telling the story of hero Amirani, (Georgian version of Greek God Prometheus), who stole the fire from gods and gave it to humans. In response to this, he was severely punished and chained to the Caucasian Mountain, particularly to the Mount Kazbegi.

Gergeti Trinity Church due to its harmonious interaction with the surrounding landscape and attractive composition is one of the outstanding examples of Georgian landscape architecture. Church is built on the top of the mountain at 2170m above sea level and comprises church, bell tower and fortress walls. Church was built in the first half of 14<sup>th</sup> century during the reign of Georgie V, the Brilliant and is the only cross-cupola church in Khevi province. Southern entrance of the Trinity Church is called "Royal Doors". The particular name is linked with the tradition, which tells that Georgian Kings, who came to this church to sanctify their crown during the centuries, entered and left the church from this door. The separate bell tower of the church dates from the second half of 14<sup>th</sup> century. The structure attached to the church from the south served as a gathering place for community, ruled by local authorities called *Khevisbers*, a patriarchal institution that still exists. The strict application of local traditions and rules, the delivery of justice and the assembling of the army for battles, were among the *Khevishers'* responsibilities. Hence, very important political, military and economic issues were negotiated here. According to the historical chronicles, Gergeti Trinity Church also served as secret storage of the treasury of Mtskheta Chatholicos See, which included one of the most venerated relics - the vine-twig cross of St. Nino, the converter of Georgia into Christianity. The monastery is the active establishment of the Georgian Orthodox Apostolic Church up today.

The isolated location of the monastery complex on top of a steep mountain at the foothill of Kazbegi mountain surrounded by the vastness of the magnificent mountains and dazzling white natural environment, make it one of the most spectacular sites. Given its unique location, the church is a popular waypoint for trekkers in the area, and can be reached by a steep 3 hour climb up the mountain, or around 30 minutes by car.

Text: Anna Shaniashvili, Art Historian

Photo by Molly Topuridze

View on Gergeti Trinity Church (14<sup>th</sup> c.), Georgia



## 9. Vardzia Historical-Architectural Museum Reserve

Listed in UNESCO World Heritage Tentative List Vardzia, an enormous cave monastery hewn out of cliffs in the second half of the twelfth century, lies at a distance of 300 kilometers from Tbilisi, in the area of Meskheti (Aspindza region) in the south-west of Georgia. Since its foundation in the second half of 12<sup>th</sup> c. this rock cut complex served as a sacred place for Georgian people. Its foundation is linked with the name of King George III and the Queen Tamar, the first and most prominent female sovereign of Georgia. Queen Tamar's epoch (12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> c.) was the "Golden Age" of Georgian history and culture. In the 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century Georgia was one of the strongest and greatest states in the Middle East.

Built on the route linking Georgia with the near east the history of Vardzia is connected with many important events of Georgian History: Being the witness of the glorious victory of Queen Tamar in the battle of Basiani (1186-1203) over the Muslim coalition forces and afterwards, the cruel battles against Mongols, Turks and Persians, Vardzia, as a fortified monastery continued to be a place of refuge for the neighboring Georgian population and a cultural center throughout centuries. In 1578, when Turks took over in Meskheti, the monastery emptied, the inhabitants left, the caves of Vardzia fell into decay and the monastery ceased to exist.

The rock cut complex of Vardia encompasses hundreds of two stored rock houses, a defensive cover, a complex tunneled water-course, an irrigation canal, and many churches. Amongst them the large hall church of the Assumption hewn in the center of the monastery, which is adorned with unique frescos, depicting the portraits of donors: King George III, Queen Tamar and the local governor Rati Surameli is the most important one. The individual manner of execution, evident in the elegance of the figures, the masterly rendering of pose, gesture and movement, the psychological expressiveness of the faces makes frescos of Vardzia a remarkable relic not only for Georgian monumental painting, but for all Easter Christian world as well.

There are three popular legends connected with Vardzia:

The first tells that once the father of Queen Tamar king George III went out hunting with his court. He took along with him his daughter, the young Tamar. The hunt began and the king and his court forgot about her. Carried away with excitement, Tamar got lost in the caves. The huntsman began anxiously to search her: "Tamar, where are you?" called on of them. The lost girl cried out: "Ak var dzia!" ("Here I am Uncle"). It is suggested that the place got its name from these last two words.

According to the second legend, in one of high cliffs in a gorge of the river Mtkvari, work had begun on the royal monastery, Vardzia. The stone was crumbly, and this complicated the process of hewing out of caves. In the evening, when work was over for the day, the workmen put down their tools and made their weary way home. Next morning they found out that the tools were not there. After a long search, the men found them by

another cliff in a completely different place. The workmen returned to the old place in amazement and continued their work. Next morning exactly the same thing happened - their tools had once again been moved. Then the workmen understood that this was the “pointing finger” and obeyed it. They began to hew out Vardzia in a new place and from then on the old place was known as Navardzievi (former Vardzia).

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The third legend narrates that to prevent the enemy from finding out where the Queen lived, Tamar ordered that 365 caves should be hewn out in Vardzia - one for every day in the year. Every day another room was hollowed out and it took a year to complete the whole complex.

The site has been transformed into a Vardzia Historical-Architectural Museum Reserve in 1938.

Text: Anna Shanshiashvili, Art Historian

Images: ©Georgian Arts and Culture Center

1. Vardzia (12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> c.), Georgia
2. Frescos of the Church of the Assumption. Vardzia (12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> c.). Georgia



## 10. Ushguli

Being one of the most impressive villages of Upper Svaneti, a highland region of amazing beauty in the north-western Georgia, Ushguli is located at 2.200m above sea level and is the highest inhabited village in Europe. Cut off by snow for the much of the years during the centuries, Svaneti offers visitors the intact and spectacular natural environment of mountain scenery, including four of the ten highest peaks of the Caucasus, rich cultural heritage, medieval-type villages with tower-houses and strong local traditions with the special mingle of ancient pagan cults with Christian rites and symbols.

Throughout its history, Svaneti formed a part of different western Georgian Kingdoms such as Colchis, later of Egrisi-Lazika, while from the 8<sup>th</sup> century it became one of the dominions of the Apkhazeti. From the 15<sup>th</sup> century, after the disintegration of united Georgian Kingdom, Svaneti became an independent principedom, retaining traditional division into communities, preserved to the present today. Svaneti was the significant centers of the medieval Georgian culture marked with special local features and strong artistic traditions. Amongst the most develop branches of medieval art are mural and icon painting. The local school of painting is characterized with strong linear expression, monumentality and restrained palette, which is peculiar for both murals executed in refined technique, such as the 12<sup>th</sup> century works of famous court painter *Tevdore* or *Michael Magrakeli*, or frescos applying naïve, folksy, though extremely enchanting pictorial means. Another extremely developed field of medieval art in Svaneti is repoussé work, mainly represented by ecclesiastical objects. Amongst these are pre-altar crosses and the abundance of chased icons.

The mountainous region of Upper Svaneti occupies the upper reaches of the Inguri river basin, between the Caucasus and Svaneti ranges. Ushguli, one of the most impressive place of upper Svaneti, comprises four villages: *Zhibiani* (some 2100 m above sea level), *Chvibiani*, *Chazhashi* and *Murqmeli*. The village of *Chazhashi*, which contains the largest concentration of ancient towers, is inscribed in UNESCO World Heritage list. It still preserves more than 200 of unusual tower-houses, which were used both as dwellings and as defense posts against the invaders who plagued the region. These towers usually have from three to five stories and the thickness of the walls decreasing with the height, giving the towers slender outline. The houses themselves are usually two-storied; the ground floor is a single hall for both people and domestic animals, while the second floor is separated by a wooden partition, which is often lavishly decorated. A door at this level provided access to the tower.

The important sightseeing's of Ushguli include: Ushguli Archeological Museum in Chazhashi, 9th-10th centuries Lamaria Church of the Virgin, 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century remains of towers, which according to the tradition were the winter and summer towers of Queen Tamar, the Church of the Savior in Chvibiani and the Churches of St. George and the Savior in Zhibiani and the churches of the Savior and St. Barbare in Murkmeli.

Svaneti became more accessible for visitors after the recent renovation and road infrastructure development activities. The majestic nature and the unity of architecture, rich cultural heritage and ancient traditions make Svaneti one of Georgia's most attractive tourist destinations.

Text: Anna Shanshiashvili, Art Historian

Images by Ia Tabagari & Gogita Bukhaidze

1. Mount Shkhara & Lamaria Church (9<sup>th</sup> - 10<sup>th</sup> c.), Georgia
2. Village Ushguli, Georgia



## 11. Gelati Monastery



Listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the Gelati Monastery with Academy is one of the most important cultural landmarks of Georgia. The Monastery is located on the mountain plain on the outskirts of the village Gelati, approximately 12 km from Kutaisi, in western Georgia.

The monastery with the academy was founded by King David IV Builder in 1106. It marked the political, economic advancement

and cultural achievements of united Georgian State, which reached its climax during the reign of King David IV Builder. Due to its religious, cultural and educational importance, Gelati was referred as New Jerusalem or another Athens. Famous Georgian public figures: theologian-philosophers, translator-commentators, philologists gathered there. Amongst others were the great Georgian philosopher *Ioane (John) of Petritsoni*, previously acting at various orthodox monasteries abroad, such as [Mangana Academy in Constantinople](#) and *Petritsoni (Bachkovo) Monastery*, (the latter found in 1083 by another prominent Georgian noble [Gregory Pakourianos](#) in Bulgaria) and [Arsen Ikaltoeli](#), who founded the second significant educational centre - the *Academy of Iklato* in eastern Georgia.

Consisting of several buildings from different periods, Gelati Monastery displays the diversity of types of both Georgian ecclesiastic architecture and secular design. The main *Church of the Nativity of the Virgin* (12<sup>th</sup> century) is a cross-domed construction with three apses projecting on the east. The narthex (room leading to the nave), the southern annex with the portal, and the east and west chapels were added later in the same century, whereas the northern annex with two chapels and two portals was built during the 13<sup>th</sup> century. *The Academy* (12<sup>th</sup> century) - a large structure with the rectangular planning survived in ruins has been recently restored and opened to the visitors. The porch richly decorated with stone curved ornaments was added *the Academy* in the 14th century. The *Church of St. George* (13<sup>th</sup> century) - a tall, domed structure with three projecting apses is nearly similar to the main church, while the *Church of St. Nicholas* (13<sup>th</sup> century) is an unusual two-storied structure with the open arched ground floor and the small domed church above it, approached by a stone stairway. A stone vaulted canopy on four columns was built in the 12th century over the spring to the north of the main church, while a room and open, arched bell tower were added to this structure the 13th century. Monastery also contains dwellings and is surrounded by the defensive wall with different entrance porches.

Alongside the architectural variety, the monastery is rich in paintings executed in different periods and mediums - Mosaic and fresco. Amongst these the multi-layered paintings of the main church of the Virgin are the most significant. Dating back to 12th-19th centuries, these murals offer a unique glimpse of nearly the whole history as well as the important stages of the development of Georgian church painting. Amongst them are

the famous mosaic of the apse - the Virgin with child Christ juxtaposed with the archangels and the unique 12<sup>th</sup> century frescos of the Narthex. The latter contains the images of the Seven Ecumenical Councils and the “Miracle of St. Euphemia”, which are exceptional for Georgia. The murals of the south-eastern chapel are examples of Palaeologan style painting, the later stage of which is exemplified by the refined fragments of the painting of the southern portal (1360-1395). The other frescoes of the 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century reflect the variety of styles of that period. The mural of the north-eastern chapel (first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> c.), reveal the high degree of skill of the master (second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> c.), while the frescos of the north-western chapel are less skilled. The murals of south-western chapel of St Marine are executed in the peculiar “folk style”, developed in Georgia in Late Medieval period. This style, specifically national in character, is distinguished with its naïve pictorial language and extremely enchanting, expressive imagery. Each layer of the painting, together with its iconographic and stylistic features, with its abundance of inscriptions and historic portraits, including the 16<sup>th</sup> century portrait of David IV in the central space of the main church, provides valuable materials not only for the study of medieval Georgian art but for the culture of the entire Eastern Christian medieval world.



In addition to its religious and cultural-educational significance, Gelati was the burial place for Georgian Kings and nobles. David IV the builder himself is buried at the southern porch of the Gelati complex, as stated in his will in which the humble monarch wished every Georgian entering the monastery to step on his grave.

Due to its high importance for the country, different governors considered it as an honour to make their contribution to the Monastery. Hence, it became the repository of many significant artworks, now being a precious part of the museum collections. Amongst many other treasures kept in the monastery were: the richly adorned 12<sup>th</sup> century Gelati Gospel, which is marked with the elaborate design, flowing line and the richness of colours, combined with the gold used as a background for miniatures and the famous *Khakuli Triptych of the Holy Virgin* composed in 12<sup>th</sup> century, containing stunning variety of a range of stones and medallions in cloisonné enamel (from 8<sup>th</sup> up to 12<sup>th</sup> century), as well as ornamental motifs demonstrating skilful execution. The triptych is priceless with its central part, which is the largest medieval cloisonné enamel in the world. As a part of its treasury, the monastery still keeps “the Gates of Ganja” devoted and brought as a trophy from his successful military campaign to the city of Ganja by the King Demetrius, the successor of King David IV, in 1139.

Gelati Monastery given its historical and cultural significance is among the most popular destinations of the country.

Text: Anna Shanshiashvili, Art Historian

Images: © Georgian Arts and Culture Centre

1. *Church of the Nativity of the Virgin* (12<sup>th</sup> century), Gelati Monastery, Georgia
2. *Interior of the Church of the Nativity of the Virgin* (12<sup>th</sup> century), Gelati Monastery, Georgia



## 12. Uplistsikhe

Being amongst of the oldest urban settlements of Caucasus, the ancient city of Uplistsikhe, functioning as a Historical-Architectural Museum-Reserve is the earliest example of Georgian rock-cut architecture. Located 10 kilometers east of the town of Gori, on a high rocky left bank of the Mtkvari River, Uplistsikhe encompasses approximately 150 cave buildings including, caves, entrance gate, fortress with towers, streets, squares, water channels, and secret tunnel leading down to the River Mtkvari. Giving origin to rock-cut architecture in Georgia, further advanced in the of David-Gareja desert monasteries and culminating in the magnificent architecture of the 12-13<sup>th</sup> century town of Vardzia, the site is notable for the co-existence of pagan and Christian cultures.

The history of the town goes back to the 2nd-3rd millenniums B.C. The huge bare cliff massif of Uplistsikhe must have compelled attention from early times, the more so that since prehistoric times, stone and cliff were considered as sacred symbols of strength and stability, while a cave signified a womb giving birth to supreme deities. Uplistsikhe, in fact, means the fortress or domain of the Lord. The main stage of building Uplistsikhe coincides with early Antiquity, (6th-4th centuries B), when major changes were underway in the country. It was then that the Kingdom of Kartli was founded and urban-type settlements turned into cities. In late 4th -early 3rd century a new temple city was built here. There is a very likelihood that Uplistsikhe had been the capital of Kartli before Mtskheta gained this title.

From the west and the south the city was protected by a tall cliff and from the east and the north, by a strong wall with four gates, a secret tunnel leading down to the River Mtkvari, a trench and a broad platform erected upon it. The city used to be divided into three districts, which differed from each other in scale and building density. The southern part occupied the smallest area. It preserves plans of simple dwellings, a vast arena and an altar-niche, the only religious cave in this section. The south section of the city must have once housed temple slaves (guards). The northern part was most likely the section where middle-class residents lived, as is indicated by the remains of temples and houses of simple design. A large wine cellar, comprising a complex, tri-partite structure, and a storage room for communion wine in which pits for fifty-eight wine pots and a grape-press were found, was located near the edge of the cliff (several grape-press can also be seen in other parts of the ancient city). Designed to store large amounts of wine, these storage facilities indicate how vast and densely populated the areas subordinated to Uplistsikhe were. Members of the temple community would bring their harvest to this site; grapes used to be pressed here in order to endow the liquid with sacredness; A wine cellar also served as a shrine. The middle section of the city, i.e., where presumably the temple was located and pagan priests resided, occupies the largest area of the cliff. The main street, which leads from the southeastern gate, divides the area into two parts. The main temple of hewn stone used to stand on the top of the cliff. Some of the fragments of the temple are incorporated into a Christian Church (the *Prince's Church*) standing on its site. This section

is where all important shrine temples and altars are concentrated. Some of these preserve their original scale and forms, e.g., *the Makviani*, the double-pillar room referred as *Tamar's Hall*, named after the prominent 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century Georgian queen Tamar, though she has never lived there etc.

In the early centuries of our era Uplistsikhe acquired a number of new complexes, including a cave, the ceiling of which is decorated with fine Roman caissons, which has been referred as to a *theatre*.

The adoption of Christianity in Georgia led to the decline of Uplistsikhe, However the beginning of the 6th century was marked by revival in Uplistsikhe reflected in the construction of the large three-nave basilica, partly carved in the cliff in place of a pagan temple in the center of the town and other building activities. In the 9th and 10th centuries, when Tbilisi was under Arab rule, Uplistsikhe emerged as the Georgians' main city and the shelter of the forces struggling for the consolidation of the country. This long period of prosperity of Uplistsikhe came to an end in the 1220s-30s, when the Mongol hordes attacked Georgia. The Mongol attack was followed by an irreversible process of final decline and fall. The 19th century saw the final depopulation of the city.

Archaeological excavations in Uplistsikhe have discovered numerous artifacts of different periods, including gold, copper and bone jewelry, pottery and a terracotta figurine of female deity, the iron hoops of four large wheels of different diameters.

Inscribed in the UNESCO World Heritage Tentative List, Uplistsikhe is one of the most significant sites of Georgia, impressing visitors with its ancient history, dimensions and the harmonious interaction of man-made structures with the natural environment of the rocky landscape.

Text: Anna Shanshiashvili, Art Historian

Images: © Georgian Arts and Culture Center

1. General view. Uplistsikhe. Georgia  
General view. Uplistsikhe. Georgia



### 13. Shatili and Mutso

The castle-towns *Shatili* and *Mutso* located in Khevsureti are among the most spectacular ancient villages of Eastern Georgian highlands, offering visitors the possibilities to explore the masterpieces of Georgian secular architecture and experience strong local traditions, kept alive in the mountainous regions of the country.

Listed in UNESCO World Heritage Tentative List *Shatili* castle-town, located at 1400 m above sea level served as a guardian of Georgia's northern borders throughout the centuries. Clinging harmoniously to the steep, rocky landscape, it was used both as housing for its inhabitant and as a fortress. The living quarters, a combination of flat-roofed houses rising one above the other and the towers built very close to each other, create an integrated fortified structure. Houses here, as generally in Khevsureti, have a three-storied structure, which provides for the compact lodging families and their cattle in one building. The roofing of the first floors serves as a yard for the second floor, while the third one is a threshing-floor, which contains half-open storage places. The uniqueness of *Shatili* lies in the system of connecting all the buildings to one another. Thus, one does not need to step outside while exploring the entire complex. *Shatili* is connected to the rest of the world by the narrow Arghuni River gorge.

The pagan beliefs, which are still strongly present in the rituals and traditions of the highland people, are reflected in the shrines nearby *Shatili*. Amongst these are *Ardoti*, located in the *Shatili* community area and *Anatoris Jvari (Cross)*, which is the pagan deity of animals in Khevsureti. The shrine includes a niche and burial vaults built of slabs of rock.

The local festival - *Shatiloba* is annually celebrated in July. Some of the village's ancient towers are transformed into the hotels to accommodate the visitors. Poetry reading and peculiar spontaneous verse - *kapia*, which has a form of a competition between two or more persons or groups, is usually performed during local festivals. The feast is accompanied by beer tasting, song and dance, traditional handicrafts and food fair. The local cuisine is famous for its natural products. Local dishes such as *khinkali* and *dambalkhacho* are widely known. The handicrafts, most often textiles applying knitting, sewing, embroidery, felt, tapestry and other techniques and using natural dyes for coloring wool products, are very typical for the region. Rugs, carpets and traditional socks, mainly decorated with geometric ornaments attest to the refined skills of households living in the mountainous parts, where the ancient practices are still preserved. Horse races - *doghi* - are also part of the celebration.

The remote village of *Mutso* is another attractive place for tourists, trekkers, and climbers. It is located close to the River *Ardotistskali*, at 180 m above sea level. The village was a forward defensive post, guarding of the border to the north. The village, which abandoned about a century ago, includes 40 different fortified structures. These are arranged on the vertically terraced landscape above the *Mutso-Ardoti Gorge*. Four fortresses-towers and several dwelling structures remain today. Among these are the *Torgva* fortress and tower. The men of *Mutso* were famous as brave warriors and hunters. They were considered to be the guardians of the treasury attached to their shrine, named *Broliskalo*

*Angel*. Legend tells that the treasure is still somewhere in the mountains of Mutso, anticipating the arrival of a Chosen One.

The *Shatili* and *Mutso* castle towns with their towers with pyramidal roofs, combined with the low houses, cling gracefully to a landscape of gentle slopes and give a distinctive traditional flavor to the highlands of eastern Georgia.

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Text: Anna Shanshiashvili, Art Historian

Images: © Georgian Arts and Culture Center

1. *Shatili* castle-town, Georgia
2. *Mutso*, Georgia
3. Khevsureti landscape, Georgia



### III. Culture expositions and fairs

#### 14. Georgian National Museum

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**Georgian National Museum (GNM)**, is the largest museum union in Georgia, composed of 10 existing museums, 4 house-museums and 2 research centers.

The richest and diverse collection of the **GNM** offers a widest range of exhibits and the entire glimpse of the whole history of the country. Country's most important archaeological findings are exposed in the **S. Janashia Museum of Georgia**. The precious artifacts of ancient metalwork from 3rd millennium BC- to the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD include: Martkopi and Bedeni discoveries, 23<sup>rd</sup> - 22<sup>nd</sup> century BC golden lion statuette, found in one of the kurgans in the Alazani Valley, examples of Trialeti culture, which are the 20<sup>th</sup> - 16<sup>th</sup> century BC valued metal items, golden beads, standards, a golden goblet decorated with precious stones, and a famous silver bucket and goblet, the latter of which is suppose to depict a vinous ceremony; the 14<sup>th</sup> - 7<sup>th</sup> century BC Colchian axe-heads, adorned with a peculiar style of graphic ornaments that demonstrate both advanced metallurgical skills and artistic values. Amongst the treasury of the museum are the precious metalwork from 6th BC and 3rd century AD the legendary `Colchis` (western Georgia), where the development of local goldsmithery was made possible by the rich resources of gold-bearing rivers. The ancient method of collecting gold using sheepskins as sieves, so that the gold grains would get caught in the fleece, still practiced in the mountainous region is reported by the Greek authors and can be considered as the possible inspiration for the Golden Fleece of Argonauts. Examples of Colchian gold work from the earliest 8th to 9th century BC include temple pendants, richly decorated with granulation and sculpted heads of predators. Gold granulation attained great variety and technical excellence in the 5<sup>th</sup> and early 4th century BC. Outstanding examples, discovered in Vani, include exquisitely crafted gold diadems, with braid-patterned holders, diamond-shaped plaques, adorned with repousse images of fighting animals: earrings; arm rings, temple pendants, lavish necklaces with miniature figures of birds and the heads of calves, goats, and rams - perhaps none more impressive than a gold necklace from Vani, which is composed of dozens of tiny granulation-adorned turtles. Amongst other striking artefacts of the museum are *Akhalgori treasures* and the rich *treasury of Mtskheta*, in which the use of multicoloured stone reached its highest level. On the fourth floor of **S. Janashia Museum of Georgia** is located the **Soviet Occupation Hall**. This exhibition represents seven decades of the Soviet rule in Georgia (1921-1991) and dedicated to the history of the anti-occupational, national-liberation movement of Georgia and to the victims of the Soviet political repression throughout this period. Here, the visitor can find unique personal files of the repressed people, orders to shoot or exile, and other artifacts representing Soviet-era in Georgia.

The artistic achievements of medieval Georgia are clearly reflected in the collection of **GNM's Museum of Fine Arts (Tbilisi)**, which preserves stone and metalwork of mostly ecclesiastical objects, such as chancel screens crosses, icons, cups and manuscript covers from the 8th to 9th century AD through the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Amongst many others the most remarkable objects of golden treasury are: the Icon of Transfiguration from Zarzma (886 AD), which is the earliest surviving monument of medieval metalwork, the renowned repoussé golden chalice of Bedia (999 AD), formed from one sheet of gold, a splendid processional cross from Martvili and the silver roundel of St. Mamai from Gelati, the 11<sup>th</sup> century pre-altar cross from Mestia, which depicts the earliest known cycle of the life of St. George and is distinguished for its refined reproduction of figures, motion and details. However, perhaps none are more impressive than the Khakuli Triptych of the Holy Virgin composed in 12<sup>th</sup> century, the largest medieval cloisonné enamel in the world combining a large number of medieval enamels from different times (8th-12th centuries) and origins (both Georgia and Byzantine) and the late 12<sup>th</sup> century Anchi Triptych of the Savior, executed by Beka Opizari, the famous Georgian goldsmith master. Alongside with artistic heritage of Middle Ages, the **Museum of Fine Arts** offers dynamic temporary exhibition programs.

**National Gallery** is one of the remarkable constitute parts of GNM network. It offers visitors the best collection of modern Georgian art. The temporary exhibition entitled *The Masterpieces of Georgian Art: First Half of 20th century* features breathtaking paintings, sculptures, and theater paintings by the most prominent Georgian artists such as: Niko Pirosmiani, David Kakabadze, Lado Gudiashvili, Gigo Gabashvili, Ketevan Magalashvili, Elene Akhvlediani and more. By visiting this exhibition, you will appreciate a broad spectrum of the artistic styles of the late 19th century and of the European avant-garde of the 20th century.

In addition to these artworks visitors can enjoy bright building of the National Gallery. This is a great combination of the old and contemporary architecture linked through glass roof. The old building of the National Gallery was constructed in 1888. This new baroque style building was designed by the German architect Albert Salzman. It is modeled on Pio Piacentini's Exhibition Palace, built in Rome. 2007-11 National Gallery was renovated and new entrance building with more exhibition halls, museum shop, and cafe designed by the Portuguese Architect Company "Ainda Arquitectura" was added.

National Gallery has eight exhibition halls. Bathed in natural light streaming in through the glass roof 8 meters above the floor as well as large windows National Gallery is luminous, inviting space, unique venue not only in Tbilisi but in the whole region of south Caucasus.

Other important museums of GNM in Tbilisi are the **Open Air Museum of Ethnography**, founded in 1966 by the famous Georgian ethnographer George Chitaia, which displays the examples of folk architecture and craftwork, more than 8 thousand exhibits brought from various regions of the country and **Tbilisi History Museum** housed in the beautiful building of former Caravanserai, which displays the collection of archeological, ethnological and documental materials reflecting the history of Tbilisi.

The regional museums of GNM include:

**Dmanisi Museum-Reserve** located 85 kilometer south-east of Tbilisi, adjacent to Patara Dmanisi village. The Museum-Reserve comprises of two main sites: a medieval city with a church and a major archaeological site of international significance where human remains were excavated. These remains date back to 1.8 million years and represent the oldest known evidence of human existence as yet discovered outside of Africa. The collections of Dmanisi Museum-Reserve consist of objects discovered during excavations of the medieval town. The Site Interpretation Centre opened at Dmanisi Museum-Reserve in October 2009.

**Svaneti Museum** in Mestia, which preserves valuable archaeological and ethnographical materials, rich collection of the Georgian manuscripts, engraved and painted icons, armor, metalwork, wooden ethnographical objects, jewelry, silverware and textiles. Notable are the collections donated to Svaneti churches by Georgian kings. There are some items of foreign origin, like: Syrian, Sassanid, Persian, Byzantine and Venetian.

**Signagi Museum**, located in one of the most beautiful city of Eastern Georgia region exhibits archeological, ethnographic and medieval expositions together with 16 paintings by Niko Pirosmanashvili, which was born in nearby village of Mirzaani.

**Samtskhe-Javakheti Museum** in Akhaltsikhe (southern Georgia), established in 1923, which preserves over 25,000 objects including manuscripts and old printed books, photos, archaeological, numismatic, and ethnographic collections, etc. The Museum's textile collection (rugs and carpets of the verge of 19th-20th century) as well as collection of ancient inscriptions cut on stone are of high importance. Of special note is the Mosque built by Ottomans in 1752 and Ruins of a medresa (Islamic school) that belongs to the Museum.

Text and Images: © Georgian National Museum

1. Deaddress(4<sup>th</sup> c. BC), Vani, Georgia
2. National Gallery, Georgian National Museum



## 15. National Centre of Manuscripts, Tbilisi

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Georgian is an ancient and distinctive language, which has no relationship with any other language, not even with the [North Caucasian](#) families. Its alphabet is one of only 14 in the world. The origin of the Georgian alphabet is uncertain, being either linked with the Phoenician, Aramaic or [Greek alphabets](#). According to traditional reports written down by [Leonti Mroveli](#) in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the original Georgian alphabet was created by [Pharnavaz](#), the first King of [Caucasian Iberia](#) (also called [Kartli](#)), in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC. However, the first examples of that alphabet, or its modified version, date from the 4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> centuries. Among the earliest attestations of the Georgian scripture: an inscription dating from 430 AD in Palestine and an inscription dating from 494 AD in Bolnisi Sioni Church. However, the existence of an unique local form of Aramaic, known as "[Armazuli](#)," which was uncovered in the findings at [Mtskheta](#), demonstrates the existence of local pre-Christian records, which shared several common features with the Georgian alphabet..

Georgian has been written in a variety of scripts over its history. Since its adaptation to a written structure, the Georgian alphabet has progressed through three primary forms. The examples of the earliest one, *asomtavruli* (majuscul) also known as *mrgvlovani* ("rounded"), are still preserved in monumental inscriptions. The *nuskhuri* ("minuscule") or *khutsuri* ("church script") first appeared in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. It was used in ecclesiastical works, with the *asomtavruli* still serving on occasion as capital letters in religious manuscripts. *Mkhedruli* ("secular"), script, which is currently used, first appeared in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. It was used for non-religious purposes through the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when it completely replaced *khutsuri*. *Mkhedruli* consists of 33 characters and has no distinction between upper and lowercase forms.

Georgian monasteries throughout the country and abroad served as educational and cultural centres. Number of richly adorned manuscripts produced in different monasteries can serve as the evidence for the intensive literary work and high level of Georgian manuscript illumination.

**The National Centre of Manuscripts (founded in 1958, Tbilisi)** is one of the most important repositories, where the literary heritage of Georgia is exposed and interpreted to the visitors. Hundreds of ancient manuscripts and miniatures, as well as historical documents are kept here. The National Centre of Manuscripts is a museum and a research establishment too.

The Centre preserves 10000 Georgian (5th-19th centuries) manuscripts, including up to 4000 most important palimpsest pages. Its fund is comprised of manuscripts, historical documents and archival materials. Noteworthy are original and translated monuments of Georgian ecclesiastical writings. Various kinds of manuscripts including Gospels and works of different Church Fathers and theologians, illuminated with miniatures are kept here. Jruchi I (936-940 AD) and Tskarostavi (10<sup>th</sup> century) Gospels are amongst the earliest examples, illumination of manuscripts was further developed and refined in 11-13th



centuries. The Alaverdi (1054 AD), Jruchi II (12<sup>th</sup> century), Gelati (12<sup>th</sup> century), Vani (12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries), Mokvi (1300 AD) Gospels, which display the elaborate design, flowing line of drawing and the richness of color combinations, are amongst the most important examples of the “Golden Age” of Georgian history.

Amongst the secular works the “Astrological treatise” written between 1188 and 1210 and about a hundred of manuscripts of the famous 12<sup>th</sup> century poet Shota Rustaveli’s poem -“Knight in the Panthers Skin” are worth of special mentioning.

The Centre also preserves up to 5000 foreign (Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Russian, Armenian, Greek, French, German, Latin, Hebrew, Polish, English, Czech, Syrian, Ethiopic, Mongolian, etc) manuscripts.

Museum Collection includes Georgian, Arabic, Turkish, Armenian and Persian historical documents as well. Especially unique are 11<sup>th</sup> - 13<sup>th</sup> century’s original documents bearing the signatures of Georgian kings and queens, high-ranking state officials, and bishops.

More than 170 private archival collections of Georgian and foreign public figures, the richest epistolary legacy, numerous folkloristic records, unique photographs, invaluable material of the new and most recent history of South Caucasus in the field of politics, economy, church life, journalism, theatre, music, etc are kept at the National Centre of Manuscripts. The Centre offers variety of services both to virtual and actual visitors. Annually, during the International day of Museums, it has an educational program entitled “Traveling through the World of Manuscripts”. It is comprised of an excursion tour and a workshop. Participants have the chance to discover old printed books and rare editions watch the manuscript digitalization process and take part in the process of manuscript restoration. In order to preserve and pass on the calligraphy skills, the Centre systematically provides calligraphy competition for youngsters.

Text: Anna Shanshiashvili, Art Historian

Images: © National Center of Manuscripts

1. Astrological treatise (1188 and 1210)
2. Alaverdi Gospels (1054 AD)



## 16. Tsinandali Alexander Chavchavadze House-Museum

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Located in the charming natural environment in Kakheti (eastern Georgia), Tsinandali Alexander Chavchavadze House-Museum (situated 79 km from Tbilisi) is amongst the popular tourist sites and active cultural centers of Georgia. The House-Museum includes the estate, garden and famous winery that once belonged to the 19<sup>th</sup> century prominent Georgian noble, romantic poet, public figure, military leader and diplomat - Alexander Chavchavadze (1786-1846).

The Chavchavadze family was one of the most prominent and highly influential noble families in 19<sup>th</sup> century Georgia. Alexander was the god-son of Catherine II of Russia, and spent his childhood in Russian noble circles. In 1813-1815 he fought against Napoleon's Army as an aide to Barclay de Tolly. The Chavchavadze family served as the first host of the intellectual guests from Europe and Russia. Large part of the progressively thinking members of the society of that time gathered at their place. Despite his close ties and service in Russian army, Alexander was amongst those Georgian public figures, who fought against Russian annexation. He was a well-known Georgian romantic poet, who introduced Western values and contemporaneous artistic tendencies, thus greatly contributing to the development of Georgian literature. In 1828 Tsinandali estate hosted the feast celebrating Alexander's beautiful daughter Nino's short-lived marriage with the Russian Diplomat and poet Alexander Griboedov (1795-1829), killed after four months in Tehran and buried (afterwards together with his devoted wife) in Tbilisi at Mtatsminda Pantheon of public figures.

Alexander Chavchavadze was the first Georgian noble to produce and bottled Georgian wine according to European methods. His vineyard is still cultivated up today. The unique oenology of Alexandre Chavchavadze, which has partially survived, includes more than 20 000 bottles of wine of 70 different varieties from different countries, with the first harvested 1839 year Saferavi among them.

The important part of the House-Museum is the garden, known as *Tsinandali Park*, which occupies 18 hectares of the land. Alexander garnished the property he inherited from his father. He was the first landowner to bring European landscape designers into Georgia. The park has a unique and interesting layout, with a mixture of natural and decorated gardens. There are different European, Asian and American exotic plants.

The Tsinandali estate was significantly damaged during the invasion of Shamil (1854), when *lezghins* destroyed and robbed 22 rooms of the palace, took over the gold, silver and many other valuable belongings of the Chavchavadze family. They burned the palace and the gardens and took 24 captives with them. The estate has been restored later. In 1887 famous landscape designer Arnold Ragel was invited from St Petersburg to renovate the park.

After the renovation works in 2008, the Tsinandali Alexander Chavchavadze House-Museum became one of the vibrant centers of cultural life in Georgia. It offers visitors the possibilities to stay in the hotels within the complex, see the house-museum, enjoy walk in

the spectacular garden, taste different types of Georgian wines in winery, visit the café, restaurant, the souvenir shop and finally the gallery, which hosts the temporary exhibitions of Georgian and famous international artists.

Page | 35 Text: Anna Shanshiashvili, Art Historian



## 17. Georgian State Museum of Theatre, Music, Cinema and Choreography

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The State Museum of Theater, Music, Cinema and Choreography in Tbilisi, founded in 1927, is amongst Georgia's richest depositories, which stores artifacts connected with the history of performing arts, music and cinema starting from antique era. Being the first museum of this type in the entire Caucasus region, it comprises more than 300 000 objects that provide comprehensive information on the development of Georgian theatre, cinema, circus, folklore, opera and ballet.

The collection of the museum comprises: depository of sculptures, posters, library and rare editions, manuscripts and archive documents, memorial objects and works of art, photos and negatives, fine arts and music. The antique mask excavated by archeologists in the town of Vani (western Georgia) is amongst the museum's most ancient objects.

Museum has the depository of posters, which contains more than 4000 items and the photo archive including 100 000 exhibits, which reflect the history of Georgian theater, music and drama.

Museum preserves manuscripts and memorial objects of famous Georgian writers, public figures and artists. They consist of private and business correspondence, records, scenarios, diaries, poetries, plays etc.

Of special note is the richest collection of video and audio records of old gramophone, contemporary cinema and music. 2 503 records reflect the history of the evolution of audio recording.

Among museum's most precious exhibits are the examples of Georgian stage design, which has a century-long tradition in the country. In 1920s, when the reformatory directors - *Kote Marjanishvili* and *Sandro Akhmeteli* started to act on the scene of Georgian theater, stage design became of the leading branched of Georgian avant-garde. The museum collection includes the works of 300 Georgian artists. Amongst these are the famous modernists, such as *David Kakabadze* (1889-1952), *Lado Gudiashvili* (1896-1980), *Kiril Zdanevich* (1892-1969), *Elena Akhvlediani* (1901-1975), etc. Amongst those exhibited, whose contribution to the development of Georgian stage design is especially great are: *Irakli Gamrekeli* (1894-1943) - one of the founders of Georgian stage design, whose works are marked by monumentality and by use of elaborate constructions, with optimal utilization of stage space. Another significant figure is *Soliko Virsaladze* (1908-1989), whose exquisite talant was especially unveiled in the musical and ballet genres. His works are distinguished by exquisite mixture of picturesqueness with constructivism, while color here has a special emphasis. Finally, the work of *Peter Otskheli* (1907-1937), an outstanding figure in the history of Georgian stage design is worth of special mentioning. His sketches, be they outlines of a decoration or a draft of a costume, reveal the qualities of perfection, of refined, elaborated design and overflowing creativity. His stage designs,

marked with the harmonious interrelation of the costume and stage decoration have restraint and a special extremely laconic and imaginative character.

Alongside Georgians the museum collection contains works of famous Fernand Léger (1881 -1955), Léon Bakst (1866- 1924), and Alexandre Benois (1870- 1960) and other Russian, Azeri, Armenian etc. artists.

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In additions to its rich and diverse collection, the museum building itself, being one of the amazing constructions, is amongst the landmarks of the city. The history of the building is connected with the romantic story of German prince - *Constantine Oldenburg* and Georgian noblewoman *Agraphina Japharidze*, who left her husband and family in Kutaisi and settled with the German Prince in Tbilisi. The beautiful building, in which the museum is housed today, has been specially commissioned by *Prince Oldenburg* for his beloved woman. Marked with the features of Gothic-Classicist eclecticism, the building was designed (1895) by the well-known architect - *Paul Stern*. A three-storied tower, high merlons, beautifully decorated cornice, open terrace and steep roofing gives an unusual look to the structure.

The Museum with its rich collection, gorgeous building, systematic temporary exhibitions and different educational programs, is amongst the important attraction of the city.

Text: Anna Shanshiashvili, Art Historian

Images: © Georgian State Museum of Theatre, Music, Cinema and Choreography

1. Georgian State Museum of Theatre, Music, Cinema and Choreography (1895)
2. Museum Display



## IV. Festivals

### 18. Art-Genie Festival

The Art Gene Festival is amongst the most attractive and popular festivals held in Georgia. The annual festival usually starts in June-July encompassing the regions and finally ending up in the traditional environment of Open Air Museum in Tbilisi, which in turn houses different dwelling and ethnographic utensils collected from 14 ethnographic regions of Georgia.

The Art Gene Festival is an initiative of the Georgian NGO “Union of Art Gene”, formed by a group of people whose mission was to identify problems associated with traditional and folk culture and find ways to solve them. The Art Gene group consists mainly of artists and musicians.

In 2003 the group began its initial investigations into the existence of the remaining indigenous Georgian art forms, including folk music, which has been passed down from generation to generation forming an integral part of Georgian life. The Art Gene Group travelled throughout all of the regions in Georgia, investigated over 100 families, who were known to maintain their strong traditions and whose activities were then filmed and recorded on the spot. Most of them were selected to participate in a Gala concert at the first Art Gene festival in Tbilisi in 2004, where they performed in front of a large audience, have been recorded live for further archival purposes and to produce and publish CDs.

In 2004 the main profile of the festival was Crafts, which was organized after extensive expeditions throughout Georgia, giving the group an insight into the huge potential within this field for many years to come. The Art Gene Group found some unknown craftsmen and blacksmiths, who are still practicing indigenous methods of their craft, thought previously to be extinct. The result of 2005 research was the publication of a book “Masters of Georgia’s Traditional Crafts”, which catalogues the work of artisans working within different fields of crafts throughout Georgia and provides their contact details to encourage commissions from the readers. The book aims to address such sensitive issues as migration and potential tourism development so much needed in rural areas, to keep these artisans interested in continuing their work for their future prosperity.

The Festivals staged modern and traditional folk music concerts, held exhibitions and sales of folk handicrafts, traditional medicine and cuisine and held folk games to promote national heritage in the capital and regions. To attract the younger generation to see traditional music the festival staged popular rock concerts towards the evenings and developed certain patterns of jamming sessions with folk, modern music and dance, which proved to become one of the trademarks of the festival.

Every year the organizers chose a new theme for the Festival. Their motivation is to give each annual Art Gene festival its own distinct profile but keeping aspects of the previous one, thus giving the festival a wider scope every year.

The Art Gene Festival proved to be one of the most successful, self-sustained and highly attended festival in the South Caucasian Region, with growing numbers of supporters from both the local and international community.

The Festivals participants from over the years have been from different ethnic minorities in Georgia and from countries such as Chechnya, Ingushetia, Ukraine, Turkey, Latvia, China, Japan, France, and UK, making the Art Gene Festival an International event.

The Festival is attended by all generations since it covers the widest range of cultural activities including: arts, crafts, folk music, modern music, blacksmithery, tannery, jewellery, cloisonné enamel, apiculture (beekeeping), basket making, knitting, kilims, weaving, sewing, embroidery, “gobelin”, cloth and felt making, musical instruments, pottery and ceramics, carpentry and stonemasonry, wood carving, culinary, traditional medicine, martial arts, dance, etc. generally putting an emphasis on the fields of activity which are still part of daily life, in all the versatility of different ethnic groups existing in Georgia.

The founders of the “Art Gene” wish this Festival to be associated with such values and feelings as: true traditions, family, compassion, humor, devotion, respect, hospitality, responsibility, healthy criticism, freedom, faith and love. By celebrating these traditions, values and feelings, the Festival serves as an antidote against the intruding globalization and contributes to maintain age old traditions and national identity.

[www.artgeni.ge](http://www.artgeni.ge)

Images: © Art Gene



## 19. International Festivals of Classical Music

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Georgia, famous for its ancient tradition of polyphonic music, celebrates various music festivals through the year. Amongst these of special note are the International Festivals of Classical music that play significant role in country's cultural life.

One of the most famous cultural events taking place in Black Sea Region of Georgia is International festival of classical music known as "Night Serenades". Festival, founded by one of the greatest Georgian violinist, Liana Isakadze, was traditionally held in the resort town of Bichvinta, in the Gagra District, located in the north-western partner of Georgia, Abkhazia (from 1982 to 1991). Over the past 8 years it has gained immense popularity both in Georgia and abroad. Due to the political situation in the country (1990), the festival ceased the existence and only in 2009 Liana Isakadze newly established the international festival with the similar name "Night Serenades" this time in Adjara, which is another coastal region of Georgia.

The festival passed with the great success in the open air on the territory of the historic Gonio fortress, which with its historical environment gives special flavor to the event. The fortress dates back to the 2nd century AD, to Roman times, with walls from the Byzantine period and merlons from Turkish rule. The town was also known for its theater and hippodrome. Festival suggests diverse program to its audience. It encompasses art pieces of Georgian and international music performed by world known artists such as: Benny Gholson, Yong K Li Alexander Korsantia, Tamar Licheli, Gintaras Rinkevich, Nika Memanishvili, Frederieke Saeijs, Michael Kugel, Jeffery Kowalsky, Sergei Nakariakov, Yuri Zhislin, Aleksandr Ridin, etc. Under the initiative of Liana Isakadze, who is counted among the world's top 20 violinists the new unique orchestra has been created, completed with the musicians recognized around the world.

Another very popular festival of classical music is held in Telavi, the royal city in Kakheti, eastern Georgia's famous wine-producing region, which became a favorite destination for music lovers since 1980s, when famous Georgian pianist Eliso Virsaladze founded the International Festival of Classical Music known as "Keba Vazisa" (Praise to Vine). Festival consisted of concert series and master classes by the world known musicians. The festival saw a rebirth in 1994. The festival program is diverse, encompassing masterpieces of classical, folk, and ethnic as well as opera pieces, performed by famous musicians such as Eduard Bruner, Natalia Gutman, Liza Batiashvili, Luiz Pelerini, Vakhtang Kakhidze etc. Moreover, young musicians from Japan, Israel, Germany, Switzerland, Bulgaria and Russia are also keenly taking part in the festival.

In autumn the capital of Georgia hosts the International Music Festival "Autumn Tbilisi", founded by the known Georgian composer and conductor Jansugh Kakhidze in 1993. The festival together with classic music performances also features folk and jazz music concerts. The programme of the festival presents the important musical works of modern Western European and Georgian composers.

Thanks to the participation of world famous stars, the festival gained the wide recognition among the lovers of music and it became one of the important musical events held in Tbilisi.





The Festival is organized by the Tbilisi Center of Music and Culture in cooperation with Tbilisi City Hall. Since 2006, the festival is actively supported by Ministry of Culture and Monument Protection of Georgia.

Images:

© International Festival “Keba Vazisa”



## 20. Jazz festivals

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Centuries of musical traditions lead to a strong connection between music and Georgians. The International Jazz Festival which has already been held in Tbilisi for 36 years played a notable role in further development of these musical traditions. The first International Jazz festival in Soviet Union was organized in Tbilisi in 1976 and later, in 1989, the capital of Georgia hosted the biggest festival throughout the USSR with participation of more than 150 foreign musicians.

The first Tbilisi Jazz Festival in independent Georgia, after the breakdown of USSR was held in 2000. Since then, the tradition of organizing it in October annually was established.

The event gained such a great popularity that the producer company-Eastern Promotions-decided to set up another independent event, Black Sea Jazz Festival, which is held in Batumi every July since 2007. Both festivals are officially registered in calendar of prestigious European Jazz Festivals and are known not only in Georgia, but also beyond its borders. Festivals, during their history, featured famous musicians such as Chick Corea, Joe Cocker, Jamiroquai, Joe Zawinul, Michael Franks, George Benson, George Duke, Herbie Hancock, Al Jarreau and others.

The Jazz Festivals became one of the most popular musical events in Georgia and they attract not only local, but also foreign lovers of jazz. Thus, the events contribute to the promotion of Georgia internationally. It is also notable that more than a half of the festival audience consists of the young generation.

Tbilisi Jazz Festival and Black Sea Jazz Festival, due to their importance, gained support from the Ministry of Culture and Monument Protection of Georgia, Tbilisi City Hall and Batumi municipality, as well as from the number of private companies.

Year after year, the Tbilisi Jazz Festival and Black Sea Jazz Festival develop, enlarge and broaden the geography of the participants.

Text: Eastern Promotion

Images: ©Eastern Promotion

*This publication has been produced with the assistance of the European Union. The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of project partner organizations and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Union.*