The Kimerioni: A Modernist Café in Tbilisi (1919–1921)

Tea Tabatadze

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The Tbilisi artistic café Kimerioni was founded in 1919 as “a Georgian poetry café-club” at the initiative of Georgia’s first modernist literary grouping, the Tsisperqants’elebi, or Blue Horn Poets. The very same year, the Russian artist Sergei Sudeikin, alongside the local Georgian artists Lado Gudiashvili and David K’ak’abadze, decorated it with murals.

The Kimerioni was an important part of Tbilisi’s artistic milieu between 1919 and 1921. It was a site where works of art were displayed, actively discussed, and theoretically interpreted. It was a space for consumption and social intercourse, a café-restaurant, founded at the same time for specifically artistic activity, conforming to the general contours of “café culture” as it had emerged elsewhere in Europe and Russia. In this sense the Kimerioni, along with numerous other artistic cafés functioning in Tbilisi between 1917 and 1921, can be regarded as part of a wider modernist phenomenon, that of the artistic cabaret-club-café, which sprung up in practically all the big cities of Europe, including Moscow and St. Petersburg, beginning in the late nineteenth century.

The establishment of such institutions was dictated by a specific cultural and political context that defined the chronology of their creation, their functional character, and their socio-cultural orientation. As a rule, artistic cabarets arose in periods of political crisis and great change. Moreover, their appearance coincided with the completion of a historical process by which art was to become an increasingly differentiated activity, perceived as a subjective, self-sufficient form of cognition and expression, resulting in its complete self-regulation and secularization. At
the same time, a clear tendency towards a synthesis or fusion of the arts was palpable: indeed, it was one of the central aesthetic gestures of the epoch. Artistic cabaret-clubs were one key reflection of this tendency.\(^6\)

These very circumstances, of social crisis and artistic self-differentiation, arose in Tbilisi during the 1910s, giving rise to a “cabaret epidemic” that had already been felt elsewhere in Russia and Europe. The establishment of artistic cafés in Tbilisi coincided with the active immigration of artists from Russia: indeed, all of them were founded by modernists of different nationalities residing in Tbilisi during that time. Although Georgians who had travelled overseas, such as the symbolist writer Grigol Robakidze and the Blue Horn P’aolo Iashvili, would have been familiar with café culture even before, both the tradition of artistic cafés and the specific aesthetics of their décor were closely associated in Georgian eyes with the cafés of Moscow and St. Petersburg.\(^7\)

By the 1910s, a large number of cafés had arisen in Tbilisi, each with a distinct role and function. These cafés looked back on certain local or indigenous precedents, such as the literary salon, a large number of which existed in Tbilisi at that time. But the most significant precedents then in existence was the traditional city tavern (dukani) and the Laghidze Café, the first “European” café in Georgia, which opened its doors in Georgia’s second city of Kutaisi in 1904, and subsequently in Tbilisi in 1906.

According to E. Kuznetsov, the traditional dukani’s function was very broad, functioning as a sort of club.\(^8\) The Tbilisi dukani was typified by an atmosphere of festive openness and candor, in which the tavern doubled as a home, and its owner its patriarchal host and presiding artist. It was a place where people of common social rank and background, with similar interests and tastes, united around the table to the accompaniment of song, wine, speechmaking, and poetry. Here consumption acquired a ritualized form and evolved into an aesthetic act.\(^9\) While traditionally attracting the urban popular classes, the taverns of Kutaisi and Tbilisi were also places where the Blue Horn Modernists, and creative people in general, used to gather. The café, by contrast, was a typically European and modern form of urban public sociability.\(^10\) The Laghidze Cafés of Kutaisi and Tbilisi were in the main visited by intellectuals and the literate élites: indeed, their symbolic function, as Paul Manning has noted, was to serve as the locus of new technology—electrification—and of intelligentsia high culture.\(^11\)

The Kimerioni was founded by and for such a milieu—it was a modern means to establish modernist art. Yet although the Blue Horns called it a café, the encounters which took place there did not differ much in kind from the traditional Georgian feasts (supra) which took place in the tavern. In a sense two types of social interaction and consumption came together here: the old and the new, the traditional feast and the electrified spectacle of intelligentsia culture, the customary wine and the new non-alcoholic soft drinks marketed by Laghidze. It was thus neither a café (not even a Laghidze café) nor merely a tavern (not even a tavern “transformed into a Parisian literary café,” as Grigol Robakidze had it).\(^12\) The Kimerioni might be best seen as a hybrid form of café-tavern. It could accommodate the poet Giorgi Leonidze’s wedding feast as well as a performance of School for Stars, a parodic play by the Russian experimental theatre director Nikolai Evreinov.
The Kimerioni was amply decorated with wall paintings that played a vital synthesizing function. In this respect, the Kimerioni falls comfortably alongside the decorated café-clubs of St. Petersburg, Moscow, Paris and Strasbourg, as a synthetic structure. This synthesizing impulse was decidedly new, specifically romantic and post-romantic. It arose from the crisis of monumental form, in whose aftermath any integration of the arts, their fusion into one pictorial space, faced obvious difficulties. In the wall paintings of the Kimerioni, we find two essentially contrary tendencies typical of modernist culture—subjective individualism, and a striving for synthesis. Further complexity arises from the collaborative nature of the murals: three different artists with distinct visions took part in the decoration of the walls; moreover, one was Russian, the other two Georgian, working together to create a single environment.

The search for synthesis had more than a decorative purpose. The wall paintings of the Kimerioni can be regarded as making visible a set of social and ideological factors which were the extra-artistic basis of the aesthetic synthesis they strove to create. These factors include Georgia’s brief period of political independence (1918–1921), which unleashed a mood of optimism in Georgia that differed starkly from the chaos of revolutionary Russia; the geographical status of Tbilisi as a junction or meeting point between East and West; and its status as a modern city in which different levels of culture and history remained interlinked and intermingled. The Kimerioni opened when Tbilisi had become the new capital of an independent nation, as well as the temporary regional center of the avant-garde in Russia and the Caucasus. Like the city, the Tbilisi avant-garde would be multiethnic and multilingual, allowing different artistic trends to coexist in an open and tolerant environment. Tbilisi’s cultural heritage fostered a less confrontational attitude towards artistic and social diversity in general. It was for these reasons that Grigol Robakidze dubbed the Tbilisi of 1917–21 a “fantastic city.”

Georgian modernism was not demonstratively oppositional or nihilistic. On the contrary, it cleaved to the general modernist principles that we recognize as Greenbergian formalism, while insisting on national artistic tradition as its point of departure. Despite the secularizing tendencies that had begun to manifest themselves in Georgian art since the late eighteenth century, the aesthetic and ideological legacies of the pre-modern remained palpable in professional painting well into the late nineteenth century. This reverence for tradition was not restricted to matters of artistic form alone; it was equally a consciously assumed social stance in favour of the national: the expectation that art should be both “national and universal” determined the nature of artistic form as well as the artist’s duty to his nation. According to Geront’i Kikodze, a literary critic of the day, art was perceived as a form of “national energy.” “Any art of any country is created within the national framework, and only then does it acquire value and justification,” wrote the artist Shalva Kikodze. The Blue Horn poet T’itsian Tabidze added: “As Europe steps in through the open doors, we must meet it armed with our national consciousness, bedecked with all the attributes of our national culture, so that a main hub is created around which all the new ideas will spool.” These attitudes typified large sections of Georgian society.
The Kimerioni, like Tbilisi’s artistic cafés in general, lacked a programmatic social or political motivation such as those found in Paris or Munich, nor did they have a specific aesthetic mission like the cabarets in St. Petersburg, or Zurich’s Cabaret Voltaire or the Café De L’Aubette in Strasbourg. Lacking a shared etiquette of behavior or orientation, they can be said to have had a common ground or ethic. The structural and functional peculiarities of Tbilisi’s artistic cafés, and specifically that of the Kimerioni, had an entirely different basis: a common attitude rather than any existing artistic theory.

For Georgian contemporaries the Kimerioni held a surpassing importance. In 1920 the writer David K’asradze wrote:

I do not even know what I am dealing with here: is this a restaurant or a new temple of art? We view a fact that cannot be denied. The Kimerioni, should be regarded as one of the most splendid artistic monuments of our era, when the architects of a new politics in recently liberated Georgia began to build a state. 21

A café-restaurant, the Kimerioni was at the same time perceived as a ritual space decorated with wall paintings—a “temple.” It is perhaps natural that such an environment served the ethical norms and aesthetic ideology of the Blue Horn poets as well as their friends and fellow artists. In this regard it belonged to “our” time and was “ours.” Yet its significance crucially transcended the creative milieu, acquiring a meaning for Georgian society as a whole. Artistic bohemia had acquired a sense of civic duty and responsibility towards the nation. K’asradze’s words don’t merely affirm the Georgian nationality of the works of art that decorated the walls of the Kimerioni. Moreover, Sergei Sudeikin, one of the chief artists to contribute to the space, was in fact Russian. K’asradze’s designation of the café as a “monument” suggests that the Kimerioni betrayed some essential signs of times: signs not merely of a formal or aesthetic nature, but indicating the wider ethical and ideological orientation of modern Georgian art as well.

To what extent did the café’s wall paintings depict Tbilisi’s environment, as well as the outlook and ambitions of Georgian society in the 1910s and 20s? Was the Kimerioni a contemporary monument, a cultural sign of its time? Do the murals of the Kimerioni also create a synthetic, spatial-pictorial structure? And if so, then how? The question becomes all the more legitimate if we recall that Sergei Sudeikin was the leading figure and primary contributor to the café’s murals. One might say that it was Sergei Sudeikin, together with David K’ak’abadze and Lado Gudiaishvili, who created early 20th-century Georgian art as an integrated phenomenon.

If we consider the murals of the Kimerioni as a unified system rather than as a sum of distinct works, it becomes possible to define the Kimerioni paintings as generating a distinct pattern in Georgian art. Such an approach necessarily discounts the ethnic provenance of each individual artist. How might we understand the Kimerioni’s wall-paintings as an ideological whole?

Schematically the wall-paintings of the café appear as follows:
As we enter, on the right wall of the south stairs leading down to the main hall we find Lado Gudiashvili’s “Stepko’s Tavern.” On the left wall just opposite “Stepko’s Tavern” would have been Sergei Sudeikin’s “Georgian Poets.” (This work is lost and no photos of it exist.) The opening to the left side of the stairs leads to the main hall of the Kimerioni. On the sides of the pillars and in the left wall’s niche are numerous compositions by Sudeikin (50 in total).

A mural entitled “Broken Mirror” and a composition with a flower basket would have been opposite the entrance where a small stage (a bandstand) had been erected. The right wall at the entrance would have been decorated with a scene of women dancing to the accompaniment of the , a Near Eastern wind instrument. On the opposite southern wall the niches were divided by stained-glass partitions. All three compositions and stained glasses belonged to Sergei Sudeikin. These works no longer exist. In the semicircular arch of the southern wall opposite the stage we find David K’ak’abadze’s “Artist and Muse.”

Lado Gudiashvili, Sergei Sudeikin and David K’ak’abadze each carried out the given task according to their own principles. Their works clearly reveal their distinct artistic visions and styles; their choice of the theme is absolutely different as well. It was their thematic and generic orientations that would finally determine the space as a whole.
For Gudiaishvili, the painter of “Stepko’s Tavern,” the unifying theme was Tbilisi itself and its traditional way of life. At precisely this time Gudiaishvili was generating his celebrated series of paintings dedicated to the city’s artisans (and tradesmen). In the Kimerioni he represents the image of a typical Tbilisi or tavern, and its keeper.

In his numerous and multi-faceted paintings Sergei Sudeikin took up the characteristic theme of theatre and theatricality, the masquerade and masks. In his works we find images of cabaret dancers, clowns, fairy-tale heroines and monsters, prostitutes, café habitués, as well as still-lives containing flowers, fantastic birds, masks and decks of cards. Sudeikin had already designed two of St. Petersburg’s most celebrated artistic cabarets, the Stray Dog (in 1912), and The Comedians’ Shelter (in 1916); the Kimerioni was thus Sudeikin’s latest attempt at realizing Russian theatre director Nikolai Evreinov’s vision of a “theatralized life.” In his David K’ak’abadze reposed a problem that had been weighing on him at this time—how to juxtapose human portraiture and landscape in one work. In K’ak’abadze’s composition for the Kimerioni, figure and background...
function as a wider cultural symbol, whereby the artist’s self-portrait is depicted against the Georgian landscape, understood as an indigenous source of inspiration.

Clearly, then, each artist chose a subject matter that was significant to him personally. How did these three themes fuse into one singular idea or concept? Whether the artistic integrity of the Kimerioni was created through prior intent or even intuitively, we cannot say. Let us recall that the entire ensemble was created through a convergence of painting and architecture according to a consistent patterning of rhythm, proportion, scale, and formal principles. All three artists reveal one and the same attitude towards these principles. There is no discord between the visual and the architectural: despite the individual style of each artist, every painting is perceived formally as a unique part of an integrated whole. The entire visual narrative of the café is based on a logic generated by the spatial relationship between each separate composition, which assisted visitors of the café to orient themselves, move rhythmically within its walls, and perceive the visual art in a specific order.

The compositional scheme of prompts the visitor to move downstairs towards the main hall, where he finds himself surrounded by the work of Sergei Sudeikin, spread along the walls and columns of the Kimerioni. Some of the compositions are neutral in terms of dictating the direction of one’s movement, while others clearly prompt us to cross the hall, walk between or around the columns, or simply come to a halt. These maneuvers arise from the thematic homogeneity and emotional calm implied by the hall’s mid-section, which depicts only still-lives. These still-lives compel us to go around them, or walk past, before turning to the wall where David K’ak’abadze’s is located. This work, with its sense of directness, equilibrium, horizontal display and strict symmetry, representing figures of a comparatively greater size, compels us to stop, as if communicating to us that our itinerary has come to an end.

The thematic diversity and dissimilarity of each artist’s work thus becomes integrated into a consistent, focused “narrative,” creating a comprehensive conceptual pattern. The compositions surrounding the entrance serve as a kind of introduction, a Kimerioni “visiting card,” if you will. On one side, reminds us of the café’s city location and the prevailing patterns of urban interaction. On the other side we see a painting with poets and artists bedecked in fancy dress and masquerade, introducing us to the café’s chief cultural protagonists as well as its prevalent atmosphere. The visitor then enters the main hall, where a masquerade is unveiled—sometimes poetic, sometimes grotesque; sometimes theatrical, and sometimes evocative of fairy-tale mystery. But as we reach David K’ak’abadze’s, our emotions are becalmed: the work reminds us of the artist’s national purpose.

Each artist’s contribution acquires an integrated meaning only within this unified system, in which it functions as a visual element of the system as a whole. This system is dictated by the ideological and ethical commitments nurtured by Georgian poets and artists of the time. In this sense, although Sergei Sudeikin’s work numerically prevails and generates the dominant sensibility of the main hall, it is the work of Lado Gudashvili and David K’ak’abadze which ultimately determine the café’s overall concept. begins the café’s “visual narrative” just ends it, while Sudeikin’s “theatricalized life” blends
into this narrative rather successfully. Thus the Kimerionioffers us a precious guide to the era’s dominant ideology, in the form of national signs as well as ideals of the artist and his function, which T’itsian T’abidze called the “hired hand” [25].

The systemic nature of the Kimerionicompositions reveal many of the significant characteristics of Georgian modernism during the 1910s. As a whole they are neither aggressively vangardist nor insular and inward-looking. They combine two distinct and apparently opposed tendencies of modernist culture: individualist subjectivism and a striving for artistic synthesis and bohemian sociability. Their unity goes beyond the aesthetic, to indicate a civic and national orientation. Such an orientation did not preclude cooperation and interaction between artists belonging to different nationalities then residing in Tbilisi. This integrity also reveals the peculiarities of Tbilisi modernity, which Grigol Robakidze aptly termed the “fantastic city.”

Notes

1. Kimerioni is derived from the word “chimera.”
3. Cafés of the time include Dzmiri nugeshi (Frateral Consolation), Parshevangis k’udi (The Peacock’s Tail), Fantastik’i’ri dukani (The Fantastic Tavern), Argonavt’ebis navi (The Argonauts’ Boat).
5. In France the cabaret emerges in the late nineteenth century, a period of intensifying anti-bourgeois sentiment. See D. Tikhvinskaia, Kabare i teatry miniatiur v Rossii 1908–1917 gg., 19. Some 15 to 20 years later cabarets were established in Berlin and Munich (Eleven Hungmen, Simplicium, Smoke and Noise) where one could hear songs inspired by the Fronde and satirical sketches on the imperial claims of Wilhelm II. During World War I, the dadaistic Cabaret Voltaire opened in respectable Zurich. According to Hugo Ball its goal was to “remind the world that there are independent men beyond war and nationalism, living with some other ideals.” See Hugo Ball (1886–1927). Dada Fragments in Art in Theory 1900–1990. An Anthology of Changing Ideas, edited by Charlse Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford, U.K. & Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992), 246. In Russia modernism came of age during the period between the revolutions of 1905 and 1917, and was typified by an exceptional outburst of creative energy, on the one hand, as well as an eschatological experience of history, on the other. See L.I. Tikhvinskaia, Kabare i teatry miniatiur v Rossii 1908–1917 gg., 19.
6. The artistic cabaret was a synthetic structure, and not merely for the obvious reason that different fields and forms of art merged within its space. Their environment was often structured on the basis of a certain aesthetic ideology. For example, the St. Petersburg cabarets were based on Nikolai Evreinov’s theory of “theatricalized life.” The last project of De Stijl, the Café de l’Aubette, was based on the idea of unification of art and life and the creation of its universal plastic model. I suspect that the latter principle underlay the decision to paint the walls of subsequent cabarets such as the Pittoreque in Moscow (painted by the artists V. Tatlin, A. Rodchenko and B. Iakulov in 1917), Brodiachaia Sobaka (The Stray Dog, painted by S. Sudeikin, N. Sapunov and M. Kulbin in 1912) and Prival Komediantov (The Comedians’ Halt, painted by S. Sudeikin, A. Iakovlev, B. Grigoriev, I. Fomin in 1916), both in St. Petersburg; the Café De L’Aubette in Strasbourg (painted by Hans Arp, Sophie
From TABATADZE / a modernist café in tbilisi (1919–1921)

7. Artists of different nationalities painted the walls of three of Tbilisi artistic cafés: the Fantastic Tavern, decorated by Lado Gudishvili, Aleksandr Petrakovskii, Nik'o Nik'oladze, Iuri Degen, Ilia Zdanevich, and Ser Gey in 1917; The Argonauts’ Boat, painted by Kirill Zdanevich, Lado Gudishvili, and Aleksandr Bazhbeuk-Melikov in 1918 and, finally, the Kimerioni—painted by Sergei Sudeikin, Lado Gudishvili, and David K’ak’abadze in 1919. None of the wall paintings belonging to the St. Petersburg, Moscow or Strasbourg cafés have survived. For this reason the survival of the wall paintings in two of Tbilisi’s artistic cafés, The Argonauts’ Boat and the Kimerioni is particularly significant.

The Kimerioni is all the more remarkable because no other café of the period apart from the Parisian La Coupole has preserved its murals so remarkably intact.


12. "And thus the Kutaisi dukans turned into Parisian literary cafés, where together with the harsh sound of the music-box and the obligatory "Mravalzhamieri" [the name of a polyphonic Georgian drinking song], names such as Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Baudelaire, Friedrich Nietzsche, Oscar Wilde, and Paul Verlaine …were uttered". See Grigol Robakidze, “Gruzinskii modernizm” (Georgian Modernism), in Ars 1 (1918): 47.

13. See Dimit’ri Tumanishvili, “Ertobliv khelovnebata nats’armoebis’ tsnebata gamo (On the notion of the ‘integrated art work’),” in Letters and Essays (Tbilisi, Ts’minda Nino, 2001); E.B. Murina, Problemy sinteza prostranstvennykh iskusstv (Problems Arising from the Synthesis of the Spatial Arts), (Moscow, Iskusstvo, 1982).


20. T’itsian T’abidze, “Tsisperi Qantsebit” (With the Blue Horns) in Tsisperi Qants,ei, No. 1 (Kutaisi: 1916), 27. For the full translation of this manifesto, see this issue.
22. According to T’itsian T’abidze and his wife Nino T’abidze the painting “Georgian Poets” depicted a two-faced image of Grigol Robakidze, Pa’olo Iashvili with horns in a Spanish hat and cloak, a self-portrait of Sudeikin, T’itsian T’abidze in the guise of Pierrot, Nino T’abidze wearing the mask of Columbine, as well as the Georgian painters Lado Gudiashvili, David K’ak’abadze and Iak’ob Nik’oladze. See T’itsian T’abidze, “Kimerioni,” in Barik’adi (22 January 1922); and Nino T’abidze, T’itsiani da misi megobrebi (T’itsian and His Friends), (Tbilisi: 2002).