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PIROSMANI (Soviet Georgia, 1971, color)

Recent years have witnessed a growing interest in the world in the work of self-taught painters, who have had no professional training and who by employing simple techniques and following only their vocation represented on canvas the world as their unsophisticated eyes saw it. Many of these painters were exceptionally talented.

The most remarkable among them is perhaps the wonderful Georgian painter Nico Pirozmanashvili, who as Jean A. Keim (The UNESCO Courier, No 10, October 1962) puts it, "far beyond Georgia, by virtue of his genius and humanity, belongs to world art."

Like all genuine popular art, his technique blends ancient traditions with imaginative representations of living reality. Despite his simple techniques, his paintings showing the old pre-revolution Georgia move viewers for their depth, force and sincerity.

Pirozmanashvili's paintings are Georgia herself, her landscape, her people, her traditions, many of which are preserved, while others are changing or have recently disappeared. One can no longer see in the streets of Tbilisi bearded street-sweepers with badges on their caps, or a doctor with an umbrella riding a donkey, nor can one see the feasting princes or merchants. The Georgian countryside has changed beyond recognition. The idea Pirozmanashvili's paintings give you of what Georgian life was like in his time, is not fully adequate. His pictures, however, so true to life and bearing such a clear imprint of the times, are of the greatest value for those who view them today both artistically and as a fact of history. Pirozmanashvili has a sense of history. People of different trades and social status are represented in his pictures: the rich and the poor, street-sweepers, merchants, peasants during the harvest. He liked to inhabit his pictures with people feasting.

He treated his characters with kind humour and great affection and painted them as he saw them both from nature and from memory. His brush thus created a whole portrait gallery.

To appreciate and assess the niche he has made for himself in art and all the wealth of the legacy left by him, one must begin by trying to understand the social environment in which his conception of the world developed.

Nico Pirozmanashvili was born in 1862 in Kakhetiya, Georgia, in the small village of Mirzaani to peasant parents. They died when he was very young, and his sisters took him with them to Tbilisi where they became servants. Life was cruel to the children. When Nico's elder sister died, he and his younger sister had to go back to their native village.

Nico went to work as a shepherd boy and his sister kept house. He taught himself to read and was soon enjoying Georgian classical writers. Vazha Pshavela became his favourite poet.

The history of the Georgian people's heroic struggle against foreign invaders captured the imagination of the young artist. He liked to choose as subjects for his paintings the great warrior Georgy Saakadze, the wise and brave Tzar Irakly II, the great Shota Rustaveli and the wise Tzarina Tamara.

His quest for knowledge made him leave his village and return to Tbilisi.

But insecurity and the necessity to earn his living by hard manual labour prevented him from going ahead with his self-education. He worked on railways for some time, but later had to give this up because of his poor health. One time he ran a dairy shop, but like all his other business undertakings it failed.

Even when he was a small boy paintings fascinated him and he could gaze while sign-painters drew signboards and murals for taverns and inns.

He taught himself to paint signboards, found clients and together with a painter G. Zaziashvili opened a paint business.

But he was not much of a businessman and was soon forced to close the shop.

Reserved and painfully self-conscious he became a travelling artist earning his living by painting murals in taverns and inns, and making signboards. Without friend or kin, feeling lonely and insecure he was ruthlessly exploited by tavern owners and wine merchants. With his brushes and paints he wandered from tavern to tavern, from one inn to another painting his pictures and signboards on oil-cloth, cardboard, tin-plate or any material he could get hold of, and sometimes painting murals. The tavern owners and patrons often paid him no money for his work, giving him instead a glass of wine or a bowl of stew.

Pirosmanashvili was proud, he never complained, never turned to anybody for help though all his life he lived in poverty.

The Society of Georgian Painters founded in 1916 invited Pirosmanashvili to attend one of its first meetings. Its members showed interest in Pirosmanashvili as a person and in his paintings. His portrait and an article devoted to him appeared in a Georgian newspaper. The Society of Georgian Painters instructed a painter Lado Gudiashvili to help Pirosmanashvili out of his financial difficulties. Once Pirosmanashvili came to a meeting of the Society. For a long time he listened to what was being said and then expressed his long cherished idea: "Here is what we need, brothers. In the middle of our town, at walking distance from everybody's homes we should build a big wooden house where we could get together. We shall buy a big table, a big samovar. We shall drink tea, many cups of it and talk about painting and art," and then he added, softly and sadly, "but you don't want all that, you talk of other things."

Unfortunately Pirosmanashvili did not get along with the Society. And the reason was that the same newspaper, which had published a favourable article about the work of Pirosmanashvili, carried a cartoon of him.

Such cruel and offensive mockery hurt Pirosmanashvili deeply and after that he severed all relations with the Society of Painters. His extreme sensitivity was wounded by the fact that his fellow-artists were not really interested in him, did not consider him their equal. Later he always avoided meeting painters. He died as he had lived, lonely and unwanted, on May 5, 1918. His burial place is unknown.

In 1912 the poet I. Zdanevich and two students of the Academy of Arts K. Zdanevich, brother of the poet, and M. Le Dantu became interested in the works of Pirosmanashvili and



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started collecting his paintings. Gradually the public began to show real interest in Piro Manashvili's art. The painter D. Shevardnadze, Director of the Georgian National Gallery, collected in a short space of time the main paintings of this remarkable artist, and they are at present in the collection of the State Museum of Fine Arts of the Georgian Republic. In recent years the Museum also acquired a number of Piro Manashvili's works from private collections. And now we have every reason to say that the Museum possesses almost all Piro Manashvili's works except a few paintings in private collections but which have been registered by the Museum.

Piro Manashvili knew nothing of painting technique and stood aloof from Georgian art of his times. His art was deeply rooted in and stemmed from genuine folk art. How, then, is the spirit of the Georgian people reflected in Piro Manashvili's paintings?



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The bonds tying Piro Manashvili with folk art are first of all felt in the constant interest of the painter in subjects and themes of peasant life: "Vintage", "Wedding in Kakheti", "Kakhetian Epos (Alasan Valley)", "Feast During Vintage", "Festival in Bolnisi" etc. Though Piro Manashvili left Kakheti when he was a boy he could never forget scenes of peasant life. It is these vivid impressions that make his paintings so wonderfully true to life. In spite of certain peculiarities of Piro Manashvili's artistic idiom, every picture he paints impresses the viewer as being genuine to the minutest detail.

The national character of Piro Manashvili's art is expressed not only in his preference for certain subjects drawn from the life of ordinary people and from Georgian history, but also in his approach to these subjects, his treatment of characters the treatment that is typical of the

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Georgian people. It is due to this feature of his talent that Pirozmanashvili will always remain part of Georgian art. His work springs from the art traditions of Georgia, and in that lies the persuasive force of his talent.

The pictures presenting life and traditions of urban life or, to be more exact, of that class and that social strata with which he was associated most of his life occupy a prominent place in his paintings. He painted a series of portraits of tavern and inn owners, drinkers, porters, circus girls, and "the beauties from Ortachal" for whose favours men fought to the death with knives. All these portraits are painted with great skill, with an undercurrent of irony but with a warm feeling and sincere love for common people.

One can feel in Pirozmanashvili's pictures a certain class attitude which the artist, perhaps, never realised himself. Let us take for instance some of his pictures so characteristic of pre-revolution Georgia in which each figure is well thought out and true to life — "Feast of Five Princes", "Rich Peasant", "Childless Millionaire and a Poor Woman with Children" and "Beggar". From these pictures one is vividly impressed that the painter sympathises with the people from the lower strata of society and chooses as his subjects scenes of the social injustice around him. In another series of paintings Pirozmanashvili eloquently depicted the national colour of the old Tbilisi. "Musha with Wine-skin", "Musha with Wine-cask", "Tavern-keeper", "Cook", "Organ Grinder", "Street-sweeper" were evidently painted from nature.

The painter liked animals. Deer, chamois, roes, bears with cubs, lions, eagles and even a giraffe come to life in his pictures. Pirozmanashvili's bear in the moonlight is fascinating. Fantastic moonlight creates what looks like a halo round the bear. But while people in Pirozmanashvili's paintings are good or bad, his animals are invariably kind. These magnificent creatures seem to come from a Georgian fairytale. Some remind one of colourful folk ceramics, traditional decorations of peasant homes. Animals described by the great Georgian poet Vazha Pshavela found their way into Pirozmanashvili's pictures. "Roes by the Spring" and "Wounded Stag" are very expressive and done in exquisite style. The big, sad and tear-dimmed eyes of the wounded are unforgettable. When one looks at these pictures the story of the little doe by Vazha Pshavela immediately comes to one's mind. As Konstantin Simonov, the writer, rightly noted, "the painter created this charming animal long before Disney's wonderful Bamby appeared on the screen and captured the imagination of children throughout the world."

Pirozmanashvili painted a number of beautiful still lifes. Every one of them is distinctive, none alike and each excellent in its own way. In his still-life paintings he drew what he saw every day. The tavern keepers who commissioned these paintings undoubtedly wanted them as advertisements for all the stuff their establishments had to offer. Some details of these paintings, for instance, shashlik on a skewer, red wine in a glass, fish, or vegetables show that Pirozmanashvili had matured as an artist. His pictures are well balanced, classical in composition and impress the viewer by their rhythm and the oneness of their artistic purpose. These paintings once again show how powerful the talent of the self-taught artist was.



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The painter dearly loved Georgia, felt her spirit and originality, her national character. Landscapes by Piro Manashvili, if somewhat schematic and reserved in colour, show how wonderfully rich and diverse the nature of Georgia is. However, with Piro Manashvili the landscape is very seldom the main object. It serves as a background for people, living, working, hunting or enjoying themselves. Scenes of nature done in reserved and laconic palette never overshadow people and animals, which are the principal element of the paintings.

The painter never left his native Kakheti and Tbilisi and never visited other parts of Georgia. Though he never saw Batumi he painted what people told him of the sea port, the mountains and the train speeding along the coast. "Hunting in India", "The Tungus River Emut" belong to this series of paintings.

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The study of Piroshmanashvili's works and the painting technique he employed show that he found his own way of representation and independently created his own manner of painting. Piroshmanashvili's works do not fit in with the works of the professional Georgian artists who were his contemporaries. His works are based on his spontaneous, vivid and sharp vision of the world around him and on a subtle and sincere interpretation of life. This is essentially different from merely copying nature. Piroshmanashvili's paintings represent his sense of history and optimistic world outlook. They were inspired by his deep love for man, for the nature of Georgia, for the heroic past of his people.

The artist's message reaches everybody. His interpretation of nature is constructive; he studies and simplifies the form; he organizes composition of his painting and balances it. He was a great draftsman. Though his pictures were somewhat schematic, he was conscious of pure form. His palette consists of primary colours, in harmonious if contrasting combinations. He likes pure colours, which he uses with flawless taste.

His colour combinations are well thought out so as not to interfere with the whole colour scheme.

As a result of his persistent endeavours his artistic techniques developed to perfection.

For his pictures he chose normally black oil-cloth on which he painted the contour of his object.

Then he applied light colours: white, pink and blue on areas of light paint — on faces, hands, clouds or details of landscape.

He painted a picture at one sitting, never improving on the details later.

Piroshmanashvili's form representation bears no trace of aridity and precision so characteristic of most "primitive" or "naive" self-taught painters in other countries.

He showed in his pictures the people of the social environment he lived in. Due to the artist's talent and endeavours we can see personalities characteristic of the then Georgia, vivid and typical for old Tbilisi.

Simply and cleverly he painted the life, customs, joys and sorrows of his people.

In the history of Georgian culture Piroshmanashvili occupies a special place.

Rare talent, sincerity and great affection for common people bring his paintings into the orbit of world art.

Sh. Amiranashvili