

Irakli Parjiani

(1950 – 1991)

Painting, graphic, Illustration

Irakli Parjiani was born on 22 May, 1950, in the town of Mestia, Upper Svaneti, in Georgia's highest mountainous region.

The ancient Svanetian towers, the frescos and mural paintings well preserved up to this very day, old manuscripts, snow capped mountains, the Svanetian songs and dances make a unique impression on the visitors. Upper Svaneti is located 700-2200 meters high above sea level. Adjacent is the village of Ushguli which is considered to be the highest inhabited place in all Europe. Compared to other regions of Georgia this corner was more protected and therefore, it became a treasury of the unique cultural monuments of Georgia. Irakli Parjiani spent his childhood and young years there, in Mestia, in an environment of snow white peaks and mountains covered with coniferous forests.

Irakli's father, Spiridon Parjiani was a representative of the Party hierarchy and occupied an important post in Svaneti. His mother, Sophio Japaridze, was a teacher of German in Mestia state school. Irakli was the third and the youngest son in the Parjiani family. It was very often that people involved in the cultural field, artists and art scholars from Tbilisi, as well as from all over the former Soviet Union visited this hospitable family. Spiridon Parjiani had a hobby: he spent most of his free time carving wood. It is noteworthy that woodcarving has always been very popular in this part of Georgia and remarkable masters of this art are still numerous in Svaneti.

Therefore, it is no wonder that all the three sons of Spiridon Parjiani and Sophio Japaridze focused their interest on the arts. After leaving school, Irakli Parjiani's elder brother, Marat Parjiani continued his studies at the Department of Painting of the Tbilisi Academy of Art. Later, the middle brother, Goven Parjiani also decided to study and master woodcarving and metal chasing in the Art Academy.

Little Irakli grew up in the environment of artists and started painting at an early age. He attended preparatory courses in Tbilisi and after leaving school he took the entrance exams at the Department of Painting of the Academy of Art. Soon after, the family sold their private house with its adjacent ancient Svanetian tower in Mestia and moved to Tbilisi. Irakli missed the house of his childhood and throughout his life regretted that it had been sold.

Irakli Parjiani studied in the Academy of Arts from 1968 to 1974; for the young artist those were the years of continuous quest, self-knowledge and self-assertion.

Despite the Soviet "iron curtain", young artists still managed to collect information on the ongoing processes and tendencies in world art; in those days it was hard to acquire high quality catalogues and without a special permit you would not succeed in obtaining desired materials on the arts.

The Parjiani family lived in 29, Pavlov Street (now: Kazbegi Street), in a three room Soviet type flat or a "Khrushchovka", as it was called then.

In 1971, at the age of 50, Irakli's mother, Sophio Japaridze died; this had a great impact on the 21 year old painter, because his mother was his spiritual friend. His feelings and emotions are overwhelmingly reflected in his poems and writings. This is the period when Irakli Parjiani joins the Tbilisi Anthroposophist circle together with is the period when Irakli Parjiani joins the Tbilisi Anthroposophist circle together with his friends Irakli Ramishvili and Jarji Balanchivadze and this is when he first becomes

acquainted with the New Testament. From then onwards, in his comprehension or creative thinking he never parts with biblical themes. It is true that Anthroposophist thinking is rather a world-outlook than a religion, but it should be emphasized that in an epoch of persecution and banning of faith and religion, during the reign of the Soviet ideology, it was the Anthroposophist thinking that proved instrumental for Irakli to study the New Testament and contemplate Christianity in a profound manner. In addition to this, he studied diligently Goethe's Theory on Colors.

After Sophio Japaridze's death, the life of the four men – the father and his three sons was far from easy.

The elder brother, Marat Parjiani, contracted tuberculosis in 1971 and very soon after, in 1972, Irakli was infected by this illness too. From then onwards, endless, exhausting and unbearable years of treatment in different clinics started in Irakli Parjiani's life. Each time, the young artist was tormented by being detached from his beloved occupation. "Creative activity or health?": this was the dilemma that Irakli Parjiani had to face in the 70s and he opted in favor of painting, his "beloved" profession. At the age of 21, he wrote: "My profession is my God; I know I won't last until old age".

In 1973, Irakli married. In 1974, he and his first wife, Manana Gordiashvili had a son – Beqa Parjiani. First he lived together with his family in the small flat in Pavlov Street together with his father and brothers, but later, he moved his family to a flat in the Krtsanisi suburb of Tbilisi.

In 1974, he graduated from Tbilisi Academy of Art.

In 1977, after divorcing his wife, Irakli moved back to the Pavlov Street flat and set up working space in a small room, divided into two by a curtain.

In 1977, the painter presented to the Academy his diploma work – "The Pastor's Family", which was rejected because of its religious content. Later, Irakli presented another picture – "The Family" before the commission and finally, he was granted a diploma. After this, he engaged himself in free creative activity.

In 1978 he starts working on copying the Gospel of St John. Irakli Parjiani was well acquainted with world miniature painting: Georgian, Byzantine and Persian art. Hence, miniature turned out to be his most beloved genre. This is how Irakli comments upon his miniature illustrations of the Gospel: "Those are sketches for future large scale paintings". Irakli Parjiani was diligently preparing himself to undertake this large-scale project during a whole year. He studied old Georgian manuscripts at the Institute of Manuscripts of Georgia and worked systematically on perfecting his calligraphy. Simultaneously, he translated the Testament by Emil Bock from Russian into Georgian, copied Bock's text and attached it to the illustrations which he made in oil pastel colors. It should be emphasized that in the entire Georgian and post-Soviet school of painting, Parjiani was the first to discover and use oil pastels. In the 80s he starts producing the desired pastel colors for his pictures and thus, paved the way to the specific, Parjiani style in painting. After completing his work on St John's Gospel, in 1979, the artist gives the form of a book to Mark's Gospel using an entirely distinctive technique and so, it is totally different from John's Gospel. Irakli Parjiani was planning to copy all four Gospels. Therefore, in the 80s, he started working on St Luke's Gospel, although he proved unable to fulfill this project. The illustrations to St Luke's Gospel are made in herbal paints and the style is close to fresco painting. All the four Gospels were planned to be accomplished according to a characteristic vision and manner and the materials and artistic devices used were diverse in expression too.

In 1979, Parjiani married for the second time.

In 1981, a daughter, Sophio Parjiani was born to Irakli Parjiani and Asmat Pitskhelauri-Parjiani, a scholar of German Language and Literature and translator.

After two years of copying the New Testament, Irakli's friend, a historian Shio Oniani, gave him a copy of an old Svanetian manuscript and it was from this document that Irakli learned about his ancestors, whose trade had been the making of copies of the New Testament. This old historic manuscript is even quoted by a renowned Georgian scholar Eqvtime Takaishvili in his work: "Archeological Expedition in Lechkhumi-Svaneti", Paris, 1938 (p. 303). The old Svanetian manuscript dates back to the year 1031. A copy of the Martvili Testament was made by Ivane Parjiani in 1050, in which he mentions himself as Parjiani: "I, Ivane Parjiani copied this Holy Testament... in my own hand ...". According to other sources, this manuscript was presented as a gift to Saint John's church in Svaneti. The church of Saint John or church of Ianishi still stands in Irakli Parjiani's father's village, Latali, and is regarded as a family church of the Parjiani clan.

In 1991, a few years before his death, the painter copied the John's Gospel anew and this time, used the canonic text as a basis; he changed the titles and decoration and also replaced some of the full-format illustrations.

In 1983, Irakli Parjiani left for Leningrad (Saint Petersburg) for treatment but in December of 1984, he intentionally cut short his treatment course and returned to Georgia, although, under vigorous pressure from his relatives and friends, he continued the treatment first in Tbilisi and later, in 1984-85, in Abastumani, the mountainous village, especially recommended for TB patients. Friends insisted that he should be accommodated in a separate ward, which was very soon turned by Irakli into an art atelier.

In 1985, Irakli Parjiani returns to Tbilisi and with his wife and daughter moves to live in Nutsubidze Plato II. In the attic of a sixteen floor block, Parjiani's four friends – all artists – started their work and thus, in that "garret", Irakli turned to painting once more and resumed his work on illustrations.

In 1986, by invitation of his friends, for the first time in his life, he travels beyond the borders of the Soviet Union to East Germany. Together with his wife and a friend he travels to the most picturesque towns of East Germany: Jena, Weimar, Erfurt, Naumburg, East Berlin and others. He spends almost a day in the Goethe Museum and the Cranach Museum and he enjoys the chance of visiting the Dresden Gallery to view the masterpieces of the representatives of the Netherlands' school of painting.

On April 9 of 1989, he participates in a protest rally in the center of Tbilisi which was brutally dissolved by the Soviet troops by using poisonous gas; the asphyxiating gas further damaged Irakli Parjiani's lungs. Nevertheless, he made no objection to the proposal of paramount importance to him and left for West Berlin in the summer of 1989, where, eventually, the joint exhibition of the three Georgian artists, Koka Ignatov, Gogi Aleks-i-Meskhishvili and Irakli Parjiani took place.

It was in West Berlin that the outstanding collection of epic paintings known as the "Berlin Cycle" was created.

He visited the East part of the German demarcation wall in the 80s and it was then that he was able to see the famous customs office – "Check-Point-Charlie" from the eastern side. In a few years, while staying in West Berlin Irakli sees the exhibits of the Check-Point-Charlie Museum and overwhelmed by the tragic fate of thousands of people he creates a painting which he called Check-Point-Charlie; this picture is a symbolic presentation of unity of a country and nation torn into two parts and very soon after, he happens to witness the reunification process of Germany.

Despite the doctors' prohibition to work with oil and water colors, Irakli continues to paint; in effect, his health becomes much worse and he ends up in the Zehlendorf Clinic in Berlin; there, he again, voluntarily cuts short his treatment and two months later returns to Tbilisi. "Without painting my life is death..."

"I must continue my work", said the painter.

In 1991, he spends the summer together with his family in the village of Manglisi near Tbilisi and creates a series of graphic drawings, the so called "Manglisi Cycle".

In December of 1991, he is hospitalized again and there, in the hospital ward, he continues working on a "Children's Bible", the book being written by his German friend Irene Johansson. Irakli's last work from this cycle – "Jonah's Birth" was left unfinished.

On December 22, 1991, civil war broke out in Tbilisi and on December 23, at 3 o'clock in the morning, while the "Painters' House" in Tbilisi center was in flames, at the age of 41, died the master, one of the outstanding representatives of modern Georgian painting, Irakli Parjiani.

Despite his short life, Irakli Parjiani left a solid artistic legacy. His life and work can be assessed as a reflection of the desires and aspirations of an artist, about which Iavlenski wrote: "I comprehended that an artist, by means of his art as well as by the forms and use of colors, must reveal the divine within himself. This is why a work of art is a visualization of God and art itself signifies a continuous craving for the deity". Indeed, craving for the unachievable is the lot of the elect.

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