

Creative intuition is an essential gift for any artist – that is, for creating a work of art in the first place. However, the art is doomed to be impetuous and anarchic unless it is shaped by the intellect. Creative intuition can be structured by acquiring artistic techniques and knowledge. Technical skill, raised to mastery, can be equivalent to art; however, the perfect command of technique is insufficient to create a work of art. Art is the synthesis of creative intuition and the application of a high level of technical skill. This is so-called artistry.

**Sergo Kobuladze**

**1969**

Sergo Kobuladze (1909-1978) is one of the most important representatives of modern Georgian art. His creative output is significant in the history of Georgian graphics, theatre design and painting. Kobuladze belonged to the first generation of graduates of the Tbilisi Academy of Art. This generation of artists created the foundations for the subsequent development of several fields of fine art.

From early childhood, Kobuladze had particular love of painting and, whilst attending secondary school, he also went to painting classes held by B. Shebuev and N. Sklifasovski. Later, in 1925, he began to attend the Tbilisi Academy of Art (Faculty of Painting), where he achieved a high level of expertise under the supervision of renowned artists, Gigo Gabashvili, Evgeni Lansere and Joseph Charlemagne.

Kobuladze himself began to work at the Academy of Art in 1938. In 1957, he became a professor and from 1952-59, he was Rector of the Academy.

From 1930 onwards, Kobuladze participated in exhibitions in the Republic of Georgia and across the Soviet Union. His work was included in international exhibitions in Venice (1956) and London (1957). Sergo Kobuladze was appointed People's Artist of Georgia (1958), Corresponding Member of the USSR Academy of Art (1958) and, posthumously, Shota Rustaveli Prize Laureate (1979).

There are many important initiatives associated with the name of Sergo Kobuladze. In 1972, he opened a 'workshop for creative graphics' where promising young painters could advance their professional skills. In 1973, on his initiative, the Laboratory for the photographic Recording of Monuments was founded. Its aim was to establish a scientific basis for creating a photographic record of examples of Georgian cultural heritage. The laboratory is still in operation today.

All his life, Kobuladze had a particular interest in the art of the Italian Renaissance. However, he also studied Georgian cultural heritage. As a result of this interest, towards the end of his life, he wrote a paper on the Golden Section, where he summed up the results of his research over many years. He calculated and presented the various uses of proportion in medieval Georgian masterpieces, such as the architecture of the Monastery of the Cross in Mtskheta and the frescoes of the church at Ateni Sioni.

Amongst Sergo Kobuladze's artistic achievements, several works have a particular historical importance, especially his illustrations for *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*.

These were created by the artist as part of a competition announced in 1934, for a publication in honor of Shota Rustaveli's anniversary. Sergo Kobuladze created eleven illustrations for the poem. "When illustrating the poem, the artist created specific boundaries for his intentions. He did not try to cover the full diversity and profundity of the poem. He also rejected a narrative approach or a detailed account of the plot. Instead, he created generalized representations of the characters to reflect his

perceptions of the overall mood and nature of Rustaveli's poem. Kobuladze sought his own self in the poem, in the way an illustrator sees something of himself in literary work he is illustrating. Kobuladze's paintings convey the following aspects of the poem: the elevated heroic mood, the nobility of the characters and their spiritual power.

Shakespeare was also of utmost importance to Kobuladze as an artist. During 1934-35, Kobuladze created four illustrations for a two-volume edition of William Shakespeare's plays: frontispieces for *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, *Richard III* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. In 1946, he returned to Shakespeare's *King Lear* and designed a cover, vignettes, frontispieces, title page and illustrations. Kobuladze carefully selected scenes that enabled him to foreground the changes in King Lear's character, the development of the tragedy and the gradual growth of tension. 'His treatment of the Shakespearean theme distinctly revealed one more feature of Kobuladze's artistic style. That is, the originality of his works owes a great deal to his focus on the close link between an illustrated literary work and the theatre. It is very important that the illustrator is a stage designer and has worked a good deal on stage sets and costumes.

In the field of book design, Sergo Kobuladze has many significant works. He illustrated an important piece of Russian epic poetry, *The Tale of Igor's Campaign* (1939-40), Shalva Dadiani's novel, *Yury Bogolyubsky* (1951), *The Works of Pushkin* (1953) and *Georgian Folk Tales* (1954).

Kobuladze is well known for his works in etching and print-making in a variety of genres – portraits, landscapes, still-life and compositional sketches. These works, created over several years, are charged with the painter's own powerful emotional impulses and are distinguished by restrained use of colorful and the delicate contours of their carefully shaped images.

His pencil portraits of Savonarola (1944) and Dante (1944) are especially noteworthy. As well as conveying a strong physical resemblance to their subjects, the precise contours of the profiles also foreground their personalities – that of a complacent and ruthless fanatical dictator (Savonarola) and of a poet and philosopher filled with willpower and inner dignity (Dante). All of his other portraits similarly convey the profundity of the depicted individual's inner world. Their forms are voluminous and still and their gaze is somewhat oblique and introverted, as if they are transcending the present moment to look into eternity. The fine contours are rendered in a reserved and delicate blend of colours, as seen in *Maiden's Head*, *A Maiden Holding a Basket with Apples* and *A Kurdish Woman* (all 1936).

Kobuladze also made an important contribution to stage design. He started working on stage sets and costumes early in his career, in the years immediately following his graduation from the Academy. He worked with Kote Marjanishvili (1932) and was a stage designer at the Shota Rustaveli Theatre, the Zakaria Paliashvili Opera and Ballet Theater and the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow (from 1931).

In 1960, he designed a curtain for the Tbilisi Opera and Ballet Theatre. Unfortunately, this wonderful work was destroyed during a fire on 9<sup>th</sup> May 1973. Later, the painter expressed a wish to recreate the curtain, but his desire remained unfulfilled.

**Mariam Gachechiladze**

## The Picture Crossed Out By Stalin

The publication of this catalogue of work by Sergo Kobuladze seems both surprising and overdue. It has been some time since anyone has been to an exhibition of his pictures, for the simple reason that no such exhibition has been held. His illustrations have not been looked at, nor have his stage designs been seen for very long time.

Not only have his illustrations and pictures been lost in that familiar and bitter game played by time, but so have a thousand other things, things that are precious and those that have only ephemeral value.

Among its other characteristics, there is one quality of this game of time that fills our memory with sorrow and helplessness: time does not care what it takes away nor what it extinguishes. Time does not calculate the results of its actions.

But one of our human skills is that we can grasp and keep hold of something that may have been battered and lost in the passage of time and, with luck, retrieve it from the past forever. And it is not necessary that the things we rescue should be a hoard of buried treasure.

It could be that we might not like all those things we retrieve from the past and we might even argue about them. These days, we may have a completely different standard of beauty and a taste for entirely dissimilar things. But what is most important is that what is retrieved from the past may turn out to be precious for you.

This catalogue traces the entire creative journey of Sergo Kobuladze, step by step. Not being a specialist in his art, I cannot follow this particular road. Rather, I belong to those who vividly remember his depiction of Dante, with that chin, an upturned laurel wreath on his forehead and a Florentine lily on his shoulder. I also remember his portraits, in which the faces seem to fill the entire space, his women with that serene fullness which embraces so much, and his illustrations. But what you remember as a child, finding himself in a gallery by pure chance, might not be comparable with the intentions of the artist all.

There are artists who hate thinking. Their feelings, intuition and a masterful hand at a particular moment become paramount. For them, reflection and calculation are secondary in their art – just enough not to hinder the main flow of their talent. Their emotions are genuine, heartfelt and immediate. Their pain and joy are fleeting, and these emotions are poured out only in the process of creating work. All of this is bold and marvelous stuff. Their work usually seems to have an elegant simplicity. Their artistic pleasures do not lie in thinking. But there are other artists who are no less talented, or possibly even more talented. Their art is born as a result of prolonged reflection, deeper research, doubts and decision-making. They seldom give their hand any more freedom than that decided upon at the planning stage. While for the former type of artists, thought and artistic skill are inseparable, for the latter, they work in tandem and are equally necessary.

And we love such artists. We love their thoughts and their skill. The pleasure for them in creating work, and for us viewing it, is different with such artists. They love something permanent in their work and guard it carefully. They know what they are doing more precisely, as they have thought about their process for long time.

I suspect Sergo Kobuladze had only seen the black and white photographic reproductions of Dante's famous portraits. He only visited Italy much later in his life. He saw Dante's portraits on the walls of the Bellagio and Carduccio, as well as works by Botticelli and Signorelli. It is this very aspect of his art that amateurs, like myself, find extremely appealing. We can trace the development of his thought processes, his decisions and the movement of his hand, which reflect his conclusions and reflections.

For such a creative approach, the relationship between the thought processes and the hand of the artist is complex. It is all very well to have thoughts and make decisions, but it is the hand that brings them to life. Such artists demand much more from the hand. And expect more. Even if their decisions are mistaken, their hand is required to comply fully. Perfection is unattainable, satisfaction rare. They set themselves impossibly high standards.

Sergo Kobuladze was twenty-five when he was commissioned to illustrate Shota Rustaveli's *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*, the epic Georgian poem of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. At the time, numerous Russian translations were published in the Soviet Union to mark the anniversary of the poem. And it was a time when Stalin personally checked Shalva Nutsubidze's translation. It was the period when the infamous purges were carried out on an unprecedented scale, and a particularly bad time for this epic poem. In the decades leading up to the anniversary, the poem had been repeatedly condemned in the Communist media as the work of a primitive medieval mind, praising feudalism. Sergo Kobuladze must have been familiar with these articles, written by prominent ideologues, as they regularly appeared on the front pages of the leading newspapers. And then, quite unexpectedly, Stalin seemed to see the value of *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*. Of course, there was a very specific reason for this sudden u-turn in official policy. It was akin to the reasoning which brought Ilia Chacchavadze into the limelight, but that's a different story.

Many of us can recall our thoughts and emotions in relation to *The Knight in the Painter's Skin* when we were twenty-five. It is much more than simply the favorite book of all Georgians. For several centuries, the poem has been the major work of literature about the life of the country and there is hardly a single Georgian who has not engaged with it in some way. Leaving aside for the time being the extensive body of research into the epic, it is clear that the deep desire of the nation to be identified and involved with the poem is hard to overestimate. This urge was so powerful that, for centuries, various individuals added their own contributions to the poem, or wrote their own poetry imitating Rustaveli. If we take into account the fact that Stalin himself painted the great poet's portrait, it becomes clear how the desire to engage with this epic poem infused a wide and diverse section of society.

There had been illustrated editions of the poem before the events mentioned above, but it was only in the 1930s that the trend became truly nationwide, triggered by the approaching anniversary. And it is of particular interest to reflect on what Sergo Kobuladze's illustrations reveal about him as an artist and as a deep thinker.

Firstly, these are extremely elaborate illustrations, the result of careful contemplation, and executed with a skilful hand of a master, a skill which, undeniably, is truly impressive.

Of course, Kobuladze was not the first among the latter-day illustrators of the poem. Even today, the late 19<sup>th</sup> century edition by Kartvelishvili, with Mihaly Zichy's illustrations is considered one of the most beautiful, along with those illustrated by Irakli Toidze and Lado Gudiashvili, contemporaries of Kobuladze.

A text that is interesting for contemplation and difficult to depict, is a way of describing *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*. Consequently, there are hundreds of ways and styles which could be used to illustrate it, but the question is which one best reflects the poem itself and so will touch the hearts of its viewers.

Zichy's works are soft, slightly on the sweet side, complete with beautiful bodies of beautiful Georgians. Even the most dramatic epic moments are rendered with exquisite softness. Toidze's illustrations are surprisingly precise, with a romanticism in his style.

Going back to Stalin for a moment, it is worth noting that there was one occasion when he crossed out Kobuladze's illustration of the meeting of the two protagonist in the poem, Tariel and Avtandil. In the 1941 Russian edition of the poem, Kobuladze's illustration of that episode was replaced by one by Zichy.

Stalin preferred Zichy's illustrations, which is not particularly surprising. First of all, he must have seen, and would certainly have read, the Kartvelishvili version of the poem of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The book had made a great impression, leaving its readers in a state of heightened emotion, as if they had participated in some festivity. And secondly, Stalin would never have liked Kobuladze's illustrations. There's no way he could have enjoyed them.

However noisy a tragedy might be, for Stalin it was of paramount importance that off-stage, in the wings, everything should be quiet and inaccessible. It is hard to say whether he was thinking about that while looking through the illustrations, but he might have sensed something along those lines. There was sweetness in Zichy's pictures; a subtle combination of the romantic and heroic in Toidze's, while Kobuladze offered sheer passion.

In Kobuladze's illustrations, everything seems to be happening at dusk or at twilight. Despite a deafeningly loud heartbeat, his canvases emanate an intense silence, as if everyone is holding their breath. He depicts moments of complete stillness, frozen seconds when human beings are like statues, caught at their most difficult, most dramatic or decisive times. Like those images which have come down to us from the Renaissance, his walls and windows, his faces and bodies belong to the whole world, without any indication of an identifiable place of origin.

Stalin loved talking about optimism. He used to write about some books that they were good because their endings were optimistic. He would surely have perceived plenty of optimism in *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*. He had a simple outlook and enjoyed stories that included victories and triumphant events. He would certainly have marveled at the poem's description of the Indo-Khataeti war and the subsequent victory. He would have taken it as a personal triumph. He was a true Communist and valued books that reflected his own outlook. For Kobuladze, the value of literature lay elsewhere.

Kobuladze's illustrations do not tell tales of victory. Strange as it might sound, even his illustrations for King Lear look more optimistic. What did a 25-year old artist see in *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*? What were his impressions? Do you recall the lion's fangs on Tariel's thigh as he brandishes his sword? It is like a sculpture, for sure, a split second, like a freeze frame in film. He shows idealized bodies, composed faces and passion expressed through these bodies. They suggest some kind of Puritanism and precision, an unusual precision. A still tree seen through an evening window, every stone and slab, every object, each fold in the characters' garments – nothing is awry, everything is ominous.

Suppose one has not read the poem and wanted to imagine what might follow the frozen scene depicted. We can see that the next move is likely to be the crucial one. These pictures leave no room for compromise. And that lack of compromise is what *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* is about for Kobuladze.

This is a very unusual interpretation of the epic. Whether one agrees with it or not is immaterial. For some reason, I believe that the environment in which Kobuladze's characters live and act is not specific or definite. Not are the characters themselves specific people. Looking at these illustrations, one cannot help disagreeing with Akaki Tsereteli about the origins of the protagonists, and siding with Ilia Chavchavadze on the issue.

For Sergo Kobuladze the protagonists' characters are not as significant as their emotions and passions; and these are often rather reserved. Why is Nestan standing with her back to us at the moment when all misfortunes seem to have passed and the sweethearts are about to be reunited?

I strongly believe that these illustrations are not about showing or demonstrating. Rather, they are about hiding and concealing. This is possibly because for Sergo Kobuladze, the poem is about Tariel. But this comes as no surprise as the title of the epic is a description of Tariel.

The Georgians are particularly fond of Avtandil, another character. Some even think that the poem is primarily about his adventures. His character and his social position seem closer to ours and consequently we understand him more easily. Avtandil's story is a long one and quite carefree, characterized by the thoughts of a pleasant man. We readily identify ourselves with him. Incidentally, one of Zichy's illustrations shows Avtandil with Patman. He is reclining on a couch, smiling, his arm resting on cushions, his leg half bent, in an extremely laid-back posture.

It is hard to imagine Sergo Kobuladze opting to illustrate the same scene from the epic poem. It would neither reflect his understanding of the poem, nor his view of the knight in the panther's skin. He saw the character of Tariel and his story as the most important in the plot, and this was his guiding principle.

In Kobuladze's interpretation, Avtandil's adventures and his good nature are secondary. Tariel, on the other hand, has a difficult task. He appears to have forgotten what kind of person he was earlier. His experience of love put him through a testing time, quite different from that which was in store for Avtandil. Avtandil, like Tariel, cannot return defeated and broken, but at least he knows what to expect and where to find solution.

Sergo Kobuladze drew Tariel's story. And having done that, he executed it in such a way that if one follows the illustration, one will see the entire enormity of his misfortune, presented in an intensely concentrated artistic manner.

In spite of the impressive strength and unyielding determination of the bodies and poses depicted, Kobuladze's illustration are rarely, if ever, heroic. There is none of the romanticism either, which other illustrator of the poem so often find irresistibly attractive. Neither is there any poetry as such.

If we wish to find Rustaveli's poetry, we need to look at the old miniatures and Lado Gudiashvili illustrations. Other artists illuminate other aspects of the famous epic. But if we wish to find out about the hardship a valiant person goes through, to learn what feels like to be alone in a hostile environment, to discover the drama of being pursued relentlessly, we have to go back to Sergo Kobuladze's pictures.

The version he offers us of *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* is original and extremely interesting. It seems to be well thought out and to have developed from much reflection and empathy. If in doubt, you might want to look again at Kobuladze's illustration of the happiest moment for Tariel, when he meets his sweetheart, having at last succeeded in saving her after many years. He should be victorious. But does he really look relaxed? Does he look very different from the Tariel sitting by the river at the beginning of the series? Possibly there is a little more hope, a barely detectable hint of joy, but that is all. What we see in Tariel is self-restraint and incredulity that the events should have taken such a turn. He is indeed a carefully thought-out character. It is unusual to come across such rationally depicted characters.

Sergo Kobuladze's pictures might remind us of the performances staged in Sandro Akhmeteli's period. What if Akhmeteli had decided to stage *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*? At first glance, the demeanor of Kobuladze's characters makes us forget that they are ordinary people, as their true nature is hidden behind their amour and their garments, the stone walls and heavy archways. His Tariel is always wary, ready for something unexpected. His Nestan and Tinanin hide their eyes, his Rostevan is tired, his Avtandil is ever-hopeful and his Kajeti Fort is menacingly unapproachable. The garments Kobuladze designed for his characters are of a style found neither in the East nor the West – they are of his own invention. His take on *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* is also very much his own, and it seems that it was in such a mood that he set to work on the illustration. The characters drawn by Zichy and Toidze are real flesh-and-blood people, whereas with Kobuladze, emotions and passion prevail. That is what he felt and that is what he ordered his hand to do.

I am not sure what Comrade Stalin's reaction might have been, as he was known to react to any puzzling complexity, even in art, with a good deal of suspicion. It is worth noting the period when Sergo Kobuladze was illustrating the epic poem. It was during the infamous years of 1935-37, when anticipation of worse to come was the order of the day. It is also useful to know what else he was working on and what he thought about art at the time.

Sergo Kobuladze's work is wide-ranging and very colourful. Illustrating *The Knight in the Painter's Skin* is just one episode in his artistic career. Shortly afterwards, he designed the production of *Tariel's Story* in Tbilisi Opera House. This is worth remembering, but personally, I think that his illustrations of the poem give us richer material for speculating about his probable thoughts and reflections.

More often than not, spectators, viewers and readers know nothing about the state of mind and personal traits of those artists whose works they either like, or possibly dislike. And more often than not, such knowledge can be more interesting than the outcome of their reflections as seen in their work.

Apparently, Sergo Kobuladze has remained a completely private person for anyone who did not know him personally. One episode in his life gives us some idea of his attitudes. An event which should have elicited his gratitude for public appreciation, in fact demonstrated his anxieties and frustrations. A documentary film was made to commemorate Sergo Kobuladze's 60<sup>th</sup> birthday. At the time, it was quite common for such films to be made and documentaries were regularly dedicated to practically all eminent Soviet people, so it should not have come as a surprise. These films seldom tried to be original and were not made by professional art critics nor outstanding directors. However, Sergo Kobuladze found it impossible to accept the film that had been made about him. In numerous letters to the local and central film studios, and to the Ministries of Culture, he demanded that the film should be withdrawn from screening, or at least some changes should be made to its content. In his letters, he discussed the flaws of the film in detail, sending them over and over again. Needless to say, no changes were made to the film.

But his stubbornness was not that of a highly ambitious person enraged by a low quality film. The problem was that Sergo Kobuladze failed to recognize himself in the film, to see the connection between his own thoughts and creative work with what was shown in the documentary. Surely this reaction was due to his own personal issues.

He was a man devoted to the arts and regarded the arts as a serious matter. And as far as he considered film to be an art form, he demanded of it the same high standards he set for himself. He could not have seen any evidence of artistic achievement in the documentary that was made about him, as such films belonged to a completely different genre. As an artist, he would have never painted a picture according to the standards of that film. And he did not need the popularity that would come from that type of film. He was not looking for fame and fortune. At least, that is the impression he gave. Nor was he interested in the honors and decorations that the authorities occasionally bestowed on him.

Sergo Kobuladze was an artist and he firmly believed that the role of an artist demanded a high standard of responsibility and honor. In accordance with this, he painted exactly in line with his convictions. He did not think solely of the light and shade in his pictures, the forms and shapes, the colors, hues and compositional aspects. It would have been impossible for him to focus on one single aspect only. He thought about everything. As for his skill of his amazing hand, that's a different story.

**Aka Morchiladze**

**Sergo Kobuladze**

**Graphics, theatre set design, painting**

**Tbilisi, 2012**