



Three Types of

Eroticism

in the Artworks of Georgian Female Artists



An Unknown World of a Well-known Artist (Elene Akhvlediani)

While reviewing the cultural life of Georgian in the 20s of the 20th century, a growing momentum for the development of the avant-garde remains as one of the most important factors. The European course of the country was replaced with the Soviet ideology, blocking the ways of natural development for the art in the country. In accord with these supra-partisan demands, the Socialist realism, which emerged on the grounds of abstracted mythic environment, laid the foundation for a certain ideological dictatorship and regulation, which, naturally, put serious pressure on every field of art, including visual art. A stereotypical attitude towards heroes, heroic deeds and historical facts was gradually established, and neglecting the attitude of the artists, in most cases, might have meant the deprivation of their lives; a new myth about a socialist reality – a declared self-representation of the Soviet System – took hold. The stereotypes were established in the field of visual art as well, most famous of them were Niko Piroshvili – a “poor, homeless, genius artist” and Elene Akhvlediani – a painter of Old Tbilisi landscapes. Certainly, Elene Akhvlediani found her own niche in this genre, but it is wrong to consider her as only a landscape artist. Elene Akhvlediani’s illustrations and figurative compositions were highly productive, which, in the majority of cases, represented independent artworks performed using female aesthetics rather than the works performed for the purpose of practicing. Therefore, we believe that her natural potential of a female artist, revealed in her series of paintings of the Parisian period, was artificially eclipsed by her works depicting Tbilisi landscapes, which were her favourite, but still overwhelmingly adapted to the Soviet ideology. The concept of a woman artist, along with the concepts of a woman metallurgist, a woman tractor driver, or a woman miner was brought into being in the Soviet reality, which brought popularity to Elene Akhvlediani, though this is only one aspect of her creative life. Her series of paintings of the Parisian period is the most important stage in the artist’s creative life, revealing her interest in cognition of her own personality and of the essence of woman, in general. This unexplored, as if inferior aspect of her creative life, which is less known to society, we think, presents the artist from a different and very interesting perspective.

In 1924, after winning a scholarship to study “New Art” in Paris, the artist found herself in the centre of contemporary art. “No artist can escape the influence of great artist, but if the time never comes when he/she is free from this influence and when he/she becomes independent, he/she will never become an interesting artist”, Elene Akhvlediani wrote. That was why the artist, who had always been in search of novelties and prone to experiments, chose to study in a studio without professors at the Academie Colarossi in Paris. Working without a professor helped the artist to reveal her interest in drawing from nude models, which is the most significant and most notable stage in the creative life of the artist and, at the same time, the page in her life story, which remains largely unexplored.

After having studied in Sklifasovski Art Studio and having attended Tbilisi State Academy of Fine Arts, where her master had been Gigo Gabashvili, as it is often mentioned while reviewing this stage in her biography, Elene Akhvlediani went to Paris as an artist who had already chosen her own theme and style. But this fact did not prevent her (like L. Gudiashvili, D. Kakabadze and Sh. Kikodze) from getting acquainted with the avant-garde trend, so popular in Paris by that time, and to try to work using the art techniques characteristic to these trend.

The Parisian period is one of the most productive and interesting stages in the creative life of Elene Akhvlediani. The novice artist, who arrived in Paris – a world city – found herself in the centre of contemporary art; in the period from 1925 to 1926 she regularly participated in a number of exhibitions. Meeting famous artists and getting acquainted with their artworks gave her a tremendous incentive and strengthened her determination, and besides, Paris has always been a city of freedom. She forgot about

all the conventions and started exploring the outer world as an independent and free artist. In this regard, she worked on different aspects: acquiring knowledge, mastering specific art techniques, and developing her inner world, while focusing on her own "self", and her female principle.

The social and creative freedom she enjoyed while staying in Paris enabled the artist to gain not only a superficial or anatomically perfect knowledge of a model but, also, an incentive to gain an understanding of the essence of her models, who in majority of cases, were women. Elene Akhvlediani's interest in studying not only a human body and shapes, but also depicting a model's character, reveals her attitude towards a human being in general.

Her series of Parisian "Nudes" consists of multiple drawings, many of which are not finished, i.e. completed during five-minute sessions. However, besides the so called drafts for paintings aimed at developing drawing skills, there are some finished and artistically conceptualized works composed by Elene Akhvlediani, which reveal her interest in the human body, a model, his/her character and her artistic individuality and expressiveness.

A number of her studio sketches show her evolution on her way to becoming an artist. Some of the sketches seem to have been performed with a swift and free stroke of her pencil. In the majority of cases the models do not change, the only thing that changes is their movement or poses, which are captured by the artist with a single stroke of her pencil. These works reveal Elene Akhvlediani's drawing talent and the degree to which she masters lines. She draws silhouettes with a single stroke of her pencil and fills in' the volumes using a chiaroscuro interplay. In some cases, the artist is experimenting, her drawings from a model are inspired by cubist drawings: she "constructs" poses, body shapes and even chiaroscuro using geometric shapes (a 1924 graphic work stored in the artist's archive is composed in the Cubist-Futurist style, no doubt that the artist was interested in this movement). A number of her sketches are composed in a classical style, in which the focus is on the complexity of a pose and body movements – a dynamic shape is composed using expressive lines, intensity of movement and a chiaroscuro interplay.

Her series of Parisian sketches, saturated with light eroticism, is worth attention. "Nude Man" – a drawing by Elene Akhvlediani in 1924 resembles sketches by Egon Schiele. While composing her "nudes", the artist boldly presents models from difficult angles, so that she does not go beyond the boundaries of aesthetics and harmony. These works show the perfect blend of the artist's inner female world and harmony with her professionalism. Female models were her new ideal, he increasingly emphasizing her aesthetics and professionalism, on the one hand, and her femininity, on the other hand. Here comes the author herself, seeing a women through her own prism and perceiving her in her own way.

It is natural that such a bold "feminine vision" and the works expressing such artistic forms and shapes would be unacceptable for the Soviet ideology perceiving "nude" as a perilous form. At a given moment we do not intend to argue that Elene Akhvlediani would have continued working in this direction if not the "Socialist Realism"; but the fact is that this aspect of the Soviet era female artist, where the theme of femininity was expressed through an individual style, was unacceptable. Presumably, this is the reason why this stage in the artist's creative life remains largely unexplored and underestimated. The public is not yet aware of the unknown world of Elene Akhvlediani – this well-known artist. Moreover, the artist's lifestyle is still considered taboo among members of the Georgian society, though, we believe, that owing to the drawings discussed above, which are imbued with eroticism and remain concealed from the outside world, Elene Akhvlediani appears as a woman, a female artist, who appreciates a 'woman' and perceives her body as sexually attractive.

The “Soviet Eroticism”

Sex, eroticism and everything that might have been identified with emotions, sensuality and passion were non-existent for the Soviet totalitarian regime. More precisely, all these did exist but remained under intense and increasing scrutiny and pressure on the part of the regime; an individual's personal or intimate life, his/her passions, imaginations and fantasies were strictly controlled. Obviously, art and literature were spheres which were controlled in the strictest possible manner. After the October Revolution, the censorship was officially legalized in both the Soviet Union and in Georgia. From 1917 to 1939 there were a number of important decrees enacted officially, which officially restricted the freedom of expression and creative self-expression.

In the case of Georgia, under the influence of the traditional Orthodox doctrines which were still unconsciously maintained in the mentality and the culture of the nation, on the one hand and an abstracted mythic degraded reality created by the Soviet ideology, on the other hand, not only the subject of sex, but also the sexual aspirations were considered taboo. The taboo on intimate or erotic issues often extended to cover not only the spheres such as visual art and literature of cinematography, but also the realms of family life: discussions of tabooed topics among family members, between mothers and their children. Most of the authors were physically rescued from the repressions by adapting to the existing censorship. In fact, this was the only way to their survival to which we owe much for having a number of art or literary works retained.

Since the 1930s and 1940s Socialist realism started to gradually undergo the process of transformation and adopting and employing national and ethnographic approaches. The key idea of that period was as follows: “nationality as an accessory of quasi-realism”. The erotic themes were still largely non-existent and tabooed; moreover, in the works of art and literary works even the gender was obscure. Figures of androgynous or generally more masculine-presenting women and men dominate the works of visual art of that period, during which not only sex, but also gender remained concealed.

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