GEORGIA
A JOURNEY THROUGH LAND, HISTORY AND CULTURE
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LOCATION AND BOUNDARIES: Georgia is bordered by Russia to the north, Turkey and Armenia to the south, Azerbaijan to the east, and the Black Sea to the west.

AREA: 69,700 sq. km

POPULATION: 4.6 million

CAPITAL: Tbilisi, pop. 1.3 million

LANGUAGE: Georgian is an ancient and distinctive language, which has no relationship with other languages, not even with the North Caucasian families. Its written alphabet is one of only 14 in the world. In addition to Kartuli (Georgian) there are Svanuri and Megruli languages, which are spoken in Samegrelo – the Western part of the country – and Svaneti –, in the north–west highland of Georgia.

RELIGION: Georgia was one of the first countries to embrace Christianity. Greek Orthodox Christianity became Georgia’s official religion in the fourth century AD and the Georgian Church became autonomous in the sixth century. Distinguished for their long tradition of religious tolerance throughout centuries, Georgians have enjoyed fairly good relations with other communities of various religious backgrounds, including Catholicism, Armenian Apostolicy, Judaism, Islam and etc.

BACKGROUND: Georgia is a country of fascinating landscapes, ancient history and remarkable culture. From snowy peaks to subtropical shores, from semi-arid deserts to rich vineyards and lush forests, from cities to enchanting villages, it is a place where everyone can discover something to his or her liking. Georgia is famous for its warmth and hospitality, wide variety of wines, unique cuisine, and the harmony of polyphonic songs and elegant dances. In Georgia, one will come across an ancient and still flourishing culture filled with churches, fortresses and towers, museums and exhibitions, sulfur baths and local bazaars. Here, the present co-exists with the past and modernity is fused with traditions. Georgia’s cultural heritage is rich and complex. Shaped by eastern and western ideas and influences, Georgians always guarded their distinctive and strong local culture and traditions.

Georgia is one of the first regions in the world in which the earliest traces of human life, dating back 1.9 to 2.0 million years, were discovered. Located at a geographic meeting point between the eastern and western worlds, the country has played an important role as the crossroads of Europe and Asia over centuries. The ancient Silk Road, linking China with Italy passed through Georgia. Numerous archaeological sites dotting the landscape eloquently illustrate the advanced state of civilization that existed in the region. Such archeological finds have produced exquisite examples of bronze, silver and gold craftsmanship. This is the country of the Golden Fleece—the myth of the Argonauts, Jason and Medea—and land of Prometheus, chained to the Caucasus Mountains.

Both the spread of Christianity throughout the area beginning in the late first century and its announcement as an official religion in the early 4th century marked important turning points in Georgian culture. It brought about the Georgian Middle Ages, which is defined as period from early 4th century until the end of the 18th century. Though Georgians maintained close connections with the established centers of the Christian East, the influence transmitted from these centers was always tempered by strong local traditions, reflected in a distinctly Georgian style of medieval art: architecture, mural painting, repousse work, cloisonné enamel art, manuscript illumination, etc.

An independent kingdom during medieval times, Georgia subsequently was dominated by different invaders including Persia, Arabs, Turkey, Iran and finally the Russian Empire in the 19th century. Despite the drawbacks caused by the Russian occupation, Georgia re-established contacts with European Countries and theatres, museums and newspapers were founded. The rich artistic tradition that began with medieval painting reinvented itself on the easel-mounted canvases of 20th century painters.

In 1921, Georgia was incorporated into the Soviet Union, and remained a part of the Soviet empire until gaining independence in 1991. Today, Georgia is a nation strongly connected to tradition, while, at the same time, embracing modernity and developing into democratic state that embodies western values.
Settlements at Khramis Didi-Gora
6th millennium BC. Kartli

Prehistoric Era

Female figure, Khramis Didi-Gora
6th millennium BC. Kartli

Ceramic shard
Khramis Didi-Gora
6th millennium BC. Kartli

Archaeologists have discovered the skull of a 1.8 million year old hominid at Dmanisi, in the foothills of the lesser Caucasus. This historic find provides a key link to humankind’s earliest transitions between Africa and Europe.
Early Bronze Age
4th-3rd millennium BC

Dolmen Culture
Dolmen, 3rd-2nd millennium BC. Eshera, Abkhazeti

Mtkvar-Araxi Culture
Kvatskhelebi settlement, 4th-3rd millennium BC. Kartli

Jar, 3rd millennium BC. Tsikhia-Gora, Kartli
Dagger, 3rd millennium BC. Tsartsis-Gora, Imereti

Bear figurine
3rd-2nd millennium BC. Azanta, Abkhazeti

Fibula
3rd millennium BC. Urbnisi, Kartli

“Dergi”, (Ceramic vine vessel)
3rd millennium BC. Akhali jinvali, Kartli
Wine-growing has been a long tradition in Georgia. Archaeological research provides evidence of viniculture as far back as 7000 years in the Caucasus region. Georgia has over 300 original varieties of grape. Many say that the generic word "wine" stems from the Georgian word "Gvino".
Cradle of Wine

Georgia is the oldest wine producing region of Europe, if not the world. Because of this, it is often referred to as “The birth place of wine” or “The cradle of wine making”. The fertile valleys of the South Caucasus, which Georgia straddles, are believed by many archaeologists to be the source of the world’s first cultivated grapevines and Neolithic wine production. The archeological excavations in Kartli, at Shulaveri, have yielded what may well be the oldest domesticated grape pipes dating from the early sixth millennium BC. The invention of pottery during the Neolithic period was crucial for processing, serving and storing wine. The earliest wine jars, complete with lees residue, and decorated with grape clusters and jubilant figures were discovered at sixth millennium BC sites of Shulaveri and Khramis Didi Gora.

Archeological findings at Trialeti and other sites of early second millennium BC further prove Georgia’s advancement of viniculture. Amongst these findings, the most important are the marvelously ornate gold and silver Trialeti goblets, the latter of which depicts a vinous ceremony scene. Unusual variety of winemaking equipment and wine vessels of ancient times attest to the high skill of Georgian craftsmen. The most impressive among these is Kvevri, giant clay vessels in which wine was fermented and stored. Georgian museums have on display numerous clay vessels of all designations. Some, such as Kvevri, Dergi, Tiki, Satskhiao, were used to ferment grape juice and to store wine; others, such as Chapi, Khelada, Karkara, Azarfesha, Doki, Sura, Chinchila, Deda-Khelada, Marani, Dzhami, Tasi, Piala, Kantsi (horn vessel), were used for serving and drinking. Many unearthed silver, gold and bronze artifacts of the third and second millennia BC bare chased imprints of vines, grape clusters and leaves.

In addition to rich archaeological material, other evident exists of Georgia’s crucial role in domesticating grapes. The Greek annals by Apollonius of Rhodes, Strabo, Procopius of Caesaria and Xenophon indicate the crucial role that Georgians played in the development of wine. In fact, many scholars argue that the generic word “wine” stems from the Georgian word “gvino”. Furthermore, the Georgian pagan gods - Aguna and Nunua - could be considered analogous to the Greek gods, Dionysus and Bacchus.

Wine production continued unabated after the country’s conversion to Christianity and throughout medieval times. The “cult of wine,” on one hand, was associated with the story of how St. Nino made the first cross in Georgia from vine branches tied together with strands of her hair, and, on the other hand, its religious importance was partly assured by the centrality of wine in the Eucharist. Incorporation of the long-lasting tradition of viniculture in Christian art is shown most clearly by the rich ornamental decoration of Georgian church facades, in which grape clusters and vines are often interwoven with stone carved foliage ornamentation. The same motives are often applied in mural painting, repousse work and manuscript illumination. As Christian symbols, grape and wine penetrated Georgian religious poetry and chorals. Among these the famous choral works, “Shen khar venakhi” (“You are a vineyard”) is of a greatest importance.

Nowadays, the best-known wine-making regions of Georgia include Kakheti (further divided onto micro-regions of Telavi and Kvareli), Kartli, Imereti, Racha-Lechkhumi and Kvemo Svaneti, and Abkhazeti. Centuries of trial has resulted in different wine styles from region to region, from light body whites to heavy bodied reds and sweet wines. There are more than 500 grape varieties in Georgia. In several parts of Georgia today, but especially in the Kakheti region of eastern Georgia where rich vineyards dominate the picturesque landscape, wine is still made in the traditional way. It is stored in large buried ceramic jars, Kvevri, in a special cellars, Marani. The Vintage, Rveli, in Georgia becomes a real autumn celebration for everyone. The living culture of wine production extends into virtually every Georgian family. For instance, the “cult of wine” has developed into a strong tradition of a table culture, Supra, where the essential leading role is assumed by the Tamada, or Toastmaster.

This long-lasting tradition of wine production, one of Georgia’s most important cultural assets, has the ability to attract tourists and thus has become an important economic resource of the country. Due to the many millennia of wine-making, in Georgian history, the traditions of its viticulture are entwined and inseparable with the country’s national identity.
MIDDLE BRONZE AGE
KURGAN CULTURE
24TH - 15TH C. BC

Fibula
3rd-2nd millennium BC.
Bedeni. Kartli

Necklace
25th-23rd c. BC.
Ananauri. Kakheti

TRIALETI CULTURE
20TH - 16TH C. BC

Lion Figurine
23rd-20th c. BC.
Tsnori. Kakheti

Fibula
23rd-20th c. BC.
Tsnori. Kakheti

The Trialeti Goblet. (Detail)
18th-17th c. BC.
Kartli

The Trialeti Goblet
18th-17th c. BC.
Kartli

The Trialeti Bucket
2nd millennium BC.
Kartli

Necklace. 20th-18th c. BC.
Trialeti. Kartli

Necklace. 20th-18th c. BC.
Trialeti. Kartli
Late Bronze-Early Iron Age

14th - 7th c. BC

Belt Fragment
8th-7th c. BC.
Mtskheta. Kartli

War chariot
9th-8th c. BC.
Gokhebi. Kakheti

Pectonal
14th-13th c. BC.
Pevechi cemetery.
Kakheti

Buckles
1st millennium BC.
Imereti

Pendant. 18th-16th c. BC.
Brili cemetery. Racha

Standard
6th-5th c. BC.
Kazbegi hoard

Hermaphroditic
7th c. BC.
Fersati. Imereti

Standard
15th c. BC.
Berikdzeebi
Kartli

Stag figurine
14th-13th c. BC.
Tsitelgorebi. Kakheti

Axehead
6th c. BC.
Ozhora cemetery.
Kartli
(Colchis Culture)
**GOLDEN FLEECE**

"The great fame this country had in early time is disclosed by the myths, which refer in an obscure way to the expedition of Jason as having proceeded as far even as Media, and also, before that time, to that of Phrixos."

Strabo, "Geography"

Medea and Jason: 320-310 BC
The red-figured krater from Paestum, Naples

Head of Pan
2nd c. BC

Colchis Civilization
Vani, Imereti, Western Georgia

Nike
2nd c. BC

Earrings
4th c. BC

Ancient Georgian Coins

"It is said that in their country gold is carried down by the mountain-torrents, and that the barbarians obtain it by means of perforated troughs and fleecy skins, and that this is the origin of the myth of the golden fleece — unless they call them Iberians, by the same name as the western Iberians, from the gold mines in the both countries."

Strabo, "Geography"
ANCIENT GEORGIAN METALWORK

Thanks to the region’s rich natural resources and its geographical location, Georgia developed metallurgical traditions which go back to the Early Bronze Age, namely the fourth to third millennium BC, when the Mtkvari-Araxian Culture (c. 3500 – 2400 BC) emerged on the territory of the East Caucasus. Unearthed artifacts from this period already demonstrate the advanced skills both in bronze metallurgy and in working with precious metals of Georgian artisans. These skills were further developed during the Middle Bronze Age, particularly during the era of the Kurgan culture. The early Kurgan culture, prevalent in south-central Georgia, is represented at two important sites: Martkopi and Bedeni. Tools and jewellery found at Martkopi and necklaces, pins, rings and temple pendants, as well as striking ornamental gold brooch discovered at Bedeni show an unusually high level of workmanship.

Alongside these artifacts a 23rd - 22nd century BC golden lion statuette, found in one of the kurgans in the Alazani Valley, is particularly noteworthy; it is the first sculptural image of its kind unearthed in the Transcaucasus area. The later Kurgan period, known for its Trialeti culture, demonstrates the further evolution of pre-Christian culture during 20th - 16th century BC. Rich burial gifts discovered include valued metal items, golden beads, standards, a golden goblet decorated with precious stones, and a famous silver bucket and goblet, the latter of which depicts a vinous ceremony scene. The first examples of golden and silver crockery - plates, jug, mugs and other dishes – are found here.

During 14th - 7th century BC, known as the late bronze-Early Iron Age, two great cultural centres formed on the territory of eastern and western Georgia, the latter of which, called Colchis, was distinguished for its production of so-called Colchian axe heads. These pieces are adorned with a peculiar style of graphic ornaments that demonstrate both advanced metallurgical skills and artistic values. The middle period of the first millennium BC was notable for the wide use of iron in Colchis. Due to its especially advanced ironwork skills, one of the Georgian tribes – khalibs – were regarded by ancient Greeks as the founders of iron technology.

Between the sixth and third century AD, the western state of Egrisi, the legendary ‘Colchis’ preserved in ancient Greek mythology and literature, and the eastern state of Kartli, called ‘Iberia,’ flourished. The development of local goldsmithery was made possible, in part, by the regions’ rich resources: gold-mines in southern Kartli and gold-bearing rivers in Egrisi. The latter, according to Greek authors, was especially ‘rich in gold’. These authors reported on the method of collecting gold, a method that is still practiced in the mountainous Svaneti region, from the Egrisi Rivers: using sheepskins as sieves, so that the gold grains would get caught in the fleece. Such a fleece might be the inspiration for the Golden Fleece of Argonauts. Examples of Colchian gold work from the earliest eighth to ninth century BC include temple pendants, richly decorated with granulation and sculpted heads of predators, which have been found at Ureki on the Black Sea coast. These fine metal pieces attest to the high level of skills among craftsmanship.

Gold granulation attained great variety and technical excellence in the fifth and early fourth century. Outstanding examples, discovered in Vani, include exquisitely crafted gold diadems, with braid-patterned holders; diamond-shaped plaques, adorned with repousse images of fighting animals; earrings; arm rings; and temple pendants. All suggest the work of a skilled master. The plethora of such objects offers clear evidence of the existence of a distinct and original Colchian goldsmithry style that emphasizes extensive use of the granulation technique in combination with filigree. Colchian sepulchres of the sixth to fourth century BC have yielded lavish necklaces with miniature figures of birds and the heads of calves, goats, and rams - perhaps none more impressive than a gold necklace from Vani, which is composed of dozens of tiny granulation-adorned turtles.

Meanwhile at Iberian sites contemporaneous with Vani, the evidence of Achaemenid Persian influence becomes more pronounced, as can be seen in a splendid fourth century BC pectoral discovered amongst the Akhalgori treasures from northwest of Tbilisi. Indeed, perhaps the most extraordinary of the Akhalgori treasures is a pair of pendants designed to hang from a horse’s bridle at the temples, crafted in the shape of two horses, with chains and acorn shapes hanging below.

The further advancement of the metalwork in eastern Georgia is demonstrated by the first century AD discoveries in Mtiskheti, the ancient capital of Georgia. In addition to the abundance of unearthed golden jewellery, such as gorgeous necklaces, earrings, rings and bracelets adorned with precious stones, the necropolis of Armaziakhevi was rich in silver cworkery, including second century bowls with the sculptural images in the centre. Another important example of silverwork from this period is the second or third century AD legs of a bedstead discovered in Bagineti. Overall, the rich finds at Mtiskheti and the techniques employed in these objects-granulation, the use of multicoloured stone and cloisonné enamel-demonstrate that these methods, which were widely used by Georgian masters throughout the following medieval centuries were the accomplishments of ancient Georgian art.
“The Georgian language is conceived for the belief in the Day of his - its Second Coming, to the judgment of Lord of every other language. And the language this is dormant till the Day, and in the language of the Gospel it is called Lazarus... For every enigma is embedded - buried in this language... And this very language, ornate and blessed by the name of Lord, humbled and degraded, is in wait of the Day of the Second Coming of the Lord.”

Ioane Zosime, 10th century
Georgian is an ancient and distinctive language, which has no relationship with other languages, not even with the North Caucasian families. Its written alphabet is one of only 14 in the world. In addition to Kartuli (Georgian), there are the Svanuri and Megruli languages, which are spoken in Samegrelo - the Western part of the country - and Svaneti, in the north west highland of Georgia.

Georgian, the official language of the republic, is spoken by about 4.1 million people worldwide. The origin of the Georgian alphabet is uncertain, though it was presumably a free adaptation of the Greek alphabet with new characters invented for the sounds peculiar to the Georgian language. According to the traditional accounts written down by Leonti Mroveli in the 11th century, the original Georgian alphabet was created by Parnavaz, the first King of Caucasian Iberia (also called Kartli), in the 3rd century BC. However, the first examples of that alphabet, or its modified version, date from the 4th-5th centuries. The earliest attestation of the language is an inscription dating from 430 AD in a church in Palestine and an inscription dating from 494 AD on Bolnisi Sioni Church. However, the existence of a unique local form of Aramaic, known as “Armazuli,” which was uncovered in the findings at Mtskheta, demonstrates that local pre-Christian records, which shared several common features with the Georgian alphabet, did exist.

Georgian has been written in a variety of scripts over its history. Since its adaptation to a written structure, the Georgian alphabet has progressed through three primary forms. The examples of the earliest one, asomtavruli (“capital letters”) also known as mrgvlovani (“rounded”), are still preserved in monumental inscriptions. The nuskhuri (“minuscule”) or khutsuri (“church script”) script first appeared in the 9th century. It was mostly used in ecclesiastical works, with the asomtavruli still serving on occasion as capital letters in religious manuscripts. Mkhedruli (“secular” or “military writing”), the alphabet that is currently used, first appeared in the 11th century. It was used for non-religious purposes through the eighteenth century, when it completely replaced khutsuri. Mkhedruli used to write modern Georgian, consists of 33 characters and has no distinction between upper and lowercase forms.

Georgian has a rich literary tradition, which began in the 5th century with the oldest surviving literary text - The Martyrdom of St. Shushanik by Iakob Tsurtaveli. The monasteries throughout the country, which also served as educational and cultural centres, were cradles of this Georgian literary heritage. Georgian religious literature offers all the genres familiar to the Greek orthodox world: translations of the commentaries, homilies, lives of Saints, treaties on monasticism, and collections of hymns. The richly adorned manuscripts that survive from these centres of enlightenment attest to the high quality of Georgian manuscript illumination. Georgian medieval secular literature culminates in the 12th century with the epic poem by Shota Rustaveli entitled, “The Knight in the Panther’s Skin” Its broad cadences and epic sweep has no comparables.

In the 17th century King Teimuraz I and King Archil contributed extensively to the evolution of Georgia’s modern prose, and Sulkhan Saba Orbelian wrote outstanding parables. In the 18th century, the foremost writers were David Guramishvili and the lyric poet Besarion Gabashvili. In the 19th century, romanticism was the dominant style, as seen in the writings of Alexander Chavchavadze, Grigol Orbeliani and Nikoloz Baratashvili. The outstanding representatives of classical Georgian literature were Ilia Chavchavadze, Akaki Tsereteli and Vazha Pshavela, who was distinguished with his unique mountain-themed stories, poems and lyrics. Among the eminent 20th century writers were Mikheil Javakhishvili, Konstantine Gamsakhurdia, Niko Lortkipanidze and others. The poetry of Galaktion Tabidze, a leading Georgian poet of the 20th century, profoundly influenced all subsequent generations of Georgian poets.

Overall the contemporary Georgian literary heritage is a part of the continuum of language and literature that has reinvented itself throughout the centuries since the times of antiquity.
CHRISTIANITY IN GEORGIA
4TH C. AD

So St. Nino and her disciples were preaching to the people day and night without rest and were showing them the way to the heaven... and all were baptized in Kartli... and became true Christians".

Leonti Mroveli

Jvari Monastery
586-605 AD. Kartli

The Cross of St. Nino

St. Simon and St. Andrew
14th c. Ubisi. Imereti

St. Nino. Painted icon.
Bodbe Monastery. Kakheti

Church of St. Simon the Canaanite
9th -10th c. Abkhazeti

Svetitskhoveli. Pillar erected upon the burial of the robe of Jesus

St. Nino. Oshki. 10th c.
Historical Tao-Klairjeti
Northern Turkey

“And in the year 38 arrived the disciples Andrew and Simeon the Canaanite. Andrew converted the Megrels and left, whereas Simeon the Canaanite died and was buried in Nikophaia”.

Vakhushti Bagrationi
The Georgian Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church is one of the world’s most ancient Christian churches. Tradition traces its origin to the mission of the Apostles St. Andrew, St. Simeon the Canaanite and St. Matthias in the first century.

Along with the Apostles’ mission to the region, the beginning of Christianity in Georgia is also linked to the burial of Christ’s robe in the royal garden in Mtskheta. According to tradition, in the first century AD, the robe of Christ was brought to Mtskheta by Rabbi Eliyahu, who was met by his sister, Sidonia, at the city gate. She became so moved upon gripping the robe that she fell dead on the spot, clasping the robe so tightly that she was buried with it in her hands. Thus the city of Mtskheta became home to the nation’s most sacred relics: A church was later built on the site of a cedar of Lebanon that grew from Sidonia’s grave. It was named Svetitskhoveli, Georgian for “life-giving pillar,” when, according to legend, one of its pillars, made from the wood of Sidonia’s cedar tree, exuded a life-giving balm and amazed everyone with its miraculous radiance.

The declaration of Christianity as an official state religion in 320-330s is associated with two figures, King Mirian II and St. Nino of Cappadocia. St. Nino taught the faith of Jesus Christ for six years and performed miracles with the power of the Holy Cross. She destroyed pagan idols by praying to Jesus and healed the sick with it in her hands. Thus the city of Mtskheta became home to the nation’s most sacred relics: A church was later built on the site of a cedar of Lebanon that grew from Sidonia’s grave. It was named Svetitskhoveli, Georgian for “life-giving pillar,” when, according to legend, one of its pillars, made from the wood of Sidonia’s cedar tree, exuded a life-giving balm and amazed everyone with its miraculous radiance.

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Iberia of Caucasus
Kartli Kingdom
4th c. BC - 3rd c. AD

"Iberia has mostly densely populated towns and cities. Houses have tiled roofs, they are designed well, and they have markets and other social establishments”.

Strabo, “Geography”

Uplistsikhe cave-town. 5th c. BC - 3rd c. AD.

Temple pendant
4th c. BC. Akhalgori

Armaziskhevi. Bath. 2nd c. AD. Mtskheta

Dagger sheath
2nd c. AD. Armaziskhevi

Bowls. 2nd c. AD. Armaziskhevi

Leg of a bedstead
2nd-3rd c. AD. Bagineti

“Armazi Bilingual”
2nd c. AD.
Mtskheta

The tomb.
1st c. AD.
Mtskheta
EARLY MEDIEVAL ARCHITECTURE
5TH-7TH CENTURIES

Martvili
The Ascension
7th c. Samegrelo

Bichvinta Mosaic
The deer at the fountain
5th c. Abkhazeti

Tsmoki Church Mosaic
7th c. Kartli

Bolnisi Sioni. The capital relief.
Kartli

Tsebelda
Panel from an altarscreen
7th-8th c. Abkhazeti

Jvari Monastery
386-604 AD. Kartli

Urmusi. 5th-6th c. Kartli

Bolnisi Sioni. 478-493 AD. Kartli

Jvari Monastery
Tympanum of the south entrance
The Ascension of the cross
The Unification of Georgia
King Bagrat III
10th-11th c.

Oshki. 10th c.
Historical Tao-Klarjeti
Northern Turkey

Nikortsminda
1010-1014 AD.
Racha

Kvetera
10th c. Kakheti

Gishi. 10th-11th c.
Historical Hereti
Azerbaijan

Processional cross of
David Kuropalate
10th c. Racha

Processional cross, detail
973 AD. Ishkhani
Historical Tao-Klarjeti
Northern Turkey

Khakhuli
Relief of an eagle on
the south facade of church. 10th c.
Historical Tao-Klarjeti
Northern Turkey

The Bagrati Cathedral. 10th-11th c. Imereti
GEORGIAN ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE

Amongst the various fields of Georgian art, architecture is one of the most important branches, distinguished with its richness in types and styles. The earliest examples of architectural enterprise found in Shulaveris Gora and Imiris Gora derive from the late Neolithic period (5th-4th millennia BC). The dwellings of this period consisted of a “beehive” type of building, with the circular floor plans, built of curving mud bricks, with opening at the apex of the hut roof. In some parts of Georgia a type of dwelling combined the domed roof with a square ground plan (3rd millennium). According to the group of scholars, this square plan domed type of house was an archetype upon which the local traditions of centralized dome buildings draw. Around 8th-9th centuries BC the emergence of two political states on the territory of Georgia: Iberia/Kartli in the east and Colchis/Egrisi in the west, determined the growth and development of ancient towns and cities (Rustavi, Mtskheta, Uplistsikhe, Poti and etc) along the trade rout from the eastern countries to the Black Sea. The architecture of ancient Georgian cities with their canal systems, fortifications, marketplaces, public buildings, palaces and richly decorated houses is repeatedly mentioned by the Greek and Roman authors.

The spread of Christianity throughout the area since the late first century (apostle’s missions) and its announcement as an official religion in early 4th c. was an important turn in Georgian culture. It gave start up to Georgian Middle Ages, which are defined as period from early 4th c. up to the end of the 17th c.

The remains of the earliest churches survived on the territory of the country prove that the first ecclesiastical buildings were of a small size and did not have any established architectural type - Svetitskhoveli, Cheremi, Nekresi, Samtavro 4th c. AD.

Further development of Christian rite led to the perfection of architectural design from simple types to advanced structures of churches. In the early medieval period (4th-6th c) two principal types of building developed in parallel - The basilica and the cross-domed building: The earliest examples of the basilica churches confirm that in Georgia at the end of 5th c the basic three-aisled design of basilica structure was altered and adapted to local needs: Dzveli Shuamta (5th c), Tskhrakara in Matani, Anchiskhati, Urbnisi and Bolnisi churches can serve as examples for these alterations. But the most unusual amongst basilica modifications is the so-called “triple-church” basilica, unique to Georgia. From the exterior these appeared to be normal basilicas, but in the interior the naïve aisles are separated by solid, continuous walls, dividing the interior lengthwise into three separated churches (Kvemo Bolnisi, Vanati, 5th - 6th c., Nekresi, Zegani 7th c etc.).

The second church type developed in Georgia was of a domed structure, which afterwards became dominant in Georgian church architecture throughout all medieval period. This type of churches evolved the clearly defined architectural designs by the 5th, beginning of 6th c. (Zegani, Idleti, Shiomgvime, Erlaant Sakdari; Triconchs and Tetracoonches - Sukhbechi, Dzveli-Gavazi, Manglisi, Ninotsminda), whilst in 6th-7th c. it reached its perfection in the famous series of monuments of i.e. Classical Period (6th-7th c). Balanced harmony of proportions and perfect adjustment of moderate decorations with tectonic architectural forms characterizes the structural design of this period. The most outstanding example of this epoch is Jvari (586-604), which culminates the artistic explorations of previous periods and gives start up to new series of monuments of i.e Jvari Type (The 7th c. churches in Ateni, Martvili and Dzveli Shuamta). Decoration of church facades with stone carved figural and decorative scenes observed in Jvari became common feature of Georgian churches afterwards. Furthermore, built on the cliff overlooking Mtskheta (the ancient capital of Georgia) Jvari is unique with its exceptional location and harmonious interaction with the surrounding landscape. Amongst other significant monuments of this period are Tsmomi (626-634) with a dome held up by four freestanding columns and facades embellished with blind arcades and Bana (mid 7th c.) with its central Tetracoonche space surrounded with richly decorated detour.

Despite the obstacles posed by the Arab invasion in mid 7th c. Georgian church architecture evolved further to its next stage: 8th-9th c. known as a Transitional Period from Classical Epoch (6th-7th c.) to i.e. Baroque of 10th-13th c. This period is characterized by the creative exploration of new structural and artistic ideas and is distinguishable with the abundance and diversity of architectural types, varied from region...
The Rise of the Georgian Kingdom
King David IV Builder
1089-1125

The portrait of King David the Builder, Gelati monastery, 16th c.

“Lord, creator of the world, bless by your divine will, David, King of the Abkhazians, Kutaisi; Heretians, and Kachetians, son of Christianity, amen.”

Gelati monastery
Church of the Virgin
12th c. Imereti

Processional cross from Gelati
12th c.

King David the Builder’s Processional cross
11th c.

Gelati Academy Porch, Dome
13th-14th c.

Church of the Virgin Apsa mosaic
12th c.

The Gelati Gospels
12th c.

Tondo from Gelati, 11th c.

Church of the Virgin Apsa mosaic
Archangel Gabriel
12th c.
The next stage of evolution of Georgian architecture i.e. Baroque (second half of 10th c. - first half of 13th c.) is the highest peak of development in medieval Georgian culture. Political and economical flourish of the country under the rule of Bagrationi dynasty led to the further advancement in Georgian architecture. Namely, the tendency towards massive constructions was reflected in glorious architecture of Cathedrals: Oshki (60s of 10th c.) and Bagrati (1003), Svetitskhoveli (first half of 11th c) and Alaverdi (first half of 11th c). Alongside the unprecedented complexity and enormous dimensions, the basic feature of this period was the profound artistic solutions in design and decor of both, the interior and exterior, enhanced by the spectacular contrast of shade, light and color. Church facades were decorated with the endless variations of rich ornamental carvings. In this regard the magnificent reliefs on the facades of 1010-1014 Nikortsminda Church and 1030 Samtavisi church are of a special importance.

Alongside the diverse church types, Georgian architecture developed the design of rock-cut ensembles, originating from the ancient rock-cut city of Uplistsikhe, advancing in David-Gareja desert monasteries and culminating in the magnificent architecture of the 12-13th c. town of Vardzia.

The following period between second half of 13th to 18th c. is known as late Medieval Age. The latter is distinguished by constant invasions of Muslim neighbors (Mongols, Turks and Persians) which inhibited the further development of architecture. These centuries are characterized with significantly less architectural innovations as the activities were mainly related to the rehabilitation of dilapidated monuments. In this period Persian influences penetrate the decorative elements of both interior and exterior of buildings, often built of bricks instead of stone. However, as whole, Georgian architectural monuments of late Middle Ages - Metekhi (1278-1289), Zarzma (beginning of 14th c), Sapara (13th c), Gergeti, (14th c), Gremi (mid 16th c) and Ananuri churches (17th c) retained their traditional type and style established in 11th c.

The strength of local building techniques has carried into modern buildings, which are adorning various towns and cities of the country.

The history of Georgian architecture can serve as an indisputable evidence for strong national identity maintained throughout the centuries with vigor.
GEORGIAN MURAL PAINTING

The wall painting, both murals and mosaics, have a long lasting tradition in Georgia. The first century miniature fresco fragment from Bagineti in Mtskehta, an ancient capital of Georgia, and the third century AD floor mosaics at Dzalisa, which depict the Feast of Dionysus, demonstrate that the tradition of adorning interiors with paintings did exist in pre-Christian Georgia. However, embellishment of interiors with paintings became the common practice after the spread of Christianity in the fourth century. Evolving from the early Christian period up to the late Middle Ages, Georgian mural painting went through different stages and formed one of the most valuable parts of country’s cultural heritage.

Amongst the earliest Christian mosaics are the fifth century floor mosaic of Bichvinta Church, which depicts the symbolic animals, bird and fruits, and slightly later pieces in the Shukhuti Baths, exposing more abstract ornamental symbolic images. Until the end of 10th century paintings in Georgian Churches decorated only the main areas of the interior, such as the apse and the central cupola above it. During the early period, two types of wall painting emerged: non-figurative symbolic images, such as those found on early paintings in Sioni Church at Ateni, and figurative images, the earliest of which is the altar painting in Tsromi (630 AD) that depicts Christ with Angels executed in mosaic techniques and fresco images of the Virgin with apostles in the lower register.

Contrary to many other parts of Eastern Christian world, Georgia was barely affected by Byzantine iconoclasm. Icon-making and reverence for icons in Georgia continued uninterrupted throughout the medieval period. Georgian paintings of the eighth and ninth centuries, found in Telovani, Armazi, and the four rock-cut Churches at Sabereebi in the monastic complex at the Gareja desert, share similar stylistic traits and mark a first step on the way to developing a national idiom of painting. Local saints became the subject of individualized iconography and portraits of secular hierarchy, donors and patrons became the part of the program of church wall painting.

The end of 10th-beginning of 11th century marked the beginning of the Golden Age of Georgian mural painting. In this period, the fresco cycle for the entire church interior was developed, which shared some features with Byzantine programs, while remaining connected with earlier local patterns. Thus, for example, paintings in the cupolas of Georgian churches generally depict the Ascension of the Cross, instead of Byzantine Christ Pantocrator, while Deesis or Christ in Majesty is typical of altar compositions for Georgia, instead of the Virgin with Child peculiar to Byzantine paintings. Strong monumentality and simplicity revealed in large compositions, which present a few prominent figures, as well as simple landscapes and architectural backgrounds, distinguish the paintings of this period.

Distinct schools of painting gradually began to emerge in the 10th century in different parts of the country: in Tao-Klarjeti in the southwest, Gareja in the east and Svaneti in the mountainous northwest region of the country. Along with the high level of artistry and refinement that characterizes the paintings of the Tao-Klarjeti churches (Otkhta Eklesia, Khakhuli, Oshki and Ishkhani), its importance rests on the fact that the style incorporated by this school was later inherited by artists in the center of the country. This link is most clearly demonstrated by the 11th century fragmentary paintings of Manglisi and the 11th century magnificent frescos of the Sioni Church at Ateni, which offer the first vivid example of a unified wall painting program in Georgia. This work is distinguished by elegantly proportioned figures, picturesque poses and gestures, and expressive faces.

Meanwhile, at Gareja, in the semi-desert region of Kakheti in eastern Georgia, wall painting also flourished and its stylistic traits-simple composition and the use of a palette of yellow gold, dark red, green and blue, which interacted harmoniously with the surrounding rock-cut monastic environment-developed. Unique stylistic elements are also associated with the school of painting that evolved in Svaneti. The most striking of its works belong to the court painter Tevdor, who developed his unique monumental and expressive style demonstrated in the paintings of the Church of Archangels in Iprari (1096), the Church of Sts. Quiricus and Julitta at Lagurka (1112) and the Church of St. George at Nakipari (1130). Another important example of this school is the paintings of the Matskhvarishi Church executed by Michael Maglakeli in 1240s.
THE GOLDEN AGE OF GEORGIAN HISTORY

KING TAMAR
12TH C.

"The queen of queens, beauty of the country and faith, Tamar, daughter of George, venerator of the Messiah"

King Tamar
1144-1184 AD.
Vardzia
Samtske-Javakheti

Anchi Saviour Triptych
Berpa Opizari, 12th-13th c.

Vardzia, 12th c.
Samtske-Javakheti

The Portrait of Shota Rustaveli
17th c.
The Cross Monastery in Jerusalem

"The knight in the Panther's Skin"
The Manuscript, 1680 AD.

Bertubani Davitganja
Monasteries Complex
12th-13th c.
Kakheti

Pectoral cross of
King Tamar
12th-13th c.
Khobi, Samegrelo

Coins of
King Tamar
1200 AD.

Coins of
King Giorgi III
1174 AD.
One of the outstanding examples dating from the 12th century is the altar mosaic of the Church of the Virgin at Gelati, which depicts the Virgin with the child flanked by archangels and displays both Byzantine and Georgian traits. To the most important monuments of this period belong the frescos of the narthex of the main church at Gelati depicting Seven Ecumenical Councils and the paintings of the Church of Archangels at Zemo Krikhi in mountainous Racha.

The artistic explorations of previous periods culminate in the series of monuments of the second half of the 12th to the first half of 13th centuries. In the 12th and 13th centuries, Georgia was one of the strongest and greatest states in the Middle East, and its economy and culture were in full blossom. Associated with the period of the reign of Queen Tamar (1184-1213), this new style is notable for its elegant, refined images, growing dynamism, flowing lines and a progressively cooler palette demonstrated by the exquisite paintings in Vardzia, an enormous cave monastery hewn out of cliffs, in the main church at Bertubani at Gareja desert, in the Churches at Kintsvisi, Betania and Timotesubani.

The following period after the second half of 13th century, was distinguished by constant invasions of Muslim neighbours. The monumental painting of this period reflects an obvious return to Byzantium and its artistic tradition. By the end of the 13th century, a new Paleologus style began to assert itself in Georgia. The first evidence of this can be seen in the painting of the Church of St. George at Atchi. Among examples of this style, which soon spread throughout the country, are the frescos of south-eastern Chapel of the main church at Gelati and the paintings of the churches at Khobi, Martvili and Zarzma. Amongst the best examples of Paleologus style in Georgia are the paintings in the Tsalengikha Church (1384-1396) executed by Kyr Manuel Eugenicus, who was invited specially from Constantinople. These paintings can serve as the best examples of the Constantinople school of wall painting. Another important example of this period is the painting in St. George’s Church at Ubisi, belonging to 14th century.

Georgian wall painting, which continued with vigour through the 16th century, revealed a connection with the Mount of Athos School of painting, as evident by the frescos of Nekresi, Akhali Shuamta, Gremi and other monuments in Kakheti. Alongside this official trend, Georgian masters incorporated a peculiar “folk” style, specifically national in character. The paintings of this style reflect an oriental influence, as shown in clothing style; however, they also reveal the originality of provincial masters, characterized with primitive, naïve pictorial language, though extremely enchanting decorative and expressive imagery. The examples of this style can be considered as the predecessors of what is called the “Tbilisian portrait” of the 19th century. Thus the rich artistic tradition that began with medieval painting in Georgia reinvented itself on the easel-mounted canvases of 19th and 20th century painters.
GEORGIAN REPOUSSÉ WORK AND CLOISONNÉ ENAMEL

The abundance of repoussé work and cloisonné enamel pieces, distinguished for their high level of craftsmanship, that have survived through the centuries in Georgia, form one of the most valuable parts of medieval Georgian cultural heritage. These works enable us to trace the development of this branch of art, mainly represented by ecclesiastical objects, such as, crosses, icons, cups and manuscript covers, from the eighth to ninth century AD through the early 19th century.

Drawing upon the ancient tradition of metalwork and enamel that dates back to the pre-Christian period, medieval Georgian masters further developed the craft, elaborating a peculiar style beginning in the eighth through ninth centuries. Christianity, which brought changes to art in general, strongly influenced the pictorial language of metalwork, moving it away from three-dimensional sculptural methods, such as volume, modelling and relish for reproducing the naturalistic forms, to a more flattened, stylized aesthetic. Overall, examples of repoussé work echo what was being produced at that time in stone reliefs and wood carvings. Hence, this process of development is part of an organic phenomenon that encompassed all Georgian sculpture.

The Icon of Transfiguration from Zarzma (886 AD), which is the earliest surviving monument of medieval metalwork, clearly demonstrates this new trend in art: the surface of the icon is flat and relatively simple. Meanwhile enamelmwork of this time is also characterized by flat and non-volumetric imagery as well as by the use of a distinctive semi-transparent emerald-green background, which can be seen in eighth century Quadrifolium with the crucifixion on the Kakhuli triptych and in the ninth century Deesis from Martvili.

By the middle of 11th century, this flat and decorative style begins to become more volumetric. This is reflected in a number of superb artworks of this period, such as the Ishkhani, Breta and Brili processional crosses, and the renowned golden chalice of Bedia (999 AD), which is formed from one sheet of gold and depicts the figures of Christ, the Virgin and the Apostles all worked in repoussé. This liturgical vessel is notable for the orderly and rhythmic organization of the figures, its decorative details and for its classicistic and powerful figural style, the monumental effect of which is symbolic of an authentic indigenous Georgian sensibility. Other fine examples from this period include the plaques from Sagolasheni and Shemokmedi, a splendid processional cross from Martvili and the silver roundel of St. Mamai from Gelati. The plastic forms of the latter are modelled with great sensitivity and the proportions of the figure are held in careful balance.

A series of surviving large pre-altar crosses, which are covered with repoussé work, can be regarded as a unique feature of Georgian medieval art. Amongst these is the 11th century pre-altar cross from Mestia, which depicts the earliest known cycle of the life of St. George and is distinguished for its refined reproduction of figures, motion and details.

The 12th century marks a tendency toward more decorative forms and away from the volumetric trend typical to the previous centuries. This period is notable for its special focus on ornamental decoration and the wide use of such decorative elements as inlaid precious stones and cloisonné enamel. The 12th century works of enamel are marked by thin partition networks, a surprising boldness of color, dynamism, and a strong emotional emphasis, the latter of which lack the doctrinal strictness of Byzantine images. The stunning variety of stones and medallions in cloisonné enamel as well as ornamental motifs, which demonstrate the skillful execution of a unified artistic effect, is evident in the Khakuli Triptych of the Holy Virgin composed in 12th century. The Triptych is the largest medieval cloisonné enamel in the world. Combining a large number of medieval enamels from different times (eighth-twelfth centuries) and origins (both Georgia and Byzantine) into a harmonious whole, the Kakhuli Triptych can be regarded as a small “museum” of this branch of art. This relish for decorativeness and ornamental embellishment is clearly seen in the late 12th century Anchi Triptych of the Savior, executed by Beka Opizari, the famous Georgian goldsmith master who worked during Queen Tamar’s reign.

Constant invasions by Muslim neighbours during period after the second half of 13th century, restrained further advancement of Georgian metalwork and enamel. However, from the 15th through 18th century, a notable number of smaller works were produced in goldsmiths’ workshops throughout the country.

Despite the harsh political and economic conditions, Georgian gold repoussé work retained its own traditions and its distinctive style throughout the centuries. On the other hand, the artistic tradition of medieval Georgian enamel degraded and fell out of use by the 15th century. Recently, however, it has been revitalized and is quickly becoming one the most popular branches of contemporary art in modern Georgia.
The Fall of the Georgian Kingdom
14th-17th c.

Holy Shroud 1632-82 AD. Kartli

Triptych. 16th c. Kakheti

Mitre. 17th c.
Gelati Monastery. Imereti

Zarzma. 14th c.
Samtskhe-Javakheti

Tsalenjikha
The Last Judgment
14th-17th c. Samegrelo

Ubisi. Annunciation. 14th c. Imereti

Ananuri. 17th-18th c.
Mtiuleti

Ananuri
Central part of the east facade 1689 AD.
Mtiuleti.

Sapara Monastery
St. Saba Church
The Raising of Lazarus
13th-14th c. Samtskhe-Javakheti

Stole. 1558 AD
Anchi
Historical Tow-Klarjeti
Northern Turkey

Gremi. 16th c. Kakheti
Mountainsous Georgia

Ushguli

Svaneti

St. George
Painted icon
13th c. Mestia

Interior paintings
Church of the Archangels
14th-15th c. Lenjeri

Forty martyrs
Painted icon
12th c. Mestia

St. Theodore
Matskhvarishi church
12th c. Latali

St. George
Painted icon
15th c. Mestia

Tusheti
Omalo

Khevsureti
Shamb'a

Gergetis Sameba, 14th c. Kazbegi
Tbilisi—The Heartland of Georgia

Metekhi Church of the Virgin 13th cc.

A group of “Karachokhels” Artisans in old Tbilisi Photo by D. I. Ermakov 1903-04

Niko Pirosmanashvili (1862-1918) “Donkey Bridge”

“There are three towns in Tiflis—Tiflis, Kala and Isni, divided by Mtkvari... There is a hot spring flowing from the rock in Tiflis and there are six baths... The flourishing gardens in the outskirts of the city are rich in fruits and flowers”

Vakhushti Bagrationi

“Sazandari”, Folklore Ensemble

Niko Pirosmanashvili (1862-1918) Argan player. Fragment

Old Tbilisi

“Argani” Musical Box

“Kinto”. Small Trailers in Old Tbilisi
As the capital of Georgia, Tbilisi (Tiflis) is a significant economic, social, and cultural centre in the country. Located strategically at the crossroads between Europe and Asia and lying along the historic Silk Road routes, the city has been exposed to a transmission of influences from east and west alike throughout the course of its history.

Archaeological studies of the region have revealed that the territory of Tbilisi was settled by humans as early as the fourth millennium B.C. The earliest actual accounts of settlement of the location come from the second half of the fourth century A.D., when a fortress was built during King Varaz-Bakur’s reign. However, according to legend, the origins of the city date to the reign of King Vakhtang Gorgasali, who ruled from 447 to 522. Tradition says that the King went hunting in the heavily wooded region with a falcon, and during the hunt, the falcon injured a pheasant causing both birds to fall into a hot spring. Afterwards, the king decreed his capital to be built on that very spot. Accordingly, the city’s name derives from the Georgian word for “warm” (tbili).

Tbilisi’s favourable and strategic location did not necessarily bode well for its existence as capital. Located strategically in the heart of the Caucasus, Tbilisi became an object of rivalry between the region’s various powers, including Persia, the Byzantine Empire, Arabia, and the Seljuk Turks. The foreign domination of the city began in the latter half of the sixth century when the Persians took over Tbilisi and ruled it for about a decade. In the year 627 A.D., Tbilisi was sacked by the Khazar armies and later from 736-738, Arab armies entered the town. After this point, the Arabs established an emirate in Tbilisi. In 764, Tbilisi was once again sacked by the Khazar, which was still under Arab control. In the year 853 A.D., the armies of Arab leader Bugha Al-Turki invaded Tbilisi in order to establish a Caliphate. Local Georgians were unsuccessful in their drive to expel the Arabs, and Arab domination of Tbilisi continued until about 1050 A.D.

In 1068, the city was once again sacked, only this time by the Seljuk Turks. In 1122, after heavy fighting with the Seljuk that involved at least 60,000 Georgians and up to 300,000 Turks, the troops of the King of Georgia, David the Builder, entered Tbilisi. After the battles for Tbilisi concluded, David moved his residence from Kutaisi (Western Georgia) to Tbilisi, making it the capital of a unified Georgian State. From the 12th -13th centuries, Tbilisi became a dominant regional power with a thriving and a well-established social structure. This lasted until 1236 A.D., when, after suffering crushing defeats, Georgia came under Mongol domination. In the 1320s, the Mongols were forcefully expelled from Georgia and Tbilisi became the capital of an independent Georgian state once again. From the late 14th until the end of the 18th century, Tbilisi fell back into the rule of various foreign invaders and on several occasions was completely burnt to the ground. In the mid-eighteenth century, King Erekle tried many times to free Tbilisi from Persian rule but, in the end, Tbilisi was destroyed in 1795 by Shah Agha-Mohammad Khan. After a devastating invasion by the Persians that ruined large parts of the city, the Russians marched into the capital in 1800. In the twentieth century, Tbilisi was the capital of the Transcaucasian Federation (1918), the first independent Georgian Republic (1918 - 1921), the Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia (1921 - 1991), and finally the second independent Republic of Georgia since 1991.
Tbilisi is a multicultural city, historically known for religious tolerance. This is especially evident in the city’s Old Town, where a Mosque, Synagogue, and Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Churches can all be found within less than 500 meters from each other. Hence, Tbilisi acquired the attributes of an international city while retaining its own specific Tbilisian culture and urban folklore, as can be seen on the historical photos of small traders - Kintos - and artisans - Karachogels, etc. - as well as on the canvases of Niko Pirosmanashvili (1862-1918), who is considered to be the greatest Georgian painter.

The city rises in terraces from both banks of the River Mtkvari. In the old section are medieval buildings and courtyards, narrow streets, overhanging balconies, and the famous hot sulphur springs. The rest of the city has been extensively modernized. The areas of Tbilisi which were built up mainly in the 19th century (Rustaveli Avenue, Vera district, etc.) have a contrasting neoclassical look. The turn of the 20th century was marked with an architectural revival, notably, with an art nouveau style. The city’s attractions include: the Sioni Cathedral (6th c. rebuilt 16th-18th c.), the Anchiskhati Basilica (6th-7th c.) the Metekhi castle and church (1278–89) together with the sculpture of King Vakhtang Gorgasali, the recently built Sameba Cathedral, a funicular railway running to height of Mtatsminda overlooking the city, as well as museums and exhibitions, sulfur baths and local bazaars. In addition, Tbilisoba (Day of Tbilisi) the largest annual celebration in the city, commemorating the foundation of Tbilisi is held towards the end of October each year and attracts many tourists.

The picturesque landscape of Tbilisi, dotted with ancient churches, fortresses and modern buildings, offers a unique glimpse into nearly the entire history of the country.

ETHNOGRAPHY OF GEORGIA

Every single province in Georgia has its own images, history, culture, traditions, dress, food, music, dance and temperament amongst its local people, all of which ensures the ethnographic mosaic of the country and its special attractiveness. This diversity is most clearly observed in the different types of dwellings, which vary from region to region according to natural and climatic conditions, lifestyles and history. The most ancient type of Georgian dwelling is darbazi, found in eastern Georgia and made with a graded roof (gyrgvini) with the central wooden column (dedabodi) that is decorated with wood-carved symbols. The baniani sakhlili, a massive stone structure with a flat roof, a light and smoke hole and a pillar in the middle, is also typical to eastern Georgia. Also serving as evidence of this extraordinary variety are the impregnable, proud towers of Svaneti in the most isolated highland of South-Western Georgia; the castle towns and low houses which cling to the soft slopes in Khevsureti; houses with threshing-floors on the terraced roofs in Mtiuleti; double-pitched roofed watchtowers in Tusheti; and the openwork wooden Oda-type houses built on wooden “legs,” specially constructed for the humid climatic conditions in the western lowlands.

The diversity in temperament among Georgians is best reflected in dressing style, which is particular to each province. Chokha, sewn of thick fabric, tight on the waist and wide on the bottom, is common male attire in every part of Georgia. Generally, the chokha outfit includes a khanjali (sword), akhalukhi (shirt worn underneath), masrebi (bullets), and kabalakhi (a hood, separate from the robe) or nablidi kudi (a tall fur hat). The special pressed wool hats are typical to Svantetian male dressing, whereas a lamb leather hat, called papakhi, is worn by Mtiuletian man. Female costume consists of a skirt (perangi), long trousers (sheidishi), long dress with a breast plate (gulispiri), and a long fabric belt (sartkeli). The head gear consists of a veil (lechaki), a carton ring covered with velvet (chikhla), a thin roll covered with silk, and a head cover. The most remarkable examples of Georgian national costume are the colorful female and male clothing from Khevsureti, which are usually decorated with extraordinarily stunning embroidery.

Traditional craft production, which developed in many different directions, also forms an indispensable part of Georgian culture. Ceramic production, which is tightly linked with the viniculture, is among the most ancient branches. Georgian folk earthenware – simple, fired clay, fully or partially painted, burnished or glazed – goes back into the hoary past. Woodworking is also a long-standing tradition: household utensils and furniture were entirely covered with carvings of different motifs, including astral bodies, crosses, radiating circles, and rituals as observed on the dedabodi.
Furthermore, Georgia is rich in textile techniques: Archaeological finds testify to the fact that weaving and dyeing was well-developed in Georgia. The high qualities of dyes, which are still preserved today, attest to the artistic taste and professional skill of their engravers. The type of textiles most widespread in Georgia are traditional table-cloths executed in the indigo blue dyeing “negative” technique. Embroidery, especially with gold and silver, was very popular in Georgia, especially on folk dress, household articles (bed covers, table-cloths, curtains, etc.) as well as on horse gear (caparison). Because of this variety, Georgian needlework employs dozens of techniques. Pressed wool, tapestry and knitting were especially advanced in the mountainous part of the country, where the ancient practices are still preserved. Old carpets and traditional socks, chitebi and patchichebi, mainly decorated with geometric ornaments attest to the refined skills of Georgian households.

Georgia is also famous for its national cuisine, remarkable for its use of assorted kinds of meat, fish, vegetables, cheeses, pickles, and pungent seasonings. Various historical regions of Georgia are known for their particular dishes: for example, khinkali from eastern mountainous Georgia, and khachapuri, mainly from Imereti, Adjara and Samegrelo. The latter is especially distinguished for its spicy, hot food. Georgian cuisine makes extensive use of walnuts. Walnuts coated in honey are used in a special New Year dessert called gozinaki and also in churchkhela, in which pieces are threaded on a string, dipped in thickened, sweetened grape juice and subsequently dried out.

Overall, table culture known as supra in Georgia has a deeper implication than an ordinary meal. It is also linked with the important element of Georgian folklore – polyphonic music (two, three or four voiced songs). Polyphony is the unifying feature of folk songs from all regions of Georgia and is a trait found in religious choirs and secular music, the foremost examples being Chakrulo and Mravalzhamiert. Both belong to the family of long Kakhetian table songs, which are meant to lift the spirits and create a festive mood. In comparison with the homophonic songs of eastern Georgia, western ones are characterized by the contrasting opposition of voices which create colorful consonances. In this respect, the Gurian musical dialect, distinct for its surprisingly high voice – krimanchuli, is most interesting and is regarded as the crown of folk polyphony. Besides table songs, Georgian folk music is rich with numerous farming and work songs, such as Gutnuri, Orovela, Urmuli, Kalouri, as well as martial and funeral songs.

Georgian folklore is also full of rituals and performances. Competitions among poet-singers, where improvised verse - kapia - is typically sung to a specific melody, are especially popular in eastern Georgian highlands of Pshavi and Khevsureti. Here in the mountains, the festival of Khatoba is dedicated to different shrines that reflect the peculiar synthesis of Christianity with the pagan religion of the region’s local people. Festivals are accompanied with boiling beer (considered a sacred drink) and drinking ceremonies. Researches trace Georgian theatre to ancient festivals celebrating nature’s renewal and fertility, known as Berikoba and Keenoba, where humorous texts, with corresponding songs and dances, formed an integral part of these extraordinary carnival pageants.

The vigorous, leaping male dances, with clashing swords, flying sparks and daggers quivering in the floor, combine elegantly with the graceful, gliding female dances. The dance Kartuli, performed by a couple, incorporates the softness and gracefulness of a woman with the dignity and love of a man. The same softness of movement is typical to the Osetian simdi and khonga dances. In contrast, the mtiuluri and khevsuruli dances from the mountains are characterized by the vigor and strictness of the movements. The war dance-khorumi and adjaruli, which are distinct for their colorful costumes, originated from southwestern region Adjara. Together, colorful costumes, wild drumming, and pipe and accordion music combine to create the overall unforgettable effect of Georgian national dances.

Though many customs and traditions separate Georgian provinces, a trait common to all is the unprecedented and long established tradition of hospitality. The indisputability of the notion that “the guest comes from god” is evident to everyone who has ever visited the country. Despite being unusually diverse in terms of landscape, people, cultures and traditions for such a small country, Georgia is marked by a solid ethnic identity that has been shaped by and maintained throughout the centuries.
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