

# The restoration/conservation in Georgia: past, present, future<sup>1</sup>

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## *The restoration/conservation in Georgia: past, present, future*

From the end of the 1990s, an issue relating to methodological problems of protection and conservation of specimens of cultural heritage became especially acute in Georgia. At the same time, various kinds of mistakes were observed in restoration and repair works conducted on movable and immovable monuments. Due to recognition of this urgent problem, at the end of 2004, the Rector of Tbilisi Academy of Art initiated the establishment of a Faculty of Restoration, Art History and Theory in the State Academy of Arts of Tbilisi, the aim of which was to establish a scientific basis on which to conduct the conservation-restoration of specimens of cultural heritage, and many steps were taken in this direction.

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The cultural heritage of Georgia covers a wide range of material. This includes many movable and immovable monuments which have attracted the interest of researchers since the

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nineteenth century. By the beginning of the twentieth century, these academics had recognized that the issue of the protection of such historical monuments must be prioritized as part of their research. It is widely acknowledged that antiquity requires care-patronage, maintenance and protection. As such, in the 1920s, established societies emerged which were involved in the protection of monuments of cultural heritage. In that period, a comprehensive documentation of monuments was begun, and several monuments were urgently strengthened. After the Second World War, the state took active steps towards protecting cultural heritage, and in 1949–50 a scientific-restoration workshop was founded in Tbilisi, comprising departments for religious and urban architecture and wall paintings. Intensive restoration works were immediately started throughout the country<sup>2</sup>. However, it soon became clear that the field required trained specialists, and in the 1960s restoration programs were initiated at the Faculties of Fine Arts and Architecture in the Academy of Arts of Tbilisi<sup>3</sup>.

The protection of museum specimens faced similar issues. The first workshop for restoration and conservation of museum specimens existed in Tbilisi at the beginning of the twentieth century. In the 1930s, a restoration and *mouflage* workshop was established, which was turned into a chemical restoration workshop a decade later. Specialists working in related fields found they also needed to develop pre-conservation research and diagnostics. This was necessary to attract chemists in the restoration field in the middle of the 1940s. Work was then begun on the chemical composition of specimens, technological schemes of preparation, and diagnostics. These were important steps in developing restoration-conservation science as an independent field, despite the restoration methods of this early period being relatively crude and often irreversible<sup>4</sup>.

It should be noted that while work and teaching in the Georgian restoration school was conducted according to the recognized methodology of monument protection of the period, it was difficult, considering the conditions of the Soviet regime, to keep up with methodological changes in the West, and to face modern challenges facing the field. At the end of the twentieth century, after gaining independence, Georgia was hit by difficult socioeconomic conditions throughout the country. These affected the restoration school which, as a result, dropped significantly behind the international level of modern innovations. Unfortunately, Georgian restoration—and teaching about restoration—remained stuck in the twentieth century with regards to its approaches and methodologies<sup>5</sup>. From the end of the 1990s, methodological problems relating to the protection and conservation of specimens of cultural heritage became particularly acute in Georgia. Meanwhile, it was observed that various types of mistake were being made in restoration and repair works conducted on movable and immovable monuments<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> ELIZBARASHVILI I., SURAMELASHVILI M., CHACHKHUNASHVILI Ts., CHURGHULIA Kh. *Architecture Restoration in Georgia: Historiography, Tradition, Experience Analysis*, Tbilisi: Georgia, 2012, pp. 34–41.

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that Academy of Arts of Tbilisi was, and still remains, the only higher educational institution where restoration is taught.

<sup>4</sup> KEBULADZE N. *Scientific Grounds of Restoration-Conservation of Archaeological Metal*: Candidate of History Sciences, 07.00.06 / Academy of Sciences of Georgia, The Center of Archaeological Research, Tbilisi, 2004, pp. 43–45.

<sup>5</sup> KUPRASHVILI N. “Art, Science or Craft? Problems of Heritage Conservation in Post-Soviet Georgia.” In: *Proceedings*, Peter Skinner, Dimitri Tumanishvili and Ana Shanshiashvili (eds.), 2011, pp. 229–231. 2nd International Symposium of Georgian Culture, “The Caucasus: Georgia on the Crossroads; Cultural Exchange across the Europe and beyond,” [sic] November 2–9, 2009, Florence, Italy. Tbilisi: Georgian Arts and Culture Center.

<sup>6</sup> Though it should be noted here that interventions carried out in the twentieth century prolonged the life of many monuments, and have frequently allowed us to subsequently protect our heritage by renewed methods and approaches.

In general, preliminary research into monuments was not conducted before restoration: none of the usual assessment of the size and nature of any damage, diagnostics, study of materials by different methods, assessment of compatibility to the restoration-conservation materials, nor documentation were performed. Works were conducted without any theoretical basis exploring the specific aspects of the specimen's cultural heritage, research into conservation materials, or appropriate documentation, resulting in deplorable results. For the majority of monuments, the process of damage became significantly accelerated and set in stone. By the end of the 1990s, the general problems of restored monuments in Georgia became widely evident: violated temperature regimes, moisture, salt deposits and heavy biological damage.

Since the second half of the twentieth century, and even in recent years, cleaning of museum specimens has been performed by methods which result in rough and irrevocable results. The structure is often changed, and pre-existing information contained on the surface of the restored object lost. The unfavourable environment in most museums, from the viewpoint of protection of specimens, has led to poor outcomes<sup>7</sup>. Disregard for the conditions necessary for preservation, along with improperly selected materials used in conservation, are among the factors that have significantly accelerated processes of biological damage, corrosion or iridescence among some of the most important immovable monuments and museum pieces, affecting paintings on canvas, metals, and glass, amongst other types of material.

The aforementioned stage of restoration-repair operations in Georgia on a vast scale coincided with essential methodological changes taking place in the Western world, as a result of extensive scientific research conducted by experts in multiple fields and institutions. In this period, the importance of fundamental research and preventive measures, as well as the need for an interdisciplinary approach to cultural heritage, was recognised. But due to the political situation in Georgia at the time, the state was completely detached from the Western world, and the management of the field was carried out as a result of directives received from Moscow. After the breaking up of the Soviet Union, this process became extremely disorganized.

By the end of the 1990s, as a result of this alarming situation, the issue of cooperation with leading European scientific centres and experts in the field of the protection of monuments was raised. Problems in the conservation-restoration field in Georgia were recognised, as a result of individual initiatives, and it became apparent that these problems would not be solved by foreign help alone—there was a fundamental lack of interdisciplinary knowledge, and an acute deficit of qualified people in Georgia at that time. At the Academy of Arts in Tbilisi—the only existing higher education institute specialising in the field of restoration—restoration was simply a branch of oil painting and architecture. It was an add-on to these faculties. The teaching program did not envisage how the specifics of this field was connected with science, and for students it provided only the teaching of handicraft.

In the 1990s, following the Bologna Declaration, and in cooperation with leading European teaching institutions, a network was established to promote the development of education and research in the conservation of cultural heritage. Conservation-restoration was at this point defined as an academic discipline within the humanities which related to all the fields of cultural heritage taught at leading universities. Conservation-restoration was recognized as an empirical scientific discipline aimed at the prevention of damage to, and “treatment” of cultural heritage objects, comprising theoretical as well as practical knowledge, and requiring the ability to

<sup>7</sup> MIKABERIDZE L. *Conservation and Research of Artefacts of Archaeological Origin*. Ap. Kutateladze State Academy of Arts of Tbilisi, Tbilisi, 2016, pp 102–115.

analyse ethical and aesthetic issues. It is a multidisciplinary subject with foundations in art and the humanities, as well as technical and natural sciences, and it also requires mastery of various practical artistic and craft techniques. Practical knowledge of conservation-restoration is based on cognitive and systemic analyses, diagnostics, and problem-setting capabilities. A conservator-restorer is thus distinguished from professionals working in adjacent fields, such as painters and craftsmen, by their solid practical basis, in-depth study of the cultural heritage object, scientific diagnosis of damage, and well-grounded knowledge about interactions between the original and conservation materials and climatic conditions.

At the end 2004, due to the recognition of the urgent problems facing the field, A Faculty of Restoration, Art History and Theory was established at the State Academy of Arts of Tbilisi, by the Rector of Tbilisi Academy of Art. The aim was to establish a scientific basis for the conservation and restoration of specimens of cultural heritage, and many steps were taken towards this. The principles underpinning education into the conservation and restoration of architecture and painting were significantly altered. New processes were established for the conservation-restoration of metal, glass, ceramic and stone that had never previously been used in Georgia. New curricula were devised to be compatible with those of leading European universities and to incorporate the principles set out by international organizations for the protection of monuments.

The implementation of a new and complex approach towards cultural heritage objects in Georgia results from the co-existence of conservation-restoration, art history, and theory. In the curriculum of the Faculty a special place is given to researching the art history research of a specimen, alongside technology, diagnostic research, the study of the original materials, preservation, conservation theory, philosophy, law, and professional ethics. A material-technical base is being created step-by-step, with the creation of a new library and the arrangement of new information systems for a basic laboratory of diagnostic research. Experts from leading international conservation centres are involved in designing curricula and giving lectures and seminars.

The steps which have been taken in the field in the last decade have been extremely important, but are not sufficient for its development. To achieve the aforementioned objectives, it will be necessary to combine the accumulated knowledge and the newly gained knowledge in a systemized fashion. This will involve analysing international norms, expanding the scientific understanding of the existing situation in Georgia, and understanding the specifics of cultural heritage specimens. All of this requires interdisciplinary research on cultural heritage objects (both movable and immovable monuments), and its implementation in teaching. The purposes of these activities are:

1. To solve existing problems in the teaching of protection of cultural heritage at the Faculty of Restoration, Art History and Theory.
2. To create an interdisciplinary research standard in restoration-conservation, and to implement the most up-to-date scientific methodology.
3. To collect and analyse the newest Western material used in the field, and to process this material alongside existing Georgian technology.
4. To establish a standard of documentation of practical works.
5. To establish basic norms of preservation.
6. To establish basic norms of monitoring.

Consequently, a comprehensive model of documentation based on interdisciplinary research

on each specimen will be created, based on theoretical work and practical testing. The standards established as a result of accomplishing these goals will become the basis for teaching in the field of conservation-restoration. This will ensure that future generations of conservation-restoration students in Georgia are grounded in scientific methodology in accordance with international standards. The new teaching curricula in the near future will stipulate to a greater extent that all practical work connected with movable and immovable monuments should be carried out according to international norms and newly established national standards.

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