

PIROSMANI

1862 – 1918

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Exhibition facts

Opening	25 October 2018 6.30 pm
Duration	26 October 2018 – 27 January 2019
Venue	Colonnade Hall
Curators	Bice Curiger, Fondation Vincent van Gogh Elisabeth Dutz, Albertina
Works	30
Catalogue	Available in English, German and French at the Museum's shop and www.albertina.at
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Opening Hours	Daily 9 am – 6 pm Wednesdays & Fridays 9 am – 9 pm
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Niko Pirosmani

Wanderer Between the Worlds

26 October 2018–27 January 2019

The ALBERTINA Museum is devoting a comprehensive exhibition to the oeuvre of Georgian painter Niko Pirosmani (1862–1918). This autodidact, who created his luminous, incisive paintings for turn-of-the-century Georgian inns and taverns, is now viewed as a hero of the avant-garde and as an artist well worth being discovered by the broader public.

For the Russian avant-garde with its Neo-Primitivist beginnings, Pirosmani was a fixed star right from the start who paved the way for the likes of Natalia Goncharova and her partner Mikhail Larionov in their quest for the primeval, simple, and deeply felt. And 1913 saw Niko Pirosmani presented as the “Rousseau of the East” at the legendary Moscow exhibition *Target*, in which Natalia Goncharova, Mikhail Larionov, Kazimir Malevich, and Marc Chagall also took part.

Language of Simplicity

Pirosmani, who had received no formal training as a painter, took his motifs from his immediate surroundings in his homeland, painting for the most part on simple, black-colored wax cloth. The outlines of human figures, animals, and everyday objects in his paintings are just as undemanding in terms of legibility as are his simple additive compositions: there is no use of extreme foreshortening, overlapping, or refined perspectives to undermine or obfuscate his narratives of peasant celebrations, grape harvests, and hunts.

Niko Pirosmani’s commissioned works, which frequently show animals or village scenes, were shown not at galleries, artist associations, or museums, but rather in places where all segments of society could view them: in taverns, at inns, and in shops. To him, art was a wide-open field while he himself was something of an outsider and a vagabond, a wanderer between the worlds—between city and country, inns and animal stalls, but at the same time inhabiting the center of society.

The Art of Unlearning

Much of the history of modern art can be read as a history of unlearning. Various strategies helped the pioneers of Cubism and Expressionism to liberate themselves from the oppressive yoke of professional training and cast off that virtuosity which, due to stubborn misuse by the salons and the academies, had become corrupt and disingenuous.

The art of unlearning needed the support of artists and amateurs who, without systematic training and in the darkness of anonymity, produced works that were admired as unmediated expressions of the authentic: the child's drawing, the art of the "mentally ill", Oceanic and African sculpture, and the naïve painting of Sunday artists thus advanced to become the midwives of modernism.

Leading the way here was the French customs officer Henri Rousseau, who had already been recognized by his contemporaries as their chief. Pablo Picasso, Wassily Kandinsky, and Guillaume Apollinaire all paid tribute to him as the primitive artist of the new era. Rousseau's genuine naïveté and the clarity of his paintings were the aim and model of a modernist wave that proceeded to sweep from Paris and Barcelona to Munich and Berlin, in the process revolutionizing the art of the early twentieth century.

Utopia of Rural Life

It is Pirosmani's immediate and special connection to his audience that causes his paintings to seem like a collective dream, addressing their viewers in a direct manner. The elemental nature of his works' themes speaks to a society in the process of exchanging rural life for urban life.

Pirosmani's painterly immediacy and stylization aim to be understood from afar, an approach that was ideally suited to the public places for which he created his works. What's more, the black waxed cloth that he used as a painting surface allows his motifs to appear as if risen up from the dark depths.

Niko Pirosmani's artistic language as a whole is extremely direct. The rural world of his paintings has already seen the arrival of railroads and illustrated magazines. The giraffe, the white bear, or the lion, on the other hand, are imaginary protagonists that bear witness to his society's invocation, typecasting, and even occasional idealization of the animalistic—as well as of its own protagonists: the shepherd, the fisherman, the village beauty, the mother with her child, the festive celebration, the messenger, and the grape harvest, as well as daily work and animals in the farmyard or out in the fields and woods.

In his paintings, Pirosmani sings the praises of a shining, harmonious order that he, "the vagabond", imagined more than actually experienced. And posterity, for its part, has transformed him into a leading figure, into a painter of hope for and faith in the goodness in human beings—even in times during which everything pointed to the contrary.

Wall Texts

Intro

The history of modernism is largely one of resistance, of young artists revolting against the academies and the brilliant, yet superficial Salon painting in Paris and Barcelona, Munich and Berlin.

The international awakening of modernism aimed at an authentic art. Practicing the art of forgetting, the avant-gardes relied on children's drawings and the dilettantes' naïve painting as well as the artistry of the mentally ill and the presumed primitivism of African and Oceanian sculpture for their inspiration.

Born in Tbilisi in 1862, Niko Pirosmani was the most important figure in the line of unlearned ancestors who helped the birth of the early Russian avant-garde's Neo-Primitivism.

What the naïve painter Henri Rousseau, also known as Le Douanier, the customs officer, meant to Picasso, Braque, and Modigliani in Paris, Pirosmani represented in the eyes of the Russian avant-garde. The early art of Chagall and Malevich, of Goncharova and Larionov would be unthinkable without the profoundly felt, simple form of the animals and figures Pirosmani always rendered frontally or in rigid profile.

The monumental character and magic poetry of Pirosmani's isolated figures already enthralled the trailblazers of modernism when first exhibited in 1913. Pirosmani was celebrated as an artist heralding an authentic art, an art not deformed by academic training. He was the fixed star on the way to the primeval simplicity of the people's soul.

Picasso likewise admired the iconic beauty and memorable impact of Pirosmani's painting. Already in his late years, the Spaniard dedicated an etching to the Georgian.

Pirosmani did not live to see his work achieve recognition and success. The lack of understanding in his native Georgia and the outbreak of World War I thwarted further exhibitions. The shop signs and portraits he sold during his lifetime were paid in kind, in wine and food. Impoverished and homeless, Niko Pirosmani died in the damp, cold shack of a cellar tavern in Tbilisi in 1918.

Festivities and Traditions

Niko Pirosmani's works highlight life in old Georgia, its customs and traditions, rural festivities and rituals structuring the year and granting a feeling of security and continuity. They show a world that seems to be in order, in which people, full of joy, celebrate the grape harvest festival or somebody's birthday, attend a church festival or a traditional wedding—embedding the festivities in landscapes in a genre-like manner. We are confronted with banquets of urbanites, merchants, and peasants, festivities of princes and simple families. The large-format banquet scenes fill the whole picture. Pirosmani positions the mostly black-clothed little figures next to and above one another according to one and the same scheme without any perspective construction, space, or shadow: face and body are depicted more or less frontally, the feet in profile.

This easily readable view, which is also the preferred mode of representation to be found in children's drawings and works by Sunday painters, and the not foreshortened architecture of houses and huts define the artist's naïve approach.

Pirosmani's banquet tables are always empty at the front so that the view of the scene is not impeded. People, animals, houses, and other objects are spread regularly and parallel to the pictorial surface across the landscape in a scattering pattern so that virtually no larger areas remain empty. Niko Pirosmani's work is influenced by the medieval understanding of painting and simple broadsheet prints that do without space and perspective.

This forerunner of the avant-garde did not have to forget anything to turn immediacy and genuine feeling into pictures. Thus, the amateur painter became the teacher of the great Russian neoprimitivists from the early Malevich and Chagall to Goncharova and Larionov.

Animals

Niko Pirosmani was often commissioned with painting animals. Some motifs were rendered in numerous, only slightly changed variants: wild animals like deer, bears and foxes, breeding stock such as pigs, goats, and hens, as well as exotic animals like giraffes, lions, tigers, and elephants.

The animals are presented either separately or in small groups such as a dam with her offspring, always format-filling and parallel to the pictorial surface and portrayed from the side. Pirosmani changed his simple standard compositions only occasionally when required. The artist did not know many animals from personal experience, nor had he seen photographs of them in newspapers. He drew on the century-old tradition of medieval art and elements of popular art such as broadsheet prints characterized by stylized and typified compositions. Pirosmani thus developed a pictorial language of his own for the signs of Tbilisi shops and taverns he was asked to paint.

Giraffe

Niko Pirosmani's works represent a number of exotic species besides the forest and farm animals the artist was familiar with. He never laid eyes on these creatures. There was no zoo in Tbilisi during his lifetime, and no travelling circus surprised its public with giraffes or lions. Pirosmani came upon these animals in simple woodcuts and stories. Following the scheme of a deer, he lengthened the giraffe's legs and neck, which still strikes us as too short, however. Having heard that giraffes have a patched coat, he rendered his specimen with black dots on a grey-white ground. Pirosmani's painting is an icon of animal portraiture that is in no way inferior to Albrecht Dürer's *Rhinoceros*, whose image is also based on nothing but descriptions.

Big Marani in the Forest

We see a large amphora lying on a clearing in the woods in the centre of the foreground. It is a *kvevri*, a traditional earthenware Georgian vessel used for the storage of wine since time immemorial. *Kvevris* vary in size. The grapes are pressed, and the juice, grape skins, stalks, and pips are poured into the *kvevri*, which is then sealed and buried in the ground where it remains at constant temperature for several months. The place where the *kvevri* is buried is called *marani*.

Niko Pirosmani's simple narrative juxtaposes objects and people on a depthless stage, adding one element to another without overlappings—a house on the horizon, an armed guard, a man carrying a tub full of apples, a fox, and huge vine tendrils forming a canopy over the bulky vessel.

Eagle Seizing a Hare

A mighty eagle has sunk its claws into the head and back of a hare. It is an ancient motif that Pirosmani was familiar with from church façades of his native Georgia. The hare is rendered stretched to its full length. Its light grey fur stands out from the greyish black plumage of the eagle. The eagle's red eyes emphasize the bird's aggressiveness.

Childless Millionaire and the Poor Woman with Children

A childless rich couple receives a newborn from a poor woman. Pirosmani labels the two groups as “millionaire, childless” and “poor woman with children,” respectively. The scene does not unfold as a three-dimensional visualization; resembling cutouts, the figures are positioned next to each other parallel to the picture plane. Suit, coat, gold buttons, shoes, and jewellery hint at the couple's wealth. The man's beard is neatly trimmed, the woman boasts conspicuously painted lips and a sophisticated coiffure. The barefooted humble woman is accompanied by her two little children: a widow, alone, without a husband, a baby in her arms, which she is still breastfeeding while handing it over. Four colours orchestrate the painting: black, white, olive-green, and blue.

The Actress Margarita

The French actress and dancer Marguerite de Sèvres arrived in Tbilisi on March 27, 1905. Her tour through tsarist Russia was announced as that of “a famous representative of an art never seen in Russia before.” Pirosmani was fascinated with the artist who sang and danced at the same time, and painted her portrait. Legend has it that he sold his last belongings to be able to buy hundreds of roses as a present for her.

The actress is presented standing in a meadow, holding a bunch of flowers in her left hand. Birds whirl around her head. The black oilcloth shimmering through the white dress and the woman's carnation lends the figure a peculiarly uncanny appearance.

The Russo-Japanese War

This painting focuses on a decisive event of Pirosmani's immediate present that provoked heated discussions in the taverns of Tbilisi, the seat of the Imperial Viceroy, in the early years of the twentieth century: the Russo-Japanese War.

In 1904, the Empire of Japan attacked the Russian naval base of Port Arthur (which is part of a Chinese seaport today). The two empires were rivals for the influence over Manchuria and Korea. After many battles involving heavy casualties, the Russian Empire was defeated in the summer of 1905.

Contemporary newspapers published reports on the battles at Port Arthur, on cannonades, and ships on fire. The painting unfolds the war events as imagined by the artist. A ship in the harbour fires at the fleet on the open sea, flames are blazing up on the horizon, and a lot of smoke billows across the sky, enhancing the scene's dramatic character. Officers direct the goings-on from a small boat in the foreground. Niko Pirosmani was no eyewitness to the battle, nor did he rely on photographs. He did not paint the soldiers involved in the chaos of action but in strict order like guards of a military parade. The work's additive composition and static order are entirely owed to the naïve representation of reality from the artist's fantasy.

Niko Pirosmani's Banquet of Artists

The great naïve painter Niko Pirosmani, honoured by the retrospective currently on show on the ground floor, had a dream: he wanted to get together with artist friends around a table to eat, drink, celebrate—and talk about art. This dream would not come true for him, however. Completely impoverished and homeless, Pirosmani died in a miserable hole of his native Tbilisi in Georgia in 1918 and was buried at an unknown site.

Yet the amateur's naïve narrative style and simple mode of rendering things, people, and animals inspired and influenced generations of artists from Malevich and Goncharova to Picasso and Baselitz.

Ilyazd

Ilya Zdanevich (Ilyazd) and his publishing house The 41st Degree publish seventy-eight numbered copies of the "artist's book" *Pirosmanachvili 1914*. A French translation of his 1914 article is illustrated with a drypoint by Pablo Picasso depicting Pirosmani in the process of painting. In drawing Pirosmani, Picasso was probably inspired by photographs and also the 1916 caricature.

Tadao Ando

The sound of the wind and the scattering of light

The rose is ephemeral, a fleeting incorporation of the short span between birth and death. The rose is graceful, yet its thorns can hurt. It is a symbol of the contradiction between beauty and mortality.

This table represents Niko Pirosmani's symbolic grave. It recalls his busy life and honours his Georgian heritage. Flowers and particularly roses are recurring motifs of his paintings. This is how the rose became the central motif of my table.

Flowers are the most beautiful shortly before their petals drift to the ground. I sought to create something that would capture the fleeting life of the rose. Finding innumerable roses preserved in full bloom, viewers of the table may enjoy the beauty in which time comes to a standstill.

Georg Baselitz

Georg Baselitz's two-part ink drawing belongs to a comprehensive series of works each of which confronts an artist important to Baselitz with Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849), the unrivalled Japanese master of colour woodcuts. The present example combines a variation of the famous portrait of the eighty-three-year-old Hokusai with a portrait of Niko Pirosmani that has only come down to us through a photograph. His distinctive moustache and intense gaze characterize Pirosmani as a bound and determined Georgian. Hokusai is drawn quickly and with calligraphic verve.

Adrian Ghenie

The Romanian artist Adrian Ghenie's approach is both realistic and vague. His *Portrait of Niko Pirosmani* is based on the only surviving photograph of the Georgian artist. Ghenie disassembles the face with the distinctive moustache into a mix of broad smeared brushstrokes and puts it back together again like a collage. The sophisticatedly joined planes of colour define Niko Pirosmani's head in a both elusive and suggestive manner.

Karen Kilimnik

Karen Kilimnik is a US-American painter and installation artist. Her paintings relate to French Rococo art and eighteenth-century English landscape painting. She sees herself as an appropriation artist who explores the still pressing fragility of the female psyche and identity in the vein of Rococo sentiments. *The Approaching Storm (A Shepherd + Pet)* is a present-day answer to Pirosmani's straightforward description of a Georgian shepherd's life one hundred years ago and the bonds between man, animal, and nature.

Yoshitomo Nara

Yoshitomo Nara, who is considered the master of Tokyo Pop, draws inspiration from the Japanese manga and anime traditions as well as from Western popular culture. *Queen Tamar after Pirosmani* is Nara's direct response to the artist Niko Pirosmani's (1862–1918) eponymous work.

ALBERTINA

Queen Tamar the Great (1160–1213) was the first woman who ruled Georgia. Proclaimed co-ruler by her father George III in 1178, she ascended to full power after his death in 1184. She modernized the state, abolished capital punishment, had monasteries and churches built, and patronized science and the arts. Her long reign is regarded as the apex of the Georgian Golden Age. Tamar died in 1213 and was canonized at a later point in time.

Yoshitomo Nara's simplifying representations confront us with big-eyed childlike figures of extremely distorted proportions: a highly artificial naïve style that owes a lot to the amateur painter Pirosmani.

Compared with Kiki Smith's work, the painting by Yoshitomo Nara, the master of Tokyo Pop, shows a quite different response to Niko Pirosmani's (1862–1918) portrait *The Actress Margarita*. The French actress and dancer Marguerite de Sèvres made her appearance in Tbilisi when she toured tsarist Russia in 1905. Pirosmani was fascinated with her and came to admire and love her from afar. He captured her in a frontal-view full-figure portrait.

Kiki Smith

Pursuing a cross-media, interdisciplinary approach, Kiki Smith explores the foundations of human existence—with “Blue Stars on Blue Tree”. The human body is always in the focus of her work. Humans and animals exist next to each other; hybrid beings open up new realities. The life-size woman, a self-portrait of the artist, presents herself naked, floating with opened and outstretched arms on the blank Nepalese paper. Her body is subject to transformation, like the figure of Daphne in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, who turns into a tree to escape Apollo's ardour.

The woman's skin resembles the bark of a tree riddled with furrows and knotholes; her arms are branches. Young shoots with small leaves growing from her knees and arms symbolize unceasing rebirth, revival, and regeneration. A sky of blue stars and small birds—representing the souls Kiki Smith wears as tattoos on her body—arches between the woman's hands. The artist is concerned with friendship, survival, and protection.

A century after the Georgian painter's death, the actress Margarita admired by him has undergone a metamorphosis and turned into the American artist Kiki Smith.

Andro Wekua

The Georgian artist Andro Wekua lives and works in Switzerland and Berlin. He reassembles fragments of his childhood recollections to new, mosaic-like narratives in his works. Wekua's figures are artificial, suggesting a reality on the border between memory and dream. They do not have any eyes, do not return our gaze; they are completely turned inward—and, at the same time, a projection surface for our imagination.

The wolf as eye evokes ancient Georgian myths. Georgians admire the lonely white wolf, feeling akin to the animal: restless, trusting its instincts, freedom-loving.

Biography

1862

Niko Pirosmani was born the youngest child of Aslan Pirosmanashvili, a poor farmer, and his wife Tekle in Mirzaani in Georgia, then part of the Russian Empire, in supposedly that year.

1870–1884

After his parents' early death, Pirosmani was raised by the petty-bourgeois family Kalantarov. He learned to write, read, and draw and was trained as a typesetter, a prestigious profession he never practiced, however.

1888–1899

After completing his training, Pirosmani worked as a cook and brakeman for the Transcaucasian Railway before he and a friend became owners of a small dairy in Tbilisi. The dairy's initial success enabled Pirosmani to have a house built for his sister in Mirzaani.

1899–1911

After Pirosmani's attempt to marry and found a family had failed, he began to drink and backed out of the business. While he had only painted on the side until then, he now tried to make ends meet by taking on odd jobs and portraying railroad employees and tavern guests. Warm meals were the currency with which people paid for his pictures. Without a permanent home, he wandered from one inn to the next and worked in an amusement park in Tbilisi for a short time.

1912–1915

Having come upon works by Niko Pirosmani in a tavern, the Russian painter Mikhail Le Dentu purchased one of his paintings and, together with artist friends, set out looking for more pictures by this unusual dilettante. In Moscow, they told Mikhail Larionov and Natalia Goncharova of their inspiring find. Larionov included works by Pirosmani in an exhibition he organized before the end of that year. The show, which would pave the way for Neo-Primitivism, immediately drew great attention. A subsequent solo presentation of the artist planned for Paris came to nothing because of the outbreak of World War I.

1916–1918

Due to the artist's anti-academic orientation, a show of Pirosmani's works in Tbilisi organized by the artist's friends found no sympathy at all. The Association of Georgian Artists not only refused to stage an official exhibition of the then homeless and completely impoverished Pirosmani but also disapproved of supporting him financially in any which way. That the Bolsheviks also seized power in Georgia soon after the Russian Revolution of 1917 did not improve Pirosmani's situation since his art was completely unsuited for propaganda purposes. The artist spent the last two years of his life in a damp, cold shack of a cellar tavern in Tbilisi. He died on Easter's eve 1918. The exact location of his grave is unknown.