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Niko Pirosmani: Between the Local, the National and the Global

Georgia's most celebrated twentieth – century painter Niko Pirosmani (1862 – 1918) experienced a belated and largely posthumous rise to fame. On the eve of World War I representatives of the Russian avant – garde, followed closely by central figures in Georgia's national revival, sought to interpret and recode the textural and thematic “unevenness” of Pirosmani's canvases as a naïve yet artful combination of historically distinct forms. The recovery of Pirosmani's legacy is thus the story of two distinct interpretive aesthetic models competing but also colluding in the artist's canonization: the cosmopolitan discourse of modernist primitivism and a nationalizing discourse of local particularity, both superimposed onto a vernacular local practice. These two discourses, along with the artistic works they sought to interpret, offer us an exemplary case of the triadic (and not merely binary) scale of centre/periphery relations: the global, the national and the local. To analytically distinguish these scales, and examine how they functioned in tandem in the history of Pirosmani's canonization as an exemplary figure of the international avant – garde, is the goal of my paper. My talk will draw from the Georgian and Russian archive of the revolutionary era, including the writings of contemporaries such as Ilia and Kirill Zdanevich, Grigol Robakidze, Titsian Tabidze, as well as later scholarship, both historical and theoretical.