

The Compositional Painting of Levan Lagidze



The Prodigal Son
Oil on canvas, 40 × 30
1987
Property of the artist's family

'[...] the composition of each epoch depends upon the way the frequented roads are frequented, people remain the same, the way their roads are frequented is what changes from one century to another and it is that that makes the composition that is before the eyes of every one of that generation and it is that that makes the composition that a creator creates. [...] Each generation has its composition, people do not change from one generation to another generation but the composition that surrounds them changes.' ²

These words belong to Gertrude Stein (1874-1946). In her 1937 book *Picasso*, this statement is preceded by the narration of the author that gave rise to her assumption regarding the composition of her era. Stein remembers the summer when she was reading a book written by one of the monks of the Abbey of Hautecombe and in it he writes of the founding of the abbey and he tells that the first site was on a height near a very frequented road. Stein became curious, and began to ask her French friends what a very frequented road could have meant in the fifteenth century. Did it mean that people passed once a day or once a week? The answer was 'more frequently than not', and this gave rise to Stein's conclusion that the composition of each epoch depends upon the way the frequented roads are frequented.

A composition which hitherto none could see—yet created by the artist, as if lying in the palm of a hand. Unlike observers, who become acquainted with this composition by merely glancing at it and remembers it, the creator follows a long and complicated path to give shape to something he or she has imagined. In most cases, this path does not end when the composition is found, since the shape that the author's mind has imagined manifests itself more frequently and through many variations of his or her art.

Nowadays, Levan Lagidze's compositions are very well known both in Georgia and abroad. His signature is familiar to all those who have seen at least one of his works and have at least once entered the labyrinth of the compositions he has created.

These labyrinths are as endless as the story of the art of painting. The possibilities here are inexhaustible and the process infinite.

A Street
Oil on canvas, 60 × 70
1985
Private collection



Lagidze proves this by his devotion to his profession and his own *Weltanschauung*. Everything seems simple at first glance: an artist uses a canvas, brushes and oil paints, sits by an easel and tells the same old story. But this is his story, told by him and therefore different from all the others.

Lagidze has been painting abstractions for over twenty years. He endlessly depicts a new world on a rectangular surface with rectangular sections. That said, everything in the previous statement is conditional: in most cases his compositions are neither complete abstractions nor rectangular sections—and what is more, nor are they square, as might seem to us at first glance. Lagidze's compositions are complex, multi-layered and multidimensional. But everything obviously begins on the plain surface of a canvas.

When Lagidze sits next to an empty canvas—of which so many stand ready in his studio (as well as many different paints, so that, as he says, he will never suddenly lack any colours)—he may not precisely know in which direction he will be heading at any given moment. However, his works reassure us of the fact that, once he begins to work and his new compositions are depicted on canvas, and despite the multitude of movements, every single motion of the artist's hand is in precise relation with his thoughts. Precision is something Lagidze has been striving towards from the very beginning. It is what directs his search along the path of the movements and actions on the surface of his canvas.

Nowadays, Lagidze's path goes through the lower layers of his painting towards its surface. It is a very frequented and multilayered path whose beginning the viewer never sees. The untrained eye can never reach

its depth. One day, perhaps, Lagidze's works could undergo a technical examination to discover their lowest layer, that which precedes his research and findings on the surface of the painting and places the expected or possible chaos in order. There, perhaps, analysis will reveal a net of intersecting lines, placed upon the canvas as a thin layer of paint with a palette-knife. This is where these rectangular sections are born before each one gradually acquires its own shape and begins to move in different directions, before stopping somewhere, occupying a space, changing places, acquiring a colouring and changing, becoming more refined, darker, paler, sinking deeper or rising to the surface. Some settle, emphasizing their meaning and sometimes even shining. Others quiver modestly and remain average, but this in no way diminishes their role—although sometimes it might even be the other way around. The lines sometimes complement each other and sometimes oppose each other. They sometimes even threaten to destroy the entire surface if it were not for the new findings or inventions to which the artist has been unexpectedly brought by necessity. Findings born of need can acquire the meaning of a new method. Everything is accumulated, like the experience that creates steadiness. Equilibrium requires precision and precision requires equilibrium. One cannot exist without the other.



Tbilisi
Oil on canvas, 100 × 160
1986
Museum of Fine Arts of Adjara



Trees

Oil on canvas, 55 × 35

1986

Property of the artist's family

Constructing a composition on a surface implies building and distributing shapes. Lagidze's compositions, as stated earlier, develop not only on the surface of the canvas but also across its layers, from the lowest to the uppermost or vice versa, resulting in many layers that cover each other's information like a palimpsest.

Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) was so moved by the word composition that, as he wrote himself in 1913, it had the same effect on him as prayer.³ A comparison such as this obviously proves that, to him, a composition meant much more than just building or construing a painting. That same year, in his work *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Kandinsky dedicated an entire chapter to Compositional Painting, in which he wrote:

'In compositional painting, which we see today developing before our eyes, we notice at once the signs of having reached the higher level of pure art, where the remains of practical desires may be completely put aside, where spirit can speak to spirit in purely artistic language – a realm of painterly-spiritual essences (subjects)!' ⁴

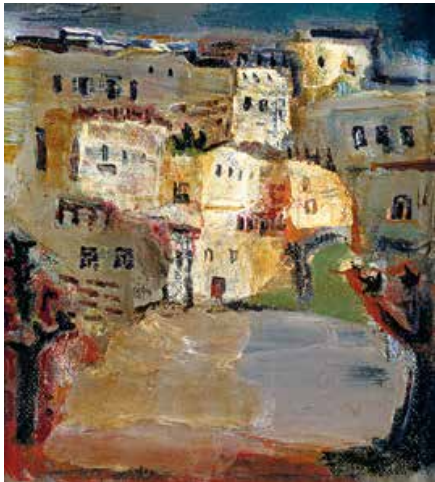
In general, this work sheds light upon what 'a composition' meant to the founder of abstractionism and what he meant specifically by 'compositional paintings'. According to Kandinsky, in the 1910s art left behind the realistic and naturalistic phases of the contemporary period and shifted towards compositional art. As he writes himself, realistic paintings satisfy the need to express practical, corporeal and transient elements. As for naturalistic painting, he argues that it originated with the Impressionists, and that the reality that our eyes see is no longer leading in this form of art but is instead more of an attempt to gradually rid ourselves of practical aims and embrace the spiritual.⁵ This is when the stage of compositional painting begins. If we consider the fact that Kandinsky, striving towards this goal, first created his so-called 'Impressions' and 'Improvisations' and that his 'Compositions' emerged in parallel, we could assume that by compositional painting he actually means a painting that is based upon the highest principles of harmony and is totally torn away from its material source.

Adam and Eve
Oil on canvas, 80 × 70
1987
Foundation of the Ministry of
Culture and Sport of Georgia



We have every reason to believe that the term 'compositional' that emerged in Kandinsky's theoretical work did not concern the structure of the painting and its construction but rather its melody, and that it is associated with the composition of music. We could assume that, in his view and in such cases, artists work like composers who have found precise sounds, analysing the principles and relationships and interactions, harmony or disharmony, of different sounds disconnected from practical and everyday needs and requirements and which mostly describe spiritual conditions and feelings.

Lagidze once told me 'Oh, composition is very important!' His 'Bach Exercises' exhibitions in Tbilisi and New York in 2017-18 were inspired by Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750). These exhibitions featured two compositions—'Bach Exercise 1' and 'Bach Exercise 2'—created in 2018. Based upon these two works, we could assume that in Bach's music



City

Oil on canvas, 30 × 25
1987

Property of the artist's family

Lagidze sought solid constructional principles, orderly rhythms, a virtuous richness of facture and colour, general principles of harmony disconnected from everyday reality and to be found in abstract and immaterial spheres.

In order to understand the significance of Lagidze's work and to define his prominent place in the vast world of art—and particularly of painting, of which he is a master—we will occasionally need to bridge his art with the works and thoughts of the many different artists whose successor, professionally speaking, he is.

In the early 1960s, a little boy would very often sit on the roof of a three-storey house on Japaridze Street in Tbilisi's Sololaki neighbourhood and would let himself be overwhelmed by the panoramic view of the city that it offered: a wide landscape, distant shapes, blurred or sharply in focus, space... Obviously, he only realized much later what this open panorama actually meant to him—and particularly the significance of this vast space of alternating views, some close, others distant. Back then, he was always closely observing his surroundings from the rooftop, and enjoyed this game that would unexpectedly penetrate his unconscious mind with thoughts that were strangely comforting. But in those days, it must have been even more important to him that this game also required courage, since sitting on a sloping roof was quite dangerous and indeed forbidden by his parents.

Years later, when it became clear that Lagidze had a talent for drawing and when he himself gradually realized that art was what he enjoyed most and that it was his passion in life, he fell particularly in love with wandering through the labyrinthine streets of his familiar panorama. During these long walks, he would often make quick sketches to retain his impressions, but he was never attracted to the idea of painting from nature. These impressions gradually began to accumulate as 'raw' materials and would in the end be turned into the artistic compositions that Lagidze constructed in his studio. And this is still how he works, even now: in his studio and mostly at night, under electric light. Obviously, when an artist isolates himself from his environment and is only surrounded by paint, brushes and the other tools of his trade, and when he needs no nature to draw from and instead transfers his own

Garden
Oil on canvas, 60 × 80
1987
Property of the artist's family



thoughts onto the canvas—as a result his works are based on his rich experience of interaction with nature and the environment, as well as precipitated impressions accumulated from daily life and the desire to endlessly research the secrets of creativity.

In the 1910s, alongside the development of abstract painting, artists began to face an invariable problem linked to art: the problem of space. This required a new approach, for when one draws ‘nothing’ on a surface, that is to say when one does not seek to imitate reality, when we do not base ourselves upon the classic i.e. academic foundations of composition (the three dimensions, geometrical perspective, *chiaroscuro* and so on)—the artist can unintentionally become equal with the surface and ‘remain’ on it. Flatness conditions the ornateness and decorativeness that could be very harmful to art—or indeed deadly, since space is the essence of art.

However, what should also be remembered here is the fact that imitating reality had earlier been rejected in such a way that recognizable objects continued to be depicted on the surface. The authors of such works, however, the founders of the Modernist view, refused to depict three-dimensional surfaces through geometrical perspective and instead underlined the importance of the surface as a basic foundation of painting. They ‘revealed’ it. This was why, at that time, when art was evolving and steps were being made, especially by the Symbolists, decorativeness became a positive aspect of art, since it opposed the imitation of three-dimensional reality. Therefore, it should not be surprising that, at the initial stage of Modernism and in parallel with decorative-

Old House
Oil on canvas, 25 × 18
1987
Private collection



ness, ornaments occupy an ‘honourable place’ that has nothing to do with common mimesis. This question was radically posed by Wilhelm Worringer in his renowned work ‘Abstraction and Empathy’,⁶ in which ornament is made to equal the requirements of abstraction. The words of the author represent the basis of true art, unlike the mere desire to imitate reality, and when abstract artworks established themselves as an achieved task, artists faced the problem of depicting space in a new way, and the decorativeness and ornateness began to be considered as ‘harmful’.

A ‘fear’ of ornamental forms that only express an outer beauty that externally can be expressive yet internally inexpressive⁷ enriched the ways by which space could be depicted on a surface. David Kakabadze (1889-1952) worked both practically and theoretically on this question of depicting space in new ways that were more relevant to this dynamic era, since he believed, like Leonardo, that relief creates the soul of an artwork.⁸

At first glance, Levan Lagidze’s works are quite planar in form. We see a wall-like rectangle whose surface is dominated by either a single colour or in other cases by no more than a few. These colours are sometimes

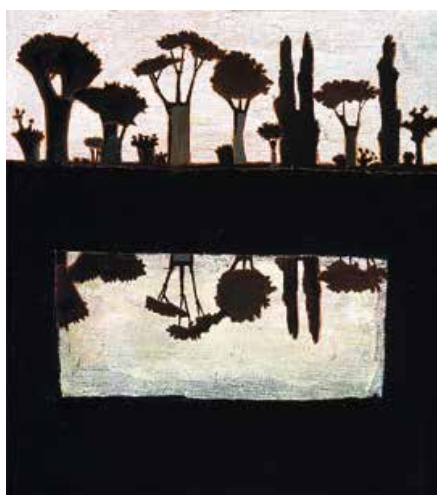
Reflection

Oil on canvas, 45 × 40
1987
Private collection

quite sharp, quickly catching the eye, and sometimes more reserved, almost achromatic. When approaching this 'flat' surface, we sink into a deep sea of colours and forms—and, more importantly, into their movements.

Nothing is still in Lagidze's paintings, and it is this movement that allows the surface of his works to breathe.

This movement on the surface of the canvas can take several forms: it can progress upwards from below, from left to right, from one side to the other, from the centre or indeed from any point outwards—or vice versa. And it almost always, with very few exceptions, progresses vertically or horizontally, along the frame. (Lagidze deliberately ignored this principle in the following paintings: *Moonlight*, 1999; *Europe*, 2004; *Landscape*, 2004; *A City in the Mountains*, 2007; and *Europe*, 2007). Sections, lines and colours come and go. The eye follows this movement and discovers the richness of the palette. Upon approaching the painting, this movement sometimes seems to sink from the surface of the canvas down into the depths, or sometimes to rise from the lowest layers up towards the viewer. It is this 'commuting' that enables Lagidze's objectless art, conventionally protected by its academic rectangular frame, to possess an inner dynamism that protects it from decorativeness. It is by this means that the artist makes us travel around the complex worlds of his paintings. The effect of this movement is often achieved by his use of colourful sections and his introduction of an element of dissonance to the rhythm of their alteration. If we pay closer attention, we can easily see that Lagidze always maintains a perfect balance—but his balance rests upon much more complicated techniques than mere mirror symmetry. From one end to another of the paintings' upper and lower sections, colour often contradicts colour, and shape often opposes shape; but this opposition sometimes resonates with other points of the composition, sometimes completely unexpected ones, and it is the resonance that Lagidze achieves that strengthens the sense of order in his paintings. As for the 'battle scenes' that take place on the paintings' surface and their depths, these give the composition its inner dynamism.



Thanks to these techniques, Lagidze gives his paintings an ever-greater degree of movement that goes beyond their frame.

Garden
Oil on canvas, 20 × 20
1988
Private collection



In the early 20th century, and despite never having been on an aeroplane, David Kakabadze painted bird's-eye views of Imeretian landscapes. Yet his depictions of nature rely upon the modern, contemporary language of the city: Kakabadze saw and depicted landscapes as surfaces covered in colourful rectangular forms.

Among the works of Paul Klee (1879-1940), we can often encounter paintings that depict the 'shapes' of the modern city. Klee was inspired by the rhythms and the silhouettes of the city's buildings, their facades, their towers, their gardens, gates, windows and balconies, and used them as a basis for the pictorial and graphic geometric abstractions that he created.⁹

Piet Mondrian (1872-1944) developed his theory of Neo-plasticism in a modern environment and matched it to the heartbeat of the megapolis, creating geometric compositions full of the movement of jazz rhythms and of Broadway, Manhattan's most dynamic street.

In his studio, Levan Lagidze 'wanders around' through the landscapes that he has created and shares his thoughts with us with his brush. And yet they all tell the same story, they all stand on the same basis, they all belong to the same compositional order, one whose regularity mirrors that of the décor of the ancient glazed tiles that cover the walls

Road
Oil on canvas, 25 × 18
1988
Private collection



of the Djoser step pyramid. Nothing is surprising here, since everything is led by a desire to reveal the essential—to reach for the skeleton, a desire to solve the riddle of an eternal regularity.

One of the beneficial characteristics of the modern metropolis is that the mega-museums to which it is home enable us to quickly travel through time. For example, visitors of New York's Metropolitan Museum can move straight from the Egyptian to the Modern period—and in doing so might be astonished by the similarity between the fragment of the third millennium BC wall tiling of the Djoser pyramid and Klee's pictorial abstractions.

In the pyramid of Djoser, and notably in the pharaoh's burial chamber, the walls are decorated with greenish-blue glazed faïence tiles, imitating the reed screens that covered the walls of his palace. Symbolically, these walls are also associated with the reed beds in which it was thought the pharaoh's life would continue after his death. Despite the enormous gap in time that separates them, the greenish-blue decorative tiles on display at the Metropolitan Museum resemble both Klee's 1925 'May Picture'—an abstract painting from his Magic Squares series that, like a mosaic, is covered in pictorial squares that continue to move even beyond the painted surface—as well as Lagidze's greenish-bluish compositions whose sections, so characteristically of his style, resonate with each other.

Labyrinths are one of the central paradigms of post-modern literature and philosophy. It is no coincidence that writers, theorists and philosophers such as Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986), Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), Gabriel García Márquez (1927-2014), Umberto Eco (1932-2016) and Roland Barthes (1915-1980), among others, sought to place them at the centre of our attention. The multiplicity of labyrinths in Lagidze's art therefore proves that his work is a response to and an expression of the period. If we follow this idea, we could assume that it is the labyrinth that constitutes the primary ornament of the post-modern epoch as well as its composition.



Landscape
 Oil on canvas, 20 × 27
 1988
 Property of the artist's family

Lagidze's compositions are diverse since the artist himself poses many pictorial challenges, but these compositions can be divided into two main groups.

Firstly, these are compositions dominated by right-angled surfaces of a particular tonality surrounded by lines and segments of different sizes and construction, yet all gathered around a main coloured field. These are relatively centric compositions. The composition is encircled by a frame within which it develops, creating a more intimate impression. Here, the notion of centre and surrounding environment is much stronger, resulting in an association with home and comfort. The area of the composition is full of different paths, yet the composition is not strictly encircled and remains capable of an outwards development; nor would it be possible to define a precise centre, yet the eye continues to rove around the middle of the picture.

The second group of Lagidze's compositions are fully covered in small sections. Here, nothing is circumscribed and it is as if the composition continues to develop beyond the painting's surface. These compositions are more spacious. They are often dominated by a single colour and the notion of horizon is quite significant. They give one the feeling of an environment, of a wide space filled with constant movement in different directions. The paths are not circumscribed by the composition's frame, but go beyond it.

The first group of compositions could be divided into a number of sub-groups. In the second group, however, such sub-groups are less obvious.

The city became one of Lagidze's main themes early on, as his final graduation project, 'Tbilisoba', at the Art Academy proves. Tbilisoba, the annual celebration of Tbilisi's foundation, was only established in 1979, yet Lagidze had already completed his wide panorama of the city by 1981.

The composition depicts Tbilisi's historic centre, but paints a more collective picture rather than a specific place. This is a painting whose

Macondo
Oil on canvas, 60 × 65
1992
Property of the artist's family



multiple layers, views and figures show Tbilisi's houses with their glazed loggias and balconies, its hills and slopes, the cliff by the river Mtkvari with houses growing on top of it, all against a background of hills. This is typical Tbilisi, with carpets hanging from the balconies, a human silhouette in the window and the usual life of Tbilisoba, during which everything acquires a theatrical mood (even nowadays). Dancing and theatre takes place in specially designated areas, and farmers sell their produce from impromptu stalls. This painting reveals the artist's panoramic view and his mastery of the skills needed to build a composition and refine its details—skills that he acquired during his student years. This painting also proves that the author has conceptualized the experience of the classic masters, among whom Pieter Brueghel (1525/1530-1569) occupies a special place for Lagidze. He copied one of Brueghel's



Winter

Oil on canvas, 30 × 35
1992

Property of the artist's family

paintings during his studies and even now still remembers that this work made a special contribution to the development of his professional style and artistic view. We could also mention Piero della Francesca (1415-1492), whose sculpted figures, rhythmic alteration of the colour of their clothing and, more importantly, 'engineering' of composition visibly influenced the artist.

Lagidze's works clearly reassure us of the fact that, to him, painting is a process of interaction with the universe, of in-depth research of the basic harmony that ties the nearest to the most distant surrounding spaces. It could be said that this represents the world as he sees it, both up close as well as in the distance, and that he is searching for the common regularity between them. This is why an environment and a space that expresses no more than the daily bustle of reality for many are a source of endless discovery to him.

Although expressive, Lagidze's brushstrokes are much more than the mere touch of a brush. Despite the fact that his art is limited to oil painting, his pictures also feature an element of graphic drawing. He achieves this by painting 'threads in relief', as if drawn on the canvas, with a palette-knife (as if scratched into the layers of paint) or a thin brush. These 'threads' sculpt areas between which the lower layers of paint (colours) are revealed. This complicated pictorial system reflects the movements of the artist's hands across the canvas, and its multitude of layers makes it absolutely impossible to copy. Such an original expression of 'graphic art' defines the stylistic diversity of Lagidze's paintings.

The quadrangular fragments and their alternation on the surface of Lagidze's paintings sometimes remind us of houses or windows. They sometimes resemble a real urban panorama (as stated by the painting's title) or a space or a horizon (as the title also indicates). They maintain a wealth of multilayered information, similar to windows, houses and the environment in which human beings live. Compositionally speaking, the lines of these quadrangular fragments create the orderly and internally dynamic rhythm that is so characteristic of Lagidze's personal style.



The Last Supper
Oil on canvas, 90 × 60
1995
Private collection

There must be a sense of comfort in or an advantage to being within and ‘manipulating’ the boundaries of all the laws, even though not created by oneself, but maintaining them in the order in which we found them. Another vivid example that springs to mind of someone who enjoyed such a privilege is the American Expressionist Mark Rothko (1903-1970). Topics do not change in his artworks, shapes repeat themselves, his signature is always clearly visible and reliable—but what causes real amazement is the diversity that he locks within his boundaries, the variations of his respect for the same order. Endlessly multiple paths emerge from these boundaries, along with new nuances and even rules. The artist is always making new discoveries, maintaining precision and not destroying his findings, never deviating from the path he has found, and yet always remaining in the process of discovery and maintaining the possibility of constant renewal.

Having one’s own signature is a great privilege for an artist. It springs from the internal world and from the processes that, although they



Expectations
Oil on canvas, 27 × 24
1997
Private collection

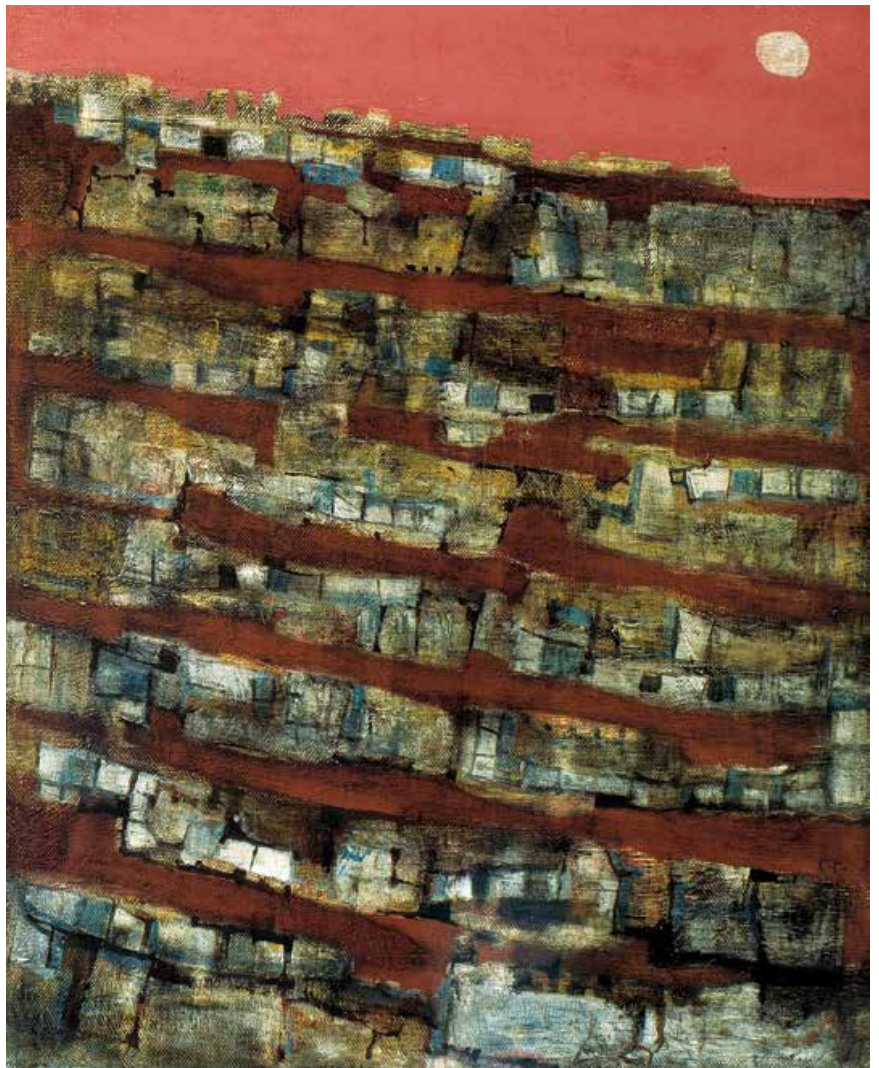
form the necessary basis for the production of artworks, remain impossible to completely comprehend and control. Artists who have found their own style and who have managed to remain loyal to it by creating many variations within its boundaries are not very common. In this case, what is meant are not only the formal ways of expression but also the themes the artist chooses to depict. And although Lagidze's paintings are formal in character and although their content cannot be clearly read (in the usual understanding of the term), the basic shapes to which the artist remains devoted could be considered as his 'theme', as the 'content' of his work. Lagidze has this privilege. Thanks to its sharpness, his signature is well known to all—and yet he creates endless variations within its boundaries; and the more he works, the more an endless number of tasks keeps emerging in front of him within these boundaries.

Lagidze's paintings have relatively general titles: composition, landscape, etc. Other titles are frequently linked to colours: red field, red landscape, red city, white city, blue mountain, blue composition, blue city, black, etc. Sometimes, his titles are relatively specific: a house, a fortress, a house on a cliff, old city, old house, a wall, a village in the mountains, city, trees, moonlight, autumn fields, vineyard, sunset, autumn meadows, a mountain, a city in the mountains, a tree in my garden, a view from the train, after the April rain, a September evening, Christmas Eve, space. He occasionally uses even more specific titles such as Europe, Florence and so on.

These are obviously conditional titles, but they do reveal the fact that Lagidze often returns to the same topics, since it is these topics that give him the basis he needs from which to generalize. Through the titles, we can also 'see' which colours inspire him the most, and along with all this we can 'read' in them the eternal poetry of living and everyday living that serves as such an endless source of inspiration to him.

He loves watching the landscape from above. He looks at it as if from a higher perspective, one in which all the elements of earth and sky are equally important, one in which every detail contains in itself the expression of wholeness. (Private communication, December 2021)

Moonlight
Oil on canvas, 80 × 60
1998
Private collection



However, in some cases it is difficult to say if he is looking down upon a landscape from above, or if he is facing it, gazing across it towards the horizon. In some of his compositions, even both angles become possible. This is how a house, a wall or something else (the micro world) that the artist sees from the front merges into the wider angle of the distant landscape (the macro world).

The dimensions of Lagidze's paintings demonstrate that he tends to always use canvases of more or less the same size: either large (130×105), medium (73×60) or small (35×32). In some cases, however, he chooses a different, more horizontal format (e.g. 'White House', 1997; 'Blue Mountain', 2004; etc.).

The titles that we have mentioned above also resonate with the works that Lagidze produced before his abstract compositions.



As we have mentioned, Levan Lagidze is a Georgian artist of the 1980s. The members of this generation graduated from the Art Academy in the early 1980s (Levan in 1981), i.e. in the Soviet Union and at a time when nobody expected it to disappear. Historic events of international importance would, however, very soon develop and bring about the collapse of the Soviet as well as the Communist system followed by the independence of Georgia. Lagidze's was therefore the first generation of artists to not only witness but also take part in the restoration of the country's freedom and independence. But in addition to these positive aspects, this generation also went through a number of painful processes such as revolutionary change, war and economic and social problems. All this found expression in both their daily life, private and social, and in their art. But despite the difficulties, and since the fight for independence was still very strong, their art was affected by many novelties and events of great importance, sharp and at the same time very diverse and noticeable for every layer of society. This generation of artists—often referred to as the last of the Soviet Union and the first of independent Georgia—was distinguished by the great number of individual artists with different views and signatures conditioned by the important processes brought on by this era of change.

Perhaps the most important of these was the fact that, after having been kept closed for decades, the door was finally reopened and it was once again possible, despite the difficulties, to travel abroad and to observe events directly and even to take part in them. At the same time, hitherto forbidden and closed literary, historical and religious archives

White House

Oil on canvas, 19 × 37

1997

Property of the artist's family



The Last Supper
 Oil on canvas, 35 × 32
 1997
 Property of the artist's family

and sources of information became newly accessible, including information on ongoing developments abroad, and notably artistic ones. The range of subject matter widened and research became more diverse.

Levan Lagidze was a distinct figure of this era and was respected for his talent, professionalism and energetic social initiatives. He sought to achieve positive change in the art world and was an active member of civil society. Between 1983 and 1987, it was Lagidze who drove the establishment of a creative studio at the Artists' House and became its director (this Artists' House, at 7 Rustaveli Avenue, was destroyed in 1991 during the civil war), and who between 1986 and 1989 was head of the youth section of the Georgian Union of Artists.

A few years later, however, Lagidze decided to stop his involvement in such initiatives and instead to completely devote himself to his private creative research.

In the art that Lagidze produced in the 1980s, we encounter works created in traditional genres: landscapes (both urban and rural), portraiture (including self-portraits) and religious compositions ('The Prodigal Son', 'Banishment from the Garden of Eden', 'The Last Supper'). Georgia regaining her independence can in general also be felt in the themes of artistic spheres. Painting religious themes, for example, was no longer forbidden—quite the contrary: interest in religion and 'turning towards it' was becoming increasingly strong, with many young Georgians taking up the study of Georgian history and religion. It was simply a way of detaching themselves from reality and its tiresome and sometimes repulsive themes. In terms of shape, Lagidze's works from that period display a tangible influence of Georgian frescoes, and they could also be said to have inspired the transparency of paint that is so characteristic of his earlier works.

Yet despite the precision of their themes, Lagidze's earlier works noticeably tend towards a certain formalism. Conditional shapes and colours reveal the artist's inclination to generalize; and it is not surprising that the structure of his earlier works can be read in the depths of his current compositions. The world view that they reveal, the notion of rhythm, the palette, the depth of colour and so on have been refined

ჟამი
Oil on canvas, 110 × 90
1996
Private collection



over the years, and have finally established themselves as his signature style of compositional painting.

But there are distinguishing characteristics as well. For example, Lagidze's early works reveal the texture of canvas through the thin layers of paint. Another distinguishing feature of this period is that he signs his works with his initials, L. L. (Nowadays his works are not signed. Instead, he sometimes adds a logo that he created for his own gallery in the lower right-hand corner of the painting.)

During the 1980s and 1990s, Lagidze painted houses, trees or other images approximately according to a same principle. Biomorphic shapes predominate in his work, mostly inspired by nature, but in their form and contours he gives them a certain angularity. Among his compositions we see views of Tbilisi and its houses with balconies hanging over the river Mtkvari, once again proof of Lagidze's inextinguishable interest in and love for the city as an idea (content) and as a structure (shape).



In his current works, the texture of the canvas remains invisible, hidden underneath many layers, but the origins of the idea of using ‘quad-rangular’ sections to construct a composition may lie in the ‘weaving’ of the surface of the canvas and its cell-like sections (akin to pixels), which remain almost totally ‘naked’ in his earlier works. In addition, these compositions already include works created by blending the two different points of perception—that of a ‘house’ and that of a ‘horizon’, an environment depicted from near and from afar. A certain panoramic view is also revealed at this stage.

Therefore, despite the compositional ‘visibility’ of his earlier works, one can still feel that Lagidze thought in an abstract way from the very beginning, and that it was not the narration or the content that were important to him but the form of expression instead. He found his language along this path. He found his Macondo!

Nowadays, Lagidze paints cities and their labyrinths that exist in his fantasy. However, just as Macondo had a prototype—Aracataca—Lagidze’s cities also have their origins in his own city. In his earlier landscapes, houses hanging above the river Mtkvari either disappear or sink into new geometrical systems or numerous brush strokes. But their presence is still implied.

More importantly, in both his early and his later work we can sense that his art is conditioned by internal necessity, for his poetic view is revealed in everything, including his approach to what he sees or depicts. Such artists are always formalists, and they never describe but instead research the ‘ornament’ that expresses their attitudes.

Lagidze speaks a contemporary language and his abstractions correspond exactly to the current times. This is also revealed by the fact that, when we look at his work, we ask ourselves whether they are abstractions or not—particularly since when we succeed in seeing them in depth, we can even read a story in them. Postmodernism began to question everything.

მთა

Oil on canvas, 24 × 27

1990s

Private collection



House
Oil on canvas, 35 × 30
2003
Private collection

These works are the expression of a period when movement was frequent not only on roads but also in a wider space, when people commuted in every direction simultaneously, when the factor of the existence of time itself became questionable, when a labyrinth could become an ornament expressing time—yet differ from the classic labyrinth, since its outlines lack graphic sharpness.

'... He looked tired but happy, saying
That he will draw a maze in the desert and return...'
Pelontine. *Blue Desert*.¹⁰

Artists nowadays no longer write declarations and manifestos. And indeed there is no need to, either. But Levan Lagidze has published a small book called *Without Me* in which he shares the thoughts of a fictional character called Pelontine with the wider public. In this book, the reader does not come across theoretical assumptions linked to shapes or general artistic tasks. This book is a compilation of thoughts that emerged from a perception of the environment or of life itself, sinking into it (as he likes to put it himself), observing it, all expressed through words as abstract as the artist's paintings. But this small book, which was published in 2015, could be considered as a manifesto by Lagidze, as although it says nothing about art itself, it says everything about everything else, but not the rest. This book reflects what the artist's fantasy feeds off in general, what thoughts he 'follows' when building his labyrinths. He sometimes watches fields and vineyards, follows the horizon, travels in different times and distances, follows shadows and light, moves from one season to another, is present there where even smells acquire 'his own' colour, step by step, from sky to sky, from road to road and from word to word. He seeks out and describes spaces in which he is no longer present...

It could be described as a postmodern artistic 'manifesto'—one with abstract thoughts that do not emphasize anything but in which thinking as a process is poetically expressed.

Colour must be the first thing that attracts the eye and the attention of the viewer willing to observe an artwork. Accordingly, it is not surprising

Blue House
Oil on canvas, 30 × 35
2005
Property of the artist's family



that nothing else in art has been written about as much as colour—by theoreticians of art, by artists themselves, by scientists, writers and philosophers. The theory of colour is a separate world full of romanticism yet incomplete. Moreover, everything that we read about colours seems to exist in abstract isolation and is perceived independently from the colours themselves, since it is impossible to talk about them precisely and convincingly. They constantly slip through our fingers and cannot tolerate specificity. In his *Colour Sphere* of 1810 (published the same year as the *Theory of Colours* by Johann Wolfgang Goethe, 1749-1832), the artist Philip Otto Runge (1777-1810) doubts the existence of a tight link between theory and practice. He wrote to his brother that when he was working as an artist, he would forget his own theories—but these were the two worlds in which he was equally interested. ¹¹

In his textbook *Interaction of Color*, Joseph Albers writes: 'If one says "Red" (the name of a colour) and there are 50 people listening, it can be expected that there will be 50 reds in their minds. And one can be sure that all these reds will be different. [...] Though there are innumerable colours—shades and tones—in our daily vocabulary, there are only around 30 colour names.' ¹²

Accordingly, it is easy to conclude that the standard names of colours simply do not let us read, let alone depict, all the many nuances that exist in any single tone. No matter how much we talk about the colourful diversity of Lagidze's compositions, the harmonious euphony of basic and 'adjacent' colours, the 'correctness' of the painting's colouring—or,



Florence
Oil on canvas, 35 × 30
2004
Private collection

as the artist puts it himself, their convincingness and so on—we will never achieve a suitable degree of precision, we will never be able to ‘open up’ his art with words, and we will never be able to explain the secret of his colour palette. Red, blue, green, pink, grey... Repeating the names of colours serves no purpose. We can only say that the colours in Lagidze’s paintings coexist in harmony, and that the more closely one observes his paintings, the more one becomes fascinated by those nuances which one discovers on their surfaces or in their depths; and what is perhaps more important is the fact that the complexity of their light is very often absolutely fascinating. Lagidze has the skill to maintain extreme simplicity, to ‘turn’ within the range of the same and almost achromatic colours or to ‘glaze’ the surface of his canvas with colours so shining and diverse that it might resemble a Byzantine mosaic. Another source of amazement are the carefully arranged strokes of different colours of paint along the edge of his compositions, so unexpected and as if ‘brought’ from ‘another’ harmony and merged with the picture’s dominant colour.

It requires huge courage and mastery to subject oneself totally to the square format of a canvas, to not ‘reject’ it, to not try to ‘destroy’ it or illusorily transform it, but instead to underline the existence of this surface throughout the entire construction of the painting, to ‘remain’ within its frame and reach for such a wealth of colour, to not be ‘scared’ of this wealth, since Lagidze’s palette is often so rich that it stands on that line beyond which kitsch is born. And although Postmodernism has internalized kitsch, it remains unacceptable in this framework of ‘pure’ art. In this regard, we could ‘understand’ Clement Greenberg (1909-1994). The critic fought a desperate battle against kitsch, but in his last interview he remarked upon his famous work *The Avant-garde and Kitsch*: ‘I made kitsch the enemy when the enemy was really the middlebrow, not kitsch. [...] The real threat to high culture was middlebrow taste.’¹³ These words might reassure us of the fact that Postmodernism has ‘tamed’ him somewhat, yet he could still not overcome the unacceptability of kitsch. Supposedly, this was because there, in the ‘pure’ art, as we refer to it, compositional art (whose apologist Greenberg was), kitsch is clearly completely unacceptable.

The pictorial impressiveness of Lagidze’s works is mostly due to the tex-

Fence
Oil on canvas, 50 × 65
2005
Private collection



ture of their surfaces, which in most cases is in relief, but this relief is very difficult to comprehend or see when looking at reproductions. This pictorial impressiveness is mostly lost when his works are reproduced.

As we mentioned above, the square lines or 'bricks' with which Lagidze composes are made up of both brush strokes as well as graphic lines. His brush strokes are very expressive, but his equally expressive lines seem to 'tame' them and place them in a certain system.

The main sections are aligned in order, vertically or horizontally, making the sense of movement not chaotic but continuous.

It is the lines he draws with his palette knife that give Lagidze's compositions their stylistic richness. They do not alternate monotonously, they break somewhere and then continue, and these exhalations bring his compositions to life. This shows us even more clearly how strong the paintings' improvisational origins are. And although it may seem paradoxical, we become reassured that the firm experience and precision of thought and therefore the process that these compositions represent is not chaotic but sequential. This is a path along which the artist slowly progresses through observation, one small step at a time.

The most important conclusion of our analysis of Lagidze's work is that his art combines a modern view that corresponds to the most recent trends with a certain 'traditionality' based upon a devotion to the ancient basis of painting and its eternal ways of drawing and construction.



Autumn Fields
Oil on canvas, 46 × 56
2007
Private collection

In his *Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction*, Christopher Butler states that ‘Many distinguished writers like Eco have some very obvious postmodernist elements, but they also have a number of more enduring conservative features, which indeed help to place them more nearly at the centre of the culture, as it is very likely to wish to remember itself.’¹⁴

Lagidze undoubtedly belongs to this category of artists. His artistic technique and expressive language make him an avant-gardist, but one who always remains firmly devoted to the classic basis in art. When he talks about paint, colour or composition, the listener cannot help but think of masters from different periods—e.g. Paul Cézanne, whom Lagidze considers as a constant model—due to their ‘convincingness’ when expressing their own beliefs with the honesty that is so characteristic of them. Lagidze is their successor and remains true to the legacy he inherited from them. This is how Postmodernism becomes merged with classic, academic origins.

And yet, Lagidze is a postmodern artist. He is a postmodern narrator who creates texts by pictorial means. As Roland Barthes (1915-1980) mentioned, myths can be created by any means, since ‘Every object in the world can pass from a closed, silent existence to an oral state, open to appropriation by society... Pictures become a kind of writing as soon as they are meaningful...’¹⁵

The city with its streets (labyrinths) is an important theme of Modernism. The city gave birth to Modernism in all its manifestations. Postmodernism then ‘mixed’ everything up, erased sharp differences, ‘mixed up’ roads and ‘did not care’ much about establishing new postulates, sometimes even refusing them. But it brought the theme of labyrinths to the fore.

The labyrinth is a central element of postmodernist philosophy which, according to Eco, has neither centre nor periphery nor exit. It is an endless structure.¹⁶ One that always gives us a choice. It is neither completely built, nor does it follow a rational understanding. This is no longer a traditional, classic labyrinth. When rules and laws are being rejected and no specific result is being achieved, this process is ‘filled with special meaning’.

Remembrance
Oil on canvas, 120 × 110
2007
Georgian Museum of Fine Arts



In the era of Modernism, any kind of game (let us equate the artist's serious work to a game) was played according to certain rules. This implied consequentiality, and by playing a game a person would acquire certain laws. These could have been building cubes. Nowadays the most popular building toy is Lego, which can give rise to endless variations. Yet it is not the rules of the game that are brought to the fore, but the free game itself, whose rules are drawn up as the game progresses.¹⁷

Lagidze's attitude towards classical principles conditions his arrangement of compositions on a surface, but the eternal code that exists in every single one of his works gives one the possibility of endlessly linking them to each other, and even if they gather and merge into a single imaginary joint composition, it would be difficult to say where the author's thoughts intersect and where the paintings come into contact with each other. The potential freedom of this combination creates an isolated hyperreality, a pluralistic picture of the universe which in reality is unreal. This is how Lagidze's landscapes unite into one single landscape. ('Landscape' is a geographical and artistic term that postmodern philosophy actively uses to express the multidimensional aspect of the structure of human thought.)

City in the Mountains

Oil on canvas, 130 × 105
2012
Private collection



David Kakabadze was the first Georgian artist to have developed abstraction in his art. Although he created his abstract works in Paris instead of Tbilisi, his artistic achievements are nevertheless part of the history of both Georgian and world art. Over the years that followed, however, the pursuit of abstraction in Georgia was stopped and indeed eliminated by the Socialist Realism that was imposed by the Soviet authorities. It was not until the late 1950s and early 1960s that a new phase of Georgian abstract art began, at a time when a measure of freedom was restored to artists by Nikita Khrushchov's (1894-1971) policy of 'thaw' and when a trickle of information on Western art was able to cross the Iron Curtain. Although abstract art was mostly experimented with and pursued 'underground' and was therefore not granted any official recognition, these efforts would bear fruit years later. At this stage, abstract art in Georgia was being developed by Aleksandre Bandzeladze (1927-1992) and Jibson Khundadze (1927-). In the 1980s, a group of Art Academy students were able to gather in Bandzeladze's studio, which was in those days an expression of their approaching freedom. In 1987, the discovery of the abstract works of Bandzeladze and his informal 'school' of students was an event of great public significance. Exhibitions of Georgian non-objective art were first held in Moscow and later in Tbilisi. At that time, nobody was fighting against abstract art. Lagidze, in those years, was still finding inspiration in his surroundings. He was not pursuing abstraction in order to 'break through' formal tasks directly, but his observations of nature and of his surroundings naturally conditioned his path towards abstraction.

Landscape
Oil on canvas, 75 × 130
2015
Private collection



As a result, and characteristically for the postmodern era, Lagidze's compositions both are and yet are not abstractions since they include more than a single story line of information and are expressions of the artist's thoughts.

At the turn of the 21st century, Levan Lagidze put his research behind him and began to paint contemporary abstract compositions. These are very diverse, both in terms of compositional 'constituent elements' and colour, and each one of them is a part of a larger process. This is why, when they are united upon a single surface, and despite each being an individual painting, these compositions create a unity, which despite its own completeness is 'ready' to be combined with other compositions. Thus, one vast labyrinth is created—a single large composition that is evolving in every direction, one not governed by a story but by a thought process, one that depicts a composition of the latest era—loaded with frequented movements.

Dr Ketevan Kintsurashvili



LEVAN LAGIDZE

Untitled

Mystery
Oil on canvas, 80 × 60
2005
Private collection

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