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TRADITIONAL WOOD CARVINGS BY GEORGIAN ARTIST VLADIMER VEPKHVADZE

Vladimer Vepkhvadze, a well-known master of Georgia in the field of artistic carving today (Figure 1), was born in 1955 in the city of Borjomi in the family of a geography teacher Natalya Vasilievna Buchuguri (1929-2020) and a professional landscape painter, teacher of art disciplines Ruben Pavlovich Vepkhvadze (1926-2006). The father of the family graduated from the Art Institute in Krasnodar, and became the first artistic representative of the dynasty, which today includes three generations.

True, Ruben Pavlovich adopted some creative skills (Figure 2), in turn, from his own father, a specialist in the field of construction, which later came in handy for both of his sons. Namely, to the elder Otari (now a well-known painter and ceramist of Georgia, a teacher at the Apollon Kutateladze Tbilisi Academy of Arts) (Figure 3) and the younger Vladimer (a master of authentic folk carving), when they began to engage in interior design. Given that Ruben was the chief artist of the Borjomi region and a teacher of art disciplines in the second half of the 20th century, a kaleidoscope of all creative events and achievements of the region, as well as orders from his father and his entourage, passed before the eyes of children throughout their childhood.

However, the creative vision and talent development of the original young man Vladimer was also greatly influenced in terms of the formation of tastes and passions by summer trips to his mother's relatives in the mountains of Gudauri. There, at the village of Khada, in the village of Iuho, where Vladimer went every year from the age of 6 and later on school holidays, he got acquainted with the work of the Georgian folk master in the field of woodcarving, quite famous in

his area, Berdia Sisauri. Impressed by the carved traditional savardzeli trestle beds, which are close to Turkish and Iranian ottomans, decorated with Orthodox symbols, the boy wanted to try to carve something himself.



Figure 1. Photo of Vladimir Vepkhvadze in the Khevsurian national costume during the production of Nana Janelidze's film "Georgia in a Drop of Dew", taken against the backdrop of the author's carvings by his brother Otari Vepkhvadze. 1998
Products by V. Vepkhvadze in the background with the author's monogram.

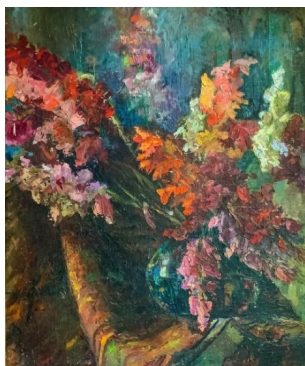


Figure 2. Vepkhvadze Ruben Pavlovich. Gladiolus. Canvas, oil. Second half of the 1980s. Private collection.



Figure 3. Vepkhvadze Otari Rubenovich. Irises. Oil on canvas. 1996/1997.

An experienced craftsman, in order to interest the young talent, suggested that Vladimer make the handle of a wooden spoon from three thin rings with the words that if he overcomes this task, he will be able to make all the other tricky patterns. The young man himself made an instrument for himself – a lancet, and methodically set to work.

The first success was inspiring: the old master assured that by making such a handle, the young man would get more complex work. These first successes, made at the age of 8-9, inspired me and gave me an incentive to try other creative experiments. The next task was the manufacture of a wooden chain, which required not only perseverance and diligence in performance, but also trained ingenuity, developed a creative approach to the performance of works. At the age of 14-15, young Volodya already gave such crafts of his own work to his girls of the heart, which invariably became a pleasant moment for the birth of any relationship.

During this period, he was also very fond of tennis, in the field of which, under the guidance of the famous athlete Alexander Metreveli, he was able to achieve impressive results and became a master of sports. Having tempered his character and developed even greater discipline and order in his actions, gradually developing his skills individually, the guy came to the choice of the first profession. It is natural that Vladimer entered the specialty "Wood and Metal" of the Department of Applied Arts of the Art College named after Sergo Toidze in Tbilisi, where he studied during 1972-1975, and successfully graduated from it before leaving for the army.

Simultaneously, V. Vepkhvadze, under the influence of his older brother Otari, who received an academic education as an artist of decorative and applied arts in the field of ceramics, began to make small sketches of author's creative works, gradually becoming a truly Georgian folk craftsman. The first in his repertoire were throne-chairs and savardzels (trestle beds with a back), decorated with icon marks and ornamental motifs taken from folk ornamentation.

In addition to the monuments of traditional art of the Khevi lands in Mtiuletia, Vladimer was seriously interested in the culture of Svaneti, where he visited local museums, including those in Zugdidi and Mestia. The master was impressed by the ancient Georgian works of the era of the union with Byzantium, which gave him an impetus to the study of religious texts and the culture of the performance of liturgical objects.

During 1978-1980 V. Vepkhvadze graduated from the State Correspondence People's University of Arts in Moscow with a degree in film actor. Developed empathy, creative sensitivity to deep spiritual searches, at that time coexisted in the author along with the search for a mission to serve people, for which the artist went to Estonia for higher education. Studying at the University of Tartov with a degree in Traumatology and Sports Medicine, he had the opportunity not only, like Michelangelo Buonarotti, to study the entire anatomy of a person in all its finest details, but also to see enough of European architecture and art.

Together with his brother Otari, who came to visit him, Vladimer visited Jurmala, Riga, Dzintari. These cities at that time were places of pilgrimage for artists from all over the Soviet Union, since the best pro-European oriented visiting plein-air were then held in the Baltic States. There you could breathe more freely and there was no feeling of closed borders. Thus, images of polymorphic creatures began to appear in Vladimer's mind, in whose features the ancient, timeless features of the cultures of the East and West were intertwined.

A characteristic example of the search of those years was the askundzhi (griffin), carved between 1980 and 1982 by a master from stone, following the example of Gothic gargoyles. The author experimented, because he was constantly looking for something folk, authentic, original and real in the images.

During his studies, when there were no modern technologies of graphic design yet, Vladimer was often involved in artistic and

design work, which he was good at, because he constantly encountered it on the example of his father's work, who occasionally performed such orders. One of the tasks – a tablet with an ikorshe (human skeleton) – he completed so skillfully and creatively that the rector of the University of Tartu told a talented student that his main vocation is creativity, and with such talent one cannot devote oneself only to medicine.

Upon returning to his homeland, Vladimer with renewed vigor took up the fulfillment of monastic orders, in which he often acted as a donor (donor), working on many of them free of charge, in the name of the holy church and holy art. In the course of the near future, he met with the artistic and technical council (concilium) of the clergy for the fulfillment of orders, where issues of canonicity, features of iconography and symbolism of works were discussed, which became part of his new knowledge and spiritual development. Gradually, monastic orders for doors, royal gates, icon cases, lecterns, benches, thrones (Figure 4), polytrons, proteges, arks of the covenant, Eucharistic sets (chalices and diskos), decoration elements of altar partitions became systemic.

Already in 1988, at the age of Christ, he made a masterpiece throne for the Catholicos of Georgia Ilya II (now kept in the monastery of St. Nino in the village of Poka on the shore of Lake Paravani in Samtskhe-Javakheti) (Figure 5). His pilgrimage to Jerusalem in 1990 had a great influence on the creative vision of the master. There, together with a group of 19 pilgrims, he rethought the texts of Scripture, and found for himself its ever new facets in visible images. Realizing the earthly path of Christ to Calvary, passing through Via Della Rossa with a cross, understanding the essence of the sacrament of the Descent of the Holy Fire, and touching the Holy of Holies – the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, visiting Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Nazareth, Sinai, Vladimer rethought the laws of the Universe and the path of the Universe, he developed his own unique vision of sacred geometry, symmetry and harmony.

During the subsequent thirty years of creative activity, he made entrance doors and altar entrances for ensembles of about ten monasteries (about 50 in total), and more than 20 thrones (Figure 6), polytrons and savardzeli. Since 1995, these orders have already had a systemic character. Basically, he received blessings from the metropolitanates on them, since he had already become a recognized master, whose works were performed with prayer, very subtly, appealing to the Byzantine-Georgian heritage (Figure 7, 8, 9, 11) according to the Greek canons (Figure 10) and were prayed for.



Figure 4. V. Vepkhvadze. Throne for an exhibition in Tbilisi. 1988. Tbilisi, private collection. Oak, walnut. Appeal to the ancient motifs of Lashes-Vani. Decorated on the back with a cross ornament and rosettes with a stylized palm leaf – a symbol of victory, peace and prosperity. The railings are decorated with bunches of vines and solar ornaments. The lower crossbar under the throne is closed by empty solar disks resembling a mirror - an attribute of the Gorgon Medusa, often used in the Middle East and Ancient Greece to scare away evil forces.



Figure 5. V. Vepkhvadze. Throne for Ilya II. 1988. Walnut, beech, chestnut.



Figure 6. V. Vepkhvadze. Throne. Likani. Borjomi district. The motives of the lower rosettes go back to the prototypes of the carving in Melesi. 1989. Beech. The solar signs in this ensemble are complemented by Egyptian, Persian, Greek type palmettes, which are a fan-shaped stylized lotus flower - symbols of divine beauty, spiritual purity, human wisdom and bliss.

forces.

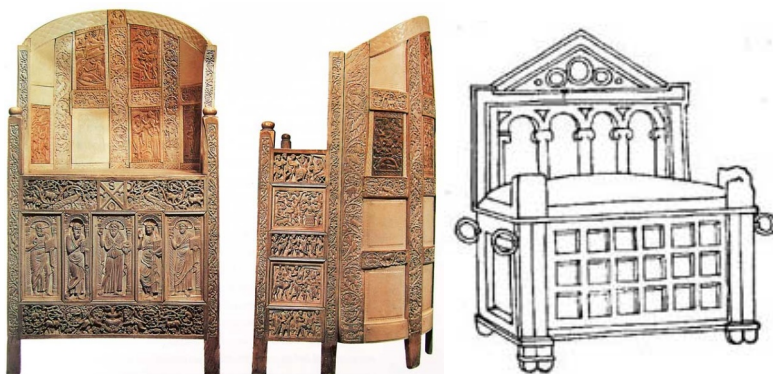


Figure 7. Throne of Maximilian. Byzantium. VI century.

Figure 8. St. Peter's chair. Byzantium. VI century.



Figure 9. Wooden fold of the tenth century. Byzantium.

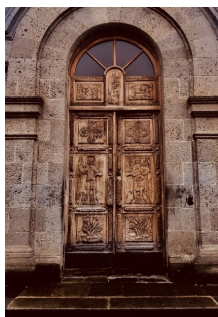


Figure 10. Vladimer Vepkhvadze. Doors. Monastery of St. Mary in Borjomi. Oak. 1998. In tetraconch rosettes of the second tier of doors, traditional motives of artistic wood carving of Georgia from the era of consolidation of the Sakartveli lands are used, with reference to the prototypes from Tsagveri and Mgvinevi. Patron Tamazi Gelashvili.

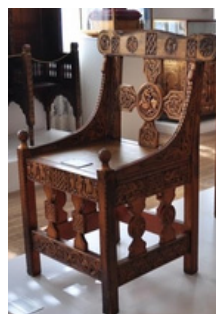


Figure 11. A replica of a Byzantine chair-throne from the Epoch antique shop.

In addition, they felt that traditionalism (Figure 12, 13), for which highly artistic items with primordially Georgian sacral symbols, made purely and with taste, are valued. Vladimer most often does not use inlay, marquetry (backgammon is an exception), in his creations there is only a place for the purity of the sound of the texture of natural wood, decorated only by hand (Figure 12, 13, 14).

Moreover, the iconographic renditions of the master's creations appeal to the plastic modeling of traditional Georgian patterns in the decoration of stone (Figure 15), chasing, as well as autochthonous wood carvings (Figure 16) of the period of consolidation of the Sakartvelian lands. Ensembles of V. Vepkhvadze's works are filled with spirituality and warmth of the hands of the master, who treats the material as if it were animated, releasing the living sacred energy of walnut, oak, boxwood, willow, each of which has a special place in the Holy Scriptures. In addition, in the works of the master there are motifs of birds - the personification of love, a grape crown, service (the cross of St. Nino), etc. (Figure 17).



Figure 14. V. Vepkhvadze. Chest (ark) for flour. About 1 meter wide and 70 cm high. The motifs of the round carving in the center appeal to the decorative solutions from Lachaise-Vani and Ananuri, the rosettes to Rkoni, the rhombic motifs of the ornament are close to the prototypes from Chazhashi. Alder. 1999 On the front facade on the right in the rondal reserve is the author's monogram V. Vepkhvadze – two letters "v" in Georgian.



Figure 15. Stone carving motifs on the facades of traditional Georgian temples. A typical example is at the Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Ananuri fortress, the end of the 17th century.

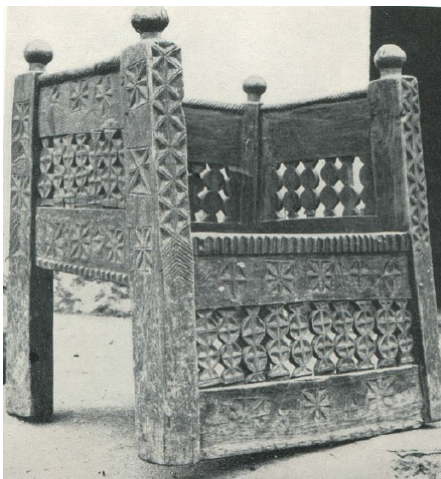


Figure 16. Wooden throne (armchair) from the Mestia Museum. Around the X-XI centuries.

So, in 2003, he began to fulfill orders for the Abastumani Metropolitan Teodere at the Alexander Nevsky Monastery. For this ensemble alone, the artist made a total of several dozen doors, four savardzels, a throne, a lectern, altar doors, including the royal gates. On average, it took him up to 2 months of work to complete one door. This ensemble was followed by an order in 2005 for items to the monastery of St. Nino in Tzagveri, Borjomi region. Basically, the master made altars from walnut with boxwood inserts. And often he also made tools for work himself, although he was given gifts from Leningrad friends and other products.

From 2003 to 2010 V. Vepkhvadze rented a workshop for the manufacture of wooden products in Tbilisi. Therefore, in parallel with liturgical things, he often performed shushabandi (carved decorations of verandas in the Persian-Georgian style), shebeke

(stained-glass windows), frames for icons and portraits in the style of Persian miniatures, parquets, etc.

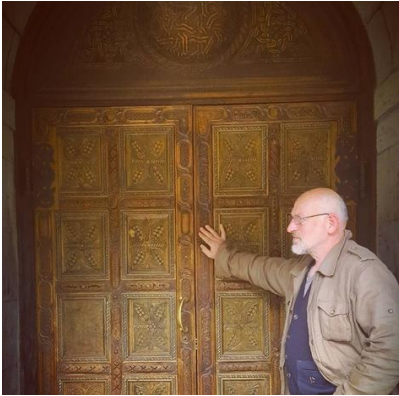


Figure 12. Photo of Vladimer Vepkhvadze near the door of his own work. Panels with fertilization motif. Monastery of Alexander Nevsky, built by order of the Romanovs in Abastumani. Oak. 2005/2006 Financing of patron Tamaz Gelashvili.



Figure 13. V. Vepkhvadze. The cross of St. Nino surrounded by the symbols of the sacrifice of Christ – the vine. Fragment of monastery doors in Tsagveri, Borjomi region. Monastery of St. Nino. Work with the blessing of Metropolitan Seraphim. 2000s.

Thus, in 2005, Vladimer completed an order for entrance central doors with stained-glass windows in a wooden frame (“shebeke”) in the Tbilisi theater “Royal District Theater”.

In the same year, the author made a number of polytrons similar to savardzeli, executed in the traditional way of the Byzantine-Georgian heritage, the back of which was decorated with five iconic hallmarks, entwined around the perimeter with a carved frieze of stylized braided ornament (Figure 18). At the same time, the side rails of the product are decorated with a dense chain of eight-part stars, with a reference to the heavenly bodies, which are crowned with a button-cone in the upper part, and the lower part of the ottoman is decorated with six groin and vegetable rosettes of different filling, between which acanthus winds.



Figure 17. V. Vepkhvadze. A sideboard decorated with carved motifs of birds, which since Byzantine times have become symbols of love, and vines. Borjomi, private collection. 2003, frame – oak, carving – linden.

One of these items, preserved in the private collection of Borjomi, is made of oak. There are references to Mahashi's Sakartvelian decors of the 10th-11th centuries, design elements of autochthonous chair-thrones and chests from Mestia, Gonio, Largvisi, Mtskheta, Koreti, Nakuralesha, Savane. The icon compositions in this work of the master appeal to the style of Lashes-Vani, the rosettes – to Supi Tsyurmsky (Figure 19–24).



Figure 18. V. Vepkhvadze. Politron (savardzeli) in the style of an ottoman, decorated with an S-shaped ornament and iconic hallmarks of the wall, carved rosettes, ornamental elements of the end of the armrests. 2005. Oak.



Figure 19-24. The primary elements of ancient Georgian woodcarving, which inspired me.

Figure 19, 24. Master Shghi. Part of the bas-relief decoration and relief ornament from Lashes-Vani (Imereti), made in a naive style (now in the collection of the Kutaisi State Historical Museum named after Niko Berdzenishvili).

Figure 20. Doors from Savane with an ornamental frieze of acanthus, laid in a wavy round meander (Imereti).

Figure 21, 22. Master Gabiso. Door rosettes from Syupi Tsurumsky (Upper Svaneti), close to solar and cross-shaped Sasashi rosettes (Racha-Lechkhumi and Lower Svaneti).

Figure 23. Fragment of a wooden blank for the chased icon of Jgrak (St. George) and Diocletian from Supi Tsurumsky (Upper Svaneti). All monuments are from the 10th-11th centuries.

In parallel, from 1984 to 1995 and from 2000 to 2005, V. Vepkhvadze worked as the head of the health center of the most famous sanatorium in Georgia – the 4th department in Borjomi-Likani (Romanov Palace). In 2006, the sanatorium of the 4th

department in Borjomi-Likani (Romanov Palace) was bought by the Kazakhs and the Rixos Hotel was opened there. Therefore, Vladimer, who worked there for several decades in his second specialty, was able to switch to orders for the design of the environment, and carried them out together with his older brother Otari Vepkhvadze. There was a little more time for creative work, which, from a hobby and hobby at that time, became the main one.

Knowledge of the basics of artistic craft, together with the comprehension of art by the sensory system and the development of creative thinking, became those “three whales” that allowed the artist to create his own figurative system in artistic wood carving, both modern and at the same time archaic in a certain way, in which genetic cultural codes of Georgia are hermetically stored.

In 2012, Vladimer took on a new large order for Zugdidi, where he acted not only as an author-carver, but also as an author-designer. In this large ensemble dedicated to St. Mary, he began the execution of the central entrance, where, according to his sketches, the rest of the elements were completed by other masters. During this period, the artist was busy with Tbilisi and Borjomi interior design projects for houses and hotels, which were decorated in a traditional way using carved wood and ceramics, together with his brother Otari Vepkhvadze.

This is how works on the restoration of old aivans of the 19th century appeared, as in the Inka cafe in Borjomi in a building owned by the Romanovs 2006. In 2009, the master was asked to restore the mirrors and carved elements of the East Hall of the Romanov Palace in Borjomi, where he participated in the restoration of an image fireplace with a portal. In the local history museum of the city, he also carried out the restoration of doors, the main entrance, the stage and the ceiling. In general, the master carried out the restoration of the facade and the East Hall here for 4 months.

And also he performed the restoration in 2017 of the carved wood of the Shushabandi balcony on the central facade of the palace of the late 19th century in Borjomi – the consul of Iran in Georgia –

Mirza Riza Khan, where the master worked together with a team of 6-7 Iranian specialists in the restoration of mirrors, sculpting and paintings in interiors and exteriors.

In parallel, in 2017, Vladimer Vepkhvadze completed an order for a chestnut throne for the Akhaldab complex in the Borjomi region. He decorated the upper semicircular part of the back of the object with a stylized groin ornamental composition, going back to the motif of a stylized double open palmet, in the center resembling an anchor tied with a braided rope (a symbol of hope, the cross, peace and Christianity), common in Byzantine-Greek and Romanesque art of the 10th-11th centuries. All these symbols are quite multi-layered and the author used them in each individual case with a specific task.

Entering the artistic council (council) of the patriarch, Vladimer always tries to work both intuitively and canonically at the same time. After all, any liturgical items, be it the wings of the Archangel Michael or the Ark of the Covenant, imply execution according to certain iconographic patterns, and besides, when communicating with monastic customers, which is especially appreciated by the master. At the heart of his creative developments lies the flair of Georgian traditional forms with an understanding of the essence of the ethno-cultural coloring of products. In his work, the author chooses a tree according to texture, texture, taking into account a combination of lighter and darker species, comprehending the initially figurative features of the future composition and its purpose.

In general, it should be noted that among the entire range of works by Vladimer, his armchairs, polytrons (pulpits), which genetically appeal to the Byzantine medieval carving within the Greek canon (order) and the period of formation of the statehood of Georgia, are absolutely masterpieces. The compositional and plot solution of the author's products with reliefs in the form of icon marks on the back of such objects refers us to the throne of the Byzantine emperor Maximilian of the 6th century, made during 546-556, and the chair of St. Peter of the 6th century (Macedonian

dynasty). The actual design of the thrones by V. Vepkhvadze also correlates precisely with the Byzantine-Greek models. A typical example is an item from the Epoch antique shop (see Figure 11)).

At the same time, the filling of the author's iconic hallmarks gravitates towards relief folds of the 10th-11th centuries of Byzantine work (a typical example is a diptych with twelve festive scenes), a period when similar things became popular in Kievan Rus thanks to dynastic marriages with the crown of Constantinople. At the same time, many elements of carved ornaments of medieval Russia, preserved in the art of Ukraine to this day, are very similar to those that Vladimer Vepkhvadze uses in his work.

So, in his works, the master depicts the motifs of a symbolic cross, including the cross of St. Nino, the abbreviation of the name of Vladimer Vepkhvadze in Georgian (in the back of the throne in 1989), a vine as a symbol of Christ's sacrifice, a burning bush, the slaughter of the Lamb of the Lord, a tree life, symbols of the sun and stars, the Holy Trinity, the Intercession of the Holy Mother of God, saints, angels, etc. The master's ornamental compositions are built according to a certain iconographic program, which allows him to lead hagiographic allegorical narratives from individual stamps in wood carving, as in icon painting.

Vladimer Vepkhvadze interprets individual elements of his works precisely as a folk master, without adhering to exact geometry, freely solving the left and right sides in the composition with a slight degree of asymmetry. Some decoration ornaments of its doors in the form of a square divided diagonally into four parts with grains (a symbol of fertilization and prosperity) have references to the traditional motifs of woodcarving boxes for needlework (tagrutsi) of the Dusheti region [3].

In general, the use of rosettes of different compositions is typical for the design of most of the master's works [6]. Namely, the type of Koretian ones with a cross-shaped braid inside, stylized leaves of palmettes from Otsindale, braided tetraconch compositions with a bump-button found on the doors of Chukuli, the shape of door

panels, as in medieval prototypes from Atsi, Lashes-Vani, ornamental rosettes, appealing to carved monuments in Tskhver, Mgvinevi, Rkoni, close to the stone ones in Nikortsinda [4], inherent in medieval Georgian woodcarving of the period of consolidation of the Sakartveli lands, and stone-cutting art of the late Middle Ages, as in Ananuri.

At the same time, the form of thrones and polytrons of the divan type by Vladimer Vepkhvadze compositionally gravitates more to the prototypes of the early Byzantine period than to the mature Middle Ages of Georgia. Many such objects of the last indicated period have been preserved in the Mestia Museum, but the author rather draws a figurative component from them, without adhering to the features of shaping that are strictly customary for this region [5].

Also, in addition to flat carving, V. Vepkhvadze works with figurative bas-relief compositions and in round sculpture. Among his works of art there are a number of author's backgammon, artistic parquet ensembles, flights of stairs, tomb crosses. Some of these works in ornamental solutions are close to the motives of stone carving, as well as art metal products, the techniques of which the master knows. For example, in the design of one of the chests (arks) for flour, the motifs of temple white stone carving were used, referring to the Ananuri ensemble of the late 17th century, ornaments of traditional Georgian coinage [6; 7; 8]. Over the period of many years of practice, the author taught many students, the most famous of which is Alexander Beridze from Borjomi.

In addition, the third generation dynasty is continued by Vladimir's children and nephews. After all, the artist's children and nephews devoted themselves to the artistic field. So, his son Luka studied in the direction of international relations, but is engaged in interior design and design in the field of wood. The eldest daughter Salome graduated from the Tbilisi Academy of Arts with a degree in Graphic Design + Directing Department of the Theater Institute and now works in the field of cinema. The youngest daughter Natia graduated from the same university in the direction of Clothing

Modeling and works in this area. Nephew George, who graduated from the Painting Department of the Tbilisi Academy of Arts, also became a master of arts and crafts. Only his direction of activity is jewelry art. Another nephew Erekle graduated from the Ceramics Department at the same educational institution, and continues the work of the dynasty.

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