Georgia’s food and drinking culture in the eyes of Nikoloz Pirosmani

Ulrica Söderlind
1
1Department of Economic History, Stockholm University, Sweden

Abstract: This article deals with how Nikoloz Pirosmani depicted Georgia’s food and drinking culture in his works. Pirosmani is today acknowledged as the great national painter of the nation, however during his lifetime he was poorly known and died as a very poor man. The author studies the paintings by Pirosmani’s hand purely from a food and beverage perspective and not from an art critic’s point of view. The author discusses in the end of the paper the different possibilities of why Pirosmani chose to depict Georgia’s food and drinking culture as he did.

Key words: Georgia (the nation), Nikoloz Pirosmani, painting as sources to food and drinking culture, statistics, economic-history.

1. Introduction

This article deals with how Nikoloz Pirosmani depicted and saw the Georgian food and drinking culture. The article will start with the sources used followed by a description about Pirosmani and his life and finally a section about Pirosmani’s art and paintings. The text ends with a closing discussion about the result of the analysis of Pirosmani’s work and the results will also be compared with the author’s own experience of the food and drinking culture in Georgia. It is important to understand that the author of this paper has no intention of making any criticism of Pirosmani’s artwork as in the terms of art criticism. The paintings that have been left behind and are acknowledged as being by Pirosmani’s hand are used as primary sources in order to find out how the painter saw his own country’s food and drinking culture.

2. Sources

Since most of the research that has been done regarding Pirosmani and his work has been carried out by Georgians most of the research has also been published in Georgian. My insufficient knowledge in the Georgian language means that the language barrier makes it impossible to read the books in Georgian. However there has been some attempt to present Pirosmani and his work in English and some new publications have been published in three languages, namely Georgian, Russian and English. There are also some websites dedicated to Pirosmani in English. Due to the language barrier I have chosen to use four books that deal with Pirosmani in English, they are the following; Pirosmani2, Niko Pirosmani3, Niko Pirosmani4, Corresponding author: Ulrica Söderlind, ulrica.soderlind@ekohist.su.se.

1 The artist birthname was Nikoloz Pirosmanashvili, however he has been known by the shortname, Nikoloz Pirosmani or Niko Pirosmani (without author, Pirosmani-selected works, Moscow, 1986: foreward). In general when Georgians are referring to the artist they only use Pirosmani, so does the authors of the books used as sources for this text.

2 Kobakhidze, Nino (ed), Pirosmani, Tbilisi, without year.
Pirosmani’s and Pirosmani-selected works. It might seem that using only four books is not enough for the purpose of this paper but as will be shown shortly the facts about the painter’s life are scarce and the four books tell more or less the same biography and there is not a lot of Pirosmani’s art left for us and the artworks are represented in the books used here.

If one puts Niko Pirosmani, Nikoloz Pirosmani or Nikoloz Pirosmanashvili into a search engine on the internet a lot of hits shows up and I have gone through most of the pages and since a lot of them are not using any sources for the information I have chosen not to use any of the internet sites as sources for this paper.

3. Pirosmani’s life – a brief overview

Among the researchers there are different opinions about Nikoloz Pirosmanashvili’s birth and death dates and the place of his birth. Some say that he was born in 1853 and others say that he was born sometime during the years 1865-1866. Some researchers say he was born in the village of Mirzaani in the region of Kakheti in eastern Georgia, others say that he was born in Shulaveri after the father Aslan Pirosmanashvili moved from the village Mirzaani to work in Shulaveri in the 1860s as a hired hand at Akhverdi Kalantov’s vineyards. Aslan brought his already existing family with him to settle down at the Kalantov’s, the family consisted of his second wife Tekle Toklikasvili, the elder son Ivane (Giorgi) and two daughters, one of the daughters was born before the move and Nikoloz eldest brother Giorgi passed away at the age of 15 in Shulaveri and the father soon followed. Shortly after the passing of the father Nikoloz the mother fell ill and passed away after a short while.

The researchers also highlight what happened to Pirosmani after his father’s passing away, some say he left for Tbilisi before his mother’s death, while others say he left after her passing away. Regardless of which Nikoloz and his two sisters were left orphans after the death of both parents. One sister got married and the other sister, named Peputsa returned to Mirzaani. The information about Nikoloz’ childhood is scarce but it is believed that the boy was taken into the Kalantrov family and they took him to Tbilisi in the mid 1870’s and the family treated him more like a child of their own then a servant, he even had his own room. He was taught to read, Georgian at first and then Russian and was often taken to the theatre and around this time he started to draw. Nikoloz read newspapers and reviews in the family library and listened to conversations about politics, art and literature when the family had guests.

It seems like Pirosmani made his first steps towards independence at the age of 26 or 27 when he started a workshop and started to paint signboards along with Georgy Zaziashvili, the business ended in bankruptcy. Some researcher claims that Pirosmani left his host family after having fallen in love with a young widow of the family and when he told her about his feelings in a letter and when they were not answered by the young woman he decided to leave the household.

After the business had failed Pirosmani accepted a work at the railways as a brakeman. He kept this job for three and a half years and because of his self-neglect and the hard working conditions on the platform of goods wagons ever open to winds, his health was severely undermined, he left the railways at the turn of 1893 or 1894.

After the railways Nikoloz started up a new business, a market for dairy products, milk, butter and cheese, first from a barrow and then from a small shop of his own. He decorated his shop with his own signboards. As earlier Nikoloz took in a partner into the business and for some time it looked like the business was in bloom and very fruitful, however several years later both partners where ruined, this time totally. It is not

---

4 Chorgolashvili, Mamia, Pirosmani-so life begins with death, Tbilisi, 2011.
5 without author, Pirosmani-selected works, Moscow, 1986
known for sure whether Nikoloz had a romantic relationship with a French chanteuse by the name of Margarita.

The documentation regarding Nikoloz’ life and whereabouts are scarce after he went into bankruptcy but it is believed that he went to see his sister Peputsa in Mirzaani from time to time and built a new house for her. Nikoloz’ whereabouts in Tbilisi varied from time to time, it seems like he did not care much where he was living, for some time he stayed with his friend Bego Yaksiyev and then he stayed at the places where he worked. These places were taverns and restaurants where he worked and painted the walls with various motifs, he also painted a lot of billboards for the restaurants and shopkeepers. At times he rented so-called lodgings, as a rule a cellar, a cubicule beneath a flight of stairs or a shed. An upended crate served as a table, and a few brick-propped planks as a bed. A stump of a candle or a kerosene lamp furnished light. Eyewitnesses to his poor homes states that the walls was hanged with his paintings.

Since there is a lot of uncertainty regarding the painter’s life the researchers are not in agreement over whether the artist carried out his work at restaurants and taverns for food and drink, especially vodka in the latter case and whether he was under constant intoxication of alcohol or not while he was working. Some say that he could not have been, since it would not be possible to paint the way he did under constant influence of alcohol. It seems however that he was a poor man that had found his calling and that he painted from his heart, mind and soul and did not take a lot of money for his work, he mainly asked the owners of the restaurants and taverns to pay what they thought the work was worth, most of the time the payment was low and he gave away a lot of his work for free as well. It seems sure however that he got paid in food and meals, at least for as long as it took him to finish his work a part from the cost of the paint and other working material.

It seems like Pirosmani’s first official recognition came in 1913 when some of his paintings were exhibited in Moscow, and in 1916 there was a one-day exhibition of his works in Tbilisi, it seems like these two exhibitions were the only ones during the artist’s lifetime.

On the other hand, there are different opinions about the birthdate of Pirosmani the date of his passing away is also under debate, some say he passed away on the 14th of March 1919 at Aramiants Hospital and was put to rest at the Petre-Pavle’s cemetery while others say the day of his passing was the night before Easter, 4th of May 1918 at the Mikhailov Hospital and was buried on the 9th of May at the Kukia cemetery, in a separate place for unknown diseases. Exhumation works have been undertaken at both the cemeteries twice in order to locate Pirosmani’s grave, in 1963 and 1969, both searches have turned to be unsuccessful. Since Pirosmani’s grave seems to be lost he has been given a symbolic grave with a memorial in the Mtatsminda cemetery. What is agreed upon is that Pirosmani died miserably poor. Pirosmani is today considered to be the great national painter of Georgia and has inspired a lot of artists and painters after him such as for example Picasso. After his passing away Pirosmani’s paintings have been on exhibition 76 times between the years 1919-2008 all around the world.

\[14\] Kobakhidze, without year: 11, Chorgolashvili, 2011:211-229, 238.
\[15\] Kobakhidze, without year: 371-374.
4. Pirosmani’s art

It is very uncertain how many works Pirosmani produced during his lifetime. According to eyewitnesses that claim to have seen a lot of the works that the painter carried out in Tbilisi he could have produced as much as two thousand pieces, these reports of the eyewitnesses are of course impossible to verify. Most of the work the artist did directly on the walls of the restaurants and taverns are most likely gone forever if there are not found under some whitewash when the restaurants or taverns will be under reconstruction. For the moment there is no telling in how many frescos that have been lost by the artist hand due to the fact that they were done straightly on the walls of the establishments. Up on till this day a little over 200 paintings have survived and it might be so that more will come to the surface in the future among the paintings that today are considered to be lost. The artist himself seldom dated his own works, there is however an exception in the group of paintings between 1916-1917 that the artist himself dated.\(^{16}\)

Pirosmani did not have any special schooling and empirically he created and evolved his own style. It seems like that one of the sources that inspired the artist was rustic folk arts and crafts of Georgia that was transformed into the painter’s colour range, rhythm and spatial concept. It also seems like the artist was to some extent marked by the Iranian influences that could be found in Tbilisi during his lifetime. It seems like Pirosmani took what inspired him and absorbed it into his own perspective and talent. The tempo the artist painted in and which is the second factor of Pirosmani’s style depended not only on the artist creative requirements and mentality, but on such purely external circumstances as the need to paint as much as possible and consequently to paint quickly. Judging from the few known facts Pirosmani painted with fantastic speed. For the smaller portraits he needed about 30 minutes, for the average size paintings three or four hours and for the bigger works, he needed but a day or two, it did not take him more than five or six days to paint his epics though they were several meters long and were populated with dozens of personages. The speed which Pirosmani painted is considered to be all more amazing in that he never had the time to prepare, to give thought to concept, composition and detail, to do any primary sketches and so on.\(^{17}\)

Pirosmani used for the bulk of his work Russian or foreign, primarily British factory made oil paints of high quality and standard except during the first world war when he was forced to work with white powder colour

\(^{16}\) Kuznetsov, 1983:26.

\(^{17}\) Kuznetsov, 1983:27-32.
which he mixed with frying oil in jars in much the same manner as a house painter. All the artwork is made in oil, except the murals which he made in distemper straight onto the stuccoed and whitewashed wall devoid of any special treatment to ensure permanence. He also used oils when decorating window panels. It is hard to say if he used wooden panels for support, there is nothing to suggest that he did. Most of the very few paintings done on an ordinary primed canvas were produced at an earlier stage, which shows that though Pirosmani was familiar with canvas and could obtain it, he rejected it for certain practical reasons, painting mostly on sheet iron, oilcloth and cardboard. All of the painter’s signboards as well as two of his still life were painted on sheet iron. Though able to withstand heavy pressure the thick roofing iron used was powerless against corrosion which gradually eroded the paintings. Due to the erosion of the signboard the shop and restaurant keepers preferred to have new signs painted on an old one that had been scraped clean. During war times privation and ruin some of the signboards were torn down to make stovepipes. Pirosmani’s own favorite medium was the black oilcloth that was not cheap. The paintings on oilcloth have survived not only because the paints were of top quality and so swiftly applied without any overpainting, but also because the oilcloth’s chemical composition is very similar to that of oils.18 In many of the artist’s paintings the black of the oilcloth was even integrated into the picture itself. In such cases, either slightly touched up or not at all, it serves to bring out details that were to have been painted black in the first place. This represents a peculiar manner of what can be termed as topsy-turvy painting, not in dark colours on a light background but in light colours on a dark background. The colour frame Pirosmani used might seem to be narrow; sometimes he used five or six colours in a painting, sometimes only three. In general it can be said that Pirosmani’s total palette consisted of cobalt blue, ultramarine, zinc or lead white, chromium oxide, pale ochre, cadmium yellow, strontium yellow, cadmium orange, English red, green, umber and black. 19

It is under discussion how many of Pirosmani’s paintings have survived, but at least 217 have been attributed to the artist, apart from these 217 paintings there are other paintings that are under scrutiny if they are made by Pirosmani or not.20 In the following I have only used the 217 survival paintings that have been attributed to the artist and not those that are still under scrutiny. Besides the remaining 217 paintings there is also an existing inventory of paintings believed to be lost today, their number is 57. 21

Graph 1. The number of representation of foodstuff and categories in the 217 official Pirosmani paintings that remained up to this date.

Graph 1 shows the number of representations of foodstuff and the categories in the 217 official Pirosmani paintings that remained, out of the 217 paintings 71 of them have depictions of foodstuffs in them. The foodstuffs have been divided into the following categories; milk, chicken/birds, meat/animals, wine, grapes, sugar, tea, fish, drinking, dining, fruits, eggs, cakes, waterbarelks, cook, mtsvadi, bread, pumpkin, nuts and vegetables. The depictions of wine and wine drinking are most frequently represented in the paintings with a little more than 30 times, depictions of drinking and dining follow closely after wine. Chicken/birds and bread are also in the top of depicted foodstuff by Pirosmani. Followed by foodstuff such as grapes, fish, vegetables, fruit, cakes, meat/animals, egg, pumpkin, milk, waterbarelks, mtsvadi, nuts, beer, sugar and tea.

Graph 2. The number of representations of foodstuff and categories in the 57 paintings of Pirosmani that is believed to be lost today.

Graph 2 show the numbers of presentations of foodstuff and categories in the 57 paintings of Pirosmani that is believed to be lost today. The categories of foodstuff are as follows: Shaslyks (Shaslyks is the same dish as Mtsvadi in Georgian), chicken, snacks, fruit, wine, sugar, tea, fish grapes, drinking, dining and beer. Out of the 57 paintings that are believed to be lost today, out of the 57 paintings 14 have depictions of foodstuff according to the existing descriptions of the paintings.

If one compares Graph 1 and 2 there is a difference between the different food categories, in the missing paintings fruit and dining is in the lead, followed by wine, drinking, shaslyks, chicken, fish, snacks, sugar, tea and beer. As well as for graph 1 and 2 the same painting can have several components of different groups of foodstuff in them so each category has been counted separately. There is a difference between the categories of foodstuff in the remaining paintings and the missing paintings, there are 21 categories in the remaining paintings and 12 categories in the missing paintings. All of the categories in the missing paintings are also represented in the remaining paintings except the category snacks. It is not possible from the existing inventory of the lost paintings to try to find out what the snacks category existed of. It is interesting to see in the two graphs that sugar, tea and beer are amongst the categories that are the least depicted just once or twice.

22 Personal communication, BA, Donadze, Paata, 2012-02-11.
Illustration nr 2. The signboard painted with oil on thin cloth that says "tea, beer, lemonade", one of the few examples of Pirosmani’s art that is left for us today where tea and beer are depicted (after Kobakhidze, without year: 220).

As for the categories of egg and cakes, they appear in the same kind of motifs in Pirosmani’s works and the overall theme is Easter. The most common combination is red eggs, Easter cake, a table and the Easter lamb. One of the remaining paintings with eggs and cakes that differs from the others is Pirosmani’s version of Christ’s ascent to Heaven, in the foreground the eggs and cake are in focus.

Illustration 3 and 4. To the left, one of Pirosmani’s versions of Easter with the lamb, cake, eggs and table and to the right the artist’s version of Christ’s ascent to heaven with the cake and eggs in the foreground. A difference between the paintings is that on the one to the left there is no wine as it is on the one to the right. The Easter lamb painting is done with oil on oilcloth and Christ’s ascent is oil on tin (after Kobakhidze, without year:102, 110).
Illustration 5 and 6. Two paintings that in this article have been chosen to illustrate Pirosmani’s way of depicting feasts, both paintings are oil on oilcloths (after Kobakhidze, without year:169, 186).

Illustrations 5 and 6 are two paintings that have been chosen for this text in order to show how Pirosmani depicted feast and/or dining and drinking. The man holding the fish in illustration nr 6 is believed to be a self-portrait of the painter. What is interesting in this context is how Pirosmani chose to lay out the various foodstuff on the table or the tablecloth. If one study the compositions of the foodstuff and dishes in the remaining paintings Pirosmani’s compositions are very similar to each other in this category of paintings. Around the laid out tablecloth on the ground or on the table a group of guests or family members are gathered for a feast. The beverage on these occasions is always wine, depicted either in big kvevris as in illustration nr. 6 or in carafe, animal skins filled up with wine or/and from drinking horns. There is always bread on the tablecloth and then the various dishes can vary from each other in the paintings in numbers but there is always roasted bird (most likely chicken), some form of vegetables (in most cases radishes and pumpkins, sometimes cucumbers and spring onion), some kind of fish, mtsvadi (barbecue) and sometimes some other meat dish. The selection of dishes and foodstuff by Pirosmani is small and narrow in these paintings. All of them are oil on oilcloth except one that is oil on cardboard.25


Illustration nr 7 is chosen to show how Pirosmani depicted still life. There is not that much still life by the artist’s hand that has survived that are categorized as still living, only five. They are made with either oil on oilcloth or oil on tin and they differ from each other in size and contents. The still life in illustration 7 shows a lot of foodstuff, mostly not processed, such as suckling pigs, birds, different kinds of fish, bodies of smaller animals such as lamb, mtsvadi, fresh grapes, pears, radishes but one also finds processed food such as sausages and wine in bottles. There is one still life that differs from the others since the depiction on that still life clearly is connected to Easter with the red eggs, Easter cake, fish and wine.  

Illustration 8 and 9. Paintings that has been choosen for this text in order to illustrate how Pirosmani depicted the categories grapes and wine (after Kobakhidze, without year:19, 238). Illustration 8 and 9 have been chosen for the text to show how the category grapes and wine are depicted by Pirosmani apart from when this category is included in the feasting paintings. Illustration 8 is believed to show a glimpse of the artist’s happy childhood before the passing away of both of his parents. From the remaining paintings there are 15 that show this category and all of them are oil on oilcloth except two that are oil on tin. Most of the paintings with grapes are from grape harvest and pressing the grapes directly after the harvest.  

5. Closing discussion

This paper has been about how Georgia’s national painter Nikoloz Pirosmani depicted the nation’s food and beverage in his art and the paintings has been studied solely from a food and beverage perspective and not from an art critic’s point of view. Not much is known about Pirosmani’s life since the sources are very scarce, research is not in agreement on either his birth or death year, even his grave is lost. Some researcher claims that the artist was born in 1853 while others say sometime during the years 1865-1866 and he passed away sometime during the years 1918-1919. Pirosmani had no schooling in painting; he seems to have been born with a gift for it and started to paint as a young man when he was living in Tbilisi with his host family after the passing away of both his parents. He started his independent life with a small business with a business partner, the adventure did not end so well since it seems like keeping track of the economy was neither of the partners strong side. Pirosmani then went on to work at the railway for some years, but did not take care of his health and suffered from bad health.

during the rest of his life. After the railway he once again started up a shop with a partner and this time it ended very badly, in bankruptcy. It is not clear whether Pirosmani had any sweethearts, however there seems to have been two women in his life that he felt deeply for but it also seems like his affection went unanswered from the women and he spent most of his life alone. Pirosmani mainly survived on his art due to the fact that he was asked or offered himself to paint signboards for shops and restaurants and frescos straight onto the walls of the taverns and restaurants. It seems like he did not have a fit and certain address in Tbilisi, he seems to have either stayed in a room at his employers during the time he was carrying out work and then moved to the next one or he rented small drafty rooms under stairs, it seems he was never easy to find when people where trying to locate him.

Regardless of his own poverty Pirosmani did by no means use cheap paint or art material for his work. It seems like his employers paid for the material that was expensive foreign oil colours and the black oilcloth that he preferred to paint on if he was not painting straightly on the walls of the taverns or restaurants or if the employers wanted some other material for their signboards, such as tin.

Pirosmani did not reach official recognition as a great painter and master until after his death, which is not uncommon among painters worldwide. Artists such Picasso and others have found inspiration in Pirosmani’s work.

As mentioned earlier in the text, it is an ongoing debate on how many of Pirosmani’s paintings have survived, but it seems that 217 of them have been acknowledged to his hand and at least 57 have gone missing that there is an inventory of.

Graph 3. The different kind of food categories in percentage in the remaining paintings by the hands of Pirosmani.

Graph 4. The different kind of food categories in percentage in the paintings believed to be lost according to inventory by the hands of Pirosmani.

Graphs 3 and 4 show the different kind of food categories in percentage in both the remaining paintings by Pirosmani and the ones that are believed to be lost. The categories are made by me, maybe someone else would have made another kind of categorization for the paintings. Since Pirosmani’s paintings are very rich in details most of the paintings contains more than one category of foodstuff, like the paintings of feast or/and dining and drinking or grape harvesting. Among the remaining paintings wine is peaking over the other categories while the peak in the lost paintings belongs equally to fruits and dining.

Grapes comes in as number six among the paintings that still remains among us today. I would have thought that grapes would have had a higher place since grapes are so vital to the Georgian nation as a whole, especially in the wine producing areas of the country. Still today the young members of the families take great pride and joy in participating in the grape harvest and the following event of pressing the grapes barefooted, I can imagine that it was the same or maybe even more so during Pirosmani’s time period. The country itself has a very long history of winemaking, the oldest evidence of cultivated grapes dates to the sixth – fourth millenium B.C. (Shulaveri-Shomu Tepe chalcolithic culture).

Bread comes in as the third category in the remaining paintings and is totally absent in the missing ones. Bread is very common in Pirosmani’s paintings, especially in the ones that are depicting feasts or dining and drinking. The most common bread that is depicted is what is called tone bread. Even today among the Georgians a meal is not considered to be complete if there is no bread on the table, regardless of the number of dishes that are placed on the table. The only times when bread is not served is when one eats Khachapuri or Khinkali. The tone bread is baked in a special oven called ‘tone’. This kind of oven is designed to provide very high, dry heat. Fuel for the fire is provided by charcoal which lines the bottom of the structure. In order to produce temperatures approaching 900 degrees Fahrenheit (480 degrees Celsius), bakers maintain a long vigil to keep the oven's coals continually burning. At such high temperatures, the bread made in a Tone oven develops a very crisp outer layer without sacrificing moistness on the inside, the tone bread is mainly made when the customer’s order it. As well as winemaking have a very long history in Georgia, so does bread, wheat was found at the same sites as the mentioned cultivated grape pips above.

Illustration 10. Detail of Pirosmani’s painting “making bread”. What is shown here is a girl heating up the tone oven before baking the bread, oil on oilcloth (after Kobakhidze, without year:26).

The categories of eggs and cakes are missing in the paintings believed to be lost even if they can be found among the remaining paintings. Present here are the red Easter eggs and Easter cakes that accompany each other in the paintings together with the Easter lamb in all the paintings except for Pirosmani’s version of Christ ascending to Heaven, where there is no lamb, but wine, eggs and cakes. The paintings with the Easter lamb have been a subject for the researchers to comment on. Georgia was one of the world’s first Christian countries, and dates such as 337 A.D. and 319 A.D. have been put forward for the country’s adoption of Christianity, only Armenia was Christianized before Georgia. Even with the early baptism of the nation some say that the Georgians kept the pre-Easter custom of bringing home a lamb which they would adorn with gaily coloured ribbons and feed on fresh, green grass; only for later to slaughter the animal for the Easter table. This custom which can be traced back to the pre-Christian era was integrated into Eastern Christianity’s rituals. The lamb was viewed as the redemptive sacrifice. Today Easter is considered to be one of the most, if not the most important feast or holiday in the Orthodox Church and the main religion in Georgia and over 65 % of Georgia’s inhabitants confess themselves to the Georgian Orthodox Church and the Patriarch is held in very high regard.

How religious Pirosmani was himself is hard to say since there are no records that speak about it and why he painted Easter in several paintings is hard to say, either he received an order to do so or he did it only for himself and by his own mind, regardless of the reasons it is difficult to assume that he was not a believer in the Christian faith. The tenderness that can be seen in the Easter paintings can be a clue or an indicator of Pirosmani’s own personal beliefs. From the food perspective I find it very interesting that the artist painted the religious holiday of Easter but not for example Christmas.

Something that is striking in both graphs nr 3 and 4 is how few times Pirosmani depicted categories such as sugar, tea and beer, one can wonder why that is? Either he did not like this foodstuff or he did not get any more orders to paint them, just one or two in each category exists today and specially tea is interesting since Georgia has been a nation with a lot of tea farmers, especially during the Soviet age and has exported large quantities of tea. Georgians in general still drink a lot of different kinds of tea. Another thing that is striking when one studies Pirosmani’s painting from a food perspective, specially the paintings of the feasts or dining and drinking is that in those paintings no one drinks beer, only wine and that the composition of the meal in itself is more or less the same with bread, wine, some kind of vegetables, meat dish, birds. The selection of dishes in the meal of feast is very limited and that is surprising considering how a Georgian table is laid out today and it seems like the very large and big feast called “Supra” has a very

28 Kuznetsov,1983:53.
long history in Georgia. What was the reason for Pirosmani’s limited selection of dishes in this kind of
paintings?
Not an easy question to answer at all, it might be so that the ones who ordered the paintings settled with this
limited selection and considered the dishes to be genuine Georgians or the artist himself had no wish to
depict a larger selection of dishes even if he could. But if this selection was considered to be representative
for the genuine dishes of the country why are the national dishes such as Khachapuri or Khinkali and the
sauce Tkhemali missing? That is a question that still remains to be answered. Today when one walks the
streets of for example Tbilisi replicas of Pirosmani’s paintings hangs at the door of Khinkali restaurants and
also inside the establishments. Of course economy and money can be one valid reason for the limited
selections of the dishes, simply that there was not enough money to pay for more paint to fill out the feast
with. However I do not really believe in that since a lot of the feast paintings are large in size and have
required a lot of paint and cloth.
Since some of the paintings that have survived are so called still life it is beyond any doubt that the artist was
able to depict other foodstuff then the ones on the feast paintings, the still life differs somewhat from the
feast paintings in that the foodstuff on them mostly are raw and not processed in any way. One finds, raw
fish, bodies of smaller animals such as lamb, fresh vegetables, nuts, pumpkin and fruits but also wine but no
beer on them. The still life’s are stunning in their simplicity since the black oilcloth is what gives the
foodstuff its glow, the foodstuff really stands out from the paintings due to the artist’s technique of using the
black oilcloth, the contrast from the black background and the colours are really eye catching and that
is most likely the idea in order to lure customers into the shops, restaurants and taverns.
Another thing that is striking in the remaining paintings is that there is no restaurant or tavern
environments depicted even if Pirosmani spent as it seems most of his time in this kind of
establishments. To conclude one can say that by studying Pirosmani’s remaining paintings from a
food perspective one gets a small glimpse of Georgia’s vivid food and drinking culture, the glimpse
that either the painter himself or his employees or both choose to show for their own reasons and
there is no trace of the restaurant or/and tavern environments. To study Pirosmani’s paintings from
the above-mentioned perspective gives one an introduction to the foodway’s of Georgia and if one wants to
learn more about it one should continue towards other sources or go and pay a visit to the country.
My analysis and discussion of Pirosmani’s work from a food perspective shall not be seen as a definitive
result and I do not claim it to be since there is always an opportunity that more paintings will rise to the
surface and can be acknowledge as work by Pirosmani’s hand.

Illustration 11. I would like to take the opportunity to end this text and article with the only remaining painting of a
cook made by Pirosmani (after Kobakhidze, without year: 67).
6. References