

Jennifer Brewin (History of Art PhD) – Tbilisi, Georgia, October 2012

My first major doctoral research trip was made possible by a generous college grant awarded to me by Pembroke College in 2012. The trip, of around 6 weeks in total, was to the Georgian capital city of Tbilisi. The first aim of the trip was to familiarise myself with potential sources of primary research material in Georgia and the institutions and individuals who might help me access them.

My doctoral research investigates the specificities and complexities of socialist realist painting in the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic under Stalin (from Sovietisation in 1921 until the beginning of World War II in 1939), as well as the mechanisms for its development and dissemination. However, at the time of planning this first research visit to Georgia, the boundaries of my project were much more fluid. UK sources concerning art in the Georgian SSR are relatively limited so needed to go to Tbilisi and visit key institutions in order to understand the scope of the material available and begin to test and challenge some of my initial hypothesis about the development of art in the Georgian SSR in the decades following Sovietisation.

I spent the first two weeks of my trip working primarily at the National Archives of Georgia, where I scoured inventories for documents pertaining to the activities of key artistic and administrative organisations and institutions including the Tbilisi Academy of Arts, the Georgian National Gallery and Metekhi Museum, the art workers' union RABIS, and the and Georgian branches of the National Commissariat of Enlightenment and the Association of Revolutionary Artists (SARMA). My search was extremely fruitful - I found numerous documents that contribute vital data to our understanding of the mechanisms that controlled artistic activity in Georgia under Stalin.

The remainder of my time was split between Tbilisi's major museums and libraries. My contacts at each institution were enormously welcoming and accommodating. At the Georgian National Museum I was able to access the vast databases of the Museum's collection of twentieth-century Georgian painting, as well as a number of important exhibition catalogues held in the Museum's library. I was also introduced to an enormously rich collection of theatre design, posters and photographs at the Georgian State Museum of Theatre, Music, Cinema and Choreography. The libraries of these museums, as well as that of the Academy of Arts and the National Parliamentary Library were also fantastic sources of information, and I found the National Parliamentary Library's collection of early twentieth-century Georgian periodical second to none.

During my stay in Tbilisi I also took Georgian language lessons, which was a fascinating experience in itself and allowed me to identify and access important Georgian language sources.

As well as being a wonderful opportunity to visit monuments of Georgian art and culture including the Rustaveli theatre's beautiful Kimerioni café, and to enjoy Tbilisi in the summer time, this research trip was extremely productive both in terms of gathering key primary source material and continuing to define the boundaries and structure of my research.