

FONDATION BEYELER

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A painting of a white wolf standing on a log in a dark, moonlit forest. The wolf is the central figure, looking towards the right. The background features large, dark trees and a full moon in a dark blue sky. A small, dark building is visible in the background. The overall mood is mysterious and nocturnal.

PIROSMANI

**NIKO PIROSMANI**

**17 September 2023 – 28 January 2024**

Cover:

Niko Pirosmani

*Bear on a Moonlit Night*

Oil on cardboard, 99.9 × 80 cm

Collection of the Shalva Amiranashvili Museum of Fine Arts of Georgia

Georgian National Museum, Tbilisi

Photo © Infinitart Foundation

## INTRODUCTION

Georgian painter Niko Pirosmani (1862–1918) succeeded like no other in merging tradition, folk culture, spirituality and modern pictorial means. Already in his lifetime, his paintings were held in high regard both in the population at large and among artists and writers. Today, Pirosmani is considered Georgia's national artist. Seemingly unspectacular at first sight, his images address deeply human phenomena. They transform everyday motifs into timeless allegories. Pirosmani knew how to show the essence of things with just a few colours and brushstrokes. His works are akin to icons, impossible to forget.

The exhibition was organised jointly by the Fondation Beyeler and the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Denmark, in cooperation with the Georgian National Museum and the Ministry of Culture, Sport and Youth of Georgia, with the friendly support of the Infnitart Foundation.

Unless otherwise indicated, all loans are from the collection of the Shalva Amiranashvili Museum of Fine Arts of Georgia, Georgian National Museum, Tbilisi.

The exhibition was developed by Sam Keller, Director, and Irakli Purtskhvanidze, adviser of the Fondation Beyeler. It was curated by Daniel Baumann, with contributions

by Georgian artists Thea Djordjadze and Andro Wekua.  
The project was led by Regula Moser, Associate Curator  
at the Fondation Beyeler.

## BIOGRAPHY

Niko Pirosmani was born in 1862 to a peasant family in the Georgian village of Mirzaani. Following the death of his parents, as an eight-year-old he was taken in by a family in the capital of Tbilisi, where he learned to read and write Georgian and Russian. He was taken along to theatre plays and taught himself to paint. He trained as a typesetter in a printer's shop and from 1890 worked as a brakeman for the Transcaucasus Railway. He also briefly ran a dairy. At the same time, Pirosmani painted signboards for shops and taverns. In 1912, his works were discovered by Russian artist Mikhail Le Dentu and Georgian artists Kirill and Ilya Zdanevich. One year later, four of his paintings were featured in the exhibition "Mishen" (Target) in Moscow alongside works by Marc Chagall, Natalia Goncharova, Mikhail Larionov and Kazimir Malevich. Ilya Zdanevich, who at one time owned more than 50 of the artist's works, tried organising a Pirosmani exhibition in Paris in 1914, but the project was thwarted by the outbreak of World War I. In 1916, Pirosmani was invited to join the Society of Georgian Artists in Tbilisi, which he however soon turned his back on. Impoverished, Pirosmani died in 1918. Today, he is Georgia's most famous artist.

## ROOM 1

### **1 Fisherman in a Red Shirt, undated\***

Oil on oilcloth

The fisherman, holding a bucket and his catch, is rendered in few, energetic brushstrokes. Gazing straight out at us, the figure appears fully alive, as though pausing only briefly in its activity for the painter's sake. Pirosmani makes particularly effective use of his pictorial means. The spare range of primary colours – red, yellow and blue – is heightened with white only in a few places, achieving intense radiance against the black picture ground. Pirosmani uses the black of his support as a further colour. The pictorial space is equally reduced to a minimum – white strokes are sketched in to suggest the flow of water, while yellow strokes above hint at the plants and reeds of the riverbank.

This distinctive painting style lends the image of an ordinary man a universality that reaches far beyond an individual portrait or a genre scene. It is reminiscent of icons and medieval depictions of saints, turning the yellow fisherman's hat into a halo.

\* Unless otherwise indicated, all following works by Niko Pirosmani are also undated.

## ROOM 1

### **2 Still Life with a Loaf of Sugar**

**(fragment of a signboard for a tavern in Didube)**

Oil on tinplate

Niko Pirozmanashvili State Museum of Mirzaani, National Agency for Cultural Heritage Preservation of Georgia

This almost monochrome still life is reminiscent of a neat display of various food items – sausages, a sugarloaf at the centre of the image, a fish. The focus lies wholly on the rhythmical composition of rounded forms and curving lines on the picture surface, further underlined by the white framing band. The exact spatial situation remains vague. Modelled in gleaming white and cool blue, the objects appear against a deep, indeterminate black ground. While the sausages are depicted hanging from hooks, the fish seems to be hovering untethered, heightening the surreal aspect of the image.

This picture is a fragment of a signboard for a tavern in Didube, a Tbilisi neighbourhood. Pirosmiani produced several such signboards.

## ROOM 2

### **3 Polar She-Bear with Cubs**

Oil on cardboard

Pirosmani's work contains numerous depictions of animals. They often fill the whole picture and their natural habitat is shown only very partially. Pirosmani seems to have been concerned less with anatomical accuracy than with the display of creaturely emotions. The bear is a dangerous predator, as evidenced by its glinting claws. Yet the picture's overall sense is determined more deeply by the way Pirosmani stages the animals. The bear's body fills the full width of the image, it looms large, heavy and sturdy. Its head is turned slightly toward us and lowered protectively over the two tiny cubs nestled against its front legs. The bear's fur seems soft and fluffy – fine strokes and delicate dots of white and orange are densely interwoven and layered on the black background. The combination of strength and softness is reminiscent of human qualities – the image thus appears as a form of family portrait or an allegory of parental love and care.



## ROOM 3

### **4 Woman with a Tankard of Beer**

Oil on oilcloth

This painting was included in the 1913 avant-garde exhibition “Mishen” (Target) in Moscow, alongside works by Marc Chagall, Natalia Goncharova, Mikhail Larionov and Kazimir Malevich. Its subject matter – a woman taking her ease drinking alcohol on her own in public – was an unusual one for the time. Pirosmeni’s restrained yet effective use of pictorial means remains striking even to the contemporary eye. He applied only three colours: red, white and yellow. Once again, he also deftly used the black background as a fourth colour by leaving out certain areas. The closely juxtaposed colour blocks formed by the table and the skirt endow the composition with calm, and despite the merely suggested filigree chair the figure appears firmly grounded. One hand rests easily on her lap. The other hand is holding up the red tankard of beer, which draws particular attention against the black background. Its touch of colour also serves to balance the composition.

## ROOM 4

### **5 The Kakhethian Train**

Oil on cardboard

In this homage to modernity, with just a few brushstrokes Pirosmani portrays standstill and movement all at once. At first sight, the image depicts a stopped train. The hard cast shadows suggest a night scene, as does the yellow light in the carriages against which the passengers appear as silhouettes. A wineskin made from animal hide is being handed over. Three more such wineskins are lying in the foreground alongside empty casks and amphoras. In Pirosmani's day, the train was still a relatively novel means of locomotion. Here, its speed is suggested by the steam gushing from the locomotive's chimney and by the blurring of the landscape as well as the wheels and the rails under the carriages. The subject matter of this painting calls to mind the period of the artist's life spent working as a brakeman for the Transcaucasus Railway. This strenuous and poorly paid work took Pirosmani across wide stretches of land, to regions such as the Black Sea and the Caucasus.

## ROOM 4

### **6 Giraffe**

Oil on oilcloth

This picture is dominated by a giraffe whose body fills its full height and width. Its proportions are inaccurate, as are the pattern and colour of its coat. Yet the animal's very essence comes to light all the more distinctly. Its head tilted, it looks out at us with a gentle gaze. Its legs, ending above the horizon line, give it elevation. The giraffe is depicted as tall but not monumental, its delicate hooves make it appear elegant and rather shy. Did Pirosmani even place a tear in the corner of its eye? This humanising manner of depicting animals is reminiscent of the paintings of his French contemporary Henri Rousseau. Like him, Pirosmani never came face to face with most of the non-European animals found in his pictures – he probably knew giraffes from illustrations or descriptions. After a live giraffe named “Zarafa” was brought from Alexandria to Marseille by ship in 1827, all of Europe had fallen prey to an unprecedented “giraffomania”.

## ROOM 4

### **7 Arsenal Hill at Night**

Oil on oilcloth

This landscape features a night scene outside the city of Tbilisi. More than half of its vertical format is taken up by a cloudy sky with a full moon, underneath which the landscape is laid out in tiers. In the foreground, between an oxcart and a modest cabin, a peasant couple are warming their hands at a blazing fire. Bathed in bright moonlight, the scene is sketched in a few highly contrasting brushstrokes of white on black. Above, against a mountain backdrop, the city sprawls as a dark strip, pierced only by the illuminated windows suggested with yellow dots. The picture provides a striking illustration of the contrast between the rural and the urban spheres, which deepened with the onset of industrialisation and modernisation, and which remains significant to this day in Georgia and elsewhere. Here, the two worlds are reconciled by the poetic night sky, poised aloft, straddling all divides.

This painting has had an interesting journey, about which more information is provided in ROOM 8.

## ROOM 5

### **8 The Childless Millionaire and Poor Woman with Her Children**

Oil on oilcloth

Pirosmani seems to be showing us the divide between rich and poor: to the left, a stately couple decked out in jewellery and elegant clothing, to the right a mother and three children, the youngest of which she is nursing. The distance between them is heightened by the two tree stumps at the back. They offer a symbolic contrast to the infant, who embodies the bloom of a new life. Gesturing, the couple seems to be addressing the little family. At the figures' feet, with a fine brush Pirosmani has written the following words in Russian: "Millionaire, childless" and "Poor woman with children". This suggests that we may be witnessing a transaction. Yet all gazes rest questioningly upon us viewers. Ultimately, the picture thus operates like a stage, on which the artist is showing us just how arbitrarily fate gives and takes.

## ROOM 6

### **9 Janitor**

Oil on oilcloth

Pirosmani painted several household employee portraits for the owner of the pleasure garden “Eldorado” in Tbilisi. Next to the cook and the wet nurse, he thus also portrayed the janitor. He is shown with a wild, bushy beard, slightly hunched, his attitude humble. His function can be inferred from the apron, the badge on his cap and the staff in his hand. The figure gains in monumentality through its frontal, full-format depiction. Its direct, piercing gaze endows it with a strong presence.

Pirosmani's portraits feature individuals of all stations in life. His interest in people seems to have run wholly independently of disparities between the rich and the poor, the powerful and the subaltern or even those at the very margins of society. In his paintings, Pirosmani paid all of them the same respectful attention.

## ROOM 6

### **10 Ortachala Belles (diptych)**

Oil on oilcloth

In this diptych featuring two “belles” from Tbilisi’s former pleasure district of Ortachala, Pirosmani fuses elements suggestive of a private setting with others relating rather to public space – the two figures, reclining sideways on cushions, display bare arms and revealing décolletés, while at the same time wearing stockings and shoes. Their lower body is covered by a sheet, which they hold gathered below their bosom. Toward the lower edge of the pictures, the cloth seems to be liquefying. This impression of a rippling body of water is heightened by the stylised plants and the little bird, suggestive of a garden scene.

This depiction brings to mind the tradition of reclining and bathing female nudes in Western art. However, the flatness on display for example in the treatment of the ornamental flower motif is also reminiscent of the pictorial idiom of traditional Georgian folk art. In this composition, Pirosmani thus took the highly modern approach of merging a variety of influences.

## ROOM 6

### **11 Georgian Woman with a Tambourine, 1906**

Oil on oilcloth

In Pirosmiani's time, Tbilisi was called the "Paris of the East". The city combined influences from Paris or Munich with local Georgian culture as well as cultures from the Asian world, especially from Persia (nowadays Iran). This depiction of a woman with a tambourine reflects these circumstances. The frame drum (*daf*) goes back to around 3000 BC in Mesopotamia. In the 18th century, it was a key feature of Persian-influenced urban musical entertainment in Tbilisi. Played chiefly by women to accompany solo chanting and dancing, it was still considered an emblem of exemplary womanhood in the early 20th century. In his 1927 publication *The Literary Bohemia of Old Tiflis*, author and journalist Ioseb Grishashvili (1889–1965) wrote of tambourine playing as a desirable skill for every young Georgian woman.



## ROOM 7

### **12 Roe Deer by a Stream**

Oil on cardboard

This room is dedicated to just one of Pirosmani's paintings. It was chosen by Georgian artist Andro Wekua (\*1977 in Sukhumi, Georgia, lives in Berlin), who has embedded it in a chapel-like setting. The combination of the specially designed lamp-sculpture, the white wall draping and the portrait of a woman creates a distinctive atmosphere. Suggestive of the display of icons, it conveys the spirituality of Pirosmani's images, which often escapes the contemporary eye.

As Wekua writes in the exhibition catalogue: "This work shows you something you are not meant to see. It depicts the subject in action, and the action is very specific. The deer does not know that you are looking at it because a deer will only drink water as long as no one is around. This action makes the work vulnerable, and through that vulnerability, the painting opens up, allowing the viewer more space to engage."



Watch this video to hear more about Andro Wekua's take on Pirosmani's work.

## ROOM 9

### **13 Five Princes Carousing, 1906**

Oil on oilcloth

This painting from 1906 is one of few dated works by Pirosmani. As most of the feasts he depicts, the five princes' revels are taking place outdoors. The event is shown close-up and isolated, it appears festive but not exuberant. The five uniformly clothed men are seated in orderly fashion, displaying no facial expressions, conspicuously still and motionless. Only the two princes seated at the heads of the table have raised their drinking horns. The table of this *supra*, the traditional Georgian banquet, appears rather spare: a few dishes are neatly arranged on the tablecloth as in a still life, a wineskin lies on the ground before it. This restraint in narrative elements allows the impact of the colour palette and the symmetrical composition to be felt the more fully. Various influences are on display in this painting, such as depictions of the Last Supper and banqueting scenes found in traditional Georgian silversmithing.

## ROOM 9

### **14 Lambkin and Easter Table with Flying Angels**

Oil on cardboard

To our contemporary eye, this painting seems properly surreal: it packs various elements closely side by side and merges different levels of reality. In light of the two crosses, some of the objects can be read as symbols relating to the Christian feast of Easter – the sheep representing Jesus (the “Lamb of God”), its white fleece a sign of purity and peace, and the red eggs suggestive of the death of Christ. Yet ostensibly, the painting depicts a peacefully drinking animal in front of a festive table set in a glade. In their pared-down treatment, the obviously supernatural winged angel heads are akin to the tree branches and the birds. Playing off the yellow flowers in the grass, the golden bird wings emit a distinctive, unreal radiance. In Pirosmani’s composition, spirituality is thus to be found not only in certain symbols but also in the depiction of nature as deeply animate.

## ROOM 9

### **15 Fête of St. George in Bolnisi**

Oil on cardboard

This panoramic landscape is like a complex theatre stage. Pirosmiani has arranged the pictorial space along a strong diagonal. This creates several staggered levels along the hillsides, on which various scenes are clearly visible to us. Even though we may not grasp every single detail, it is clear that the painter is showing us the image of an invitingly open world. This world holds space for many different individual actions and activities, which together form a large whole.

Narrative landscapes such as this one are frequent in Pirosmiani's work. Even though the artist left his native village of Mirzaani as a child and spent the rest of his life in Tbilisi, urban scenes play almost no role in his work – the portrayal of social life is always embedded in depictions of an all-encompassing nature.

## ROOM 9

### **16 Doctor on a Jackass**

Oil on cardboard

This painting shows a rider in a barren landscape. His stately attire is in contrast to the appearance of his mount, a donkey he is riding without a bridle, using a simple twig to steer it. According to the title, the figure is that of a doctor – possibly on his way to visit a sick person, for his gaze is directed steadfastly ahead, his eyes firmly on the road. The donkey's head is turned toward us, its short legs moving at a leisurely pace. The background is divided into two large areas, sky and earth, the landscape devoid of any details. A sight such as this, unusual to our contemporary eyes, would have been commonplace in the countryside in Pirosmeni's time. It is also reminiscent of a Christian subject matter well-known from numerous paintings: Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. It is therefore all too understandable that, looking at Pirosmeni's paintings, Russian artist Mikhail Le Dentu exclaimed: "A modern Giotto!".

## INFORMATION

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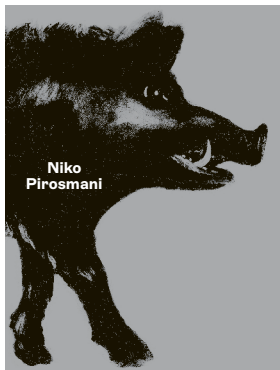
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We look forward to receiving your feedback on the exhibition guide at: [kunstvermittlung@fondationbeyeler.ch](mailto:kunstvermittlung@fondationbeyeler.ch)

## CATALOGUE



### **NIKO PIROSMANI**

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for the Fondation Beyeler

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Further publications on Niko Pirosmanni are available from  
our Art Shop: [shop.fondationbeyeler.ch](https://shop.fondationbeyeler.ch)

Upcoming exhibition:

### **JEFF WALL**

28 January – 21 April 2024

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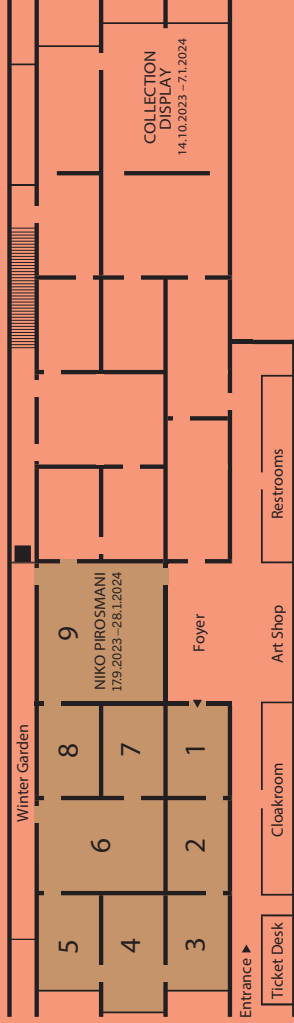
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Please do not touch the artworks !

The audioguide “Takes on Pirosmani” is available from our Art Shop (free up to age 25).