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TBILISI IN THE MEMORIES OF THE EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY PERSIAN ARTIST*

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In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it became a custom among educated and wealthy Persians to send their children abroad to study European languages, professions and lifestyle. Those for whom the big cities of Europe were geographically and especially financially inaccessible came to the nearest city of the Russian Empire - Tbilisi, and received education in private boarding schools and colleges.

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, for Iranian artists, especially from Tabriz (Azerbaijan, Iran), Tbilisi was the closest city where they could get acquainted and master the methods and techniques of European academic painting. At that time, a number of artistic societies and private or public art schools operated in Tbilisi. Around 1900, three members of the Arjangi family from Tabriz, who are considered outstanding representatives of modern Iranian painting, received an artistic education in Tbilisi: Seyd Ebrahim Aqa Mir and his sons, Seyd Hosayn Mir Mosavar Arjangi and Seyd Abbas Rasam Arjangi. A number of their works, which were revealed and inventoried by Grigol Beradze, have been preserved in the Oriental Collection of the National Museum of Georgia.

Seyd Abbas Rasam Arjangi (1892-1975) arrived in Tbilisi in 1911 and spent four years here. He graduated from the school of painting and sculpture, which operated in the Arshakuni Palace, in the building of the present Tbilisi State Academy of Arts. His years of study in Tbilisi proved to be very successful for him professionally: he soon earned the status of the school's best student and not only managed to sell his works but even found regular clients. On the recommendation of the school director, in parallel with his studies, he worked as a restorer of damaged works by Iranian artists stored in the Oriental Fund of the Caucasus Museum. After Tbilisi, Abbas Rasam continued his studies in Moscow and returned to his homeland in 1917. In Tehran, he opened his own gallery, Arjangi Gallery, which became a gathering place for the local artistic elite. He has about 2,000 works left. Abbas Rasam is considered one of the best Iranian artists, calligraphers and sculptors of the early twentieth century.

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In addition to works of art, Seyd Abbas Rasam left a three-volume collection of poems, as well as an autobiographical *Diary of Memories*, in which a large section is dedicated to the four years he spent in Tbilisi. The new (second) edition of this book appeared in 2019: *Daftar-e Khaterat-e Rassam-e Arjangi, be-kushesh-e Mohammad Hasan-e Hamed, Aydin-e Aghdashloo, Khashayar-e Fahni*, Tehran: Nashr-e Peykare, 1398/2019.

In the part of the book about Abbas Rasam's time in Tbilisi, attention is focused on two main aspects: 1. Study and professional development at the art school and 2. The hard life of the Iranians who were permanently or temporarily staying in Tbilisi during that period, and the socio-political activities of their revolutionary part. For readers interested in the early twentieth-century history of Tbilisi, a detailed description of the school of painting and sculpture is of particular interest. However, the author also talks about other subjects. He emotionally, sometimes with humor and sometimes with heartache, tells us about his daily life - relationships with the local population and Iranian compatriots, classmates and teachers, his first love and the feelings associated with it, arrest, stay in prison, and escape from there with the help of his Iranian comrades.

Abbas Rasam talks little about Tbilisi itself and its attractions. Information about the city is limited to the Mushtaid Garden and the Funicular, which, according to the Tbilissian Muslim tradition of that time, is called Sheikh Sana'an Mountain.

It must be said that Abbas Rasam Arjang was not only a good artist but also a skilled writer. His *Diary of Memories* is written in simple, lively language, the narrative is dynamic, full of alternating tragic and humorous passages. In general, it is a fascinating reading. In addition, the book contains important material for researchers interested in various aspects of the history of Tbilisi at the beginning of the twentieth century.