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### **The Influence of Western European Pictorial Traditions in Arsen Kurbanov's Paintings**

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#### **Abstract**

This article is devoted to the study of the picturesque heritage of the Dagestan artist Arsen Kurbanov (1990s). The choice of these chronological frames is conditioned by the desire to study the initial period of the artist's creative work, which determined his further creative path of development, his aesthetic preferences and style affiliation. Arsen Kurbanov's creative method was significantly developed from the traditions of Western European academic painting. The revival of the Italian Quattrocento era, the peculiarities of the artistic vision of the Northern Renaissance masters, the creativity of Vermeer Delft, served as the basics by which the Dagestani artist was inspired. Creating his compositions, allowing to recall the works of Giotto di Bondone, and the masters of the early Renaissance, as well as P. Brueghel and Vermeer, Arsen Kurbanov does not resort to "blind" copying of their manners and methods of painting, but reinterprets creatively the heritage of great masters. By introducing the elements of identity into his works that go back to the cultural peculiarities of his people - the Dagestani reality, and also developing in the bosom of the Petersburg Academy of Arts, he contributes to the development of his original style, unlike all previous achievements of classical art. Thus, the ancient mythology, and the biblical subjects of his paintings, receive new specific forms of expression in the pluralistic environment of contemporary artistic trends. They acquire the features of relevance and "vitality" in the system of academic art canons. The appeal to historical reminiscences and taking over the best achievements from the pictorial heritage of the masters of the past allowed Arsen Kurbanov to find his place in the newest art of Russia, and to remain a unique, interesting and contemporary artist at the same time. The studying of classical painting tradition role in the development of Arsen Kurbanov's artistic language is the main goal of the proposed article. A wide spectrum of various means of picturesque expressiveness and artistic techniques is analyzed, which served as a fundamental factor in his aesthetic preferences and recognizable handwriting.

**Keywords:** Arsen Kurbanov, Painting, Classicism, Academism, Style, Influence, Plot, Biblical, Mythological.

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## Introduction

Arsen Kurbanov is a vivid representative of the academic line of Dagestan and Russian fine arts development. He was born on July 29, 1969 in the city of Makhachkala, the Republic of Dagestan. He came from a creative family. Regarding his parents, his father is a well-known Dagestan artist Khairullah Magomedovich Kurbanov, his mother is also a high-class painter, Galina Vasilyevna Pshenitsyna. During the period from 1985 to 1988, Arsen Kurbanov studied at the Dagestan Art College named after M.A. Jemal. In 1988 he entered the St. Petersburg Academic Institute of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture named after I.E. Repin, which he graduated in 1994 in the studio of the professor, the academician of the Russian Academy of Arts Yu.M. Neprintsev. Since 2008, Arsen Kurbanov has been teaching at the institute named after I.E. Repin.

Arsen Kurbanov, along with his brother Yaroslav, found their creative path in the direction of classical art, and they show themselves in this field as talented, unordinary artists with their worldviews and extraordinary artistic handwriting. In general, Kurbanov's choice to develop his skills towards academic, in general, realistic art, is not random. Since childhood, studying and being brought up in the atmosphere of a creative family (his father Khairullah Kurbanov and mother Galina Pshenitsyna are the bright representatives of the realistic school of Dagestan fine arts), he scrupulously mastered the techniques of realistic transfer of nature by the language of visual arts. Kurbanov comprehended everything his parents could give him, and went on to seek his own creative path, within the line of realistic art. His pictorial heritage represents a previously undeveloped (at least to his level) academic trend in the fine arts of Dagestan. He does not repeat the well-known plots of pictures from a mythological or a biblical cycle from the Renaissance heritage mechanically, but creates the canvases on the basis of a subjective interpretation of the great heritage, adding the features of his own national worldview in them.

From the master's professional creative experience, the fascination with different epochs, styles and manners of the masters of Western European classicism at different times becomes noticeable. From the strict detached images of the early 1990's, close to the works of artists of the early renaissance, he turns to the rapid dynamics of the Baroque manner in the paintings of 2000s. However, his painting can not be described by unilateral analogies in comparison with previous eras, it is complex, unique and corresponds to the spirit of modernity. His biblical themes in his paintings are not canonical, and sometimes they give a kind ironic remark on the Gospel stories ("Lamentation" (1996), "Madonna" (1997)).

In Arsen Kurbanov's works, created during the 1990s, you can see the echoes of artistic techniques, originating from Dutch painting (the Northern Renaissance in general), where a close attention to nature, to the transfer of object texture features, and a careful drawing of details are evident. At the same time, the images of a person's figure in his paintings are not deprived of anatomical accuracy and body beauty in some cases, and the assumption of conventions in others. In this sense, one also recalls the difference in the principles of the figurative-plastic decision of a man's figure, to which the masters of the Italian Renaissance and the artists of the northern renaissance came by their own special ways.

Arsen Kurbanov, freely experimenting with the rich heritage of Renaissance painting before the masters of the 17th century, close to the stylistics of works by J. Bellini, S. Botticelli, P. Brueghel, Jan Vermeer, gradually comes to a dynamic, filled and full-blooded life and high poetics of academic style works. In this respect, the evolution of the author's work paves the way for diverse artistic and stylistic searches in the 1990s, diversified from the monumental lapidary nature of abstract images to the subtle lyricism of the intricately detailed everyday scenes, to a more homogeneous system of harmoniously clear and picturesque spectacular works from the early 2000s.

Keeping the qualities of the detached and exalted, the mythological or biblical subjects in Arsen Kurbanov's paintings do not lose their intimacy with nature likeness, the characters of images give out the images of a

contemporary. Together with this, the portraits and the everyday subjects of his paintings, rise to a capacious multi-valued symbol and acquire biblical significance.

## **Methods**

Research methods are based on an integrated approach and rely on diachronic (comparative-historical) and formal-stylistic one in combination with the methods of cultural-historical analysis.

The diachronic method of works of art study is based on the identification of successive stages of artistic creativity, the comparative analysis of which reveals the signs of the evolution of form and content in the process of historical development. As for Arsen Kurbanov's works, this method will reveal formal-stylistic and ideological-content combinations with the works of the masters of the past.

The formal-stylistic method is determined by the method of work analysis based on external signs - the use of certain composite and figurative-plastic techniques of fine art. The appeal to the formal-stylistic method in Arsen Kurbanov's painting makes it possible to identify the artistic and stylistic nature of his paintings.

The cultural-historical approach in the analysis of works of art leads to the awareness of the fact of artistic heritage as a valuable product of creative potencies for a contemporary artist. This method also leads to the understanding of art as an integral part of spiritual culture and the development of which is conditioned by the interaction of various artistic phenomena in the context of traditions and innovation. In Arsen Kurbanov's works, the method of cultural and historical analysis is of great importance, since this artist draws his creative inspirations, relying on the artistic and aesthetic experience of classical art.

## **Results**

The results of the research include the description and the analysis of Arsen Kurbanov's paintings, as well as the conclusions on the topics being developed.

Arsen Kurbanov's painting of the early 1990s marks the initial stage of his professional creative development. In his paintings he develops biblical and mythological subjects, writes genre portraits, the images of saints and contemporaries. The artist is deeply involved in the figurative and stylistic structure of the artistic heritage of the Renaissance, especially the Northern European countries, and partially also by the Italian Early Renaissance. A few works were written about Arsen Kurbanov paintings [3, 4, 5, 6, 7]. The available literature on this author is represented mainly by small articles in booklets from the exhibitions. Quite a lot has been written in foreign and domestic publications about European classical and academic art [8-23]. Starting from the great heritage of Western European classicism, the Dagestani artist invariably brings the spirit of his time to the picturesque canvases, clothed in the values and aesthetic representations of another cultural and historical paradigm. This is how we notice the lively connection of times, the uninterrupted movement of classical art traditions, which finds its true connoisseurs and supporters at the present stage of its development.

The painting "The White Goat" (1990s) by its character of figurative disclosure, brings to mind the paintings of the Italian Proto-Renaissance and the Early Renaissance artists. The plot of the composition is metaphorical, it has a semisemantic ideological and semantic content. The image of a goat is widely found in the paintings of famous artists of different times and trends.

The goat is the symbol of sexual energy and fertility. In Greek mythology, it is expressed in the image of a satyr - a man with hoofs and horns, with a long goat beard. Satyrs are forest gods, the demons of fertility, hunting for nymphs, personifying various life-giving and fertile forces of the Earth. Along with the meaning of evil spirit, desires, stubbornness and indomitability, an allegorical image of a cloven-hoofed animal also acts as a noble animal - the "tender goddess", who in ancient Greek mythology nourished the infant Zeus

with her milk. In its polysemy, the choice of a plot is not accidental in the analyzed work of the Dagestani artist. Due to the inclusion of images in the central field of the composition - two pillars occupying the entire height of the picture, it began to be divided into three parts, like a triptych. The gaps between these pillars occupying the middle part, have a conveniently located goat, separating from the rest of the images by its centrality. On the formed left part, the image of the shepherd is pictured, shepherding sheep. The right side of the stone barrier has the figure of a boy, perhaps, the shepherd's son is in front of us who helps him to take care for the sheep.

The background for these characters is the wide-open view of a mountain landscape. Lonely and quite comfortable settled goat on a juicy green field, stands out from the rest by its position. Perhaps, the author of this work aspired to provide an allegorical sense in the image of this animal by its unique nature from the rest. The objects of the images are treated in a generalized manner, and the white sheep and the figure of the shepherd are identified in a capacious manner, collectively, they are monumental, even somewhat sparse. Due to the lapidary approach in the solution of plastic problems, all image objects and characters look massive, even somewhat arbitrary, but attractive in their own way. Some generality and clear readability of plastic masses, the silhouette nature of their contours, makes us recall the innovative illusory methods of nature transfer for their time, which we see in the works of the Florentine painter of the 14th century Giotto di Bondone.

The depth of the mountain landscape spatial development suggests two comparisons: firstly, the multidimensionality of the classic landscape samples, where the foreground is usually occupied with a plot situation unfolding, and secondly, the similarity with the highland relief of the native land - Dagestan, where in the steep slopes of the mountains have impregnable auls, the peaks disappear into an infinite distance, dissolving in the blue color of the light-air medium. In these comparisons, Arsen Kurbanov's aesthetic search, based on the rich heritage of Western artistic culture, is not accidental, which, in its turn, is creatively reinterpreted by him according to his own imagination and the peculiarities of the national worldview.

A peculiar form of different national and cultural paradigm fusion is felt in the painting "Italian motive?", another, significantly different from the first title is "The Repentance of Judas" (1993). The plot of the composition depicts the fragment of a small settlement in the spirit of Italian towns in a mountain or a coastal area with magnificent views of the sea coasts and endless prospects. The everyday scenes of the villagers, filling the space with small figures make an unpretentious motive at first glance. In the foreground, we see the sheep grazing the grass, the shepherd cares for the lamb, apparently just born. A man with a rope around his neck strangely fell asleep on a tree branch, a group of people in the courtyard of the house depict the scene of Cross Carrying. In the courtyards, on the rooftops and along the streets, the figures of tenants are scattered, busy with their daily worries. The motives described resemble the cycles of evangelical plots with the image of Christ on the one hand, painfully pulling a heavy cross on himself, a good shepherd with a lamb sacrificed for the atonement of human sins, and also the Judas repentant of what he did and accepting such a strange ironic way of self-punishment. On the other hand, the scenes from the Scriptures that were originally laid on each other unfold here without taking into account strict canons and prescriptions. The actions of the characters are torn off from a single content line, different story situations are interspersed with each other, seemingly dissolving in the panorama of the dominant landscape. However, due to the subordinate role of the landscape, so significant topics from the biblical writings are perceived in conjunction with the picture space, the viewer does not have a need to find meaningful connections between the images of the characters. The artist does not emphasize the clarity of figurative and iconographic disclosure of specific characters, he is not attached to their details. The integrity of forms and a wide spread of figures in the natural environment, definitely reminds P. Brueghel's manner of painting [1. p. 44].

If we talk about the peculiarities of two forms of cultural and historical reality fusion - European-Italian and Dagestan, it is interesting to note that everyday plots with the figures of people dealing with everyday affairs in an array of architectural buildings is a widespread theme in Dagestani painting. The buildings with multi-level roofed roofs of red tiles, found in the overlapping of Italian town houses are surprisingly similar in their forms and constructive solutions to the housing constructions of the high-mountain architecture of Dagestan. This feature is also manifested in the monumental appearance of buildings with massive blind walls in two floors, a free step-by-step arrangement of houses along the mountainous terrain relief, small windows, masonry walls from a hewn stone.

This seems to be a more profound attention of the artist to the details of nature, some deviation from the strictness in the laws of linear perspective, from the beauty of anatomical accuracy in the picturing of a person figure, the interest in everyday life and the pastorals played in the composition of plot lines. Certainly, the similarity with traditions of the Dutch painting is traced behind such features [2. p.341]. In such works as "Curious Angel" (1993), "The Tower of Babel" (1992), there are some similarities with the paintings of Peter Brueghel the Elder (1525-1569). Deep panoramic views of nature with clearly expressed spatial plans, generalized figures of people, filling the entire field of the picture with small spots in an inseparable connection with nature, the elements of everyday life combined with biblical themes serve as illustrative examples that allow to see common features in them with the graphic traditions of the North European masters of the Renaissance. However, one can not draw direct analogies here. In Arsen Kurbanov's pictures, there are a lot of distinctive and unique features that are clearly expressed in the depiction of the material world objects by the composition "Curious Angel". The hypertrophied forms of trees, pictured to the full height of the canvas in combination with the lapidary treated landscape, from which a flowering garden, a clear lake and distant mountains shrouded in the blue are presented. They also look fabulous and unreal, as the plot of the composition depicting an angel on the house roof, watching the domestic scenes of the villagers.

Another composition "The Tower of Babel" is also built like the elaborated canons of the classic landscape genre. In the foreground, the naked women near the river play a famous story - the bathers. The figure of a man who glanced at the bathing women is even closer to a viewer. Deeper, on the distant background the high crowns of trees are depicted, on the seashore the Tower of Babel stands alone above the entire landscape; it is easy to see a certain similarity in these images with the famous paintings on this subject, for example, the "Tower of Babel" of the mentioned Peter Brueghel. The coloristic solution of the composition stands out according to the canon of classic landscape painting. The foreground is painted in brownish-ochry tones. The middle and especially the distant plan is filled with blue colors.

At the turn of the nineties the paintings by A. Kurbanov, clearly show the trends of direct imitation. However, the concept of imitation in this context can not be identified with a simple copying of artistic heritage samples, devoid of a creative talent. Dagestan artist imitates the style of the works by Jan Vermeer of Delft (1632-1675) deliberately. In his paintings: "Performance" (1992), "Vermeer's Memoirs" (1995), "At the Window" (2000), the same images and plot scenes appear as on the canvases of the great Dutchman "The Delft Sphinx," as the French critic Thoré-Bürger called it. Arsen Kurbanov pays tribute and respect to Vermeer's skill, "bows" to his creations and it would be incorrect to find only the sign of blind copying. One needs to learn from great masters. In this understanding, the compositions of the Dagestani artist are not analogies, but similarities, we notice not the mechanical reproduction of the finished works in them, but the desire to comprehend the experience and the skill of a brilliant painter on the basis of his own figurative-plot and compositional considerations.

In the work "Performance"<sup>7</sup>, the artist depicts a young girl with a servant in the sunlit interior. It's not difficult to guess that the girl is a lady, she is busy reading, and the servant who serves the lady sits beside her on a chair in a calm and thoughtful pose. The atmosphere of silence and harmony reigns throughout the space of the picture. The table is covered with a velvet carpet, its freely falling folds contrast with a clear geometric ornamentation of the floor. The fabrics and the objects of everyday life, freely stretched across the table, a lonely hanging portrait on a light background, acquire the supermaterial essence of things, like in the Vermeer paintings, fill the composition with a more exalted emotional and psychological way. Arsen Kurbanov, is also active in relation to the transfer of consecration in the interior, intensively pouring from a window. Sharply identified black and white contrasts of image objects emphasize the rhythm of tonal spots, illusory deepen the space. Light plays an equally important role in the creation of an emotional atmosphere of the picture, as well as in self-immersion and inner independence in the character images - the distinguishing feature of Vermeer style.

Another work by Arsen Kurbanov "Remembering Vermeer" (1998) is also interesting. The composition gives a plot, typical for paintings indicated by the author's name. Here a young lady is depicted reading a letter at an open window, and an elegant gentleman with a respectful gesture bringing her a bouquet of flowers. Such a scene makes to recall a number of works by Jan Vermeer, such as "Interrupted Music Lesson", "A Girl with a Glass of Wine", "A Glass of Wine". It should be noted that the composition of the Dagestani artist synthesizes the individual figurative and artistic motifs from the various works of the Dutch master into one whole. In this regard, the image of a lady meeting in such an atmosphere, for example, in the work "Lady, writing letter, with her maid" is connected with the image of a gentleman present in the above mentioned compositions: "Interrupted Music Lesson", "A Girl with a Glass of Wine", "A Glass of Wine".

Arsen Kurbanov builds the space of his painting similar to these genre-everyday compositions: at the window we see a table covered with a carpet, latticed doors with stained glass, a floor with geometric ornaments and a picture on the wall, executed in the manner of a classic painting. The details of images that enhance the texture of objects, such as glossy gloss on a woman's dress, velvety pile carpet, the purity and the transparency of porcelain and glass are developed actively. A scrupulous modeling of forms does not lead the picture to the "dryness" of the photographic method of image reproduction. On the contrary, the essential beauty of the material world is activated in them. And the intercomparability of objects and the finest transitions in the elaboration of details, strengthen their emotional response. Faces, gestures and movements of the portrayed ones, become refined, which, in general, is consistent with their picturesque-plastic manner of performance. The coloring of the work is based on contrasting combinations of dark blue, light ochre, brown and blue tones, which make it possible to perceive the objects of images clearly.

The spirit of Vermeer's art can also be seen in the single genre portraits by Arsen Kurbanov. A clear example of this is the composition "At the Window" (2000). Everything is traditional here too, like a Dutch master painted - a young girl stands by the window with a brush in her hand. She prepared to paint on paper, but a moment before she glanced toward the viewer. With this same technique, the artist has achieved the subtle emotional and psychological contact that arises between the depicted character and the viewer, and it looks impressive. The whole space of the composition, filled on the left by a long curtain with a restless play of black and white folds, a fragment of an antique chair and a blue terry carpet covering the table in the lower right corner, serves as a beautiful, laconically arranged tonal background for an active sounding of the girl's intense yellow dress, symbolically consistent with her bright, pretty smile.

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<sup>7</sup> The painting is called "Performance" due to the fact that the figures depicted in the interior of the composition constitute a full-scale educational setting while the artist was studying at the fourth course of the Petersburg Academy of Arts.

## Conclusion

Summing up the above analysis of Arsen Kurbanov's paintings, it is necessary to point out the distinctive features of his creative searches, covering the initial period of his professional development. Relying on the rich sources of the West European artistic heritage and adopting the experience of individual masters, schools and trends, the Dagestani artist creates the works in his own way. Reconsidering the genre-stylistic, compositional, figurative-plastic principles of classical art creatively, and also developing the mythological and religious themes from the ancient and the Christian cultural and historical heritage, Arsen Kurbanov continues to think in terms of local national perception of the world. In his canvases, he freely plays biblical stories, gives them the features of everyday life, and sometimes fills with irony. He gives the character of realism to canonical images, such as the Madonna and Child. The faces of women and babies in this work are similar to those that are written from nature.

From more graphic and rigidly outlined forms of a monumentalized character, Arsen Kurbanov comes to a freer picturesque manner in the works of the 2000s. If the works of the 1990s can be called "search" ones, a kind of student on the basis of classic paintings, then in the works of the last decade the author's individual style of the artist is developed deeper, it is close to the manner of baroque painting. Turning to the artistic trends that go back to the cultural traditions of other countries and peoples, the author under study helps to form new traditions in the art of Dagestan, which have not been developed before, i.e. the academic flow in Dagestani painting. Arsen Kurbanov certainly improves his experience and skill through the practical development of formal, stylistic, technical and performing features of the pictorial heritage of the great masters of the past. Due to the fact that the author under study imitated the great artists, his skills were perfected, the aesthetic outlook expanded, and the knowledge of history and artistic traditions expanded and deepened. Arsen's creativity proves once again that classic art is inexhaustible in its development and gaining new expressive qualities in the face of individual and, in a certain sense, original masters. The art critic Galina Tuluzakova writes the following about the creativity of the author under study: "... Self-expression and uniqueness is easily and naturally obtained in canonical artistic languages. The tree of tradition is eternally green, revealing the modern through the past (more precisely, the eternal). And this thesis fully proves Arsen Kurbanov's works, which become one of the notable phenomena in the artistic life not only of the St. Petersburg academic school that he represents, but also of the artistic life of Russia in the first decade of the 21st century" [7. p. 6.].

## Footnotes

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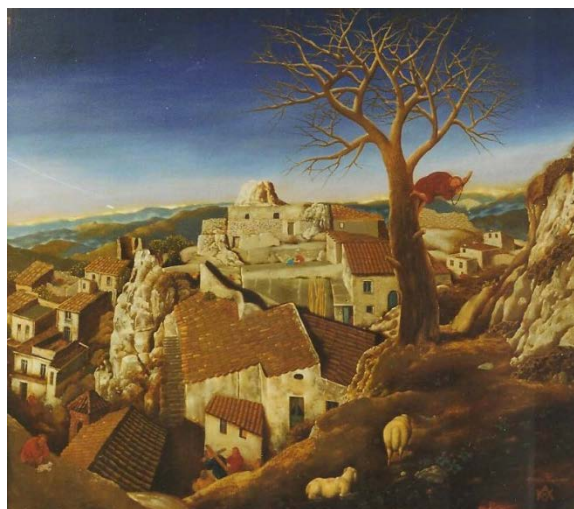
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## Illustrations



A. Kh. Kurbanov. White goat. Oil on canvas 1990s.



A. Kh. Kurbanov. Italian motive (Repentance of Judas) Oil on canvas, 1993.



A. Kh. Kurbanov. Remembering Vermeer ... Oil on canvas, 1998.