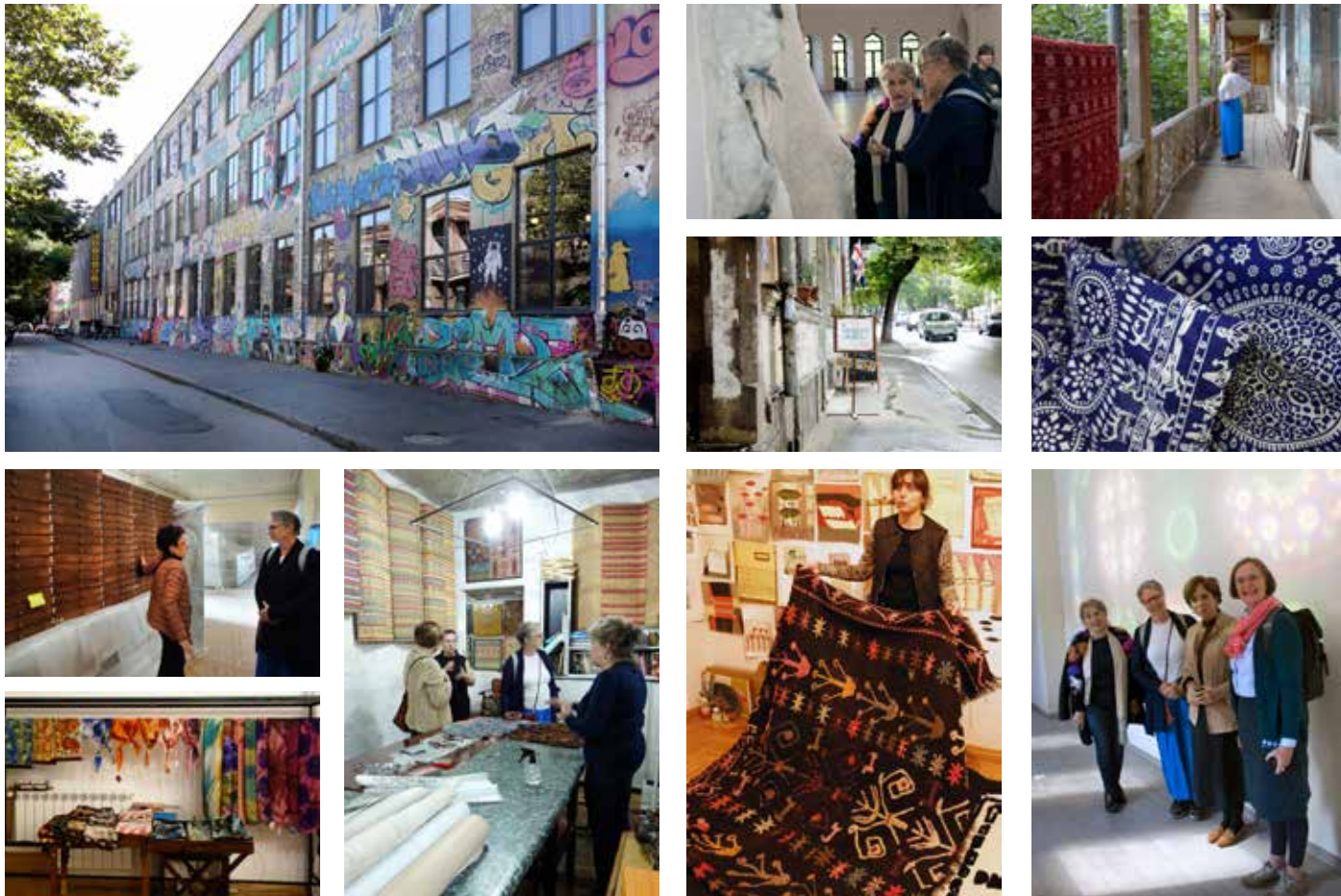


Georgia Cooperation Travel: Textile culture at the crossroads between West and East



Cultural hub Fabrica; Prof. Tina Kldiashvili/Prof. Bärbel Schmidt; Courtyard at Textilartist Nino Kipshidze; Blueprint; Gallery 27 in the Sololaki district; Prof. Tina Kldiashvili/Prof. Bärbel Schmidt/Maya Kipiani/Lucia Schwalenberg at State Academy of Arts; Prof. Nino Kvrivishvili in her atelier; Ekaterine Geguchadze showing her textile art to Maya Kipiani/Prof. Bärbel Schmidt/Prof. Tina Kldiashvili; painted silk from Eka Khuntsaria; Nino Kuprava and Prof. Bärbel Schmidt on a tour of the Silk Museum under renovation.

Photos: State Academy of the Arts, Lucia Schwalenberg.

Textile culture, the cultural heritage blue print and the crossroads between West and East were the main topics for a cooperation travel to Georgia of Prof. Bärbel Schmidt and Lucia Schwalenberg, Osnabrück University. The goal of the Textile Studies program at Osnabrück University is to train future textile teachers, stimulate the students' curiosity and excitement for textiles and encourage further studies of textile culture. The Textile Studies department offers a setting where the students experience that knowledge is unlimited and learning is for life. Textile Studies has a special responsibility on behalf of textile skills for sustainable and cultural development.

Countries at the crossroads between East and West like Georgia are embossed by a multi-layered approach to cultural history, contemporary design and post-soviet challenge. They strive for the revival of craft skills and techniques. They research and revive textile techniques such as blueprint, felting, weaving and silk painting. These techniques are taught at the State Art Academy in Tbilisi as well as practised or supported by a growing number of textile artists, regional and institutional initiatives such as the Unesco.

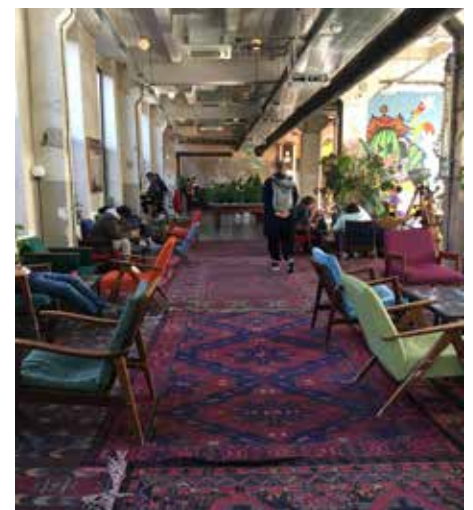
The cooperation travel is funded by the German Academic Exchange Service DAAD as preparatory trip for mobility projects with partner countries. The project is being continued by exploring concrete cooperation options in Georgia's capital Tbilisi with the State Academy of Arts, its experimental research laboratory for Blue Cloth/Lurja Supra, the States Silk Museum and local textile artists.



Lucia Schwalenberg, Prof. Bärbel Schmidt, Maya Kipiani at State Academy of the Arts. *Photos: State Academy of the Arts, Lucia Schwalenberg.*

Overwhelming hospitality, a morbid mixture of styles and the underlying concern of violence in neighboring and home regions. Traveling to Georgia feels like immersing into a melting pot between Europe and the Middle East. The country shares a border with Russia, Turkey, Armenia and Azerbaijan. Ukraine, Moldova, Romania and Bulgaria lie across the Black Sea. Iran borders below Armenia. After the 1917 revolution Georgia liberated itself from Tsarist Russia and established a republic. In 1921 the Red Army invaded and Georgia became a Soviet Republic. In 1991, Georgia regained its independence of the former USSR. The country has 4.5 million inhabitants and is the size of Bavaria. It is characterized by the breathtaking mountain landscape of the Caucasus. The highest mountain, Shkhara, measures 5201 meters. After the Russian invasion in 2008, the Georgian provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia are occupied by Russia. Crossing the non-officially recognized border is prohibited. Families and friends are separated. There is no solution in sight. The majority of the young generation in Georgia rejects Russia.

The capital Tbilisi has been a meeting place of cultures since the Silk Road. Textiles are an important part of this. Tbilisi was our base for a week with intense encounters. Tbilisi is surrounded by mountains and situated in the lowlands of the Kura River. With a spirit of cosmopolitanism, Tbilisi is home to 1.5 million people and center of most of the country's cultural and political organizations. The stunning old town with the oldest early Christian churches and historic sulfur baths is surrounded by Soviet-era apartment blocks on both sides of the river. It is the home of the State Academy of the Arts, the State Silk Museum and a variety of textile artist that we had the chance to visit. A number of museums, workshops and places worth seeing are waiting for a next time. At all places we were invited throughout the travel, we observed a warmhearted hospitality and textile culture as an integrate part of the Georgian cultural heritage.



Tbilisi Old Town, cultural hub Fabrica with hand-woven caucasian rugs. *Photos: Lucia Schwalenberg.*



Lurja Supra/Blueprint at the experimental research laboratory of the State Academy of the Arts. *Photo: State Academy of the Arts.*

The State Academy of Arts Tbilisi runs the UNESCO-project Traditional Blue Cloth/Lurji Supra with an experimental research laboratory. Goal is to develop textile handicraft, to preserve the cultural heritage of Georgian Blue Table Cloth and to support the regional creative industry in Shida Kartli, Bolnisi, Marneuli, Pankisi and Dusheti by integrating women and ethnic minorities. The Academy of Arts organised workshops together with the National Museum and the National Agency for cultural heritage preservation.

Lurji supra is a traditional block-print textile in indigo blue. It is used during supra feasts as integral part of Georgian culture. The oldest samples date back to the seventeenth century. Factory manufacturing began at the end of the nineteenth century, gradually driving out traditional hand-painting methods. At the end of twentieth century factories closed as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Production of blue tablecloths stopped. In 2010 Professors Tinatin Kldiashvili and Ketevan Kavtaradz launched a research laboratory for to restore and develop the original textile technology. Students are able to use old motifs and to create their own design.



Lurja Supra/Blueprint at the experimental research laboratory of the State Academy of the Arts Tbilisi. *Photo: Lucia Schwalenberg.*



Tina Kldiashvili with felt work, students showing tapestry weavings, loom in the textile department. *Photos: Academy of Arts, Lucia Schwalenberg.*

The Academy of Arts encourages students to develop their own approach to textile art. This includes exhibitions such as the show of textile graduate Tinatin Basilashvili, which we were able to visit. Many members of the teaching staff practise an artistic career. Tina Kldiashvili as academy vicepresident and head of textile department practises tapestry weaving, felt and embroidery works, showcased in the Tbilisi Tapestry Museum. Academic member Ekaterine Geguchadze is running her own textile studio. She uses a variety of techniques such as stained glass, weaving, felt and enamel work. Academy professor Nino Kvrivishvili works with tapestry and textile installations. She participates in international exhibitions as a parallel of the Venice Biennale and residency programs in Georgia, Germany, Switzerland and Lithuania. When we visited her, she was preparing an exhibition in Paris. She deals with the cultural history of Georgia and sheds light on its craft and industrial past. She looks for relics of material culture and fragments of memory. In doing so, she integrates motifs such as cones of yarn left over from former Soviet factories or spools like those used by her grandmother, who moved from Russia to Georgia to work in the textile industry in former time. She procured one of the few surviving handlooms for the academy to work with the students with yarn from abandoned factories. Access to equipment and material in Georgia is a challenge. In Georgia, all weaving and spinning mills ceased during the turmoil of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Reviving craft and techniques is a task.



Exhibition by Tinatin Basilashvili, Ekaterine Geguchadze in her studio, artwork by Nino Kvrivishvili. *Photos: Lucia Schwalenberg.*



Carpet dealer in the old town of Tbilisi, photo documentation of carpets. *Photos: Lucia Schwalenberg, Bärbel Schmidt.*

After a packed day full of information and visions at the Academy of Arts, we took the opportunity to re-research material culture in the galleries and squares of Tbilisi. A number of carpet dealers offer hand-woven historical and contemporary carpets from different regions of the Caucasus. These include kilims from Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia. These rugs feature geometric and imaginative patterns. Stylized animal and figures also appear, often arranged in pairs surrounded by a border with smaller decorative elements. Popular motifs include deers, peacocks and floral ornaments. The carpets are traditionally used as wall decorations, floor coverings and seating. With some of this large pictorial weavings, the question arises as to what stories they tell. This is particularly true of several carpets with the year 1941 woven into them and the motif of mounted soldiers of the Red Army, which frame a couple or a single woman in pairs. 1941 was the year when Hitler invaded Russia and when Stalin deported German settlers in the Caucasus to Siberia.



Hand-woven carpet: motif of two mounted soldiers of the Red Army and a couple with woven year 1941. *Photo: Lucia Schwalenberg.*



View of Katharinenfeld (today Bolnisi), early 19th century, houses of German settlers. *Photo: Bolnisi Museum.*

The village of Bolnisi was founded in 1818 by German families as Katharinenfeld. Religious Pietists left for the Caucasus because of economic hardship and religious coercion. Tsar Alexander I allowed them to settle and exempted them from military service. The Caucasian Germans settled as farmers, winemakers and craftsmen. The settlers built typical houses with high gables in half-timbered construction and wine cellars. With the Crimean War in the 19th century, ethnic minorities were increasingly persecuted. Economic success led to envy and resentment. Starting in 1874, exemption from military service and self-government was abolished. When the Red Army took over in 1921, the villages were renamed. This was followed by expropriation and forced collectivization. Ethnic minorities were excluded from collective farms. In 1932/33, famine followed. Arbitrary arrests occurred. When the German Nazis invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, Stalin deported the Caucasian Germans who were not married to Georgians to Siberia or Kazakhstan. There are still traces of German settlement in the streets of Bolnisi. The Protestant community meets in the newly renovated former Schulzenamt. A group of Sunday school children welcomed us with German songs. The conversation with the village elders gave touching insights into their fate of life. The Bolnisi Museum got renovated in 2020 and displays material culture from early times to the period of German colonization. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, a total of 2.3 million resettlers came to Germany as Russian Germans, including some of the former Caucasian Germans.



Singing with Sunday school children from the former German colony Katharinenfeld (today Bolnisi). *Photo: Nazi Londaridze, Lucia Schwalenberg.*

The last day of our trip we started at the Blue House hidden in a courtyard on Rustaveli Avenue with typical Georgian wooden balconies. The house and its owners experienced turbulent times. There were threats of demolition during the Stalin era and it got converted into a community space. Nowadays Nino Kipshidze and her family use it for a wide range of artistic craftsmanship such as textile art, painting, photography and architecture. Nino combines in her work pieces of cloth and vintage embroideries. She founded a Georgian Textile Group and organised exhibitions as the International Textile Biennale at the Silk Museum in Tbilisi.

The State Silk Museum is one of the oldest museums in Georgia and was part of the Caucasian Sericulture Station, that aimed to develop regional silk production. It includes objects like industrial and handcrafted textiles, cocoons, butterflies, dyes, patterns, historical photos as well as items associated with silk production such as weaving looms, a library and educational activities. Since the 90s, international textile experts help to save the institution, including the German-Dutch textile expert Beatrijs Sterk and textile friends. Nino Kuprava led us on a tour of the museum, which is under restoration, and shared her textile visions.

With a stopover at the buzzing Fabrica cultural hub, we continued to Nino Kvavilashvili at Gallery 27. She is founder of Georgian Handicraft Organisation. The gallery houses workshops and showcases regional artists with blueprint, silkprint, batik and other crafts. Craft coordinator Natia Trapaidze is aiming to revive hand-weaving, as it was applied to traditional clothing. There are almost no looms left. An courageous challenge.

After a walk along the ridge path on the edge of the old town we were warmly welcomed by Eka Khuntsaria, a textile artist and graphic designer, in her Silk Room. Her speciality are intensely colored silk paintings with stylized flowers and ornaments used as wallhangings or applied art.

The happy final to this intensive trip was an evening with the Canadian-Slovenian nature activist Carmen Kuntz. Her insights into protecting the beauty of nature in Georgia and neighboring countries were a inspiring conclusion. At the end of this trip there was a lot left for a next time.

Thanks to ... Everybody who helped and shared information for planning this research travel to Georgia. A special madloba/thanks to Maya Kipiani, Tina Kldiashvili, Ekaterine Geguchadze, Nino Kvrivishvili, Murimani, Nazi Londaridze, Nino Kipshidze, Nino Kuprava, Nino Kvavilashvili, Eka Khuntsaria, Carmen Kuntz and Beatrijs Sterk.

About Bärbel ... She teaches Textile Studies as a Professor at Osnabrück University/Germany. Her research fields are textile culture and textile education. After a cooperative project with Textile Research Centre Leiden/NL she is currently working on an exhibition project with with the Kalkriese Museum on clothing from the Roman era. Her research topics also include the Immaterial World Cultural Heritage Blueprint.

About Lucia ... After studying Journalism and Textile Design in Munich and Hannover, Lucia completed the Shuttle Course at Kunsthochschule Linz/Textiles Zentrum Haslach/Austria. She works as a textile designer, weaving lecturer and research staff member at Osnabrück University/Textile Studies. She is working on her PHD-project „The Beiderwand weaving workshop Meldorf as a textile place of memory“.



House of the family of textile artist Nino Kipshidze with typical Tbilisi balconies, view over Tbilisi at evening dawn. *Photos: Lucia Schwalenberg.*