

Artist as the ambassador

North Fort Myers artist Michael St. Amand toured The Republic of Georgia last month and appeared alongside other international artists in a major museum exhibit.

By Charles Runnells

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Michael St. Amand never planned to be an ambassador.

Then again, the North Fort Myers artist never planned to visit the former Soviet Union, either. And both of those things have happened.

St. Amand returned home last week after an eye-opening tour of The Republic of Georgia. The three-week trip included chats with local dignitaries, visits to monasteries and vineyards, and Amand's appearance in a major art exhibit alongside artists from Germany, The Philippines and 12 other countries.

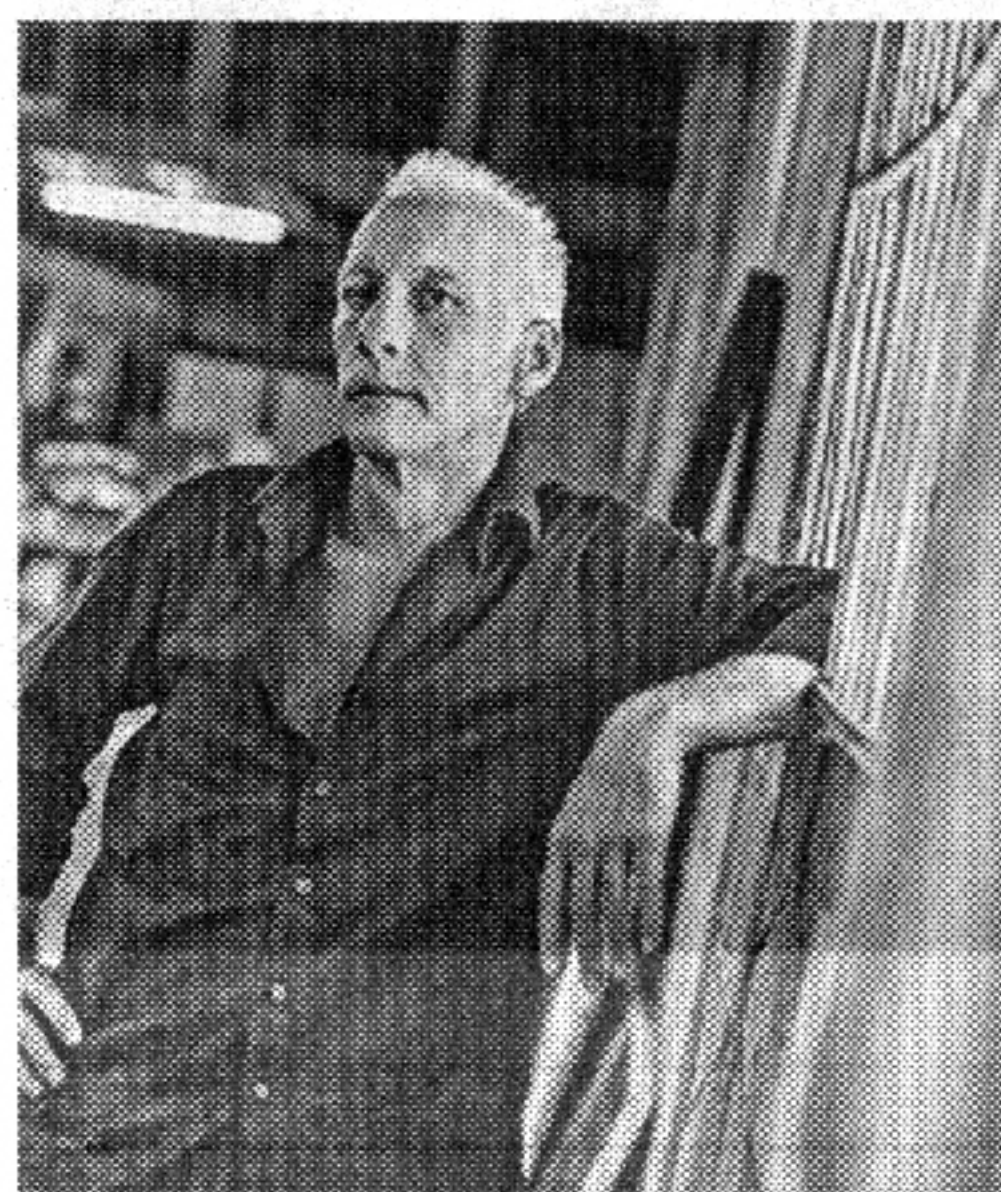
The exhibit featured two of St. Amand's large-scale paintings, plus digital art and video installations.

"The whole experience was pretty mind-blowing," says St. Amand, 54. "We were basically treated like royalty everywhere we went."

"They don't see many American artists there. They told me I was the first American painter ever shown in Georgia (alongside Los Angeles artist Rafael Serrano, who didn't make the trip)."

Now St. Amand is working with the show's creators to bring the "Punctum Contra Punctum" exhibit to Florida and elsewhere sometime in 2013 or 2014. They're shopping the tour to potential museums in the United States and Germany.

The idea is to get different cultures communicating through artwork instead of warfare.



Michael St. Amand

"Artwork is better than guns to cross cultural boundaries," St. Amand says. "It's a way to express ideas and philosophies."

"That's part of my philosophy: Making the world a better place through art."

The show's curators discovered St. Amand online and liked his work, says Georgian artist and co-organizer Alex Berdysheff. So they e-mailed St. Amand and invited him to the multimedia show at the Georgian National Museum in Tbilisi.

"He's on the edge of what's going on today in American art," Berdysheff says. "That shows in his work. What we saw (online) was enough for us to base our decision."

St. Amand and his partner, Cheridah Tyner, paid for their flights to Georgia, but exhibit organizers footed the bill for everything else.

The artist says he had no idea what to expect in the post-Soviet Union country. Georgia



Amand's large-scale painting "Mundata Sonata 4" appeared in an exhibit last month at the Georgian National Museum in The Republic of Georgia. SPECIAL TO THE NEWS-PRESS

declared independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, shortly before that country's collapse. Since then, Georgia has been plagued by poverty, civil war and other issues.

St. Amand saw poverty while he was there, but he also found friendly people, wonderful food and some impressive architecture — 4th century churches and other classic architecture standing alongside The Peace Bridge and

other 21st century buildings.

"It's beautiful to see the progress there and where they want the country to go," he says.

The tour included TV interviews and frequent discussions with locals about politics and Georgian and American history. And St. Amand took the job very seriously, realizing he wasn't just representing himself.

He was representing Amer-

ica.

"It was a beautiful, cross-cultural exchange of ideas and cultures and different mind-sets," he says. "Who would have thought that I'd be an ambassador? Of all the things in the world I could have wound up doing ..."

It was the trip of a lifetime, he says. He's already talking about going back next year.

"Will I do it again?" he says. "You bet. In a heartbeat."