

Zurab Tsereteli, Sculptor of Grand Monuments and Putin Admirer, Dies at 91

By [AFP](#)

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Sculptor Zurab Tsereteli. **Sergei Kiselev / Moskva News Agency**

Georgian-Russian sculptor Zurab Tsereteli, known for his towering and often controversial public monuments, has died at age 91, Russian state media reported Tuesday.

He passed away at his home in Peredelkino, a village southwest of Moscow, “surrounded by his works,” his assistant Sergei Shagulashvili told the RIA Novosti news agency.

Born and trained in Tbilisi, Tsereteli rose to prominence in the 1960s, designing resort complexes in Soviet Georgia. He later became chief artist for the Soviet Foreign Ministry and, from 1997 until his death, served as president of Russia’s Academy of Arts.

A favorite of Moscow’s elite, Tsereteli’s close ties with former Mayor Yury Luzhkov earned him what critics described as a “monopoly” on public art in the Russian capital. His bold,

monumental style became a fixture of Moscow's cityscape — and a frequent target of derision.

His massive statue of Peter the Great sailing down the Moscow River was widely criticized, while his 500-ton Christopher Columbus monument, built in the early 1990s, was rejected as a “monstrosity” by several U.S. cities.

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Despite the criticism, Tsereteli found praise for overseeing the reconstruction of Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in the 1990s, a project seen by many as symbolically restoring a piece of Russia's spiritual heritage after the church's destruction under Stalin.

In the final years of the Soviet Union, Tsereteli briefly gained international acclaim with works celebrating the end of the Cold War, including “Break the Wall of Distrust” in London (1989) and “Good Defeats Evil” in New York (1990), the latter crafted partly from Soviet and American missile fragments.

In 2001, he attempted to donate a 30-meter sculpture dedicated to victims of the 9/11 attacks to New York City. The piece, featuring a giant teardrop, was declined but later installed in 2005 in Bayonne, New Jersey, across the water from lower Manhattan.

Tsereteli was a vocal admirer of President Vladimir Putin. In 2004, he unveiled a five-meter bronze statue of the Russian leader in judo attire, but the Kremlin reportedly disliked the tribute so much that an anonymous official told the Komsomolskaya Pravda newspaper it belonged only “in the courtyard of the sculptor's own home.”

“He, of all people, should know that President Putin has an extremely negative attitude toward such things,” the official said.

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