

Representation of Architecture in Medieval Georgian Murals

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(Presented by Academy Member Roin Metreveli)

ABSTRACT. In recent decades representation of architecture in medieval art became of special interest for art historians as far as the concept of spatial rendering in painting reveals the world vision of the artist and of the cultural milieu of the period. However this issue is not studied sufficiently in Georgian scholarship. Main objective of the paper is to establish specific traits of the mode of representation of architecture in medieval Georgian mural painting on the background of the works of Byzantine art. On the basis of analyses of the character and content of representation of architecture in painting, six functional groups have been identified, namely: 1. Architectural setting in general; 2. Representations of extant church buildings as a part of donator portraits; 3. Representations of extant buildings in historic scenes; 4. Representations of the city of Jerusalem; 5. Representations of the Heavenly Jerusalem; 6. Representations of the Holy Sepulcher. The paper presents examples of the images relevant for each group in Georgian murals, that attest for the specific and individual character of this art. Survey of the works of Georgian mural painting on different stages of development shows that space rendering in those works is somewhat different from that in other Christian countries with rich Hellenistic and Greco-Roman cultural legacy. Special attention is paid to the character of representation of church models offered by donors to divine patrons. Importance of architectural setting is demonstrated on particular case studies that confirm specific character of medieval Georgian art and gives us an interesting insight in the artistic and iconological approach of Medieval artists and their commissioners. © 2019 Bull. Georg. Natl. Acad. Sci.

Key words: painted architecture, model-bearers, Georgian medieval painting

The spatial arrangement of a painting is one of the most important aspects of pictorial representation. E. Panofsky refers to it as a “symbolic form”, thus highlighting that the concept of spatial rendering in painting reveals the world vision of the artist and of the cultural milieu of the period [1] not only in the Middle Ages, but also at most stages of the development of painting. There is a vast amount of

literature on the aspects of perspective system in Medieval art [1-4].

Background settings, namely landscape and architecture, play an important role in the artistic rendering of the image in Medieval painting, and reveal well its content [2: 13, 18, 63]. When discussing the character of the representation of architecture in painting, six functional groups may

be identified: 1. Architectural setting in general; to be found in various scenes of the rich repertoire of Christian iconography; 2. Representations of extant church buildings (rarer, fortresses) as a part of donator portraits – model-bearers; 3. Representations of extant buildings in historic scenes; 4. Representations of the city of Jerusalem, including the scene of the Entry into Jerusalem; 5. Representations of the Heavenly Jerusalem; 6. Representations of the Holy Sepulcher. Each of these groups offers a specific insight into the iconological and artistic approach of the Medieval painters towards representing real or imaginary architecture.

Architectural Setting in General

Unlike Hellenistic and Roman art, or that of the Renaissance, Medieval painting ignores the rules of linear perspective and constructs space according to another principle that is often defined as an “inverted”, “multifocal” or “multi-centred” perspective [2:144,145; 3; 4]. This approach creates a dynamic space, involves the concept of time and gives the artist more freedom for vivid and effective expression of content and its polysemantic meaning. Painted architecture often takes the form of fantastic buildings that can hardly be imagined in real urban or rural environments.

The shapes and details of buildings in Georgian art are mostly similar to those in Byzantine painting, featuring longitudinal buildings with gable roofs, domes of different shapes and rows of openings, sometimes with the outline of masonry on walls; canopies based on columns; exedras, staircases, or long walls with merlons with a great variety of curved forms,. They usually refer to temple, church, sanctuary, altar; creating an allusion to the Old and New Testaments [2:43-44].

Studies of Georgian artworks of different periods have shown that Georgian painting always tended towards a plane rendering of space. This tendency was popular in Medieval Christian art in general, but even so, the flatness of the spatial arrangement in Medieval Georgian painting differs

in mode of expression and artistic rendering from that of other Christian countries. Its *valuer* is somewhat different from Byzantine painting in its more "illusionistic" rendering of the space. On the other hand, the outright flatness of Cappadocian murals is also unusual for Georgian art [5:221].

Certainly, the mode of expression of space can be seen to vary at different stages of the development of Medieval Georgian painting. From the 8th to the 11th centuries the flatness of space arrangement is more apparent (Ateni, Iprali, Zemo-Krikhi, etc), while in the 12th and 13th centuries, implications of "depth" are more pronounced. In the late 13th century, the murals of the St. George Church in Achi (western Georgia) clearly reveal traits of the Palaiologan style, and yet its main feature, whereby architectural and landscape settings are rendered in a more "illusionistic" manner, was totally ignored: the buildings and hills of the Georgian work are two-dimensional, just as they were in the 11th century Georgian paintings.

Even in the Palaiologan period (14th and 15th centuries), when Georgian painting shared with Byzantine art a strongly expressed spatial arrangement, this “three-dimensionality” seems to have been alien to the Georgian painters and is reduced in many ways. Various approaches may be observed in the murals of the late Medieval (post-Byzantine) period, mostly tending to the plane arrangement of space, especially in the more traditional, so-called “folk” paintings. In general, space rendering in Medieval Georgian painting differs from that of the Christian countries with a rich Hellenistic and Greco-Roman cultural legacy. The same approach may be attested to in the sculpture, metalwork and stone reliefs.

Representations of Extant Church Buildings as a Part of Donator Portraits

Representations of the models of churches offered to divine patrons (Christ, the Virgin, various saints) by *ktetors* comprise a specific group of images. Architecture as an *encomium* of its founder and

commissioner has often been used as an efficient device in literature, as well as in visual arts. There are a lot of images of model-bearers in Medieval Georgian wall painting, especially in the late Medieval period.

A significant issue in regard to painted architecture is the degree of likeness to the original building [6:12, 16]. This depended much on the intension and order of the commissioner, the decision of the artist and his knowledge about the original building, the main content of the donator's image as a whole, the message it was to bear, and other factors. Indeed, when there is an opportunity to compare the representation with the existing edifice many aspects of the painting can be revealed: what was the intended message of the commissioner, which elements of the representation were more significant for the artist, what was the source of information or inspiration for him, the level of conventionality of approach, etc. [6:12, 16].

In order to enhance understanding of this issue, one can refer to the Medieval concept of copy, which is very different from the modern notion of copy. The Medieval copy repeats the very essence of the model; its main idea, often ignoring accuracy of likeness [7:116-130]. The same approach may be seen in the mode of representation of the architecture in Medieval painting. This approach is rooted in the depth of the character of Christian art and comes from neglecting a realistic mode of expression.

A model may represent a church in general, without any name or identification. In the 11th century wall painting of the main church of the Udabno Monastery in Gareji, the *ktetor* holds a simple gabled building of single-nave church without any specific traits.

Yet, in most cases, the model represents a particular building, using characteristic details and traits, including the architectural type of the church (domed or with gable roof), proportions, shape of openings, annexes, etc. In some instances, one can

clearly see an attempt to achieve as much likeness as possible given the limits of the media, scale and knowledge. Examples of a "photographical" likeness with an original building are rare, as artists typically selected those elements that were most characteristic from functional and symbolic points of view.

In some murals, the model in the hands of a *ktetor* is large enough to catch the eye not only because of its size, but also due to its place in the composition, also being highlighted by other artistic devices. The model of the Gelati Cathedral of the Virgin that King David the Builder (1089-1125) offers to God is of a noticeable size and, what is more noteworthy, has a great semblance to the actual building. Unlike Gelati, the image of the church in the donor portrait of King Levan (1520-1574) found in the Gremi Church of the Archangels in Kakheti, does not represent the general outline and proportions of the real building.

In the late Middle Ages, a compositional scheme was developed with the position of the church model as central, supported and elevated by two donors on each side (Nikortsinda, Martvili, Khobi, etc), which is actually a reference to the 10th century stone relief from Petobani Church. Surprisingly, there are few representations of model-bearers in Georgian murals from the period between the 10th and 13th centuries, although many more can be found in sculptures on the facades of churches. Royal donors are rarely seen holding the models of churches.

Among the five portraits of Queen Tamar (1184-1213) only one, in the wall painting of Vardzia rock-hewn church, shows her with the model of the fortress of Vardzia, offering it to the Virgin. In all other cases she, her father and her son are depicted in the pose of supplication but without models offered to God [8:30-39]. Thus, there are some specific traits that distinguish the approach to representations of the *ktetors* and model-bearers in Georgian murals from that in Byzantium.

Representations of Extant Buildings in Historic Scenes

There is a number of representations of historic buildings in Georgian wall paintings. Among them, the most outstanding example is the representation of the 7th century Cathedral of Bana (in Tao, historic region in south-west Georgia, present-day Turkey) in the murals painted in 1036 in the south apse of the Oshki Church of St John the Baptist [9:11-22]. The image of the Bana Cathedral is supplied with a Georgian inscription that leaves no doubt as to which church is being represented. Besides, the depicted building bears a close resemblance to the remains of the cathedral. The composition is rather damaged, preventing identification of the scene. It may be presumed it is a representation of an important historic event that took place in Bana Cathedral. The majority of scholars believe it to be the wedding of King Bagrat to Byzantine Princess Helena in 1032 [10:137, 146-148; 11:139-194].

Representations of the City of Jerusalem

The rendering of the images of the city of Jerusalem, especially in narrative scenes, provides interesting insight into the approach of Medieval artists when representing real architecture which they are familiar with at least in the form of illustrations and sketches. The iconography of the Entry into Jerusalem has a long history, dating back to the early Byzantine period (such as the illumination of the 6th century Rossano Codex). Since then, the main elements of the composition were established, albeit with slight variations. In most of the scenes, along with the representation of the city of Jerusalem, there is a depiction of a mountain, generally referred to as the Mount of Olives, usually placed behind the figure of Christ and the Apostles accompanying Him.

The scene of the Entry into Jerusalem in the 13th century mural painting of the Archangel Church at Tanghili (Upper Svaneti, highlands of western Georgia) offers a rather rare version of this image [12:398-400]. The mountain appears as a low hill.

At its top there is a representation of a cross with diagonal rays between its arms: an image and prediction of the future Crucifixion, thus identifying the hill as Golgotha. Moreover, next to it there is a representation of a small building like a single-nave church typical of those built in Svaneti, presumably symbolizing the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. At the same time, in the representation of the city of Jerusalem, the churches inside the enclosing wall are domed buildings, quite different from church architecture in Svaneti. Apparently, the artist took influence from a model illustrated in a book illumination or elsewhere, and yet the image of Golgotha seems to be of his own invention. This “prophecy” of the Crucifixion is highlighted to an extent that can hardly be found in other Georgian examples.

The scene of the Entry into Jerusalem in the 16th century murals of the church in Chala (Imereti, western Georgia) is divided into two parts on the west and south walls. The image of the city of Jerusalem is represented “separately” and looks more like a church building with two towers on the sides, without enclosing walls, houses, temples, etc. What is most interesting, the Georgian inscription identifies it as a *saqdari* – church.

Representations of the Heavenly Jerusalem

A polysemantic character of the Christian art is well attested in the 16th century representation of Heavenly Jerusalem in the north annex of the Gelati Cathedral of the Virgin [13]. The image is part of a larger composition of the coronation of the king and queen, displayed around the entrance, with Christ in the tympanum and two angels descending from heaven to the royal persons depicted in the lower zone on each side of the entrance. Angels bear the royal insignia, thus emphasizing the main content: royal power in general and the king and the queen blessed from Heaven. The image of Heavenly Jerusalem is placed above the figure of the King, and the Angel nearly embraces it in offering a sword to the King.

In the middle of this circular city is the large building of a domed church, bearing close resemblance to the Gelati Cathedral of the Virgin. It is noteworthy that Gelati Monastery was founded by King David the Builder in 1106 as the “New Jerusalem”. Thus, the polysemantic character of this image of the city is quite obvious [13:174-179].

Representations of the Holy Sepulcher

There are many representations of the Tomb of Christ in narrative scenes, though not so many referring to the architecture of the Holy Sepulcher [14:128-144]. An important example is provided by the 17th century painting in Svetitskhoveli Cathedral in Mtskheta, the religious capital of Georgia. Narrative scenes depicted on the canopy of the life-giving pillar, believed to have been erected on the place of burial of Christ’s Tunic, illustrate the history of the conversion of Kartli.

On the west wall of the canopy, in the lower tier, is a representation of the construction of the first church in Mtskheta. In accordance with the

texts of the Life of St. Nino and Conversion of Georgia, St. Nino, stands in front of a pillar that is elevated by two angels. But, unlike in other representations of this scene, where the pillar is depicted in plain architectural form, here it looks like a building thanks to the many openings depicted on its walls, as well as a canopy based on thin columns at its top – a clear indication to the Holy Sepulcher [15:89-93].

The representations of architecture, both imaginative and real, in Medieval Georgian art give an interesting insight into the creative process as well as into the iconological approach of Medieval artists and their commissioners. I have mentioned only several aspects of this issue. The vast material and richness of approaches certainly opens prospects for further investigation.

The work was supported by Shota Rustaveli National Science Foundaton of Georgia (SRNSFG). Grant no FR2017/ FR17-221. Project title: “Perception and Representation of Architecture in Medieval Georgia”.

ხელოვნების ისტორია

არქიტექტურის გამოსახვა შუა საუკუნეების ქართული კედლის მხატვრობაში

მ. დიდებულიძე

გ. ჩუბინაშვილის სახ. ქართული ხელოვნების ისტორიისა და ძეგლთა დაცვის ეროვნული კვლევითი ცენტრი. ძველი ქართული ხელოვნების განყოფილება

(წარმოდგენილია აკადემიის წევრის რ. მეტრეველის მიერ)

ბოლო ათწლეულებში საგრძნობლად გაიზარდა ხელოვნებათმცოდნეთა ინტერესი შუა საუკუნეების სახვით ხელოვნებაში არქიტექტურის გამოსახვის მიმართ, ვინაიდან, როგორც ცნობილია, მისი მხატვრული გადაწყვეტა მეტწილად ასახავს ოსტატის, კულტურული გარემოს, ეპოქის მსოფლმხედველობას. თუმცა ქართულ მეცნიერებაში ეს საკითხი სათანადოდ შესწავლილი არ არის. წარმოდგენილი სტატიის მიზანია, დადგინდეს არქიტექტურის გამოსახვის სპეციფიკური ხასიათი შუა საუკუნეების ქართულ მხატვრობაში და გამოიკვეთოს როგორც საზიარო, ასევე განსხვავებული ნიშნები ბიზანტიური მხატვრობის ნამუშევრებთან. მხატვრობაში ხუროთმოძღვრების გამოსახვის ხასიათისა და შინაარსის ანალიზის საფუძველზე გამოყოფილ იქნა ექვსი ფუნქციური ჯგუფი, სახელდობრ: 1. არქიტექტურა ზოგადად; 2. რეალურად არსებული ნაგებობების გამოსახულებანი, როგორც საქტიტორო პორტრეტების შემადგენელი ნაწილი; 3. არსებული ნაგებობების გამოსახულებანი ისტორიული შინაარსის სცენებში; 4. ქალაქ იერუსალიმის გამოსახულებები; 5. ზეციური იერუსალიმის გამოსახულებები; 6. უფლის საფლავის გამოსახულებანი. სტატიაში განხილულია დასახელებული ჯგუფების შესაბამისი გამოსახულებანი ქართულ კედლის მხატვრობაში, როგორც ამ ხელოვნების თავისებური ხასიათის დადასტურება. ქართული ფერწერის ნაწარმოებების განხილვა განვითარების სხვადასხვა ეტაპზე ცხადყოფს, რომ მათი სივრცითი გადაწყვეტა განსხვავებულია იმ ქრისტიანული ქვეყნების ხელოვნებისგან, რომლებსაც უფრო ძლიერი ელინისტურ-რომაული კულტურული ტრადიცია ჰქონდათ – ქართული ნიმუშები უფრო მიდრეკილია სიბრტყოვანებისკენ. საგანგებო ყურადღება ეთმობა ეკლესიათა მოდელების გამოსახვას, რომლებსაც ქტიტორები მიართმევენ ზეციურ მფარველებს. არქიტექტურული ანტურაჟის მნიშვნელოვნება განხილულია რამდენიმე კონკრეტული ნიმუშის საფუძველზე, რომლებიც მოწმობს შუა საუკუნეების ქართული ხელოვნების სპეციფიკურ ხასიათს და შუა საუკუნეების ოსტატთა და მათი დამკვეთების მხატვრული და სახითმეტყველებითი მიდგომების საგულისხმო ხედვას გვთავაზობს.

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Received May, 2019