

Paradigm of the Development of Icon Painting in the Church of Soviet Georgia

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The centuries-long tradition of icon painting was all but lost after the establishment of Soviet rule in Georgia, and as such, the issue of its restoration became particularly acute at the end of the 20th century, when church art freed itself from atheistic ideological pressure. The widespread theory of canonical icon painting, which originates from 19th-century Russia, claims that there is only one artistic language fit for conveying Biblical truth. Yet, the research shows that neither the Tbilisi Sioni and Didube murals, nor the decoration of Kashveti church link the canon of icon painting with any artistic style. These mural decorations, alongside with the archive documents, confirm that the Georgian Catholicos-Patriarchs favored the application of new, modern artistic methods in ecclesiastical painting – those being familiar to contemporary society. The large-scale construction of churches in post-Soviet Georgia, accompanied by massive decoration works, contributed to the creation of a primitive, superficial interpretation of canonical icon painting. Therefore, analysing the concept behind church decorations of the Soviet period is a precondition for proper understanding of the renewal of the icon painting tradition. © 2023 Bull. Georg. Natl. Acad. Sci.

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Most of the centuries-old Georgian artworks belong to church art, and so are the subject of the interest of art historians, and yet little attention has been paid to them from the theological perspective. The post-Soviet era, which was marked by a growing call for themes of national identity and religion in art, created a demand for new forms of icon painting. This, in turn, led to the question of how traditional art forms could be restored in order to be properly used to advance this rich heritage of art further. It was then found that the Georgian school of icon painting (masters, and the knowledge of

their work) had been completely lost. The artists who came from secular painting were learning the rules for depicting an icon (the special requirements set by the church) from foreign literature and masters.

The problem, known today as the canonicity of icon painting, was first identified in Russia at the end of the 19th century. Critical evaluation of churches decorated in the European style laid the basis for works which are still used as guides to the canonicity of icon painting. These works strictly define that the "iconicity" of an image should be

created by artistic forms that point to the sanctity of the archetype image, and ‘symbolic realism’ is merely an artistic language which unfolds the spiritual world of man as the temple of God. „The issue in the bitter struggles of the iconoclastic period was not merely the right to represent God and His saints; the central issue was precisely the image bearing and revealing the truth, i.e., a certain “style” of art, which corresponded to the Gospel. For a thousand years, the “style” of the icon was the common heritage of all of Christendom, whether in the East or the West. There was no other“ [1: 469-470].

Georgia engaged in this debate at the end of the 20th century and, along with supporters of the theory of symbolic realism, there were opponents who appealed to history and argued that “there were neither the ‘canonical forms’, nor the mandatory techniques in old times; the canon serves a more general purpose of icon painting and should be understood more as an internal spiritual work” [2:209].

The position of Georgian scholars and artists was shared by Ilia II (Catholicos-Patriarch of Georgia from 1977), and the murals of the Didube and Sioni churches in Tbilisi (1978-1988) confirm this, with murals created by well-known contemporary Georgian artists who were given full artistic freedom. At the meeting of the artistic council, Catholicos-Patriarch Ilia II noted that the sketches presented by Al. Bandzeladze were fully acceptable from the ecclesiastical point of view, and with this, he approved the modern artistic interpretation of the biblical stories and the individual style of the artist [3].

An even more daring move was the decoration of Sioni Cathedral with a cubist-abstractionist painting by Levan Tsutskiridze. It was planned to assign more contemporary artists to paint church murals, but the civil war in Tbilisi and other events that followed put a halt to the process.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the painting of thousands of newly built churches, and

decorating them with icons and other necessary items, has required a plethora of icon-painters and an accelerated pace of work. Therefore, new Georgian churches were decorated mainly with imported materials, or painted by self-taught artists. A new generation of icon painters appeared en masse, and no attempt has been made in recent years to perform church painting in a modern artistic style.

The process of restoring and further developing the icon painting tradition is ongoing, as is the fact that it is often accompanied by disagreements and contradictions among art historians, artists, and clergy. Thus, it is even more interesting to understand the concept behind ecclesiastical painting created during the Soviet era – a most difficult period for the Church of Georgia, which regardless everything, represents the very first attempt to restore the interrupted tradition of Georgian icon painting.

Patriarch Kalistrate Tsintsadze, Catholicos-Patriarch of Georgia (in 1932-1952, canonized as a saint in 2016) was closely involved in the construction of Kashveti Church in Tbilisi. Its decoration was assigned to Lado Gudiashvili, a Georgian artist who mastered his art in Paris.

The analysis of the mural shows that Lado Gudiashvili used his knowledge in full: he applied both monumental and easel painting, as well as decorative and applied art, while, in terms of technology, he painted the frescoes of the Kashveti altar with hot wax paints (encaustic), produced using his own formula, thus creating the first pattern of unique wax monumental painting in Georgia.

In 1947, during the era of belligerent atheism in Soviet Georgia, the painting of the church on the central avenue of the capital city was hardly imaginable, so the new daring artistic solution became a subject of acute public discussion. As seen from the memoirs of his contemporaries, these particular circumstances led Patriarch Kalistrate to affirm his position in writing, and, along with describing Lado Gudiashvili’s work, to clearly specify the principles

of the icon painting tradition and its canonicity, the observance of which he would wish for from the artist assigned the job. From the text, we learn that a critical attitude towards the artist had already been shown during the working process, often manifested through negative, emotional and unfair expressions of discontent. "This critical attitude is most often shown by those who strictly adhere to the traditional forms of icon painting", concludes the author. "If we look at the tradition of temple decoration, we see constant changes ... There have often been many attempts to stop the developing of the church art but the church strongly condemns them, and blesses the artists in their inspiration to express the messages of the Gospel in the spirit of the modern times, and thereby, confirm the oneness of the divine source. What is the tradition of temple decoration, if not a living connection with the art of the people and the era?" [4].

The analysis of the Kashveti murals shows that a fundamental pillar of the new ecclesiastical painting is that the traditional iconographic scheme and the content of the Biblical mystery should be present, but the message conveyed by the contemporary church should bear a new theological emphasis; it should be relevant to the people of the modern era, and therefore, the artist should choose modern aesthetic forms in order to establish a living connection between the depicted and the believer. If we compare this concept with the theory of 'symbolic realism' mentioned above, we can see a radical difference, since the mentioned theory recognizes the one and only artistic language of creating an Orthodox icon, which ensures compliance of the image with the Biblical truth. We believe that the grounds for the position of Catholicos-Patriarch of Georgia Kalistrate Tsintsadze should be sought in the Decree of the Seventh Ecumenical Council.

The text of the Decree gives a list of the means of painting known at the time, and it can be assumed that this points to those materials, which can yet be discovered by artists in the future:

"...venerable and holy images, in painting and mosaic, as of other fit materials" [5]. It is important to note that in its Decree (which represents a summary document of the main decisions that was made) the Ecumenical Council considered it necessary to specifically approve a variety of icon-making technologies and methods. This, in turn, implies a diversity of artistic forms, since using different paints and materials serves the purpose of creating diverse art forms.

The rules for making and placing icons, created by the Holy, Great, Ecumenical Synod, serve the main purpose of icon veneration and its primary function of connecting the holy prototype with the believer. We believe that this intermediary, missionary function is the main reason substantiating the need for artistic diversity in icons. The Council set the icon-painter the mission to make images of saints using native and modern aesthetics of a particular culture and epoch in order to allow "men to be lifted up to the memory of their prototypes, and to a longing after them" [5]. According to the New Testament, in order to achieve this mission, the missionary should always communicate through the other person's language and culture [6].

We believe that the painting commissioned by Patriarch Kalistrate for the Kashveti altar was done according to the principle required by the missionary purpose of the icon as a visual text, and the artistic work was evaluated by the Patriarch using the same criteria. By presenting the Georgian landscape and using a modern artistic style, the artist aimed precisely at attracting viewers and provoking a sense of familiarity and belonging, while by using wax technology, he gave the frescoes a better texture and durability.

Kalistrate Tsintsadze's letters show that under the conditions of physical, financial and moral persecution, the Patriarch fought not only to preserve the church services, but also the cherished aspects of those services – Georgian chanting, architecture and icon-painting – by studying their needs. He was well aware of the aesthetics that

were organic to Georgian culture and taste, and of those different from it, and meticulously worked to update the church literature. In almost all his works, one can find the principles he expressed regarding the Kashveti murals – speaking in a language understandable and acceptable to the listener and viewer in prayer and theology. As with the murals, the Patriarch also worked on liturgical texts by updating and correcting them in order to make prayers more understandable.

Thus, the analysis of church painting made during the period of Patriarch Kalistrate Tsintsadze highlights that all branches of divine service, inclu-

ding iconography, need constant renewal. Even in such a difficult time as it was, he managed to create a pattern of church decoration, which organically fitted into the great monuments of Georgian culture. Performed in compliance with the church teachings, the Kashveti altar decoration remains an outstanding example for study which continues the best tradition of icon painting.

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ბელოგნების ისტორია

ხატწერის განვითარების პარადიგმა საბჭოთა საქართველოს ეკლესიაში

თ. ინწკირველი

საქართველოს ტექნიკური უნივერსიტეტი, თეოლოგიის სასწავლო-სამეცნიერო ცენტრი, თბილისი, საქართველო

(წარმოდგენილია აკადემიის წევრის ლ. მელიქიშვილის მიერ)

საქართველოს მრავალსაუკუნოვანი ხატწერის ტრადიცია საბჭოთა მმართველობის დამყარების შემდეგ საბოლოოდ დაიკარგა. მისი განახლების პრობლემა მთელი სიმძაფრით XX საუკუნის ბოლოს დადგა, როდესაც გაირკვა, რომ აღარავის ჰქონდა ცოდნა იმის შესახებ, თუ რა სპეციფიკური მოთხოვნები აქვს მართლმადიდებელ ეკლესიას ხატწერისადმი, ანუ, რას წარმოადგენს ხატწერის კანონიკა. დღეს გავრცელებული თეორიის მიხედვით არსებობს ხატწერის ერთადერთი მხატვრული ენა, რომელიც მთელი საქრისტიანოს მონაპოვარია და შესაფერისია სახარებისეული ჭეშმარიტების გადმოსაცემად. კვლევამ აჩვენა, რომ საქართველოს კათოლიკოს-პატრიარქის, ილია მეორის დაკვეთით შესრულებული მოხატულობები თბილისის სიონისა და დიდუბის ღმრთისმშობლის ტაძრებისა, ისევე, როგორც ქაშვეთის წმ. გიორგის ტაძრის 1947 წელს შესრულებული მოხატულობა, ხატწერის კანონიკურობას არ უკავშირებს გამომსახველობის მხატვრულ სტილს, არამედ პირიქით, ამ მოხატულობათა ანალიზი და

პატრიარქ კალისტრატეს არქივში დაცული მასალების შესწავლა ცხადყოფს, რომ საქართველოს კათოლიკოს-პატრიარქების მიერ ხატწერის წესად მოაზრებულია თანამედროვე საზოგადოებისთვის მისაღები, ახალი მხატვრული ხერხებისა და ფორმების გამოყენება. ეს პოზიცია პასუხობს VII მსოფლიო საეკლესიო კრების განჩინებას, რომელიც საეკლესიო ხელოვნების შესასრულებლად აკურთხებს ყოველგვარ ტექნიკას. საქართველოში დიდი რაოდენობით ტაძართმშენებლობის საჭიროებამ და მათი გამშვენების მასშტაბურმა სამუშაოებმა კანონიკური ხატწერის მარტივ, ზედაპირულ გაგებას შეუწყო ხელი. ამ ფონზე საბჭოთა პერიოდში შექმნილი საეკლესიო მხატვრობის კონცეფციის ანალიზი ტრადიციის მართებულად გააზრებისა და განახლების საწინდარია.

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