

Georgian Illustrated Manuscripts from Tao-Klarjeti

Georgian manuscripts copied and illustrated in Tao-Klarjeti are the earliest examples of Georgian book art. Therefore, the major features which connect Georgian miniature painting with Oriental Christian or Byzantine world were revealed in their artistic aesthetics as well as the unique character of their décor.

The first illustrated Georgian manuscript connected with the Tao-Klarjeti scriptorium is of 9th century. In Adyshi Gospel of 897 according to the early Christian artistic tradition, illustrated pages are assembled at the beginning of the gospel text. The portraits of the Evangelist confirm the existence of old artistic model and represent the so-called “mixed” iconographic type of the writers (standing and seating).

The most impressive composition here is a sanctuary with a sort of dome (Ciborium). It seems that this page ends Christ’s terrestrial way of life, as described in New Testament and there for, looks like symbolic indication of the “Holy Sepulchre“, built by Constantine the Great.

The late antique traditions are shown in artistic peculiarities of the miniatures, light, bright (pink, green, blue) palette, to certain extent in pictorial rendering of figures, in refined, subtle and tidy manner of execution, accentuation of the content by color, gradation of main tone, combination of the local color - all these are main trends of the miniatures from this book.

Painter Theodor of Jruchi Gospel (H-1660) represents quite different manner of illumination. The principle of illustration offered by him outstrips from the artistic demands of the epoch. Effigies of the Evangelists represent the close connection with late antique cultural world: their figures, expression, complicated garments, decorative elements of the architectural backgrounds, cockleshell-shaped lunettes. In this case such structure reminds us the theatrical scenery.

Alongside with conventional artistic forms, this manuscript includes first topical scenes from the gospel text: the evangelists are coupled with healing scenes: St.Matthew with iconic representation of the Virgin with child, St.Mark with blind healing, St.Luke with evil spirit and St.John with cure of paralytic scenes.

Copied and illustrated at Shatberdi monastery these manuscripts show the different approach to the illumination and reveal an existence of old artistic tradition.

Early Georgian illuminated manuscripts manifested great impact of East Christian book art. Influences of Syriac artistic traditions are reflected in the forms and decorations of the Canon tables, in the iconography of the portraits of Evangelists and in the forms and the methods of distribution of the Crosses in the text of Georgian Gospel-books.

Syriac influences were deep and strong from the beginning, covering all elements of book decoration. Traces of these influences are clearly distinguished.

Paper will examine the use of Syriac artistic peculiarities (starting from the Rabbula Gospel) on the Georgian manuscripts. Two groups of Georgian manuscripts will be investigated: manuscripts from Tao-Klarjeti artistic school of the 9-10th centuries and manuscripts from the Black Mountain (Antioch) of the 11th century.

The paper focused on the study of characteristic features of the Syriac manuscripts (Rabbula Gospel, Bibl.Nat.Syr. 30, 40, 41, 341,355, 356, Berlin, Preuss.Bibl.Sachau 220, 332 and etc.) reflecting different principles and aspects of decoration and will show the similarities and influences with the Georgian codices (Adyshi, Jruchi, Berti Gospels, A-98, A-484, S-962 and others). Paper presents iconographic and artistic analysis of the decor and iconographic variations used in both Syriac and Georgian manuscripts.

Historical background and cultural interactions between these two regions will be also discussed

To this scriptorium is also connected liturgical book of chants (S-425). The authors’ eastern appearances, their block-shape figures, variegated colors and water-color effects are characteristic for this artistic school.

The resemble features are represented in coupled series of Tskarostavi Gospels (A-98): in spite of primitive rendering Tao-Klarjetian features are obvious: eastern types, importance of line, transparent water-colors.

Eventually, the scribes began to use the cinnabar and the letters became decorative bearing some elements of ornamentation. Among the decorated manuscripts the gospels stand out by their specific ornamentations. Location of some elements of décor depend on the context of the text, therefore the succession of distribution in the ornamentation of the gospels is almost fixed.

In case of artistic decoration capital letters (Initials) occupy an important position. Till X century contours of capital letters looked like the text letters: they were written by ink, only a bit larger. Stylization of the capital letter at first took place in the IX century.

Our paper was to represent why the artists used this graphical style to adorn only the Spiritual books (like Synaxarion, Chants and etc.) and chose "Byzantinised", graceful miniatures to decorate gospel books.

Among the illustrated manuscripts of the XI century Mestia Gospel should be noted. Copied at the Oshki monastery the codex is the best model of the Tao-Klarjetian artistic school.

One of the Canon tables reflects our attention with its unusual execution in the form of domed church. Plausibly painter was inspired with the architectural splendor of Oshki church.

In the XII century the decorations became richer and more solemn.

Canon Tables occupy a special place in the décor of manuscripts illustrated in Tao-Klarjeti which are the most traditional element in the formation of artistic structure of Gospels.

The method of creation, development and formation of the artistic images of the system of canon tables starts in the early Middle centuries and, together with the letter of its author, Eusebius of Caesarea, became an indispensable part of Christian book arts. The series of canon tables made it easier to find identical extracts of the Gospel text during the liturgical year. The canon tables created in early middle ages acquired decorative character together with their practical function. In many cases they became the most decorative illustrations, carrying the symbolic meaning.

In the process of the decoration of Tao-Klarjeti manuscripts the letter by Eusebius of Caesarea did not play a particularly important role in the process of the manuscript illustration and the artists only presented the series of vaults. Eusebius of Caesarea allotted 10 pages to the canon tables and its original variant has not reached us.

Editing reforms carried out in the 10th century changed the original format of manuscripts. The canon tables were arranged on 10 pages and together with the letter of Eusebius of Caesarea the number of them reached 12. The Syrian (16-19) and Latin (12-16) systems changes accordingly. Only the Armenian system retained its original, a 10- page form. It is difficult to determine the regularity regarding the number of canon tables in the manuscripts from Tao-Klarjeti of the 9th-10th centuries. They are arranged on 5-8 pages (Adishi, Jruchi). The shape of the canon tables is also worth mentioning: if earlier single, double or threepart systems were frequent (Adishi, Jruchi, Berti, Tskarostavi), from the 11th century the framing in the shape of triumphal arch appears. However, this change was gradual and it appeared in a final shape in Mestia Gospel canon tables.

This paper will present the artistic evolution of the canon table system in Tao-Klarjeti manuscripts and also, iconographic or stylistic tendencies typical of this artistic school in the context of Georgian, Byzantine, Greek, Syrian or other contexts of Eastern Christian book paintings.

The development line of canon tables revealed in Adishi, Jruchi, Tskharostavi, Mestia Gospels, their gradual modification which appeared in the final form in the décor of Mestia Gospel will also be discussed in the paper.

Artistic development of Georgian Canon table systems reveals that the editing or artistic changes, appearing in the Byzantine manuscripts at the end of the 10th century, are reflected in Georgian codes. Modified shape, general structure, introduction of entablatures and renewed ornamental repertoire are obvious illustrations of this opinion.

The goal of the paper was to reveal and characterize artistic specificity of the canon table series found in the manuscripts from Tao-Klarjeti, describe their aesthetics and the influence of cultural connections regarding the development of this décor in Georgian tradition.