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Georgian Miniature: Key Stages of Development

In my present lecture I will talk about key stages of development of the Georgian miniature. Although this Seasonal School is dedicated to Tao-Klarjeti I decided not to limit myself only to Tao-Klarjeti group of manuscripts but present in general outline the other illuminated codices, which are very important and interesting for the study of the history of art of not only Georgia, but also Byzantium and in general, of the East Christian world. All these handwritten books are created in the different times and therefore they present artistic tasks and peculiarities of their solutions on the different stages of development of the Georgian miniature.

All the statements you will hear today are delivered by two prominent Georgian scientists, Rene Shmerling and Gaiane Alibegashvili. I also used the works of the notable Georgian scholar, member of this Kekelidze Center of Manuscripts, Elene Matchavariani. I also want to outline valuable contribution of Nino Kavtaria, young promising scientist of Center of Manuscripts to the study of the manuscripts copied in the scriptorium of the Black Mountain and especially to the research of manuscript of Alaverdi Gospels.

According to the surviving evidence, Georgian miniature tradition spans the period from the 9th through the 18th century. Foundation of monasteries as early as the 5th-6th century attests to the role Christianity played in shaping ideology and culture in Georgia. Monasteries, which served as centres of literary activity, contributed to the advancement of Georgian writing and miniature painting. None of the extant manuscripts dated to the period earlier than the 9th century, including 5th-7th century fragmented texts of the palimpsests, is illustrated. However, these early manuscripts stand out for their brilliant calligraphy. The majority of these early manuscripts are large codices remarkable for the delicate refinement of the *asomtavruli* (majuscule) letters in which they are rendered. The pattern of arrangement of a text and blank spaces around it in these manuscripts is highly impressive. The artistic effect is based on the division of texts in clearly separated lines, the steady rhythm created by a regular succession of letters, as well as the use of ink of varying intensity creating an effect of gentle transition from dark to light brown tones and enlivening the yellowish surface of the parchment. Until the late 9th and early 10th century, Georgian manuscript pages were illustrated sparingly. Despite the use of bright red in titles, capitals and tale pieces, these miniatures create an impression of monochrome paintings.

It was not until the second half of the 10th century, or more precisely, the 970s, that the artistic appearance of Georgian manuscripts began to change. Cinnabar became widely used along with decorative elements, such as initials and later headpieces, becoming more and more common. At that stage headpieces in manuscripts copied in Georgia, notably the collections of hymns by Modrekili, were still shaped as narrow, horizontally elongated rectangles.

My presentation is dedicated to miniature painting, a main element of text decoration. Illustrating the content, it is a central, indivisible part of a manuscript page defining its artistic and compositional image.

Of the surviving manuscripts, only two codices are illustrated, namely the Adishi Gospels copied in 897 and Jruchi 1 Gospels, the text of the latter having been inscribed in 936, and the miniatures executed in 940. The miniatures of both manuscripts are stylistically akin to the 9th and 10th century works and demonstrate the diversity of models used by Georgian artists.

The miniatures in the Adishi manuscript are located at the beginning of the text. On the verso of the folio is depicted a quadripholium, while the next five folios bear canon tables. These are followed by two miniatures, one of which features an evangelist standing on two feet and another – a sitting evangelist. The miniatures terminate in a separately depicted ciborium, also referred to as *tempietto*.

Another manuscript, Jruchi I, is the only surviving manuscript to have the illustrations of the scenes of Christ Healing Miracles (Healing of the Blind Man, Healing of the Obsessed Man and Healing of the Paralyzed Man) united into a single cycle. No other Georgian or foreign manuscript provides these scenes grouped into one cycle. Given that such scenes are absent in manuscript illustrations before the 5th century, it becomes obvious that the models available to Georgian artists belonged to the period earlier than the 5th century, i.e. Late Antiquity, when the Healing scenes were more relevant due to their symbolic essence (the theme of Salvation) and responded to the vital interests of the time.

These miniatures are highly remarkable not only for their thematic composition, but also due to the principle of their distribution in the codex. The title page of the Gospels, as in the Adishi Gospels, is topped by a quadripholium. The next seven pages are taken up by the canon tables. Yet unlike other illuminated Georgian manuscripts, the remaining eight miniatures are located close to the text. Compositions are distributed according to individual Gospels. Each Gospel has two miniatures in the beginning, on the verso and the recto of the folio respectively: the Gospel of Matthew features Matthew the Evangelist and an icon-like image of the Virgin and Child; the Gospel by Mark the Evangelist shows Mark and the Healing of the Blind Man; the Gospel by Luke is supplemented with the image of Luke the Evangelist and the Healing of the Paralyzed Man, while the Gospel by John presents the image of John and the Healing of the Possessed Man. Each thematic composition contains only two characters: Christ and the sick man. The background is neutral, i.e. the point of action is not marked. Yet it appears that in the prototype the background of the figures was spatial. Other differences are also apparent, which allows us to believe that these Georgian miniatures deviate from their prototype of Late Antiquity to conform with the principles of medieval worldview. For example, free postures of the figures and their natural movement rendered with the knowledge of the anatomy of the human body co-exist with the petrified movements, lack of proportion, and angularity of drapery folds.

Prompted by a new artistic spirit, the revision of the characteristics inherent in the prototype also entailed the changing of a colour palette. This is evidenced by thick layers of paint applied to specific sections of the background and figures. These features set them apart from the Jruchi I miniatures characterized by light, lively and refined patterns, which still retained the linearity that most probably characterized the prototype dating from Late Antiquity.

It is remarkable that Christ and John are presented as young men. Also noteworthy are other details, such as a columned portico, an arcade supported by columns framing the compositions, ornamental motifs, curled leaves at the bottom of the arch. These elements can be found in the manuscripts containing Caesarian text-type with canon tables.

It thus appears that compared with the Adishi illustrations, the Jruchi I miniatures display a closer kinship with the Near East art which, in its turn, takes roots in the Hellenistic art of Late Antiquity.

Now regarding the artistic schools.

It is very rarely that Georgian artists provide notes regarding the place of manuscript inscription, due to which manuscripts dating from the 9th through the 11th century cannot be assigned to the places of their origin. It remains unknown whether they were produced in central regions of Georgia, such as Kartli and Kakheti, or in western Georgia. Yet the intensive efforts aiming at producing national art evidenced in different regions of Georgia throughout the 10th and 11th centuries makes it plausible to assume the presence of local painting schools.

There is, however, a group of manuscripts from that period that can be attributed to the place of origin thanks to the colophons provided in them. They were copied in South Georgia and are referred to as *Tao-Klarjeti group* according to the name of the region. The aforementioned Adishi and Jruchi I illustrated manuscripts made at Shatberdi are affiliated with this group. Other surviving manuscripts of this group are not supplemented with thematic miniatures. Yet they are typical examples of illuminated manuscripts, providing remarkable evidence regarding the manner of execution of decorative elements such as initials, headpieces and canon tables.

These manuscripts are characterized by a preference for graphical treatment. A thin, transparent layer of paint is applied to the outlines made by thin lines. The use of a multi-layer painting technique is relatively rare. Non-painted sections, i.e. the natural tonality of parchment, equally important as painted sections, are highly notable. Non-painted sections in the decoration of initials are sometimes covered with parallel lines or colored and black dots. In general, the initials in these manuscripts differ from Byzantine ones. Canon table ornaments, the motifs of which show an obvious affinity with the ornaments of Georgian architecture, are noteworthy. The peculiarity of decorative adornment of these illustrations is also defined by a clear, bright tonal coloring, such as blue, red, light green and yellow. All of these indicate the

adoption of a creative approach by the master that led to the shaping of an original artistic image of the Tao-Klarjeti manuscripts.

The specific nature of the manuscripts making up the *Tao-Klarjeti group* is obvious when comparing them with the Georgian manuscripts produced in the religious centers abroad.

As is known, the late 10th century saw the establishment of close political and cultural ties between Georgia and Byzantium. It is quite natural that with the growing influence of Byzantium over the Near East, Byzantine cultural achievements became a model for the entire Christendom, including Georgia, which sought to adopt these achievements. Georgian monasteries were founded in Constantinople, in Mount Athos and Black Mountain. Georgian monks closely worked with Greek monks, benefitted from the best educational opportunities available at the time and adopted major cultural achievements of Byzantium. There is a close stylistic similarity between Georgian and Byzantine miniatures in terms of the manner of execution. Judging by the quality of illustrations, it is apparent that Georgian artists had fully mastered the technique of manuscript decoration.

The trend for the approximation to Byzantine culture encouraged the production of illustrated manuscripts and separate miniatures. In addition to that, Georgian aristocracy and high-ranking clergy commissioned lavishly adorned manuscripts in Byzantine style. Byzantine influence is obvious in codices which repeat certain patterns of manuscript illumination, as well as types of ornament, color palettes, iconographic models, and a multi-layer painting technique, e.g. Codex A-1 decorated with headpieces, canon tables and initials, copied in 1030; a collection of works by Gregory the Theologian; Gospel H-1704 copied in Mount Athos in the 980s, and the Alaverdi Gospels inscribed and illustrated in 1054 in the Calippo Monastery, also close to Antioch. This latter manuscript is embellished with headpieces, canon tables and the figures of evangelists. At the end it has the Epistle of Abgar and five miniatures illustrating the text. The title page, like the Adishi and Jruchi I title pages, features a cross, which, in this case, is erected on a postament.

Copied and illustrated in the Monastery of Khora in Constantinople, a Minor Synaxarion A-648 is a remarkable manuscript reflecting an intensive creative collaboration between Georgian and Byzantine artists. The manuscript was inscribed and decorated by a Georgian artist, Basil son of Malush, who was also responsible for the decoration of the collection of works by Gregory the Theologian A-1, as well as two manuscripts of Minor Nomocanon, A-96 and S-143. In 1028, he also copied part of another codex containing works by Gregory the Theologian. Of these manuscripts only a Minor Synaxarion is illustrated with miniatures, which are highly remarkable for their artistic quality. Gaiane Alibegashvili, whose research focuses on miniature art, attributed the miniatures of this manuscript to Greek artists. The scholar saw a stylistic resemblance between these and other Greek manuscripts illustrated with miniatures in the late 10th and early 11th century, notably with the illustrations of the Menologion of Basil II.

Almost all miniatures of the Synaxarion, be it the scenes from the Gospels or the lives of saints (*vitae*), employ compositional patterns that are canonical in the Byzantine art of the time, i.e.

the late 10th and 11th century. The compositions in the Synaxarion also reveal the trend towards a generalized rendering of the main idea. This is indicated by a minimum number of characters, prevalence of abstract golden backgrounds, as well as the laconic rendering of landscape and architectural elements. For example, the composition of the erection of the cross presents three strictly frontal figures giving no indication of action. The movement of deacons and the symmetrical location on both sides of the high priest creates an atmosphere of festivity, while in the same scene of the Menologion by Basil II the movement and gestures of the figures, notably of Empress Helena Pointing to the True Cross, create an impression of action.

Judging by the picturesque articulation of colorful surfaces through the alteration of highlights and shadows and the use of conventional 'reflexes' (the clothes worn by the Holy Women), the works retain artistic features typical of Late Antiquity, which were commonly used in Byzantine art of the late 10th and early 11th century.

The other two manuscripts – the Pentecostarion A-734 and a collection of works by Gregory the Theologian A-109 – were created in the first half of the 12th century and the early 13th century respectively, i.e. during the heyday of the Georgian kingdom. Along with the willingness to adopt the achievements of Byzantine art, the illustrations of the manuscripts demonstrate a high level of cultural development as well as the creativity of Georgian artists. Despite a wide chronological gap between the miniatures of these manuscripts, both display the same pattern of rendering plots, i.e. generalization and a respective focus on dogmatic meaning. Monumentality, inherent to generalization, is characteristic of an overall system employed in the decoration of both manuscripts – full-page miniatures appear like frontispieces serving to introduce the text. Early attempts of generalized rendering, as mentioned above, are apparent already in the miniatures of the Synaxarion. The trend reached its maturity in Byzantine manuscripts of the 11th and early 12th century. The illustrations of the two manuscripts reflect this very tendency. It is also to be noted that both the Pentecostarion and a collection of works by Gregory the Theologian are the most typical liturgical collections illustrated according to this principle. Close examination of the miniatures of the two chronologically distant manuscripts revealed several stylistic features, such as the preference for linear treatment, application of unbroken colour spots and the use of moderate colour palette despite a variety of tones, which, as believed by scholars, are directly associated with the national tradition.

The Pentecostarion was illustrated by seven miniatures corresponding to the themes of the composition. The miniatures, kept in the repository of manuscripts (A-743) date from the first half of the 12th century. The text of the manuscript is now lost. The content of the compositions is related to the readings from the Gospels for the Sunday liturgies and the holy feasts throughout the period from Easter to Pentecost. An iconographic analysis showed that the artist followed extended compositional models. Yet he did not include narrative elements related to the time and action, such as people and an angel in the scene of the Healing of the Paralyzed Man, Healing of the Blind at Siloam, two phases of action in both scenes; citizens, a pitcher and a bucket in the scene of a Samaritan woman and the cosmos and hetimasia in the Pentecost. Thus the Pentecostarion miniatures were designed to demonstrate the main idea of the theme in a laconic, generalized form rather than provide its narrative illustration.

The miniatures of the manuscript A-734 are distinguished by their high level of artistic execution. It is apparent that the artist was fully aware of a multi-layered painting technique, which he adapted to his own artistic preference. Shadows and highlights are painted in thin layers, without disturbing the uniformity of colour spots. An overall impression is created by locally applied colour spots and angular patterns marking drapery folds, sections of buildings, etc. Linear treatment and expressiveness are typical characteristics of the national stylistic repertoire. Not limited to miniature painting, these features are visible in mural paintings dating from different periods.

Another typically Georgian illustrated religious manuscript is a collection of Homilies by Gregory Nazianzenus 109, dated to the early 13th century. Containing 16 liturgical homilies, the collection is decorated with 13 miniatures. The thematic composition of the miniatures includes full-figure saints standing separately – compositions and scenes from the Gospels related to the Homilies. The miniatures are not framed. The impression of framing is, in some cases, created by geometricized architectural forms and horizontal lines marking the ground. However, even in the case of the presence of these elements, the figures are represented in direct contact with the clean surface of the page their laconic silhouettes being clearly visible against such backgrounds.

Equally noteworthy is a compositional solution: a limited number of characters, their large size, strict gestures and minimum number of attributes marking the site of action add an air of monumentality and festivity to the miniatures. Each miniature precedes a homily providing a generalized rendering of its content. For example, let us consider the miniature that precedes a sermon on the Plague of Hail. The centre features the frontal figures of man and woman, their importance highlighted by large size and gracious movements. In contrast, two small male figures are represented in the right and left edges of the composition, both shown in a bending position to express humility. The entire composition appears strict and hieratic. The sharp contrast between the central and secondary characters indicates the lack of artist's intention to provide a straightforward rendering of the theme. He rather attempted to convey the essence of a few opening sentences of the sermon through a laconic compositional formula. The trend of creating generalized, laconic compositions, evident in this and two previous manuscripts, is dictated by the liturgical function of these codices.

Of the Georgian decorated manuscripts especially remarkable are three richly illustrated Gospels, whose artistic and historic importance is not limited to Georgian art. They play a significant role in the study of the art of Eastern Christendom. These are the Gelati Gospels Q 902 (early half of the 12th century), Jruchi Gospels H-1667 (late 12th century) and Mokvi Gospels Q-908 (1330). All of the manuscripts is rich in miniatures. However, a different system of illustration is employed in each case. More specifically, each Gospel of the Gelati and Jruchi manuscripts is provided with detailed illustrations forming independent cycles. They differ sharply from the system of illustration used in the Mokvi Gospels. The manuscript has 157 miniatures, of which 98 illustrate the Gospel of Matthew. The other three Gospels include only

those scenes that are not present in the Gospel of Matthew. Thus the illustrations of each of the four Mokvi Gospels are conceived as an integral cycle.

Each of the mentioned Gospels is a remarkable work of its time reflecting its artistic trends, be it linear-decorative treatment or the approaches inherent in Palaeologan art.

I will draw your attention to the miniatures adorning only one Gospel, namely the Jruchi 2 miniatures. The place of inscribing and illustrating the manuscript remains unclear. Neither do we have any records regarding a commissioner. The manuscript is dated to the late 12th century, when Georgian culture reached its zenith under Queen Tamar. It was the time when the stylistic features defining the original character of the Jruchi 2 miniatures became especially pronounced. This is indicated by an increased dynamism and outstanding expressiveness, features that originated in earlier locally produced works and evolved into typical characteristics of national art. Lack of accuracy in rendering frame borders, placement of figures on margins, latitude in rendering postures and the movement of waving drapery, as well as the presence of a tree bending towards a main character create an internal tension and a sense of dramatism. Equally characteristic is plasticity and refined decorativeness, especially evident in the sophisticated rendering of a calligraphic line.

The Jruchi 2 miniatures are some of the most remarkable works of their time, which defines their special importance in the history of Georgian art. None of the 12th and 13th century Georgian manuscripts, except Jruchi 2, has reflected the artistic trends of the time with such intensity. Its numerous manuscripts also provide invaluable evidence for the study of specific issues relating to the illustration of Gospels.

As an illustration, I would like to draw your attention to one of the Jruchi 2 miniatures, namely the scene of the Crucifixion provided in the Gospel According to Matthew (65v, Matthew 27,54). Distinguished by a highly expressive composition, it is especially noteworthy for the rare iconographic redaction it offers. The text of the Gospel regarding the Crucifixion is illustrated so as to highlight its dogmatic essence rather than provide a detailed historical rendering. Of note are three figures depicted on the margin, marking a symbolic reference to the replacement of a synagogue by a new Christian church. The image of a kneeling woman turned to the Lord in supplication, with a hand of an angel on her shoulder as a sign of protection, personifies the Church. With a hand movement, the angel throws away the figure to the margin, whose only a small part of the back and leg are visible. This female figure represents a synagogue, which, according to the movement, is running away.