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## **The Idea of the Skhalta Painting and Some Aspects of the Iconographic Program**

### **Abstract:**

Skhalta Church is located in the Ajara region, south-western part of Georgia. Skhalta fresco painting shows the signs of the Paleologos style, which appears in medieval Georgian art from the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century to the first half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The peculiarities of this stage are determined by the centuries-old local traditions and signs of a new style.

The main idea and iconographic features of the painting of the Skhalta single-nave church express the expectation of the Second Coming, which is mainly notable for the Georgian wall paintings of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The theological views of the Skhalta painting ensemble as well as the common ideological solutions were based on the demands of the founders on the one hand, and on the other hand, on the general epoch-making spirit.

### **Key words:**

art, fresco, Georgian, Bizantyne, eschatology.

Skhalta Church is located in the south-western part of Georgia (Ajara Autonomous Republic), in the gorge of the river Skhaltistskali, 100 km away from the city of Batumi. The single-nave temple built in the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century is the main building of the Skhalta monastery complex. It features gabled, seven-arched apse and a southern porch. The church used to be painted completely, including the porch. To this day the frescos are mostly preserved in the sanctuary, vault and the west wall. Considering its artistic-stylistic features, Skhalta painting should have been accomplished at the turn of the 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries and is close to the samples of the Georgian wall painting of the Paleologos style of the same period: Likhne, Martvili, St Saba in Sapara, Sori, Ubisi, St. Marine in Sapara, Tsalenjikha, Vamek Dadiani's chapel in Khobi – 1384-1396; Nabat-evi – 1412-1431, etc. (Virsaladze 2007, 20-23; Ch'ich'ileishvili 2010).

The painting of Skhalta was characterized by a diverse repertoire and a well-developed iconographic program. In the hall-type, single-nave churches without domes the paintings of an altar acquire special signif-

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icance inasmuch as the apse places the compositions defining the basic idea and the themes of the entire painting. The conch of the altar apse was presented by “Supplication” (Deisis) – with the figures of the Savior sitting on the throne, the Virgin and John the Baptist, Seraphim and Tetramorph. From top to bottom on the wall of the apse, the first register of the artist’s four registers is dedicated to a group of kneeling angels glorifying the Lord, the second – to a series of half-figures of the saints depicted in medallions, the third register – the middle row of the apse wall – to the scene of the “Holy Communion”, and the fourth register – to the traditionally represented figures of high priests (Chart 1). The “Deisis” presented in the conch of the altar proves the allegiance to the eastern Christian, Georgian traditions as it was very popular in the Georgian monumental painting and was almost continuously found from the 11<sup>th</sup> century to the late period (Aladashvili 1983, 4). “Deisis” expresses the idea of the Lord’s theophany, the second coming, salvation and protection. The kneeling figures of the angels glorifying the Lord, which is included in the painting of the apse are also associated to the protecting prayer and the part of the liturgy that refers to the Second Coming (Revelation 7, 11-12). The painting of the altar also emphasizes the themes of sacrifice and salvation of humanity that is manifested in the composition of eucharist and the saint in medallions.

The idea of revelation-second coming revealed in the altar is clearly read in the “heavenly zone” of the vault in the church nave where four compositions are presented: “Annunciation”, “Transfiguration”, “Ascension of Jesus” and “Pentecost” (Charts 2-3). “Annunciation” is the scene expressing the message of the Savior’s coming down on earth and His messianic mission as well as the dogma of the incarnated Lord. In relation to the composition of the “Deisis”, it also has the meaning of the Lord’s glory and salvation. “Transfiguration”, first and foremost, responds directly to the “Deisis-Vision”, inasmuch as, according to the Gospel, it is understood as the theophanic revelation of the Lord (Mathew 17,5).

The interpretation of the phenomenon, so common in the Paleologos epoch, is very interesting. According to the theologian of the 14<sup>th</sup> century – Gregory Palamas, the divine light that illuminated Christ on Mount Tabor is an intangible energy that is available through a virtuous approach and mental union with God (Palamas 1996, 69). The views of Hesychast teachings influenced the iconography of the scene of the “Transfiguration”, which was especially popular in the art of the second half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century and the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The artists tried to depict a light that radiated abundantly from the Savior and transferred to people the “Divine Grace” (Lifšić 1987, 22-23; Lihačeva 1986, 216-217). The composition of the “Transfiguration” in Skhalta, depicted in the traditional iconographic

edition can be considered as an expression of the Hesychast ideas with its accentuated location within the painting system. The “Ascension of Jesus” and “Pentecost” depicted with the extensive iconographic edition in the upper zone of the vault underline the idea of the revelation of God and the Second Coming. In the Byzantine monuments of the classical period (10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> centuries), “Pentecost” is depicted as an accompanying scene of the dome scheme – compositions of the “Ascension” and the Pantocrator (Demus 1948, 20). Examples of combining these plots with an eschatological idea are shown by the monuments of the Georgian monumental painting of the 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries: Achi, frescos of the churches of Chokhuldi Savior (13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> cc), John Chrisostom in Lashtkhveri (14<sup>th</sup> c) (Velmans 1980-1981, 92).

The general theological idea of Skhalta painting, which is manifested in the scenes located in the celestial zone of the vault from east to west, finds a logical end in the composition of the “Judgment Day” on the western wall. There is a strong tradition of depicting this scene on the west wall or in the western part of the temple in Byzantine and Georgian art (Ateni – 11<sup>th</sup> c., Ikvi – 12<sup>th</sup> c., Timotesubani – 13<sup>th</sup> c., Sapara, Chule – 14<sup>th</sup> c., Nabakhtevi – 15<sup>th</sup> c. etc.). The composition of Skhalta contains the components characteristic of the scene: countless groups of the heavenly hosts, the seated figures of the Apostles, the episode of rolling up the sky, trumpeting angels, the Savior surrounded by the figures of archangels and protectors in the mid belt. Teams of the Righteous, resurrection of the dead, Hetoimasia, procession towards Paradise, fragments depicting heaven and hell (Pic. 1-2). Below the composition of the “Judgement Day”, above the western door, there is another depiction of “Deisis”, which again brings forth the idea of patronage, forgiveness and salvation, as Supplication simultaneously symbolizes the prayer to the Pantocrator for the final forgiveness of sins and the glory of the Savior (Pic. 3). Therefore, it is clear that in the composition of the “Judgement Day” in Skhalta painting. Along with the theme of judgement, great importance is attached to the theme of salvation.

Thus, the main idea of the theological program of the Skhalta painting is related to the revelation-second coming of the Lord and salvation. The tendency of such a complication in the theological program of painting and the interest in theophanic-eschatological themes are evident in the paintings of the Paleologos epoch. Eschatological idea is the basis of the monuments of the 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> cc Georgian monumental painting – the paintings of the churches in Achi, Ubisi, Svipi, Jragi, Ienashi, Laghami, Sapara, St. Saba, Chule, Vamek Dadiani’s chapel in Khobi, etc. (Q’enia 1990, 125-166; Iosebidge 1989, 29).

In addition to the basic ideological contexts, the scenes of the Christological cycle depicted on the slopes of the vault (Nativity, Presentation, Theophany, Raising of Lazarus, Entry in Jerusalem, the Last Supper, Jesus in Gethsemane, thirty pieces of silvers for Judas, Judas' Kiss, Jesus before Caiaphas, the Bearing of the Cross, the Raising of the Cross, the Crucifixion, the Decent from the Cross, Lamentation, the Decent into Hell, Anastasis) reveal various aspects of the Christian faith. For example, the theme of the Virgin Mary is the leitmotif of the scenes and saints depicted in the north-eastern part of the temple (Annunciation, Assumption and Jacob the Patriarch) and echoes the idea of theophany and second coming of the Lord announced in the altar as well as the protective theme of the Virgin.

The idea of incarnated Lord is revealed through the depiction of "Christ's Nativity" with extensive iconographic edition in the western part of the temple as well as with the scenes of the "Massacre of Innocents" and the infancy of John the Baptist. The episodes of the journey of the Magi, a shepherd talking to Joseph, restoration of Salome's hand and flight into Egypt included into the Skhalta composition of "Nativity" express the proof of the divine will (Chart 4, Pic. 4). The theme of the incarnated Lord is expanded by the compositions of John the Baptist's infancy (the Annunciation of Zechariah, the Taking of Young John to the Desert by an Angel) depicted in the south-western niche. According to the Scripture, John the Baptist announces the appearance of the Messiah to people and prepares the way for him (Luke 1, 14-17; Mathew 1, 5-25; Marc 1, 3; John 1, 23; Isaiah – 40, 3; Malachi – 4, 6). At the same time, in the hymns to John the Baptist of the ancient iadgari (Church collection), he is the forgiver of sins and supporter (Kurtsik'idze 1980, 251). In the work of the 13<sup>th</sup> century figure – Abuserisdze Tbeli, "Galobani Samta Iovanetani" ("Chants of the Three Johns") dedicated to the forerunner, John the Theologian and John the Chrysostom, John the Baptist is depicted as a saint standing at the crossroads of the two worlds who ends the Old testament and starts the New "beginning of the grace" (Khalvashi 1998, 105-108).

Along with the consistent presentation of the dogmas of the Christian faith, Skhalta painting clearly shows the superiority of the theophanic-eschatological idea and the idea of Salvation, which should be an expression of the dominant viewpoints in the Georgian life and public thought of that period. Eschatological ideas appeared in Georgian Christian literature from time to time in works translated by Georgian writers and public figures (K'kelidze 1957, 105-106). However, the eschatological beliefs and the pessimistic mood characteristic of the epoch are especially

evident in the time of historical hardship, from the 13<sup>th</sup> century, when the Georgian people, shocked by the attacks of the enemy (Mongols, Khwarazmians), meditate about the end of the world and dream of the Second Coming, after which the “interminable life” will be established, suffering will end and the truth will celebrate. Eschatological ideas are first and foremost evident in the literary legacy of the 13<sup>th</sup> century figure Abuserisdze Tbeli as well as in the writings of the 14<sup>th</sup> century historian - “The Chronicler”, who argues that the cause of the hardship is disbelief and sinfulness (K’ekelidze 1957, 108). Abuserisdze Tbeli belonged to the family that ruled Ajara principedom during the 10<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries. Their name is associated with the construction of churches and monasteries in this part of feudal Georgia, painting of frescos, decoration with icons, ordering chants and hymns praising Lord’s glory, charity, etc.

Iconographic and artistic-stylistic analysis shows that Skhalta Church must have been painted at the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century or the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. However, in compiling the basic idea of the painting and the iconographic program, emphasizing the idea of the Second Coming, the salvation and supplication themes, as well as various iconographic aspects associated with them, the donators took into account both the public spirit of the era and the eschatological views of their great ancestor.

### Conclusion

The presentation of the aspects of the idea and iconographic programs of the Skhalta painting show that all the specially selected elements in the painting system carry a certain ideological essence and are based on the principle of depicting traditional themes in an orderly system. The idea of the Lord’s revelation–second coming, the themes of the incarnation, sacrifice, John the Baptist’s and the Virgin’s assistance determine the diversity and polyphonic sounding of the theological program of Skhalta painting.

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## Illustrations

Skhalta. Painting scheme 1: the altar apse, northern slope and wall.

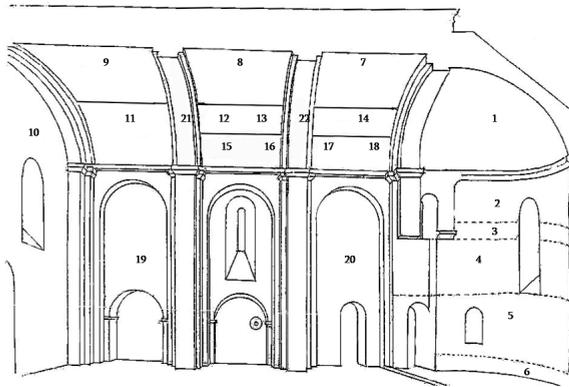
Skhalta. Painting scheme 1: the altar apse, southern slope and wall.

Skhalta. "Last Judgment". Rolling of the Sky.

Skhalta. "Last Judgment". Trumpeting Angel.

Skhalta. Western Tympanum. "Deisis".

Skhalta. "Nativity". Annunciation to the Shepherds (fragment).



Scheme 1.

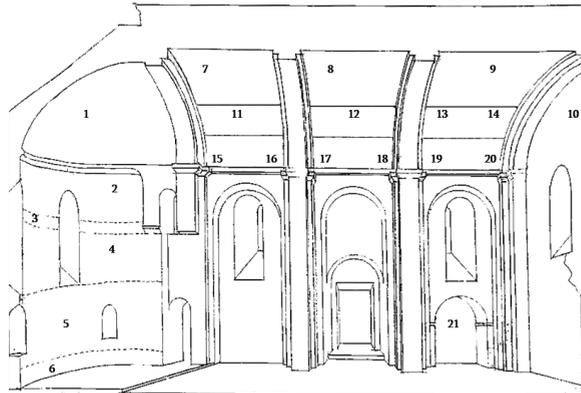
1. The altar apse, northern slope and wall

1. Deisis
2. Kneeling angels
3. Saints in medallions
4. Holy Communion
5. High Priests
6. Decorative curtain
7. Annunciation
8. Ascension of Jesus
9. Pentecost
10. The Last Judgment
11. Nativity
12. Presentation
13. Theophany
14. The Raising of Lazarus
15. Judas' Kiss
16. Peter's Denial
17. Christ before Caiaphas
18. The Bearing of the Cross
19. Massacre of the Innocents
20. Assumption of the Virgin
21. Prophets
22. Fathers

2.

The altar apse, southern slope and wall

1. Deisis
2. Kneeling angels
3. Saints in medallions
4. Holy Communion
5. High Priests
6. Decorative curtain
7. Transfiguration
8. Ascension of Christ
9. Pentecost
10. The Last Judgment
11. Entry into Jerusalem
12. The Last Supper
13. Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane
14. 30 Pieces of Silver for Judas
15. Raising of the Cross
16. Crucifixion
17. Descent from the Cross
18. Lamentation
19. The Descent into Hell
20. Anastasis
21. Scenes from John the Baptist's childhood:  
Annunciation of the Angel to Zachariah;  
Angel Takes Young John to the Desert.



Scheme 2.



*Skhalta. "Last Judgment". Rolling of the Sky.*



*Skhalta. "Last Judgment". Trumpeting Angel.*



*Skhalta. Western Tympanum. "Deisis".*



*Skhalta. "Nativity". Annunciation to the Shepherds (fragment).*

## Маја Чичилејшвили

### Идеја осликовања Скалте и неки аспекти иконографског програма

Црква Скалта се налази у Ацарији, југоисточном делу Грузије. Фрескопис у Скалти показује знакове стила Палеолога, који је, у средњовековној грузијској уметности, присутан од краја 13. до прве половине 15. века. Особености овог раздобља су одређене вековима старим локалним традицијама и знаковима новог стила.

Главна идеја и иконографске карактеристике сликарства у једнобродној цркви у Скалти изражавају очекивање Другог доласка, које је, иначе, најприметније у грузијском зидном сликарству 14. века. И теолошке перспектива сликарског ансамбла Скалте и општа идеолошка решења засновани су на захтевима ктитора, с једне, и, преовлађујућем духу епохе, с друге стране.

#### Кључне речи:

уметност, фреска, грузијско, византијско, есхатологија.