

## Performative Aspects of the Georgian Façades Decoration

In the introduction to his book *Likeness and Presence*, Hans Belting states that images have gained power and influence, which theologians sought to strip them of.<sup>1</sup> The Church had tried, but controlling images through words has never been easy. Images have tremendous power as well as limitations. A work of art's inherent capability to engage audiences and to set them in motion within the structures of a given work, leading viewers from beginning to end to involvement, travel through stages along converging and diverging paths.

Medieval Georgia adorns a vast repertoire of monumental sculptural decorations of churches' façades that emerged in Georgia in the wake of Christianity.

Standing in front of a sculpted façade such as the sixth-seventh century Jvari Church or Samtavisi Cathedral of the early eleventh century (figs. 1, 2), one can imagine and even feel the transformative process the medieval beholder may have undergone.



Fig. 1. Jvari Church. South façade.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> All images were taken by Erga Shneurson, unless otherwise written.



**Fig. 2. Samtavisi Cathedral. South east façade.**

Upon approaching a church, the silhouette of the decorative system becomes clearer, surprisingly rich, and astonishing in its proportions, rhythm, and beauty, even today. The façades sculpture (metaphorically seen as a veil), incorporated in the blind arches, thus evoked religious feelings and exaltation in the beholder, activating him to cross the liminal threshold of the façade's veil in his pursuit to unite with the One. The inherent power of the image was thus used to pursue multivalent values, deliver religious messages, and manifest their politics to the faithful.

The motifs of the blind arches, niches, and sculpture, found in most Georgian churches throughout the centuries, created a visual language integrated into Georgian art, embodying the concealing/revealing metaphor of the *parochet* (the veil covering the tabernacle's entrance, according to Exodus 19:12-13; Exodus 40:21).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> On Georgian façades sculpture: Shneurson, *A Veil of Sacredness*, pp. 313-338; Dadiani, Khundadze, Kvachataдзе, *Medieval Georgian Sculpture*; Djobadze, *Early Medieval Georgian Monasteries*; Djobadze, *The Sculpture on the Eastern Façade of the Holy Cross of Mtskheta*; Beridze, Alpago-Novello, Lafontaine-Dosogne, *Art and Architecture*; Aladashvili, *Monumentalnaya Skulptura*.

The veil, curtain, or *parochet* was used here to delineate the façades as sacred spaces in which the reliefs and sculptures initiated a hierophany, an eruption of holiness.

The façade of Samtavisi Cathedral (fig. 2) is a critical test case for the evolution of the façades of sculpted Georgian churches. The non-figurative program offers the possibility for growth and expansion in the interpretative framework for the sculptural system, which focuses on the potential of evoking an intuitive and imaginative response. The Griffon and the other reliefs are almost free-standing sculptures, stylized as an abstract cycle, thus suggesting the real presence of the Divine in the ecclesiastical space. Consequently, this raises the question of how the beholder experienced such an artistic program. What power does the artwork have that affects viewers, both then and now?

The article consists of three main elements. The relationship between the sculpted façade and the viewer. Crossing the façade, the beholders underwent a spiritual transformation, analogous to crossing the tabernacle veil/parochet, and the implications for how the beholder perceived crossing the liminal threshold of the façades. The next stage is to study the façades as an “experience”. Gadamer’s theory of experience analyzes how it can be applied to the viewer’s receptiveness to the sculptures and the symbolic language created on the facades. The third and final part of the study is concerned with the performative aspects of the sculpted façades and examples of the possible performative acts that occurred in front of or around the church edifices.

## **1. Façades as Liminal Zone and Transition**

The façades serve as a liminal zone between the outer material world and the inner spirituality of the house of God. The sacred veil unfolding on the façades mediated God’s presence to the approaching worshipper. Entering the Holy of Holies,<sup>1</sup> thus alters the church’s interior and exterior into one whole and perfect entity. Hence, upon entering the house of God, the congregant first crossed the sacred liminal threshold of the façade and experienced spiritual exaltation in the desire to unite with the One. Thus, the symbolic decorative system across the façade suggested a comprehensive approach and fulfilled the desire to unify the interior and exterior of the church edifice.

Consequently, the relationship between the viewers and the ornamented façades created the sacred space in the context of “performativity”.<sup>2</sup> Facing the sculpted façades, the mental state of the beholders underwent changes that transformed

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<sup>1</sup> Which became accessible to Christians through the death of Jesus.

<sup>2</sup> Matters of performance are discussed in: Weigert, *Performance*, pp. 61-95; Suydman, Ziegler, *Performance and Transformation*; Pentcheva, *The Performative Icon*; Pentcheva, *The Sensual Icon, Space*; Gertsman, *Visualizing Medieval Performance*.

them from a passive viewer into an active worshipper. Therefore, the sculpted details were meant to reveal the Divine's presence on the façades and in the surrounding landscape, as well as to reveal performative aspects beyond the limitations of the static sacred image, and become a wide-ranging and transformative act.

Originating in modernist archaeological practices and formalist approaches, the studies of medieval Georgian churches have overlooked thus far the spiritual aspects orchestrated by architecture, sculpture, and painting. The same approach intensified through an excessive focus on the decorative object. Therefore, as Trkulja claimed concerning the reception of medieval art, "The decorative program of the façade can only be understood if we divest our thinking from art as an object to art as experience".<sup>1</sup> Thus, sculptures are meant to be read as drama taking place on the façades. It is as if the worshipper who crosses this threshold and enters the church is essentially proceeding into the Holy of Holies.

## 2. Experience

Before moving on to a discussion of performance, I would first like to look at the idea of the façades as an "experience". The expression "experience" demands further attention because it is applied to the viewer's receptiveness. Medieval signs, symbols, and image theory are derived from Neoplatonic treatises. Pseudo Dionysius's doctrine has already reiterated the Platonic idea of a schism between sign and thing, body and anima, bringing to the surface the symbolic capacity of the object to mediate comprehensible realities. However, our contemporary culture can only grasp the decorative program on the façades by diverting our thinking from art as an object to art as an experience.<sup>2</sup>

The essence of "experience" has been examined at great depth and from a comprehensive perspective by Hans Georg Gadamer in his book *Truth and Method*. He says, "Everyone who experiences a work of art incorporates this experience wholly within himself".<sup>3</sup> Experience, in Gadamer's understanding, comprises a broad hermeneutic perspective and meaning beyond experiencing a text. Works of art have in their essence the quality or state of being coincidental or contemporary, which allows them to address the viewers directly, with a particular immediacy, despite the passing of time.<sup>4</sup> Gadamer analyzes "experience" by focusing on symbol and allegory to perceive the place and role of the sacred in art; hence, he refers to something more significant beyond its external appearance. He refers here to the religious and sacra-

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<sup>1</sup> Trkulja, *Divine Revelation Performed*, pp. 214-247.

<sup>2</sup> Only then can we grasp the uniqueness of the system of blind arches with its exceptional sculptures as a metaphoric veil or parochet that unfolds across the church façades.

<sup>3</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, pp. 102, 353-355.

<sup>4</sup> Hafiz, *The Place of the Sacred*, p. 99.



mental.<sup>1</sup> According to Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, the symbols are the sensory tool representing God, which the human mind, accustomed to the world of senses, can grasp intuitively.<sup>2</sup> This act leads to the knowledge of the divine up to a certain point. Thus, symbols mediate between visible and invisible, revealing God's presence on the sculpted façades. Gadamer goes beyond the state of mind of the creator and spectators, stating that experience is the "mode of being of the work of art itself".<sup>3</sup> He sees the work of art as something graspable by or comparable to the concept of a game, which means that the experience of art is similar to the experience of a game, with the viewer losing themselves in it. Experiencing art reflects the truth in the artwork. Gadamer claims that "it is possible to know the divine in no other way than by starting from the world of the senses".<sup>4</sup> In this respect, Gadamer's statement echoes Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite's assertion that only by leaving one's senses behind can one exalt oneself in one's pursuit to unite with the One. However, a human being can only begin this journey when occupied with the senses. According to Gadamer's theory, experiencing art is compared to a game.<sup>5</sup> The game and the world of art have the independent status "of existence from its creator, player, and spectator".<sup>6</sup> However, determining the work of art as something resulting from an event of truth plays a central role in this 'game'. Games and Art consist of self-representation.<sup>7</sup>

The work of art does not stand as an object by itself. Instead, it is an experience that changes the person who experiences it. Concerning religious art in Georgia, the sculpted façades acted not solely as artwork. Rather, they initiated a whole chain reaction: reliefs versus beholders "playing the game", allowing them to experience an eruption of truth, extracting strong emotions, moving by processions, prayers, music, and sublime landscapes. Artwork poses a challenge to the viewers in their existence, primarily due to the appearance of artwork as mimetic, self-reflective, and representational of someone.<sup>8</sup> Mimesis establishes the relationship between 'religion', 'God', and 'Art' throughout the Middle Ages.<sup>9</sup> Religious rites and symbols represent something beyond themselves, potentially the infinite whole, taking the viewer with them to experience the truth resulting from the drama enacted on the façades. Gadamer investigates "experiencing" artwork through the eyes of the contemporaneous viewer in medieval times.<sup>10</sup> He does not differentiate between the media of the work.

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<sup>1</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 63.

<sup>2</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, p. 198.

<sup>3</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, pp. 83-84.

<sup>4</sup> Idem, p. 63.

<sup>5</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, pp. 101-110, 115-117, 128-131.

<sup>6</sup> Idem, pp. 128-131.

<sup>7</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, pp. 115-117.

<sup>8</sup> Hafiz, *The Place of the Sacred*, p. 115.

<sup>9</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 105.

<sup>10</sup> For further discussion of Gadamer's investigation of 'experiencing', see Franeta, *Gadamer's Hermeneutics*, pp. 219-234.

Jelena Trkulja's investigation accurately reflects the experience of façade sculpture in Byzantium during the late period of the empire. It raises the question of the Byzantine church exteriors' effect on the observer.<sup>1</sup> Trkulja, though, shared with Gadamer the understanding of the value of the artwork and its implication on the observer. She offers viewers insight into the importance of exterior ornaments. Moreover, she asks how people perceive and experience the churches while viewing them within their daily community life. While it may be speculation to imagine how contemporaneous viewers may have reacted to the façades sculpture, it is reasonable, considering what we see today on the façades.

Façades sculpture appears to have been a significant and deliberate choice in medieval Georgia's art, designed in the same manner as the church's interior and creating a hierotopy of architectural construction to define sacred space. The façades ornaments engage the cognitive skills of the viewers, evoking the viewer's response to the drama on the façades, initiating mental transformation and exaltation, and revealing God's presence in them. In many cases, Georgia, a mountainous country, dominated the landscape that endowed the sculptures and the biblical scenes with a supernatural realm. The nature of the sublime decoration channeled the core dogmas and turned the façades into a message board of Divine Revelation.

The topographic position of the edifice, the large surface of the façade, towering over the surroundings, the sublime scenery, and the scenes depicted on the façade bore a semiotic potentiality to convey biblical thoughts and political messages. The sculptures changed how the congregation experienced the church edifice before entering the House of God. The edifices with the sculpted decoration manifest their presence in reality and in a tangible way. The standing edifices, with their vast exterior reliefs spread throughout the country, tell a unique story. The architectural framework reflects a spiritual atmosphere and symbolism surrounding the church, which tells a story of exclusive choice – façades sculpture – to express the feelings, aspirations, religious faith, and beliefs of the initiators of the edifice and the local viewers.

### **3. Performance Acting in Front of or for the Beholder**

The façade sculpture does not stand as a mode of decoration separate from other parts of the church, its interior, rituals, or its performative context. Together with the monumental fresco program of the interior, the church furniture, light, fragrance, and music, the decorated church façades created conditions for the performance of the liturgy and for experiencing the Divine's presence. Their striking visual appearance promoted aesthetic enjoyment, while their semiotic potency stirred associations with

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<sup>1</sup> Trkulja, *Divine Revelation Performed*, p. 214.

the Divine beauty.<sup>1</sup> Otto Demus provided theoretical reflections on the scheme of the Byzantine church interior, dividing it into a tripartite painted program that guided the eye of the beholders upwards, gradually ‘lifting’ them into the Heavenly realm.<sup>2</sup> Each zone of the church has its role within the comprehensive architectural and decorative program, destined to convey the divine message. The exterior also possesses a hierarchical program destined to carry and transmit the Divine Light, but communicates it differently.<sup>3</sup> In Georgia, the exterior ornamental elements lack linear narratives. The educational message is hidden behind the symbolism of the reliefs and the natural signs, theophanies, and sculptured scenes. Thus, the façades’ decoration acts strikingly to activate the beholders, initiating them to perform rites, procession, and prayers while facing the façades.

Performance is understood as the enactment of something in front of and for the sake of the beholder.<sup>4</sup> In a broader sense, it is “all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants”.<sup>5</sup> While the first part of the definition relates to performance as acting in front of a passive viewer, the second includes the viewer in the event. It activates them and is therefore encapsulated in the hierotopical perception. The church façades communicated with the viewer through a decorative system of signs. They triggered a cognitive process through the physical senses. As Nelson, Pentcheva, Eliade, and Pseudo Dionysius the Areopagite discussed, in this respect. Natural signs are shapes that do not depend on their being understood in context, culture, or convention. They are found in nature and bear an innate quality to communicate essential ideas. Pseudo Dionysius the Areopagite discussed, at length, the theme of symbols-signs-images, stating “Representation in a bodily way and multiple shapes and forms be given to what has neither shape nor form”.<sup>6</sup> The decoration gives meaning to the structures, which in turn initiates the act of cognition. This process is based on the potentiality of a semi-otic value in the decoration and the image’s power.<sup>7</sup> Regarding the sculpted façades, the performative process can transmit notions of the Divine through associating simple forms. Christian narrative cycles demand some knowledge of the scriptures, which the ordinary Christian viewer of the era possessed only on a fundamental level.

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<sup>1</sup> Trkulja, *Divine Revelation Performed*, p. 230.

<sup>2</sup> Demus, *Byzantine Mosaic Decoration*.

<sup>3</sup> Idem, *Byzantine Mosaic Decoration*, pp. 230-231.

<sup>4</sup> Weigert, *Experience Performance*, p. 62.

<sup>5</sup> Gertsman, *Visualizing Medieval Performance*, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, *Letters*, Letter Nine, 1105 A, C, pp. 281, 283. For a discussion of “natural signs”, senses, their implications on human behavior and their use in art, see Pentcheva, *The Sensual Icon*; Nelson, *To Say and to See*, pp. 143-168; Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*; Turner, *Liminal to Liminoid*, p. 27; Evans, *Natural Signs and Knowledge of God*.

<sup>7</sup> Freedberg, *The Power of the Images*.

Natural signs, on the other hand, work intuitively. Evans states in his book *Natural Signs* that they are inconclusive as ‘proofs’.<sup>1</sup> Rather, their importance lies in their powers. Harrington claims that natural forms are essentially material, but within the context of sacred symbols, they also indirectly reveal the Divine.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, to be understood, natural signs like a circle do not depend on context, culture, or convention. A circle originates from nature, as do waves and other shapes.<sup>3</sup> Natural signs that bear the quality of movement, and sometimes luminosity, may appear in three dimensions and rotations. Historically, the whirling discs are believed to be miraculous signs with physical powers that are representative of the Logos.<sup>4</sup>

The viewer’s consciousness, initiated by visual forms and architecture, is supplemented by the cognitive process. Examining the church façades’ ornaments is a process based on their heuristic potential. This also relates to the transmission of abstract ideas regarding the divine in an associative way with the forms. Decoration composed of natural signs presents simple geometric forms that enable the viewer to draw an immediate connection between the sign and the symbolized, just as smoke suggests fire. The circle/disc holds the ability to communicate using intuition, which is their core idea.<sup>5</sup> These signs, often appearing on Georgian church façades, imply eternity and perfection.

The viewer’s participation in the religious drama evoked by the decorated façade created the spatial setting of the hierotopical imagery. The ornamented façades had the semiotic ability to interpret the theological and philosophical perceptions that the façades were endowed with and initiated the process of thinking and spiritual exultation. They remained uninterrupted throughout art history and were independent from any cultural values. Signs and symbols were mediated between the viewer and God’s presence on the façades, facilitating the understanding of the decorative system.

This is also the case with the decorative circles in Nikortsminda, for example (fig. 3). The intuitive or natural use of forms saturated with religious scenes reinforces the beholder’s understanding of God’s invisible and abstract presence.

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<sup>1</sup> “Individual can recognize the natural signs that lie at the core of an argument, and see these signs as having genuine force”. Evans, *Natural signs and Knowledge of God*, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Harrington, *Sacred Place*, p. 49.

<sup>3</sup> To answer the question of how one draws the connection between, for example, the full circle and eternity, one needs to look at the moon and to read Ezekiel’s vision in Ezekiel 1:16-18. In this verse, he presented the image of the wheels to allude to the circle and its perfection as God created it. The sign can direct an individual to the reality of its inherent meaning without any process of interpretation. The sign is something that makes truth more evident to someone. Evans, *Natural Signs and Knowledge of God*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>4</sup> Archeological evidence points to the earliest appearance of the rosette in Mesopotamia, during the Middle Bronze Ages 2000-1200 B.C.E. Woodcock, *The Rosette in the Late Second Temple Period*, pp. 56-57; Trkulja, *Divine Revelation Performed*, p. 225.

<sup>5</sup> For discussion about the disc, see Trkulja, *The Rose Window*, pp. 143-161.





**Fig. 3. Nikortsminda Church. Circle Relief.**



**Fig. 4. Oshki Church. South Façade. Courtesy of Anzor Mtchedlishvili.**

The role of the sculptural frames and forms on the façades was to capture the viewer's mind immediately. They played an instrumental role in this process by reawakening the viewer's knowledge about the sign deposited in the mind of the past.<sup>1</sup> Understanding intuitively, conveniently, and straightforwardly requires a simple mode of cognition from the beholder, less demanding than narrative descriptions. However, at the same time, they are complex because of the ornament's abstract nature and the lack of intercession of narrative. The ordinary or illiterate beholder may not have had the capacity to understand the semiotic messages and the profound philosophical and theological perceptions of the decorative program on the church façades. Nevertheless, it is clear that upon facing the façades, such as those of Oshki, Nikortsminda (figs. 3, 4), and other churches, and such as Samtavisi Cathedral (fig. 2), the viewer would be overwhelmed with the beauty of this embellished system. Thus, they experienced a spiritual exaltation appropriate to their level of theological knowledge, activating their cognition, feelings, and senses.

In reality, only a few viewers could participate fully in the cognitive process; most viewers would have engaged in the general performance of the church decoration, namely, in its transformation into a sacred place. The worshippers probably first saw the silhouette of the church from a distance. As they climbed the mountain or came upon some close, elevated, or remote setting where many of the churches were located, the building's perception gradually increased as it came into complete focus. Only upon reaching the church, the beholder gain a more definite impression of the sculptures. These were probably perceived instantly and intuitively and did not initiate any cognitive process. It seems that in the case of sculpted Georgian church façades, the purpose was to create a framework that gave rise to a supernatural, symbolic atmosphere, elevating the spirituality of the beholders and enabling them to climb up to higher spheres in their quest to unite with the One.

#### **4. Performing Processions and Mental Transformation**

The sculpted façades are related to the edifice of the church as the center of the theological concept and its exterior sculptures as the initial trigger for the mental transition of human perception while facing the façades. The ecclesiastical buildings were usually the tallest and most prominent structures of a site, built of the most durable materials and decorated uniquely. As such, they visually dominated the landscape. It is plausible that the patrons were not ignorant of the semiotic potential of these large surfaces towering over their surroundings. Rather, they used it in a sophisticated way for their purposes.

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<sup>1</sup> On depositing memories and recollecting them, read in: Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, pp. 8-21, 77-78.

The Jvari church (fig. 1) offers the possibility of a procession conducted around the church. Georgian chronicles provide information on gatherings and processions that were performed under and around the cross, depicted on the tympanum entrance to the church. The chronicles described a gathering on Fridays and Thursdays in Mtskheta, Jvari, and other churches, with the participation of the clergy and the Catholics.<sup>1</sup> The description indicates that the celebration of the cross in Georgian churches resembled the Jerusalem liturgy during the Holy Week, including the Adoration, Exaltation – Display of the Cross, and liturgical processions.

Moreover, until the tenth century, the Georgian liturgy followed Jerusalem, which was characterized as a stationary liturgy.<sup>2</sup> Thus, processions and rites in front of the cross are apparent, as the written sources describe, although their character and details are not evident. The center of such processions in the Jvari church should have been the cross in Clypeus borne by two angels, depicted in the tympanum of the entrance to the church, as the chronicles indicate (fig. 1). At the west of the entrance on the south façade, in an arched niche, reliefs of three figures can still be seen. It is impossible to proceed from that point to the west due to the mountain's steep slopes. The city of Mtskheta (fig. 5) lies in the valley. From the entrance towards the east, additional signs of relief indicate that a comprehensive sculptural program once existed. On the east façade, one encounters the donor's panels, inscriptions, and various ornamental reliefs that are still spread over the façades.



**Fig. 5. City of Mtskheta**  
(View from Jvari Church toward the west).

<sup>1</sup> Thomson, *The History of King Vaxt'ang Gorgasali*, p. 236.

<sup>2</sup> According Baldwin, *The Urban Character of Christian Worship*, p. 37, a “stationary liturgy” is a service of worship at a designated church, shrine, or public place in or near a city or town, on a designated feast, fast, or commemoration, which is presided over by the bishop or his representative and intended as the local church’s main liturgical celebration of the day”.



Consequently, the suggested possibility of a procession that originated under the cross (fig. 1) could have moved to the west and then have been directed back towards the east to the donor's panels (fig. 6). Another possibility of the procession is to dictate a path from the point of the gathering under the cross to the east. The possible procession of clergy and catholicos was accompanied by prayers, hymns, carrying crucifixes, and perhaps additional ritual objects and banners.



**Fig. 6. Jvari. Donors panels.**



**Fig. 7. Oshki. Stylite west façade.**

The stational liturgies of Jerusalem, Rome, and Constantinople influenced the choice of lectionary readings.<sup>1</sup> The clearest example of this is the adoption of the Jerusalem calendar in the early fifth century, together with lessons from liturgical celebrations, by the Armenian and Georgian churches. Another influence upon Jerusalem's stational liturgy was developing the 'entrance rite's structure of the Eucharist discerned in all three liturgies.<sup>2</sup> The structure of the 'entrance rite' is beyond the scope of this study, but, at least by the early seventh century, there was an entrance psalm in the Jerusalem Eucharist, reflecting the close connections between Jerusalem – Georgia – and Byzantium in this respect. Moreover, the Georgian Lectionary assigned an entrance psalm for every Eucharistic celebration.

As early as the year 385, we read in Egeria's diary about movement from one station to another before and after Eucharist celebrations, combined with a gathering of the faithful. Since Jerusalem was a central site of the birth of the Christian faith and its significant events, the city naturally served as a model for several sites in Rome and Constantinople and at the periphery of the Christian world. Apparently, outdoor processions were ubiquitous in the Christian world and shaped by the Jerusalem model. It is also clear that the *litē* and the 'entrance rite' represent the outdoor public processions that included the congregations. John Chrysostom, bishop of Constantinople (398-404), organized such processions. He wrote homilies to describe them, for example, depositing relics in a Martyrium, where it took place, indicating that the empress had also participated in and funded the procession.<sup>3</sup> Socrates Scholastikos and Sozomen, both fifth-century Byzantine church historians who wrote about such processions in Constantinople, also mentioned processions that took place at Antioch.<sup>4</sup>

The existence of processions in the Jvari church and the indications of other outdoor processions shed light on their importance in public religious life in medieval Georgia. Liturgy and imagery sometimes worked together, enhancing each other's shared meanings. The notion of processions traveling through the architectural spaces, guided by the sculpture of sacred scenes, appeared in all outdoor liturgical processions. This was an essential component of any experience of the beholder and essential to public religious life. The act of leading and directing the worshippers through the façades, sculptures, and thus following the work of art repeats itself in Oshki church, Nikortsminda church, and many others.

The Oshki church bore and displayed various new forms and ideas expressing novel perceptions of that time. I employ the figures of two stylites, one on the western

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<sup>1</sup> Baldovin, *The Urban Character of Christian Worship*, p. 240.

<sup>2</sup> Baldovin, *The Urban Character of Christian Worship*, p. 241.

<sup>3</sup> John Chrysostom, Socrates Scholastikos and Sozomen wrote about the procession against the Arians. Baldovin, *The Urban Character of Christian Worship*, pp. 183-185; Cotsonis, *Byzantine Figural Processional Crosses*, p. 15 and note 25.

<sup>4</sup> Crossley, *Ductus and Memoria*, p. 216.



façade (fig. 7) and the other atop the sculpted column in the chapel featuring the south arcade (fig. 8), to illustrate the new forms, ideas, and perceptions.<sup>1</sup>



**Fig. 8. Oshki Church. Stylite-Column, south chapel.**

The stylite figures were embedded in the national memory of Georgia for centuries. Therefore, they functioned as memoria in the Georgian national perception and played an essential role in extracting images from symbolic signs and language. In Georgia, the stylite figures were highly appreciated, and they can be found in frescos, icons, and sculptures. Georgia between the ninth and the thirteenth centuries reveals several examples: Udabno church, tenth century (figs. 9,10,11), in the David Gareja desert, where one of the oldest surviving stylite images is found.

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<sup>1</sup> Udabno, photos by Lado Mirianashvili with translation of inscriptions; Eastmond, Skhirtladze, *Udabno Monastery in Georgia*; Lafontaine-Dosogne, *L'influence de culte de Saint Syméon Stylite*, p. 194.



Fig. 9. Symeon the Elder. Courtesy of Lado Mirianashvili.





Fig. 10. Symeon the Younger. Courtesy of Lado Mirianashvili.



**Fig. 11. Refectory, Udabno Church. Courtesy of Lado Mirianashvili.**

The architecture and other visual elements merge to function as a primary directional path for the viewer. The Oshki's south façade presents a unique example of an open façade, comprising an elaborate arcade whose sculpture and colors can still be seen today (fig. 12). Such a façade was probably created explicitly for those processions and liturgy that began outside the church. The nature of such rituals is unknown, and one can only assume their existence, however, from the lives of the stylites regarding how people venerated them, gathering around the columns for religious purposes, resolving problems, and even for the Eucharist ritual.<sup>1</sup> The option of holding the Eucharistic liturgy in the open landscape was carried out in the cases of Symeon, the Stylite the Elder, and the Younger, as described in their *vitae*.<sup>2</sup> Theodoret reported Symeon's daily and nightly activities: praying, teaching, receiving requests for healing, and resolving quarrels, reflecting the involvement of the two stylites in various levels of the sacred ritual conducted in community ritual structures and daily life.<sup>3</sup> When Symeon the Elder's leg became rotten from wounds and was bound and

<sup>1</sup> Ashbrook-Harvey, *The Stylite's Liturgy*, p. 525.

<sup>2</sup> The Ecclesiastical History of Theodoret 1.13 states that "He holds communion with God". *"The ecclesiastical history, dialogues, and letters of Theodoret"*, 1.13. For the translation of Theodoret's description of Symeon's life, see Doran, *The Lives of Simeon Stylites*, pp. 69-84; Ashbrook Harvey, *The Stylite's Liturgy*, p. 531.

<sup>3</sup> Theodoret reported Symeon's activities during the day and the night: prying, teaching, receiving requests for healing, and resolving quarrels. The main steps of the customary structure

constrained to his pillar, the congregation joined him in the Eucharistic rite underneath it.<sup>1</sup> To include Symeon within the Eucharistic liturgy of the church, the church had to move that liturgy outside its walls.<sup>2</sup> With this move, the sacred order enacted in the church building was now performed outside in the landscape in front of the sculpted façade. The Oshki church exemplifies the possibility of the ritual of the stylite, enacted outside, in front of the southern open arcade.

I thus suggest that a possible ritual pathway existed that was paved by their memoria, inculcated for centuries in the Georgian mind, by the devotion to the stylites, their status, and popularity in Georgia, and by the visual ductus. The ductus movement began at the west façade with the sculpted Stylite the Younger (fig. 7). It then led through the open south arcaded façade, passing the carved column topped with the Stylite the Elder (fig. 8), the scenes sculpted on the façade with angels, foliage, and hunting scenes. It then crossed the porch of the church with the overhead sculpture of the archangels Michael and Gabriel (fig. 13), the massive eagle with a beast in its claws (fig. 14), and then, toward the east, where the beholder faced the large sculpted panels of the donors flanking the Deesis (fig. 15).



**Fig. 12. Oshki. South Façade.**

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of the Eucharist liturgy consisted of the proclamation and exposition of scripture, the recitation of litanies of supplication and petition, the reconciliation of peace, and communion between the human and the divine. Ashbrook Harvey, *The Stylite's Liturgy*, p. 531.

<sup>1</sup> Idem, p. 531.

<sup>2</sup> Two conclusions are relevant to this study: first, the saint's liturgical activity, could not be extricated from its civic ramifications; and second, his ascetic discipline had a purpose only when practiced within the discipline of the church as a civic community.

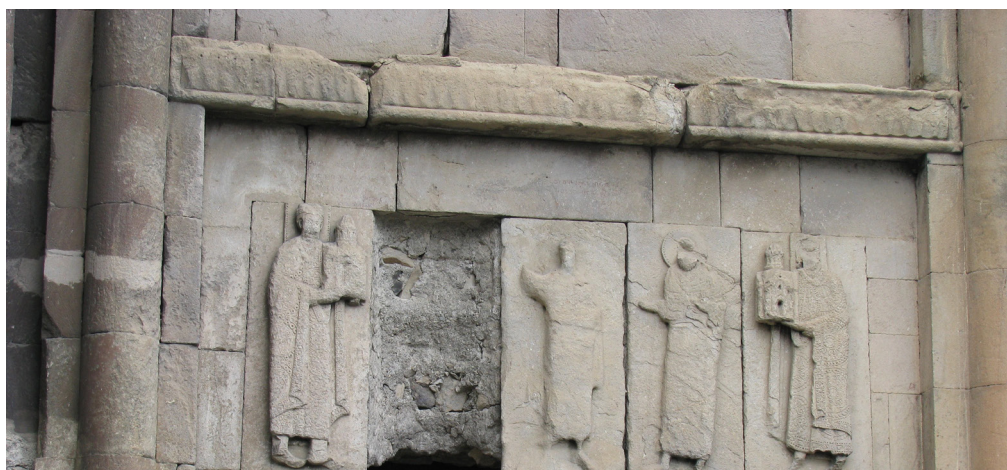




**Fig. 13. Oshki. Archangels Michael and Gabriel.**



**Fig. 14. Oshki. Eagle with a Beast in its Claws.**



**Fig. 15. Oshki. Donors Panels.**

The longitudinal spine of the church, moving from west to east, accompanied by the reliefs resembling a celestial sphere, is an all-important structure in this controlled procession.<sup>1</sup> The beholders, confronted with sculptures, motifs, and themes strung out along a pathway, provide the direction for the images' theatrical equivalents, the liturgy of salvation through the mediation of the rulers flanking the Deesis. The path reflects human participation in the imagery that the spatial stage evokes as the drama of the sculpted scenes unfolds and the beholders' performative involvement takes place.

Nikortsminda cathedral, dating from the beginning of the eleventh century, features a myriad of reliefs of different biblical subjects. Such a vast program of theophanies on the façades was meant to appeal to the worshippers approaching the church, inviting them to participate in some kind of rite and thus influencing their state of mind.

The center of each façade is endowed with a relief portraying theophany – on the west – *Majestas Domini*; south – Christ's second coming; east – Metamorphosis. Besides the theophanies, other themes are depicted (figs. 16, 17, 18).

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<sup>1</sup> Crossley, *Ductus and Memoria*, p. 229.





**Fig. 16. Nikortsminda West. Majestas Domini.**



**Fig. 17. Nikortsminda, South. Christ's Second Coming.**



**Fig. 18. Nikortsminda, East. Metamorphosis.**



Consequently, the program was significantly occupied with spiritual topics and flourished with vegetal, geometric, and figurative forms. The system of blind arches creates a metaphorical *parochet* all over the church edifice, strengthening the dramatic atmosphere enveloping the façades. The dramatic presence of the theophanic scenes attests to deep theological and philosophical meanings. Hence, these scenes reflect comprehensive layers of religious and cultural concepts and philosophical notions. The artisan's or patron's priority in Nikortsminda was to present an optimistic approach to the revelation scenes and to ignore any signs of the Last Day Judgment, punishment, and threats. In the background, one should bear in mind the historical events of the period.<sup>1</sup> The spiritual reading of the book of Revelation nourished eschatological hopes for a better life and future, invoking expectations for Christ's coming to establish his new kingdom on earth.<sup>2</sup>

In such an atmosphere, it is apparent that processions were part of the rituals conducted in and around the church's sublime location and inspirational artistic program.



**Fig. 19. Nikortsminda. Detail of North. Tympanum.**

<sup>1</sup> The rulers Bagrat III, David the Great, and their followers strove to unite Georgian provinces under one central reign, thus marking the rise of national feelings and anticipations.

<sup>2</sup> The western world Christians understood John's vision in a literal way as historical fact and in a spiritual way, while between Greek Christians, believers in the East it was accepted as an allegory and spiritual value. The book's canonization by Orthodoxy occurred in the fourteenth century. Nevertheless, the book had a vast influence on early Christians, and between the fathers of the Church. McGinn, *John's Apocalypse and the Apocalyptic Mentality*, pp. 8, 18.



In conclusion, the idea of the ductus generates an additional visible layer of interpretation of the political connection between the façades sculptures and their viewers. From the movement pattern of the spectators and their observation of the scenes or even partial details, they could extract the event and the whole story that it represented. The process of recollection was intensified by visual means of the architecture, the sculptures, and probably also by the processions and prayers.<sup>1</sup> The ductus concept led the beholders on a distinctive path around a particular accompanying rite, around the church, or nearby. The landscape surrounding the holy site created a sacred atmosphere and thus intensified the spiritual feelings of the faithful before or after entering the sacred place. Crossley's statement in his article *Ductus and Memoria* states that "the aim of this essay is to move from the cathedral as text to the cathedral as experience, and to explore the relationship between aesthetics and performance". Thus, he refers to the Gothic façades sculpture as a sacred book, *summa in stone*, which is very relevant to Georgian church façades. Moreover, exploring the relationship between aesthetics and performance corresponds to the relationship between the beholders and the façades sculpture. Crossley understands their emotional state and human responses to the façades sculpture were a somatic reception. In other words, they felt a response that one experiences in his body and not only in his mind. The meaning of the word 'somatic' in this respect is linked to the term 'memoria'.

According to Gadamer's theory, human beings in the ancient world were able to bind themselves to the divine and sacred through the experience of artwork, and they recognized this as an experience of Creation itself. These words harness sculptures to extract the mental status of the beholder facing the façades. The desire to enter the church inspired the faithful to reach their ultimate destination, entering the house of God. The façades in this respect became 'unfinished business', something that demanded a return.<sup>2</sup> Only when the decorative system became evident and could be understood as a whole united program could the beholder cross the liminal spiritual threshold of the façade – the "sacred space" into the church, experiencing the other world.

The sacred work of art reminds us that the mode of being exists in three dimensions – a structure of the façades – the church, the creation – the work of art, and the performance – the beholder. This construction corresponds to the "transformation in the beholder's mental state facing the sculpted facades". To truly understand the significance of religious images, the crucial factor is not form, style, or aesthetics but the response and reaction of viewers. In Georgia, this construction is visualized, I contend, through the metaphoric *parochet*, the veil unfolding across the entire edifice of the church.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For Carruthers's conception of memory, see Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought*.

<sup>2</sup> Trkulja, *Divine Revelation Performed*, p. 230.

<sup>3</sup> Was this the process the medieval believer underwent? Was this the way she or he experienced her or his arrival at the church? Probably; but we can only speculate about her or his state of mind and feelings, since there are no known written sources, nor any oral traditions.

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## Performative Aspects of the Georgian Façades Decoration

### Summary

Standing before decorated façades like those at Jvari, Oshki, Nikortsminda, and many others, one can imagine and even feel the transformative process the medieval beholder may have undergone. Even today, the decorative system has become clearer, surprisingly rich, and astonishing in its proportions, rhythm, and beauty.

Thus, the sculpted scenes today recall the land's history and the region's local events in Georgia at the time, evoking religious feelings and exaltation. The inherent power of the image was thus used to pursue multivalent principles.

The relationship of the sculpted façades to their previous model represents a change or evolutionary stage in their adornment. The sculpted façades generate another visible interpretive layer of the political connection between the church's edifice and the viewers. From the pattern of the spectators' movement and their observation of the scenes or even partial details, they could grasp the event and the entire story that it represented. Their recollection was intensified by visual means of the architecture, the sculptures, and most likely by the processions and prayers. The landscape surrounding the holy site created a sacred atmosphere and thus strengthened the spiritual feelings of the pious before or after entering the sacred place. Crossley stated in his article *Ductus and Memoria* that "the aim of this essay is to move from the cathedral as text to the cathedral as experience, and to explore the relationship between aesthetics and performance". Thus, he refers to the Gothic façades sculpture as a sacred book, *summa in stone*, which is very relevant to Georgian church façades.

The work of art does not stand as an object by itself. Instead, it is an experience that alters and influences the person who experiences it. Concerning religious art in Georgia, the sculpted façades acted not solely as artwork. Instead, they initiated a whole chain reaction: reliefs versus beholders, allowing them to experience an eruption of truth, extracting strong emotions, moving by processions, prayers, music, and sublime landscapes. Artwork poses a challenge to the viewers, primarily due to its appearance as mimetic, self-reflecting, and representational of someone.

The façades' performative aspects surpass the limitations of the static sacred image, becoming a wide-ranging and transformative act. Thus, the sculptures are meant to be read as drama on the façades. Consequently, this raises the question of how the beholder experienced such an artistic program. What power did and does the artwork have that affected viewers, both then and now?

The sacred work of art reminds us that the mode of being corresponds to the “transformation in the beholder’s mental state facing the sculpted façades”. The significance of understanding religious images is that the crucial factor is not form, style, or aesthetics; rather, it is but the response and reaction of viewers. In Georgia, this construction is visualized, I contend, through the metaphoric *parochet*, the veil of sculptures unfolding across the entire edifice of the church.



## ქართული ფასადის დეკორის პერფორმატიული ასპექტები

რეზიუმე

ჯვრის, ოშკის, ნიკორწმინდის და სხვა მრავალი ძეგლის ფასადის წინაშე მდგარმა ადამიანმა შეიძლება წარმოიდგინოს და, გარკვეულწილად, შეიგრძნოს კიდევ ის ზემოქმედება, რასაც შუა საუკუნეებში მათი მხილველი განიცდიდა. დღესაც კი დეკორატიული სისტემა მკაფიო, გასაოცრად მდიდარი და განსაცვიფრებელია თავისი პროპორციებით, რიტმითა და სილამაზით.

ამგვარად, სკულპტურული სცენები დღემდე გვახსენებს ქვეყნის ისტორიასა და იმდროინდელ ადგილობრივ მოვლენებს საქართველოში, აღძრავს რელიგიურ განცდებს და აღტაცებას იწვევს. მათი საშუალებით გამოსახულების შინაგანი ძალა გამოიყენებოდა მრავალმნიშვნელოვანი პრინციპების რეალიზაციისათვის.

ახალი და ძველი სკულპტურული ფასადების შედარება წარმოაჩენს ცვლილებას ან ევოლუციურ ეტაპს მათი დეკორის განვითარებაში. სკულპტურული ფასადები ქმნიდა კიდევ ერთ, ხილულ ინტერპრეტაციულ ფენას, რომელიც წარმოაჩენდა პოლიტიკურ კავშირს ეკლესიის ნაგებობასა და მნახველებს შორის. მნახველთა მოძრაობა და მათ მიერ სცენებზე ან თუნდაც ცალკეულ დეტალებზე დაკვირვება შესაძლებელს ხდიდა გაეაზრებინათ მოვლენა და მთელი მისი ისტორია. მათი მახსოვრობა კიდევ უფრო ძლიერდებოდა არქიტექტურის ვიზუალური საშუალებებით, ქანდაკებებით და, დიდი ალბათობით, პროცესიებისა და ლოცვების საშუალებითაც. წმინდა ადგილის გარშემო არსებული ლანდშაფტი ქმნიდა საკრალურ ატმოსფეროს და, ამგვარად, აძლიერებდა მორწმუნეთა სულიერ განცდებს, წმიდა ადგილებში შესვლამდე და მის შემდეგაც. ქროსლი თავის ნაშრომში *Ductus and Memoria* ამტკიცებდა, რომ „ამ ესეს მიზანია ტაძარი აღვიქვათ არა როგორც ტექსტი, არამედ როგორც გამოცდილება და შევისწავლოთ ურთიერთკავშირი ესთეტიკასა და პერფორმანსს შორის“. ამგვარად, იგი გოთიკური ფასადების სკულპტურას „წმინდა წიგნს“, *summa in stone*-ს, უწოდებს, რაც ძალზე ესადაგება ქართული ეკლესიების ფასადებს.

ხელოვნების ნიმუში არ არსებობს როგორც დამოუკიდებელი, თვითმყოფადი ობიექტი. პირიქით, ის არის გამოცდილება, რომელიც ცვლის ადამიანს და ზემოქმედებს ადამიანზე, რომელსაც მასთან აქვს შეხება. რაც შეეხება რელიგიურ ხელოვნებას საქართველოში, სკულპტურული ფასადები მხოლოდ ხელოვნების ნიმუშებად არ მოიაზრებოდა. პირიქით, ისინი იწვევდნენ მთელ ჯაჭვურ რეაქციას: რელიეფები ურთიერთმოქმედებდა

მაყურებლებზე, აძლევდა მათ შესაძლებლობას განეცადათ ჭეშმარიტების ამოფრქვევა, აღძრავდა მძაფრ ემოციებს, რაც ძლიერდებოდა პროცესიების, ლოცვების, მუსიკისა და ამაღლებული პეიზაჟების მეშვეობით. ხელოვნების ნიმუში გამოწვევა იყო მაყურებლისთვის, უპირველესად თავისი მიმეტიკური, თვითრეფლექსიური და რეპრეზენტაციული ბუნების წყალობით.

ფასადების პერფორმაციული ასპექტები სცილდება სტატიკური საკრალური გამოსახულების ჩარჩოებს და გარდაიქმნება მასშტაბურ და ტრანსფორმაციულ აქტად. ამდენად, ქანდაკებები უნდა აღიქმებოდეს როგორც ფასადებზე წარმოდგენილი დრამა. ამასთან დაკავშირებით ჩნდება კითხვა: როგორ აღიქვამდა მაყურებელი ასეთ მხატვრულ პროგრამას? რა ძალა ჰქონდათ და აქვთ ხელოვნების ნიმუშებს, რომლებიც დღესაც ისევე ზემოქმედებენ მაყურებელზე, როგორც მაშინ?

საკრალური ხელოვნების ნიმუში შეგვახსენებს, რომ მისი არსებობის რეჟიმი „სკულპტურული ფასადების დამკვირვებლის სულიერი მდგომარეობის გარდასახვაში“ მდგომარეობს. რელიგიური სახეების გააზრებაში გადამწყვეტ ფაქტორს არ წარმოადგენს ფორმა, სტილი ან ესთეტიკა, არამედ მაყურებლის ემოციური გამოხმაურება და რეაქცია. საქართველოში ეს კონსტრუქცია, ჩემი არგუმენტით, ვიზუალიზებულია მეტაფორული *პაროხეტის* – ქანდაკებათა ფარდის – სახით, რომელიც ეკლესიის მთელ ნაგებობაზეა გაშლილი.

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მითითებულის გარდა, ყველა სურათი გადაღებულია ერგა შნეურსონის მიერ.