

## Figure and Ornament: Aesthetics, Art and Architecture in the Caucasus region, from 400 to 1650

Tbilisi, Sep 29–Oct 1, 2011

Deadline: Jan 31, 2011

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[Please note: the deadline has been extended to January, 31!]

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Figure and ornament have generally been considered as opposites. Figurative representations, however, can be ornamented or framed by ornaments, and ornaments are frequently formed by repeated figural motives, such as animals or plants. In fact, ornaments and figures are related in manifold ways and define or articulate pictorial or architectonic spaces, elaborating various aesthetic concepts. Traditionally, the distinction between figure and ornament has been understood as a consequence of specific religious belief systems and their attitude towards images. Whereas medieval Western and Byzantine Christian art has primarily been considered as figurative even if images have not always been uncontested, Islamic art, in turn, has often been perceived as iconophobic and mainly ornamental. Recent art historical research has strongly argued against such polarization, indeed the respective role of figure and ornament can no longer be seen as a basic difference between “Christian” and “Islamic” art. This opens a wide range of new questions especially for regions where Christians and Muslims were neighbours or have interacted over the centuries.

Under these premises, the conference will be dedicated to the various relationships between figure and ornament in the arts of the Caucasus from the Middle Ages until the early 17th century, in particular in Georgia, Armenia, Eastern Anatolia and Azerbaijan, also including Iran. While the current debates on the coexistence of and the cultural exchange between Christianity and Islam are mainly concentrated on the Mediterranean, the conference will take a closer look at the region between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, which has hardly been considered from this perspective. From early times, the Caucasian area has been characterized by an encounter and conflict between the Greco-Roman and Persian or Central Asian worlds of the Middle Ages and by the formation of Georgian and Armenian Christianity relating to Byzantium on the one hand and various Islamic cultures on the other. However, religion represents just one major aspect for understanding the arts of the Caucasian area, and another no less important aspect concerns the competing

or related models of kingship and monarchical representation, often transcending religious divisions.

The cultures the conference will discuss are not to be seen as given or static units but as having been formed and transformed in relation and interaction with each other. Thus, on the one hand, the conference examines the cultural transfer of phenomena beyond regions and borders, and on the other hand it aims to diagnose and compare the elaboration of different visual cultures in the Caucasus and their aesthetics regarding figure and ornament. The main questions that could be addressed in the conference sessions are: how can relationships between figure and ornament be described and analyzed, how do they contribute to create and define spaces, and what is their function and meaning? How do figures and ornaments activate, penetrate or dissolve surfaces? What role do different media play, for example in terms of materiality and its aesthetic implications? Can we observe forms of hierarchization and artistic classification between figures and ornaments and how are they related to religious, political and social contexts? Where can we speak of joint formal patterns and of migration and adaption, and how can we trace shifts in form and meaning from one region or historical moment to another? How do historical (vertical) references interact with transcultural (horizontal) ones, to which past or present do they refer and do we encounter "free" formal solutions of aesthetic problems? How are political and religious concerns negotiated by figure and ornament? How could a collaborative research agenda for the history of art in the Caucasus region be built up beyond historical and present religious and political divisions?

Proposals (ca 2500 characters) should be sent together with a CurriculumVitae (max 3 pages) by 15 January 2011 to both following addresses:

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Reference:

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