

Title: The Khakhuli Triptych

Date: 8th-12th centuries

Geography: Khakhuli Monastery, Turkey and Gelati Monastery (near Kutaisi), Georgia

Culture: Georgian and Byzantine

Medium: gold, enamel, precious stones

Dimensions: 58 x 79 in.

Current Institution: Museum of Fine Arts, Tbilisi, Georgia

Link to the object: https://museum.ge/index.php?m=305&cid=216&col_id=12452

[last accessed 22nd September 2024]

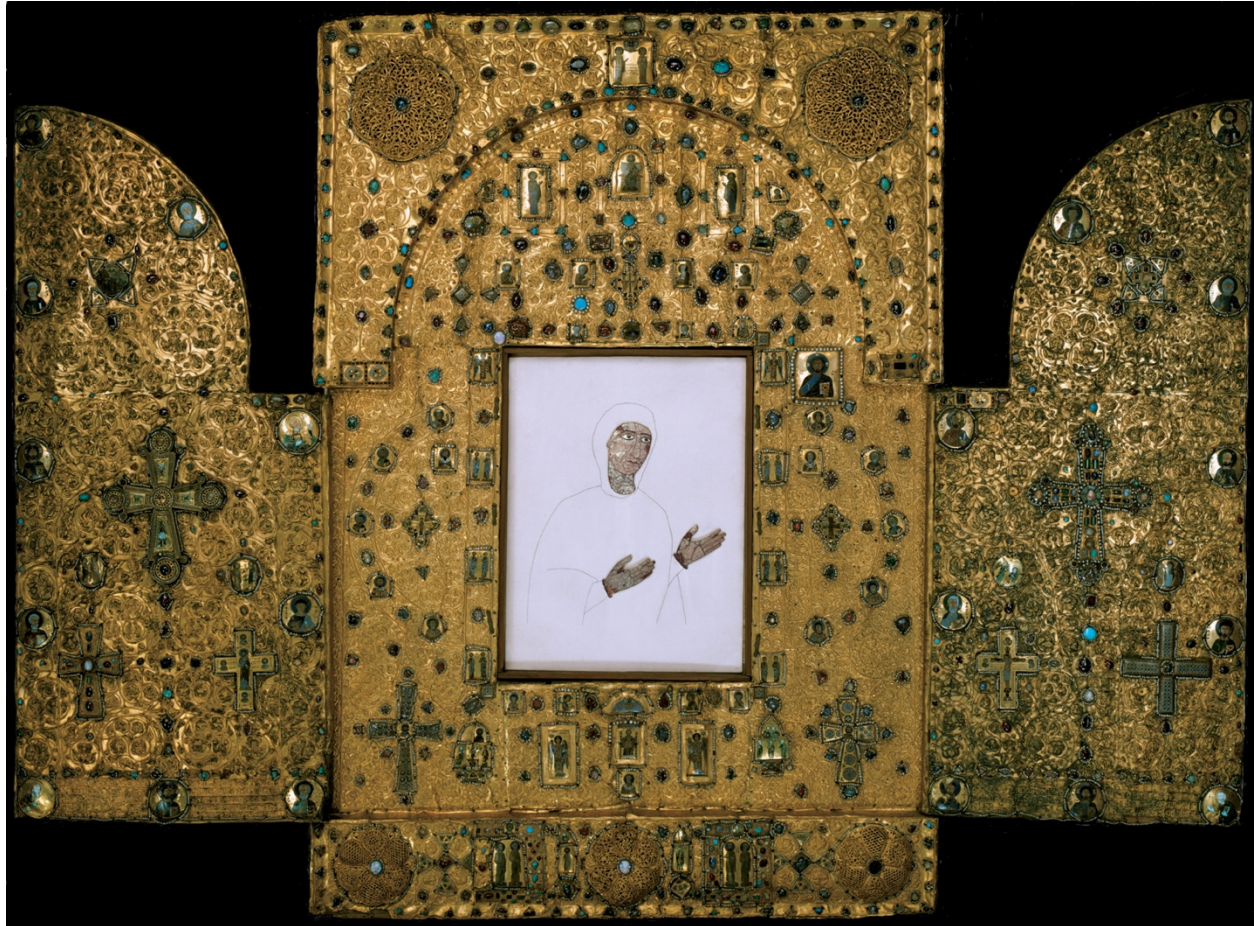


Fig. 1. The Khakhuli Triptych (ca.1120-30). Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts (Tbilisi, Georgia)

alt="The medieval Georgian triptych of Khakhuli made in gold and gilded silver shows the enamel icon of the Virgin in the center and over one hundred smaller enamel pieces and gems around it"

Keywords: icon, triptych, Georgia, enamel, cloisonné, repoussé revetment

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The golden triptych of Khakhuli is one of the most significant medieval Georgian works of art. The execution of the large triptych is connected to the famous King Davit‘ IV Aǰmašenebeli (1089-1125) and the so-called “Golden Age” of the Kingdom of Georgia. Now housed in the Tbilisi Museum of Fine Arts, the enormous Khakhuli triptych (58 x 79 in.) has rich adornment that includes over a hundred different types of enamel pieces dating from the eighth to the twelfth centuries, precious stones, and a background of repoussé ornament. Additionally, the Georgian *Asomtavruli* inscription (the oldest out of the three Georgian scripts) arranged on the lower parts of the wings of the triptych highlights the prominence of the central enamel icon of the Virgin by recording King Davit‘ as its donor—and his son King Demetre as its embellisher. Consequently, the golden triptych and its constituent parts were donated to the image that, since the tenth century, had been housed in the Khakhuli Monastery (present-day eastern Turkey). According to his chronicler, King Davit‘ donated precious objects and family valuables from his treasury to this icon for its embellishment towards the end of his reign. The large golden object—with its lavish enamel decoration originally made by Georgian and Byzantine craftsmen—was subsequently placed in the newly built church of the Gelati Monastery (near Kutaisi, Georgia) founded by the king himself. Despite the fragmentary condition of the central icon of the Virgin, it remains unique because its individual enamel pieces—face and hands—represent one of the largest of its kind to have survived from the Middle Ages.

Multiple depictions of the same subjects emphasize the main themes of the triptych: the cross, royal figures, and the Virgin. In the arrangement of the enamels, crosses act as mediators between the main figure—that of the Virgin—and the enamel pieces with depictions of royal figures. The image of the Virgin appears not only on the central icon, but also on numerous enamels spread across the surface of the triptych. Furthermore, five enamel pieces representing royal figures are arranged in the shape of a cross on the triptych. Noteworthy is the plaque with the representation of Byzantine Emperor Michael VII Doukas and his Georgian wife Marta, which is located at the top of the central panel of the triptych and is visible even when the wings are closed. The representation insists upon the ties of kinship between the Georgian and Byzantine courts. By placing the plaque at the highest point of the triptych, the commissioners of the Khakhuli triptych emphasized that they shared a member of their royal family with the imperial family of Byzantium: the Georgian Empress Marta was the aunt of King Davit‘ and an important figure for him. Moreover, the placement of the enamel highlights the divine origin of rulership.



Fig. 2. An enamel piece from the top of the central panel of the Khakhuli triptych showing Byzantine Emperor Michael VII Doukas and his Georgian wife Marta. Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts (Tbilisi, Georgia)

alt="Cloisonné enamel plaque with Byzantine Emperor Michael VII Doukas and his Georgian wife Marta "

The organization of the enamel pieces determines the triptych's decorative system. They are the most significant component while the surrounding background is completely filled in with repoussé ornaments featuring stylized leaves inscribed in circles. An in-depth examination of the repoussé ornaments indicates that the location of each enamel piece and gem was determined prior to these ornaments' addition. Accordingly, aside from a few later added enamel pieces—to replace the missing originals—all the enamels are original to the triptych.

Not only the inner surfaces, but also the outer surfaces of the wings—which are visible when the triptych is closed—are decorated. Featuring on each wing two large crosses surrounded by foliated trees, the exterior decoration looks completely different from the interior. Because of this, current scholarship suggests that the Virgin of Khakhuli was already a triptych in the tenth

century and exterior panels of the wings were later reattached to the central icon of the Virgin by Kings Davit' and Demetre.

The Khakhuli triptych may be considered one of the most ambitious attempts to bring together enamels of different origins and periods and exhibit them as a single object. In fact, many of the enamels arrived as diplomatic gifts to Georgia and were assembled by Davit' for a specific purpose: to create the Khakhuli triptych. Consequently, the purpose of these objects was changed, and they were embedded with new meanings through a new physical setting and audience.

Despite debate on the specific region of manufacture of the individual enamel plaques, scholars agree that the Khakhuli triptych, created by the order of the royal family, is unique. The variety of enamels and precious stones demonstrates the power and wealth of the Georgian kingdom in the twelfth century. It also shows that medieval Georgia was an established member of the Orthodox Christian family and had active diplomatic, trade, and ecclesiastical relations with the Byzantine Empire.

Biography

Sopio Gagoshidze is a PhD candidate in Art History at Rutgers University and a Dodge Avenir Fellow at the Zimmerli Art Museum. She specializes in South Caucasian and Byzantine art and visual culture and is particularly interested in artistic exchanges between Georgia and Byzantium. Email: s.gagoshidze@rutgers.edu

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