V. *Per visibilia:* concreciones pictóricas de lo invisible

Per visibilia: *Pictorial Formulations for the Invisible*

The Tangible and the Invisible: from Faces to Concepts, and to Malevich[1]

Lo tangible y lo invisible, de los rostros a los conceptos, y a Malevich

Ivan Foletti
Masaryk University, Brno
ivan.foletti@gmail.com
ORCID ID: orcid.org/0000-0002-3080-7177

Abstract

How to represent God was a crucial question in the early Middle Ages. While the idea that the face of Christ could be depicted was accepted, alternative versions emerged over the centuries. Following an initial phase with devotional images oscillating between mimetic and schematic, aniconic images appeared more prevalently. Aniconic *ornamentum* then became one of the most effective ways to give a tangible dimension to the invisible god.

Keywords: Aniconic Images, *Ornamentum*, San Vincenzo al Volturno, Sant'Agnese in Rome, Golden Altar of Ambrose, Khachkars, "Crista" of Suger of Saint Denis, Malevich.

Resumen

Cómo representar a Dios fue una cuestión crucial en la Alta Edad Media. Si bien se aceptaba la idea de que se podía representar el rostro de Cristo, a lo largo de los siglos surgieron versiones alternativas. Tras una fase inicial en la que las imágenes devocionales oscilaban entre lo mimético y lo esquemático, aparecieron con más frecuencia las imágenes anicónicas. El ornamento anicónico se convirtió entonces en una de las formas más eficaces de dar una dimensión tangible al dios invisible.

Palabras clave: Imágenes anicónicas, *Ornamentum*, San Vincenzo al Volturno, Sant'Agnese en Roma, Altar de Oro de Ambrosio, Khachkars, "Crista" de Suger de Saint Denis, Malevich.

---

[1] To Herb, the *varenyky*, and his incredible gift in uniting worlds.

The purpose of this text is to reflect on how images and objects, activated in different ways, can become a bridge between tangible and invisible realities.[2] I will explore in particular how distancing oneself from the antique "mimesis" becomes a way of constructing a new (and unprecedented?) experience of the sacred[3]. Such a concept is unthinkable without referring to the studies of Herbert L. Kessler who, through his research on the "spiritual eye", has provided art historians with a tool to overcome the limits of traditional historiography, often framed by a limiting, materialistic perspective[4]. In this sense, we can see Kessler's intellectual originality in perfect harmony with the path opened, within the frame of the Russian cultural tradition, by figures such as Pavel Florensky and André Grabar[5]. At the centre of my interest in the following pages will be the premodern beholder, the one who could "experience medieval art"[6].

In the following pages I will investigate early medieval anthropomorphic objects spanning over three centuries which, in their formal and mediatic choices, express to us how material culture can activate the "spiritual eye". The second part of this essay will be dedicated to the notion of aniconism in the early medieval world, which, it seems, became a preferred vector to go beyond the senses. Such a *longue durée* approach is justified by the desire to pinpoint dynamics and questions which are hard to be assessed when looking at individual cases. To use the metaphor proposed by Richard Krautheimer, my desire is here to look to the forest, and not to the single trees.[7]

FACES, THE SENSES, AND BEYOND

The early medieval period was, from an artistic point of view, a moment of radical transformation of the visual canons. At least since the time of Raffaello Santi (1483–1520) and Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574), this visual transformation has been considered decadent, as it diverged from the classical canons. The motivation for these changes has been identified in the

---

[2] This article has been carried out as part the project *Cultural Interactions in the Medieval Subcaucasian Region: Historiographical and Art-Historical Perspectives* (GF21-01706L).

[3] For the very fertile discussions on the notion of mimesis in the West, see the seminal studies by E. AUERBACH, *Mimesis. Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur*, Bern, 1946, reflected upon in the art historical framework notably by E. H. GOMBRICH, *Art and illusion: a study in the psychology of pictorial representation*, New York, 1960, especially chapter 4, pp. 99–125 and IDEM, *The Heritage of Apelles*, Oxford, 1976. On the transformations of the notion of mimesis in the Ancient world, see also J. ELSNER, "Between Mimesis and Divine Power: Visuality in the Graeco-Roman World", in *Visuality Before and Beyond the Renaissance*, R. S. NELSON (ed.), Cambridge, 2000, pp. 45–69.

[4] H. L. KESSLER, *Spiritual Seeing: picturing God's invisibility in medieval art*, Philadelphia, 2000.

[5] P. FLORENSKY, "Obratnaja perspektiva", *Trudy po znakovim sistemam*, III (1967), pp. 381–416. English translation as "Reverse perspective (1920)", in P. FLORENSKY, *Beyond visions. Essays on the Perception of Art*, N. Misler (ed.), W. SALMOND (transl.), London, 2002, pp. 197–272; A. GRABAR, "Plotin et les origines de l'esthétique médiévale", *Cahiers Archéologiques*, I (1945), pp. 15–34; for the English transl., with introduction, see A. GRABAR, *Plotinus and the Origins of Medieval Aesthetics*, transl., A. PALLADINO (ed., transl., and introduction), Rome/Brno, 2018.

[6] H. L. KESSLER, *Experiencing Medieval Art*, Toronto/Buffalo/London, 2019.

[7] "In my Ph.D. thesis I had seen the forest but neglected the trees; in working on the Corpus, I had seen the trees but not the forest. Now I saw the forest because of the trees; I had firm ground under my feet", in R. KRAUTHEIMER, "And Gladly Did He Learn and Gladly Teach", in *Rome: Tradition, Innovation, and Renewal A Canadian International Art History Conference, 8-13 June 1987 in honour of Richard Krautheimer*, Victoria, B.C., 1991, pp. 93–126, part. 104.

development of the new Christian religion, and above all, in what Vasari considered, using ancient Roman terminology, the "barbarian invasions"[8]. This is not the place to deconstruct this historiographical myth, but one aspect is crucial for this volume: during what was called "Late Antiquity", in the space of a few decades, a real visual revolution took place. This change is evident when comparing the faces in the Roman mosaics in the church of Santi Cosma e Damiano (526–530) with those in Sant'Agnese Fuori le Mura (625–638) (Figs. 1–2)[9]. The sculptural face of the Apostle Paul of Santi Cosma e Damiano and that of Sant'Agnese can be seen as diametrical opposites in aesthetic choice. The first is depicted using coloured tiles in a contrast of light and shadow that creates the illusion of space, giving the face a sculptural dimension. The second is fashioned in a completely two-dimensional way, giving up any ambition of mimesis.

These formal changes may be related to the arrival of new visual standards on the Italian peninsula, "imported" by the nomadic populations settling there between the fifth and seventh centuries. The most important in this regard is the advent of the Lombards who, in 568, arrived on the peninsula with armed forces as well as civilians, radically tilting the demographic

Fig. 1. St. Peter, Church of St. Cosmas and Damian, 527-530, Rome (© CEMS)

Fig. 2. St. Agnes, Church of St. Agnes, 625-638, Rome (foto: Domenico Ventura)

---

[8] See e.g. B. Forti, "Vasari e la 'ruina estrema' del Medioevo: genesi e sviluppi di un'idea", *Arte medievale*, 4/4 (2014), pp. 231-252; M. M. Morresi, "Il tardoantico sottoposto a censura: le rappresentazioni dell'arco di Costantino tra Quattro e Cinquecento", *Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa. Classe di Lettere e Filosofia*, 5/2/1, (2010), pp. 45-66, 366-374; A. Thiery, "Il Medioevo nell'Introduzione e nel Proemio delle Vite", in *Il Vasari storiografo e artista. Atti del congresso internazionale nel IV centenario della morte* (Arezzo-Firenze, 2-8 settembre 1974), Florence, 1976, pp. 351-381.

[9] On these due monuments see the most recent contributions with previous bibliography: by G. Ferraù, *Sant'Agnese fuori la mura: il complesso monumentale sulla via Nomentana*, Castiglione di Sicilia, 2020; I. Foletti, "Maranatha: space, liturgy, and image in the Basilica of Saints Cosmas and Damian on the Roman Forum", in *The fifth century in Rome. Art, Liturgy, Patronage*, I. Foletti, M. Gianandrea (eds.), Rome, 2017, pp. 161–179.

balance. The visual canons that accompanied them, visible in their jewellery above all, are based on the extreme conceptualization of form (Fig. 3)[10]. Over the following centuries, this aesthetic would become, for the Italian peninsula, dominant in the mass media of the time: from monumental art to coins and everyday objects. That the arrival of new inputs was crucial for such a change is obvious. At the same time, however, the idea of a total and radical decline in the arts – as presented by Vasari and his successors – is today impossible to sustain. Throughout the centuries in question, in fact, objects and monuments survive almost everywhere that maintain ancient tradition undisturbed – for instance, the Greek diaspora church of Santa Maria Antiqua in Rome, the small temple of Clitunno in Spoleto with its decorations, and the frescoes of the extramural church of Sancta Maria Foris Portas in Castelseprio.[11] The Agnese mosaic dates with certainty to the same decades as one of the most "Hellenistic" paintings in Santa Maria Antiqua, the so-called scene of the "Maccabean".

We are therefore forced to ascertain that, if an aesthetic revolution indeed took place around the year 600 – and would have a radical impact on the following centuries –, it was rather the result of a cultural encounter. At the same time, however, it would seem simplistic to take it as the inevitable result of a deterministic *Zeitgeist*. We are convinced that the choice to use images that do not aim to imitate nature, but instead promote a conceptual vision, corresponds to a specific intellectual desire. The motionless and emotionless face of Saint Agnes could be taken as a reflection of the "meekness" praised by Gregory the Great in describing the face of Saint Benedict.[12] More interestingly, with Martin F. Lešák, we have recently placed mosaics from the Via Nomentana in relation with readings that, from the years of Gregory himself, took place in the basilica during the stationary liturgy.[13] The result is extremely interesting: this text corresponds to the Gospel parable of a man who decided to sell all his possessions to buy a single rare pearl, a metaphor for the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 13:45-46) – this idea is also present in the *passio* of St. Agnes. Agnes's face, besides its two-dimensionality, is

---

[10] For fibulae in general see the synthesis of I. Barbiera, "*Sudata marito fibula*: oggetti di prestigio e identità di genere tra pubblico e privato in età tardo antica e altomedievale", in *Spazio pubblico e spazio privato tra storia e archeologia (secoli VI-XI)*, G. Bianchi, C. La Rocca, T. Lazzari (eds.), Turhnout, 2018, pp. 327–341. For the new emerging language see A. M. Romanini, "La scultura di epoca longobarda in Italia settentrionale: questioni storiografiche", *Corso di Cultura sull'Arte Ravennate e Bizantina*, 36 (1989), pp. 389–417; M. Andaloro, "Dal ritratto all'icona", in *Arte e iconografia a Roma. da Costantino a Cola di Rienzo*, M. Andaloro, S. Romano (eds.), Milan, 2000, pp. 31–67; I. Foletti, "De la liminalité à la présence: les coupoles milanaise, leurs décorations et la naissance du moyen âge", in *Entre terre et ciel. La coupole entre l'Antiquité Tardive et le haut moyen âge: structure, fonction*, C. Croci, V. Ivanovici (eds.), Lausanne, 2018, pp. 125–144.

[11] See the recent contribution with previous bibliography: *Santa Maria Antiqua tra Roma e Bisanzio*, M. Andaloro, G. Bordi (eds.), Milan, 2016; J. Osborne, *Rome in the eighth century: a history in art*, Cambridge/New York/ Port Melbourne/New Delhi/Singapore, 2020; J. Mitchell, *Lombard legacy: cultural strategies and the visual arts in early medieval Italy*, London, 2018, pp. 185-246; G. Binazzi, "Considerazioni sulla cronologia del tempietto sul Clitunno", *Lanx*, 18 (2014), pp. 1–47. For a general reflection see V. Pace, "La questione bizantina in alcuni monumenti dell'Italia altomedievale: la 'perizia greca' nei 'tempietti' di Cividale e del Clitunno, Santa Maria foris portas a Castelseprio e San Salvatore a Brescia, Santa Maria Antiqua a Roma", in *Medioevo mediterraneo*, C. A. Quintavalle (ed.), Parma, 2007, pp. 215–223.

[12] Gregorio Magno, *Libro II° dei 'Dialoghi'*, Rome, 2000, p. 3.

[13] I. Foletti, M. F. Lešák, "Hidden Treasure and Precious Pearl: Sant'Agnese fuori le mura, Apse Mosaic, and the Experience of Liturgy", in *From Words to Space*, S. de Blaauw, E. Scirocco (eds.), Rome, 2022 (forthcoming).

Fig. 3. Disc brooch, 7th-9th c., London, British Museum (© The Trustees of the British Museum)

composed almost exclusively of white tiles and therefore shines like a pearl in the apse space, recalling the widespread *topos* associating pearls, saints, and relics[14]. At the same time, the whiteness of her face is traditionally attributed to virginal virtue. Anyone visiting the basilica at the time of the solemn rites of the stationary liturgy, with the pope possibly present, was therefore in a dark basement space where the image of the martyr shone with her whiteness[15]. While listening to the readings and the homilies of the popes, Agnes's features prompted the visitor to activate their "spiritual eye". The "conceptual" face of the saint certainly did not help imagine the very young martyr in the flesh and blood. Instead, it forced the viewer's mind to go beyond the tangible world, moving beyond the senses to interact with the spiritual world.

The idea that early medieval faces became a stimulus for a journey beyond the senses is evinced in examples across the entire European continent. Suffice to recall the face of Fides, the saint of Conques, whose golden statue was produced at the end of the 9th century[16]. The

---

[14] See, e.g., in Prudentius, *Liber Peristephanon*, engl. transl: *Prudentius' Crown of Martyrs – Liber Peristephanon*, L. Krisak (transl.), London/New York, 2020.

[15] D. E. Trout, "Pictures With Words: Reading the Apse Mosaic of S. Agnese f.l.m. (Rome)", *Studies in Iconography*, 40 (2019), pp. 1–26; A. Ballardini, "*Habeas corpus*: Agnese nella basilica di via Nomentana", in *Di Bisanzio dirai ciò che è passato, ciò che passa e che sarà*, S. Pedone, A. Paribeni (eds.), 2 vols., Rome, 2018, vol. 1, pp. 253–279.

[16] In the impressive bibliography on Sainte Foy see J. Taralon, "La Majesté d'or de Sainte Foy de Conques", *Bulletin monumental*, 155 (1997), pp. 11–73; B. Fricke, *Fallen idols, risen saints: Sainte Foy of Conques and the revival of monumental sculpture in medieval art*, Turnhout, 2015 [2007]; I. Foletti, "Dancing with Sainte Foy. Movement and the Iconic Presence", *Convivium*, VI (2019), pp. 70–87.

golden face of the saint originally belongs to the image of a robust Roman emperor and not a delicate child martyr (Fig. 4). Also in this case, therefore, the image diverges from historical reality considerably. Even here, however, especially thanks to Bernard of Angers' *Liber Miraculorum*, we know that through this face, which does not show a desire for mimetic representation of the young saint, an encounter with the presence of Fides regularly took place.[17] Thus, we reach a paradoxical point: images we would now define as "conceptual", far from any illusion of historicity, become tools to awaken the "spiritual eye", to go beyond tangible reality. In other words, the less an image recalls Greco-Roman mimetic tradition, the more it seems able to permit an encounter with the invisible.

In this regard, a stained-glass window from San Vincenzo al Volturno, discovered in the 2000s and investigated mainly by Francesca Dell'Acqua, presents an interesting example[18]. Discovered in the context of a gutter, it is not yet clear if this object had been installed and then

Fig. 4. Face of Fides, 4th c, Conques, Trésor de l'Abbatial (© CEMS)

---

[17] See *The Book of Sainte Foy*, transl. with an introduction and notes by P. Sheingorn, Philadelphia, 1995, pp. 43; 92; 120–121.

[18] F. Dell'Acqua, *Iconophilia: politics, religion, preaching, and the use of images in Rome, c. 680–880*, London/New York, 2020, pp. 156–159; F. Dell'Acqua, "The Christ from San Vincenzo al Volturno (9th c.): Another Instance of 'Christ's Dazzling Face'", in *The Single Stained-Glass Panel. XXIV. International Colloquium of the Corpus Vitrearum (Zurich, 30th of June -4th of July 2008)*, S. Trümpler (ed.), Bern, 2010, pp. 11–22; F. Dell'Acqua, "Il volto di Cristo e il dilemma dell'artista: un esempio di IX secolo", in *"Conosco un ottimo storico dell'arte…" Per Enrico Castelnuovo Scritti di allievi e amici pisani*, M. M. Donato, M. Ferretti (eds.), Pisa, 2012, pp. 20–27.

became possibly a spoil (later abandoned) or if it was considered a mistake.[19] Given the cruciform halo surrounding his head, the small fragment of stained glass undoubtedly represents the figure of Christ (Fig. 5). Paradoxically, however, instead of his face, only a small white glass piece remains – according to Dell'Acqua, it cannot be excluded that this face was originally decorated with "cold paint" or "silver stain", but nothing proves this[20]. Indeed, the analysis carried out on this fragment has found no traces of painting. Therefore, it seems plausible that, in the window, the face of Christ showed only white light during the day. This choice can obviously be explained as a visual expression of the Johannine verse "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12). However, this explanation does not seem sufficient to us, above all in virtue of the fact that the window had to be visible and "legible" even at night, by candlelight, when the face, inside the sacred building, must have instead appeared as a sort of dark mirror. It certainly reflected light – possibly from the crypt of Sant'Epifanio, as proposed by Dell'Acqua – but must have been visible against a black background.[21] The Christ of San Vincenzo must therefore be

Fig. 5. Face of Christ, early 9th c, Castel San Vincenzo (Isernia), Università Suor Orsola Benincasa (© Francesca Dell'Acqua)

---

[19] Dᴇʟʟ'Aᴄǫᴜᴀ, "Il volto di Cristo", p. 21.

[20] *Ibidem*, p. 22.

[21] *Ibidem*, pp. 23–25.

considered an image that inspired a reflection on the nature of Christ in the viewer, here plausibly the monastic community of Volturno. Recently, Dell'Acqua proposed that we interpret this window in the context of the Roman reaction to the "iconoclastic" phenomenon[22]. This reading seems pertinent to me, but what interests me most here is a different aspect: a Christ without a face can in no way be understood as a mere object of devotion. It is an image that must to move beyond the visible, and the tangible reality. Such an idea becomes even more pertinent if we take into account the chapel of San Zenone, in the basilica of Santa Prassede in Rome. There, one of the most ancient images of the Deësis is represented, from the time of the papacy of Paschal I (817-824).[23] The composition of this image is, however, exceptional: the images of the Theotokos and John the Baptist, are separated by window. It is hard to say what its original filling was, but what is certain is that it allowed light to enter.[24] In Rome and in San Vincenzo, the framework seems thus to be very similar: light filtering through a window constitutes the choice way to make the concept of Christ's divinity visible.

The three examples briefly discussed here are certainly not meant to propose a complex picture of over three centuries of visual culture. However, through the centuries, we can see a similar motivation emerge: an image/object that does not aim to create the illusion of reality. On the contrary, the monuments evoked explicitly negate tangible reality in favour of a metaphorical interpretation. This must, therefore, be understood as a stimulus for an encounter with a figural image. Paradoxically, therefore, its distance from reality becomes an instrument for the *praesentia* of the saints, or of Christ himself.

Aniconic seeing

The face of the stained-glass window in San Vincenzo opens up an even more complex question: that of aniconic objects that become, over the centuries, devotional *foci*.[25] In this sense, it is hard to pinpoint the exact moment of such a shift. What is certain is that, once again around the year 600, we can identify the first important monument moving in this direction: the cover of Theodolinda's Gospel. This precious bookbinding is decorated with gold, cameos, enamels, and encrusted with precious stones. The design that emerges is that of a golden cross on a background of the same colour[26]. The outlines of this cross, however, are marked with red and green stones. There are no surviving codex covers from this period – although it has been postulated that this was the function of the Diptych of Five Parts in the treasury museum of the Milan Cathedral[27]. It seems, however, plausible to assume that these had iconic

---

[22] Dell'Acqua, *Iconophilia*, pp. 156–158.

[23] For the chapel in general within the context of "Carolingian" Rome see e.g. I. Foletti, V. Giesser, "Il ix secolo", in *Le committenze pontificie a Roma nel Medioevo*, M. D'Onofrio (ed.), Rome, 2016, pp. 219–237. For the chapel see also e. g. B. Brenk, "Zur Bildprogramm der Zenokapelle in Rom", in Homenaje al *Prof. Helmut Schlunk,* Madrid, 1975, pp. 213-221; G. V. Mackie, "The Zeno chapel: a prayer for salvation", Papers of the British School at Rome, 57 (1989), pp. 172-199; A. Pirochtová, *Kaple San Zenone v bazilice Santa Prassede v Římě* [Master thesis], Brno 2012; Dell'Acqua, *Iconophilia*, p. 152.

[24] For the notion of "Christ light" see also Dell'Acqua, *Iconophilia*, pp. 121–165.

[25] For this notion see M. Bacci, "Site-worship and the iconopoietic power of kinetic devotions", *Convivium*, VI/1 (2019), pp. 20–47.

[26] M. Frazer, "Oreficerie altomedievali", in *Il Duomo di Monza: I tesori*, R. Conti (ed.), Milan, 1989, pp. 15–48.

[27] Z. Frantová, *Heresy and loyalty. The ivory Diptych of Five Parts from the Cathedral Treasury in Milan*, Brno, 2014.

decorations during the fifth century. Also in this case, the visual decisions made on the Monza Gospel cover seem to suggest a reaction to the culture of nomads, who had mastered the art of working gold and encrusting it with precious stones. Following recent considerations by Dorota Vahančíková, however, the choice of an aniconic binding should not be seen simply as the result of the Lombard aesthetic, but should instead be understood as a specific conceptual choice: sacred books in the early Middle Ages were, like reliquaries, covered with precious stones to emphasize the sacredness of their contents[28]. On the one hand, the materials used themselves – precious stones – had a very explicit meaning for the early medieval audience[29]. On the other, the same (jewelled) image of the cross should be understood as a tool to activate the "spiritual eye". It thus appears to be no mere coincidence that golden crosses on golden backgrounds also decorated Justinian's Hagia Sophia, as well as the church of Hagia Eirene, during the eighth century. There, the contemplation of a non-anthropomorphic image must have been intended as a vehicle to enter into a relationship with what is not represented[30]. It is thus not surprising that the very idea of decoration dominated by an "ornamentum", with a metaphorical meaning, fits with the Roman cultural background perfectly.[31] The idea of a non-figurative visual pattern seems to be the logical result of the meeting of different visual cultures on the Italian peninsula around the year 600.

A similar idea – that of contemplation of invisible content through geometric and aniconic forms – can be seen throughout the centuries: this is the case for reliquaries like the Stephanburse of Vienna and the Enger Reliquary[32]. In these famous cases – all dating back to the eighth and ninth centuries – the containers do not represent their contents through images, but rather with geometric motifs and the choice of materials. In this case, too, the true, spiritual content can only be revealed through a contemplative gaze. This process is confirmed in the gigantic reliquary of the Milanese golden altar, still preserved in the basilica of Sant'Ambrogio[33]. Up close, it is an extraordinary document of ninth-century hagiographic narrative. From a distance, however, the common viewer is once again faced with an aniconic object (Fig. 6). The true "cultic focus" of the basilica is therefore an object that presumes the

[28] D. Vahančíková, *The Jeweled Manuscripts: Carolingian Treasure Bindings and their role in the Christian liturgy*, [M.A. thesis], Brno, 2019.

[29] B. Buettner, "From Bones to Stones – Reflections on Jeweled Reliquaries", in *Reliquiare im Mittelalter*, B. Reudenbach, G. Toussaint (eds.), Berlin, 2011 [2005], pp. 43–60; C. Hahn, "What Do Reliquaries Do for Relics?", *Numen*, 57, 3/4, (2010), pp. 284–316.

[30] N. Teteriatnikov, *Justinianic mosaics of Hagia Sophia and their aftermath*, Washington, D.C., 2017; K. Kravčíková, *The church of Hagia Eirene in Constantinople*, [Bachelor thesis], Brno, 2017.

[31] P. Gros, "La notion d'ornamentum de Vitruve à Alberti", *Perspective*, 1 (2010), pp. 130–136; L. Canetti, "Rappresentare e vedere l'invisibile. Una semantica storica degli *ornamenta ecclesiae*", in *Religiosità e civiltà. Le comunicazioni simboliche (secoli IX–XIII)*, (Conference proceedings, Domodossola, Sacro Monte e Castello di Mattarella, 20–23 September 2007), G. Andenna (ed.), Milan, 2009, pp. 345–405; Idem, *Impronte di gloria. Effigie e ornamento nell'Europa cristiana*, Rome, 2012.

[32] See R. Prochno, *Die Stephansburse: Die Sprache der Steine: Edelsteinallegorese im frühen Mittelalter*, Regensburg, 2012; K. E. Overbey, "Seeing through stone: materiality and place in a medieval Scottish pendant reliquary", *Res*, 65/66 (2015), pp. 242–258.

[33] See I. Foletti, *Objects, relics, and migrants: the Basilica of Sant'Ambrogio in Milan and the cult of its saints (386-972)*, Rome, 2020, pp. 107–160, with the previous bibliography.

Fig. 6. Golden Altar of St. Ambrogio, Basilica si Sant'Ambrogio, 824-859, Milan (foto: Domenico Ventura)

activation of the "spiritual eye", the only way to encounter the saints "hidden" in the altar. This situation is even more explicit for the select few who could approach the back of the altar, where the *fenestella confessionis* – which gives access to the relics of Ambrose, Gervasius and Protasius – is opened to them. The inscription on the latter mentions that these relics are more precious than the gold and precious stones that make up the altar. In all likelihood, the *fenestella* opened onto the porphyry sarcophagus that was inside the wooden structure of the altar.[34] In this sense, even those who had contemplated the images of Ambrose's biography on the back of the altar now found themselves facing a monochromatic square of porphyry. Such a vision could only serve as an invitation to look beyond the tangible world, as well as the senses.

In a much broader perspective, a very similar phenomenon is a distinctive element of one of the most ancient Christian cultures, the Armenian culture. There, since the early Middle Ages, but then throughout the centuries and still today, one of the major elements of Christian devotion and identity are khachkars.[35] Because of their very particular nature, they have

---

[34] W. Cupperi, "'Regia purpureo marmore crusta tegit' il sarcofago reimpiegato per la sepoltura di sant'Ambrogio e la tradizione dell'antico nella Basilica ambrosiana a Milano", *Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa, Classe di Lettere e Filosofia. Quaderni*, 4/14 (2004), pp. 141–176.

[35] On these objects see the synthesis by P. Donabédian, "Le khatchkar"; "Le khatchkar (du xiiie siècle aux temps modernes)", in *Armenia sacra. Mémoire chrétienne des Arméniens (ive - xviiie siècle)*, J. Durand, I. Rapti (eds.), pp. 153–161; 310–314.

been subject in our time to an evident cultural genocide.[36] More importantly for this article, they are usually placed in cemeteries, the atria of churches (the Gavits or Džamatun), and marked by crosses placed in a more or less ornamental context. Their function is, by all evidence, devotional. It is no longer possible to believe that Armenian art was aniconic for theological reasons, since from the 7th century at the latest, we find apse images on Armenian monuments.[37] However, the locations and the supposed uses for medieval khachkars lead us to consider them as a sort of devotional aniconic panel. Similarly, as for the objects described above, in Armenian culture, an intimate meeting of the divine seems to be devoted to the *ornamentum*.[38]

The culmination of my reflection on the Christian context may be the famous "Crista" (Fig. 7), produced in the Carolingian era (and destroyed during the French Revolution), contemplated by Suger of Saint-Denis (1081–1151)[39]. The original function of this object, perfectly aniconic and composed of precious stones, is not certain. What we do know is the use the abbot made of it:

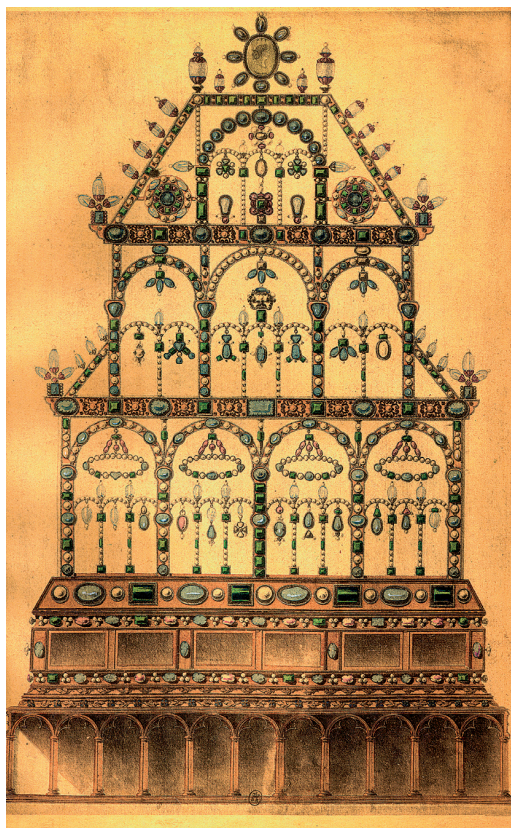"Thus, when – out of my delight in the beauty of the house of God – the

Fig. 7. Étienne-Éloi Labarre, "Crista" (Escrain of Charlemagne), 1794, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Cabinet des Estampes, Le 38C. (from http://www.medart.pitt.edu/image/france/st-denis/felebien/Piersac/PiersacScreenCharl-screen.jpg).

---

[36] On the most famous example of cultural genocide see H. Petrosyan, "The Culture of Julfa khachkars and their Repatriation Movement", in *L'arte armena. Storia critica e nuove prospettive*, A. Ferrari, S. Riccioni, M. Ruffilli, B. Spampinato (eds.), Venice, 2020, pp. 181–203.

[37] It is enough to remember the churches of Mren or Talin see e.g. C. Maranci, "New observations on the frescoes at Mren", *Revue des études arméniennes*, 35 (2013), pp. 203–225; V. Hermanová, *The church of Talin*, (B.A. Thesis), Brno, 2020.

[38] In another context, on the geometrical processes underlying the divine, see also the studies of B. C. Tilghman, "Ornament and Incarnation in Insular Art", *Gesta*, 55/2 (2016), pp. 157–177 and Idem, "Pattern, Process, and the Creation of Meaning in the Lindisfarne Gospels", *West86th*, 24/1 (2017), pp. 3–28.

[39] J. Barbier, "Nouvelles remarques sur l''Escrain de Charlemagne', *Bulletin de la Société Nationale des Antiquaires de France*, (1995/1997), pp. 254–265. See also H. L. Kessler, "Faithful Attraction", *Codex Aquilarensis*, 35 (2019), pp. 59–84.

loveliness of the many-colored gems had called me away from external cares and worthy me-
diation has induced me to reflect, transferring that which is material to that which is immate-
rial, on the diversity of the sacred virtues; then it seems to me that I see myself dwelling, as it
were, in some strange region of the universe which neither exists entirely in the slime of the
earth nor entirely in the purity of Heaven; and that, by the Grace of God, I can be transported
from this inferior to that higher world in an anagogical manner"[40].

What more explicit way to verbalize what is described above: precious stones and gold,
arranged in an aniconic way, become, for Suger, material tools, objects, to go beyond the sens-
es and access the invisible God.

Conclusion

In this short paper, I intended to present a series of exceptional monuments from the
early Middle Ages. In all the case studies selected, the formal and conceptual decisions seem
to have a shared ambition: to challenge the limit between the visible and invisible in material-
izing the divine (and the saints).

Fig. 8. Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings 0.10, in the "Krasnij ugol" the black square on a white
background by Kazimir Malevič, Khudozhestvennoe Buro, Petrograd, December 1915 – January
1916 (from Maria TAROUTINA, The Icon and the Square. Russian Modernism and the Russo-
Byzantine Revival, University Park, 2018, p. 181.)

---

[40] *Unde, cum ex dilectione decoris domus Dei aliquando multicolor gemmarum speciositas ab extrinsecis me curet
devocaret, sanctarum etiam diversitatem virtutum, de materialibus ad immaterialia transferendo, honesta medi-
tatio insistere persuaderet, videor videre me quasi sub aliqua extranea orbis terrarum plaga, quae nec tota sit in*

I would like to conclude this essay by recalling one of the most impressive moments of understanding and materializing this problem. Knowing the deep fascination Herbert L. Kessler has for Russia, its art, its culture (and its cuisine), I would like to mention here a masterpiece of the Russian avant-garde. It seems to me that the theoretical thought behind the early medieval objects above is close to the famous black square on a white background, created by Kazimir Malevich and exhibited in 1915 (Fig. 8)[41]. It is only by challenging the anthropomorphic image of traditional religious painting, with an act of "abstraction", that the invisible God can be represented. Malevich's intuition seems thus to be very near to that of creators all around the early medieval Mediterranean. Instead of using a face to inspire the "spiritual gaze" to potentially culminate in an "iconic presence"[42]. The monuments, like the Malevich image in Moscow over a millennium later, was meant to make the invisible visible with a material and visual act[43].

---

terrarum fece, nec tota in celi puritate demorari, ab hac etiam inferiori ad illam superiorem anagogico more Deo donante posse transferri (*De admin.* II, 38). The translation is from *Abbot Suger on the abbey church of St.-Denis and its art treasures*, E. PANOFSKY, G. PANOFSKY-SOERGEL (eds. and transl.), Princeton, NJ, 1979, p. 63.

[41] J. SIMMEN, *Kasimir Malewitsch – das schwarze Quadrat. Vom Anti-Bild zur Ikone der Moderne*, Frankfurt am Main, 1998.

[42] H. L. KESSLER, *Seeing Medieval Art*, Peterborough, On, 2004; H. BELTING, "Iconic Presence. Images in Religious Traditions", *Material Religion*, XII/ 2 (2016), pp. 235–237; H. BELTING, I. FOLETTI, M. F. LEŠÁK, "The Movement and the Experience of 'Iconic Presence'. An Introduction", *Convivium*, VI/1 (2019), pp. 11–15.

[43] I am on purpose avoiding the word "abstraction", since discussing such concept would go beyond the ambitions of this short text. I believe it is, however, important to remind the very "hot" discussion on this topic, see e.g. *Abstraction in medieval art. beyond the ornament*, E. GERTSMAN (ed.), Amsterdam, 2021; V. DEBIAIS, E. GERTSMAN, "Au-delà des sens, l'abstraction", in *Objects Beyond the Senses. Studies in Honor of Herbert L. Kessler*, P. CORDEZ, I. FOLETTI (eds.), Brno/Turnhout, 2021 (=Convivium, VIII, 1), pp. 28–51.