

Understanding Merab Abramishvili's Artistic Paradigm

The work of Merab Abramishvili is among the best-known but as-yet not properly acknowledged (even in Georgia) artistic phenomena of contemporary art. Two catalogs of the artist's paintings and drawings were published in 2010 and 2016, and only a few academic papers have examined certain aspects of his work¹.

This paper aims to explore the main themes and motives in Abramishvili's work, reconsidering the question of its relation to different artistic traditions, as well as contextualizing his work considering the post-Soviet and postmodern conditions. Further, the paper argues that although displaying obvious connections with medieval Christian art, Persian miniature painting, or Kajar art and certain features characteristic of postmodern art, Abramishvili's artistic work does not fall within the confines of any cultural or religious paradigm. He uses the forms of expression of different artistic traditions, and applies the postmodernist method of quotation while forming his authentic visual aesthetic and worldview.

The cultural background of Merab Abramishvili's work is the end of the Soviet era and the post-Soviet condition with its social, political, and cultural transitions, whose crisis became a kind of stimulating factor for the so-called "80s generation" of Georgian artists. This was reflected in the thematic and conceptual aspects of their work, and was expressed, among other ways, in a particular emphasis on the immaterial and the irrational. The need to reconstruct cultural identity and form a new conceptual framework relevant to contemporary culture was perceived as the main task of the artistic and cultural processes of this period. This was realized primarily by applying the artistic strategy of historical retrospection. The turn to the historic past of the country and the traditional forms of artistic expression was defined as a way of self-

¹ The forewords for these catalogs, by N. Shervashidze, B. Tsikoridze, and K. Shubitidze, alongside biographical references, provide an overview of the general characteristics of Abramishvili's artistic expression and briefly refer to the post-Soviet and postmodernist contexts. A. Kldiashvili remarks on the relation of Merab Abramishvili's work to medieval Christian murals and manuscript illuminations in her article "On the Main Tendencies of 1980s Georgian Art" ("Georgian Antiquities", 17, 2014. 348-367). L. Antelava interprets certain aspects of Abramishvili's work in "Vitalism and Cosmology in Merab Abramishvili's Work" ("Cultural Dialogue in Georgian Art of 20th Century", VII. 2017). In my dissertation "Merab Abramishvili's Work as a Phenomenon: Interpreting the Meanings in the Context of 20th Century European Philosophical Thought" (Tbilisi State Academy of Art, 2019), I attempted to interpret Abramishvili's work, applying the methods of art historical research and hermeneutic approach. The observations and arguments presented in this paper are based on the outcomes of this research.

preservation of culture and a means to recover one's own history and identity. Furthermore, the actualization of historical themes and spiritual motifs was grounded in the counter-reaction to the restrictions that had been imposed by the regime.

Comprehending the historical past as a potential to build the future was particularly important (although seemingly inconsequential) in the 1910s-20s avant-garde art in Georgia which, along with the assimilation and processing of the forms of European modernist art, placed a special emphasis on the past and the traditional forms of expression – an approach that is categorically alien and incompatible to modernism. In the 1980s, Georgian culture applied the same strategy of re-contextualization. This kind of reception of history is intertwined with the concept of national identity, which has always maintained the function of a stimulus of cultural development in the region of Transcaucasus in general².

Along with alternative artistic practices, there appeared a formulated conception with a particular interest in the historical and religious past of the country that a part of the “80s generation” artists shared. This conception implied the formation of a new conceptual basis, realized through the interpretation of tradition and aimed at re-attaining and re-activating the “lost” past in accordance with new conditions. Some of those artists were able to express a distinctly personal vision within their original artistic world, and played an important part in the formation of a new stage in Georgian art.

The uncertainty and absurdity of post-Soviet reality were reflected (although not in a direct way) in Merab Abramishvili's work. The harmonious and idyllic world of his paintings, as well as his particular interest in picturing the Gardens of Paradise, has been explained by a desire to escape from the destructive reality that surrounded him. Similarly, the rather tragic environment and thematics of his earlier works (such as *Shavlego* (fig. 1), the scenes of the Lamentation, the Crucifixion, the Apocalypse, and the Abyss) have been seen as echoing the spirit of the times.

² N. Shervashidze, “The Review of Pre-History of Postmodern Culture in the Transcaucasus”. *Amirani - Journal of the International Caucasological Research Institute*. Vol.8. Montréal-Tbilisi. 2003. p. 207



Fig.1 M. Abramishvili, *Shavlego*, 1992

However, at a deeper level, these works display the artist's existential quest. It is the personal intuitive vision, rather than a purposeful development of rational-conceptual ideas, that determines Abramishvili's work, whose primary focus is on exploring essential meanings through artistic form. In this sense, his work is existential in nature. The underlying ontological context and a gradual shift in the paradigm are reflected in the evolution of Abramishvili's artistic expression, fulfilled in his later works.

The theme of death is often addressed in Abramishvili's early paintings. Instead of avoiding and disguising the inevitability of death, as is characteristic of contemporary Western culture, Abramishvili constantly remembers and faces it. It is precisely by exploring the theme of death that the artist begins to comprehend the phenomenon of life. That is why the idea of sacrifice is so important and so frequently visualized in his early works. Eventually, the concept of death is understood as comprising the ideas of eternity and constant renewal. The agitation and uneasiness seen in the early paintings are transformed into a vital sense of vividness and uplifting atmosphere in his later works. This can be observed in any theme, from the compositions of paradise and the depictions of plants, to the motifs of the Gospel, where the thematic focus, as well as the manner of execution, changes significantly. The compositions of flourishing plants with strong winding roots (fig. 2), or paradise in the form of a mandala with vibrating circles, evoke a sense of vitality and allude to the idea of eternal return. However, unlike the philosophical interpretation of this concept (Schopenhauer, Hartman, and Nietzsche), which implies meaninglessness and a recurrence of life, and which views death as a way towards this repetition, Abramishvili's vision lacks such connotation and implies vitalism, understood as an absolute principle and force of life.



Fig.2 M. Abramishvili, *Dog-Rose*. 2006

This formal and conceptual evolution is particularly manifest in the compositions on Christian themes. The shaping of meaning and the gradual shift in artistic expression observed in these paintings are simultaneous and interdependent.

The compositions of the Annunciation, for instance, allow us to illustrate this process. The earlier depictions of the scene display features such as obscure forms, unspecified contours and silhouettes, and dim, faded color spots, typical of early Abramishvili (fig. 3). Later, the motif undergoes several changes, including an increased degree of specification and different expression of transparent color. Eventually, the clear structure of the composition, lacking excessive details, becomes “wrapped” in a white radiance of light encompassing the background and emanating through the azure of clothes (fig. 4). Alongside the resulting intensified sense of immateriality, the composition becomes clearer than the earlier examples. While still maintaining the conditionality of convention, somewhat indistinct, abstract imagery is replaced with clear forms and convincing expression.



Fig.3 M. Abramishvili, *Annunciation*, 1996



Fig.4 M. Abramishvili, *Annunciation*, 2006

The distinct separation of a figure from the background by means of color, as well as saturating color with light and thus unifying compositional elements in the picture, becomes typical of Abramishvili's later period. A great degree of generalization and conditionality on the one hand, and structural clarity and laconic expression of form on the other, become paradoxically unified as an artistic whole. The synthesis of contradictory principles is a fundamental feature characteristic of Abramishvili's picture language. The contrast between undivided surfaces and accentuated small decorative details results in a peculiarity of representation, where indications of materiality and the intensified sense of the immaterial coexist. The reduction to minimalistic expression and the use of the technique of washing out the surface several times, as well as incorporating a flow of light within the picture, lead to the fading of physical form and the emergence of a sense of metaphysical reality. Washing out the clear outlines of things leads to the overcoming of material solidity. Light, as a metaphor for transcendental meaning, also serves as an artistic means to introduce the concept of the infinite and eternal. Such emphasis and actualization of light is not only an interpretation of artistic form, but is also the realization of a personal vision and a conceptual interpretation. This approach exhibits the rejection of objectivity and acknowledges the inner experience as the universal criterion. These intermingled processes of transformation of form and meaning are manifest in any theme, from biblical motifs to depictions of plants (fig. 5, 6).



Fig.5 M. Abramishvili, *Palm Tree*, 2000



Fig.6 M. Abramishvili, *Palm Tree*, 2006

This shift finds a peculiar expression in the images of the Gardens of Paradise that change throughout the years. A typical composition (fig. 7) presents trees with round canopies depicted on a background of thin layers of washed-out colors, revealing the surface of the plywood and further “planes”, with a distant view of a curve of the river and the silhouettes of deer and trees. The central part of the composition is occupied by a hill and a tree with a snake coiled around its roots. The compositional structure of the picture is constructed by alternating layers of different tones of red of blossoming trees, rhythmical circles of small birds depicted around them, and vast empty areas of landscape that function as spatial intervals. These visual metaphors - these intervals of space/silence - are crucial for understanding the artist’s philosophy.



Fig.7 M. Abramishvili, *Paradise*, 2005



Fig.8 M. Abramishvili, *Paradise*, 2006

In *Paradise*, painted in 2006 (fig. 8), the increased intensity of light and the radiance of transparent colors lead to the dematerialization of the surface. The decorative expression of ornamental details and the emphasis on the spatial intervals that are perceived as silent pauses become united in one artistic whole. A gradual shift of focus from material form (depictions of animals and plants) onto empty areas of sky and “space” (functioning as a metaphor for the immaterial) corresponds to the gradual transformation of matter into a lack of substance. Transcending materiality by introducing a sense of infinity in the picture leads to the opening of another dimension of being that becomes actualized through the artwork, manifesting an idea that is “not the contrary of the sensible; that is its lining and its depth”³. To represent the

³ M. Merleau-Ponty, “The Visible and the Invisible”. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968. p. 149

transcendental meaning and to introduce the ineffable, the artist constructs an alternative, dream-like world while applying the language of signs, metaphors, and symbols. However, it is not the symbolism of the image that Abramishvili's picture language depends upon. Rather, the signs, the metaphors, the technique, and the symbols all contribute to creating a formal expression that alludes to a transcendental meaning and represents the closest visual equivalent of the dimension, about which, in relation to the boundaries of language, Ludwig Wittgenstein noted: "whereof one cannot speak, one must be silent"⁴.

In 2005, Merab Abramishvili painted the Gardens of Paradise in the form of a mandala (fig. 9). This almost square-shaped, large painting depicts vibrating ornamental circles composed of scrupulously executed, small calligraphic drawings of plants, with blue, red, and pink leaves, arranged in close sequence. The circle is enclosed by depictions of small silhouettes of angels with blue clothes and wings and gold halos. The sections between the circle and its encompassing square are filled with plant ornaments. Different visual conventions - the principle of a carpet-like arrangement and "flatness" and a "spatial" representation realized by incorporating the intervals of empty areas of the background and the transparency of color - become synthesized in the picture.

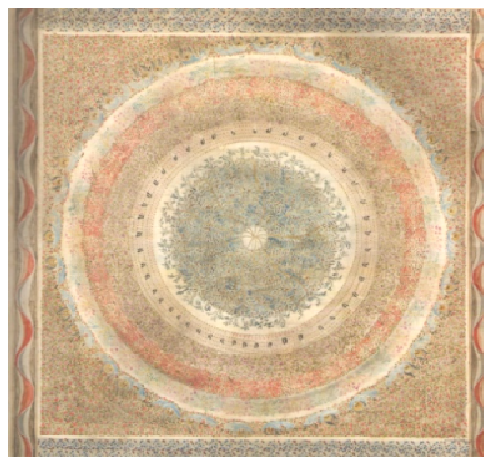


Fig.9 M. Abramishvili, *Paradise*, 2005

This transformation in the motif of paradise - its representation in the form of a mandala - is a logical conclusion of the artist's quest, revealing his personal vision. Between the painting "The First Day of Creation", where the obscurity of the image alludes to the material world still

⁴ L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. London, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner&Co., 1922. P. 23

lacking its final structure, and the Paradise-mandala, we can trace a path at the beginning of which “the heavens and the earth were created” and at the end – time disappeared, “the last days” came, the beginning of “a new heaven and a new earth”. It is not coincidental that one of Abramishvili’s later works is “New Jerusalem” (fig. 10), a large painting imbued with an unearthly atmosphere filled with light and space, which represents a new earth and a new humanity.

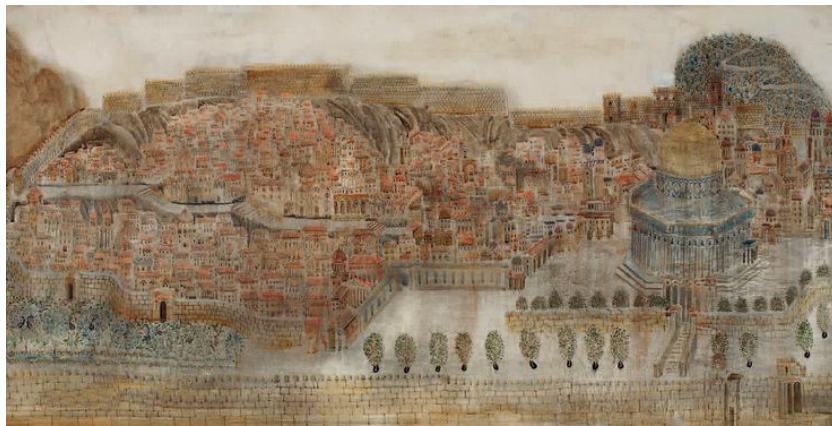


Fig.10 M. Abramishvili, *New Jerusalem*, 2006

To further our grasp of Abramishvili’s artistic paradigm, it is important to explore the question of space-time interrelation in his work. A representation of reality is interlinked with pictorial space, which determines the peculiarity of the representation of time in a work of art that, in turn, is a manifestation of the author’s perception and experience of the world. Time is articulated in the artwork through the metaphor of space; the impalpable (non-sensory) is replaced by something visible (visually perceptible).⁵

In order to “build” a picture space, Abramishvili applies different systems of visual representation, combining the elements of mimetic expression and abstraction, uniting the general and the specific in one picture. Such paradoxical synthesis of oppositions is expressed in the coexistence of monumentality of representation, the precision and accuracy of execution of details in the framework of a generalized form, and the incorporation of spaciousness and depth in a picture plane, emphasizing the flat surface at the same time. This kind of juxtaposition of incongruous formal elements results in an equally paradoxical expression of the mirage-like,

⁵ L. Mamaladze-Antelava, “The Problem of Space/Time Transformation in 20th c. Georgian Painting”, *Georgian Antiquities*, 13, 2009, p. 240

ephemeral space, and transparent, immaterial forms, which are also vivid, vibrant and visually convincing. The totality of expression that results from a kind of meditative concentration on the subject matter, on the here and now of the picture, creates a concentrated space from which time is eliminated. In addition to introducing a visual representation of the state of presence and stillness, the halt of the flow of time is also a result of the rhythmical repetition of forms and movements and alternating homogenous spatial intervals that function as metaphors alluding to the presence beyond the dimension of time. This leads to the emergence of a kind of monotonous, inert visual rhythm, and is particularly manifest in the compositions of Silk Road and the Gardens of Paradise, with the processions and multiple rows and circles of plants and animals. The technique of washing out the surface multiple times and thus removing the solidness of matter also contributes to the emergence of a sense of totality, expansion, and, eventually, the disappearance of the sense of time in the picture. A similar perception of the category of time is displayed in Pirosmanni's paintings, where the static scenes are as though disconnected from the actual flow of time, introducing an intense sense of timelessness.

Such detachment from time gives rise to a sense of wholeness of the world – a peculiarity that does not fit into the context of contemporary culture, which has lost its holistic picture of the world and, consequently, the ability to structure time. Fragmentation has become a distinguishing feature of contemporary art, seeing monolithic meanings and sublime ideas of artwork (and the world in general) being rejected. The space and time of the contemporary human are fragmented, having fallen out of the wider context⁶.

The agitated state and anxiety of modern Man have been linked to the experience of time and the awareness of his “historicity” that also discloses the dread of confronting death and non-existence, non-being⁷. If dread is the result of an encounter with Nothing (according to Kierkegaard and Heidegger), then it is also the result of a dissolution of Being. It is precisely this

⁶ A. B. Oliva, „Transavangarde International“, Milano, Giancarlo Politi Editore, 1982.

⁷ M. Eliade, “Religious Symbolism and the Modern Man's Anxiety”, in *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries. The Encounter between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities*, New York, Harper and Row, Publishers, 1967, p. 235

agitation that defines Abramishvili's early work and eventually leads to the shaping of his artistic paradigm, where the shift from the historical mode of consciousness is realized.

Examining the features of Abramishvili's picture space in the representation of the space/time categories brings forth the question of its relation to the cultural paradigm of postmodernism - the prevailing discourse in Western art and thought at the time. Postmodernism was a logical development of the century-old premises of Western culture; however, it has had a hold over the rest of the world too, and the sociocultural crisis related to the post-Soviet transition in Georgia since the 1980s reveals certain similarities to the postmodernist discourse.

Postmodernist tendencies in Georgian art and literature (features such as double coding, a parodic adaptation of classics, and carnival aesthetics) can be observed from the 1980s onwards, and are revealed in fine arts primarily in the above-mentioned method of historical retrospection, realized through the interpretation of earlier artistic traditions, incorporation of different cultural codes, archetypal patterns and historical, and religious and mythological themes⁸.

Such a retrospective approach, implying the revival of the languages of the past, is a general tendency characteristic of postmodernist art. The method of quotation and intertextuality are fundamental features of this approach. Although every text is related to some other text in some way, and intertextuality as a primordial and essential characteristic of the text has been used since ancient times, its use as a systematic method that involves the principle of intertextuality is a determining feature of postmodernist artistic practice. The concept of intertextuality is related to the concept of "ready-made texts", the pre-existing textual material, and the earlier forms of artistic expression, the reference to which shapes what J. Kristeva calls "the mosaic of quotations". Quoting a historical text serves the purpose of its critical commentary. The artist "quotes in order to disprove (or alter) the original statement he is

⁸ Cultural coding as an artistic method can be seen in Irakli Parjiani's work, for instance, whose unique visual aesthetic was defined by the merging of different cultural information: Fresco paintings from the mountainous region of Svaneti, inspirations from manuscript illuminations, Eastern Christian murals, and contemporary Western art on the one hand, and his interest in esoteric teachings of anthroposophy on the other. The past as a concept and a source of inspiration is also an important element in the work of Levan Chogoshvili. In his attempts to recover a romantic landscape of the past and its "spirit" and values, Chogoshvili interprets historical occurrences, loading them with new content and transforming tradition into a new visual and conceptual form.

quoting, or he combines heterogeneous signs (forms, motifs) in order to ‘prove’ something in a new allegorical, oblique way”⁹. Exaggeration, ironic and sarcastic interpretation of the proto text (the quoted visual source), and applying it for the purpose of intentional confrontation to the ideals and values of the past, are typical for the postmodernist method of quotation and intertextuality.

The method of using quotation and intertextual relations is evident in Abramishvili’s work. The visual origins of the motifs in Abramishvili’s paintings are found in medieval Georgian murals and embroidery, Persian miniature paintings, and Kajar art. Certain motifs are even reminiscent of Pirosmiani’s paintings, bronze belt clasps from ancient Georgia, prehistoric cave paintings, early Christian mosaics, the works of the masters of the quattrocento, and the frescos of Pompeii (fig. 11-21).



Fig.11 M. Abramishvili,
Archangel Gabriel, 1993



Fig.12 Archangel Gabriel,
Ateni Sioni church,
11th century



Fig.13 M. Abramishvili,
Shah-Abas, 2001



Fig.14 *Lovers*,
Kajar art,
19th century

⁹ H. Belting, “The End of the History of Art?”, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1987. p. 59



Fig.15 M. Abramishvili, *Bison*, 1999



Fig.16 *Bison*, Altamira Cave, c. 15000 BCE



Fig.17 M. Abramishvili, *Quails*, detail, 2003



Fig.18 *Birds*, Early Christian mosaic, detail, Marseille Cathedral



Fig.19 M. Abramishvili, *Prostitute*, 2003



Fig.20 *Flora*, Villa of Ariadne in Stabiae near Pompeii, c. 15-45 AD

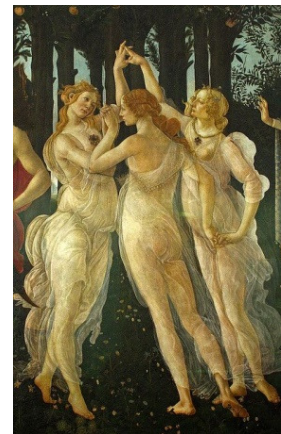


Fig.21 Botticelli, *Primavera*, detail, 1482

Abramishvili's work reveals reminiscent relations to various works and artistic traditions in an intertext shaped by means of creative processing of other texts that become transformed and submitted to his artistic vision. While using quotation as a method of artistic interpretation, he applies specific motifs and elements of the primary visual source and (at the earlier stage) employs stylization (the intentional artistic processing whereby certain formal elements of the proto text become stylized) as a form of quotation. Further, the early works display more similarities to the proto text (as seen in the works on Christian themes). A gradual distancing from the original image and the use of reminiscence as an intuitive form of quotation is particularly evident in Abramishvili's later work.

This strategy is, again, particularly manifest in the compositions of biblical motifs, where the artist uses certain elements from medieval murals. However, through creative processing and interpretation, a fundamentally different signification and original artistic expression are realized. If we take a closer look at the works of the later period, and compare them to samples of medieval wall paintings, examining specific means of representation and the manner of execution (obviously, it would not be reasonable to look for traditional symbolic meanings and canonical schemes or even any rational-conceptual interrelations), we will discover that they do not share many similarities. A small plane, decorativeness, intense plasticity of calligraphic lines, and concentration on details, characteristic of miniature art, are synthesized with the large-scale format of monumental art. It becomes clear that the primary source only serves as an inspiration, and what remains in common is a conditional convention and dematerialization of form.

Similarly, the works that display the artistic adaptation of oriental motifs, such as "Harem", "Shah Abas", "300 Aragvian Warriors", are completely reminiscent of samples of Persian miniature art and Kajar art in terms of the use of color, the abundance of scrupulously executed details, the emphasis on linear style, the arrangement of space, stylized forms, non-spatial, plane-oriented rendering, and the interrelation between figure and background. However, adopting those artistic means to the format of easel painting leads to the creation of a

fundamentally different artistic expression, as seen in “300 Aragvian Warriors” (fig. 22, 23), for instance, where, unlike Persian miniature art, vast empty sections are emphasized¹⁰. This kind of interrelation between a figure and the background, and the contrasting juxtaposition of scrupulously detailed decorative surfaces and extremely generalized blank backgrounds, is one of the determining features of Abramishvili’s work. Intensive local colors and naturalistic elements typical of Persian miniature paintings are replaced with deep, non-local, washed-out color spots and the extreme generalization revealing a completely different artistic task and formal structure.



Fig. 22 M. Abramishvili, *300 Aragvian Warriors*, 1987



Fig. 23 M. Abramishvili, *300 Aragvian Warriors*, detail, 1987

However, although the method of quotation and intertextual relations are apparent in Abramishvili’s works, his artistic strategy differs from the postmodernist approach. He does not apply allusion – the form of quotation characteristic of postmodernist art - or ironic, parodic, or sarcastic subtexts. Unlike the postmodernist approach, which uses quotation as a means of protest, destruction, and intentional disruption of values, in Abramishvili’s paintings, the same method serves as a means of assertion: The method of deconstruction is replaced with a search for unity. His work is not a “mosaic of quotations” or a collage, but rather, an intertext loaded with deeper meanings and imbued with a sense of metaphysical presence and vitality.

¹⁰ Interestingly enough, a similar artistic solution is found in Georgian illumination for a manuscript of Firdausi’s *Shahnameh*.

Programmatic eclecticism characteristic of postmodernist art is opposed to a synthesis of artistic forms. The structured, organized and harmonious, monolithic world displayed in Abramishvili's paintings is the complete opposite of the fragmented and eclectic vision suggested by postmodernism.

What makes it possible for the artist to construct a holistic picture of the world - a peculiarity so unusual to contemporary cultural perception? We can answer this question by recalling Max Dvořák's observation of Michelangelo's work, which he sees as a manifestation of the "overcoming of materialism characteristic of the Renaissance era and the return to the supersensible" that transcended the boundaries of individual moments and became a universal spiritual movement¹¹. We can argue that – obviously, without implying any causal relationship - Abramishvili's work displays a similar aspect: A paradigmatic shift realized on an individual level and reflected in the processes of transformation and the evolution of artistic form, reflecting the spirit of the era. Moreover, it allows a kind of breakthrough and lays the foundation for a new paradigm that transcends the boundaries of historical, cultural, and even spatial and temporal conditionality.

¹¹ Max Dvořák, *"Die Kirche Gesù in Rom"* in *Geschichte Der Italienischen Kunst Im Zeitalter Der Renaissance*, München, Piper, 1928, pp. 113-114

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