Introduction:
Historians and the Arts – an Interdisciplinary Dialogue

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What is more important – word or image? This question remained pivotal for Christian culture throughout the Middle Ages. To the Church fathers, the world of resemblance appeared potentially precarious; even sacral representations, those of Christ, the Mother of God, and the saints, seemed to be less than the Word of the Sacred Scriptures. Indeed, how could it be possible to worship God in his representations without worshipping the representations themselves? Where to draw the line between the licit and the illicit? From the very beginning, the Christian stance on images was ambivalent. On the one hand, Christianity drew on the Old Testament tradition that tabooed creating and venerating images of the divine. On the other hand, it took for granted the possibility of mediation between the visible and the invisible, since the incarnation of Christ was for Christianity the major principle and the model of mediation.

Correlation of word and image was continuously debated throughout the Middle Ages. This was not only true for the periods of Byzantine iconoclasm or Carolingian polemics regarding the cult of images. The 'classical' Middle Ages produced a Western theory of image as a result of the twelfth-century religious polemics with the Jews as representatives of an an-iconic religion. However, not even by Reformation times was the priority of either word or image set once and for all; in spite of the iconoclastic tendencies expressed at the time, the Word in this period did not completely banish the Image from the discourse of power.[1]

What functions did images have in medieval culture? Was the role of visual representation limited to assisting piety, to revealing the Word of God in artistic images or to demonstrating the dogmas of the Holy Scriptures?

Following Church authors, for a long time historians regarded images exclusively as a reflection of theological discourse. According to a long-standing viewpoint, medieval images were just the 'Bible for the illiterate' (thus was the function of medieval visual representation interpreted by Emile Mâle[2]).

The origins of such a minimalist attitude to images should be sought in medieval Christian culture itself, which never actually overcame the Old Testament ban on visual representation. However, for the Middle Ages the idea of the

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[1] See the article by O. V. Dmitriyeva.
[2] E. Mâle, *L'Art religieux du XIII siècle en France* (Paris, 1898).

Incarnation was principal, of the Word become Flesh, which implied a very different attitude toward the visual. The medieval image in a way reiterates the mystery of incarnation, endowing the transcendental and inaccessible with material body and shape.

The idea of the visible and the invisible joined together stands behind medieval symbolism and the medieval penchant for thinking through images. Every thought, every concept was prone to crystallize in a visual image, a representation. Faith and religious sentiments were transformed into images. Thoughts, abstract notions, even metaphors found embodiment in visible representations; ideas were expressed through well delineated and multicolored forms. Medieval symbolic thinking was primarily done with the help of visual notions, a thinking based on seeing. Even *universalia* attained a visible material shape: only the Middle Ages could have produced such a movement as 'realism.' Apparently, thinking in the Middle Ages was impossible without seeing. And if this was so, by studying the medieval way of seeing one can learn how medieval persons regarded the world, one can re-create their system of references and notions. In all historical periods the way of seeing is most likely determined by contemporaneous culture, related to the way of thinking and evolving side by side. Seeing is not a purely mechanical act, in every period it is determined by the prevalent system of notions.[3] "Every new form of seeing epitomizes a new content of the world."[4] Yet, one can suggest that in no other period was seeing so closely linked to the way of thinking and perceiving the world as in the Middle Ages. Is that not what Pierre Francastel implies by saying that images were a *sine qua non* for the existence of the social order in the Middle Ages? Realizing the role of visualization in the life of medieval society, we struggle to analyze images in the context of the history of medieval culture and society.

By examining the role of visual representation in social relations, we expand the field of historical research. For us, images are not mere reflections of theological or literary discourse, a visual commentary on the scriptures; neither are they to be studied only from the standpoint of the evolution of forms. Rather, we focus on the role of images in social practice, primarily their functions in regard to power and memory.

It is common knowledge that art can serve as a means of power representation, can express political objectives, and may glorify rulers and politicians.[5]

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[3] Actual seeing definitely differs from seeing imposed artificially by a cultural norm. To support this judgement, let us refer to Pavel Florensky, who argued that linear perspective is imposed on us by our culture and that in fact we perceive the world in retrospect. Stimulating experiments done by B. V. Rauschenbach confirmed that at a near distance humans see in a axonometry, whereas at a greater distance they see in linear perspective. See B. V. Rauschenbach, *Prostranstvennye postroenia v zhivopisi* (Spatial constructions in painting) (Moscow, 1980).

[4] H. Wölflin, *Osnovnye poniatiya istorii iskusstv* (Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe) (Moscow, 1920), 20.

[5] See the analysis of this function of visual arts in the article by O. S. Voskoboinikov.

The role of the visual arts in ideology and propaganda is also well attested. Very often, images signal the presence of power in a society. Images put across dynastic ideas, images help assert the legitimacy of power. Besides, images can also be viewed as a kind of *memoria.* An important tool in recording the memory of the past events, images have a substantial commemorative function; in accordance with a certain system of values and notions they record the events and realities that should be remembered.[6] Images stimulate memory through the emotional impact they exert on beholders. *Memoria* expressed in visual images may become a consolidating element for a group and may reflect the group's social identity. In short, a visual memory of certain events and characters is an essential means of collective self-identification.[7] The image helps manifest a group's unity (a social group, ecclesiastical parish or a monastic community) and its consolidation around certain values.

Another attempt to open the field of historical research is the study of the history of gesture. Gesture is an embodiment of the word; it is a word accessible visually, meant to have a visual effect. In this sense, gesture constitutes the space where Word and Image overlap and join each other. The role of gestures in the rites and rituals of medieval society with its sophisticated symbolism of social relations cannot be overstated. Trying to decipher the meaning of gestures, including those known from iconographic sources, we inevitably discover links between social history and art history.[8] At the same time, the study of gestures that served for memorizing medieval texts and communication of other information (mnemonic gestures), opens up one more aspect of an interdisciplinary project – a study of image on the borderline between the history of memory and the history of gesture.[9]

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It is no secret – we only want to speak *pro domo nostra* – that by tradition or, rather, by custom, art historians are only concerned with art history, historians are only interested in history; Orientalists or Byzantinists are rarely in contact with specialists on Western Middle Ages, and so on. This separation is a natural and inevitable development of the system of knowledge, which designates differentiation, internal partition of knowledge into diverse disciplines, and their formation as more or less independent institutions. At some point, however, this separation ceases to be beneficial.

The growth of historical anthropology has made intensive contact indispensable and promising among the representatives of the above-mentioned and numerous other related disciplines. That is why attempts to bring together specialists from different fields seems very timely and needed for modern

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[6] See the article by S. I. Luchitskaya.
[7] More on that in the article by Yu. Ye. Arnautova.
[8] See the article by S. B. Kulayeva.
[9] See the article by A. I. Khomentovskaya.

scholarship. Such a collaboration may not be equally urgent for different specialists. Yet, some new possibilities will always open up as a result of, on the one hand, the general need for a wider synthesis and the integration of disciplines and, on the other hand, from the discussion and elaboration of possible new approaches to similar problems involving both visual and textual material.

Scholarly communication is necessary, it is an indispensable condition of our life. Still, the purpose is to find new pathways, new ways of reading historical sources – "reading" in a broader sense, for both textual and visual sources – so that their comparison brings about new points of view and new possibilities for research.

The wide conceptional and methodological framework of historical anthropology permits us to establish a relationship between images and written sources, even when these relations are indirect and require scrupulous analysis. Such analysis allows us a closer approach to the structures of the mentality of one or another period.

Today, the view of the visual arts and their analysis have changed. Everyone knows that such a distinguished historian of medieval art as Emile Mâle believed that the structure of medieval cathedrals, sculpture, and so on, was nothing else than (to generalize) an illustration in stone of the Bible and other sacred texts. From Mâle's point of view, one could immediately relate visual images to written texts. Now we know that this is not so simple. Mâle's approach ignored a specific semantic language of pictorial sources and the very nature of artistic creativity. Therefore, one needs more sophisticated, less straightforward, better thought out methods to establish relations between different spheres of intellectual activity, whether in medieval studies, or the Renaissance, in the West or in the East, in Byzantine or Muslim art, in Russian or in Western European art. We face new problems, but also multiple new possibilities have opened up.

Images in Medieval and Early Modern Culture

(Approaches in Russian Historical Research)

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Preface

In recent years, many historians have recognized their special interest in visual sources. The 'iconic turn' has also become vital for the historical disciplines.[1]

Images were a constitutive part of medieval and early modern daily life – with regard to their function and usage as well as their contents, 'language' and perception. Communication with the help of and via pictures played an important role for all strata of society. Therefore, research into the visual system and culture of these periods has become a basic constituent of (social) historical research.[2]

We would like to thank the authors of this volume, Svetlana I. Luchitskaya and Aron Ya. Gurevich in particular, for their interest and readiness to have their approaches towards images, which they had presented at a Moscow conference and in the 2002 special volume of the journal *Одиссей. Человек в истории*: ("Слово и образ в средневековой кулмуре" ("Mot et image dans la culture médiévale"), translated into English and published as a 'Sonderband' of *Medium Aevum Quotidianum*. These investigations of the visual culture of the past by Russian historical researchers are an important contribution to the international trends and efforts to include images as parts of medieval and early modern culture and sources for today's (social) historians. The articles offer a wide spectrum: from the history of gestures to various aspects and functions of images in *memoria*, political and religious life. The relevant roles that visual

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[1] Concerning the 'iconic' or 'pictorial turn' see, e. g., W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory. Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago, 1994); *idem*,. "Der Pictorial Turn," in *Privileg Blick. Kritik der visuellen Kultur*, ed. Christian Kravagna (Berlin, 1997), 15-40; Jan Baetens, "Reading Vision? What Contexts for the Pictorial Turn?", *Semiotica* 126 (1999), 203-218.

[2] See, e. g., Francis Haskell, *History and Its Images. Art and the Representation of the Past* (New Haven and London, 1993); Jérôme Baschet and Jean-Claude Schmitt (ed.), *L'image. Fonctions et usages des images dans l'Occident médiéval* (Paris, 1996); Gerhard Jaritz (ed.), *Pictura quasi fictura. Die Rolle des Bildes in der Erforschung von Alltag und Sachkultur des Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit* (Vienna, 1996); Otto Gerhard Oexle (ed.), *Der Blick auf die Bilder. Kunstgeschichte und Geschichte im Gespräch* (Göttingen, 1997); Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* (Ithaca, 2001) ; Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Le corps des images. Essais sur la culture visuelle au Moyen Âge* (Paris, 2002); Andrea von Hülsen-Esch and Jean-Claude Schmitt (ed.), *Die Methodik der Bildinterpretation. Les méthodes de l'interprétation de l'image. Deitsch-französische Kolloquien 1998-2000*, 2 vols. (Göttingen, 2002); Axel Bolvig and Phillip Lindley (ed.), *History and Images. Towards a New Iconology* (Turnhout, 2003).

culture played in the Middle Ages and the early modern period are convincingly presented and underlined. Transdisciplinarity and the necessity of contextualization and dialogue are proved to be indispensable.

We do hope that this special volume of *Medium Aevum Quotidianum* will help to intensify and strengthen the international contacts and cooperation among 'image-historians'. An increasing variety of approaches towards visual sources may, on the one hand, contribute to better understanding specific and individual matters of communication in medieval and early modern society. On the other hand, such approaches will open up possibilities for recognizing general patterns of image usage and perception – patterns of intention as well as patterns of response.[3] Analyses of micro- and macro-levels will add to each other. Their structures, contexts and networks will become clearer.

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[3] See, e. g., some contributions of leading representatives of the social history of art already in the eighties of the twentieth century, as: Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention. On the Historical Explanation of Pictures* (New Haven and London, 1986); David Freedberg*, The Power of Images. Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago and London, 1989). See also the important remarks by Keith Moxey, "Reading the 'Reality Effect'," in *Pictura quasi fictura. Die Rolle des Bildes in der Sachkultur des Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit,* ed. Gerhard Jaritz (Vienna, 1996), 15-22.