

## Louisa Bashmakova at SFU

—Mary Ann Stouck

Dr. Louisa Bashmakova from Kuban State University in southern Russia visited Simon Fraser in March 2002 under the sponsorship of the Humanities Institute, in association with the Departments of English and Humanities. Dr. Bashmakova has a PhD in literature from Moscow State University, and heads Kuban State University's Department of the History of Culture. She is also the founder and director of a very successful visiting student program with the Association of Midwestern Colleges. While at Simon Fraser, Dr. Bashmakova gave a lecture on the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova in Dr. Myler Wilkinson's Humanities 340 course on St. Petersburg. She also spoke to Dr. David Stouck's American literature course on "A Russian Reading American Literature" (she is a specialist in the field of American literature, and wrote her dissertation on Richard Wright). Students found her perspectives on both Russian and North American writers fascinating, and enjoyed a lively dialogue with her. She also accompanied a group of seniors to Victoria on a field trip, as part of a course studying British Columbia writing under Dr. Wilkinson. Visits to the Provincial Museum and the Emily Carr House enabled her to become acquainted for the first time with the art and culture of the West Coast. This was a productive cultural exchange, appreciated by both students and faculty at SFU and by our Russian guest.

Mary Ann Stouck, Department of English and Department of Humanities, SFU

## Herbert L. Kessler at SFU

—Paul Dutton

The Institute for the Humanities and Broadview Press (with additional assistance from the Koerner Foundation and UBC's Medieval and Renaissance Studies series at Green College) sponsored a visit and three lectures by the noted medieval art historian Herbert L. Kessler of Johns Hopkins University in the third week of March 2002. Professor Kessler is preparing a book entitled *Seeing Medieval Art* which examines how we regard medieval art and how the medievals themselves approached the art they made. The three lectures, "Object and Ornament," "Picturing a Perpetual Past" and "Looking and Longing" were well attended and exposed participants to the underlying nature of medieval art.

After examining the general purposes and assumptions of medieval art, the speaker moved the audience through a series of specific objects: the stained glass of St. Denis, the mosaics and paintings of 12th century Italian churches, and a variety of objects. Slowly peeling back the layers of meaning and artifice that cover these objects, Professor Kessler restored a context to these works of art that would not be possible if we had approached them 'cold' as though we were tourists merely passing through some medieval church. But, and perhaps more

importantly, he provided us with a technique or, better still, an approach that we postmoderns can take when faced with 'alien' art, alien because full of assumptions and intentions we no longer share or immediately understand.

Medieval men and women, for instance, decorated reliquaries (the shrines in which they stored saints' bones) with gold and semi-precious stones not just to praise God, but to echo the symbolism of the *Bible* and to invoke the heavenly Jerusalem to come; ironically, then, theirs was an immaterial and symbolical art, even if today we see in such displays something slightly baroque and gaudy. Those richly ornate objects were made by the same artists and patrons (men such as Abbot Suger of St. Denis) who were exploring the immaterial and divinizing properties of light as cast through stained glass windows, pointed arches, and even onto the manuscript page.

In the end, then, Professor Kessler suggested that all art needs to be understood on its own terms with as full an engagement with its particular context and intellectual world as possible, at least, to 'get it' as its makers meant it to be experienced.

Paul Dutton, Department of History and Department of Humanities, SFU

