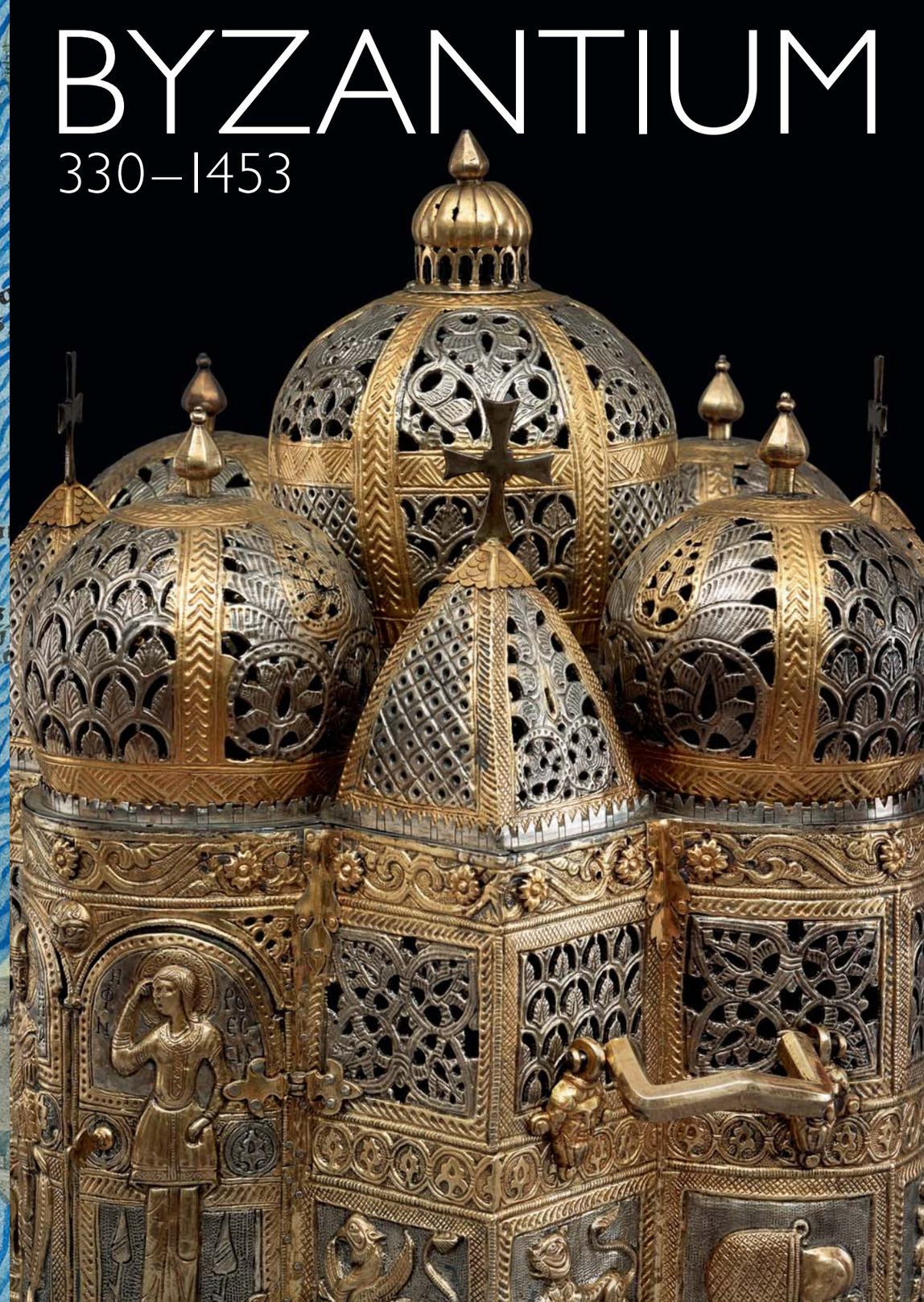
BYZANTIUM
330–1453



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Royal Academy of Arts

BYZANTIUM
330–1453

MAIN GALLERIES
25 OCTOBER 2008 – 22 MARCH 2009

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE EXHIBITION
FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

COMPILED FROM THE NOTES OF
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FOR THE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

THIS GUIDE IS DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF
DR PATRICIA L. BAKER (1942–2008)

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FRONT COVER
CAT. 176 (DETAIL)
PERFUME BRAZIER IN THE FORM
OF A DOMED BUILDING
BASILICA DI SAN MARCO, VENICE, TESORO, INV. NO. 109
PHOTO PER GENTILE CONCESSIONE DELLE PROCURATORIA DI SAN MARCO/CAMERAPHOTO ARTE, VENICE

BACK COVER
CAT. 11 (DETAIL)
CRISTOFORO BUONDELMONTI
LIBER INSULARUM ARCHIPELAGI
(BOOK OF THE ISLANDS OF THE ARCHIPELAGO)
THE BRITISH LIBRARY, LONDON, ARUNDEL 93, FOLIOS 154V–155R

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A BRIEF HISTORY

'Byzantium.' The word might bring to mind intrigue, duplicity and intensely complicated bureaucratic structures. The name 'Byzantine' was in fact first used in sixteenth-century history books to refer to the Christian empire that at one time encompassed parts of Central and Eastern Europe, Asia and North Africa, and lasted for a thousand years. This Byzantine or East Roman Empire began on 11 May 330 and its eventual end came with its conquest by the Ottoman Turks on 29 May 1453.

The origin of the name 'Byzantium', which was a settlement on a promontory between the Golden Horn and the Bosphoros, is shrouded in legend. The traditional story is that it was founded as a small colony from the Greek city of Megara around 660BC, and that the settlers were led by a man called Byzas, giving rise to the name Byzantion. The harbour city only grew in size when it was developed by the Roman Emperor Septimius Severus in 196 and its name was Latinized to Byzantium.

Byzantium in c.1050

Design: Isambard Thomas
Map Relief: Mountain High Maps
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The Roman Emperor Constantine the Great (ruled 306–37; cat. 5), on defeating his rival Licinius, decided to make this town his new capital, personally marking out the city limits in November 326. Four years later, he inaugurated his capital and named it Constantinople. The city was the political centre of Byzantium, and Constantine's allusion to it as the 'New Rome' did more than lend the new city a sense of history: it staked the Byzantine Empire's claim as a direct continuation of the Roman Empire, asserting its global dominance and divine consecration. Rome had been named the fourth and final earthly kingdom in the Book of Daniel from the Christian Old Testament and the Hebrew Bible. Thus Constantine's linking of the 'New Rome' to the old granted the city divine sanction and implied that its fall would lead to the end of the world.

'Constantine resolved to make the city a home fit for an emperor … He surrounded it with a wall … cutting off the whole isthmus from sea to sea. He built a palace scarcely inferior to the one in Rome. He decorated the Hippodrome most beautifully, incorporating the temple of the Dioscuri in it.'
Zosimus, New History, c. 501

Although Roman traditions were incorporated into Byzantine culture – indeed the Byzantines saw themselves as Romans – the emperors aligned themselves firmly with the Christian God. Their success as rulers was linked to their association with Christ as seen in this medallion of Justinian I (r. 527–65).

Cat. 5
Head of Constantine I, the Great
325–30
Cast bronze, gilt
Height 36 cm
National Museum, Belgrade, 79-IV
Photo Nebojša Borić

Cat. 29 The *adventus*, or arrival, of the sixth-century emperor Justinian is depicted on a replica of a gold coin from Constantinople. The emperor is portrayed on horseback and in military regalia, wearing a cuirass, a piece of armour that covered the chest and back; a cloak fastened at one shoulder; a plumed helmet; and a crown in the form of a headband. Justinian rides behind the personified Victory, who clasps a trophy and carries a palm. The translated inscription reads, 'Welfare and Glory of the Romans'. The star shining next to Justinian is an ancient symbol of a ruler's advent; no doubt the viewer was meant to see a parallel with Christ's entry, or Advent, into Jerusalem. The original medallion, minted to commemorate the conquest of the Vandals, was uncovered in Cappadocia in 1751, but it was stolen from the Bibliothèque Nationale in 1831 and melted down. Today, it is only known from this replica.

For what purpose would a medallion like this have been used in a political, religious or social context?

Cat. 29
Copy from a cast of a now lost gold medallion of Justinian I (527–65)
Mint of Constantinople, 534 (?)–538
Electrotype
Diameter 8.2 cm
The Trustees of the British Museum, BMC P.25
Photo © The Trustees of the British Museum, London

By 565, Justinian had regained control of lands lost to the empire after the death of Theodosios I in 395. Palestine, Syria, Anatolia, Greece, the Balkans, Italy, Southern Spain and the Northern African Coast including Egypt were regained, but the price proved very costly. Those living in the war zones and conquered areas were taxed heavily and little revenue was invested in their regions. Internal unrest allowed the army of the Persians to advance in 602 and reach Constantinople. The threat was so real that many in Constantinople claimed that only the miraculous intercession of the Virgin Mary saved the city and caused the invaders to withdraw in 626.

By 661, Persia was no longer a threat, but in its place were the Umayyad (661–749) and the Abbasid Caliphate (750–*c.* 1258), the dynasties of the Islamic Arab Empire who took control of Eastern and Northern Africa, Syria and parts of Spain. The Muslims attacked Constantinople by sea, and the northern frontiers of Byzantium came under concerted Bulgar and Slav action.

These tensions continued until the reign of Basil II (r. 963–1025), which was marked with successful military campaigns. He restored both Byzantine territory and authority, but his reign was not an expansive period for arts and architecture. In contrast, Constantine IX Monomachos (r. 1042–55), while perhaps less militarily adept, was a strong supporter of arts and literature and one of the greatest patrons of mosaics in the history of Byzantine art.

In 1054, a new problem arose, with a papal bull, or decree, officially announcing the schism of the Churches of Rome and Constantinople. The Byzantine emperors could no longer presume that help and support might come from the Christian leaders of the west. When the Byzantine army was defeated at Manzikert in 1071 by the Seljuk Turks, Byzantium had lost most of its eastern provinces, and the defeat opened up Anatolia to Seljuk and, later Ottoman, control. The west declined Byzantine pleas for military support to stop the Seljuk Muslims' advances in Anatolia, preferring instead to promote plans to conquer the 'Holy Lands'. The western armies came to the east in a series of Crusades, which resulted in new Latin Kingdoms in the eastern Mediterranean.

The aim of the first three crusades had been to end Muslim control and 'return' the Holy Lands to Christian rule, although this turned out to mean the control of western European rulers rather than Byzantine. The Fourth Crusade had similar aspirations but then turned on Constantinople in 1204. After the sack of Constantinople and the looting of its imperial and church treasures, a Latin Kingdom was set

'Sulayman, king of the Arabs said, "I shall not cease from the struggle with Constantinople until I force my way into it or I bring about the destruction of the entire dominions of the Arabs".'
Chronicle of Dionysios of Tel-Mahre, seventh century

'Hurl your javelins and arrows against them … so that they know that they are fighting … with the descendants of the Greeks and the Romans.'
Emperor Constantine XI Palaiologos addressing his forces on 28 May 1453, *Chronicle of Pseudo-Sphrantzes*

Cat. 11
CRISTOFORO BUONDELMONTI
(*c.* 1385–*c.* 1430)
Liber insularum archipelagi
(Book of the Islands of the Archipelago)
Ghent, 1482–85
Ink and paint on parchment
36.5 x 25.5 cm

The British Library, London, Arundel 93 , folios 154v–155r
Photo © The British Library Board, London. All Rights Reserved.

up and St Sophia was turned into a Catholic church with western clergy. The Byzantine imperial family took refuge in Nicaea and waited until it could attack and regain Constantinople. The Byzantines finally restored their empire and expelled the Latins in 1261.

In that same year, Michael VIII Palaiologos entered the city of Constantinople and restored Byzantine rule. He declared that St Sophia was once again to be an Orthodox Christian church. The return of the Byzantines was marked by a procession led by the famous icon of the Virgin Hodegetria passing through the Golden Gate, which was traditionally the entrance to Constantinople for an emperor in triumph. In spite of this victory, Byzantium continued to be threatened from the east by the Ottoman Turks. By 1326, Ottoman forces had taken the Byzantine city of Brusa and established it as an Ottoman capital, and had begun to encircle Constantinople and its environs.

There was a period of continual encroachment upon Constantinople until, in the spring of 1453, the city – now with a much-reduced population – was besieged by Ottoman forces. To the consternation of its population, the Archangel Michael was seen flying heavenwards from the dome of St Sophia and the famous icon of the Virgin Hodegetria slipped from its frame while being paraded along the city walls. To the horrified residents of Constantinople, this signified that any hope of divine intervention or rescue was clearly doomed.

Nicolò Barbaro recorded the events in his 1453 *Diary of the Siege of Constantinople*:

> *On the twenty-ninth of May, our Lord God decided that He was willing for the city to fall on this day … in order to fulfil all the ancient prophecies … All these three had come to pass seeing that the Turks had passed into Greece, there was an Emperor called Constantine, son of Helen, and the moon had given a sign in the sky.*

Constantinople fell to the Ottomans on 29 May 1453, but the Orthodox Church survived, and continues the traditions and rites of Byzantium to this day in Istanbul, the modern name for Constantine's city.

Cat. 11 Twelve centuries after Constantine founded the city that bore his name, a Florentine priest, Cristoforo Buondelmonti, created this rare first-hand illustration of the city of Constantinople. Buondelmonti included this unique bird's-eye view of the city in his popular book, *Liber insularum archipelagi (Book of the Islands of the Archipelago)*. Constantinople is perhaps included in the drawings of

Colūna .lxx. cubitorū alta videt' ī qua iusti man' ene' equester habetur

ecclia₃ ad meridie ī platea colūna .lxx. cubitorū alta videt' c' ī capite iustinian' eneus equester h₃t' et pomū cū leua aureū tenēs ad oriētē cū dext' minat' et iux hāc sex colūne minores erectae magne vide' sciati. Vlt' u° has ad meridie ypodromus ostēdit' qd' latinē eq cursus appellatur. In h° ąt spa' nobiles corā iustrabant pplō et duella atq₃ ornamēta pabat'. de .xc. ciā lōgitudīe brachia et .c.xxuij. āpliatur et sup' colūnas edificatū ē ī qb' cist'na āplissima optīe aq totū superdcm cōtinet spaciū. In capite vō ypodromi .xxuij. eāt altissīe colūne vbi ipatorz cū pricipib' ī sidebat Ab vnaq₃ alta pte ypodromi sedilia gradata ī lōgitudine erāt ipi' minorea vbi pplō sedendo ōne ludū videbat p mediū deniq₃ dcī cī' ī lōgitudīe huius ē mur' et p°. vs° sc ą₃ sophia ē eclia cū muro magnifico et mirabiliū fenestrarz adornata vbi diueq₃ iuuencule cū matrīs suos pspiuebāt dilcōs vbi ī pricipio dcī muri balneū eigebat' ī q vulneati ponebātur dein aguilia ex vno lapide ī qtuor eneis taxill' ī altū rcā cinitur cubitorz .xluij. et ī pede eius sic sonat. Difficil' ędā dnīs parē serenus Iussus et extictis palmā portare tirānis. Omnia theodosio cedunt soboliq₃ phenni Terdeni sic vict' ego domitusq₃ dieb'. Iudice sb' prodo sup has elat' ab auras. Vltra hunc lapidē tres eneos serpētes ī vnū videm' ora apta habētes a quib' ut d' aq vinū et lac exibāt dieb' iustiātū vltra ecciā alta ex mult' lapidib' cōuecta lviij. cubitorz eigit' vltra deniq₃ ī fine huil' muri h'. iij. huil' colūne minores videtur erecte ī qb' ipatrix eminebat ad festū. Fecit g° theodosius oīa ista et multa alia laudanda p vrbe ī pruit'. Insup hodie ifinite colūne q̄zqde qinq₃ videt' maiores et lx. cubitorz pqlibet eleuat' ī altū et p° colūna iustiani dcā Scā crux q° ī loco .iiij. erce pspice videt' ī qb' qde eq .iiij. enei aurati positi erāt et veneti illos venecias apd' sm̄ detulē nītum colūnis rīmanētib' Terciaq₃ ę'. colūnarz qī ī me° polis st' posite ī qbus crīcta actoz ipatoris sculpta cognoscūt'. In ecclia vō scōrz aplorz qnta cū angelo eneo et cōstātino genuflexo colūna ē. et ī ecclia ia dirupta q āplissia oīa sepulc ipatorz porphirea vide'. magnifica vna cū cōstantino ī meso Et ibi colūna vbi xp̄s flagellat' et ligat'. In mōsteio pātocrtora ē lapis vbi ioseph īuoluit xp̄m ī sindone ī monasterio scī Iohis de petra st' vestimēta xp̄i et arōdo cum spōgeaq₃ lācea ī vnū cōseruata Sunt deniq₃ p vrbe īnumabiles ecclie atz cisterne mire magnitudis et ī dustre fabricate et ī ruina posite vinea pro q̄libet ī ea tū vel ę'. vegetū vinu crescit Cistna scī Iohis de pet' Cistna pādopti Cistna pātoctera Cistna aplorz. Cisterna machometi ī q subtili artificio sūt ordinate colūne qd ē ī credibile ad narrandū et alie mlte sīc scā sophia q ē pricipalior alijs et Iustinian' ī qndecī ānis illud expliauit op' Scs demetr'. Scā hermi Scā latar' Chirannas. Enea petrusq₃ paul' Scā xl'. mrm et sua cisterna āplissima optīe aq ī q ut d' nullū īuenire finem. Anastas' perileptos Scs Iohes de studio Scs andreas vlacharna ī q tāta co piavbiq₃ edificata rimanet ipar₃ ecclia₃ vna pulchrior alta ex lōgu cet enrare Sūt eteni p cītate pauci hitatores et īmini latiorū q nuq scta pacē cū eis optinebūt et si pmittet nō obseruabūt. Fuit ecciā h° vrbs pulcherrima valde et aulaq₃ sapie hoestatis nīc vō ad ignorāciaq₃ duiciā vetuste opīois puēti pcī ġule adheserūt et ī tantū delati ppt' copiā piscīuq₃ carnīū q ę'. ps ipi' admo'. ī ciderūt lepre et doctinā Iohis crisostomi damasceniq₃ aliorz scōrz patrū dimisere Ad septētrione vō p vnū miliare pera Ianuēnsiū pulcherrima ciuitas est.

Ecclesia sancte sophia est ecclia cū muro magnifico et mirabiliū fenestrarū adornata

In ecclia scōrū aplorū qnta cū angelo eneo et cōstantino genuflexo columna est.

In hac ciuitate sunt pauci hitatores et minima latinorum

pera ciuitas

Constantinopolis ciuitas

the Greek Islands because it was a major shipping hub in Central Europe.

A sixteenth-century English translation of Buondelmonti's book, now housed in the British Library, claims that the '[southwest] corner of the city is marked very plainly … and a mole [pier or breakwater] is shewn jutting from the west side of the moat'. Buondelmonti has both described and drawn Constantinople as 'triangular', and he has shown the fortified walls of the city from every angle at once. The city's great cathedral, the church of St Sophia, is the largest building on the map; the city's horse-racing track and social centre, the Hippodrome, is found beside it.

What is the significance of the fact that St Sophia and the hippodrome, the social centre of the city, were built so close to each other?

What does this say about society in Constantinople and Constantine's view of his city?

CONSTANTINE AND CHRISTIANITY

Constantine was the first Roman emperor to convert to Christianity. The close alliance of the imperial family with the Church may be said to have started in 313, when Constantine announced that Christianity was to be officially tolerated throughout Byzantium. This came about as a result of a vision that appeared to Constantine in 312. Battling against his chief rival, Maxentius, to claim the throne of the Roman Empire, Constantine saw the sign of the Cross and interpreted this as a sign that the Christian God would make him victorious. He in fact defeated Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge in Rome on 28 October 312.

Constantine strengthened his ties to Christianity by summoning the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 325. The council gave the Christian world the Nicene Creed, the basic Christian statement of faith. The imperial family began to encourage the popular belief that Christ looked benignly on the Byzantine Emperor and his household. Rebellion against or hostility towards the Emperor was seen as tantamount to attacking the Christian God.

Constantine's mother, Helena, was even more closely associated with Christianity than her son. In 326, at the age of 78, Helena went on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land to 'worship on the footprints of the Saviour'. By sending his mother to identify Christianity's sacred sites, Constantine demonstrated his benevolence toward its numerous followers, thereby gaining him popular support amongst Christians.

'O imperial City, City fortified, City of the great king … Queen of the queen of cities, song of songs and splendour of splendours!'
Niketas Choniates on Constantinople, early thirteenth century

Cat. 188
Reliquary of the True Cross
Southern Italy (?), late twelfth century or c. 1200
Silver gilt, cloisonné opaque enamels on a silver gilt support, wood, glass paste
24 x 11.7 x 1.5 cm
Musée des Beaux-Arts de Dijon, inv. no. CA 1554
Photo © MBA, Dijon/François Jay

While there, she visited several cities, Jerusalem among them, and is said to have found the actual wooden cross on which Christ was crucified. A number of objects in this exhibition refer directly or indirectly to this important relic (cat. 188). Helena died shortly after completing her pilgrimage. Constantine's interest in the Holy Land led to the construction of the churches of the Holy Sepulchre, Nativity and Ascension. Pilgrims would bring back ampullae, small flasks filled with holy oil, as souvenirs of their visits to these churches (see cat. 340). Constantine himself is said to have converted to Christianity only on his deathbed in 337.

THE CONTINUATION OF PAGANISM

Constantine's conversion led to the dominance of Christianity. Though they practised Christianity, Constantinople's upper classes continued to read pagan Classical texts and many domestic furnishings continued to use pagan mythological imagery side by side with Christian images. Often Classical myths and the style of and motifs from pagan art influenced the new Christian imagery. Pagan architectural forms were also adapted for Christian use.

Cat. 8 This mosaic pavement found in Thebes was probably once a floor in a private house. Its pagan scenes signify that the person who lived in the house was an educated member of the upper classes, probably a rich Christian, who was unwilling to entirely abandon traditional Classical themes. The pavement is typical of Early Byzantium, depicting popular themes of the period: hunting scenes and a personification of the months.

The pavement's north panel portrays the months February, April, May and July. February holds two ducks, April a sheep, July a bundle of wheat, but May's object has been damaged and lost. The south panel depicts both a hunter and his dog chasing prey, and a disfigured man named Akkolos turning his back on the viewer. This panel is inscribed:

> *Demetrios and Epiphanes made the mosaic, Demetrios designed it, Epiphanes executed it with great care. Responsible for the whole work of art was Pavlos, priest and teacher of the divine word.*

The 'signature' of these two artists is rare, and makes their workshop one of only a few that are documented in the Early Byzantine period.

What does this mosaic floor tell us about the tastes and interests of the upper classes in the early Byzantine period?

Cat. 8
Part of a mosaic pavement with personifications of the months
Thebes, early sixth century
Stone and marble
340 × 66 cm

The Hellenic Ministry of Culture, 23rd Ephorate of Byzantine Antiquities, Chalkis
Photo © Hellenic Ministry of Culture – Archaeological Receipts Fund, Athens

Cat. 66 This extraordinary example of Byzantine carved ivory called the Veroli casket was made four centuries later, in the tenth century. It demonstrates a continued interest in classical images and is sophisticated both in the content of its imagery and in the skill of its carving in ivory and bone.

Middle Byzantine artists and writers sometimes borrowed the images and text of the Classical period and used them alongside Christian stories. Pagan scenes depicted on the casket include the rape of Europa by the god Zeus, disguised as a bull; the triumph of Dionysus, god of wine; and the sacrifice of Iphigenia to the goddess of the hunt, Artemis. The back of the casket contains overtly erotic imagery: winged cherubs parody the rapes of both Europa and Ganymede.

The Veroli Casket would have belonged to a member of the imperial court of Byzantium, and the meaning implicit in its juxtaposed erotic and tragic imagery was intentionally difficult, demanding interpretation by a knowledgeable and sophisticated viewer.

Why do you think these particular scenes were chosen to appear on this casket?

Why would Byzantine artists continue to employ Classical images?

Cat. 66
The Veroli Casket
Constantinople,
mid-tenth century
Ivory and bone on wood core, metal hardware
11.5 x 40.5 x 16 cm

Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 216-1885
Photo ©V&A Images/V&A Museum

THE BYZANTINE CHURCH

As the Christian Church received imperial blessing and became an important axis of power, its art and architecture underwent dramatic changes. Whereas pagan temples had primarily housed only small shrines to individual gods, Christian churches needed to accommodate entire congregations and complex services. Basilicas were large Roman assembly halls, used as marketplaces or law courts. Constantine commissioned several churches to be constructed in the form of a basilica, including the Holy Sepulchre at Jerusalem and St Peter's in Rome. In the fifth century domes were introduced, and by the time St Sophia was rebuilt in 532–37 the style of Byzantine churches, centrally planned with large domes, was well established. Christian churches were the community's home away from home and with their new religious function operated as regular meeting places.

The experience of the Byzantine church – with a central dome, elaborate decorations in rich materials, and the service itself – was intentionally dramatic and powerful. Foundation charters of monasteries show us that great consideration was paid to the lighting of the interiors. Churches were lit with an enormous *choros*, such as this thirteenth- or fourteenth-century copper chandelier, decorated

Cat. 170
Chandelier (*choros*)
Thirteenth–fourteenth century
Cast copper alloy
Diameter 350 cm;
height (without hangings) c.465 cm

Archäologische Staatssammlung, Munich
Photo Archäologische Staatssammlung, Munich/K. Rainer

Cat. 176
Perfume brazier in the form of a domed building
Constantinople or Italy, end of the twelfth century
Silver, partially gilded, embossed and perforated
36 × 30 cm

Basilica di San Marco, Venice, Tesoro, inv. no. 109
Photo per gentile concessione delle Procuratoria di San Marco / Cameraphoto Arte, Venice

'Painting can do for the illiterate what writing does for those who can read.'
Pope Gregory the Great, sixth century

with sphinxes and double-headed eagles (cat. 170). Certain areas of the church would have been thrown into light and other areas concealed in shadow. In Orthodox churches, with these contrasts of dark and light, heady smell of incense, and constant twinkling of the mosaics in the flickering candle light, the painted images of holy figures appeared to move, and it seemed to the worshippers that heaven really had come to earth and encompassed them.

Cat. 176 This silver-gilt perfume brazier, or burner, was probably made in Constantinople towards the end of the twelfth century. As a model of a church, it illustrates the architecture employed for the great houses of worship. The brazier functions as both an element of ritual and as an object of worship.

The miniature building has a central dome surrounded by four apses, or vaulted recesses, and four towers. The perforated roof depicts a pattern of plants and would have looked extremely dramatic with the smoke of fragrant incense emerging through it. The walls of the church are embossed with gryphons, lions, a cherub in a basket, a centaur, and a siren, all symbols of vices. Preceding these symbols are two tall human figures, each decorating a doorway. The male figure is a representation of Andreia, or strength; the female is Phronesis or prudence.

Why do you think symbols of strength and prudence are placed specifically on the doors of this church?

Looking at the high level of craftsmanship needed to produce this object, and the rich materials used to produce it, what do you think this suggests about the importance of ritual and the status of the Byzantine church itself?

Why do you think this incense burner was made in the shape of a church? What might this church represent?

ICONS

Every decorative aspect of the church had a function in worship. The main central hall – called the *naos*, or nave – was covered in three vertical levels that showed portraits of the saints, who seemed to gaze directly at churchgoers. These portraits were icons – from the Greek word *eikon*, meaning 'image' – and they were made in a variety of media, including mosaics, frescoes and painted wood. They were often attributed not to the artists who made them, but to the wealthy patrons who commissioned them or the emperors to whom they were

given. Icons were made to last for eternity, longer than the life of any human.

Byzantine iconophiles, or image-lovers, believed that icons were holy in their own right, and not solely devotional objects. Icons and their recurrent subjects – Christ as ruler of the world, the Virgin and Child, and a host of various saints – provided a moral example to worshippers, illuminating the importance of family life and reiterating Christian doctrine.

The traditional icon was painted on wood, which was shaped to form a tray-like panel. Strips of linen were glued onto the surface to delay cracking and warping; these were then covered with layers of gesso to provide a smooth surface. The preliminary drawing was made with charcoal; the image was then painted in egg tempera using mineral colours; and finally it was waxed or varnished.

In Late Byzantium some of the images were covered with precious metals and stones, leaving only the faces and hands visible. In this period they were often displayed in churches on the tall iconostasis screens that separated the altar and celebrating priests from the congregation. On these screens icons were arranged in horizontal rows in the churches. The uppermost level contained pictures of Old Testament prophets and patriarchs. Beneath this level was the 'Festival Row', depicting the major events of the Orthodox Christian religious calendar. The lowest tier of paintings showed Mary, Christ and John the Baptist, and in later centuries this was expanded to include the archangels, apostles and saints, with a central image of 'Christ Pantokrator' in judgmental majesty, holding the gospel and raising his hand in blessing. The images were seen and respected as actual portraits of the saints made during their lifetime.

The first thing a worshipper did on entering church was to visit and honour the icons displayed at ground level, kissing and touching them as well as lighting candles in front of them. Physical contact with the icons was believed to impart the saints' power to a churchgoer. Icons also served as intercessors between the worshipper and the holy figures. As Robin Cormack states in *Byzantine Art,*

> *Byzantine icons had a functional as well as an aesthetic aim: they were made as props in the face of joy and sorrow, happiness and pain. They received the prayers and veneration that passed through them to the 'other' world that they symbolized, and they were expected to reflect the powers of God.*

During the liturgy, incense would engulf both the congregation and the icons, involving both in the same physical activity. In this way,

'As the painters when they paint icons from icons, looking closely at the model, are eager to transfer the character of the icon to their own masterpiece, so must he who strives to perfect himself in all branches of virtue look to the lives of saints as if to living and moving images and make their virtue his own by imitation.'
Eighth-century *Sacra Parallela* of John of Damascus

'The honour that is paid to the image passes on to that which the image represents and he who does worship to the image, does worship to the subject represented in it.'
Second Council of Nicaea, 787

icons are not relics of art history but real aspects of a living religious tradition whose aesthetic and function have continued for over a thousand years.

Cat. 230 Icons of the Virgin were particularly important in the Byzantine church. This two-sided icon of the Virgin Psychosostria, meaning 'She who saves Souls', is painted on wood in egg tempera. This miraculous icon, it was believed, had the power to heal the faithful and it may well have been carried in procession during the Festival of the Annunciation. The front of the icon is a portrait of the Virgin and Child. The back depicts the Annunciation, during which the Archangel Gabriel tells Mary that she will give birth to the Son of God.

In creating icons, Byzantine artists adhered to traditional depictions of the saint or holy figure's facial features, pose and even their demeanour so that the viewer could easily identify the subject. Naturalistic details of landscape, space, light and proportions are eliminated in order to suggest a spiritual world that is separate from the earthly realm.

How does this icon invite the viewer's prayers and devotion?

Why do you think the artist would choose to portray these two images together?

Cat. 230
Two-sided icon with the Virgin Psychosostria (front) **and the Annunciation** (back)
Constantinople, early fourteenth century
Egg tempera and gold on wood, with silver-gilt revetment with enamel
93 x 68 cm
Icon Gallery, Ohrid, inv. no. 10
Photo Zoran Letra

Cat. 58 The 1325 inventory of the Church of San Marco in Venice mentions this icon of the Archangel Michael; it was probably plundered during the Sack of Constantinople in 1204. It is still kept today in the Treasury of San Marco, Venice. Michael stands guarding the Garden of Paradise, his eyes watchful and his posture taut and alert. The icon is decorated with gold and embossed *cloisonné* enamel, in which coloured areas are separated by metal strips. It is bordered by an enamelled decorative pattern interspersed with medallions of saints. The saints along the vertical edges are soldiers, and were particularly venerated at times of war. The three medallions along the top of the frame depict, from left to right, St Peter, Christ and the Egyptian saint Menas; their counterparts along the bottom of the frame have been lost. When this precious icon was restored in 1834, the wings of the archangel were reapplied. The same nineteenth-century restoration work saw the removal of the gemstones in the border and their replacement with coloured glass.

What do you think the different patterned areas behind Michael represent?

What is he holding in his hands? What might these objects signify?

Cat. 58
Icon of the Archangel Michael
Constantinople, twelfth century
Silver gilt on wood, gold cloisonné enamel, precious stones
46.5 x 35 x 2.7 cm

Basilica di San Marco, Venice, Tesoro, inv. no. 16
Photo per gentile concessione delle Procuratoria di San Marco/Cameraphoto Arte, Venice

Cat. 224 This icon of the soldier-saint St Theodore Stratelates is a micro-mosaic. Its minute tesserae, or tiles, are made of expensive materials like lapis lazuli, jasper, marble and gilded copper. The size of the tesserae has allowed the artist to create subtle gradations of colour and shading, apparent in the saint's hair and beard and in the gentle glow of his flesh tones. The artist would first have made an under-painting on wax before laying the mosaic tiles on top.

Micro-mosaics were incredibly valuable, due both to their semi-precious media and to their painstaking method. This micro-mosaic icon is one of the most sophisticated examples of its kind and was probably made in the court workshops for the imperial family. It exemplifies the solemnity of the icons' subjects. The use of gold as a background colour is used to specifically signify the light of heaven.

Why might such a precious form of artwork come especially into favour in the centuries following the end of iconoclasm? (See discussion below)

Why do you suppose artists adopted the mosaic technique, previously used for large wall murals, to make these little objects of devotion?

'The mortal man who beholds the image directs his mind to a higher contemplation. His veneration is no longer distracted … he trembles as if he were in the [holy] presence … art is able by means of colours to transmit the prayers of the mind.'
Agathias, sixth-century Byzantine poet

Cat. 224
Micromosaic icon with St Theodore
Constantinople, early fourteenth century
Wood, tesserae of marble, jasper, lapis lazuli, stone and gilded copper, wax, resin
9 x 7.4 cm

State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, inv. no. w 29
Photo © The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

ICONOCLASM

Despite the veneration of holy portraits in Early Byzantine devotional art, a debate raged for centuries on how best to decorate the great churches of Byzantium. In the eighth century, Emperor Leo III (r. 717–41) started a regime of iconoclasm, or 'image-breaking', outlawing the production and worship of icons and forbidding images of Christ, the Virgin or the Saints. The iconoclasts felt that the depiction and worship of any figures in a House of God was akin to the creation of graven images, expressly forbidden by the Second Commandment. Holy images had also begun to be used in unorthodox ways, appearing as decorations on everyday household items like bowls and plates.

In retaliation, some iconophiles called Leo 'the Saracen-minded', linking him to the invading Arabs whose Muslim faith also forbade the depiction of the human figure. Muslim artists created arabesques, flowing and intertwined lace-like lines, to decorate mosques and books of the Koran. Iconoclasm enjoyed two spells of dominance, the first from 730–87 and the second from 814–42.

Cat. 50
Psalter with Christ praying and with the Crucifixion and an iconoclast
Constantinople, soon after 843
Parchment
21 x 17.5 cm

The State Historical Museum, Moscow, GIM 86795 Khlud. 129-d, folio 67r
Photo © The State Historical Museum, Moscow

Cat. 50 The Khludov Psalter is a ninth-century iconophile book attacking in its pictures the practices of the iconoclasts. Christian manuscripts were revered by the iconophiles for housing the 'Word of God', and their lavish illustration paid him respect. This page from the Khludov Psalter depicts Christ on the cross, his side being cut with a lance by one Roman soldier. The other dabs his face with a sponge of vinegar attached to a long pole, and an inscription reads, 'They mixed vinegar and gall'. To the left of this scene a wild-haired iconoclast whitewashes an icon of Christ on a wall, alongside the inscription, 'Iconoclasts mixed water and lime on his face'.

How has the artist visually linked the iconoclasts to Christ's persecutors, aside from the similarly worded inscriptions?

Few icons from the Early Byzantine period have survived, but there are some rare examples in this exhibition. Many were undoubtedly destroyed during the iconoclastic period.

CONCLUSION

In a tradition that dates only from iconoclasm, St Luke the Evangelist was thought to have been the first artist to paint icons. The story was that he painted from life an icon of the Virgin Mary with the infant Christ. The Byzantines believed that this icon, called the icon of the Virgin Hodegetria, was housed in the Hodegon monastery in Constantinople. Every Tuesday morning for three centuries, until the Ottoman conquest in 1453, the icon of the Virgin Hodegetria was paraded around the square in front of the Hodegon monastery. Although the portrait itself was extremely heavy, the miracle that took place every Tuesday saw its transformation into a feather-light object, so light that one man could carry it, as seen in cat. 266.

Cat. 266 Although the Tuesday miracle always took place in Constantinople, the figures in this Russian textile are depicted in Moscow. The three men wearing crowns standing to the left of the icon-bearer are probably the Grand Prince Ivan III, his son Vassili, and Vassili's son Dimitri. Ivan and Dimitri have grey-toned haloes around their crowns, medieval signifiers of monarchy. The icon-bearer appears in the centre of this embroidery and can be identified by the x-shaped straps across his chest, holding the icon of the Virgin and Child above his head.

Although the miracle took place in Constantinople, why does the textile present it as taking place in Moscow?

The depiction of a Constantinople religious procession taking place in a Moscow square with members of the Russian Church tells an important story about Orthodox Christianity. An Orthodox Christian in Russia or the Balkans would have been able to attend services in a Byzantine church and to participate in the rituals taking place.

The geographical spread of the Byzantine Empire was vast, and its members belonged to different ethnic groups and spoke different languages. Orthodoxy was, and may still be today, the tie that unites people of otherwise disparate cultures and countries.

Cat. 266
Embroidered icon with the miracle of the Hodegetria
Moscow (?), 1498 (?)
Taffeta and damask, embroidered with gold and silver threads
95.1 x 98 cm

State Historical Museum, Moscow (GIM 15455 shch/RB.-5)
Photo © The State Historical Museum, Moscow

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