Rome in the East: The Art of Byzantium

Byzantine art can be thought of as the art of Constantinople, whose ancient name, before Constantine was Byzantium.
The Byzantine Empire
Byzantine Art

• The art of Constantinople had a far reaching and long lasting impact on the surrounding region.
• Dates from the 5th through the 15th centuries.
• Includes art centered in the Ukraine and Russia as well.
• Three “Golden Ages.”
The Three Golden Ages of Byzantine Art

• **First**, the Early Byzantine period, associated with the Emperor Justinian, dates from 527 to 726.
• In 726 the iconoclastic **controversy** led to the destruction of many religious images.
• The middle period began in 823, when Empress. Theodora reinstated the veneration of **icons** and lasted until 1204, when Christian crusaders from the West occupied Constantinople.
• The late Byzantine period began with the restoration of Byzantine rule in 1261, and ended when Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1453.
• Byzantine art continued to flourish in Russia, which succeeded Constantinople, as the center of the Eastern Orthodox Church.
Iconoclasm

- Judaism, Islam and Christianity have always been uneasy with religious images.
- The fear was that people would worship the images as idols.
- In the 6th century, this idea grew into a major controversy in the Eastern Church as images increasingly replaced holy relics as objects of devotion.
- Many icons were believed to have been created miraculously, and all were thought to have protective and healing powers.
- In 726, Emperor Leo III began a campaign of *iconoclasm*, (image breaking) decreeing that all religious images were idols and should be destroyed.
- In the decades that followed, Iconoclasts undertook destruction of devotional images throughout the Eastern Empire.
- In 843, Empress Theodora reversed the policy.
Early Byzantine
Constantinople, Turkey

Church of Hagia Sophia
Constantinople

- During the 5th and 6th centuries, while much of Italy was struggling with invasions and religious controversy, the Eastern Empire prospered.
- The capital, Constantinople, remained secure behind massive walls defended by the imperial navy.
- Its control of sea routes between Europe and Asia made many of its citizens wealthy.
- Under the patronage of wealthy citizens and the imperial family, the city became an artistic center.
- Traditional Greek literature, philosophy and science combined with the influences of regions under the empire’s control - Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and Persia - to create a distinctive Byzantine culture.
Emperor Justinian and Empress Theodora

• In the 6th century Byzantine power, wealth and culture reached its high point.
• **Ravenna** became the administrative and political capital in the West and Rome’s power declined.
• To centralize the government and impose a uniform legal system, Justinian began a thorough compilation of Roman law, known as the Justinian code.
• Justinian and his wife, Empress Theodora began an enormous campaign to rebuild Constantinople.
• Unfortunately, little remains of their building projects or the imperial capital itself.
• One magnificent exception is the Church of Hagia Sophia, (Holy Wisdom).
Church of Hagia Sophia, Istanbul 532-537
Church of Hagia Sophia, Istanbul 532-537

- The original 4th century church at this site was destroyed by rioters protesting against Justinian in 532.
- The flaming church was a threat to the imperial family, but Theodora refused to flee, saying, “Purple makes a fine shroud”, meaning she would rather die wearing the imperial purple than run from the attackers.
- Justinian’s supporters took courage in her remarks and crushed the rebels, restoring order.
- Justinian selected two scholars, one a mathematician and the other a physicist, to rebuild the church as a symbol of imperial power and Christian glory.
The body of the original church is now surrounded by later additions, including the **minarets** built after 1453 by the Ottoman Turks. Today the church is a museum.
The two architects developed a daring and magnificent design. The dome provided a vast golden light filled space for worshippers.
Plan of Hagia Sophia

- Central plan with a dome inscribed in a square.
- Half domes connected on either side of the central dome to create a central nave.
- The half domes connect to the narthex at one end of the nave and the apse at the other.
- Unlike the Pantheon dome, which is solid with an oculus at the top, this dome has a band of 40 windows around its base.
- Very daring architectural design.
- In 588, first dome did collapse, but was rebuilt with exterior buttressing and has now survived earthquakes.
• Hagia Sophia’s dome is 108 feet in diameter and rises to a height of 180 feet above the floor.
• It rests on pendentives.
• Emperor Justinian lavished on the Hagia Sophia an equivalent of $150 million.
• This beautiful monument unites East and West, past and present.
Early Byzantine Art
Egypt
Monastery of St. Catherine, Mt. Sinai
Church of the Virgin
St. Catherine’s Monastery
Mt Sinai, Egypt

- St. Catherine's Monastery is a monastery on the Sinai peninsula, at the foot of Mount Sinai, in Egypt.
- It was built at the site where Moses is believed to have seen the Burning Bush, which is alive and on the grounds.
- Though it is commonly known as Saint Catherine's, the actual name of the monastery is the Monastery of the Transfiguration.
- Numerous ancient manuscripts have been preserved in the library, which is second only to the manuscript library of the Vatican.
- It is one of the oldest Christian monasteries in the world.
• Originally founded by the Emperor Justinian in 527, the monastery has weathered numerous changes in the history of the region, including the invasion of Islam, whose founder Mohammed himself guaranteed protection for the monastery. (The monastery still has possession of a written document from Mohammed to prove it.)
Transfiguration of Christ
Church of the Virgin, Mount Sinai, Egypt
mosaic c. 548-565
• Triple blue **mandorla**, almond shaped halo
• Golden sky, rays of light emitting from Jesus
• Classical orator pose, calm among the chaos
- Invisible wind appears to be blowing
- Mt. Tabor is represented by a narrow strip beneath the figures
- Contrasting abstract and classical elements
- The Roman ideal of strictly portraying reality has given way to new style that sought to express religious meaning rather than external appearances
Early Byzantine Art
Ravenna, Italy

San Vitale
San Appolinare
Mausoleum of Galia Placidia
The Churches of Ravenna

• In 526 the bishop of Ravenna commissioned two new churches; one for the city, and one for its port.
• With funding from a local banker, they built a central plan church dedicated to the 4th century Roman martyr, Saint Vitalis, and a basilica plan church dedicated to Saint Appollinaris in the port of Classis
San Vitale from above
Plan of San Vitale
Ravenna, Italy 526-547

- Basically a central-domed octagon, extended by semicircular bays, surrounded by an ambulatory and gallery, all covered by vaults.
- The narthex, a rectangular sanctuary and semicircular apse project from one of the sides of the octagon connected the church to the palace.
• Sanctuary apse with mosaic of Christ flanked by St Vitale and Bishop of Ravenna who presents a model of the church to Christ.
• Two images of Moses flank an arch.
• The lower one depicts moment when Moses, tending his sheep, heard the voice of God coming from the burning bush.
• The upper image depicts Moses removing his shoes, a symbolic gesture of respect in the presence of God or holy ground.
Emperor Justinian and Empress Theodora

- Were not present when San Vitale was consecrated in 547, perhaps never even went to Ravenna.
- However two large mosaic murals stand in for them.
Emperor Justinian
As head of state, Justinian wears a huge crown and a purple robe. Justinian stands in the center of his panel, holding a golden paten for the Host. The Bishop Maximianus is next to him holding a golden cross.
• The attendants carry a golden and jeweled encased gospel and a censor, which will be used to purify the altar prior to the Mass.
• The soldiers on the left carry a shield with the chi/rho monogram.
Empress Theodora
Theodora

• Theodora stands under a fluted shell canopy, her head is surrounded by a halo.
• She carries a golden chalice, studded with jewels.
• She brings a gift to the altar, just as the Magi pictured on her robe brought gifts to the Christ child.
• There is a fountain on the left, possibly symbolizing baptism.
• Theodora died shortly after this mosaic was completed.
Classical Influence in the Mosaics of San Vitale

• The mosaics combine imperial ritual, Old Testament narrative and Christian symbolism.
• The settings, like that around Theodora, the shell, the drapery, are classical illusionistic devices.
• However in these mosaics they don’t create space.
• Byzantine artists did not conceive pictorial space the way the Romans did.
• They did not view space through a “window” that receded toward a distant horizon.
A Change in Perception

- Byzantine artists believed that invisible rays of sight joined the eye to the image, so that pictorial space extended forward from the picture plane to the eye of the beholder and included the real space between them.

- Parallel lines appear to diverge as they get farther away and objects seem to tip up in a representational system known as reverse perspective.
Church of San Appolinare in Classe
former port of Ravenna, Dedicated 549
San Appolinare is a Basilica plan church.
San Appolinare

- Nothing interferes with the view to the raised sanctuary in the apse.
• Hand of God comes out of the sky, Moses and Elijah emerge from the water to legitimize Christ (In center of cross) and Christianity.
• Peter, James and John, symbolized by the sheep with raised heads, also witness the scene.
• St. Apolinnare, Bishop in pose of an orant, raises his arms in prayer.
• 12 sheep represent the 12 apostles.
• Landscape is filled with stylized plants and flowers, very shallow space.
Unlike the landscape in the Good Shepherd lunette of the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, these highly stylized forms bear little resemblance to nature.

The artists eliminated any suggestion of spatial recession by making the trees and lambs at the top of the golden sky larger than those at the bottom.

Moving away from Classical style to a more symbolic style, the message is what is important.
The iconoclasts who ruled for more than a century, lost power in 863. Under new leadership the Eastern Empire was revitalized. During this period, Constantinople’s scope included Turkey, The Balkans, Greece, Southern Italy as well as Russia, the Ukraine and Venice. Middle Byzantine Art was visually powerful and reflected the strongly spiritual forces of the period’s wealthy leadership.
11th Century
Greek mosaics

- 11th century artists studied both classical art and Justinian art forms.
- They conceived their subjects in terms of an intellectual rather than physical ideal.
- They continued to represent the human figure in narratives, but some artists eliminated all unnecessary details.
- Focusing on the essential elements of a scene to convey its mood or message.
• "The Pantocrator" is from the Royal Church at Monreale, Sicily. Mosaic, Late 12th Century.

• **Pancreator**: creator of everything.
Church of the Dormition, Greece, 10th century
• Icon of *Christ Pantocrator*
  • mosaic Church of the Dormition,
  • Greece 1080-1100
Icon of Christ Pantocrator
Church of the Dormition, Greece 1080-1100

- Christ, sovereign of all, mosaic in the central dome
- Solid gold background
- God as both judge and savior
- Highly simplified forms
Compare:
How are they similar; how do they differ?

- Both mosaics depict the Baptism of Christ.
- Top: Baptistry of the Orthodox, Ravenna, 490-500 CE
- Bottom: Church of the Dormitian, Greece, 1080-1100
Middle Byzantine Art
Venice, Italy

St Mark’s Cathedral
Venice

- The northeastern Italian city of Venice, set on the Adriatic at the crossroads of Europe and Asia minor, had been subject to Byzantine rule in the sixth and seventh centuries and, until the tenth century, the city’s ruler, the **doge**, had to be ratified by the emperor.

- At the end of the tenth century, Constantinople granted Venice a special trade status that allowed its merchants to control much of the commercial interchange between the East and the West, which brought the city great wealth and increased its exposure to Eastern cultures, clearly reflected in its art and architecture.

- One of Venice’s great Byzantine monuments, built in 1063, is the Cathedral of Saint Mark, which was modeled after the Church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople.
Cathedral of Saint Mark’s
Venice
• In 1063, the doge commissioned a new church to replace his small palace chapel.
• This chapel had served as a martyrium, holding the relics of Saint Mark the apostle, which were brought from Egypt to Venice in 828.
• Venetian architects looked to the Byzantine domed church for inspiration and designed the massive new cathedral using the Greek cross plan, each square unit is covered by a dome, (five in all).
• St Mark’s
• Venice
St Mark’s, a Roman Catholic Church, was built during the Middle Byzantine period. The Eastern influence is clearly visible in its architecture.
Interior St Mark’s

- There are five great domes, separated by barrel vaults.
- Marble covers the lower walls and golden mosaics illuminated the upper walls and ceiling.
- The mosaics depict stories of the life of Christ and the apostles.
Virgin cloisonne, Pala d'Oro

- In Saint Mark’s is the famous Pala d'Oro, a glorious altarpiece pieced together over several hundred years so that it has elements of the Gothic as well as the Byzantine.
- The Pala d'Oro is made of gold and is set with enamels, jewels, semi-precious stones and pearls.
- **Cloisonne** is a method of enameling on metal.
• Archangel Michael
• 10th Century, icon, silver gilt and enamel.
• 19" X 14".
• Treasury of the Cathedral of San Marco, Venice
Ivories, Manuscripts and Panel Painting

• Court workshops of Constantinople excelled in the production of carved ivory objects for liturgical use.
• The court also sponsored a major scriptorium for the production of manuscripts.
• Byzantine painters also painted icons on panels and frescos.
Archangel Michael panel of a diptych, ivory, early 6th century

- Archangel Michael in a very classicizing style.
- The figure is classical but the surrounding space is not.
- Notice the placement of his feet in relation to the steps and the columns.
Justinian as Conqueror
Ivory mid 6th century

- The art and architecture of Justinian, who reigned 527-565, are regarded as the highest achievements of Early Byzantine Art.
- Justinian attempted in his military and political actions as well as in his monuments to restore the glory and grandeur of the Roman Empire.
- Does this piece feel Roman or classical?
Manuscripts

- A scriptorium was a writing room for the production of manuscripts, written by hand.
- The earliest manuscripts bound into a book, or codex, dates from 512.
- The ancient Egyptians, Greeks and Romans wrote on papyrus scrolls, called rotulus and were on an average 11 yards long when unrolled.
- The codex, ancestor to the modern book, was more practical and easier to handle.
- The sheets of the codex were either flat parchment (lambskin) or vellum (unborn calf skin).
- Illustrations in books were called miniatures, from minium, the Latin word for a reddish color pigment.
- Manuscripts decorated with gold were said to be illuminated.
- Heavy leather covered pieces of board served as covers and kept the sheets of the codex flat.
- Very opulent manuscripts had covers decorated with precious metals, jewels, ivory and enamels.
- Two pages from the Rabbula Gospels, Syria 586
- *The Crucifixion and The Ascension*
DeMateria Medica

• Botanical encyclopedia, compiled in the 1st century by a Greek physician, who was traveled as a doctor with the Roman army.

• First systematic listing of plants based on their appearance, properties and medicinal uses.

• Generations of scribes copied it over the centuries.

• The earliest known surviving copy of this manuscript, called a codex, was from Constantinople in 512.

• The illustrators transformed this Greek reference book into a beautifully illustrated work.

• Even though the original book had been pagan, Christians embraced it, believing it to have both religious and medicinal significance.
Lamiæ tria genera.

Linum. Nīvy.

Pulmonaria alba sylvis foliis ovatis lanceolatis, radice lutea, ovario ovoideo, sementibus seminibus rotundis, fructibus flavis et succulo pharmaceutico.
• David composing the Psalms
• folio 1
• Paris Psalter,
• ca. 959-970
• Tempera on vellum
What is an icon?

- From Greek eikn, from eikenai, *to be like, to seem*

  a. An image; a representation.
  b. A representation or picture of a sacred or sanctified Christian personage, traditionally used and venerated in the Eastern Church.
  c. An important and enduring symbol
  d. One who is the object of great attention and devotion
  e. *Computer Science* A picture on a screen that represents a specific file, directory, window, option, or program.
Icons

• Eastern Christians prayed to Christ, Mary, and the saints while looking at images of them on icons.
• After much debate and destruction of icons, Eastern Christian leaders distinguished between idolatry, the worship of images, and the veneration of an idea.
• The Eastern Church came to accept icons as aids to meditation and prayer.
• The images were believed to act as intermediaries between worshipers and saints.
The Image of Christ

- The first such image of Christ was believed to have been a portrait that miraculously appeared on the scarf of Veronica.
- Veronica, a follower of Christ, wiped his face with her scarf as he carried his cross to the crucifixion.
Most early icons were destroyed in the 8th century in the **iconoclasm**.

A few were preserved in the monastery of St Catherine on Mt. Sinai.

As **Theotokos**, God-bearer, Mary was viewed as a powerful intercessor between her Son and repentant worshipers.

She was also the **Seat of Wisdom** and many images of the Virgin and Child depict Mary holding Jesus on her lap, suggesting that she represents the throne of Solomon.
• Mary holds the infant Jesus on her lap.
• Flanked by two early Christian warrior saints, Theodore on the left and George on the right.
• Both said to have killed dragons, representing the triumph of the Church over the “evil serpent” of paganism.
• The Christ child, the Virgin and the angels in the rear were painted in a somewhat illusionistic or Roman style.
• However, the two saints in front are treated much more stylistically.
The Old Testament Trinity or Three Angels Visiting Abraham

- Representing the idea of the Trinity, One God in three persons was a challenge for artists.
- Some chose to depict God as three identical persons, as seen here.
- The artist has illustrated the Old Testament story of Abraham and his wife Sarah, being visited by three divine strangers.
Typical of the Byzantine style with elongated bodies and hands, small faces with large eyes, flat noses and small mouths.

• This is a very recognizable style and continues today in Russian icon painting.
What do you think about the way the forms are represented?

Audrey Rublyov
Icon, 1410-20
55”x44” tempera on panel
Iconostasis
• The most prominent feature of an Orthodox church is the Iconostasis, consisting of one or more rows of Icons and broken by a set of doors in the center, the Holy or Royal Doors, and a door at each side, the Deacon's Doors.
• A typical Iconostasis consists of one or more tiers of Icons.

• At the center of the first, or lowest, tier, are the Royal Doors, on which are placed Icons of the four Evangelists who announced to the world Good News.

• At either side of the Royal Doors are always placed an Icon of the Savior and of the Most Holy Theotokos (to the left).
At first, an iconostasis was just a low wall, a symbolic marker of the division between the Sanctuary and the Nave, that is, between the heaven and the earth.

This little wall was not meant to prevent the faithful who came to worship in the Church from seeing the Sanctuary.

The Byzantines never envisioned the separation of the sanctuary from the nave by such a "material" veil.

They used a low marble or wooden fence to display the icons of those saints who were celebrated on a particular day to all believers.

Since the placement and removal of the icons from the top of this low wall turned into an everyday chore, the icons were permanently installed on the wall.
The Byzantine Tradition

• Art in the Byzantine tradition continued to be produced for the Eastern Christian Church for many centuries.
• It continues to this day in Russian Icon painting.
• However in Constantinople, the Byzantine empire came to an end in 1453.
• The forces of the Ottoman Empire overran the city, and Constantinople became part of the Islamic world.
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