

Sarah McCormick and Kate McDonald
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Dr. Theodore Christou
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Byzantium Representations in and of Art

1. Thesis

What were the modes of artistic representation utilized during the age of Byzantium? To what extent were religious and secular cultures represented, subverted and/or reproduced in art? What was the role of art in Byzantium?

2. Sources/Limitations of Study

a. Primary and Secondary

The primary sources utilized for this paper are the works of visual arts created from the dedication of Byzantium by the Emperor Constantine in 330 CE to its eventual sacking by the Ottomans in 1453. The images were selected as representative of artistic movements and styles during this time. The images of Byzantine art were selected from the exhibit of Byzantine art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Byzantine art were creations known to be of a serious, conservative nature. The purpose of the artwork was not, typically, to allow for individual interpretation, “but was the voice of orthodox dogma” (Chilvers par.2). Byzantine artists produced many different kinds of works, including panel paintings, frescos, manuscript illuminations, ivories, enamels, textiles, jewellery, and metalwork, yet the finest pieces produced are seen in the mosaic decoration of churches (Chilvers par.2). On the interior of the church, mosaics were applied to all surfaces and the shimmering of colors combined with the implacably staring figures created an effect of excessive power (Chilvers par.2). During the eighth and ninth centuries, many works of art were destroyed due to the iconoclast (“image-breaking”) outbursts (Chilvers par.2).

Secondary sources include various texts written as interpretations on Byzantine art by authors from the twentieth century. These texts cite primary sources and have their own authorial/historical motivations at play.

b. Perspectives

To broach the subject of Byzantium is to venture into the realm of a highly contested historical period. The term “Byzantine” in and of itself has been a hotly

contested word, often considered an epithet. In Byzantine Art and Archaeology, O.M Dalton warns that there are general considerations to past historical precedence that must be attended to: “If a writer required an epithet for all that was obsolete or unenlightened, he found it in the word Byzantine; if such an author had the ear of Europe, he could pervert history with a phrase” (O.M Dalton 3). We feel it is necessary to be aware how deeply embedded in controversy the subject of Byzantium is. In an effort to readdress the realm of pejorative studies on Byzantium, we have decided to examine Byzantium and Byzantine art as the product of a great empire that was diverse. We posit that the Byzantine discourse is one that is multi-voiced and multi-cultural, who was influenced by other cultures and in turn influenced other cultures. As such we have decided to examine Byzantine Art in the context of a diaspora: works are influenced and shaped by the displaced of cultures and the creation of new ones. “Byzantium developed its own characteristics out of and in response to centuries of earlier history and settlement” (Cameron 9) and we believe that its art was a reflection thereof.

The approach of art historians is one that should be taken into consideration with the selection of works and their accompanying critical perspectives. Byzantium as a field of study in the art history discourse is one that is difficult to classify. Utilizing the jargon of historical periods West Roman, Later Roman and Romanic are insufficient as they do not give credit to the complexities of influences at play in Byzantium and give too much prominence to Rome. Furthermore, there is a body of work that points to an understanding of Byzantine art as inextricably tied to Christianity. From this perspective, “Art was to reflect the Intelligible Being; it was not to record the vagaries of humanity” (Beckwith 65).

c. Awareness of Perspectives Not Taken

There is some contention regarding the classification and division of the vast historical period of Byzantium. The historian, O.M Dalton, the author of the seminal study of Byzantine art, Byzantine Art and Archaeology, characterizes Byzantium into four historical epochs: I. From the foundation of Constantinople to the outbreak of iconoclasm, II. The iconoclastic period, III. The accession of Basil I in 867 CE to the sack of Constantinople in 1204 CE, and IV. From the Restoration to the Turkish Conquest. While Dalton’s divisions of time are based historical moments and further subdivided into geographical locales.

The work of John Beckwith, The Art of Constantinople: An Introduction to Byzantine Art, examines the Byzantine works of art as being understood in a construct of Roman power and Christian supremacy. Beckwith’s position is as such: “When Constantinople the Great dedicated Byzantium as the capital of the Roman Empire, an immediate emphasis was placed on the alliance of imperial might with a religion officially recognized only for some seventeen years. The New Rome was deliberately set up in contrast with the Old, which still clung tenaciously to its pagan rites and customs. The temples of Byzantium rapidly became museums; only the Christian religion was tolerated at Constantinople.” (3) He regards many works through the lens of the solidification of Christianity.

In our examination of Byzantine Art, we had to narrowly define art in and of itself. In the context of this essay, we selected art to be Visual Art. This sorting impulse was undertaken in order to narrow the scope of our research. Furthermore, we chose to address the historical scope of Byzantine Art through the growth and development of its artistic traditions.

3. Argument/Discussion/Evidence

Byzantine art is positioned historically as medieval art, which has specific implications for the works produced. Art was produced based on commission, as such, works were privately financed and their content and style largely dictated by the purchaser. As Averil Cameron establishes in his book The Byzantines “it is only with the twelfth century that artists’ signatures become more common” (156). Little is known of Byzantine artists and “the vast majority of Byzantine painters and craftsmen were anonymous” (Cameron 156).

Byzantine art spans more than 1,000 years and was centered on a Christian society based in Constantinople (Cormack 2). Most Byzantine art was created for the Eastern Orthodox Church and much was made by servants of the courts or members of religious orders most of whom remained anonymous (Cormack 2). Known to the Byzantines as “holy icons”, artwork from the Byzantine period are primarily seen as religious pieces (Cormack 2). These “icons”, or rather “eikons” are meant to mean any kind of image in church, and since much effort and resources went into the creation of these pieces it makes sense to refer to them as “art” (Cormack 2).

Artwork from the Byzantine period was made to last an eternity, and these icons were worshipped by all who identified themselves as being a part of society (Cormack 2). Byzantine artists had to follow many rules about subject matter, content, and form. Symbolic representation was very important in Byzantine art (Cormack 2). The subjects appear flat and fairly abstract compared to the liveliness and individualism of Western art because Byzantine artists used little shading or other techniques that would have made their subjects more lifelike (Cormack 2). Due to the dispute about what kind of imagery was allowed under God’s law, production and veneration of the icons was banned for a significant period of time during Byzantine history by the iconoclast emperors (Cormack 2). The ban eventually came to an end, and to show their faith, all Orthodox Christians began kissing the icons (Cormack 2).



Left: Icon with the Holy Virgin Pelagonitissa, by Makariya Zograf, Late Byzantine, 1421-2, tempera on wood, 53 by 37 by 1 5/8 inches, Museum of Macedonia, Skopje

Byzantine artwork was made to serve purposes of an aesthetic and functional nature. The art was made to inflict a certain emotion and had the ability to create an atmosphere more potent than most other art forms (Cormack 2). Byzantine icons were “made as props in the face of joy and sorrow, happiness and pain” (Cormack 2). These religious icons received prayers and veneration that was believed to pass through them to the “other world”, and were thought to reflect the powers of god. These powers were expected to remain for centuries and were available in churches (Cormack 2).

The City of Constantinople was of extreme importance to the Byzantine citizens and had a large impact on the artistic world. This importance is not only due to the fact that Constantinople was the capital, but also due to its geographical location (Rice 31). From a glance at the map, you are able to see how the city stands on a peninsula, and is “located on the only direct sea route between Russia and the Black Sea to the North, and Greece, Syria, Italy, Egypt, and all the powerful area of the Mediterranean to the South” (Rice 31). Also, in the fourth century it was radically redeveloped and enlarged, it was meant to display Constantine’s military triumph and liquidation of rival emperors in the Roman world (Cormack 6). The artistic style of the Byzantium basically ended with the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453, but the style provided influence, especially in Russia, and elsewhere where the Orthodox Church remained (Cormack 6).

The primary medium of Byzantine art was the use of glass mosaics. While the Romans made use of small stones to create their mosaics, the Byzantines used small pieces of colour glass, set into the mortar of the church walls at different angles to catch the light (Urton, par. 2).. The mosaics are often given a golden background to emphasize the heavenly atmosphere, and the figures represented are often given halos to show their

divine status (Urton, par. 2).. Occasionally, as in the picture below, the Holy Roman Emperor or Empress is portrayed, in order to show the union of the church and state (Urton, par. 2)..



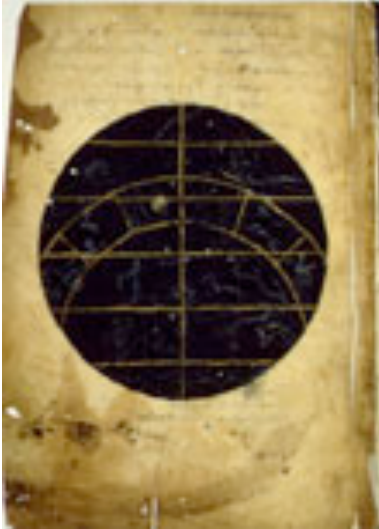
Left – Empress Theodora, 547, is depicted holding a goblet, which represents the blood of Christ.

Another Mosaic inside the church illustrates Emperor Justinian, holding bread, which represents the body of Christ (Urton, 2000).

In terms of the Byzantine mosaics, there are two periods of importance that need to be distinguished. The first of the periods ranged from the fourth to the seventh centuries, and the second from the ninth to the twelfth century. The two periods are separated by the Iconoclast age (Rice 130). However, mosaics produced outside of that age are not to be dismissed, as many secular work from the iconoclast age demonstrate a high degree of beauty, one that was once believed to only be obtained through the presence of figures in artwork (Rice 143). Also, many of the mosaics to survive come from the fourteenth century, and are believed to be some of the most beautiful of all produced from the Byzantine period (Rice 134).

Byzantine art was not limited to the decoration of churches. A large number of “minor” or “luxury” arts were products, many still being of a religious nature, although some remaining without a spiritual meaning. “The official use of images as protectors of armies and cities was, of course, an ancient pagan practice, and the belief in and the exploitation of the magic properties” (Beckwith 55). For example, ivories representing themes from classical mythology, and ceramics decorated with figures that may derive from the Akritic epics. From the 9th to 12th Century: The tendencies toward a religious art which avoided the appearance of weight, volume, or the third dimension, which excised the inessential and accidental, which evoked an image of the Absolute, merely became fact” (Beckwith 65).

While iconoclasm restricted and led to the destruction of much of the religious and iconic art, it never led to a complete ban of all artwork. Ptolemy's "Handy Table" is a manuscript that is held by the Vatican, and is another source of evidence that secular art continued to be produced after the Iconoclasm.



Left: [Ptolemy](#), *Handy Tables*
In Greek
Parchment
Ninth century

4. Relation/Significance for Contemporary Society or Education

The implications of contemporary studies are diverse. Byzantine Art can be studied independently as its own subject in and of itself. The diversity of works produced that bridge the periods of Antiquity and the medieval period are representative pieces to demonstrate to students that history is flexible: times lines and chronological classifications do not uniformly apply in the study of history.

The art produced in Byzantium can be examined for its influence on later artistic styles and movements. History can be thus presented as a series of concentric circles that extend outwards through time.

Cross-curricular approaches to Byzantium art could be presented in the form of literacy unit based on "Sailing to Byzantium," a poem by William Butler Yeats. The content of the poem could frame and guide the students exploration and understanding of Byzantium.

I
That is no country for old men. The young
In one another's arms, birds in the trees
---Those dying generations---at their song,
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
Fish, flesh, or fowl commend all summer long
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.
Caught in that sensual music all neglect
Monuments of unaging intellect.
II
An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress,

Nor is there singing school but studying
Monuments of its own magnificence;
And therefore I have sailed the seas and come
To the holy city of Byzantium.

III

O sages standing in God's holy fire
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,
And be the singing-masters of my soul.
Consume my heart away; sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal
It knows not what it is; and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity.

IV

Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing,
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
Or set upon a golden bough to sing
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

5. Conclusions

The dual roles of the Byzantine Empire-as a vast and powerful domain and as the epicentre of the propagation of Christianity-are represented and reproduced in the visual arts produced. We believe that the dominant discourses and ideologies of Byzantium can be understood and examined through its art.

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