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Looking East (Fr. John Garvey)

Ξένες γλώσσες / In English

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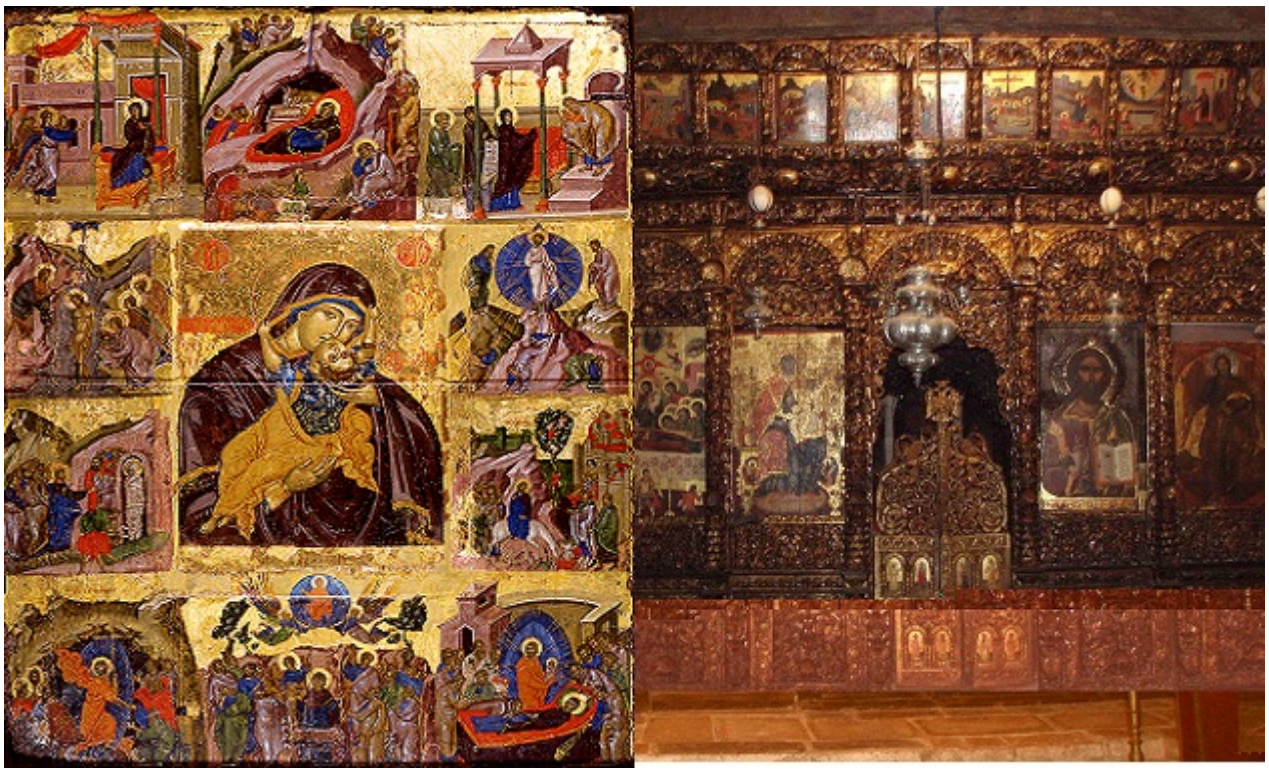
‘Byzantium’ at the Met

In 1997, New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art hosted an exhibit called “The Glory of Byzantium.” It covered the period from 843 to 1261, the time stretching from just after the resolution of the iconoclastic crisis until the restoration of the authority of the Eastern Roman Empire, following its fall to the Fourth Crusade in 1204. It was a wonderful selection of icons, fabrics, metalwork, mosaics, and illuminated manuscripts. When I saw it (I went twice) I thought that it would be the last time I would ever see so much magnificent Byzantine art in one place.



It’s nice to know that I was wrong. Until July 4, the Metropolitan offers an equally glorious exhibition, this one called “Byzantium: Faith and Power (1261- 1557).” The Metropolitan, over three exhibits, has been responsible for the most comprehensive display of Orthodox religious art (in its many forms) ever presented

anywhere. In 1977, it presented “The Age of Spirituality,” which surveyed early Christian art, from the third through the eighth century. The 1997 exhibit carried the story forward, and the present exhibition covers what might be called the rest of the story-the period from the restoration until the final fall of Byzantium to the Ottoman Empire in 1453, when what was Constantinople morphed into Istanbul, and more than a century following the fall. In that time, the influence of Byzantine arts and the presence of Byzantine artists in diaspora began to show up in Western art, and the descriptive word Byzantium was given to the West by a German scholar. The last two of these extraordinary exhibits were curated by Helen C. Evans, who oversees the Met’s collection of early Christian and Byzantine art. She and her colleague Mahrukh Tarapor and all those who worked with them (including the generous corporate sponsors), deserve all the praise we can heap on them.

The art here comes from an extraordinary array of sources, from Greece, Romania, Serbia, Russia, France, Italy, Macedonia, Egypt, Georgia, Ethiopia, the Vatican-thirty nations, all told-and there is a room devoted largely to work from one of the richest sources of Orthodox art, the Holy Monastery of St. Catherine, on the Sinai Peninsula. St. Catherine’s allowed some of its icons and manuscripts to be displayed in 1997; this time it offered many more, and Archbishop Damianos of Sinai came to New York to offer a dedicatory prayer and bless the exhibit.

Many of the individual works of art are remarkable, but what is even more interesting is the way in which they serve to show how East and West continued to influence each other, even after the rift that followed the crusaders’ desecration of Constantinople. They also reveal the influence of Orthodox iconography on the Ottoman style, the influence of Muslim forms on Orthodox artists, the influence of the West on the later Byzantine style, and the influence of Orthodox iconography on the artists of the Northern Renaissance. This permeability of religious and cultural borders may be surprising to those who assume that the East/West division following the Fourth Crusade was more or less absolute.

St. Catherine’s monastery and its fortunes are a case in point. The monastery, where monks have lived since the fourth century, was formally placed under the protection of the emperor Justinian in the sixth century. It was originally dedicated to the Mother of God of the Burning Bush, because Mount Sinai was the place where Moses was said to have encountered God. But it was also associated with St. Catherine, whose body was there, and who became as popular in the West as she was in the East; in later years, as pilgrims streamed east to visit, the name was changed. One of the items on display here is a beautiful chalice made in 1411, a gift to the Orthodox monastery from the Catholic king of France, Charles VI.

Similarly, a thirteenth-century Serbian icon of SS. Peter and Paul, lent by the Vatican, was a gift to Pope Nicholas IV from Helena of Anjou. It is thoroughly Orthodox in style, but there is an inset of the patron and the pope (a trope that was to become a part of Western art).

There are many unusual items that illustrate the ways in which Byzantine art moved across borders and was itself influenced by non-Byzantine art. For example, an illuminated Ottoman text codified sixteenth-century standards governing the mines. The mythical Martian anthropologist we have all been waiting for might mistake it for an illuminated Gospel, even though the miners are depicted in secular clothes and the text is thoroughly secular. There is a bilingual book of the Gospels, c. 1300, which may have been produced to help the Latin bride of a Byzantine emperor learn Greek. Occasionally the art is downright playful: a thirteenth-century copy of the Idylls of Theocritus arranges the words of the poem in the form of the pipes of Pan, the sort of thing done by the French modernist poet Guillaume Apollinaire in the early years of the twentieth century.

The ways in which Islam and Christianity mingled also take fascinating forms here. One illuminated Coptic manuscript of the Epistles and the Acts of the Apostles was apparently commissioned by a Muslim. An Armenian Gospel book shows the clear influence of Islamic decorative art, while an illustration in one fourteenth-century Iranian account of the life of Mohammed shows the equally clear influence of Byzantine iconography.

Another fascinating strand is the evolution of Eastern iconography and Western art as they influenced each other. One of the first works you see on entering the exhibit is a processional icon that depicts the Virgin and Child on one side, and the crucified Christ on the other. This icon, known as the Virgin “Pafsolype” (cessation of sorrow), is a fine example of canonical iconography. Icons are painted in ways that conform to a set of conventions that have a deeper point: they are not meant

to be naturalistic, since this could be seen as distracting the worshiper from seeing that they are meant to depict something eternally true; God the Father is not to be depicted, since he is literally not to be imagined. (This canon is frequently violated…there are many icons that depict the Father as an old man with a beard.) In any case, the difference between this fourteenth-century icon and a sixteenth-century icon of St. Symeon Theodochos, attributed to the Cretan artist Michael Damaskinos, is instructive: the influence of Italian mannerism shows in the saint's facial features, which could be a portrait painted from life.

This exchange worked in both directions, with Byzantine themes heading west. A recurrent iconographic image is Christ depicted as the Man of Sorrows, the Christ of the Passion, and there are several fine examples here. One particularly good one is a darkly outlined depiction, from fourteenth-century Moscow. A fifteenth-century Venetian painting by Michele Giambono is a faithfully Byzantine reproduction of the Man of Sorrows, but the artist includes St. Francis of Assisi in the picture; a late fifteenth-century Cretan icon of the Mother of Consolation also includes St. Francis.

Northern Renaissance artists reinterpreted the themes of icons in a Western idiom. One fifteenth-century Virgin and Child painting from the workshop of Jan van Eyck incorporates the conventions associated with an Orthodox icon, one popularly attributed to St. Luke, but it is definitely a Western work of art.

My only complaint about the exhibit is so small that it hardly bears mentioning: a wall text concerning the Orthodox liturgy gets its timing wrong (the reading of the Gospel does not follow the great entrance). No one will notice except nitpicking, compulsive Orthodox priests.

When I saw the 1997 exhibit, a friend said, "We really shouldn't be able to see these things." What he meant was that these are objects associated with worship and devotion, and shouldn't be placed in the neutral and nonsacred space of a museum. I knew what he meant, and knew also that he was more than happy to be there. These works have a way of making the space they occupy sacred. The fact that initially reluctant monasteries, the Vatican, the Patriarch of Constantinople, and many other collectors were willing to be so generous in allowing the glory of these wonderful icons, chalices, vestments, and manuscripts to be shared by all is a great gift. Enjoy it if you can.

This article was first published by Commonweal, on April 23, 2004, and is posted here with permission.

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