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Introduction to Material Culture in the Byzantine and Christian Museum, Athens

(with plates 29–32)

Ideas and matter, moulded purposefully by the artist and endowed with aesthetic value, constitute the work of art, which is a material testimony of Art and Culture. The Byzantine and Christian Museum in Athens possesses a considerable wealth of material testimonies of Byzantine Culture. Just a small sample will be displayed in its new permanent exhibition, which will be developed over an area of 6000 square metres, including 2030 selected exhibits.

The first major unit of the exhibition is entitled 'From the Ancient to the Christian World'. This focuses on an era of continuity as well as of severance and change. Familiar figures acquired a new symbolic meaning. The figure of the philosopher was now used to render Christ. The familiar figure of Zeus *kriophoros* – bearing a ram – was transformed into the Good Shepherd of the Gospel (pl. 29, fig. 1). Orpheus now symbolized Christ, whose word allures. (pl. 29, fig. 2). The figure of "Isbardias" and terracotta lamps of symbolic shape (inventory number T. 18) are some of the other notable works with analogous esoteric meaning.

As a consequence of the recognition of Christianity as official religion of the Roman Empire and its spread, ancient sanctuaries were transformed into Christian places of worship. Christians purified the pagan temples with their cult images and consecrated them as churches. Some sculptures from the conversion of the Parthenon into a church are exhibited as an independent sub-unit, in which we can see a closure panel from a fifth-century ambo or pulpit and two sections of a twelfth-century architrave.

The churches of the new religion produced their own material evidence too. The triumph of the new religion was manifest in matter. Remains of a mosaic pavement and sculptures from the Ilissos basilica (T. 39) (pl. 29, fig. 3), carvings from Early Christian basilicas, such as the marble relief with the scene of the Nativity (T. 95), a pier capital from the reign of Theodosius (T. 8), a cup (T. 2350) and metal lamps (T. 2809) merely hint at the wide range of such objects.

In the first centuries of Christianity, the continuity of the tradition of the ancient world is also obvious in secular art, as well as in the daily habits of people. A mural from a fourth-century urban house in Athens, a lovely round table from Thera and various lamps give us an inkling into domestic decoration and household furnishings. Pieces of jewellery are associated with personal adornment, crosses and small icons with private devotions, and amulets with superstition, while coins, stamps, seals and weights relate to the domain of public life.

However, for Christians of seminal importance is the belief in the life to come, the life after death, in which the souls live on in the world hereafter: 'a bright place, a verdant place, a place of leisure'. Examples of tombs, such as the double grave from Stamata in Attica, the unique 'Martyrs' Table' (pl. 29, fig. 4), grave goods such as clay vases, and funerary inscriptions comprise a rich sub-unit devoted to mortuary customs.

Within the multi-ethnic and ecumenical Byzantine Empire, the Christians of Egypt, whom the Arabs called Copts, were a singular group. An important collection in the Byzantine and Christian Museum gives a panorama of Coptic material culture from Early Christian times until the Age of Islam, with sculptures (T. 108), textiles (T. 665), ivory reliefs (T. 1634), crosses (T. 2264) and other items, in which the Hellenistic heritage is combined with Oriental influences.

Political ideology not only sets its seal on institutions but also leaves its mark on material objects. In Byzantium the role of the emperor and of the state administration was decisive.

Imprinted on the 275 gold coins spanning the fourth to the fifteenth century, in the Avgeris Collection, are the portraits of the emperors, their attributes and their relationship with the Church and with God. The medalion (T. 465), copy of the Barberini diptych, lead seals and the fourteenth-century chrysobull of Andronikos II Palaeologos are tangible evidence of imperial authority, while the folio from a purple codex of the sixth century (T. 21) (p. 30, fig. 1), the balance weights, the lead seals of state officials and the wedding crowns of the *spantharokandidatos* Romanos, give an insight into the courtly milieu and the state bureaucracy.

The period from the seventh to the end of the ninth century, is conventionally known as the 'dark age'. It was marked by upheavals and rivalries, as well as of true creativity.

The hoard buried in the seventh century on the island of Lesbos, to protect it from barbarian incursions, is doubly important. First it belies the political crisis in the seventh century, and second it bespeaks the sophistication of metalworking. Coins, jewellery and vessels in gold and silver, constitute irrefutable witnesses to the heights this art had reached in the seventh century (pl. 30, fig. 2).

The subsequent crisis of Iconoclasm inevitably affected art, as is apparent in sculptures (T. 1851). In the ninth century, sculptures such as the closure panel (T. 291), the architrave (T. 429) and the column capital (T. 217) decorated the church at Skripou, of transitional architectural type.

We shall pass now to the section devoted to the Byzantine church, and look at the works of art connected with it. This large and important body of material culture, encompassing icons, sculptures, creations in the minor arts, manuscripts and textiles, comprises an abstract unit relating to worship.

The 'Triumph of the Icons' begins with a two-sided icon of the Crucifixion from the ninth and thirteenth centuries (pl. 30, fig. 3) and continues with some of the most important examples of the art of portable icons, such as the mosaic Virgin of Tenderness (*Glykophilousa*), the thirteenth-century Virgin *Episkepsis* from Asia Minor (pl. 30, fig. 4), Saint George (T. 2726), the two-sided icon with Christ Pantocrator (T. 188), an icon of Archangel Michael (T. 2162) (pl. 31, fig. 1), the Crucifixion from the church of the *Helkomenos* at Monemvasia (T. 40) and several others. – Noteworthy are three marble icons: the tenth-century plaque with three Apostles (T. 150), the eleventh-century Virgin orans (T. 149) and the twelfth-century Virgin and Child (T. 147).

The entrance to the Byzantine church is enhanced by doorframes and lintels, such as T. 348, which dates from the tenth century. A marble sarcophagus of the tenth-eleventh century (T. 1784) reminds us of its existence at the entrance to the nave, while the form of windows with mullions and pier capitals, of an eleventh-century marble templon-screen with architraves (T. 197) and of eleventh-century closure panels such as the exquisite pieces T. 164 and T. 159, are evoked.

Two units negotiate the mural decoration of the Byzantine church. In the first unit, thirteenth-century wall-paintings from Oropos in Attica (T. 2227), from Naxos, Kythera and Tanagra are presented, while in the second one, the entire decoration of a church, with three successive layers of wall-paintings (ninth, eleventh and thirteenth centuries) is displayed.

The eleventh-century manuscript Lectionary (T. 145), an epitachelion of the fourteenth to fifteenth century (T. 686) (pl. 31, fig. 2), the fourteenth-century epigonatia or genuals (T. 714) and the tenth-century cross (T. 248) exemplify the crafts of writing, textiles and metalworking associated with the Byzantine church.

The unit entitled 'Attica, a Byzantine province' includes Byzantine wall-paintings and sculptures. These display peculiarities of the local school, undoubtedly influenced by the region's illustrious Classical past. The architectural members and ornaments are distinguished by symmetry and the sense of measure, reflecting memories from the Classical tradition, as is apparent in sculptures from the church of Saint John *Mangoutis* (T. 293) and closure panels from *Kapnikarea* (T. 1674), the Virgin *Koulourdou* (T. 158), the *Moni Petraki* (T. 166) and the dependency (*metochion*) of the Holy Sepulchre (T. 162). On the contrary, the wall-paintings from the church in the *Penteli* Cave (T. 2660) and Saint Nikolaos at Kalamos (T. 2662), bear witness to the artistic achievements of a provincial workshop of Byzantine painters.

The virtual visit now brings us to a fascinating unit dealing with material culture. It introduces the visitor to diverse aspects of the daily life of people in the Byzantine Age.

Through the pottery workshops of the Byzantine realm, the common language of decoration and the various techniques can be seen, such as the thirteenth-century bowl (T. 168) from a Thessalonica workshop and the plate (T. 2457) from a Corinth workshop. A group of earthenware vases for domestic use – for cooking, for eating and for decorating the house – includes a deep bowl or basin (T. 2713), a large ‘sauce-boat’ (*saltsarion*) and a cooking pot, all three dating from the twelfth-century (pl. 31, fig. 3).

Personal adornment as an indicator of social status is vividly illustrated by the selection of jewellery and toiletry utensils, such as the pair of tenth-century earrings (T. 2265) and the tenth-century comb (T. 2352). Characteristic objects of private devotion in this unit are the small fourteenth-century icon of the Prophet Daniel (T. 1566), the small twelfth-century icon (T. 475), cross-reliquaries such as T. 243, and so on.

Impressive too, are the sculptures from secular architectural decoration, such as the reliefs with mythological representations: an eleventh-century plaque with a Centaur (T. 178) and a tenth-century one with Heracles (T. 175).

The final centuries of Byzantium were a time of acute political crisis. In 1204 Constantinople was captured by the Franks and the Latins, and although it was regained by the Byzantines in 1261 a large portion of the Empire remained under Frankish and Venetian rule.

The influence of Byzantine art in the West, as well as of Western art in Byzantium was intense, as is apparent from a group of sculptures, such as the thirteenth-century Nativity (T. 251) and the fourteenth-century arch from an arcosolium (T. 232).

These same reciprocal influences can be detected in the wall-painting of the Virgin of the Catalans, from the fifteenth-century church of Prophet Elijah of Athens, in portable icons, and in the fourteenth-century Crusader panoply (T. 1302) (pl. 31, fig. 4). In the same period, the art of the Palaeologan dynasty in the Byzantine State is expressed in the outstanding fourteenth- and fifteenth-century icons we have already heard about, as well as in the earliest icon illustrating the hymn “In Thee Rejoiceth” (T. 134) and the superb fourteenth-century Saint George (T. 198).

In 1453 the Queen of Cities – that is Constantinople – fell. The Ottoman conquest brought an end to the political presence of Byzantium. But the material culture of the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries bears eloquent witness to the continuity of Byzantine art, which remained very much alive over this long period. Hellenism was now under foreign rule. Nevertheless, it created works such as the unique fifteenth-century wall-painting of the Ascension, from the island of Lefkada (Santa Maura) (pl. 32, fig. 1). The painter Angelos Akotantos painted the Virgin *Kardiotissa* in the fifteenth century, Michael Damaskenos Saint Anthony in the sixteenth century, Emmanuel Tzanes the Virgin Enthroned in 1664, and Ilias Moskos the Annunciation in 1675 (T. 1519).

The flourishing monasteries and workshops, in Constantinople, Philippopolis, Ioannina and elsewhere, were producing wonderful works in metal, such as the Gospelbook covers and the Communion chalice (T. 37a) dated 1632 (pl. 32, fig. 2), or exquisitely embroidered vestments such as the sakkos (T. 753) (pl. 32, fig. 3) and the epigonation (T. 707) by the embroideress Despoineta, who practised her art in the seventeenth century. Wood-carving reached such a peak that the craftsmen from Metsovo were called ‘*saitanades*’, which means literally devils, presumably because of their demonic skills.

There was a considerable output of works by Greeks in the expatriate communities all over Europe, particularly printed books and metalwork. In the eighteenth century Catherine the Great of Russia presented precious gifts from the imperial workshops of Moscow to the important Greek community of Leghorn (Livorno) in Italy. Paintings such as the nineteenth-century ‘Allegory of Love’, the antimensium T. 1124 of 1803, and above all the delightful island fanlights (*phengites*), epitomize the freshness and charm of folk art. (pl. 32, fig. 4).

In the Modern Greek State, after 1830, religious works continued to be produced in the Byzantine tradition, alongside the creations of German and Greek Nazarene painters, such as Thiersch and Hadjiyannopoulos. After the Greek defeat in Asia Minor in 1922, the refugees brought to their new homeland precious testimonies of the material culture of the Greek communities there, such as the superb thirteenth-century icon of the Virgin, the eighteenth-century epitachelion (T. 1505) and the lamp dated 1787 (T. 1440).

Through two thousand and more items of material culture exhibited in the new Byzantine and Christian Museum of Athens we endeavour not only to preserve but also to present to the public a civilization underpinned by the Greek language and the Greek sense of measure, and imbued with influences from East and West. We endeavour to make those who visit the Museum participants in a civilization that is an integral part of our common 'European past, and – why not? – of a common European future.