

BYZANTINE ART



4-19. Transfiguration of Christ, apse mosaic, Monastery of St. Catherine, Mount Sinai, Egypt. c. 560. The Monastery of St. Catherine is at the foot of Mount Sinai (see map, page 154), where, according to the Old Testament, God gave the Ten Commandments to Moses. Isolated in the Sinai Desert, the monastery, which has been in continuous use since the sixth century, is a repository of early manuscripts and other works of art (see fig. 4-21). Original patron of the monastery complex was the Byzantine emperor Justinian.

In Christian tradition, the Transfiguration occurred when three apostles accompanied Christ to the top of a mountain. While they prayed, Christ was lifted up into the sky, surrounded by an aura of heavenly light, and appeared flanked by the Old Testament prophets Moses and Elijah (Matthew 17:1-13). The voice of God the Father was heard from a cloud: "This is my beloved Son: hear him." In the mosaic of the transfiguration of Christ at the monastery at the base of Mount Sinai, Christ is represented on the axis surrounded by a mandorla (almond-shaped halo) of blue light, which emphasizes his resplendent white robes (fig. 4-19). Moses and Elijah symmetrically flank Christ, while the apostles below gesture with wondrous exclamation. The divinity of Christ is demonstrated in a scene with a spiritual emphasis that removes it from our physical world. No geographic details are given, and the event is bathed in a golden light symbolic of spiritual enlightenment. Although modeling is used, the shadows are linear patterns, denying the figures any illusion of weight or mass.

HISTORY

In 323, Constantine decided to move the capital of the Roman Empire from Rome to the eastern part of the Empire, to a historic trading center on the Bosphorus called Byzantium (from which we derive the name for the Byzantine civilization). The eastern provinces of the Empire, already strongly Christianized, had become increasingly more important, and the new capital was far from the political instability of Rome and the threats of barbarian invaders. The new capital, dedicated in 330, was named Constantinople.

Constantine's decision was a wise one. A port located at the center of regional trade routes and surrounded by rich timbered forests and agricultural fields, Constantinople developed rapidly as an economic and cultural center. This growth led to an increased military capability, and, during the reign of the emperor Justinian (ruled 527 - 565), areas of the Empire that had been lost—Italy, southern Spain, and North Africa—were again brought under imperial rule. Under Justinian, an intelligent and efficient emperor, Byzantine civilization prospered. His wife, Theodora, a former circus performer, gave resolute counsel in assisting to govern the Empire. Justinian and Theodora shared a vision of reviving the grandeur of the Roman Empire while advancing the Christian faith (see figs. 4-25, 4-26).

But Justinian's military gains proved costly and short-lived. Later, the Empire was reduced through uprisings in western Europe and, beginning in the seventh century, through the rapid advance of the Islamic religion, which with zeal spread the ideals of the prophet Muhammad to Arabia, Persia, North Africa, and Spain. The location of Constantinople meant that the influence of Roman culture was gradually supplanted by Greek taste and values, and Greek replaced Latin as the official language at court. Disagreements within the Church led to an official split in 1054 between the Western, or Roman, Church and the Byzantine, or Orthodox, Church, with its center in Constantinople. This split helps explain why the Christian Crusaders, on their way to fight the Muslims in 1204, diverted their campaign and captured and sacked Constantinople. They ruled the area for about fifty years. Cultural and political stability was later restored, but in 1453 Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Turks and was later renamed Istanbul.

ART

Many aspects of ancient Greek art and culture were preserved or revived during the long history of the Eastern, Byzantine Empire. The extensive revival of antiquity that occurred in the tenth century, for example, can be seen in a manuscript painting from the *Paris Psalter* (a book of Psalms) in which Isaiah's prayers are met by a ray of light that extends from the hand of God (fig. 4-20). The figures on each side of Isaiah are classical personifications: Night is a female contrapposto figure wearing a Greek costume and with a veil of stars over her head, while Dawn is a boy with a lighted torch. The gold background is still dominant, as it was four centuries earlier in the *Transfiguration* at Mount Sinai, but elements of landscape recalling Hellenistic and early Roman painting have been revived. The classicizing influence is more strongly stated here than in comparable manuscript illuminations from western Europe.

4-20. *Prayer of Isaiah*, from the *Paris Psalter*, c. 900. Manuscript painting on vellum, 14" x 10". Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris.



THE ICON AND ICONOCLASM

One unique form of painting that developed in Orthodox Christianity was the **icon** (Greek for "image"). Used during religious services and to decorate churches, an icon is a consecrated religious painting that displays a holy person or event and is viewed as a vehicle to communicate with the spiritual world. Some icons were believed to date from the time of Jesus, and the most famous were thought to be of divine origin. *The Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints Theodore and George and Angels* (fig. 4-21) is a rare surviving example of a sixth-century icon. The drapery patterns tend to flatten the figures, but the modeling and the slight contrapposto positions seen in the saints continue the classical interest in naturalism. Above the Virgin, two angels look sharply upward to God, whose hand descends into the pictorial space, emitting a strong ray of light. The static composition of the Virgin and saints, with their intense staring eyes, is characteristic of icon paintings. The medium is **encaustic** (from the Greek *enkaiein*, "to burn in"). It involves mixing dry pigments with hot wax, a technique that creates an effect that is both translucent and brilliant.

By the later sixth century, the faithful attributed miraculous powers to certain icons. Conservative factions, called iconoclasts (image destroyers), feared that icons had become objects of worship, which would be heretical; the divine nature of Christ, they argued, should not be represented, and to do so would encourage idolatry. They were countered by the **iconodules** (image venerators), who argued that because Christ had become human (the doctrine of the Incarnation), it was permissible to depict him in his human form. The dispute erupted into open and at times bloody conflict between 726 and 843, a period in Byzantine history known as the Iconoclastic Controversy. During this period, icons and other religious images were damaged or destroyed, accounting for many losses of works of Early Christian and Byzantine art. A final victory for the iconodules occurred in 843; even today, one Sunday in the Orthodox Christian Church calendar celebrates the restoration of images.



4-21. *The Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints Theodore and George and Angels*. 6th century. Encaustic on wood, 27 x 19 3/8 " Monastery of St. Catherine, Mount Sinai.

THE BYZANTINE ARTIST

Byzantine artists, like their Roman predecessors, were trained and practiced in a workshop system. While they constructed and decorated public buildings and churches, the collective efforts of these artists in different media were coordinated by an official overseer. As is true of much of the Middle Ages, artists worked in anonymity.



Specialized workshops produced a variety of media, including mosaics, mural and icon paintings, manuscript illustrations, and small sculpture. Large-scale figurative sculpture, one of the cornerstones of Greek and Roman art, was seldom produced during the Byzantine era, perhaps out of fear that such works would have the connotations of earlier idols. Byzantine carvers produced sarcophagi reliefs and small, exquisitely refined ivories to adorn religious and secular objects.

HAGIA SOPHIA

The interior of Hagia Sophia (fig. 4-22) offers a dramatic interplay of two crucial architectural elements: space and light. On entering, the visitor is astonished by the enormous interior space. Flanked by semi-domes on two sides, the central dome rests

like a colossal canopy on four gigantic piers. The windows at the base of the dome create rays of light that dematerialize these supports. The high dome appears suspended, hovering in space above us.

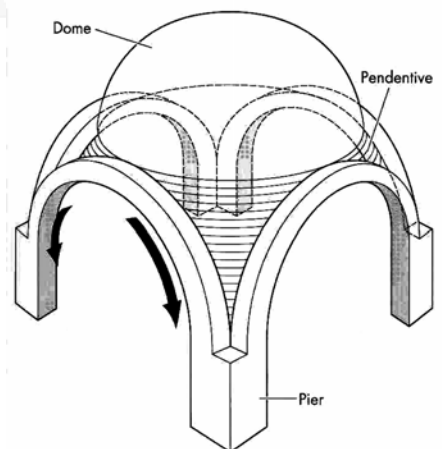
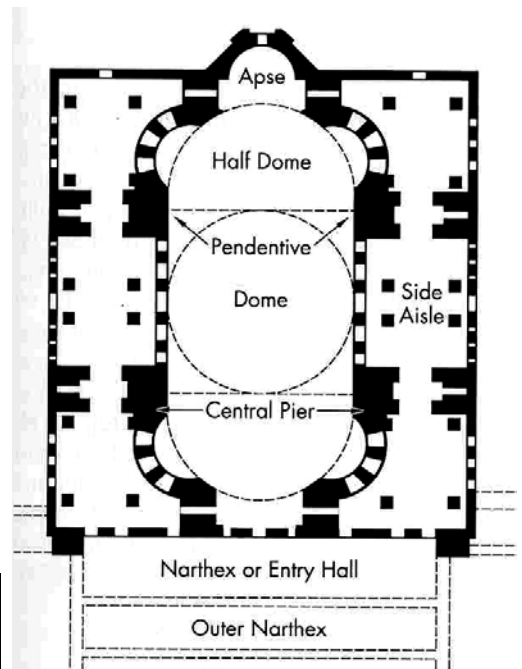
Just as the drama of light at the Pantheon in Rome (see fig. 3-117) represents a metaphysical joining of the physical and spiritual worlds, so too was the amplitude of light within Hagia Sophia bound to the religious purpose of the building. Originally, the light was even more intense, for the windows around the dome were successively decreased when the dome was rebuilt three times due to structural damage from earthquakes, in 558, 989, and 1346. Light was an integral part of Hagia Sophia's effect, for when combined with the immense interior space and mosaics, the building created a powerful physical and spiritual experience, as recorded by Procopius, the court historian to Justinian, writing shortly after the church was decorated:

The sun's light and its shining rays fill the church. One would say that the space is not lit by the sun without, but that the source of light is to be found within, such is the abundance of light. ...So light is the construction, the dome seems not to rest on a solid structure, but to cover the space with a sphere of gold suspended in the sky.... The scintillations of the light forbid the spectator's gaze to linger on the details; each one attracts the eye and leads it on to the next. The circular motion of one's gaze reproduces itself to infinity. ...The spirit rises toward God and floats in the air, certain that He is not far away, but loves to stay close to those whom He has chosen.



4-22. Anthemius of Tralles and Isidorus of Miletus. Interior, Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom), Istanbul (Constantinople), Turkey. 532-37. Hagia Sophia, 270' in length, covers almost 1.5 acres, and the great central dome, 108' in diameter, crowns at a height of more than 185'. After the Ottoman Turks captured Constantinople in 1453, Hagia Sophia was converted to an Islamic mosque. Towering minarets, from which the faithful were called to prayer, were added to the exterior, while on the interior the Christian mosaics were covered and eight huge discs with sayings from the Koran and names of Muslim prophets

This remarkable synthesis of light and architectural form was conceived by Anthemius of Tralles, an artist and scientist, and Isidorus of Miletus, an architect and engineer. During a brief, six-week period, they evolved a new architectural plan that combined the longitudinal orientation of the basilica with the central plan (figs. 4-23, 4-24). Unlike Roman architects, who preferred to support a dome on a **drum**, Anthemius and Isidorus raised the central dome on **pendentives**, curving triangular segments that provide the transition from



the square plan of the piers to the circular base of the dome (right), and flanked it with semi- or **half domes**. The huge piers reduced the load-bearing function of the walls, allowing for large amounts of window space (such nonsupporting walls are known as screen walls). That Hagia Sophia was completed in just five years demonstrates the importance of the building in Justinian's plans. It is reported that at its dedication in 537, the emperor compared his accomplishment to that of Solomon, builder of the Temple in Jerusalem, when he proclaimed, "Solomon, I have outdone thee!"

SAN VITALE, RAVENNA

The centrally planned church of San Vitale has the plain brick exterior that characterized much Early Christian and Byzantine architecture, but inside a comprehensive mosaic program synthesizes Christian iconography with imperial Byzantine politics (figs. 4-25, 4-26). It is a complex ideological program that joins Old and New Testament scenes, symbols, decorative patterns, and imperial portraiture. The unity of the mosaic program is defined by the axial placement of a number of images and symbols of Christ on, for example, the apex of the arch and at the center of the **groin vault**, where a lamb symbolizes Christ and his sacrifice. The monogram Chi-Rho leads to the most important of these references, the youthful Christ seated on the blue sphere of the universe in the apse. These align with the altar, where Christ's sacrifice is reenacted during the Mass, reinforcing this programmatic unity.

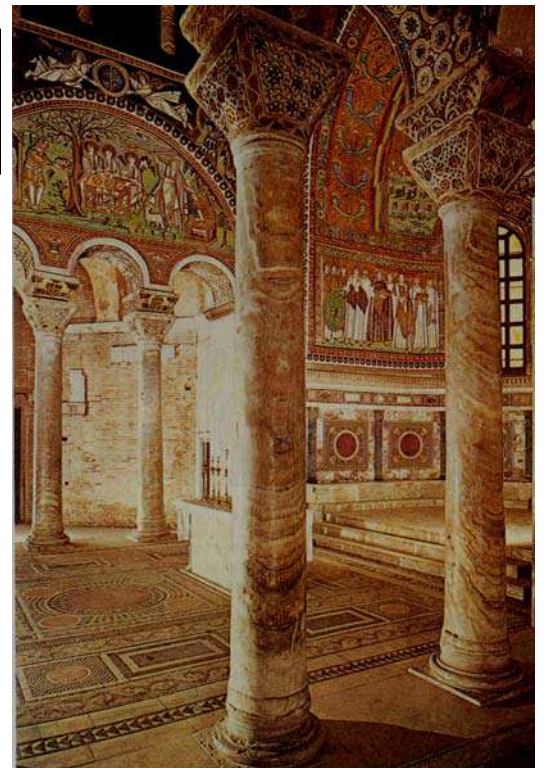


4-25. Interior, San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy. 526-47. Ravenna had been the capital city of the Ostrogoths, a Germanic people who conquered Italy by 493. In 540, the city was taken by Justinian's army and became a regional Italian capital and the local religious center of the Byzantine Empire. Commissioned by the Byzantine emperor Justinian and the local bishop, Maximianus.

4-26. (right) Mosaics, San Vitale. c. 547. In the lunette, Abraham Feeding the Three Angels is represented. Between the columns is a glimpse of Justinian, Bishop Maximianus, and Attendants and the inlaid marble decoration below the mosaics.

The offering of bread and wine at the altar is prefigured by scenes from the Old Testament. In the semi-circular area enclosed by the arch (lunette) to the left of the altar, Abraham is depicted offering hospitality to three angels symbolic of the Trinity (see fig. 4-26). To the right, Abraham is shown about to sacrifice his son Isaac, a narrative prophetic of Christ's sacrifice.

On the left wall of the apse, a rectangular mosaic depicts Justinian with ecclesiastical personnel on his left, including Maximianus, bishop of Ravenna, and civil and military personnel on his right (see fig. 4-26). Justinian carries the vessel that held the bread for the Mass; on the soldier's shield at the left border, a Chi-Rho monogram indicates the political importance Christianity had assumed within the Empire. Although the figures are frontal, the manner in which they are lined up suggests a procession. Justinian never visited San Vitale, but his significance in this, his western capital, is implied by the mosaic.



Justinian's placement, flanked by ecclesiastical and civil representatives, communicates his position as head of both Church and State (in the Byzantine Empire, the emperor appointed the patriarch of Constantinople, the leader of the Eastern Christian Church). Individualized portraits are restricted to Justinian and his close associates. Although the figures overlap one another and some modeling is suggested, the scene, with its gold background, denies the illusion of real space. It is as if the earthly court of Justinian has been transfigured into a spiritual realm. As emperor, Justinian wears a jeweled crown, while as the earthly representative of God, he is shown with a halo. A decorative, rainbowlike mosaic band rises vertically above his head to descend to the opposite mosaic of the empress Theodora, shown bringing the chalice of wine to the altar, and her attendants (fig. 4-27). The open passageway represented on the left of the mosaic is a subtle indication of the fact that Theodora and the other women are expected to observe the religious ceremonies at San Vitale from the galleries on the second floor.



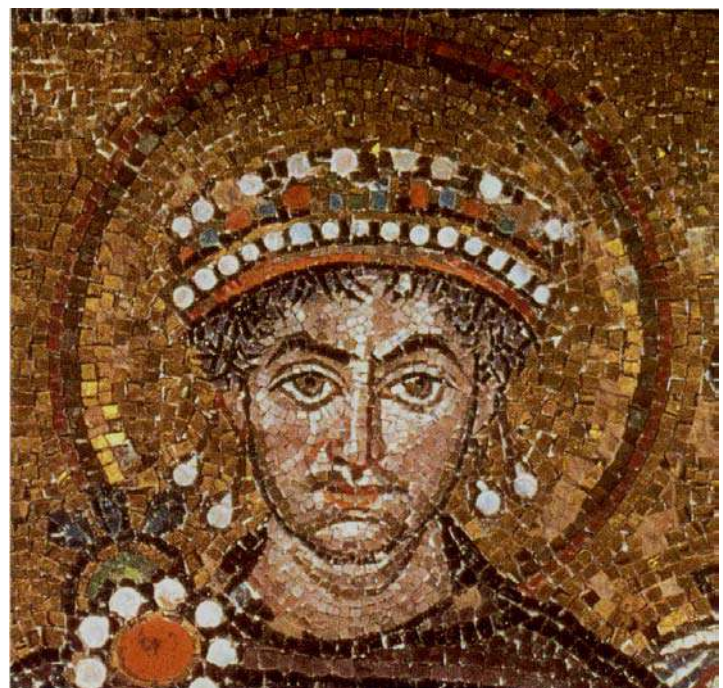
4-27 *Theodora and Attendants* anse mosaic San Vitale Ravenna Italv c 547

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In the semidome of the apse, the beardless Christ hands a crown to the Early Christian martyr Saint Vitalis, for whom the church was named. To Christ's left, Bishop Ecclesius, who laid the plans for the church, presents a model of the church. The complex ideological interrelationship of the mosaics is typical of Byzantine art, in which each figurative or decorative element is part of a comprehensive architectural and thematic unity.

TECHNIQUE: MOSAIC

The technique of mosaic seems to have developed from an earlier technique of pressing pebbles into plaster to form a durable and decorative floor covering. By the late fifth century BCE, Greek artists began arranging the pebbles into abstract and figurative designs. Soon, natural stones were replaced by cut pieces of colored stone, especially marble, called **tesserae** (singular: tessera, from the Greek *tesseres*, a square). The term tesserae is also used for the pieces of stone and glass in wall mosaics, as at Ravenna (fig. 4-28). At first, Roman mosaic was used primarily on the floors of private homes (see fig. 3-53), but occasionally it also decorated walls. Roman wall mosaics began to use glass tesserae in many colors, as well as gold tesserae, formed by sandwiching gold leaf between two layers of glass.



4.28 Justinian, detail of figure 4-26, c. 547.

The early Christians used mosaics to embellish the walls of their churches, but it was during the Byzantine era that the most splendid effects were achieved, as walls and vaults were covered with glass and marble mosaics enhanced by the predominant gold background.

In creating a mosaic, the image is first outlined on the floor, wall, or vault. Successive areas of this surface are then covered with fresh cement or plaster, and tesserae are placed into it, following the established design. As the cement or plaster hardens, the tesserae will be held firmly in place. When tesserae were set into walls and vaults, care was taken to adjust each so that its surface was at a slight angle to that of the neighboring tesserae. As the ever-changing light from the windows strikes the polished or glass tesserae, the changing angles of refraction create a shimmering and ethereal effect, a vision particularly suited to the mystical values of Christianity.

The figure of the *Pantocrator* at Daphni, Greece (right), is an impressive example of fully mature Byzantine mosaic technique. The tesserae are arranged to reinforce the definition of an edge or surface; note, for example, how the curved patterns on Christ's forehead create a sense of plastic form while strengthening the vigorous facial expression. Except for the gold background, large areas of a single color are avoided. At Daphni, the highlighted area of Christ's brown robe contains gold and red tesserae to make it seem not merely lit, but radiant and, therefore, suffused with spiritual energy.

4-67. *Pantocrator*, mosaic in central dome, Church of the Dormition, Daphni, Greece. C. 1100

