

■ BY LUCY GORDAN

*"Drawing on the traditions of the ancient world, a new art developed to serve the official state religion of Christianity, making Byzantium the first great Christian empire; wealth accumulated through its territories and tax regimes and an active trade network led to a flourishing of the arts as churches and monasteries were built and handsomely decorated to advance the belief."*

— **Prince Charles of England, chief sponsor of the Byzantium exhibition**



Silver paten with the Communion of the Apostles, dating to 565-67, on loan from Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, D.C.

work. Some of the works have never before been displayed in public. Since many are fragile and difficult to transport, it's unlikely they will ever be displayed together again.

**Byzantium 330-1453**, made possible through collaboration between the Royal Academy of Arts and the Benaki Museum in Athens, which loaned about a quarter of the artifacts on display, also includes great works from the San Marco Treasury in Venice and St. Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai and rare items from collections across Europe, the United States, Russia, the

## BYZANTIUM 330-1453: ELEVEN CENTURIES OF CHRISTIAN ART

After my interview with Dom José Cardinal da Cruz Policarpo, the Patriarch of Lisbon, who has spoken of the importance of learning more about one's own religious faith by comparing it to others ("Of Books, Art, and People," *Inside the Vatican*, November 2008), I felt obliged to devote an essay to reviewing an exhibition which traces the history of the Eastern Church through its art.

In fact, the patrons and artists of the Eastern Church saw themselves as members of a Christian Roman Empire and believed that they represented the apogee of human civilization.

Through March 22, the British Royal Academy of Arts, located in Burlington House, on Piccadilly, in London, England, is hosting a ground-breaking exhibition devoted to Byzantium (open daily from 10 AM-6 PM; Fridays from 10 AM-10 PM).

"The term *Byzantine* has come to mean something tortuous — a rigid or labyrinthine process," writes Prince Charles, "and these negative connotations have, unjustly, tarnished an extraordinary culture that flourished over a thousand-year period..." Highlighting the splendors of the Byzantine Empire, this first major exhibition of Byzantine art in the United Kingdom in 50 years comprises over 340 objects including icons, liturgical manuscripts and their elaborately decorated covers, detached wall paintings, miniature mosaics, ivories, enamels, and jewelry, plus gold and silver metal-



Above, the "Chalice of the Patriarchs" with gemstones and pearls, by an unknown artist in the 10th or 11th century, from the Treasury of San Marco in Venice, Italy.

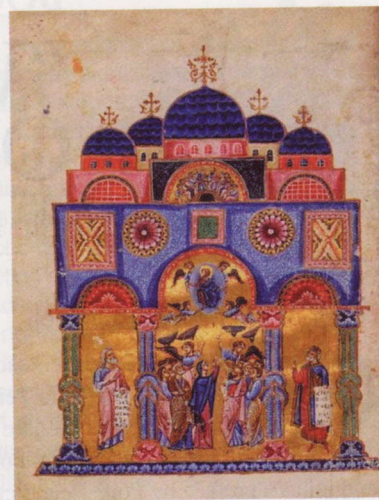
Below, the Khiludov Psalter, one of only three Byzantine psalters surviving from the 9th century and on loan from the State Historical Museum in Moscow



Ukraine, and Egypt. Surprisingly, however, there are none from Turkey, which had been willing to lend 17 artifacts from Istanbul's Archeology Museum and one from the Antalya Museum and is, of course, home to Byzantium, modern Istanbul. (Charles Saumarez Smith, chief executive of the Royal Academy since 2007, blames Turkish red tape and the exorbitant insurance costs Turkey set on these loans. Instead, the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism attributes the problem to the hostile "Greek lobby" of sponsors, not to mention that Greek Prime Minister Costas Karamanlis inaugurated the show. However, other failed negotiations for loans include only Greek institutions: the reclusive Greek Orthodox monastic community of Mount Athos and monasteries in Patmos and Meteora.)

In spite of these "misunderstandings" and disappointments, the magnificent artifacts here cover all c. 1,100 years of the empire, beginning with the foundation of Constantinople in 330 AD by the first Christian Roman Emperor, Constantine the Great, who believed that his hand was guided by God as he laid out the street plans of his new Christian city, and concluding with the capture of the city by the Ottoman forces of Sultan Mehmed II in 1453.

Among the oldest objects here are marbles on loan from the Cleveland Museum which date to the second half of the third century, and the "newest" is an icon of St. Theodore



From left, enamel icon of the Archangel Michael on loan from the Treasury of San Marco in Venice, Italy; silver, partially gilded incense-burner in the shape of a church, dating to the 10th or 11th century, by an unknown artist and on loan from the Treasury of San Marco in Venice, Italy; and a parchment illuminated page from the *Homilies of the Virgin Mary* by John Kokkinobaphos dating

from the first half of the 12th century, on loan from the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris. Below, a double-sided wooden processional cross, attributed to Giunta Pisano, dating from 1250 and on loan from Museo Nazionale di San Matteo in Pisa; bottom, mosaic icon of St. Stephen by an unknown artist dating from 1108-1113 and on loan from the National Conservation Area of St. Sophia in Kiev, Ukraine

Tero slaying the dragon, from the Byzantine and Christian Museum in Athens, dating to 1425-50 AD.

One of the aims of **Byzantium 330-1453** is certainly to show that this empire, a world power that stretched from Tripoli in Libya to St. Petersburg, was not in continual decline as Gibbon professed — indeed, quite the contrary.

Organized by themes displayed in chronological order, **Byzantium 330-1453** makes an effort to illustrate history through art, exploring the origins of Byzantium; the founding of Constantinople in 330 and its rise to prominence; two periods of iconoclastic threats when the emperors banned Christian figurative art; the post-iconoclast revival; and the remarkable crescendo of Byzantine art during the Middle Ages and its close connections with early Renaissance art in Italy during the 13th and 14th centuries.

The star items on display are the Antioch Chalice, 500-550 AD, on loan from the Cloisters of the Metropolitan Museum in New York, and the ornate Chalice of the Patriarchs, c. 10th-11th century, highlight of the several artifacts on loan from the Treasury of San Marco in Venice.

After its discovery in 1911, the silver gilt Antioch Chalice was believed to have been the Holy Grail, the cup used by Christ at the Last Supper, but today it is recognized as a 6th-century chalice or possibly a standing lamp whose exterior decoration is a visual representation of Christ's words: "I am the light of the world" (Gospel of St. John, Chapter 8, verse 12).



Other highlights include a 12th-century two-sided icon of the Virgin *Hodegetria* (literally, "she who shows the way") (obverse) and the Man of Sorrows (reverse) on loan from the Byzantine Museum in Kastoria; an impressive 10th-11th century ivory casket from Troyes Cathedral depicting hunting scenes and riders; jewelry from Cyprus' Lambousa Treasure, and several magnificent illuminated manuscripts: *The Trapezuntian Gospels*; *The Thei Gospels*; *The Khludov Psalter*, which dates to 857-865 AD and is one of only three Byzantine psalters to survive from the 9th century; and the *Homilies of Monk James Kokkinobaphos*, a manuscript dating from 1100-1150 AD, on loan from the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris.

**Byzantium 330-1453** continues the Royal Academy's tradition of hosting outstanding exhibitions exploring world cultures, which have included *Africa: The Art of a Continent* (1995), *Aztecs* (2002), *Turks: A Journey of a Thousand Years* (2005), and *China: The Three Emperors, 1662-1795* (2006).

For those readers of *Inside the Vatican* who cannot make the trip to London, the Royal Academy has published a magnificent and informative catalogue, which can be ordered directly from its website, [www.royalacademy.org.uk](http://www.royalacademy.org.uk).

Although it may seem expensive at 55 pounds for the hardcover and 27.95 pounds for the softcover, it's well worth the investment to include in any library, especially one specializing in Church history or the influence of Byzantine art on Christian and Islamic traditions. ○