



Art History

Art of Byzantium

Name:

Section:

Score: ____/5

Directions: Read the following article about art from Byzantium between the years 330-1453 and answer the thought questions at the end of the article.

Byzantium (ca. 330–1453)

In 330 A.D., the first Christian ruler of the Roman empire, Constantine the Great (r. 306–337), transferred the ancient imperial capital from Rome to the city of Byzantium located on the easternmost territory of the European continent, at a major intersection of east-west trade. The emperor renamed this ancient port city Constantinople ("the city of Constantine") in his own honor; it was also called the "New Rome," owing to the city's new status as political capital of the Roman empire. The Christian, ultimately Greek-speaking state ruled from that city would come to be called Byzantium by modern historians, although the empire's medieval citizens described themselves as "Rhomaioi," Romans, and considered themselves the inheritors of the ancient Roman empire.

The Beginning of Byzantium

The first golden age of the empire, the Early Byzantine period, extends from the founding of the new capital into the 700s. Christianity replaced the gods of antiquity as the official religion of the culturally and religiously diverse state in the late 300s. The practice of Christian monasticism developed in the fourth century, and continued to be an important part of the Byzantine faith, spreading from Egypt to all parts of the empire.

In the Early Byzantine period, Byzantium's educated elite used Roman law, and Greek and Roman culture, to maintain a highly organized government centered on the court and its great cities. In later decades, urban decline and the invasions of the empire's western territories by Germanic tribes, especially in the fifth century, led to the diminishment of western centers including Rome, sacked in 410 by the Goths and in 455 by the Vandals. Despite the territorial gains of the emperor Justinian I in the sixth century, many of the empire's Italian provinces were overtaken by Lombards in the late 500s. In the 600s, Persian and Arab invasions devastated much of Byzantium's eastern territories.

The artistic traditions of the wealthy state extended throughout the empire, including the southernmost provinces of Egypt and North Africa, which remained under Byzantine control until the Arab conquest of the region in the seventh century. The development of the codex, or bound manuscript, replacing the ancient scroll marked a major innovation in these first centuries. A number of deluxe, illustrated Early Byzantine manuscripts survive from the fourth to sixth centuries, including Old and New Testaments, editions of Virgil's Aeneid and Homer's Iliad, and medical treatises such as Dioscurides' *De materia medica*. In the portable arts, silver vessels and furnishings, both for secular and ecclesiastical use, survive in significant number for the early centuries, as do objects made of ivory, the tusk of the elephant. Extraordinary works were also created in glass for both secular and religious audiences, and utilitarian and non-utilitarian purposes. Over the course of the Early Byzantine period, production of sculpture in the round declined, marking a change from the ancient traditions of sculpting portrait busts and full-length statues to commemorate civic and religious figures. Relief carving in diverse media and the two-dimensional arts of painting and mosaic work were extremely popular in both secular and religious art.

Several shining examples of secular architecture survive from these early centuries, including vestiges of an atrium in the Great Palace in Constantinople, decorated with a lavish mosaic program representing daily life and



Pectoral Cross,
6th–7th century,
Byzantine, Gold

the riches of the empire. Also surviving from the capital are the remains of two aristocratic homes, the palaces of Antiochus and of Lausus. Other great ancient cities of the empire, including Antioch and Ephesos, also preserve remains from this secular building tradition. For ecclesiastical architecture in the early Byzantine period, domed churches, the most important being Constantinople's Church of Hagia Sophia, and other domed sacred buildings began to appear in greater number alongside traditional basilica forms, first seen in the large-scale churches sponsored by Emperor Constantine I in the early fourth century. In the 700s and early 800s, the Iconoclastic controversy raged over the proper use of religious images, resulting in the destruction of icons in all media, especially in the capital of Constantinople.



Hagia Sophia, Constantinople, 532–37, view of eastern facade

Middle Byzantium

The resolution of the Iconoclastic controversy in favor of the use of icons ushered in a second flowering of the empire, the Middle Byzantine period (843–1204). Greek became the official language of the Byzantine state and church, and Christianity spread from Constantinople throughout the Slavic lands to the north. Efforts to recover eastern territories lost to Arab armies in the seventh century, including Syria and Crete, met with some success early in the period. The Byzantine system of military governorship over themes (administrative divisions), existing from the seventh to twelfth centuries, provided administration for the state's distant and expanding territories.

Art and architecture flourished during the Middle Byzantine period, owing to the empire's growing wealth and broad base of affluent patrons. Manuscript production reached an apogee, as did works in cloisonné enamel and stone and ivory carving. An intensified revival of interest in classical art forms and ancient literature reflected Byzantium's continuous and active engagement with its ancient past throughout the empire's long history.



Medallion with Christ from an Icon Frame, ca. 1100, Byzantine; From the Djumati Monastery, Georgia

Church builders of the ninth to twelfth centuries in general favored smaller or mid-sized churches of domed, centrally planned design, with the "cross-in-square plan" emerging as one of the most popular. Several supports for processional crosses take the form of such church designs. The mosaic and fresco programs decorating the vaulted and domed spaces of these buildings often utilized their curved surfaces for dramatic effect or to complement narrative. Such monumental decoration reveals a careful consideration of how images would relate and respond to one another across space, both vertically and horizontally. During the Middle Byzantine period, figural images and especially icons were increasingly employed for the decoration of the templon, or eastern sanctuary barrier of the Byzantine church, and its adjacent wall spaces. The first great monasteries were built on Mount Athos (Greece), which would become one of the most important and enduring centers of Byzantine Christianity.

Little survives of the rich history of secular building from this period. Literary sources record new building and restoration of the Great Palace in Constantinople, as well as the foundation of new imperial and aristocratic buildings throughout the imperial city. Written accounts suggest that Islamic court culture and palace design had an important influence on aspects of Byzantine secular building. Monuments in this tradition include the "Mouchroutas" palace structure of the Great Palace, which was adorned with muqarnas or stalactite decoration; the Bryas palace of Emperor Theophilos (r. 829–42); and numerous noble mansions in the empire's eastern province of Cappadocia.

The Period of the Latin Occupation

In 1204, armies of the Fourth Crusade invaded from western Europe, conquering the ancient Byzantine imperial capital and founding the "Latin Empire of Constantinople," while other imperial territories also fell to Crusader rule. The Crusader state in Constantinople was one of several in the thirteenth-century Levant, all under the spiritual authority of the pope as head of the Latin Church of Western Europe. This Crusader state lasted from 1204 until 1261, when Byzantine rule was reestablished in Constantinople and limited portions of the former Byzantine empire were also retaken.

The Latin Occupation of 1204–61 had a profound effect on the empire and the Byzantine peoples, causing major political fragmentation as well as the dislocation of Byzantine populations, especially the empire's nobility and ruling classes. New political capitals and Byzantine states "in exile" with competing rulers were founded on the periphery of the empire's former borders: in the west, in Arta, capital of the Despotate of Epirus; in the east, at Trebizond, capital of the Empire of Trebizond on the Black Sea; and at Nicaea, capital of the Kingdom of Nicaea, located in western Asia Minor bordering the Latin Empire in Constantinople on its eastern periphery. This last Byzantine state at Nicaea was to lead the expulsion of the Latins from Constantinople in 1261 and the reestablishment of Byzantine rule over the imperial city in the name of a new reigning dynasty, the Palaiologoi.

A number of impressive Byzantine architectural projects and outstanding artistic monuments survived the travails of the Latin Occupation. Some of these take their inspiration, at least in part, from designs and artistic styles popular under the Komnenoi, the last reigning dynasty before the Latin conquest. In other instances, there is a fascinating fusion of Byzantine and western European elements in a single monument.

Late Byzantium

While the political boundaries of Late Byzantium under the Palaiologan emperors were drastically reduced from the expansive lands of the Early and Middle Byzantine periods, Byzantine religious influence still extended far beyond its borders. The focus of Byzantine power was now centered in Constantinople, and extended westward to northern and central Greece, and south into the Peloponnesos. In the east, the Byzantine Empire of Trebizond, which had flourished during the Latin Occupation, continued to exist as an independently ruled Byzantine territory in competition with the Palaiologan-ruled empire with its capital at Constantinople. The last Byzantine lands would be conquered by the Ottoman Turks in the mid-fifteenth century, with Constantinople taken in 1453, and Mistra and Trebizond in 1460. These Islamic conquests brought an end to an empire that endured more than 1,100 years after its first founding. Long after its fall, Byzantium set a standard for luxury, beauty, and learning that inspired the Latin West and the Islamic East.

Art and architecture flourished for significant periods in the Late Byzantine centuries. This stands in surprising contrast to the desperate military and political circumstances endured by Byzantine rulers. Despite shrinking funds for support of the arts, patrons of all social levels founded new buildings and renovated older structures damaged or neglected during the Latin Occupation. These buildings were decorated with new monumental programs, icons, and church furnishings. Hagia Sophia in Constantinople was one important church that was repaired and its decoration embellished by the Palaiologan emperors. Monasteries, in particular, including the surviving Chora Monastery in Constantinople, were the beneficiaries of this enduring interest in architectural and artistic patronage. In the portable arts, devotional works of art, including icons for private devotion, continued to be made, albeit in more economical materials, with the lesser metals replacing gold, silver, and fine cloisonné enamel once popular in Middle Byzantine art. The medium of the miniature mosaic icon enjoyed particular popularity during the Late Byzantine centuries, with their brilliant surfaces and illusion of luxury formed from more modest materials such as colored stone, semiprecious gems, and glass embedded in wax or resin on a wooden support.

Thought Questions:

1. What type of Art characterizes the Beginning period of Byzantium?
2. What type of Art characterizes the Middle period of Byzantium?
3. What type of Art characterizes the Latin period of Byzantium?
4. What type of Art characterizes the late period of Byzantium?