

# DUMBARTON OAKS

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## ***Lasting Impressions Reveals Stories and Histories from the Byzantine Empire***

Drawn from the world's largest collection of Byzantine seals, this exhibition takes viewers on a journey into the medieval world

Dumbarton Oaks Museum  
November 23, 2021–November 2022

WASHINGTON — For over 1,100 years, Byzantines from every walk of life used seals to guard and authenticate valuables and as a means of identifying themselves and presenting their credentials to the world. [\*\*\*Lasting Impressions\*\*\*](#), on view at the **Dumbarton Oaks Museum from November 23, 2021, through November 2022**, explores individual stories and family histories, the concept of status, developments in popular piety, and the inner workings of the state as shown through the intricate impressions on seals.

This exhibition, curated by [\*\*Jonathan Shea\*\*](#), Associate Curator of Coins and Seals, demonstrates that each seal is more than just a record of now-lost communications, documents, or actions—it is the record of a person, and one usually not known from any other source. Seals are decorated with a great variety of religious and secular imagery and intricate inscriptions. Together text and image acted as personal statements of status, position, family, education, and piety. Whether to make their owner stand out, fit in, or both, the images used on seals were an important part of projecting self-identity. Each seal is a testament to someone living in the Byzantine Empire and no other single source provides so much information about such a broad range of individual Byzantines.

“In the small space available on a seal—a single image and half a tweet—the Byzantines had to communicate everything that they felt mattered about themselves. They are wonderful expressions of how Byzantines from all parts of society interacted with one another and viewed themselves and their world. Because seals were used by such a broad swathe of Byzantines from across the entire span of the empire’s history, they offer a unique insight into Byzantium, its people, culture, art, and faith.”

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From the gold seals that were attached only to the most prestigious imperial documents and communications to the lead seals of merchants, craftsmen, and bathhouse attendants, Dumbarton Oaks is home to 17,000 Byzantine seals, the largest collection in the world. Since the arrival of the first seals at Dumbarton Oaks in 1947, five generations of scholars have worked to understand and catalogue these objects and apply the data gained to enhance our understanding of the Byzantine Empire. Seal designs were not static over Byzantium's long history. *Lasting Impressions* leads audiences through the evolving iconography and inscriptions on seals, highlighting changing devotional practices, cultural shifts, and revealing the mechanics of the imperial state.

For those who cannot make it to see *Lasting Impressions* in person, they can traverse Byzantine history through the seals in our [online catalogue](#).

## ABOUT DUMBARTON OAKS

Dumbarton Oaks is a Harvard research institute, library, museum, and historic garden located in Washington, DC. The institution emerged thanks to the imagination and legacy of Robert and Mildred Woods Bliss, collectors of art and patrons of the humanities. The museum houses world-class galleries of Byzantine and Pre-Columbian art, two areas of interest to the Blisses. A third collection of a different sort exists in the historic garden, which Mildred Bliss created in close collaboration with renowned landscape designer Beatrix Farrand. The garden provides a resource for Garden and Landscape Studies. Since 1940, when the Blisses gifted the estate and collections to Harvard University, Dumbarton Oaks has supported the advance of knowledge in the three areas of Byzantine, Pre-Columbian, and Garden and Landscape Studies through a fellowship program and other awards; scholarly conferences; publications; and digital initiatives. In recent years, Dumbarton Oaks has extended its service to the community, already evident in the museum, garden, and public events, by developing collection-based educational programs for DC students.

The founders, Robert Woods Bliss and Mildred Barnes Bliss, called upon future policy-makers “to remember that Dumbarton Oaks is conceived in a new pattern, where quality and not number shall determine the choice of its scholars; that it is the home of the Humanities, not a mere aggregation of books and objects of art; that the house itself and the gardens have their educational importance and that all are of humanistic value.” These ambitions continue to guide Dumbarton Oaks, but with close attention to ensuring that the Blisses’ “new pattern” retains its vitality through constant renewal.

The research institute's location in Washington, DC, is no accident. Robert Bliss was a diplomat who enjoyed a distinguished career in the Foreign Service and eventually served as Ambassador to Argentina. Dumbarton Oaks is known for hosting the Dumbarton Oaks Conversations, a series of important diplomatic meetings in 1944, at the height of the Second World War, whose outcome was the United Nations charter that was adopted in San Francisco in 1945. At these

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meetings, delegations from China, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States deliberated over proposals for the establishment of an organization to maintain peace and security in the world.

The historic garden and museum are the public face of Dumbarton Oaks and receive thousands of visitors each year. The garden is perhaps the last remaining landscape in North America that hews closely to the original Farrand design; it was voted by National Geographic one of the ten best gardens in the world. Buildings of architectural importance on the Dumbarton Oaks campus are the Pre-Columbian Pavilion, the museum wing housing the Pre-Columbian Collections, designed by Philip Johnson and completed in 1963, and the research Library designed by Venturi, Scott, Brown and completed in 2007.

Learn more at [www.doaks.org](http://www.doaks.org).