**Byzantine Studies at Dumbarton Oaks**

A. M. Friend, Jr.

Saturday April 26, 1947

In 1940, together with the Collection of Objects of Art about which you heard yesterday, Mr. and Mrs. Bliss gave also the excellent research library which now occupies all the second floor of this beautiful house.

As it was said with grace and succinctness on the day of the dedica­tion – the Collection was to illustrate the books and the library was to interpret the objects. The conception, then, was unified and the focus of studies at Dumbarton Oaks began in the Arts. There is every reason to believe that this center of learning which now is part of Harvard Univer­sity will have a wholesome regard for its first beginnings, and that how­ever wide the scope of the studies may come to be, there in the midst of them will be the visual Arts.

The earliest of the projects in the Arts undertaken at Dumbarton Oaks has already born useful fruit. This is the census of Early Christian, Byzantine and related objects in American Collections – a catalogue which was of the greatest assistance in assembling the myriad of objects in the magnificent Exhibition of Early Christian and Byzantine Art we have seen at the Balti­more Museum.

The war in Europe had of course made it impossible to inaugurate or develop any of the projects of study that require a first-hand acquaintance with works of art besides those which were in this country – so the scholars at Dumbarton Oaks had perforce to construct their research more completely out of the books in the excellent library.

Two projects were devised, well and ingeniously, to make the most out of this limiting situation:

One, called the Research Archives, sought to collect in a systematic way and to record in a uniform manner all the published data concerning the monumental remains of Byzantine and Early Christian architecture and its decoration in sculpture, mosaic and fresco.

The other, called the Fontes, excerpted from the literary sources, from the historians, Church fathers, lives of the saints, etc., all passages which referred to works of art and architecture. It tries, with the use of more modern and newly discovered texts, to do more com­pletely and systematically what Unger and Jean Paul Richter inaugurated so many years ago.

These projects, which could be managed with a changing personnel, are actually tools of research and as such have their continuing value in Dumbarton Oaks.

At the same time there was added to the resources for research a copy of one of the most magnificent of the aids to scholarship in the Art of the Middle Ages, the Index of Christian Iconography which had been developed over many years in Princeton University whose bicenten­nial we have been helping to celebrate.

By 1942 the United States was completely engulfed in the great struggle. One by one the more mature scholars departed for various kinds of war activity and there ensued for Byzantine studies at Dumbar­ton Oaks the dark night of the soul. Yet even so, throughout the war, by reason of the devoted assistance of the members of the Board of Scholars and the help of Byzantine scholars from sister institutions, the continuity of the work in Dumbarton Oaks was never interrupted.

Indeed it was during this very period of enforced retardation that the plans for the more permanent foundation of the research structure were set out, and some progress was made to bring into being studies of larger scope and more enduring value which could eventuate in publication after the war.

The period of collecting, recording and the making of tools of research as the main occupation of the scholars, enforced as it was by both the war and the youth of the Institution, was plainly over and the time ripe to assume an honorable position in scholarship by means of significant publications.

In order to do this Dumbarton Oaks was made an integral part of the academic structure of Harvard University and the scholars were given academic ranks from Professor to Instructor exactly as in Cam­bridge. A few Junior Fellowships were continued for the training of younger men and women in Byzantine studies.

A still more important development is, that, while the field of research is kept to the period from Constantine the Great to the Fall of Constantinople in 1453 and, in general, to the lands of the Eastern Roman Empire, the basis of studies has been broadened to include History and Law, Theology and Liturgy, Philosophy and Science, as well as the Arts – in short it includes all the Byzantine Humanities as was intended by the deed of gift recorded on the tablet affixed to this building.

Given the amazingly coherent and conservative nature of Byzantine Civilization, qualities which gave it stability and vitality, this could hardly be otherwise. Actually to accomplish any creative scholarship in Byzantine studies or to understand fully the underlying powers which are expressed in this culture requires a profound knowledge of all the human­ities. No narrow specialization or preoccupation has been or will be adequate.

So therefore the band of scholars now gathered together at Dumbarton Oaks includes those whose chief field is in history, or in theology, or in literature, on an equal footing with the historians of Art and Architecture. Visiting professors and scholars in all the fields of Byzantine studies have been or will be invited to Dumbarton Oaks for terms of varying lengths depending upon their desire and ability to get leaves from their original institutions.

In this way the studies, in whatever subject, come to publi­cation in a milieu nourished by the presence and criticism of scholars in the different branches of the humanities and with a richness and temperateness that only those who are at home in several disciplines can achieve.

----------

Yet in Dumbarton Oaks the focus, as I have said, has been on scholarship in the Fine Arts. The two projects in cooperative re­search most recently inaugurated are in architecture. Started in war time, they have to do with churches which were so completely de­stroyed in the middle ages that the first hand investigation of the sites, impossible under present conditions, would play but a secondary part in their restoration.

The churches are famous ones in Jerusalem and Constantinople.

The one, the Church of Sion, the mother of all the churches, is the martyrion of the upper chamber of Pentecost. The other is the church of the Holy Apostles where were buried the Byzantine Emperors from Constantine on in order to be near the bodies of the Apostles Andrew, Luke and Timothy.

These buildings can be restored only from their copies in archi­tecture, from texts and literary descriptions and from the copies of their famous mosaics preserved in the miniatures of ancient manuscripts. I mention these two projects of research only to illustrate the necessity of a center for scholarly cooperation, such as Dumbarton Oaks.

What is required for them is not only a knowledge of Art and Archi­tecture but also expert and critical competence in the fields of history, theology and texts and literature – more than can be de­manded of any one man.

The scholar in Art and Architecture in all periods of history has need of cooperation with those competent in other fields but this is particularly true in the Early Christian and Byzantine centuries when the meaning of works of art is so central to their artistic signifi­cance and when the remains of even the greatest monuments are so frag­mentary, so few, and so confusing.

Likewise, for similar reasons, the historian, the theologian and the liturgiologist have need of the Arts which can supply them with a synthesis and epitome at once visual and compelling so that the haze of centuries and the prejudices of a different civilization can be swept away by the immediate power of a great work of Art. The effect of Aya Sophia upon all beholders is only the greatest example of the peculiar presence that Byzantine art exerts even down to the smallest ivory or the tiniest enamel.

But historians have not always been so sensible of this. He who wrote the greatest history of Byzantium in our language, a splendid ex­ample and classic of English prose, and himself compared with Tacitus and Thucydides, was equally insensible to Art and to religion. Indeed he has a definite prejudice against both – a fact which vitiated his understanding of a civilization in which these elements taken together may be said to be the very core. Gibbon’s prejudice concerning the Christian religion has often been commented upon. I supply an ex­ample of his prejudice concerning Art, and also of his elegant prose.

Referring to the Emperor Theodosius the Second, upon whom, as upon other Emperors he did not like, he pours out his irony and scorn, he has this to say:

The ample leisure which he acquired by neglecting the essential duties of his high office was filled by idle amusements and unprofitable studies. Hunting was the only active pursuit that could tempt him be­yond the limits of the palace; but he most assiduously labored, sometimes by the light of a midnight lamp, in the mechanic occupations of painting and carving; and the elegance with which he transcribed religious books entitled the Roman Emperor to the singular epithet of Calligraphes, or a fair writer.

However, we can hardly blame Gibbon for any insensitivity to the great or fine monuments of Byzantine Art since he could have seen but very few. The collections in museums did not exist and neglect or white­wash covered the great cycles of the monumental mosaics. The miniatures in the precious manuscripts were hidden away in the volumes of religious texts and were of interest to the ecclesiastic or to the antiquarian who busied himself with examples of this minor and mechanic illustration. Only the great church of Aya Sophia charmed the traveller by the majesty of its space and the beauty of its proportions into an enthusiastic ap­preciation of a great work of Art.

The interest in early Christian and Byzantine Art was largely con­fined to the church antiquarian and to the historian who saw in the monu­ments examples wherewith to illustrate religious or political history. The works of art were secondary historical documents. Historical documents they certainly are, but no artist ever created them for the purpose of illustrating history.

It was not until the 19th century that Early Christian and Mediaeval Arts were thought of as having an internal and independent history of their own. Classical art had long since had its Winckelmann and much earlier still, the art of the Italian Renaissance started its history with Vasari who had set the stigma of primitive on the Byzantine art which preceded Cimabue and Giotto.

The idea, that the Arts have their own development, resulted al­ways in an intense interest in the peculiar qualities of art itself. On the one hand the history of Art became the history of the develop­ment of styles. The work of art was an illustration of the particular phase of a style – of a period or of a single artist. Aside from the fact that no true artist has created a work of art merely to illustrate a style, this limited point of view of the art historians has not had a too successful issue in dealing with Early Christian and Byzantine art. The remains of the first are too scanty and too widely distributed in provenance to allow as yet the demonstration of a cohesive, stylistic development. Byzantine art is too conservative, and with its tendency to copy and preserve the works of the past, it, like Chinese art, puts an unbearable strain upon sheer stylistic criticism.

This conservative nature of Byzantine art and its effect upon stylis­tic criticism can be illustrated by the difficulties of the Vatican editors in their magnificent publication of the Menologium of the Emperor Basil the Second. The many beautiful miniatures of this volume were painted by eight separate artists. Each signed his name in the margins of the pictures he had painted. If the work of any one artist is taken together it is seen that he painted in several very different styles. But if the miniatures are grouped according to types of subject matter, that is, all the prophet pictures together, or all the New Testament ones, then each group exhibits a homogeneous style regardless of the artists who severally did the pictures. In Byzantine art the style of the type and prototype takes precedence over the idiosyncrasies of the period or of the individual artist.

The essential nature of Byzantine Art lies in the creation and preservation of iconographic types into which the meaning and style of the original conception has been infused and by means of which these qualities are condensed to be transmitted to later times. This explains the remarkable and peculiar continuity of Byzantine Art in which the iconographic meaning and the artistic style are so interpenetrated that neither can be fruitfully studied without an understanding of the other.

It is to the Russian historians of Byzantine Art – Kondakov, Pokrovski, Ainalov, Smirnov – that we owe the fullest appreciation of the fundamental nature of the iconographical and typical point of view. Kondakov's book “The History of Byzantine Art and Iconography according to Miniatures of Greek Manuscripts” published in 1876 and again (in French) in 1886–91, was a remarkable achievement and is still a living and fruitful contribu­tion. By basing his book upon the miniatures in manuscripts he came as close as may be to origins of iconography. And by the arrangement of his material in categories of texts he showed his appreciation of the importance of the development of types. Kondakov more than anyone else, so it seems to me, laid a new and sure foundation for the history of East Christian Art.

Not less important, though less well known, is Ainalov's "The Hellenistic Origin of Byzantine Art" published in 1900. It is a mis­fortune in the history of scholarship that this book was never trans­lated from the Russian. His treatment of style and iconography in the monuments of Early Christian Art deserved a wider influence than it exerted, except in Russia, and would have prevented by its exactitude of method and its grasp of the origins of style and types the acceptance of the vagaries, of scholars much better known than he.

----------

The reason, as I see it, of the early preeminence of the Russian scholars in the history of Byzantine Art, and of their understanding of its basic nature, is their innate conception of a work of Art as an icon.

In this sense the work of art is not merely a document which illustrates a phase of political or cultural history, nor is it only an example in the develop­ment of style, nor indeed simply an iconographical subject invented to illustrate a text or idea. The icon is a type in which is concentrated and epitomized a transcendental, eternal and religious meaning. It is not an illustration but stands in place of the prototype itself, as John of Damascus tells us – not an illustration then in the oblique sense of a reference but the immediate presence of the sacred subject portrayed.

Thus we can understand the veneration of the images in the Eastern Church, and the importance and the poignancy of the iconoclastic contro­versy. Nor ought we to be surprised when miracles are attributed to the sacred icons.

From the artistic point of view it was the final fulfillment of the peculiar essence of Byzantine Art, with its preoccupation in iconography and types, to evolve the icon. Only this art seems to have had the power to refine a type and to condense the full significance of religious meaning so that this content shines through to the beholder as an immediate experience. The type whether set forth in a monumental mosaic or in the tiniest enamel, coin or ivory impresses us with an equal authority. This singular fact shows clearly that in Byzantine Art it is the inner sig­nificance of the types and not the more superficial beauties of scale, style and color or the ingenuities of the iconography which in the end compels our admiration. The work does not have to be big to be monu­mental nor, if it be at large scale, is there any loss of the personal presence of the icon. One can rightly say that in the icon the eternal and the temporal are fused together in a work of Art, itself a symbol of the Incarnation.

The number of particular types finally raised to this pitch of power is, even in Byzantine Art, relatively few. Yet once we come into the presence of one of them there can be no mistaking the awe which it excites. The experience can be had in this very building. In the Museum is a full size reproduction of the mosaic over the royal doors of the narthex of Aya Sophia. It represents the Emperor Basil I who prostrates himself in adoration before a most remarkable representation of the en­throned Christ. The grave majesty of the sacred face, the frontality and timelessness of the pose and the authoritative presence of the whole figure tell us immediately that this type of Christ is a powerful and famous icon, and that we together with the Emperor should be in reverence before it.

This image of Christ was well known to the Byzantine Emperors, The mosaic in Aya Sophia is but a copy or representation of the great mosaic image of the enthroned Christ which occupied the conch of the apse over the imperial throne in the Chrysotriclinium of the sacred palace. According to the book of ceremonies the Emperor never left nor returned to the palace without making his prostrations to this mosaic icon.

As it stood over the imperial throne the icon of the enthroned Christ gave the warrant of the authority of the Byzantine Emperor and the King of Kings was present over the seat of the Basileus.

This icon was not only copied in the narthex of Aya Sophia but appears also as the reverse on the Imperial coinage. Here the type has preserved in latin the title by which it was known, IESUS CHRISTOS REX HEGNANTIUM – Jesus Christ the King of those who rule – a reference to the original meaning of the icon placed as it was over the imperial throne.

This epithet for the Savior, derived from the 6th chapter of the first letter of St. Paul to Timothy, has a further connotation. It was used in one version of the famous cherubic hymn sung at the Great En­trance in the Byzantine liturgy. In this procession of the holy gifts, Christ as the King of Kings is described as if present, surrounded by the court of heaven and the body guard of the angels. In Aya Sophia during the imperial liturgy the procession of the Great Entrance was joined in the very center of the church by another procession of the Emperor surrounded by his court and the spear-bearing guards. Here the Byzantine Emperor met the King of Kings and accompanied Him to the sanctuary. Directly above, in a medallion of mosaic at the apex of the great dome, was figured a copy of our famous icon so that the enthroned Christ was seen presiding over all.

This icon of the rex regnantium invented for the mosaic over the throne in the palace existed before Iconoclasm as we know from two epigrams in the Greek Anthology which record its restoration and from the copy on the coins of Justinian II wherein in a tiny medallion is preserved not only the type and the title but something of the majesty and beauty of the great original. In the course of its long history this image was always par excellence the icon of the imperial power. To its divine prototype alone the Byzan­tine autocrat acknowledged his responsibility. And he confessed his humility by his prostration before the work of art.

----------

By the short study of this particular icon I wish to show that Byzantine Art in a peculiar way is part and parcel of the History of the Byzantine Empire. The official art of the Roman Emperors, so useful for political purposes, becomes in the hand of the Christian Augusti a not less powerful instrument of persuasion and authority.

I have insisted upon the general iconic significance inherent in Byzantine Art because it was just this that placed the Arts in the very center of theological controversy and religious development. Again Byzantine Art by this same iconic quality became a very vital part of liturgical expression.

So in Dumbarton Oaks where the studies in all the Byzantine human­ities have or will have their place, the Arts will continue to be in the midst since by their inherent nature they are a peculiar and author­itative expression of all the rest.