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## The Lost Millennium

By Stanley Casson

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It is barely a generation since John Addington Symonds estimated the importance of Byzantine art in the following trenchant sentence: 'The so-called Romanesque and Byzantine styles were but the dotage of a second childhood fumbling with the methods and materials of an irrecoverable past.' That, indeed, was all he had to say on the subject. Dismissing its effete inspiration with the winged words and a distant roll of drums, he went on to consider the beauties of the Renaissance. And what he said has been said again and again by hundreds of honest folk.

I always knew that he was wrong; but life is short, and to explain to the deliberately unreceptive or to the devotedly prejudiced is all so much good time wasted. I have spent it instead scouring the museums of Europe for those precious relics of Byzantine art which he never troubled to look for; I have been to the great citadel itself, Byzantium the golden, and patiently searched for its hundred churches, content with a miraculously saved mosaic here or a lovely carved capital there. And I have been privileged to be the first infidel to excavate the soil of Stamboul itself, under the very shadow of St. Sophia, to find what I could of the broken fragments of those glowing centuries of Byzantine splendor. And it is all a heart-rending job. For the very thought that a thousand years of art have left hardly enough behind them to fill one museum is grim testimony to the destructive power of that barbarous virility which replaced the ancient stronghold of Constantinople with the warring states of Western Europe.

But when one has found the actualities of Byzantine art, the marvels of those fragile and intimate churches of Byzantium, the austere grace of her paintings, and the incredible delicacy of her jewelry, one is fortified against the vandal criticism of an Italomaniac. But — and this is the mistake that so many of the now more vocal defenders of Byzantine art make — defense is not here to be based on offense. To reinstate Byzantine art as the princess among the great periods that she deserves to be, one need take no other style of art into consideration. The claims of Byzantium are not made more strong by a denigration of Italy, of Persia, or of Islam. That is but to revive the disputes of old religions, to treat art as politics, to prostitute the compelling loveliness of a forgotten world. We can for once take the taste of our medieval ancestors as our guide; for they, illumined by their own achievements in Gothic or Romanesque or even early Renaissance, still searched and searched again for those priceless gems of Byzantine art which might come their way as imperial gifts, as Crusaders' loot, or as genuine purchase.

Such relics as these have now been brought together from the museums and the cathedrals of Europe into an exhibition of Byzantine art just opened in Paris—the very first of its kind. Without the predatory taste for the Byzantine which the western Barbarians of the Middle Ages possessed in so marked a quality, I doubt if this exhibition would ever have been held. For, as one of its organizers has rightly said: 'Our ancestors never missed an opportunity of acquiring an example of Byzantine art; and we can see that they were not mistaken in their choice.' *Hommage aux barbares*.

Seeing this exhibition as I have just done, I am fortified anew. For here, now that they are all brought together, the exquisite jewels of Byzantine taste recapture for a passing second the warmth and splendor of the most luxurious and exquisite period of history the world has ever seen. An hour in these quiet rooms in Paris, where so much is collected, and all the sour wit of Gibbon is sweetened. Here is no Decline and Fall; here is the very birth and flowering of a new and gracious and intimate art such as the world has never seen. Indeed, comparisons cannot be made. Byzantine art seems almost to have sprung fully armed from the head of Zeus. For it is Greek in its reserve, Greek in its decision, and Greek in its delicacy; and yet it owes no sort or kind of debt to Greek art at all. It is the Greek spirit working in a new way. It is—or at least Byzantine art of the tenth century is—a completely new contribution to that never-ceasing creative spirit which we call the art of this, that, or the other period.

What struck me here, as indeed it has always struck me in the contemplation of any masterpiece of Byzantine art, though never so forcibly before, is that the Byzantine artist is a master of whatever branch of art he adopts. He, like his ancient Greek progenitor, made into a work of art whatever he handled, so that the distinction into 'arts and crafts' becomes meaningless. To-day we live in a snobbish age, an age when artists are often the worst snobs of all. To them the 'crafts' or the 'minor arts' form a branch of the lower orders of creative inspiration to which they will not sink. As a result, industry has captured them and left the poor artist to earn a precarious livelihood with his 'easel pictures,' his statues, and his masterpieces. And precarious it is, for there are but few people who will buy them, while the whole world is waiting for art to be employed in the things of daily life or in the smaller adornments that give us a portable and more convenient form of expressing our artistic appreciation. Still, if the artists are determined to starve, that is no concern of mine.

Abolish this distinction of arts and crafts and the artist can be active wherever he wishes. And at Byzantium that is exactly what he did. Nothing was too small or too large for him. The same man could carve the lovely marble Madonna relief, eight feet high, that was found a few years ago below the old Palace of the Sultans at Stamboul, and with equal joy a small ivory box a few inches square. The painter of pictures could turn his hand to a small mosaic icon half a foot in length. The sculptor could cut gems and the architect make an inlaid pavement.

How far we are today from this creative freedom! What open snobs we have all become!

Seeing so much Byzantine art gathered in one place, I have gained certain impressions that I have never been able to arrive at before. For seeing the art of a thousand years piecemeal is an exercise in disjunctive absorption that only a fine synthetic brain can master. And I regret that I have a brain that is neither fine nor synthesizing.

I was struck first by the intimacy of Byzantine art. Just as its small and colored churches would warm the heart of the frostiest of worshipers, so its jewels and paintings and silks and ivories demand an instant attention from the most casual and convey an impression of immediate beauty to the most reserved mind. Like all great art, it needs no explanation: it arrives. But to one prepossessed by theories or prejudices it will fail to convey anything. Approach it simply and its answer will be simple.

Firstly its colors. The Byzantines were a subtle folk. They avoided the primary colors like the plague and they avoided subtle nuances as much. They were masters of *selection*. And they selected color in everything. In gems they were austere in their choice. Not a ruby or an emerald or a diamond will you see. They chose above all pale liquid blues-sapphirines and aquamarines. They seem to have had a passion for that strange sea blue that the ancient Greeks strove so often to describe. I have never seen any Byzantine jewel made of carnelian, or of amber, or of topaz. I think they thought such colors slightly vulgar, fit only for barbarians. But both in this exhibition and in all the museums and collections I have ever seen, two stones and two only are predominant - the sea-blue sapphire and dark green bloodstone, spotted with red. Here and there deep lapis lazuli or amethyst is used, but not often.

These same colors appear again and again in their paintings and mosaics. There is one painting in this exhibition of the Christ on the Cross, sent from Athens. Below the Cross is Mary mourning. Her tall, strange figure, as far removed from the manner of Italian art as Rubens from Cimabue, is of one color only, a dark and enraptured sea blue. And the rest of the picture is painted on a gold ground, glittering and vivid. The figure of Mary is the figure of Sorrow herself, unmoving, remote, inhuman. There is no appeal here, in the sense that emotion rushes to one's mind; this is the very transcendence of grief. Byzantine art is often called intellectual and inhuman, but here it seems far more human than emotional art in that its meaning cuts straight through the heavings of emotion and conveys the very Platonic Idea itself. *Surréalisme* if you will - immediate contact with the artist's mind. And all this is achieved by a strange color and a strange form. Art critics may rage, but it is formalism blending with realism.

Perhaps in Byzantine silks and tissues the blend of form and color is even more amazing. Think of a silk

on which are lions and stags, odd and heraldic, and the only colors dark royal blue, turquoise, and two shades of cream. Or another in orange, tomato red, and white; or a third in blue, black, and purple—all alike in great lozenge designs with griffins and elephants and lions. Together these superb silks bring the court of Byzantium before my eyes — that court which lives in the pages of Anna Comnena or in the dry manual *De Cerimoniis* of Constantine Porphyrogenitus.

Next, what impressed me most was the calm impersonality of Byzantine art in the sense that the personality of the maker himself is imperceptible. You can tell the difference between the good and the brilliant, between the able and the slick, between the firm hand and the weak. But there is no nonsense about detecting the sensitivity of the artist. All one can detect is his immense preoccupation with his task, his utter devotion to what he has to do, and his absolute integrity in doing it. Here is no artist who wants to convey his own character and ideas to you. Instead, he is the essential Greek, aiming at what all artists of genius always aim at—a complete satisfaction of their artistic intentions, no more. So worked the archaic Greeks, with never a thought for glory or recognition. That is why they hardly ever signed their works in archaic Greece and why the Byzantines never signed their work at all. You may search for signatures and all the fun that such things provide for the art critic, and at Byzantium you will search in vain. Romans signed their statues and their gems frequently enough. Romanesque and Gothic Frenchmen and Germans signed their statues as often as they could—Byzantines never. Byzantine artists spoke, in all probability, of the 'glory of God,' but I doubt if it worried them much! They carved or painted or wove because they loved to do so and because it was their proper profession. That is what I mean by integrity. Contrast it with the progression of the modern painter who starts signing his pictures as 'William Henry Smith,' later, perhaps, becomes better known as 'Henry Smith,' and in the full flush of glory ends up as SMITH, crudely daubed in a corner in an affected scrawl that all good critics recognize! Or, as with Whistler, the affectation can be even more advanced and he can dispense with a signature and merely paint a butterfly on the frame!

All this hocus-pocus is alien to a period when art forms part of the life of the time and artists are not segregated. Byzantines achieved a style that diverged but seldom into individual variations. The style was forged by generations of men of integrity and, once forged and refined, existed as a supreme standard to which men had to attain to be artists. As they attained it they altered it insensibly, and as time when on it changed in their hands as a world will swing inevitably on its axis away from or forward to the sun.

One can just detect the alternations of season, as it were, in the march of artistic production in Byzantium. In the fourth century you can see Roman art suddenly fade and die, to be replaced by a superb formalism, derived, I think, from those strange Syrian folk whose work we see at Palmyra; then for a century all was cold again and nothing stirred. With the building of St. Sophia came a second blaze of skill and genius, to be extinguished almost at once by the fearful assaults of external enemies and the withering blight of Iconoclasm. But the sun rose once more in the eighth and ninth centuries, and by the tenth Byzantine art touched heights of splendor that were never surpassed. The eleventh century and the twelfth saw the Empire a paradise for art and a blaze of wealth that poured in from all four quarters of the earth. Then in 1204, came the Crusaders and the envious Italians from Venice, with that archbrigand Enrico Dandolo. The Empire crashed, and her gold and jewels and paintings were scattered and burned and sold and bartered to every corner of Barbary—all in the name of Christ and the Holy Land, to which the Crusaders had forgotten to go. A century of darkness followed, with a series of French emperors as incompetent as they were illiterate. They passed, and Greeks again held their city, but it was impoverished and empty, ready only to fall a little later to the gathering vultures. But, in that brief renaissance, art grew and flourished anew, and Byzantine art of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries is again a sunlit and vivid thing.

Vitality, then, is as strong as integrity with the Byzantine artist. He lives again and again, and his work is never the same. The commonest charge against Byzantine art is that it is repetitive, dull, and traditional, in the sense that there is no creation. To this there can be only one answer—that Byzantine art is perpetual creation, that it is variation within defined limits, and this is the severest test to which an art or an artist can ever be put. That was the secret of Greek art in ancient times. The endless repetition of Apollos and Aphrodites and the rest seems but dull repetition; and yet the greatness of art, as Polyclitus said, its most difficult stage for the artist, was when you came to the point of variation. That which made your Apollo differ from the Apollo of someone else was what decided whether you or he was the great artist. So with

the Byzantines. Here are the Virgins, the Pantocrators, the Crucifixions, and the Saints, and in more secular art the great heraldic beasts and the intricate patterns, but the point wherein one saint or griffin differed from another was the point at which one artist could be identified as great and another as merely good.

Sometimes I read that Byzantine art is but a *macédoine* of various Oriental and some Occidental elements, a rehash of oddments garnered by a decadent and weary folk from the various lands of Asia and Europe into which their conquering arms had penetrated. This exhibition at Paris has taught me how far worse than a half truth this creed is, for it suggests the utter artistic sterility of the Byzantines.

Like all great art, Byzantine art drew inspiration from all sources. After all, early Greek art was a blend of Hittite, Assyrian, and Egyptian influences. But there is all the difference in the world between a blend which is a mere aggregation of elements and a blend which is a transformation into something new with a vitality of its own. Those who think that the accusation of being a 'blend' is derogative have the minds of grocers. They are thinking in terms of tea and tobacco. Byzantine art, like all great art, borrowed and blended and then moulded it all anew into a fresh creation. And behind the blending, though this is a point that critics mostly forget, was the mind that made the selection. To choose aright you have to have impeccable taste and wise judgment, and those are two precious qualities that make for great art. The swift draftsmanship of the Sassanian artist had the same appeal to the Byzantines that it has for us. The bright liveliness of the Hellenistic painter charmed Byzantine eyes-though it did not control their hands. Syrian austerity, and the ancient hieratic styles of the mighty monuments of Asia, Hittite and other, that still stood above ground, captured their fancy. Thus in their new synthesis we find austerity, freshness of color, and swift delineation faithfully renewed. The sweeping lines of a mosaic apse, the simple fall of drapery on a marble relief or an ivory box, and the massive strength of Byzantine sculptured animals show what were their inspiration. Yet there is no single work of art from Byzantium that one could for a single moment mistake for Sassanian, for Hittite, or for Hellenistic.

Seeing so much Byzantine art gathered together, I paused to think and to ask myself what particular emotions affected me. Strangely, I found them difficult to discover, or else so recondite as to be hard to identify. Yet there was no question that I was affected in some queer emotional way, and deeply affected. For there were works which drew my eye and held it by a fascination that I found it almost impossible to explain. I had some odd sense of exhilaration, some feeling of profound satisfaction that I could not analyze. Yet there was nothing overt in these lovely things that produced an immediate response with which I was familiar. There were none of the normal reactions: I did not feel myself charmed, delighted, envious, or overwhelmed-the conventional impressions which one derives from a group of masterpieces. There was something remote about these jewels and sculptures and paintings and silks which stirred something remote and unfamiliar in myself. I felt that I had been put in touch with a world that was not this world and yet not another, with something that mostly lies dormant in our ordinary experience. It is no use to explain it all by a facile belief in the 'hieratic' qualities of Byzantinism; Byzantine art may be 'transcendental' for all I know, but unfortunately I have never been able to understand what this word means. Sympathetic friends tell me that it implies a background of mysticism, which is but to explain the obscure by the incomprehensible.

Below it all, I think, really lies the fact that Byzantine art satisfies more than most forms of art because it is at once simple, intimate, and unreal. It reflects nothing, interprets nothing, and suggests nothing that is not more or less explicit. My emotional reactions to it are, simply enough, the satisfaction of emotions rather than their awaking. Byzantine art gives rather than takes. That is why I went away so profoundly refreshed. For an art that requires a whole system of responses from the observer is a troublesome art. It presupposes an educated public, and, in consequence, is simply the old snobbery all over again. And worse, it breeds art critics who act as midwives to the ignorant. As soon as art has reached the stage where it needs all this paraphernalia and all these high priests, it may as well shut up shop and produce merely for the delectation of artists. Byzantine art does nothing of the kind. It is understandable at once by the simple-minded peasant and by the emperor's retinue. Byzantium was, with all its courts and its glory, completely democratic. Emperors may have been half divine, they may have had the authority of a Pope and the despotism of the Medicis, but at any moment the populace of Constantinople was ready to hurl

them from their thrones and replace them by a shepherd or a monk or a plain soldier. The history of the Empire is the history of democratic Athens all over again, with the same meteoric rises and falls of great men. And Byzantine art has that same democratic spirit. Greek blood and Greek mind do not change in a few thousand years.

Again I thank heaven that the art critics have not got at Byzantine art. There is no scope for their parrot talk of 'linear rhythm,' 'tactile values,' 'significant form,' 'life-communicating qualities,' and all the rest of the stock in trade. What a balderdash it all is, to be sure! A Byzantine ivory and a Byzantine cloisonné plaque of gold are just glorious creations, designed with the intention of conveying an impression of splendor and calm beauty. And there is a hint behind so many of them of the artist's desire to make you think how splendid he was to do such good work. Like Benvenuto Cellini, he seems to be trying all the time to show you that he was a fine artist, you a person of taste, and the work a thing of joy which pleased him, should please you, and will remain to please others. For every good artist must be proud, though that is no excuse for his being a snob.

Cellini is relegated to a lower order of artists by many discerning folk just because he talked too much about what he did and was obviously delighted with his own work. Nowadays the artist, having done his masterpiece, leaves the talking to the critics and is too proud to pretend that he is pleased with what he has done. He is expected to stand apart on a cloud like a minor Creator, with a take-it-or-leave-it expression on his divine brows. But Cellini produced his masterpiece, explained all about it, told you it was first-rate, and added that you were a fool if you couldn't see it-which is a very different thing from withdrawing from the plebeian crowd and fitting on a halo of gilded snobbery. Cellini, I think, was the greatest sculptor of the Renaissance after Michelangelo, not an effete follower of others generated at the fag-end of the High Period, as he is so often made out to be.

And Byzantines, I am sure, were of the stamp of Cellini. They worked with passion and joy, and, as a result, never produced mediocre works. The standard of all Byzantine art before the fall of Constantinople in 1453 is astonishingly high. They had the finger skill of the Chinese and the Japanese and a capacity of design worthy only of the ancient Greeks. What a blend that can be their art will show you. Imagine an onyx plate (which I have just seen in Paris) in the centre of which is a gold circular cloisonné plaque. That plaque is not more than an inch and a quarter in diameter, and yet the scene depicted on it is the 'Last Supper.' Just think what intricate work went to its making, for the designing of every one of the figures at the table in a thin strip of gold, the hollows filled with different-colored enamels! No one but an Oriental could do it to-day. And yet the same artists could carve the great figures of emperors in purple porphyry which have survived the destruction of the Imperial City. The same men made the colored marble revetments which enclose the entire interior of St. Sophia or St. Mark's at Venice. It is this refusal to despise small-scale work which marks the Byzantine as a true artist, devoid of pride. For the true artist sees art in whatever he handles. Such were the Greeks of ancient times and the Greeks of medieval times.

Today we are more inclined than we used to be to give Byzantine art its due place in the history of art. But this reinstatement has produced the inevitable exaggeration. Defenders of Byzantine art are often as ridiculous as its opponents. Those who cannot decide between the two should go to the fountainhead itself and examine dispassionately the quiet genius of Byzantine art, which seems to derive an added calm from the fact that it was generated in a turbulent and violent world.