

# BYZANTINE ART

*Frederic Will, Ph.D.*

**Overview** Byzantine art was not motivated by desire for innovation or change, and though there was abundant conflict within Byzantine intellectual circles--cf. the two major Iconoclastic Movements of the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries--the working traditions of Byzantine art were static from its inception until the 14<sup>th</sup> century. However within that traditionalism lay a respect for careful and profound work, which was unsurpassed in its vein, and which played its role in making Byzantium the wealthiest and most sophisticated world city of its time.

## Architecture

**San Vitale** From 540-750 C.E., Ravenna, in north eastern Italy, was the capital of the Ravenna Exarchate of the Byzantine Empire, and the site of much imperial patronage and major artistic undertakings. The church of San Vitale in Ravenna, dating from 546 C.E., shares with much early Christian architecture (the Romanesque, in the West) a polygonal structure with four auxiliary domes, surrounding a central dome which, because there is no longitudinally axial nave, becomes the center of light and spirituality for the entire church. Effects of unusual subtlety are scattered throughout the church, as in the surfaces of the capitals and impost blocks, covered with what seems a fine lacy surface, a visual conflict with the heavy solidity of the construction in the dome.

**Hagia Sophia** This master cathedral, the supreme self-assertion of the Emperor Justinian and his wife Theodora, brought together the architectural genius of two of Byzantium's finest artists--thinkers--and geometers, Anthemius of Tralles and Isidore of Miletus. They worked, as did the makers of San Vitale, around the centrality of the dome, which was the primary light source for the huge temple; they worked with particular genius on the construction of the triangular pendentives, which descend from the central dome and gradually displace its weight onto the subsidiary domes, which carried the energy of the pendentives all the way to the floor of the cathedral.

**St. Mark's in Venice** Saint Mark's Cathedral was begun in 1063, on a main piazza in the Venice of high commerce and high art, one of the richest allies of Byzantium itself. The building is in the form of a Greek cross--arms of equal lengths--with each of the five domes--one central, four over the arms--covered with wood and gilded copper, a brilliant formula to the observer from below.

## Mosaic

**San Vitale** On either side of the altar at San Vitale extend splendid mosaics of the Emperor Justinian and his wife Theodora. A famed mosaic, of Theodora and her attendants, displays the queen with nine attendants, all created from subtly dyed mosaics--some in brilliant gold tesserae--aligned with their trademark Byzantine faces, huge eyes and tiny mouths, a long thin nose. What rivets our eyes is not exactly bodies depicted, but stylized spirits.

**St. Mark's** In the so-called Creation dome, above the narthex of the Cathedral, we follow concentric mosaic circles depicting the Creation Story from the Book of *Genesis*. One panel concentrates on the creation of Eve from Adam's rib. The pictorial formulae are stylized--no pretense of realism--and vivid, so that a worshipper without ability to read--the case of most--would instantly recognize the material depicted.

## Painting

**Madonna and Child** Elongated forms, lengthy draped clothing, stylized faces--the long noses, wide eyes, small mouths mentioned above--these are trademarks of Byzantine painting, most of it thematically inspired from Christian sources, much of the best of it depicting the glorious sorrows of The Lady Mother of the Church. A splendid example, of this regal sadness, is the *Madonna and Child Enthroned* from 1270 C.E. Sadness, delicacy, loss and glory are compacted into one object of contemplation.

## Reading

Beckwith, John, *Early Christian and Byzantine Art*, Harmondsworth, 1973.

Cormack, Robin, *Byzantine Art*, Oxford, 2000.

## Discussion questions

Taking a wide view, what connections do you see between ancient Greco-Roman visual art, and that of Byzantium?

What kind of presence does Christianity exert on Byzantine art? Does it appear in particular themes or visual procedures?

What are Byzantine icons? Did the finest Byzantine artists turn their attention toward that form? Were the themes of some of those icons 'secular'?