

The Exhibition

Heaven and Earth: Art of Byzantium from Greek Collections is a major, international loan exhibition. Byzantine artists drew from pagan and early Christian foundations to fashion the opulent and deeply spiritual world of Byzantium (A.D. 330–1453). The establishment of Christianity as the state religion inspired the creation of luminous icons, textiles, architectural sculptures, frescoes, and mosaics to adorn basilicas throughout the empire. Prosperous monasteries illuminated sacred manuscripts and preserved monuments of Greek literature, while private patronage fostered the embellishment of daily life. Nearly two hundred objects, exclusively from Greek collections, display the distinctive Byzantine aesthetic that influenced the artistic traditions of neighboring cultures for over a millennium. For this exhibition, special attention has been paid to objects that have never before been on view in the United States.

Organized by the Hellenic Ministry of Education, Religious Affairs, Culture and Sports, with participation of Museums all over Greece and curatorial contributions from the J. Paul Getty Museum (Mary Louise Hart) and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., the exhibition is the result of the 2011 Framework for Cultural Cooperation between the Getty Trust and the Hellenic Ministry of Culture.

The exhibition is organized around five themes:

(1) From the Ancient to the Byzantine World will focus on the Late Antique philosophical and cultural foundation of early Christian theological thought and visual language. Sub-themes include the coexistence of Christianity with pagan cults in major Greek cities of the ancient world, such as Athens, Corinth, and Sparta; the persistence of Graeco-Roman forms of artistic expression, with an emphasis on portraiture; and the impact of Neoplatonism on the depiction of the human figure and imperial portraits.

(2) The Christian Empire considers the importance of the adoption of Christianity as the one state religion in transforming the public and private spheres of Late Roman Imperial life, as evident in the stylistic development and function of Late Antique and Early Byzantine secular and liturgical works of art. Special emphasis will be given to the early Christian basilica and its evolution through the growing predominance of images of Byzantine saints in icons and illuminated manuscripts.

(3) Intellectual Life explores the richness of Byzantine thought and verbal culture, and the contributions of the Greek language to state administration and cultural life. Objects will include Byzantine copies of ancient Greek texts, which played a decisive role in the education of the Byzantine elite.

(4) The Pleasures of Life will present aspects of everyday life, a subject rarely included in exhibitions of Byzantine art. The first section centers on the decoration of the house, the table, and domestic accessories. The second section will focus on personal adornment, including a superb collection of Byzantine jewels that demonstrate the survival of certain Roman techniques, as well as the innovations achieved by Byzantine craftsmen –innovations that turned Byzantine jewelry into items of prestige and diplomatic gifts.

(5) Byzantium at the Crossroads explores the artistic and cultural effects of Byzantine Greece's continuous contact with neighboring political powers. Military confrontation and diplomatic negotiations opened channels of communication that shaped Byzantine perceptions of other cultures, introducing new elements into the cultural and artistic life of Byzantium. These contacts made Byzantine Greece a cosmopolitan culture of diverse artistic expressions, an aspect of Byzantine history too little investigated in museum exhibitions.

The exhibition will be supported by a catalogue to be prepared by the Greek organizing committee and a book about the Byzantine cities of Greece.

It will be complemented by a full slate of programming including gallery talks (i.e. courses highlighting artistic techniques represented in the exhibition, artist demonstrations), exhibition tours, lectures, play readings, family festival etc. Of particular interest would be an event presenting Byzantine cuisine, and a lecture/concert featuring Byzantine music. The Getty is currently working with the Medieval Academy of Cambridge, Massachusetts to plan the keynote address of its 2014 conference at the Getty Villa during the opening week of this exhibition. Additionally, the Getty Museum's Education department is considering the development of a special course at UCLA based on themes in the exhibition.