

Social Media, the Spiritual Version

Byzantine Icons in 'Heaven and Earth,' at the National Gallery

The Byzantium empire started out on a utopian note. In 313, the Roman emperor Constantine I established a policy of religious tolerance throughout his realm and carried it over into an imperial capital he was establishing far to the east, where he gave the existing town Byzantium a new name, Constantinople, and a new identity as a kind of City of God on the Bosphorus.

To Constantine, with his calculated, hands-across-the-aisle take on politics, all gods were good. But the diplomatic largess he instituted didn't last. In 380, another emperor, Theodosius I, declared Christianity the official Byzantine faith, and so it remained for a thousand years, with other Hellenic religions — sometimes called pagan — either absorbed into the new order or forced out.

For good and bad, the Byzantine one-faith system shaped everything. It created a chosen-by-God ruling class, with emperors who were regarded as semi-divine and a clergy sanctioned to take pretty much anything it wanted. Inevitably, internal power struggles cast along religious lines developed — notably, beginning in the eighth century, in the prolonged conflict over the morality of depicting figures in a religious context.

This battle over what would seem a doctrinal technicality stopped just short of full-on civil war. It led to persecutions, banishments and assassinations. It created an economic debilitation that spread through an empire, then at its height, that ruled large swaths of territory on three continents. The conflict also defined the lines of a class war, with underprivileged elements of Byzantine society, like peasants, the urban poor and women, demanding that icons — the holy images that they treasured, that they turned to for help and that functioned as a powerful force for social cohesion — be retained.

How Byzantine icons worked can be difficult to convey to modern Western viewers raised on the arm's-length, quasi-objective ethic of art appreciation.

Icons weren't just objects, nor were they art, as we understand the term. They were living, interactive entities wired into the world. In a way, they functioned as a spiritual version of social media, connecting and channeling energies among scattered, friendly and largely invisible parties, earthly and celestial.

Relationships with icons could also be hands-on personal. Approached with an ardent, trusting spirit, they listened to you, looked at you, took you in. Because they had invigorating properties, you touched them, kissed them, coddled them. You asked favors of them: please give this, protect me from that. And if the favors weren't granted, you could scold them, temporarily unfriend them. That was allowed. They were companions, guardians and courts of last resort.

That they were often beautiful contributed to their charisma, and there are extremely beautiful images in this show. And that beauty, although framed by stylistic conventions, is surprisingly varied.

Classical realism has, by this point in the show, been left behind, and, with it, reality as experienced in three dimensions. In the new reality, the body is an idea of body — flattened,

stretched, abstract — a pattern with cosmetic shading. It's part of a universe that favors surface over depth. In one-point perspective, as employed in the Italian Renaissance, lines shoot back into a picture and converge; in Byzantine icons, the opposite occurs: the lines emerge outward from the picture and meet in you, the viewer.

You see these features in play in a splendid image of Christ Pantokrator, Christ the Almighty [labeled *Jesus Christ* in our show]. He's seen bust-length, dark-robed, expressionless against a gold ground. There's some painterly modeling in his face, and his halo is raised in relief. But essentially he's an emblem, an ideal, an embodiment of imperturbability, of holy silence.

By the [fifteenth century], the Byzantine empire was going or gone. In 1453, the Ottoman Turks captured Constantinople after a long siege. At the end, the city's residents, sensing the futility of defensive fighting, resorted to a secret weapon: They brought out their holiest, most potent icons and paraded them on the city walls, in hopes of divine protection. No use. But how interesting it is for us — what a lesson in the meaning of "art" — to try to see these paintings through those *in extremis* eyes.

- Holland Cotter, New York Times Art Review, October 24, 2013

http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/25/arts/design/byzantine-icons-in-heaven-and-earth-at-the-national-gallery.html?_r=0